CHAPTER 8

MOTHERS BATTLE BUSING AND NONTRADITIONAL EDUCATION IN 1970S DETROIT

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Throughout the turbulent decade of the 1960s, much of Detroit’s white working class seemed to slumber, secure in the insularity of their homes and communities. On a local level, their lives had remained relatively calm; the schools their children attended were largely the same traditional, Protestant-oriented environments they had known during their own school days—or so they thought. The conflict and turmoil swirling in the larger society appeared to be safely removed from the comfortable enclaves they enjoyed.1 Then, suddenly, everything seemed to change. The impetus for this upheaval was the 1971 federal district court ruling in *Milliken v. Bradley*2 that the Detroit school system was unlawfully segregated, and that children would face school reassignment, using busing as a remedy. Seemingly overnight, the autonomy parents believed they had—their ability to control major decisions regarding the upbringing of their children—was snatched away, as the busing mandate decreed that their children would face school reassignment for the purposes of alleviating the racial imbalances in the public schools.

White, working- and lower-middle-class parents—particularly those living in the northeast and northwest sections of Detroit—felt deeply
distressed at the prospect of losing control over their children’s education. This distress was expressed—and likely felt—most acutely among the mothers, who believed their children’s well-being was one of their most fundamental responsibilities. The mothers’ dismay only increased as they became aware of other “radical” trends occurring in the schools—changes that previously had gone unnoticed. It seemed that the schools were placing increased emphasis on sex education, stressing a morally ambiguous character development curriculum known as “values clarification,” and promoting the ideas of women’s liberation. Perceiving the educational and cultural trends with great alarm and desperately trying to retain control over their children’s lives, some Detroit mothers threw themselves into action. These stay-at-home mothers, lacking any prior experience with advocacy groups, developed a number of protest organizations that focused on social and political mobilization to restore parental rights and local control over educational issues. One of the best-known of these organizations was Mothers’ Alert Detroit (MAD), operating under the successive leadership of Carmen Roberts and Shirley Wohlfield.

This essay puts a “human face” on the otherwise abstract categories in regard to the politics of educational and cultural reform during the 1970s. Using an examination of the experiences of a group of activist women in Detroit, I argue that the opposition to busing and other reforms stemming from the movements of the 1960s and ’70s cannot be reduced simplistically to race- or class-based arguments, but rather, when seen from the ground, represent a “chain reaction” ignited by a perceived threat to parental rights and the control of their most cherished possession—their children. The ways that MAD mothers interpreted the conflicts in which they were embroiled colored their reactions to such issues; thus, one cannot sufficiently analyze their behavior without appreciating how they made meaning of the issues confronting them.

While racialized beliefs and tensions over busing served as the catalyst that brought mothers such as MAD members out of their homes and into the larger sociopolitical fray, other issues related to parental control, conservative values, and educational reform captured their interests and carried their activities far beyond protests over busing and desegregation. Thus, the unifying “threads” running throughout the concerns of MAD mothers were parental rights and family values, as much as racial anxieties.

I situate these tensions at the micro level to show how they were perceived by a group representing a pivotal segment of the voting population: