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Critical Bifocality and Circuits of Privilege: Expanding Critical Ethnographic Theory and Design

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By Lois Weis and Michelle Fine

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Thank you.

Theorizing and Documenting the Consolidation of Privilege in times of Swelling Inequality Gaps

Lois Weis and Michelle Fine

Almost 10 years ago, in *Working Method* (2004), we argued for a critical theory of method for educational studies, which would analyze lives in the context of history, structure, and institutions, across the power lines of privilege and marginalization. We opened the volume as follows:

This book sits at the intersection of theory, design and method; it offers, perhaps, a theory of method for conducting critical theoretical and analytic work on social (in)justice. We write the book for both veteran social researchers and graduate students eager to move among history, political economy, and the lives of ordinary people, for that is what we think we do best. For more than 20 years we have, individually and together, tried to write with communities under siege and to document the costs of oppression and the strengths of endurance that circulate among poor and working class youth and young adults in America. Producing this work in schools, communities, and prisons, we work in this volume to reveal the story behind the method that allows us to theorize and interrogate (in)justice in times when neoliberal ideology saturates and the Right prevails. (Weis & Fine, 2004, p. xv)

In what we then called “compositional studies,” we highlighted the twinned importance of *critical theory and design*, in which ethnographic research on the daily lives of people, must, at root, be theorized and researched in relation to deep structural constraints.

In 2004, we were worried about the then normative practice of studying individuals or singular groups as if those groups were coherent and bounded. We suggested, instead, that educational research make visible the linkages, leakages, tensions and solidarities within and between groups, across time and space. In particular, we stressed that ethnographic and narrative material be deliberately placed into contextual and historic understanding of economic and racial formations.

Today, a decade after the publication of *Working Method*, we find ourselves honored that our work has been so well cited, but concerned that essential elements of our framework have faded. In particular, our commitment to a braided design attentive to both structures and lives has unraveled and split off into literatures on structures or lives, thereby eclipsing the critical interactions between sociopolitical formations, and what takes place on the ground. Our key point—that structures produce lives, at one and the same time as lives across the social class spectrum produce, reproduce and at times contest these same social/economic structures—has somehow gotten lost.

To offer a popular example of what we fear has been a misapplication of our writings, let us turn to the prolific research on “safe spaces.” Our specific concern is that these studies must be placed within an historic and structural analysis of widening inequality gaps, as linked to inequalities of distribution and recognition. However, although we are often credited, we were/are not so interested in simply documenting sites of possibility or archiving counter stories alone. More seriously, we are concerned that the silo-ing of “safe spaces” involves the scooping out of key linkages, which constrict the analytic and political power of research on marginalized youth. Without such analytic and practical groundings, critical scholars are hobbled in our ability to expose and contest fundamental inequalities that produce marginalization and privilege, and

we are left to advocate merely for more sweet, quiet spots of refuge rather than structural change. We need research that can peer behind the drapes that hide the tithed making of privilege and disadvantage, revealing the micro practices by which privilege and structural decay come to be produced, sustained, reproduced, embodied, and contested. Safe spaces reveal the miraculous ways people cope with oppression but do not easily shed light on the structural architecture of the problem.

Social theory and analyses could no longer afford to separate lives or apparent “problems” from global and local structures; present from past; resilience from oppression; achievement from opportunity; progress from decline. We would argue now that critical scholars have a responsibility to connect the dots across these presumed binaries, and refuse to reproduce representations of individuals as if autonomous, self-contained units, dangling freely, able to pursue their life choices unencumbered by constraint. Following up on and simultaneously stretching our own 2004 work, we now advocate for *critical bifocality*, a dedicated theoretical and methodological commitment to a bifocal design, documenting at once the linkages and capillaries of structural arrangements and the discursive practices by which privileged and marginalized youth and parents make sense of their circumstances.

The political and empirical splitting of structures from problems, or marginalized lives, has long plagued the social sciences in the U.S. In 1899 Susan Wharton commissioned WEB Du Bois to study the “Negro problem” of Philadelphia. Determined to analyze the Negro problem as a “symptom, not a cause,” of the troubling economic and racial order, DuBois dedicated himself to the systematic understanding of high morbidity, illness, crime, lack of education, and homelessness rates of Negroes, by comparing them to Whites in the North, the South, and Europe and Negroes in Europe 1884 – 1890. Knowing that he had been hired to document

“pathology” as if it were inherent in Black culture, DuBois nevertheless took the assignment.

