Barbara J. Miner begins *Lessons from the Heartland*, her story of the struggle for justice in the Milwaukee school system, with a blighted image of her hometown, and an allusion to the new American ghetto. In Milwaukee in 2011, 55.3 percent of working-age black men in Milwaukee did not have a job, 60 percent of the city’s public school students were black, and by 2013 the city’s eminent voucher program was funneling its one billionth dollar of public money into its private and religious schools, she tells. This is a picture, first and foremost, of unjustifiable abandonment – of the city, of its schools, and of its black population. Inequality within the public schools must never be viewed far from this picture, Miner implies, for the wellbeing of our public school system is tied to the possibility for “an informed citizenry and a vibrant democracy.” During the heyday of the civil rights movement activists had easily moved between issues regarding housing, employment, and schools – for these activists, they were all issues of equality and justice, with roots in racism and discrimination. “The school problem cannot be solved until the housing problem is solved,” Miner notes Martin Luther King Jr. spoke these clairvoyant words in March of 1963, just months after delivering his “I have a Dream” speech. And the same remains true today: “Education policy is housing policy,” writes scholar Richard Rothstein in a 2014 article in *Portside*.

Yet Miner’s history tells that in the trail from the civil rights era to today, this vein of thought has been muted. The public conversation over school reform that has taken place since the 1950s has too often occurred within vacuum that isolates inequality *within the schools* as the primary issue. The struggle for equality in Milwaukee’s public school system has been strong and deliberate, but Miner’s story suggests that what’s been left out of the institutional dialogue on school reform is that creating a more equal education system relies upon the creation of a more just and equal society, and that inequality within our schools is evidence many aspirations of the Civil Rights Movement have yet to be achieved. If we recognize that our commitment to public school reform is not only about improving student achievement but about the creation of a more just society, and that the welfare of our school system is inextricably tied to the existence of justice within our society, then we recognize that we cannot talk about school reform without discussing the conditions that have created and nurtured the inequalities within our school system. For Miner, this means talking about race, the labor market, and housing.

In order to illustrate the role of race and racial stigma in shaping Milwaukee’s modern social fabric, Miner takes us back to before the Great Migration, to a time when our modern concept of the black-white divide did not yet exist. The idyllic nature with which she describes Milwaukee’s “Glory Days” of the 1950s haunts the rest the history, as the confrontational politics of the 1960s left many white voters and political conservatives with the belief that Milwaukee’s best move was a return to the comfort and segregation of the 1950s. Milwaukee’s Glory Days, of course, were not founded on racial segregation but rather on a thriving economy, which produced nearly full employment through providing jobs for everyone, black and white, and even those with only a high school diploma. Racial discrimination existed, but Milwaukee’s black population was small which meant the city’s power elite had not yet had to confront the question of racial integration on any large scale.

Then came the Great Migration, when blacks flooded into the North’s rust belt cities in search of work and an escape from Jim Crow. From 1950 to 1960 the city’s black population nearly tripled from 22,000 to 62,500, causing a drastic and abrupt change in the demographic makeup of many of the city’s neighborhoods. While many Southern blacks did find jobs, they also confronted institutional racism in the form of real estate practices and mortgage and home insurance policies that isolated blacks to an region of the city that was known by the power elite and the media as “The Inner Core,” connoting Milwaukee’s poor black neighborhoods. “The Inner City did not develop by happenstance,” writes Miner, “It was the result of restrictive covenants prohibiting selling or renting or anyone other than Caucasians, and of a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ among realtors not to sell or rent to blacks or Jews except in the Central City.”

