

# PUBLIC TALES WAG THE DOG

## *Telling Stories about Structural Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era<sup>1</sup>*

Tricia Rose

*Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America,  
Department of Africana Studies, Brown University*

### Abstract

This essay examines the case of Kelley Williams-Bolar—an African American single mother from Akron, Ohio—who in 2011 was arrested, charged with a felony, and jailed for sending her two daughters to a predominantly White suburban public school in Copley Township without meeting the township's residency requirements. This essay closely examines the case with particular attention paid to the important but often unacknowledged intersections of race, gender, economic privilege, spatial containment, and racialized criminalization that shaped the case. The Williams-Bolar case became a public site of contesting narratives, some obscuring these intersections, others acknowledging them. Those who supported Copley Township's prosecution of Williams-Bolar relied on a law and order mandate and fiscal responsibility that supported the dominant racial narrative while appearing to be race, gender, and class neutral. But many were critical of Williams-Bolar's arrest and the story used to justify it. Their response was a massive and heated online challenge that inspired existing and newly outraged parents and educational activists from a wide range of backgrounds, triggering petitions signed by hundreds of thousands of people requesting that the Governor of Ohio pardon Williams-Bolar.

This essay places the case in the context of what I call the "*invisible intersections of colorblind racism*," the racial privileges of housing and educational resource hoarding via private property taxes for suburban upper-middle-class Whites and the expanded application of the criminalization of the Black poor to Black mothers who receive state assistance by the judicial system, in political discourse and mass media narrative. Williams-Bolar's supporters used the power of social media to build community activism and to generate alternative narratives that countered the discursive and structural forces that were at work. Finally, this article considers the value and impact of alternative narratives about Williams-Bolar and her actions as generated by supporters.

**Keywords:** Structural Racism, Educational Inequality, Colorblind Racism, Criminalization of Race, Social Media, Intersectionality, Public Racial Narrative, Spatialization of Race

### INTRODUCTION

The post-civil rights era has generated unique challenges for activists, citizens, and scholars who strive to generate broad public support for ending systemic racial

---

Du Bois Review, 10:2 (2013) 447–469.

© 2013 W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research 1742-058X/13 \$15.00  
doi:10.1017/S1742058X13000234

inequality. The triumph over mainstream advocacy of Jim Crow racism, the development of a widespread belief in the *idea* of racial equality, and a visible symbolic brand of racial integration in mass media have worked to obscure the complex, intersectional, and entrenched reproduction of post-civil rights era colorblind structural racism. This creates a profound conundrum: how does one tell an efficient and compelling story that illuminates the intersecting structural forces that work to maintain high levels of poverty and deep disadvantage for Black people in a world where very few profess to believe in maintaining racial inequality?

I do not choose the phrase “tell the story” at random. Storytelling has been revealed to be a central means by which all humans process information and retain knowledge. The exponential growth of mass media over the past thirty years and their profound dependence on storytelling give compelling and efficient mass mediated stories more leverage than ever. Critical race theorists have consistently highlighted the potential of alternative narrative, new stories, and the importance of broken silences to illuminate and transform social relations and assignments of power (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Delgado and Stafancic, 2000).

So, when I say “tell the story” I don’t just mean providing the facts of this condition to those already willing to listen; instead, I mean creating a compelling and emotionally motivating narrative about this condition to *as many people as possible* in a way that can generate multi-racial collective action and social movement for progressive racial change.

This is a conundrum because these worsening conditions of racial inequality and the ongoing resistance to generating policies that end discrimination are taking place in a society that since the end of the civil rights era takes disproportionate pride in having ended legal apartheid. More importantly, the United States has a broader mainstream White populace that, studies show, largely disavows racist ideology and claims belief in racial equality. The anchoring ideology for their position is colorblindness: many Whites claim not to see color, not to use color in evaluating people or situations, and thus believe themselves not to be contributing to whatever racial differences exist. In fact, in this contemporary moment, naming race and illuminating the effects of various decisions and policies as racialized has become understood as *itself* an act of racism. This is partly due to a liberal White belief that since explicit and intentional racial animosity and legalized racism are largely gone, the conditions we see—and the facts that link them to systemic racism—must not be the product of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Wise 2010). Scholars, however, present compelling evidence to the contrary. For example, several studies show how racism continues to function systematically and comprehensively across all significant social institutions; that it functions formally and informally on multiple social levels and that the impact is cumulative, reinforced by law, policy, and by public narrative (Brown et al., 2003; Collins 2010; Miller and Garrañ, 2007).

Consequently, the deluge of facts about the depths of ongoing present day racial inequality and institutionalized racial discrimination largely evoke White confusion, paralysis, and what communications researchers Entman and Rojecki (2000) call “an ambivalent response” among the vast majority of Whites: “the ambivalent majority are people with good intentions who are somehow stymied from achieving them” (p. 33). This predominant group of Whites have “ambivalent” or “perplexed” racial attitudes and can “exhibit attitudes that may be tipped toward comity or hostility depending on the interaction of political climate, personal experience, and mediated communications” (p. 16).

This ambivalent racial attitude is a key to the heightened importance of racial storytelling in the post-civil rights era, especially under conditions of limited personal

experience, a racially ambivalent or hostile political climate, and high reliance on mediated communications. This attitude of ambivalence, coupled with extraordinarily expanded space of mediated communications, can have a profound impact on this swing constituency and thus possess the potential to produce dramatic and immediate effects on inspiring or dissuading cross-racial alliances to end racial inequalities.

Mediated communications are more extensive and more multifaceted than ever. Consequently, mass media is both a powerful engine for reproducing entrenched racial narratives that support and maintain racial inequality and, at the same time, it carries the potential (through democratic forms of online networking) for generating and consolidating new, efficient, and compelling narratives about the importance of combating systemic racial inequality. Today more than ever, public tales are powerful tools for tipping the public toward or away from progressive concerns. Put another way, what kind of mass mediated story can we tell to move White racial ambivalence away from hostility and toward cross-racial understanding and collaboration?

The case of Kelley Williams-Bolar suggests the nature of a public tale with transformative power. Williams-Bolar is an African American single mother from Akron, Ohio who was arrested in 2011, charged with a felony, and jailed for sending her two daughters to a predominantly White suburban public school in Copley Township without meeting the township's residency requirements. This essay closely examines the dynamics of this public tale and its grounding in often unacknowledged intersections of race, gender, economic privilege, spatial containment, systemic educational inequality, and racialized criminalization. The Williams-Bolar case became a site of contesting narratives, some obscuring these intersections, others acknowledging them. Those who supported Copley Township's prosecution of Williams-Bolar defended it with an argument about a law and order mandate and fiscal responsibility that supported the dominant racial narrative while appearing to be neutral with regard to race, gender, and class. But many were critical of Williams-Bolar's arrest and the story used to justify it. Their response was a massive and heated online challenge that inspired existing and newly outraged parents and educational activists from a wide range of racial and class backgrounds, triggering petitions signed by hundreds of thousands of people requesting that the Governor of Ohio pardon Williams-Bolar.

This essay closely examines the case of Kelley Williams-Bolar as an illuminating example of the profound impact multiple intersecting strands of institutional racism have on life choices and outcomes in the post-civil rights era and the power of post-racial narratives and counter narratives to shape interpretation and outcome. It places her case and the public tales about her and the case in the context of what I am calling the "*invisible intersections of colorblind racism*," the racial privileges of housing and educational resource hoarding via private property taxes for suburban upper-middle-class Whites and the expanded application of the criminalization of the Black poor to Black women who receive state assistance by the judicial system, in political discourse and mass media narrative. Finally, this article considers the value and impact of alternative narratives about Williams-Bolar and her actions as generated by supporters. Of particular interest is the way in which Williams-Bolar's supporters used the power of new social media to build community activism and to generate alternative narratives that countered the discursive and structural forces that were at work.

## EMERGENCE OF A PUBLIC TALE

In late January 2011, it was widely reported that Kelley Williams-Bolar, a single mother of two elementary school-age daughters from Akron, Ohio, enrolled them in

a suburban school in the adjacent Copley Township from 2006 to 2008, claiming residency at her father's Copley Township residence. Williams-Bolar's alleged infraction came to light because the Copley Township school system has an extremely aggressive program for identifying and punishing the families of any students who do not live in Copley Township from attending their schools. Private investigators hired by the school district follow suspected out-of-town school attendees and parents are given a financial reward of \$100 if they turn in people who do not live in the district. In fact, according to Williams-Bolar, she recalled "receiving a post card in the mail announcing the reward to families throughout the district" (Hing 2012; Khalek 2011). Williams-Bolar's residency was challenged with evidence gathered by private investigators hired by the school district who filmed her taking her daughters to the Copley school from her Akron apartment. Williams-Bolar explained that her daughters lived in both places, that they spent a great deal of time at her father's home. She says this was particularly true during the years in question because for some of that time she was taking care of her father after he had had a stroke. Her father, she argued, was a highly involved grandparent who she considered a co-parent. Kelley Williams-Bolar says she was instructed by school district officials to get a "grandparent affidavit," which, it seems, would allow her daughters to attend Copley Township schools legally (Singleton and Williams-Bolar, 2011).