Determined to chronicle the details of Black life in Philadelphia, he knocked on doors, counted beds, catalogued health conditions, educational opportunities and criminal justice involvement in order to:

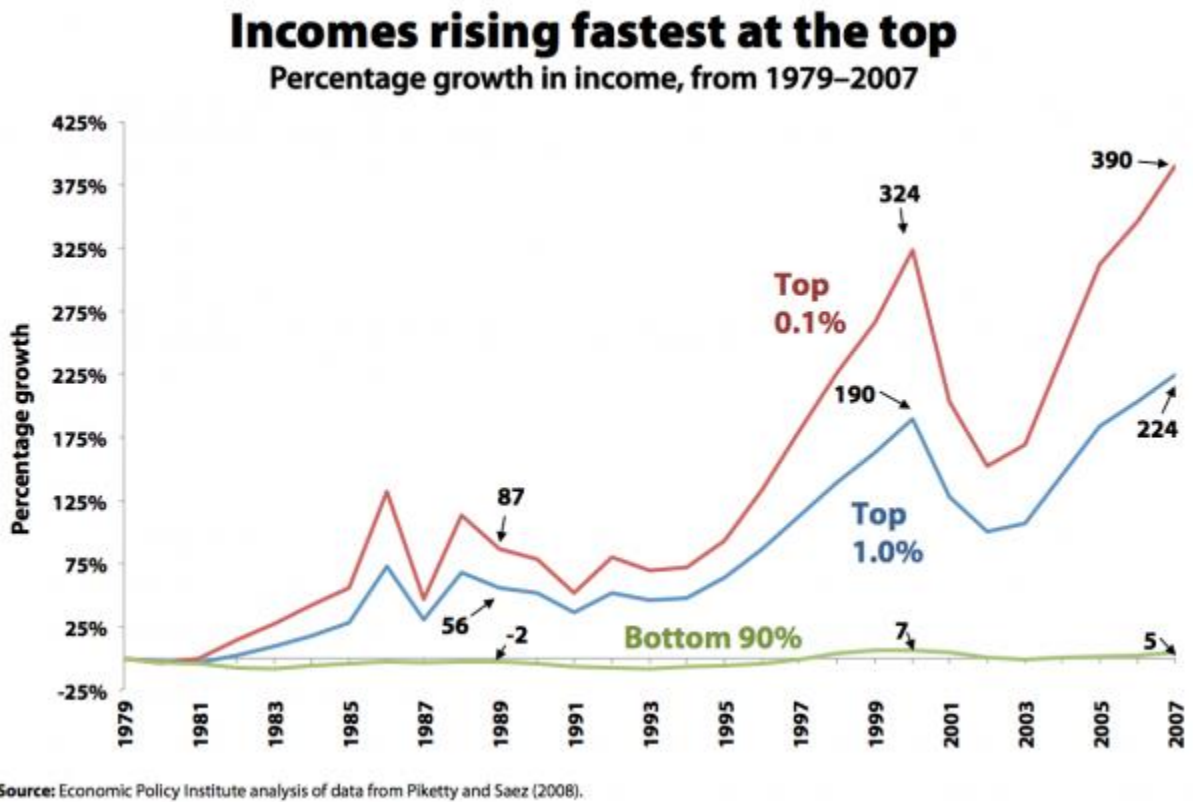
1. Document the economic, historic, educational and social groundings of these problems
2. Reverse the gaze of causality that landed squarely on the bodies and genetics of ostensible Negro inferiority, and,
3. Problematize the racialized and classed knots of dispossession and privilege

DuBois accepted the commission and decided that his job was to flip the script; to situate Black lives in history and structure, contesting then current cultural and biological explanations of the “Negro problem.”

Unfortunately, *The Philadelphia Negro* has largely been neglected in academic social sciences. When it is read, taught, or referenced, it is too often narrowly misconstrued as an early 20th century study of Blacks in Philadelphia. Du Bois’ ambitious design of history, structure, and Black lives has been corrupted, funneled, and thereby miscast, as the study of a group rather than an indictment of 20th century America, built structurally and historically on a foundation of racialized and classed oppression.

We fear an analogous strain of epistemological shrinkage infects contemporary research on poor youth of color, their schools, and communities. Isolated studies of individuals, cultures, or community life “white out” structures, histories, and cumulative State neglect, camouflage circuits of disinvestment, and fail to reveal the production and reproduction of privilege.