Although the U.S. Supreme Court had outlawed restrictive covenants in 1948, the Federal Housing Authority encouraged segregation through the de facto racist policy of redlining. By marking residents of black neighborhoods as risky or unqualified loan recipients, the FHA aided the funneling of public and private resources into the mostly white suburbs, while black neighborhoods saw disinvestment and abandonment. In his recent article “The Case for Reparations,” Ta-Nehisi Coates points to the fact that such government-condoned policies effectively barred blacks from the greatest form of passage to the middle class yet in U.S. history: home ownership. These policies also kept blacks economically and geographically isolated, with little choice as to where to live or where to send their children to school. Miner includes a poignant quote by a white student from an urban neighborhood undergoing white flight that illustrates the devastating effects of white flight on Milwaukee’s schools:

“Higher mathematics and science were falling by the wayside in favor of shop or home economics…when I was a freshman, four foreign languages were being taught. When I graduated, the program for the next year included only Spanish. In my last two years at the school the teaching staff changed every semester. The teachers who had been there for a few years transferred to other schools. Our new teachers generally came directly from colleges” (36).

As institutionally condoned white flight wreaked havoc on inner city neighborhoods and the welfare of black families, activists began to demand action to curb inequality within housing and the schools. During the 1960s activists from newly-formed organizations (such as the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee, or MUSIC) joined with members of the clergy and more established organizations such as the NAACP and CORE to take advantage of the grassroots momentum and political mindset of the civil rights era and to use the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling to press for an end to segregation and ambitious housing and school reforms. In 1964, in one of the largest Milwaukee demonstrations, members of MUSIC organized a one-day Freedom Boycott of the public schools to pressure the school board to act to end segregation and discrimination within the public schools. Between 11,000 and 15,000 students participated, roughly half of the nonwhite students in public schools. Rather than attend school, students flooded into churches and community buildings where they were taught for the day by a mixture of businessmen, retired teachers, clergy, blue-collar workers, and a few participating public school teachers. Martin Luther King Jr. referred to the Freedom School Boycott as “a creative way” to dramatize the segregation issue.

Yet it would be difficult for any reader to walk away from Miner’s account with a vision of the desegregation era as a success. Miner alludes to the metaphor of square dancing to describe the progress of the desegregation movement: each step forward followed by a step sideways and a step backwards. What the reader senses is the truth of Miner’s assertion that the era of desegregation was, like the post-Civil War Reconstruction era, “a brief attempt to redress injustice” situated within a long history of institutionally-perpetuated inequality. Miner’s history of desegregation is indeed long, arduous, and ultimately anticlimactic – much as the struggle itself was, by Miner’s telling. Despite the apparent success of the Freedom School Boycott and years of large scale protests calling for open housing legislation, Miner writes that “the Milwaukee Public Schools ended the tumultuous 1960s much as it began: segregated” (67). Miner shows that in large part this was because the school board fought tooth and nail to avoid facing the complicated issue of housing segregation, which was bound to upset white voters. The school board continued to protect the conventional concept of “neighborhood schools” as the stalwart of the educational system. Rather than fighting institutional racism in housing policy, which would have brought some fairness to neighborhood schooling, the school board instead spent the 1960s and 70s using housing patterns to *justify* segregation within the schools.

The culmination of the civil rights era’s mobilizations around desegregation in fact occurred a decade after the initial demand. Finally on January 19, 1976 – eleven years after forty one black and white public school students filed charges challenging segregation within the schools– Milwaukee’ Judge John Reynolds Jr. ruled that segregation did indeed exist within Milwaukee’s schools and that “segregation was intentionally created and maintained by the defendants,” or the Milwaukee school board. Though this declaration paved the way for activists of the desegregation movement to go on the offensive, Miner recognizes that by placing blame on the school board Reynolds’ helped to dismiss the view that housing segregation was to blame. At the same time, bussing – the much-anticipated method to racial integration – was undermined before the busses even got rolling as “the bus, not segregation or equal educational opportunity, became the hot-button issue” (78).

The bus conjured up – with help from the media – images of Boston’s turbulent attempts at school integration, and Milwaukee’s anti-integrationists immediately took up the mantra of “no forced bussing” before the order had even been mandated. In order to assuage conflict and confrontation, members of the Milwaukee power structure – who by now knew they had to act on desegregation – decided to deemphasize the issue of racial integration altogether, centering the reforms around the creation of a series of “specialty schools” to be filled by lottery, and keeping bussing voluntary. The plan was sold to the public “using the carrot of voluntary choice” to appeal to white voters and beat back the violent connotation of “forced bussing” that was already being thrown around by the opposition. Thus the public was sold on an integration plan through a rhetoric that posed “choice” as justice, and relegated the objective of racial equality.