The affidavit was rejected as void in June 2008 (the last month during which the daughters claimed Copley Township residence). Kelley Williams-Bolar indicated that the form was rejected because the approval signature of the children's biological father was not on the form. She claimed that she has full legal custody of her daughters and therefore his signature was not needed. Williams-Bolar had ended her daughters' enrollment in Copley Township schools at the end of the 2007–2008 school year. In January 2008, two and a half months after a contentious hearing on her residency, Williams-Bolar received an Ohio Department of Education letter saying: "The Department is considering the matter closed at this time" (John 2011). However, eighteen months later in November of 2009, Williams-Bolar was indicted on two felony counts of tampering with official records, claiming that records show that she lived in an Akron public housing development. She was also charged with grand theft for stealing what the Summit County prosecutors claim was \$30,500 in educational resources. The cost of one year of school per child in Copley Township is \$6,895. The grand theft charges were dismissed but the felony counts for tampering with records remained. Judge Patricia Cosgrove sentenced Williams-Bolar to the maximum sentence of five years and then suspended all but the nine days she had already spent in jail, two years of probation, and eighty hours of community service (O'Malley 2011).

Copley Township School Superintendent Brian Poe's justification of the district's policies hinges on the district's decision not to participate in Ohio's program of school open enrollment. Poe (2011) indicates that "feedback" from the community led the district to believe that it "did have a number of students who did not reside in our district." There is significant local concern about the role of property taxes. Poe continues: "And if we have two more students or five more students that come to us, we don't receive any additional state funds for that. Our state funds are set per year. And so, if two, five or ten more students come to us, we don't get an increase in those funds" (2011).

Poe states that between 2005 and 2011 Copley Township schools had had forty-eight residency cases and were able to "resolve" forty-seven of them. Poe described residency hearings as a place where families "have an opportunity to, you know, present some evidence to us that they actually are residing and that does happen in

some instances. Other parents chose to withdraw their students. Other parents are given the option to pay tuition. And other parents do move into the district" (*Headline News* 2011). Of these forty-seven other cases, twenty-nine involved Black students, fifteen involved White students, and three involved Asian American students (King 2011; O'Malley 2011).

## CONTESTING FRAMEWORKS: INTERPRETING WILLIAMS-BOLAR'S STORY

In 2011, the Williams-Bolar case became a mass mediated public tale. Although many supported Copley Township's decision to bring in the prosecutor's office, the vast majority of respondents opposed it. The Kelley Williams-Bolar case touched an empathetic and outraged nerve among a diverse, nationwide group of parents and citizens. Most news articles and television reports noted that their offices had received many calls and emails and the "vast majority" were in support of Williams-Bolar. Many readers and commentators expressed empathy for a mother who wanted to send her daughters to a superior school and to keep them safe. Few commentators took issue with whether or not Williams-Bolar had broken the residency requirement law. Instead the vast majority of her supporters focused on matters they deemed a greater crime: the issues of legalized inequality in education, vast gaps in degrees of neighborhood safety, racial neighborhood segregation, and the often insurmountable difficulties poorer, working, single parents face when trying to educate and protect their children. In particular, supporters emphasized the crucial role educational inequality plays in maintaining spatial, racial, and class inequalities and exclusions (Lipman 2011). As Jamilah King (2011) writing for *ColorLines News for Action* argued: "At the heart of the matter was the fact that Williams-Bolar was convicted for doing what many reasonable parents have done for decades: cleverly manipulating an already rigged educational system to work in (the) best interests of her children."

Nine separate Facebook pages (all but one in support of Williams-Bolar) offered opportunity to comment frequently on posted articles. As one Facebook supporter said, "I actually don't think she made a bad choice, but rather a forced choice unfortunately. More times than not the underprivileged are expected to accept their situation as just that; . . . theirs. I still commend her choice to go out and change what was a bad educational experience for her children the best way she could." Another supporter from Savannah, Georgia said: "Kelley, I love you! I am here 110%. The system doesn't always work for us so we have to take matters into our own hands to protect our children! If only all parents cared so much for their kids to risk everything! Now, how can we, as a country, get them to remove your charges? Let me know if I can help!" (Facebook 2011).

Two separate petitions were set up and within twenty-four hours each had garnered nearly 8,000 signatures. The first, a Facebook petition seeking support for Williams-Bolar, grew to 7,292 signatures in less than a day. Petition leader Deborah Price of Washington, D.C., told the *Beacon Journal*: "The ladies are so enraged . . . All the women that have come online have related. It's a living reality for parents" (Meyer and Billicsky, 2011). Massachusetts mother Caitlin Lord set up the second petition on [www.Change.org](http://www.Change.org). According to various sites, organizations such as Color of Change and Moms Rising collaborated on this petition—which by August of 2011 had over 165,000 signatures—scheduled to be sent to the governor of Ohio requesting that he pardon her, and thus remove the permanent felony label on her record ([change.org](http://change.org) 2011).

The Summit County prosecutor, Sheri Walsh, found herself needing to defend the decision to prosecute Williams-Bolar. Walsh did this primarily by constructing Williams-Bolar first and foremost as a criminal whose main purpose was to defraud the county and government rather than a person trying to protect or better the lives of her children. To achieve this narrative shift, Walsh evaded the complex web of intersecting forms of structural inequality and discrimination that provide the crucial context for Williams-Bolar's expressed motives and the laws and policies that constrained her alternatives:

Kelley Williams-Bolar was not prosecuted and sent to jail because she wanted a better life for her children. She falsified documents, engaged in many different acts of deception to four different governmental agencies, and continued to do so over a two-year period. When the school district confronted her she continued to lie and created further deceptions, resulting in being charged with a felony (Walsh 2011).

Walsh assumes one singular motive for Williams-Bolar's actions and frames the case through an absolute dichotomy: a person who falsifies government documents *cannot* do so as a parent trying to provide a better life for her children. Walsh's strategy treats the residency laws as fundamentally just; there is therefore no legitimate motive to break those laws, and a person who would do so is simply a criminal. To do this, Walsh uses criminalizing language to sever "criminal acts" from legal or social contexts.

The vast majority of those public commentators who were critical of Williams-Bolar echoed Walsh's criminalizing frame. They constructed Williams-Bolar as motivated by criminal intentions *rather than* protective parental instincts, and thus deemed her unworthy of social support. A February 2, 2011, Akron News Now.com article by Tina Kaufman stimulated a series of comments of this type from readers. For example, *Cruisemeister* said: "She lied and manipulated the system, now she is paying the consequences. Just another person who feels that they are entitled to everything and screw the system." *Make Sense* said: "She is a liar and abused the system, under the guidance of her father . . .," *debbilous* said: "She is a real piece of work . . . she should be prosecuted for lying on the other government paperwork. She should lose her ability to teach, live in AMHA housing and all the other perks she has received!" and *who cares* said, "People need to learn that they can't just go and TAKE better things . . . they have to earn them. They have to work for it."

These comments and prosecutor Walsh's justification rely on separating Kelley Williams-Bolar's motives from the complex intersecting facets of her conditions and from the ethical framing intersectional discrimination generates. Critics worked to isolate each element of her life, her expressed motivations, and any potential options she may have in order to assert that her agenda was amoral, selfish, criminal, greedy, and/or lazy. This attack required denying, ignoring, or separating Williams-Bolar from the intersecting social constraints that largely shape her life and opportunity structure.

In contrast, Williams-Bolar's supporters situate her in her social context. They do not shrink from acknowledging her fraud, instead framing her actions as necessary to correct an unjust system that is maintained by those who benefit from its being rigged. These are not incompatible distinctions largely because they perceive the system to be designed to produce multiple intersecting inequalities and difficulties for working class or poor parents, especially mothers—difficulties that put many parents in a bind: Should we follow the law to the letter and ask our children to



absorb race- and class-produced risks generated by these same laws or bend a rule or two to reduce their exposure to them?

## COLORBLIND RACISM'S INVISIBLE INTERSECTIONS

Defenders of the decision to prosecute Williams-Bolar (Poe, Walsh, and some commenters on websites) argued that in the absence of evidence that their policies and actions were motivated by race, race was completely irrelevant. As Poe noted during a *Headline News* Television interview: "If it were racially motivated, of the other forty-seven instances, that we were able to resolve, you know, you had families from all different backgrounds in those cases. . . . I would think you would see other instances such as this" (2011). The claim is that other non-White families were not brought to trial, so there could not be any racial motivation in this case.