Since we wrote *Working Method*, much has changed. Inequality gaps have swelled; educational segregation and stratification have become more normative; the testing industry now dominates public schools; mass incarceration of Black and Brown bodies is well recognized as a national problem; “college for all” is the mantra while unemployment rates and student loan debt skyrocket; and the top 1% have gotten much richer. The production and reproduction of privilege is far more apparent, as the Economic Policy Institute, drawing from Piketty and Saez, demonstrates below, thereby threatening our collective well being.



We realize that attending to structures and lives is a weighty task, but to paraphrase Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009), this is our scholarly debt to educational studies in times of

swelling inequality gaps: to interrogate how deficit and privilege are made, sustained, justified, and reified over time and space, with a keen eye towards their unmaking. Given the production of ever deepening inequalities in local spaces and global contexts (Chauvel, 2010; Gilbert, 2003; Piketty & Saez, 2003, 2006; Sherman & Aron-Dine, 2007), we want to encourage designs that trace how widening inequality gaps penetrate lives and communities across and within nations; how the neo-liberal realignment of opportunities and resources exacerbate race and class stratification; how the accumulation of privilege is implicated in the deepening of poverty; how the well-funded surveillance of working class and poor communities affectively penetrates local institutions, community life and young bodies; and how those who benefit and those who lose make sense of our contemporary economic and political circumstances.

Our purpose in this article is to revisit our *Working Methods* framework a decade later, through two emblematic studies on the production and reproduction of privilege, and the shadows cast on institutions and communities of cumulative disinvestment. In these studies, engaged since the publication of *Working Method*, we highlight deep structural shifts in the now global economy and its linked educational institutions, intentionally theorizing how such massive realignment at the global level has attendant consequences for the local level with regard to lived-out social and economic practices of individuals and collectivities. First we review Lois' recent work on privileged secondary schools as linked to the massification of the postsecondary sector (worldwide) and the production of the "brokering class" of upper middle class professionals, and then Michelle's work with school closings/re-openings, tracking quantitatively and qualitatively what we have called circuits of dispossession and privilege that derive from neoliberal policy shifts. Both studies are designed to understand how wide sweeps of economics, politics, and policy circulate through educational institutions, and then are refracted differentially

in the consciousness and commitments of both privileged and marginalized parents and youth. As we sketch a glimpse of these two studies, readers will notice that our writing convention will shift from “we” to I, or Lois or Michelle, and then at the end we will return to our “we,” signifying our distinct empirical projects and our shared theoretical framework.

Studying Privilege inside New Global Realities: Middle/Upper-middle Class Parents, Schools and Students Working Inside the Press of the Global Knowledge Economy

Since the 1970s, we have witnessed a massive realignment of the global economy, a point that we did not take into serious account when we authored *Working Method*. In the first wave of this realignment, working-class jobs—primarily in manufacturing—were increasingly exported from highly industrialized countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Japan to poor countries, where multinational companies can hire skilled and unskilled laborers at lower pay and without benefits. In the current second wave, middle-class jobs are also exported, as members of a new and expanded middle class in countries such as India and China are educated as architects, accountants, medical technicians and doctors, and are willing to work for multinational companies at a fraction of the salary they would earn for the same work at corporate headquarters (Weis and Dolby, 2012). This evolving set of international economic and human resource relations affects the educational experiences, outcomes, aspirations, and apathies of younger generations in a variety of exporting and importing countries. Those who are educated, as well as those who are not, now live and work inside a globally-driven knowledge economy that alters the fulcrum of educational experiences and outcomes, whether students and families are aware of it or not.

Additionally, the movement of peoples across national borders, including those who possess “flexible citizenship” (Ong, 1999) by virtue of possession of high-status knowledge—those who can transcend nation-state boundaries with their inherited and/or earned cultural and intellectual capital (for example, high-powered intellectuals, engineers, and medical professionals who are seduced to work in economically powerful nations)—bring new expectations and new demands both to their children and the schools they attend (Li, 2005; Weis, 2008). The point here is that the global knowledge economy coupled with the movement of peoples across national borders fundamentally alters the context within which social structure both seeps into the consciousness of students and families, as well as altering the “limit situations” within which this all plays. Coupled with the economic crash of 2008, this set of drivers renders the economic future of the next generation highly uncertain. It is in this context that families in first wave-industrialized nations seek to instantiate opportunities for their children at one and the same time as such opportunities are objectively increasingly scarce (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011).

