Urban Education as Racialized State Violence: What is the Role of Higher Education?

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Abstract

This address was given as the plenary presentation to the 24th Annual Conference of the Coalition for Urban and Metropolitan Universities, Chicago, Illinois, October 23, 2018

Keywords: displacement; community; minorities; neoliberalism; school closures; privatization; protest

Good morning. Thank you so much to all the conference organizers for inviting me to a dialogue with you. I know that CUMU has a place-based mission and that the theme of this conference is partnering with community organizations and institutions for equity. That's exactly what I want to talk about today.

Displacement is an issue I will focus on today, so I want to begin by recognizing the space we are in and acknowledging the native peoples whose land we are on. Forward to 2018, we should note that this opulent hotel we are meeting in, located on Chicago's Gold Coast, in a global city, was a few weeks ago a site of a city-wide strike by primarily Black, Brown, Asian, immigrant, and women hotel workers for the simple justice of year-round health insurance. These low-wage service workers live the effects of globalized displacement and the flexibilization of labor that is a cornerstone of the neoliberal restructuring of the labor force, even as they find it increasingly impossible to live in the city. Another act of displacement. Our universities are also complicit. They employ increasing numbers of part-time, contingent academic labor, PhDs who work out of their cars and often live near the poverty line, without a stable place of employment. In my talk today I want to draw connections between what geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls these "disparate spaces" connected by restructuring of the urban economy and urban space, neoliberalization of public education, the politics of race, the resistance of grassroots social movements, and ultimately our universities.

I want to locate myself in this story also. I am a professor of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I teach young people who are going to be Chicago Public School (CPS) teachers and graduate students who study urban education. I am the parent of a CPS graduate and I have been involved in organizing for education justice in the city for over 20 years. I study the relationship of urban education policy and the political economy of cities and the politics of race. So I am deeply committed to the issues I am going to talk about. As an activist scholar, I claim what feminist philosopher Sandra Harding (2015) calls the "situated objectivity" of engagement in the social processes I study. I have seen first-hand the lived experience of CPS policies. While I draw on research on urban education and my own extensive ethnographic data, my analysis privileges perspectives of the Black and Latinx families, students, and their teachers that I organize with. Their experiences, histories, insights, and desires are

central to understand the dialectics of the racialized neoliberal restructuring of public education and emerging alternatives.

School Closings and Black Disposability

On May 22, 2013, Chicago's mayor-appointed school Board voted to close 49 neighborhood elementary schools and one high school—the most school closures at one time ever in the U.S. The mayor justified the mass closures on grounds of a fiscal "crisis" that required public austerity. The closures impacted 133 schools in total, including designated "receiving schools," and approximately 47,000 students. The Board's decision followed seven intense months of protest in which literally thousands of parents, students, teachers, and community members testified at public hearings, marched, picketed, sat in, held press conferences and vigils, organized a three-day march across the city, and more to stop their schools from being closed. The 50 closings were on top of over 10 years of previous drastic school actions in which the Board had closed, phased out, consolidated, or turned around 105 neighborhood public schools.

In 2013, the Board promised it would close no more schools for five years. Yet, less than a year later, they turned over Dvorak, McNair, and Gresham elementary schools—all in Black communities—to a non-profit management organization, dismissing all staff and destabilizing the schools. Then, in April 2018, five years after the 2013 mass closings, the Board voted to phase out and close four more high schools in the African American Englewood section of Chicago and one primarily Black elementary school on the near South side.

School closings in working class communities of color in Chicago are part of a national pattern. In 2014, the Journey 4 Justice Alliance reported that, in recent years, Detroit, New York, and Chicago had all closed more than 100 public schools. Columbus, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Houston, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Kansas City, Milwaukee, and Baltimore each closed more than 25. The District of Columbia closed 39 since 2008. In each case, Black and Brown students were primarily affected.