It seems appropriate that only one chapter of Miner’s book contains what could by any means be called an optimistic title: “The Buses Roll and Desegregation Begins.” For Miner, the rolling buses symbolize both the momentary momentum of the desegregationists’ movement and a prediction of the movement’s ultimate unraveling. In Miner’s depiction “forced bussing” was a fear that haunted Milwaukee politicians and white voters’ imaginations before Milwaukee’s desegregation movement even had feet, thus the power structure was committed to its defeat. When Judge Reynolds pinned the blame for school segregation on the school board, he implied that the problem could be solved through a change of policy alone. School board policy, of course, was largely beholden to white voters, many of whom, through decades of racial segregation, remained fearful of calls for integration. Though voluntary bussing posed as equal opportunity, politicians knew that most whites’ “choice” would keep them where they were – geographically and racially segregated in the Milwaukee suburbs. Thus at its grandest moment the struggle for integration was pursued through a half-hearted bussing program, which did little to lessen segregation on any broad scale and did nothing to confront the issues of housing segregation and economic inequality that lay at the root of disparity within the schools.

Miner shrewdly follows the role of media in shaping the debates surrounding Milwaukee’s various attempts at school integration, and her tale illuminates the media’s role in fostering bias within the very language of the debate. While the keystone of desegregation policy was laden the burdensome “forced bussing,” the voluntary bussing and voucher programs were pitched as “choice,” which alluded to the free market ideology that began to take root in the 1980s. The idea of equality thus became more narrowly defined by equality of opportunity - i.e. everybody has equal opportunity to apply for the new “specialty schools” - rather than equality of outcome - i.e. we will ensure your child, rich or poor, black or white, receives a good education. The framework of choice is deceptive further because it places the welfare and outcome of students’ on the decisions of the individual or their family, further obscuring the role of institutions in shaping individuals’ circumstances and determining the opportunities made available to them. Were we to look at housing patterns within the framework of “choice,” racial segregation becomes inexplicable as a social phenomenon. Why would blacks “choose” to isolate themselves in poor rundown neighborhoods? Further, why did blacks not simply “choose” to leave the cities when the neighborhoods went downhill?

The language of individual “choice” also obliterates any vision of or hope for the capacity of the public sector to provide for the public good. This, in turn, leads to a loss of vision of the integral role of public institutions – and a public school system above all – in the preservation of our democratic system. For Miner, this erosion of faith in the public school system has been one of the most harmful effects of the more recent veins of Milwaukee school system reform. By the late 1990s “neighborhood schools” had returned, accompanied by the media’s portrayal of nostalgia for an uncomplicated – and segregated – past. By the 1990s “the free market consumer mentality dominated” debate over the school system. Meanwhile “the vision of a public school system balancing the needs of all children had essentially vanished.” Once again the school board used housing segregation as an as a justification for integration’s failure rather than as a justification for its necessity. Miner notes that unlike the long and active struggle to desegregate the schools – which took a fourteen year court battle and years of organization and activism – the return to neighborhood schools happened in no time, approved by Republican governor Tommy Thompson and the state legislature within a year. A cross section of community groups and parents spoke up against the return, their concerns centered on the likelihood that neighborhood schools would lead to re-segregation, but “their arguments were never seriously addressed.” The power structure was already committed to the rollback in time.