Based on recent work in the UK, Diane Reay, Gill Crozier, and David James (2011) suggest,

Despite the advent of the ‘age of anxiety’, the emergence of the ‘super rich’, and economic upheavals (Apple 2010), it appears that the white middle classes continue to thrive, their social position strengthened and consolidated. However, there are also growing signs of unease, the exacerbation of anxiety, and a lack of ontological security, ‘the sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individuals (Giddens, 1991, p. 243). (p.2)

The authors go on to state that “these insecurities are particularly evident in their children’s education” (Reay et al. p. 2). This surfaces in anxieties related to where their children go to school; what they learn in school in contrast to what other people’s children learn in different schools; and, as Lois argues elsewhere (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins, 2013), in the US context, how specific secondary schools, and experiences within these secondary schools, position their children for the now global knowledge economy in which access to highly valued postsecondary destinations is conceptualized as increasingly paramount. This all sits, it can be argued, inside “a growing sense of insecurity that was once the preserve of the working class but now permeates almost the whole of society. If this is the case, it can be further argued that just as the integrity and value of the working class was undermined over the last decades of the twentieth century (Skeggs, 2004), the beginning of the twenty first century may herald the unraveling of white middle-class identity” (Reay et. al., p.6). Barbara Ehrenreich (1990) called attention to an earlier version of psychic distress associated with such perceived disintegration in the early 1990’s.

The argument regarding the expected disintegration of the middle class parallels that made about the working class twenty to thirty years ago, where it was suggested by Gorz (1983), Aronowitz (1992), and others, that we must say “Farewell to the working class” as well paid male laboring jobs and accompanying working class cultural productions would not survive what Bluestone and Harrison (1984) refer to as the “de-industrialization of the economy.” In contradistinction, through intense ethnographic work in a working-class community in the United States over a fifteen year time period, Lois (2004) argues that we cannot write off the White working class simply because White men no longer have access to well-paying laboring jobs in the primary labor market. Exploring empirically and longitudinally the re-making of this class both discursively and behaviorally inside radical, globally-based economic restructuring

(Reich, 2001, Weis, 2004), she suggests that the White working class has staged its own “class reunion,” having rearticulated itself as a distinct class fraction in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Such rearticulation embodies deep restructuring along gender lines coupled with the consolidation of whiteness as privilege. This produces, for the moment at least, a working-class fractional collective that serves in part to challenge increased globally driven demand for the neoliberal subject (Weis, 2004).

The lived reworking of class inside economic restructuring as chronicled and theorized in the particular locale in which data for *Class Reunion* (2004) were collected, highlights the importance of critical design. In the current context, and in light of charges of impending class dislocation of the relatively privileged, her recent work conducted in a privileged secondary school is instructive.

Based on two years of ethnographic research in an NAIS (National Association of Independent Schools) co-educational day school in a second tier (non-global) city, data (to be reported in full elsewhere; Weis, Cipollone and Jenkins, 2013) reveal the extent to which and the ways in which the press of the global seeps into the consciousness of middle/upper-middle class schools, parents, students and teachers so as to exert particular class-linked forms of pressure specifically tied to the college preparation and admissions process in US secondary schools¹. In so doing, and taking our updated theory of method seriously, Lois explores a specifically located and largely unacknowledged re-working of class as situated in an iconic relatively elite

¹ According to the National Association of Independent Schools, the median tuition for their member day schools in 2008-2009 was \$17,441. Tuition in the particular school under investigation here ran \$18,250 for the 2008-2009 school year, slightly above the median figure cited by NAIS . Tuition for boarding schools was approximately \$37,017. Out of 28,384 private (not public/state) schools in the United States, about 1,050 are NAIS. Average tuition for other private schools is substantially less, with day schools running about \$10,841 and boarding schools approximately \$23,448.) http://www.greatschools.org/find-a-school/defining-your-ideal/59-private-vs-public-schools.gs_

secondary school, while simultaneously focusing on the mechanisms through which observed, macro level, globally induced phenomena are produced and reproduced at the lived level on a daily basis, whether by explicit design/work, or by virtue of what Bourdieu refers to as “habitus”—a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, quoting Bourdieu, 1982:18). Taking seriously the notion that the production of class (as well as class structure more broadly) must be studied and theorized in relation to differentially located class actors, our method and subsequently collected data pry open critical discussion with regard to the explicit “work” involved in maintaining advantage under massively shifting global conditions and as specifically linked to a now national and increasingly segmented US marketplace for postsecondary education.