Puerto Rico is the latest case in point. In April 2018, the governor of Puerto Rico seized on the devastation and displacement caused by Hurricane Maria to announce plans to close more than 300 out of 1,100 public schools on the Island and to open up Puerto Rico to charter schools and private school vouchers for the first time, even as teachers and parents came together to clean, repair, and reopen their schools. Shortly after the hurricane, Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, an advocate of charters and vouchers, flew to the Island to strategize with Puerto Rican officials. It was a déjà vu moment, calling up the specter of pushing through school closings and privatization in New Orleans in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina. School closings are the new "normal" response to "natural" disasters and urban fiscal "crises."

The main target of these policies is Black communities where economic strangulation is exacerbated by urban austerity measures to dismantle public housing, public health clinics, schools, and other public services. As Black studies professor Rose Brewer (2012) points out, this is a form of neoliberal urban crisis management rooted in Black disposability and oriented to capital accumulation. Public disinvestment is coupled with intensified policing, incarceration, and police violence against Black children, men, and women. Along with lack of affordable

housing and living wage jobs, these policies are driving African Americans out of the city, but they have also sparked a new wave of militant organizing, demonstrated by the movement that forced the trial and conviction of the police officer who murdered Black teenager Laquan Macdonald in Chicago.

I want to talk about these dialectics centered on public education and pose some questions about implications for our work in urban universities. My focus is Chicago, but the same urban political economic and racial dynamics play out in other U.S. cities, albeit in varied ways.

Accumulation by Dispossession

Privatization of education in the U.S., and globally, typifies the neoliberal strategy of "accumulation by dispossession." That is, private appropriation of public goods and institutions—"the commons"—from public housing, to the Amazon rain forest, to public water systems, to the human genome—and their commodification for profit. Neoliberal policies over the past thirty years have transformed public education into a lucrative global industry. The U.S. education market alone (Zion Market Research) was valued at about $1.35 trillion in 2017.

Markets in charter schools, education services, curriculum, on-line classes, teacher training operations, testing, tutoring services, branded university satellites, for-profit colleges, and more are hot investment opportunities. Speculative investment in charter school bonds and charter school real estate is the subject of investor webinars and bond trader and hedge fund newsletters. This process has been facilitated by political administrations on both sides of the aisle and shaped by billionaire venture philanthropists, exemplified by the Walton Family, Melinda and Bill Gates, and Eli Broad Foundations and Facebook CEO Mark Zucker, who have benefited from the extraordinary upward redistribution of wealth over the past three decades. Capitalizing on neoliberal policies to disinvest in urban public schools, they leverage their enormous wealth to promote education markets, business management of schools, the technology-driven education standards and testing industries, and retooling schooling for human capital development. In a colonial model, they decide what is best for working class students of color.

Chicago School Closings

Closing public schools is a key policy lever to facilitate marketization of public education. In Chicago, since 2001, 170 neighborhood public schools were closed, phased out, consolidated, co-located, or handed over to private "turnaround" managers. Schools with more than 99 percent students of color (what the Chicago Teachers Union calls "Apartheid schools") have been the principle target. In the 2013 closings, 79 percent of the students affected were Black although 40.5 percent of the students in the district are Black. Most of the other affected students were Latinx. Due to school closings, some Black areas of the city have few neighborhood public schools left. Many were closed for low enrollment, even as CPS authorized and funded 131 charter schools, mostly enrolling Black and Brown students. At the same time, CPS's budget has disproportionately benefitted selective enrollment and specialty schools in primarily white, upper-middle class and gentrified areas.

This racialized pattern is repeated nationally. Over 80 percent of the students affected by Philadelphia's closure of 23 schools in 2013 were Black, though the school district student population was 58 percent Black. Just four percent of students affected were white. Washington D.C.'s closure of 15 schools in 2013 affected about 2,700 students; just two (less than 0.01 percent) were white, although white students make up nine percent of the D.C. public school population. Of the total affected students, 93 percent were Black although 72 percent of the students in the district are Black. Detroit, with a student population that is 82 percent Black, closed more than 100 schools since 2005. In each of these cities, there is an associated expansion of charter schools.