As it was, the rhetorical framework of “choice” did catch on, and, compounded with a new conservative political climate, it laid the groundwork for the spawning of the voucher school movement. Miner kicks off her discussion of the voucher program by asserting that the growth of the voucher school system was accompanied by “the long, painful, and conscious abandonment of Milwaukee’s public schools” (155). The absence of public oversight is precisely at the root of the voucher schools’ success, she teaches. Conservatives and libertarians and free market activists seized upon voucher schools exactly because of their disdain for government oversight and intervention. Though spawned by an unlikely alliance of conservatives, libertarians, black nationalists, business leaders, and religious school advocates, the Milwaukee voucher program’s stalwart supporter is the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, a philanthropic institution committed to a “free market worldview” and to “replacing public education” with a universal voucher system for private and religious schools. Miner notes that the Bradley foundation was also the largest funder for Charles Murray’s research for *The Bell Curve*, a book that argued whites are inherently smarter than blacks, and provides prescriptions for school reform with the presupposition that “in a universal education system, many students will not reach the level of education that most people view as basic.”

The biography on the Bradley foundation is evidence Miner’s concern that the voucher program is not only incidentally damaging to the prospects for the public school system, but that it deliberately seeks to erode confidence or faith in the public school system by shifting resources away from the public and into the private realm. As it happens, conservatives have not yet been able to show the private system to be stronger than the public, though they worked hard to make it true. When Scott Walker took office he cut $840 million form elementary and secondary public education, and limited the amounts districts were legally allowed to raise. At the same time he massively expanded the state’s voucher program.

*Lessons From the Heartlands* reworks the debate over school reform by drawing our attention to the narrowness of the school reform debate. For Miner, public school reform has never really failed – if anything, it hardly ever began, and was never given the time, space, or resources to succeed. One way that Miner broadens the debate is by showing that school reform was hardly ever in the hands of the people who had demanded it to begin with. Miner includes a brief biography of black nationalist and school reform activist Polly Williams who was the initial mind and drive behind the voucher school movement. Williams explains to Miner that the voucher schools were intended to act as a less bureaucratic arena in which parents could have more say and more control. Any successes, she said, were supposed to be channeled back into the public schools. Eventually Williams was replaced as spokesperson as the movement was coopted by conservative with an active interest in eroding public faith in the public school system. When the movement got dragged away from Williams, her original vision was obscured. She left the movement as they movement had left her, with only a “bittersweet legacy.”

Ultimately, the most telling fact about the voucher schools is that they never became as popular as the Milwaukee power structure or the Bradley Foundation would lead us to believe. Despite gaining broad backing by conservatives and becoming an integral component of a Republican strategy committed to privatization and anti-unionism, Miner confirms that “the public at large remains skeptical.” And for good reason, as voucher schools have time and again proven themselves prone to all the problems that are abetted by a lack of transparency. Despite the voucher program’s expansion in Milwaukee and other cities that have gotten strong financial backing from anti-public sector ideologues, the voucher school system has little public support.

It is this obscured reality that Miner’s core message regards. For her assertion all along is that the struggle for justice within the schools has its ups and downs, but that it carries on. After illuminating so many of the integrationists’ defeats, she leaves us with an optimistic picture: the people in the streets, demanding justice, occupying the Wisconsin state capital in protest of Governor Scott Walker’s attempts to decimate the public sector and the rights of public sector employees in 2011. The show of force speaks to Miner’s implicit belief that to whatever extent faith in the public sector has been eroded, it has happened outside of the people’s hands. For at every moment at which the power structure has made moves to destroy the people’s progress in creating more fair and just systems, community members and concerned parents and activists have always stood up to challenge it, to protect their schools and their families and their right to demand more from the systems that are supposed to serve them. Though since the 1970s those in power have paid these figures little attention, their existence and their participation leaves a historical record - captured and recorded, now, by Miner - that the struggle is not over and the community has not given up.

On the flip side, Miner’s account shows us that the movement for integration must be exactly that – a movement in the most literal sense of the word. The possibility that racial integration has been treated as either inevitable or impossible, as Miner advises, has been a detriment to its progress. She reminds us that despite the ubiquity in politics of a rhetoric that emphasizes the individual and obscures the public good, that the American people still have a vision of that public good and a belief that that public sector produces something valuable - in short, that they are owed something better. Miner, along with the voices she records, reminds us that as long as people continue to keep working, to keep putting boots on the ground and politicians up against the wall, then the movement continues.