As noted above, this study will be reported in full elsewhere, and data reported here are simply used to illustrate the power of method². Full ethnographic research was comprised of participant observation in hundreds of classes, and in-depth interviews with students in the top twenty percent of the class, teachers of these students, counselors, parents and administrators. For current purposes, a few vignettes will suffice:

Susan and Robert Larkin, Parents of Matthews Academy 12th grader.

² The full study comprises deep ethnographic work over a two year period in three relatively privileged secondary institutions: two NAIS secondary day schools and one affluent suburban public. Data were gathered during the last two years of secondary school, a key point where students are specifically entering and engaging the college admissions process

Susan: So I would say the last 8-10 years that I've heard parents talking about it (college application process and entry). Parents of the older children, I would say, maybe even into middle school, parents are contriving or conniving.

Robert: From my point of view, in a real sense, it (the conniving and contriving) started in sophomore year.

Susan: It intensified certainly.

Robert: Became much more apparent. So we had heard, Susan probably more than I had. We'd heard the noise, some of the sure things, but it didn't have anything to do with us, things that we had to do. And I think it was at that level, we began to realize that it was competitive, and...maybe you could've started sending your child to this place to do extracurriculars and you would tell your colleagues (other parents of children in the class) afterwards, to show how good you are, but you wouldn't actually bring them all up and say, "Why don't we all send our children to (the local cancer research facility) to do cancer research...because everyone wanted to get a step ahead with their children, was my impression.

Ethan Sanderson, Matthews student.

Lois: Then you had to actually apply?

Ethan: Right.

Lois: How did you decide where to apply, and did you do this in conjunction with your (in-school located) college counselor?

Ethan: Yes, I was in contact with them about the choices I had made about colleges and they told me whether they thought it was a good idea or not. They agreed with me on my

choices. It was a mixture of sort of touring and seeing if I felt right there, and academically what I was looking for.

Lois: And academically, what you are looking for sounds to me like strong humanities and languages. Is that a fair assessment?

Ethan: Yes.

Lois: So where did you end up applying?

Ethan: I applied early decision to Dartmouth³, and was deferred, and my strategy was sort of to apply to Brown, but also get a good list. I applied to eleven schools and I have my reaches, middles, and safeties.

Lois: OK, let's go through them. So you applied early to Dartmouth. Is Dartmouth early decision or early action?

Ethan: Both. I applied early decision though.

Lois: And then what?

Ethan: I'll do it in order. Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth, and Columbia; Amherst, Colgate, Middlebury, MIT; American, Northeastern and Fordham.

Lois: And if you were to realistically assess, where are your "reach" schools and what do you consider your "safeties"?

Ethan: My safeties would definitely be Northeastern, American, and Fordham. My middles would be the Middlebury and Colgate group, and then my reach is the obvious.

Joe Marino: Matthews student.

³ Actual colleges have been altered to protect anonymity. The alternate colleges named approximate the original in rank and tier. The 2009 Barron's *Compact Guide to Colleges*, 16th edition was used as a reference.

Joe: I visited MIT, Cal Polytechnical, Clarkson, Dartmouth, which I did not apply to...I visited Dartmouth and Colgate (...) I visited ...I think every place I went to, I visited the head of the math department or a math professor.

Lois: Really? And they saw you?

Joe: Yes.

Lois: How did you do that?

Joe: I emailed them and my mother emailed them, and we set it up and we asked "Could you possibly meet a prospective students?" And they said, "Sure, I'd be willing to".

Lois: So you and your mother went to meet famous Professor X, Y, and Z?

Joe: Uh Huh.

Although data suggest highly complex interactions that will be the subject of future publications, overall these data from the NAIS school reveal the targeted "class work" of a now highly insecure middle/upper-middle class who "elect" to attend historically elite private secondary day schools and who now engage in a very specific form of "class warfare," one in which the middle/upper-middle class individually and collectively mobilizes its embodied cultural, social, and economic capital both to preserve itself in uncertain economic times while simultaneously attempting to instantiate a distinctly professional and managerial upper-middle class through access to particular kinds of postsecondary destinations in a now national and increasingly competitive marketplace for postsecondary education. Affirming the notion that class position must now be "won" at both the individual and collective level, rather than constituting the "manner to which one is born," data enable us to track and theorize the intensified preparation for, and application to, particular kinds of postsecondary destinations as is

now taking place in elite (and, in markedly different ways and to varying extent perhaps, affluent suburban and “star” urban public) secondary schools. Although the media have taken note of such “application frenzy” around postsecondary destinations, there is little scholarly work that tracks and theorizes this frenzy as a distinctly “class process,” one that represents intensified “class work” at one and the same time as class “winners” and “losers” become ever more apparent in the larger global and national context.