Yet, there is little evidence that closing schools improves education. The vast majority of students do not experience improved academic performance. A study of Chicago's 2013 mass closings by the Consortium on Chicago Research found "academic outcomes were neutral at best, and negative in some instances." Nor is there evidence that charter schools overall improve education.

Root Shock

Public officials justify closing schools with a narrative of "failure" and "underutilization." But this narrative washes out the complexity of schools rooted in communities and erases histories of structural racism and public policies and private investment decisions that have gotten them to this point. The official narrative negates the pain, loss, and dislocation that children experience when their schools are closed. It disregards parents' fears for the increased risks to children forced to travel long distances, cross dangerous streets, or go out of their neighborhoods. Closing a school breaks the web of sustaining human connections that coalesce there, producing trauma that Professor of Urban Policy and Public Health, Mindy Fullilove, calls "root shock"— "the traumatic stress of the loss of [one's] lifeworld" whose effects last for decades.

The interviews our team of activists and scholars at the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education did with parents affected by Chicago's 2013 school closings captured this trauma. One parent said, "…the kids were grieving. It was just like somebody had died and it had. The school died". Many described their schools as like "family" and their closure as a blow to the community. Our interviews with Black and Latinx parents revealed that many were deeply involved in their schools as volunteer teaching assistants, coaches, school monitors, unofficial community liaisons, elected local school council representatives, and more. Some anchored school programs. They had intimate knowledge of the interplay of their school's strengths and weaknesses, perspectives on how to improve it, and broad, humanistic visions of the education they wanted. The school closing process itself dehumanized the parents and their children who were excluded from decision-making and whose deep knowledge and insight were disregarded and dismissed.

Neoliberal Urbanism and Education Policy

Taking a wider view, we cannot fully understand the forces driving these policies and their implications without considering the spatial, economic, and racial logics of neoliberal urban development. Animated by global economic competitiveness and urban entrepreneurship, urban

governance regimes make development decisions to satisfy capital markets, real estate developers, and elite consumers. Their neoliberal strategies prioritize downtown development, gentrification, privatization of public goods, outsourcing of union labor, and subsidies to capital, pushing aside whatever stands in the way, including public housing, public schools, and the people who live there. The result is deeply intertwined political, economic, and spatial urban dichotomies along lines of class, race, and ethnicity. These contrasting realities are on display in Chicago, a city centered on global business services, tourism, and real estate development. A city of luxury zones and hardship zones, tax breaks for corporations and the wealthy and poverty and near-poverty wages for immigrants, women and people of color who work for them.

Gentrification, rooted in real estate development and speculation on property values, is a pivotal sector of this neoliberal urban economy. This is a process in which the built environment is selectively junked, abandoned, destroyed, and reconstructed to create "a new locational grid" for capital accumulation, to paraphrase urban policy scholar Rachel Weber. Before communities can be new sites of capital accumulation, they have to be devalued, prepared for development, and reimagined as places of value. Their "regeneration" is made possible by dispersing the people who live there, erasing the community identities they have constructed, and replacing them with new, sanitized images. In the *New Political Economy of Urban Education*, I argue that education policy is integral to this differential valuation of city spaces. In gentrifying areas, CPS closes and then rebrands neighborhood schools as specialty schools to attract real estate investment and the consumers of new middle class housing. In white middle and upper-middle class areas, CPS expands selective enrollment schools and enhances the resources and curriculum of existing neighborhood schools. At the same time, divesting in public schools in low-income Black and Latinx communities, and replacing them with charter schools, signals further state abandonment of areas of the city not yet ripe for profitable reinvestment.

As geographer Laura Pulido (2016) points out, white supremacy is integral to processes of devaluation and re-valuation of urban space and urban schools:

> The devaluation of Black (and other nonwhite) bodies has been a central feature of global capitalism for centuries and creates a landscape of differential value which can be harnessed in diverse ways to facilitate the accumulation of more power and profit than would otherwise be possible.