This position taken by defenders of the prosecution is congruent with the logic of the dominant framework of discrimination law. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1993) has astutely argued that such a position refuses to perceive the modes of racial, gendered, and class discrimination that largely define the maintenance of inequality in the post-civil rights era. Crenshaw's important essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex," states that:

Discrimination which is wrongful proceeds from the identification of a specific class or category; either a discriminator intentionally identifies this category, or a process is adopted which somehow disadvantages all members of this category. According to this dominant view, a discriminator treats all people within a race or sex category similarly. Any significant experiential or statistical variation within this group suggests that either the group is not being discriminated against or that conflicting interests exist which defeat any attempts to bring a common claim (1993, p. 386).

This approach to identifying discrimination, Crenshaw argues, operates on an underlying conception that: "the wrong which antidiscrimination law addresses is the use of race or gender factors to interfere with decisions that would otherwise be fair or neutral" (1993, p. 386). And, it is this "single axis" approach, as Crenshaw calls it, that denies the intersectional forces of race and gendered forms of discrimination that define the status quo, rather than the exceptional discriminatory act. So when Poe uses the absence of complaints of racially disparate treatment by other non-White families with residency problems to deny the possibility of racial discrimination, he is following exactly the problematic interpretation of what constitutes discrimination that Crenshaw criticizes: for discrimination to occur, everyone must be treated in the *same* discriminatory way; if this is not the case, statistical variations negate the significance of that which might be found. But Poe's defense also suggests that race is the only factor involved and that it functions independently of other relevant and intersecting factors such as gender, single motherhood, and economic status.

This conception of discrimination not only relies on the "but for" logic Crenshaw identifies (e.g., "'but for my race,' I would not have been discriminated against") which attempts to individuate acts of discrimination, but it renders invisible the *intersectional* workings of racial discrimination. The nature of racial discrimination in Williams-Bolar's case simply cannot be rendered visible without serious attention to how her gender, class, and status as a single mother uniquely define her experiences

with racial discrimination. These conditions are not additive but mutually constitutive; intersectional analysis reveals new information about how discrimination works (Dhamoon 2011; García Bedolla 2007; Hancock 2007).

Williams-Bolar's "crime" is motivated by a set of conditions in her West Akron neighborhood that result from the intersectional nature of structural racialized, gendered, and class discrimination that takes place via normalized discriminatory practices in education, housing, childcare, the workforce, and policing. In short, without taking an intersectional approach we cannot see the ways in which multiple categories of identity and intersecting institutional forms of discrimination generate what Crenshaw calls the "complexities of compoundedness" (1993, p. 394).

The forces that work to constrain the opportunities for Kelley Williams-Bolar and her children—and thousands of women like her—are highly intersectional. As a poor, Black woman and mother, Williams-Bolar's life is significantly impacted by an intersecting matrix of social and structurally determined conditions that profoundly limit her ability to move up the economic and social ladder and to provide her children with a safe and supportive spatial and educational environment. The intersecting effects of gender, racial, and economic discrimination; racialized disparities in surveillance, policing, and incarceration; housing segregation and neighborhood opportunity indices; and racial- and class-driven educational inequality create multifaceted conditions of oppression for poor Black people and communities.

## THE INTERSECTIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE SPATIALIZATION OF RACE

Central among the denials of intersectional discrimination is the refusal to acknowledge the depth and breadth of the impact of racial spatial containment of poor Black people. Black urban poor communities are the product of a century's worth of systematic discrimination, spatial containment, and targeted disaccumulation of community resources. The spatial dimension of racism generates powerful forms of intersectional discrimination by reinforcing, compounding, and exacerbating categories of social, familial, and community stability for those who have been caught in the spatial racial net. People contained in poor Black urban neighborhoods are much more likely to be victimized by discrimination in facets of life circumscribed or impacted by spatial conditions. Thus one's access to stable, good paying jobs is limited; banks and other services such as insurance can more easily use one's location to do "risk-based" assessments that generate discriminatory outcomes, and one's children are more likely to attend schools with fewer resources and greater needs. Access to transportation, healthy foods, decent supermarkets, and health services are also far more likely to be truncated as a direct result of spatial racial discrimination.

A widely supported set of real estate rental, lending, public transportation, and hiring practices ensures that Black and Brown racially segregated and undercapitalized communities are significantly prevented from gaining the same level of advantages from work, tax contributions, and property investments as those afforded to Whites. Well-documented real estate, mortgage, and other housing policies have kept newly migrated Blacks in contained geographic areas, significantly reducing their chances of being homeowners and ensured lower property value for those who overcame such hurdles.

Spatial containment produces overcrowding and notably fewer city services, higher poverty (due to economic discrimination and other economic shifts), and thus higher crime, underfunded local schools with a more distressed student population,



less quality educational environments, and fewer childcare and other family support services and networks for working parents. As George Lipsitz (2011) notes:

People of different races do not inhabit different places by choice. Housing and lending discrimination, the design of school district boundaries, zoning regulations, policing strategies, the location of highways and transit systems and a host of tax subsidies do disastrous work by making places synonymous with races. The racial meaning of place makes American Whiteness one of the most systematically subsidized identities in the world (p. 6).<sup>2</sup>

Not only have urban Black citizens been contained in designated areas where housing values were discriminatorily under-evaluated, but as more Black people moved to cities, Whites took their racially supported resources out of cities. This “White flight” preserved and consolidated their advantages and simultaneously repressed the opportunities of Black residents. As middle-class Whites took their tax bases to predominantly White suburbs, job discrimination against Blacks reduced their tax base and added to increasingly concentrated segregated poverty. This racialized moving pattern creates highly concentrated Black communities that are structurally disadvantaged, a pattern that continues today. Such neighborhoods show losses in private businesses, losses in political power and medical facilities, environmental discrimination, deteriorating buildings, and loss of revenue for public schools (Katznelson 2006; Shapiro 2004).

Black people are disproportionately represented among the working poor and the unemployed, so concentrated and segregated Black neighborhoods are far more likely to be disproportionately poor with higher concentrations of unemployed people. Several recent studies demonstrate that many Whites continue to express an unwillingness to live around Black people of the same class position and a majority move when Black populations increase beyond 20%. According to sociologists Massey and Denton (1993), Whites begin not to move into a neighborhood that is 20% Black because they are uncomfortable with that balance, while Blacks are comfortable with that balance. When the ratio tips toward 70% White to 30% Black, Whites don’t just stop moving in, they begin to sell homes and move out. This behavioral pattern sustains group-based de facto segregation under the guise of individual choice.

The case of Kelley Williams-Bolar directly connects to this state of affairs. News reports state that Williams-Bolar is employed as a teacher’s aide in an Akron public school where the salary for this position is approximately \$19,400 per year—a salary that hovers around the federal guideline threshold for poverty for a family of three (Salary.com; State of Ohio Adult Parole Authority 2011). Williams-Bolar’s poverty-level wage job makes her eligible for public housing assistance; she lives in subsidized housing on Hartford Avenue in the West Akron neighborhood in Akron (State of Ohio Adult Parole Authority 2011). Her children face living conditions that are not remarkable. 34% of Black children are born into poverty as compared to 31% of Hispanic children and 11% of White children. National unemployment rates of 8–10%, a figure considered dangerously high for the economy and for our society as a whole, are about *half* of the *on-going* rates of Black unemployment (Cottrell 2010). Ohio is not an exception to these national conditions. In Ohio, and in the city of Akron, the general unemployment rates are about the national average of 8–10% (Department of Numbers). Statewide, in 2011 the unemployment rate for Black people reached 17% (Perkins 2013). In Akron, White unemployment is at about 5.5% and Black unemployment is just over 13% (City-data.com 2012a).

Akron's proportional racial demographics overall suggest a relatively integrated space, as the town population is 63% White and 29% Black (City-data.com 2012a). A closer look at neighborhood maps reveal a pattern of highly racially and class segregated spatial arrangements in Akron. A neighborhood demographic map of the west side of Akron (the neighborhoods that abut the Copley Township), reveals high levels of racial concentration/segregation. West Akron, where Kelley Williams-Bolar lives, is a very large neighborhood adjacent to Copley Township, is 85% Black and 12% White. The two smaller neighborhoods north of West Akron, are predominantly White: Fairlawn Heights is 92% White and Wallhaven is 79% White. In the two neighborhood districts south of the West Akron neighborhood both are yet again disproportionately White: the smaller neighborhood of Rolling Acres is 67% White, while the larger Kenmore neighborhood is 95% White (City-data.com 2012b).<sup>3</sup> Copley Township is itself 86% White and 8.5% Black (Copley Township).