Since 2000, a quarter million African Americans have left Chicago; most who left since 2010 were low-income and young. In 2000, Black students were 52 percent of CPS's population; today they are 37 percent. Of the roughly 170 schools closed, 88 percent of the students affected were Black. In 2013, CPS closed one quarter of all the predominantly Black schools in the city in a single year. Many were anchors in communities that experienced economic impoverishment, public and private disinvestment, dismantling of public housing, and home foreclosures. Some had served generations of families. Closed, abandoned school buildings and the churn of new charter schools further destabilizes these communities, readying them for future development, minus the people who live there.

In what the Chicago Teachers Union (2012) calls an "apartheid" school district, race and class disparities in resources and curriculum are stark. The CTU documents that schools in Black and

Latinx low-income communities disproportionately lack music and art teachers, updated science labs, school nurses, adequate counselors and libraries. Abandonment of Black community resources is linked to the expendability of Black labor in an economy of outsourced production, automation, and low-wage service work. Black students are more likely to be subject to racialized policing and containment than to economic and social opportunity.

As Ta Nahisi Coates demonstrates in relation to Chicago's North Lawndale community, these racial inequities rest on historically state-sanctioned housing segregation and discrimination that robbed communities of color of wealth and resources while the state facilitated wealth accumulation by whites. Similarly, the Journey 4 Justice Alliance documents that many closed schools that served low-income, working class Black, Latinx, and other students of color in Washington D.C., Chicago, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, and elsewhere had a history of inequitable resources and lack of investment. For example, in 2012, the Chicago Board of Education voted to phase out Dyett High School after years of disinvestment and destabilization. This was despite parent and community organizing to bring in resources and programs, the school's accelerated rates of college going, and a nationally recognized restorative justice program. By 2012, there were no Advanced Placement classes, only a rudimentary schedule of science and math classes, and students took art online. College preparatory and mentoring programs initiated by teachers and community members were lost when CPS refused to continue funding them. Dyett High School student, Walter Flowers, summarized, "It just feels like they don't care as much as we want them to. It's been heartbreaking. CPS just turned its back on us…." In December 2011, CPS's Chief Operating Officer admitted that CPS did not intend to invest in schools that would be closed in the next 5–10 years.

These policies represent what Jodi Melamed calls the "state-finance-racial violence nexus," the integral relationship of political/economic governance with racial violence that enables accumulation by dispossession. Melamed argues, "It has become increasingly plain that accumulation for financial asset-owning classes requires violence toward others and seeks to expropriate for capital the entire field of social provision (land, work, education, health)."

Another Education is Possible

More than any other education policy, school closings have generated organized grassroots resistance and community-union coalitions, led by people of color. Not willing to simply defend public schools as they are, parents and teachers want something more. Over the past 10 years, they have developed a critical analysis of the intersection of racism and privatization and formulated programs for racial justice, sustainable neighborhood schools, and self-determination.

Examples are growing:

- the national Journey for Justice Alliance's report, *An Equitable and Just School System Now;*
- The Chicago Teachers Union programs, *The Schools Chicago Students Deserve* and *A Just Chicago;*
- The Milwaukee community-labor coalition, Schools and Communities United, proposal *Fulfill the Promise: The schools and Communities our Children Deserve;*

- The Alliance to Reclaim our Schools *Education Justice is Racial Justice* platform; and
- The education platform of the Movement for Black Lives.

In our research, parents voiced their desire for a rich, challenging, humane curriculum, a holistic education centered on children's development, not testing and competition. They want respectful, culturally relevant public schools that are centers of community where young people develop academically, and as thoughtful, caring and just humans. Their vision dwarfs the impoverished, instrumental conception of schools as aggregate test scores, bodies with future job skills, and obedient subjects.