## CONTESTING FRAMEWORKS: MOTIVES AND STRUCTURAL PRIVILEGE

Kelley Williams-Bolar repeatedly claimed that her purpose for sending her daughters to the Copley Township school had to do with her heightened concern over their safety in what she realized was a dangerous neighborhood and her ability to leave her daughters under the watchful eye of her father after school while she was at work. According to Williams-Bolar, her Akron Public Housing authority subsidized apartment had been robbed several times, the last time being especially disturbing. Williams-Bolar says that her home was violently burglarized during a school day when one of her daughters almost stayed home from school. This last robbery was cited by Williams-Bolar as a significant factor in her decision to enroll the girls in the Copley Township school where they could be watched by their grandfather after school.<sup>4</sup>

The debate over Williams-Bolar's motivation has been at the heart of a framing tug of war in the public narratives about the case. The narratives of supporters and activists work to connect dangerous neighborhoods to the quality of educational experiences and also to the contexts for children's afterschool care and quality of life. The narratives of critics work to completely disaggregate these intersecting factors and require a focus on only one factor at a time. These critics claim that if fears for her safety were Williams-Bolar's primary motivation then the story shouldn't be about getting her children a better education. If gaining education for her children was her motive, then she should simply pay for that education; afterschool home break-ins shouldn't matter.

But this parsing out reflects a fundamental denial of the intersectional nature of the forces working against Williams-Bolar and many like her. Neighborhood safety and school quality are deeply intertwined interdependent factors that disproportionately impact Black poor communities; interpreting them as separate matters—to "prove" that Kelley Williams-Bolar didn't have a laudable reason to make quality education her goal—denies the profound and reinforcing relationship between the two and obscures the role of spatialized racism.<sup>5</sup>

The history of the creation of urban ghettos is characterized by a compendium of forces that concentrate crime and delinquency. Living in a neighborhood with a high crime rate deeply impacts public safety and children's safety within and outside schools. Students in these communities have higher levels of anxiety, lower concentration levels, and are subject to greater punishment for missteps. Keeping the emotional, social, and other impacts of high crime and economic disadvantage out of schools is virtually impossible.

By contrast, protected suburbs are created by using the advantages accrued by Whiteness to enhance the quality of everyday life and schools, and the dramatically increased neighborhood safety that suburban areas have largely been able to secure for themselves. This consolidation of advantages significantly generated by racial privilege consolidates disadvantage in Black and other non-White areas where poverty, crime, disadvantage, and schools with fewer resources are accumulated.

Even in the cases where public schools in urban Black communities produce solid performance results among students, the pressures on these schools to maintain such outcomes are enormous. The fragility created by the accumulation of risk, difficulty, and suffering in the families and neighborhoods surrounding the school add extraordinary degrees of difficulty to teachers, students, and administrators who are working against a rising tide.

Because Williams-Bolar's "crime" was sending her kids to the Copley Township schools while living (at least primarily) in Akron, her public supporters have remained focused on the school disparity issue of the story as the linchpin issue that maintains the intersectional discrimination the case illuminates. The schools in Copley Township are not only very highly ranked but are located in a very safe neighborhood in which her father lives. Local supporters emphasized that the superior Copley Township schools' refusal to participate in statewide public school open enrollment plan was part of a larger system that creates great racial and class disparities among schools. Angry critics argued that she was stealing education from tax paying Copley Township residents, but also used her safety-based explanation to enact another narrative: that she was selfish and just wanted her father to be a babysitter. This narrative reflects additional hurdles that women and working poor women have when it comes to providing proper oversight of their children while they work. Williams-Bolar's designation of her father as a co-parent in helping to raise her daughters is precisely the kind of family support network that assists single parents, and under other circumstances would be considered responsible parenting.

Poor families have limited options for consistent, appropriate care of children. Access to affordable and high quality childcare is uneven at best and at worst, compounds other challenges in poor communities. Safe and appropriate oversight of children after school hours has long been considered a crucial aspect of keeping young people out of trouble and on academic track, but access to such childcare is limited. According to Zigler et al. (2009), "formal childcare is less frequently available in low income neighborhoods, and informal care may be less readily available than previously thought. A 1995 study found that nearly two thirds of families receiving welfare had no friend or relative who could provide child care and that their access to formal arrangements was limited by cost and transportation" (p. 12). Though Kelley Williams-Bolar's reliance on her father as a babysitter was viewed by critics as the selfish act of a bad mother, she opted for a popular form of child care support for working parents, especially for the working poor who have limited access to, or resources for, formal childcare.

## OPTING OUT: SPATIALIZED RACISM IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

At the heart of Copley Township's justification for aggressively prosecuting Kelly Williams-Bolar for falsifying residency records is that doing so gave her daughters "unauthorized" access to free, very well-funded public Copley Township schools. Thus, this case also reveals the ways that spatialized racism functions to maintain deep inequalities in educational access.

The use of local property taxes to fund public schooling has been widely considered a key element in the maintenance of unequal educational spending and opportunities based on class and race nationwide. Towns with excellent and well-funded schools are closely aligned with towns that have higher property values, thus cementing both additional educational and financial resources for wealthier homeowners and their children. Children who live in towns and districts where property values are higher have access to schools where families with higher incomes can use these resources to enrich learning, sports, and other student success support networks (Orfield et al., 1996; Scott and Holme, 2002). The system of property tax dependent education largely supports and reinforces wealth and income advantages for Whites and enables what Robert Reich (1991) describes as “the secession of the successful” from civic life: “In many cities and towns, the wealthy have in effect withdrawn their dollars from the support of public services and institutions shared by all and dedicated the savings to their own private services.” As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue: “the intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and consequently school) inequity” (p. 48).

Ohio’s educational funding system—one that continues to rely heavily on property taxes—was deemed unconstitutional by the State Supreme Court of Ohio in a series of cases *DeRolph v. Ohio*, I, II, III, IV, and V. The first *DeRolph* case filed in 1991 spanned over a decade of legal debate and produced four Supreme Court decisions. The Court continued to reiterate that the Ohio funding system was unconstitutional and systematically flawed, particularly because its over-reliance on property taxes created an imbalanced system that did not provide equal education in a “thorough and efficient manner.” The court issued instructions to the Ohio General Assembly to create a new statewide system of funding (Hill 2008). But this ruling has largely been resisted and ignored. As McKinley (2006) notes:

The degree of political animosity and partisanship that have built up over roughly a fifteen year period dealing with the issues inherent in the numerous *DeRolph* decisions have arguably created a state of siege where the mandates of the court have been ignored. After four Supreme Court decisions in which the state school funding system has been declared unconstitutional, the mandates of *DeRolph* I, II and IV have not been carried out . . . In short, the rule of law had not been obeyed in terms of enforcement of a remedy under *DeRolph*, yet, the system had been declared unconstitutional no less than four times (pp. 442–443).

Despite *DeRolph*, which outlaws this practice, Ohio continues to rely heavily on property taxes to fund education. Ohio allocates about 36% of its General Revenue Fund to school funding. School funding in Ohio is nearly evenly split between state funds and local taxpayer funds, each contributing 46% of the overall school budget with the remaining 8% coming from the Federal government. Allocations are determined largely by a cost per student figure called the “foundation” amount. This amount is provided to districts based on the number of students enrolled in the district. In 2009 the foundation amount was \$5,732 per student. According to the organization School Funding Matters, “Ohio’s aid formula assigns a responsibility to each local school district to pay a portion of the foundation amount. Generally, this local share equals the amount of money that the school district would raise with a 23 mill (2.3% property tax). This amount will vary from district to district depending on property values” (Ohio’s Current School Funding System).<sup>6</sup> This funding system creates wide disparities between property value rich districts and those with lower property values.

During this standoff, legislators have created greater access to a wider range of schools across districts for Ohio's children, an Ohio Department of Education state-wide open enrollment program has been developed which, "allows a student to attend school tuition free in a district other than the district where his or her parents reside" (Ohio's Current School Funding System). But, this policy, designed to create a modicum of greater equity by creating more flow between schools (while still retaining the privileges that property tax based funding allows), has been undermined by the "opt out" loophole. Towns can opt out of the open enrollment system and bar students who live beyond the district's boundaries from attending unless they pay tuition. Of the 663 school districts in Ohio, 429 have open enrollment, 144 have opted out of the open enrollment program, and ninety have an "adjacent districts only" policy for accepting out of district students tuition-free. Thus, according to the Ohio Department of Education, nearly a third of all public schools in Ohio have opted out of the open enrollment program.