I want to share two concrete examples of school transformation rooted in community struggles and parents' educational vision. The first is the campaign that culminated in a 34-day hunger strike in 2015 to re-open Dyett High School in Chicago's historic African American Bronzeville neighborhood. Despite community proposals to revitalize Dyett and plans to create a network of aligned Bronzeville elementary schools, in 2012 CPS voted to phase out the high school over the protests of parents and students. Over three years, a persistent grassroots campaign forced CPS to agree to reopen Dyett as a neighborhood high school and to issue a call for proposals for the school's focus and vision. In community meetings large and small, students, parents and community members forged a vision for the school they wanted for their community. Together with community organizations, teachers, and university partners, they formed the Coalition to Revitalize Dyett to co-develop and write a comprehensive 53-page proposal for the Dyett High School of Global Leadership and Green Technology, based on the community vision.

The vision expressed the intergenerational wisdom and educational vision of a working class Black community. Through dialogue and analysis, parents and young people distilled critiques of the inequitable and oppressive schooling Black children are subjected to, and unfolded their dreams into a farsighted, community-rooted, humanizing, research-based, educational proposal focused on "environmental sustainability and leadership for peace and justice." It built on experience of youth and parent organizing, critical Freirian pedagogy, educational research, and historical practices of Black education. The proposal was endorsed by several past presidents of the American Educational Research Association. It began:

> Our philosophy of education is to prepare young people to deeply understand and study their social and physical reality so they can enter the global stage of history as actors in transforming their world….Education should value and build on the young people of Bronzeville, their culture, languages, experiences, history, wisdom, and elders to enable them to know who they are, where they come from, where they are going, and to love their community and themselves.
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> The model is a school who cares for children and youth as whole people, wraps around them both supports and challenges they need in order to develop. As in a village, it treats them with respect and dignity, and demands excellence and commitment to even a greater good than their own individual success. This is a model that nurtures leadership; it teaches perseverance, expects the best, and supports solidarity.… (Dyett RFP, 2015)

This philosophy infused the proposed curriculum, pedagogy, school culture and organization, approach to school discipline and relationships, physical structure of the building, involvement of parents and community, national and global connections—even as the proposal followed required CPS guidelines.

When it became clear CPS was violating its own process and would reject the community proposal, 12 parents, grandparents, teachers, and supporters launched a 34-day hunger strike that drew national and international attention and support from across Chicago. The hunger strike exposed the link between school closings and anti-Black state violence. Protesters against the police murder of a Rekia Boyd, a Black woman in Chicago, made that connection explicit when they marched, at night, from a protest at the police station to the Dyett strike. After 34 days, the hunger strikers were forced to end the hunger strike when, as grandmother Irene Robinson said, it was evident that "Rahm Emanuel [Chicago mayor] would rather let us die." Nonetheless, the campaign succeeded in forcing CPS to re-open Dyett as a neighborhood public high school, though without the proposal's focus. And the struggle for the full community vision continues.

The second example is the national campaign for Sustainable Community Schools, a forward-looking alternative to school closings and privatization. The campaign calls for transforming neighborhood schools into sustainable public schools with engaging culturally relevant curriculum, high quality teaching—not high stakes testing—wrap-around supports, restorative justice, and transformational parent and community engagement. In Chicago, a coalition of the Chicago Teachers Union (2018) and community organizations, building on the vision for a revitalized Dyett High School, won 20 Sustainable Community (see also CPS, 2018) Schools in the 2016 teachers' union contract. Their principles grow out of the Dyett High School proposal:

- Racial justice and equity;
- Transparency and trusting relationships;
- Self-determination and self-governance;
- Building on community strengths and community wisdom;
- Shared leadership and collaboration;
- Reflective learning culture; and
- Whole Child approach to education.

The Dyett proposal and organizing for Sustainable Community schools provide counter narratives and demonstrate concrete alternatives to the deeply inequitable economic, political, spatial, racialized landscape of the city. They imagine schools as life-affirming, identity-affirming spaces, incubators of critical thought and action rooted in community and relationships of solidarity and humanization. They exemplify a strategy of fighting for schools as part of fighting for sustainable urban working class communities.