The system creates the greatest motivation for property-rich towns to opt out, and simultaneously creates a demand for the schools in property tax rich districts that do not. Copley-Fairlawn and 143 other districts opt out of open enrollment. Copley-Fairlawn's tax base is so asset rich that if they contributed their 2.3% property tax to the foundation formula, it would override the state/district shared resource allocation program and require them to *send back state funds*. The *Fairlawn Batch Patch*, a local internet newsletter, published an article defending Copley-Fairlawn's decision to opt out of the open enrollment which made the following argument:

The Copley-Fairlawn School District has rational (and non-racist) reasons for refusing to offer open enrollment. Copley-Fairlawn schools have real and practical reasons for opting out of open enrollment. Ohio's school funding formula provides money to each district based on the number of students enrolled, then deducts from that allocation a local share calculated from the local tax base. The tax base in the Copley-Fairlawn district is *so valuable that the local share is greater than the state allocation would be*. *If the formula were strictly followed, the school would owe the state money* (italics added). Instead, the state provides to the district a flat guaranteed allocation. But when the district on the guarantee gains students, it does not receive additional funds. So while most districts gain state money when enrollment increases, a district like Copley-Fairlawn gains only expenses without additional money to offset those expenses (Piepho 2011).

By opting out, the Copley Township district retains its flat guaranteed allocation from the state. But because it does not receive funds for its student enrollment, new enrollments do not generate additional state funds for the district. Thus, the district saves its property tax generated funds that would otherwise be *due to the state* based on the funding formula. The opt-out loophole thus entitles wealthy districts to state funds that augment their own education budgets, but permits them to avoid returning anything to the state in return for the privilege of hoarding higher tax-bracket-based educational funds. The opt-out loophole also allows a state funded type of spatially and class based public school privatization. The funding system and the opt-out loophole maintain the appearance of open exchange of students across class and racially bounded districts, yet allow those districts with the greatest assets and wealth to retain their most important privileges.

The logic of the defense in the *Fairlawn-Batch Patch* interprets this substantial advantage as a *disadvantage*: Copley Township and Fairlawn would have expenses without additional resources if "outside" students enroll, even though they are also



able to save and control locally what should be their proper share of the cost to educate all children in Ohio.

This interpretation of the Copley Township district as a bounded space that should reasonably sequester its resources and protect its interests over the collective interests of the county, region, state, etc., is made in seemingly race neutral terms. While the language of the Copley Township's rights and responsibilities to protect its residents does not refer to race, its spatial terms and boundaries are largely the result of past and present decisions designed to create, maintain, and protect racialized and class privileged spatialization. Lipsitz (2011) notes: "Decades and centuries of segregation have taught well-off communities to hoard amenities and resources, to exclude allegedly undesirable populations, and to seek to maximize their own property values in competition with other communities. These nearly universal strategies for class advantage follow a distinct racial pattern in the United States. They subsidize segregation and produce rewards for Whiteness" (p. 28). Superintendent Poe puts it this way: "If you're paying taxes on a home here . . . those dollars need to stay home with our students" (Flam 2011).

This evocation of an implicitly racialized "defensive localism" allows the 86.5% White residents of Copley Township its accumulated privilege on what are embedded racial terms that reinforce White privilege and resource accumulation while publicly denying racism and appearing completely absent of racial motivation. This works to obscure the powerful impact of generations of race-based resource asset accumulation on education and the use of extreme localism to create and maintain racial boundaries to protect it. The basis of this "defensive localism" is constructed as "rational" and even virtuous because it saves the district money while providing excellent education to its children; it represents appropriate fiscal management of community funds—something all districts should embrace.

Residents and officials of Copley Township can openly discuss this rationale in what they posit as purely financial terms, while ignoring yet benefiting from the racialized consolidation of resources generated by racialized spatialization. And, it supports a system that is set up to produce and maintain racial privilege in the form of economic rationalism. As Lipsitz (2011) explains, the maintenance of racialized space allows "the advocates of expressly racist policies to disavow any racial intent. They speak on behalf of Whiteness and its accumulated privileges and immunities, but rather than having to speak *as* Whites, they protect themselves as racially unmarked homeowners, citizens, and taxpayers whose preferred policies just happen to sustain White privilege and power" (p. 35).<sup>7</sup>

This facile dynamic that shapes the maintenance of a seemingly race-neutral position, and an expressed objection to the suggestion of any racial intent or racist motivation is a crucial formulation of the maintenance of White racial privileges in the post-civil rights era. Over the past thirty years a complex process of seemingly race neutral "opting out" strategies supported in the form of seemingly race neutral policies have worked to produce an appearance of colorblind equality when in fact, the work of racial and racialized class privileges continue to maintain substantial White advantage.

Officials and their defenders argued that Williams-Bolar was offered the "option" to move into the district. Many bitter online retorts to articles used Williams-Bolar's seeming unwillingness to move into the district to support their claims that her aim was to defraud the district. Could Ms. Williams-Bolar have simply relocated to Copley Township? A closer look at the available units on the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority website that maps locations of its public housing shows no public housing in Copley or Fairlawn, but shows several public housing buildings in West Akron alone



(an area which is over 85% Black). For voucher-supported privately owned apartments, which is the type of housing in which Kelley Williams-Bolar resided, the AMHA lists 127 possible housing voucher apartments priced between \$400 and \$800 per month in the West Akron neighborhood alone (among twenty-three designated neighborhoods in Akron) while Fairlawn listed three and Copley listed only one available unit (for \$1,300 a month, nearly twice the price of the highest listed apartment in West Akron). As an avalanche of research has revealed, housing, lending, transit, hiring, and other practices as well as racialized district configurations work to protect and sequester wealthy White districts keeping out low income, affordable housing and the disproportionately Black people who often need to rely on it.

## READING CONDUCT AS CRIMINAL IN PUBLIC STORIES

The Kelley Williams-Bolar story is at heart a story about crime: about the criminalizing of poverty and Black mothers on welfare, about differential consequences of definitions of “crime” framed by dominant tales of race and gender, and about collective disregard of violations of law that serve to protect White privilege. Many supporters of the prosecution of the Summit County Prosecutor’s office and the policies of the Copley Township School Board used language heavily associated with the long-standing story/narrative of Black criminality, reinforcing the notion that Black people represent the undeserving poor, and that poor Black mothers game the system for personal benefit (Hill-Collins 2005; Lubiano 1998; Roberts 1997). Critical commentary frequently used language about Williams-Bolar that mirrored the terms of dominant racial narratives about poor Black women who rely on assistance programs of one sort or another. Foxnews.com (2011) issued stories with headlines like: “Education Scam Gives Ohio Woman a Lesson in Jail Time,” mirroring the perception of Williams-Bolar as a cheater who gets her comeuppance. These mandates of punishment rely on the use of apparently “race neutral” words to significant racial effect.

A long-standing, widespread, and regularly reinforced set of racial narratives about Black people *as criminals* has reinforced public acceptance of heightened prosecution of Black people and expansion of the prison system (Muhammad 2011). As Angela Davis (1998) argues in her essay “Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex”:

Imprisonment has become the response of first resort to far too many of the social problems that burden people who are ensconced in poverty. These problems often are veiled by being conveniently grouped together under the category “crime” and by the automatic attribution of criminal behavior to people of color.

Despite the dominant mainstream evasion of discussion about the myriad systemic means by which Blacks are kept at the bottom rung of the economic ladder, the policing, prosecution, and sentencing rates for Blacks—along with a dramatic expansion of the prison industrial complex since the 1980s—has resulted in an extraordinary rise in the prison population generally, but especially a devastatingly large percentage of Black people in prison or on parole. In 1980 our national prison population hovered around 500,000; by 2006 it had grown to over two million. According to 2009 U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 39.4% of the incarcerated were non-Hispanic Blacks with 20% being Hispanics (of all races). In addition to this exponential growth, studies also show higher levels of punishment for Blacks even for crimes that are actually more often committed by Whites (Couture et al., 2007). The criminal justice system is one of the most blatant

and troubling means by which a modern day racial caste system has been recreated in the post-civil rights era (Alexander 2010).

Black women receive distinct attention in these public tales of Black criminality. Tales about them focus on an intersection of sexual excess/misconduct and immorality and the role of motherhood under conditions of poverty. Relying on the continued power of the Reagan-spawned narrative of the Black “welfare queen,” this story constructs poor Black mothers on public assistance as cheating women who used their wanton sexuality to illegally extract money and services from the state (Collins 2005; Roberts 1997). As Jordan-Zachary (2008) notes, this turns vulnerability on its head: “welfare use no longer represents a state of poverty, but rather, a life of luxury” (p. 29). These supposed welfare queens, the story goes, have babies just to get increases in welfare payments; they are also unfit mothers because they pass on criminal values to their children. The result has been the literal and discursive criminalization of welfare recipients (Gilens 1999; Gustafson 2009; Hancock 2004; Jordan-Zachary 2008; Roberts 2003; White 2007).