The Dyett hunger strike demonstrated how far the state is willing to go to prevent working class Black parents from exercising agency to control their destiny, how little regard it has for Black life, and how critical schools are to the racialized neoliberal plan for the city. It also demonstrated that fierce contests over urban education embody the struggle for place and self-determination for Black and other communities of color. Hunger striker, grandmother, and life-long Bronzeville resident, April Stogner, explained, "This is our community. It has been taken

hostage and it is time to let it go. This is ours. We are going to fight for it…" (See also Ewing, 2019).

What is the Role of Universities?

So what role do universities play and what role should they play? U.S. universities are contradictory institutions. On the one hand, they were set up as elitist, exclusionary, white institutions-- supports for racial capitalism. The neoliberal university's growth strategy, its financial and management policies, its allocation of resources are shaped by logics of business. Entrepreneurship, corporate funding, market competition, increased tuition revenues, cost-cutting through subcontracting to private services, and public private partnerships in which profit taking by private investors and companies is part of the equation. These are the normalized strategies of universities across the U.S.

The new multimillion-dollar classroom and dorm building going up at University of Illinois at Chicago, across from my office, for example, is a public-private venture, at least partly aimed at attracting high tuition-paying out-of-state and international students and marketing. Meanwhile, there are fewer Black students as the University (a publicly funded urban institution) markets itself to out-of-state and international students and CPS continues to fail to educate Black students, and the dystopian realities of neoliberal urbanism come to roost in our classrooms. My working class students preparing to be teachers are stressed out by debt, working full time jobs, living undocumented, family evictions, police violence, and low-wages.

Some of our universities are key actors in gentrification and displacement. UIC is a key player in the gentrification of the nearby Mexican working class community of Pilsen. Its partnerships with developers facilitated the construction of University Village, a middle and upper-income mega gentrification complex on the site of a former public housing project and historic Black community. The university's role as gentrifier is mirrored by the University of Pennsylvania in West Philadelphia, Columbia University in Harlem, Temple University in North Philadelphia, and more.

Moreover, some of our universities are complicit in the disinvestment and privatization of education, which I have described. University representatives sit on public policy-making boards that devise and legitimate processes of dispossession and marketization. They partner with charter-school chains, Teach for America, and other sectors of the education privatization industry. They comply with, even help design, neoliberal school district policies, and fail to oppose, and sometimes benefit from, policies that devastate communities they purport to serve. Over vociferous protests of parents and teachers, DePaul University got $50 million in public Tax Increment Finance (TIF) dollars to fund its new stadium while CPS budgets were slashed as austerity measures. These are public funds that rightfully belong to schools.

Yet universities are also spaces for community collaborative research, critical scholarship and debate, and student organizing. University partnerships with community organizations and projects are the focus of this conference's workshops. An example is the Dyett proposal: UIC College of Education faculty collaborated with parents, community organizations, students, and teachers to write the proposal, and the Dean of the College of Education endorsed it.

But how do we push back against the neoliberal university itself? How do we build community partnerships outside the university that also hold the university accountable for its role in school closings and gentrification of the neighborhoods where our community partners work and live? What can we do to make the university pay living wages to its workers, who live in the communities we partner with and whose children attend public schools? How can we use community collaborations to organize for open admissions and free tuition to open up the university to the working class communities it excludes, but who fund it? How can we pressure the university to refuse contracts with education privatizers, to stop gentrifying and displacing Black and other communities of color as students fought to do historically at Columbia University? How do we pressure the university to open up its space and deploy its skills, material resources, prestige, and public voice to challenge injustices in the city and beyond? If the university is actually complicit in education policy as anti-Black violence, how do we do our work to contest that? How do we stand with struggles for what Henri Lefebvre termed "the right to the city"? Those are the questions we need to grapple with and the challenges we all face.

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