The categorical association of Black people with crime enables the interpretation of Williams-Bolar’s protective investment in her children as a symbol of criminalized Black motherhood. These broader discourses justify the differential treatment of her and other such cases. Rather than being treated on its individual merits, the case is framed as a symbolic “exemplar” in order to serve as a vehicle for “deterrence.” Narratives of deterrence play a significant role in justifying higher sentencing for Blacks, and avoiding application of similar hyper-punishment for Whites, who can be treated as individuals rather than exemplars of criminality. In this case, the presiding judge, Judge Patricia Cosgrove, made explicit her desire to punish Williams-Bolar in order to deter other potential wrong-doers. She said: “I felt that some punishment or deterrent was needed for other individuals who might think to defraud the various school districts” (Canning and Tanglao, 2011). Judge Cosgrove’s comment is interesting here. Since forty-seven of forty-eight similar cases over the past six years were resolved without charges being brought, it would seem safe to say that Copley Township’s current system—with private investigators, informant payments for tips, and rigorous investigation of residency proof—has demonstrated its adequacy as a deterrent. Judge Cosgrove’s comment about the potential threat of defrauding “the *various* school districts” suggests that she is concerned with protecting not only Copley Township, but also those districts that have chosen to opt out of open enrollment. In a fully open enrollment, loophole-free school system, residency fraud is impossible. “Deterrence” only makes sense in the context of protecting the privileges of the higher property tax districts that have been arranged to evade the open enrollment mandate.

The Williams-Bolar case brought a great deal of national attention to Summit County Prosecutor Sherri Bevan Walsh, and much of it was critical. In response, Walsh created a special “Williams-Bolar Frequently Asked Questions” link on the Summit County Prosecutor website. The answers to these “frequently asked questions” all revolve around explaining and justifying the charges and the decision to prosecute the case as a felony. For example, government records tampering is deemed by state law to be a felony, but can often be reduced to a misdemeanor. The charges were not reduced in Williams-Bolar’s case. Walsh provides lengthy explanation for the decision not to reduce the charges in this case, emphasizing two key reasons that would lead her office to reduce the charges:

- 1) If there is evidence to support a felony charge but there are concerns that a jury might not convict. For example, when a key witness is not cooperating or has disappeared.
- 2) There is sufficient evidence to support the felony charge but

the defendant has no prior felony record, has expressed remorse for her conduct, and has accepted responsibility for her conduct. Also, in a theft case, we consider the efforts or desire to repay the money (County of Summit).

Walsh's justification suggests that she is not concerned with needing more evidence or problems convincing a jury. Rather, Walsh presents the decision to prosecute as hinging entirely on the prosecutor's judgments about Williams-Bolar's expression of remorse, her acceptance of responsibility, and her willingness to repay the money:

Ms. Williams Bolar had no prior felony record. However, at no time did she express remorse or accept responsibility for her actions. Nor did she agree to make any restitution for her crimes (a payment plan was offered numerous times). In fact, her behavior was the exact opposite. She knowingly and repeatedly violated the law. She ignored all requests and attempts to resolve her crime with the school system unlike the other families who were similarly situated and chose to do the right thing. A prosecutor cannot, in good conscience and in fairness to all law abiding citizens, offer a "plea bargain" to a person who has no regard for the law" (County of Summit).

Walsh's arguments about denying Williams-Bolar the opportunity of a plea bargain—her intransigence and consequent unworthiness—appears to differ from typical practice in criminal law. Prosecutorial discretion provides wide latitude for determining which crimes will be pursued, settled, or brought to a jury for criminal prosecution. Plea bargains are made for many reasons, even in the case of multiply convicted hardened criminals who have repeatedly shown a lack of regard for the laws that protect citizens from violence and harm. It would be impossible for a court system to prosecute all the criminal activities brought before it without substantial use of plea-bargaining. The system would be overwhelmed and it would be financially unfeasible. Walsh frames the rejection of payment plans without regard for Williams-Bolar's actual financial circumstances. The district had requested repayment of \$6,895 tuition for each girl for each of the two years they had attended Copley Township schools—a total of \$27,580. This figure amounts to well over a year and a half of Williams-Bolar's annual salary as a teacher's aide, a draconian penalty that would mire her in astronomical debt for the foreseeable future. This calculation of her potential debt is based on Williams-Bolar's wages prior to her payment of taxes that should, in principle at least, cover her children's attendance in any public school in a state with an open enrollment policy.

Walsh justifies felony punishment of Williams-Bolar on the basis of lack of remorse, failure to provide restitution, knowingly and repeatedly violating the law, and failing to resolve her crime. This justifying logic should encourage Walsh to prosecute the Copley Township school district. Such disrespect for the law without remorse in fact characterizes Copley Township and other school districts that have publicly ignored the multiple rulings by the Ohio Supreme Court that reliance on property taxes for educational funding is *unconstitutional*.

## THE TALE WAGS THE DOG

As Marshall Ganz (2008) has argued, stories are "one way we can translate our values into the emotions that inspire action." They are "powerful means for destroying . . .

presuppositions [and] received wisdoms . . . against a background in which legal and political discourse takes place” (Delgado 1989, p. 2413). Our public stories are not told in cultural vacuums; the better a story connects to other existing ideas and narratives, the more powerful its impact. Racial narratives, Imani Perry (2011) notes, are “stories that do explanatory work and instruct” people to develop generalized ideas about a given racial group. In contexts where everyday diverse contact is limited and significant histories of racial discrimination exist, racial narratives do significant work in shaping stories about Black people. Racial narratives, Perry continues, are a “fundamental piece of how we acquire knowledge about those groups. They are also part of how we make decisions about how to treat individual members of these groups. The power of narrative is universal—even while racial stories may be subjective, cultural, and contingent” (2011, p. 44).

In contemporary U.S. society, dominant narratives appear to support the rule of law as paramount, even when it defends a racially unjust system. These are the primary narratives used in the service of White racial, spatial, and class privilege. Despite the powerful familiarity of the story framing Williams-Bolar as a criminal and welfare cheat, as a racialized and gendered symbol of the undeserving poor, her case marshaled support and powerful counter-narratives. Many people identified with her as a parent trying to do the best for her children in the crushing context of an intricate web of intersecting racial, gendered, and class obstacles. Many of her supporters understood the compounded intersectional forces at work against her and used them to reframe the meaning of her actions.

Broad public access to spaces for telling, sharing, and developing counter-dominant stories that acknowledge the intersectionality of inequalities matters. In the face of the well-worn racial and gendered criminalizing frames used by Copley Township school district officials, the prosecutor, and critics of Williams-Bolar, a diverse collection of everyday people, advocates, and leaders came out in support of the idea that Ohio’s district-bounded educational systems reinforce systemic inequalities. Diverse sympathizers were brought together by the power and familiarity of Williams-Bolar’s story. They linked their fate to Williams-Bolar and others like her; their actions represented a “move from a politics based primarily on a narrow definition of group or individual self-interest to action in service of a transformative vision of social justice” (Guinier and Torres, 2002, p. 22).

What might otherwise appear to be individual, disconnected responses were amplified by circumstance and social networking outlets. Communities of support on Facebook and Twitter also increased attention from and revised the relatively neutral tenor of mainstream media coverage to reinforce collective recognition of intersectional inequities. The protests and counter-narratives defused and successfully rewrote the dominant racial, gendered, and class narratives that had served to justify Williams-Bolar’s arrest and sentencing.

Public silence on the subject was broken by the widespread online and public support for Williams-Bolar. A number of well-known and accomplished Black people publically admitted that their parents had made similar calculations in the face of spatialized racism and educational inequality. Celebrities like actor Danny Glover and musician QuestLove spoke out in support of Williams-Bolar on Tumblr and Twitter. Michael Lomax, president and CEO of the United Negro College Fund, told the story of his own family providing a different home address so that he and his sister could attend rigorous academic high schools and avoid the L.A. Manual Arts High School which tracks students into trades rather than college (Dawkins 2011; Lomax 2011). These admissions effectively served to challenge the devious criminal individual narrative used to frame Williams-Bolar’s actions and recontextualize her

actions and decisions as part of a collective response to an unjust educational system. In addition, two nation-wide, well-supported petitions strongly urged Governor Kasich to grant her clemency. The Change.org petition netted 185,249 signatures and the ColorofChange.org petition contained an additional 67,000 signatures and then joined with MomsRising.org to deliver more than 165,000 petition signatures to Governor Kasich. These petitions were reinforced by Color of Change's follow-up telephone campaign in September 2011 to encourage Governor Kasich to pardon Williams-Bolar. On September 7, 2011, despite a unanimous recommendation by the Ohio parole board to *deny* Williams-Bolar a pardon, Governor Kasich used his executive clemency override authority to reduce the felony charges to first-degree misdemeanors. He deemed the penalty "excessive for the offense" and publicly thanked all petition signers, but was also careful to couch his decision in terms amenable to a law and order mandate when he said, "No one should interpret this as a pass—it's a second chance" (Eversley 2011).

The case of Kelley Williams-Bolar illuminates the critical space of public narrative and the power of single axis discrimination reasoning to defend colorblind racism and obscure the intersectional and institutional nature of racialized inequalities. Normalization of structured inequalities is achieved through the maintenance of what Richard Delgado (1989) calls a "prevailing *mindset* by means of which members of the dominant group justify the world as it is" (p. 2413).<sup>8</sup> But this case is also powerful evidence of the importance of widely accessible counter narratives to challenge interpretations of prevailing mindsets and build solidarity across various intersecting communities. Harnessing the collectivizing power of the public tale is a crucial aspect of turning intersectional networks of discrimination into intersectional networks of collective possibility.

---

**Corresponding author:** Professor Tricia Rose, Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America, Department of Africana Studies, Brown University, 155 Angell Street, Providence, RI 02912. E-mail: Tricia\_Rose@brown.edu

## NOTES

1. The author would like to thank PhD candidate Micah Salkind for his excellent research assistance on this article; express appreciation for the very helpful anonymous reader reports and for the insightful and very helpful editorial assistance with this essay by the *Du Bois Review* special editors, especially Professor Barbara Tomlinson.
2. See also p. 37 for discussion on concentrations of poverty.
3. There are a few exceptions to this pattern of greater racial concentration that overall population ratios warrant. So, for example, Downtown, East Akron and Elizabeth Part Valley are around 60/40, Black-White areas.
4. An *Ohio.com* article by Beacon Journal writer Ed Meyer (2011) reports the following comments from Williams-Bolar's attorney at the trial: "During the daytime, it's a pretty nice-looking neighborhood," O'Brien said. "But she doesn't find out until she's living there for a while that, once the sun goes down, look out! There's gunfire. There's home break-ins." During the first two years Williams-Bolar lived there, from 2004 to 2006, O'Brien said, she filed about a dozen Akron police reports about neighborhood violence "and strange people being in and around her house."
5. It is worth noting that the emphasis on the recent robberies as her motive may have been partly a legal strategy to prevent interpretation of her as having premeditated her theft of Copley Township's educational resources. The legal context may have made it impossible for her to directly admit her educational intentions.
6. See also Johnson and Ingle (2009).
7. See also Holme (2002). Beyond the impact of hoarding educational resources by race and class, Holme's study shows how status ideologies such as race and class often define school



quality for parents. This approach may reveal another dimension to the importance of the maintenance of racialized space as determining quality and value, not simply as a means by which existing value is distributed.

8. See also Perry (2011) on the importance of racial narrative in the post-civil rights era.

## REFERENCES

- Alexander, Michelle (2010). *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo (2003). *Racism Without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Brown, Michael K., Martin Carnoy, Elliot Currie, Troy Duster, David B. Oppenheimer, Marjorie M. Shultz, and David Wellman (Eds.) (2003). *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Colorblind Society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Canning, Andrea and Leezel Tanglao (2011). Ohio Mom Kelley Williams-Bolar Jailed for Sending Kids to Better School District. *ABCNews*, January 26. (<http://abcnews.go.com/US/ohio-mom-jailed-sending-kids-school-district/story?id=12763654&page=1>) (accessed March 2011).
- Change.org (2011). Gov. John Kasich: Pardon Kelley Williams-Bolar—She Shouldn't Go to Jail for Protecting Her Kids. Petition started by Caitlin Lord. (<http://www.change.org/petitions/gov-john-kasich-pardon-kelley-williams-bolar-she-shouldnt-go-to-jail-for-protecting-her-kids>) (site discontinued) (accessed March 2011).
- City-data.com (2012a). Akron, OH (Ohio) Houses and Residents. (<http://www.city-data.com/housing/houses-Akron-Ohio.html>) (accessed October 2012).
- City-data.com (2012b). Akron, Ohio Neighborhood Map—Income, House Prices, Occupations, Boundaries. (<http://www.city-data.com/nbmaps/neigh-Akron-Ohio.html>) (accessed October 2012).
- Collins, Patricia Hill (2005). *Black Sexual Politics: African-Americans, Gender and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia Hill (2010). *A Different Kind of Public Education: Race, Schools, the Media and Democratic Possibilities*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Copley Township. Demographics. (<http://www.copley.oh.us/about-copley/about-copley/demographics.html>) (accessed June 2011).
- Cottrell, Megan (2010). The Shocking Statistics on Child Poverty. change.org. (<http://news.change.org/stories/the-shocking-statistics-on-child-poverty>) (accessed August 2011).
- County of Summit. Page of Prosecutor, Sheri Bevan Walsh. (<http://www.co.summit.oh.us/prosecutor/Williams-Bolar%20FAQ's.htm>) (site discontinued) (accessed October 2011).
- Couture, Heather, Paige M. Harrison, and William J. Sabol (2007). Bureau of Justice Statistics: Prisoners in 2006. Office of Justice Programs. (<http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=908>) (accessed August 2011).
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé (1993). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. In D. Kelly Weisberg (Ed.), *Feminist Legal Theory Foundations*, pp. 383–395. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé, Neil Gotanda, Garry Peller, and Kendall Thomas (Eds.) (1996). *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. New York: The New Press.
- Davis, Angela (1998). Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex. ([http://colorlines.com/archives/1998/09/masked\\_racism\\_reflections\\_on\\_the\\_prison\\_industrial\\_complex.htm](http://colorlines.com/archives/1998/09/masked_racism_reflections_on_the_prison_industrial_complex.htm)) (accessed July 2011).
- Dawkins, Marcia Alesen (2011). A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste—Except in Ohio. *truthdig*, January 29. ([http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/a\\_mind\\_is\\_a\\_terrible\\_thing\\_to\\_wasteexcept\\_in\\_ohio\\_20110129/?ln](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/a_mind_is_a_terrible_thing_to_wasteexcept_in_ohio_20110129/?ln)) (accessed July 2011).
- Delgado, Richard (1989). A Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, 87(8): 2411–2441.
- Delgado, Richard and Jean Stancic (Eds.) (2000). *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Department of Numbers. Akron, Ohio Unemployment. (<http://www.deptofnumbers.com/unemployment/ohio/akron/>) (accessed May 2011).
- Dhamoon, Rita Kaur (2011). Considerations on Mainstreaming Intersectionality. *Political Research Quarterly*, 64(1): 230–243.



- Entman, Robert M. and Andrew Rojecki (2000). *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*. Chicago, IL: University Chicago Press.
- Eversley, Melanie (2011). Ohio Governor Reduces Mom's Charges to Misdemeanors. *USA Today*, September 7. <<http://content.usatoday.com/communities/ondeadline/post/2011/09/ohio-mom-gets/1#.UT9bD4WAT1e>> (accessed November 2011).
- Facebook Inc. (2011). Support Kelley Williams-Bolar. <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Support-Kelley-Williams-Bolar/178291305540894>> (accessed November 2012).
- Flam, Lisa (2011). Ohio Mom Jailed for Lying About Kids' School Residency. *AolNews.*, January 26. <<http://www.aolnews.com/2011/01/26/ohio-mom-kelley-williams-bolar-jailed-for-lying-about-kids-scho/>> (accessed March 2011).
- Foxnews.com (2011). Education Scam Given Ohio Woman a Lesson in Jail Time. January 26. <<http://www.foxnews.com/us/2011/01/26/woman-jailed-attempt-better-childrens-education/>>. (accessed March 2011).
- Ganz, Marshall (2008). What is Public Narrative? <<http://leadingchangenetwork.com/files/2012/05/What-is-Public-Narrative-Fall-2011.pdf>> (accessed June 2011).
- García Bedolla, Lisa (2007). Intersections of Inequality: Understanding Marginalization and Privilege in the Post-Civil Rights Era. *Politics and Gender*, 3(2): 232–248.
- Gilens, Martin (1999). *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Anti-poverty Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Guinier, Lani and Gerald Torres (2002). *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gustafson, Kaaryn (2009). The Criminalization of Poverty. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 99(3): 643–716.
- Hancock, Ange-Marie (2004). *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*. New York: NYU Press.
- Hancock, Ange-Marie (2007). Intersectionality as a Normative and Empirical Paradigm. *Politics and Gender*, 3(2): 248–254.
- Headline News (2011). HLN News Morning Segment. 8:00 am January 27, Transcript. (accessed February 2011).
- Hill, Robert Frederick III (2008). *An Historical Analysis of Policy Decisions and the Fiscal Equity of School Funding in Ohio: 1980–2003*. PhD Dissertation, College of Education, Ashland University.
- Hing, Julianne (2012). Kelley Williams-Bolar's Long, Winding Fight to Educate Her Daughters. <[http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/05/kelley\\_williams\\_bolar\\_school\\_choice.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/05/kelley_williams_bolar_school_choice.html)> (accessed July 2012).
- Holme, Jennifer Jellison (2002). Buying Homes, Buying Schools: School Choice and the Social Construction of School Quality. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(2): 177–205.
- John (2011). Copley Wins Residency Fight. *Ohio.com*, January 17. <<http://www.ohio.com/blogs/education/first-bell-on-education-1.286050/copley-wins-residency-fight-1.286537>> (accessed March 2011).
- Johnson, P. A. and W. K. Ingle (2009). Property Taxes and School Funding in Ohio. Bowling Green, OH: Institute for Child & Family Policy. <[http://www.chardon.k12.oh.us/Downloads/PropertyTaxes\\_SchoolFunding.pdf](http://www.chardon.k12.oh.us/Downloads/PropertyTaxes_SchoolFunding.pdf)> (accessed July 2011).
- Jordan-Zachary, Julia (2008). *Black Women, Cultural Images and Social Policy*. New York: Routledge.
- Katznelson, Ira (2006). *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth Century America*. New York: Norton.
- Kaufman, Tina (2011). Analysis: Williams-Bolar for the Record. *Akron News Now.com*, February 2. <[http://www.akronnewsnow.com/news/itemdetail.asp?ID=43708&section=news&subsection=localnews&title=ANALYSIS\\_Williams-Bolar\\_For\\_The\\_Record](http://www.akronnewsnow.com/news/itemdetail.asp?ID=43708&section=news&subsection=localnews&title=ANALYSIS_Williams-Bolar_For_The_Record)> (accessed July 2011).
- Khalek, Rania (2011). 20 Years in Prison for Sending Your Kids to the Wrong School? Inequality in School Systems Leads Parents to Big Risks. <[http://www.alternet.org/story/152737/20\\_years\\_in\\_prison\\_for\\_sending\\_your\\_kids\\_to\\_the\\_wrong\\_school\\_inequality\\_in\\_school\\_systems\\_leads\\_parents\\_to\\_big\\_risks](http://www.alternet.org/story/152737/20_years_in_prison_for_sending_your_kids_to_the_wrong_school_inequality_in_school_systems_leads_parents_to_big_risks)> (accessed November 2011).
- King, Jamilah (2011). Theft Charges Dismissed Against Ohio Mom Kelley Williams-Bolar. *ColorLines News for Action*, February 1. <[http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/02/theft\\_charge\\_dismissed\\_against\\_ohio\\_mom\\_kelley\\_williams-bolar.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/02/theft_charge_dismissed_against_ohio_mom_kelley_williams-bolar.html)> (accessed March 2011).
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria and William F. Tate, IV (1995). Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education. *Teacher's College Record*, 97: 47–68.

- Lipman, Pauline (2011). *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race and the Right to the City*. New York: Routledge.
- Lipsitz, George (2011). *How Racism Takes Place*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Lomax, Michael (2011). The Akron Mom and Me. *The Root*, February 17. <<http://www.theroot.com/views/akron-mom-and-me>> (accessed March 2011).
- Lubiano, Wahneema (Ed.) (1998). *The House that Race Built*. New York: Vintage.
- Massey, Douglass S. and Nancy A. Denton (1993). *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McKinley, Sandra K. (2006). Litigation and Other Considerations in School Finance Reform in Ohio. *Forum on Public Policy*, 2(2): 441–454.
- Meyer, Ed (2011). Prosecutor Says AMHA Tenant, Father Schemed to Get Girls in Copley Schools. *Ohio.com*, January 21. <<http://www.ohio.com/news/pair-accused-of-lies-1.201124>> (accessed March 2011).
- Meyer, Ed and Carol Billicsky (2011). Kelley Williams-Bolar Leaves Jail But Public Outcry Escalates. *Ohio.com*, January 26. <<http://www.ohio.com/news/kelley-williams-bolar-leaves-jail-but-public-outcry-escalates-1.202301>> (accessed March 2011).
- Miller, Joshua and Anne Marie Garran (2007). The Web of Institutional Racism. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 77(1): 33–66.
- Muhammad, Khalil Gibran (2011). *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ohio Department of Education. <<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEPrimary.aspx?page=2&TopicRelationID=704>> (accessed July 2011).
- Ohio's Current School Funding System. <[http://www.tpspc.org/meeting\\_info/flyers/OhiosSchoolFundingSystem.pdf](http://www.tpspc.org/meeting_info/flyers/OhiosSchoolFundingSystem.pdf)> (accessed July 2011).
- O'Malley, Michael (2011). Did the Punishment Fit the Crime When Akron Mother Was Jailed for Sending Her Kids to a Suburban School? *The Plain Dealer*, February 13.
- Orfield, Gary, S. E. Eaton, and Harvard Project on School Desegregation (1996). *Dismantling Desegregation: The Quiet Reversal of Brown vs. Board of Education*. New York: New Press.
- Perkins, Olivera (2013). Black jobless rate often twice overall rate; National Urban League seeks to address it. *Cleveland.com*, May 19. <[http://www.cleveland.com/business/index.ssf/2013/05/black\\_jobless\\_rate\\_ofTEN\\_twice.html](http://www.cleveland.com/business/index.ssf/2013/05/black_jobless_rate_ofTEN_twice.html)> (accessed August 28, 2013).
- Perry, Imani (2011). *More Beautiful and More Terrible: The Embrace and Transcendence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. New York: New York University Press.
- Piepho, Scott (2011). Five Inconvenient Facts about the Kelley Williams-Bolar Case. *Fairlawn-Bath Patch*, February 4. <<http://fairlawn-bath.patch.com/articles/five-inconvenient-facts-about-the-kelley-williams-bolar-case>> (accessed July 2011).
- Poe, Brian (2011). Mother Jailed for School Fraud, Flares Controversy. Interview with Michel Martin. *Tell Me More*. NPR, January 28. <<http://www.npr.org/2011/01/28/133306180/Mother-Jailed-For-School-Fraud-Flares-Controversy>> (accessed July 2011).
- Reich, Robert B. (1991). Secession of the Successful. *New York Times Magazine*, January 20. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/20/magazine/secession-of-the-successful.html>> (accessed June 2011).
- Roberts, Dorothy (1997). *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Pantheon.
- Roberts, Dorothy (2003). *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*. New York: Basic Civitas Books.
- Salary.com. Teacher Aide Salary Details, Akron, OH. <<http://swz.salary.com/SalaryWizard/Teacher-Aide-Salary-Details-Akron-OH.aspx>> (accessed July 2011).
- Scott, Janelle and Jennifer Jellison Holme (2002). Public Schools, Private Resources: The Role of Social Networks in California Charter School Reform. In Amy Stuart Wells (Ed.), *Where Charter School Policy Fails: The Problems of Accountability and Equity*, pp. 102–128. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Shapiro, Tom (2004). *The Hidden Costs of Being African-American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality*. New York: Oxford.
- Singleton, David and Kelley Williams-Bolar (2011). Ohio Mom Defends Sending Kids To Better School District. Interview with Michel Martin. *Tell Me More*. NPR, Feb. 10. <<http://www.npr.org/2011/02/10/133654397/Ohio-Mom-Defends-Sending-Kids-To-Better-School-District>> (accessed March 2011).
- State of Ohio Adult Parole Authority, Columbus, Ohio (2011). Minutes of the SPECIAL MEETING of the Adult Parole Authority, July 20. <<http://www.drc.ohio.gov/Public/WilliamsBolarKellyClemency.pdf>> (accessed November 2011).

- Tucker, Randy (2011). Workplace Equality for Blacks Remains Elusive. *Dayton Daily News*, January 16. (<http://www.daytondailynews.com/news/dayton-news/workplace-equality-for-Blacks-remains-elusive-1056416.html>) (accessed March 2011).
- Walsh, Sheri (2011). Williams-Bolar FAQ's. <http://www.co.summit.oh.us/prosecutor/Williams-Bolar%20FAQ's.htm> (accessed July 2011).
- White, Julie Anne (2007). The Hollow and the Ghetto: Space, Race and the Politics of Poverty. *Politics and Gender*, 3(2): 271–280.
- Wise, Tim (2010). *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat From Racial Equality*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights.
- Zigler, Edward, Katherine Marsland, and Heather Lord (2009). *The Tragedy of Childcare in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University.