Data from the current study additionally forecast the increasing contradiction between individual and collective struggles related to the broader middle class. Given that affluent parents, schools, and students are now positioning for a more highly segmented postsecondary sector, one in which the number of available spaces at “highly selective” (and, in this case, specifically the Ivies) colleges and universities in particular, remain relatively constant in relation to increased numbers of applicants who both wish to gain entrance to such institutions and are able to “see themselves there,” stark contradictions emerge with regard to working on behalf of the class (working for the school as a whole so as to make all students more competitive, for example), and working for one’s children (so as to make them more competitive in relation to other potential applicants). The Larkins, above, state this well:

(W)e began to realize that it was competitive, and...maybe you could’ve started sending your child to this place to do extracurriculars and you would tell your colleagues (other parents of children in the class) afterwards, to show how good you are, but you wouldn’t actually bring them all up and say, ‘Why don’t we all send our children to (the local cancer research facility) to do cancer research’...because everyone wanted to get a step ahead with their children, was my impression.

Given the stakes, then, the middle class increasingly turns upon *itself*, thereby self-fracturing as a broad-based class, while moving to consolidate individually located position for the next generation, and specifically for their own children. It is then, arguably the case that as the professional and managerial upper middle class now consciously exploits any and all opportunities to position their children for advantage, they effectively constrict access for the rest of the middle classes, thereby cutting themselves off from any kind of larger class base.

This struggle plays itself out most fervently over access to postsecondary destinations, wherein the postsecondary sector itself is becoming increasingly stratified in the US and the stakes for admission become ever higher. While such individualistic tendencies may have always been a hallmark of the middle class (Reay et al., 2011), it is arguably the case both that the middle class itself was *highly dependent* upon collective class work whether acknowledged or not, *and* that the economy was robust enough to provide “good jobs” for the next generation across difference within the broadly construed middle class. In altered economic context, this is no longer the case (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011), and, as a consequence, the professional and managerial upper-middle class mobilizes all potential class resources both individually and collectively (although the collective itself is potentially fractured as parents move to mobilize on behalf of their own children, as noted above) as it seeks to pull away from the rest of the middle group, a group that it sees as steadily losing economic ground and from which it is now consciously seeking to distance through attendance at particular kinds of schools. This is happening at one and the same time as a new and more complex status hierarchy is emerging/being produced within the postsecondary sector itself, a new status hierarchy with marked consequences for both future individual position and the class structure as a whole .

Such "class struggles," Lois argues, are more and more centered on secondary schools, where parents, students, and schools exhibit intense focus on positioning for entrance to an increasingly stratified postsecondary sector, which itself is falling victim to greater intensification around "winners" and "losers" (Bowen, Chingos and McPherson, 2009; Slaughter and Rhodes, 2004; Thomas and Bell, 2008). Not only are selective colleges and universities in the US highly linked to postsecondary persistence and completion patterns (Bowen, Chingos and McPherson, 2009; Hearn, 1990; Mortenson, 2003; Stephan, Rosenbaum and Person, 2009; Thomas and Bell, 2008), but more highly selective institutions confer on their graduates both special entrée to the best graduate and professional programs in the country (Eide, Brewer and Ehrenberg, 1998) and well-documented labor market advantages (Bowen and Bok, 1998; Rumberger and Thomas, 1993; Thomas, 2000; Thomas and Zhang, 2005). These relationships hold even when characteristics of entering students are held constant in the analysis.

While this may have always been the case to some extent, with increasing constriction of available "good jobs" in the US economy, it is arguably the case that such relationships become stronger over time. In this context, relatively privileged parents, students, and schools individually and collectively mobilize all available class resources so as to situate their children for entrance to particularly located postsecondary institutions ("most selective" and, even more so, "highly selective," on the ubiquitous and increasingly present ranking systems), thereby solidifying the border between the middle and upper-middle (professional and managerial) classes, while simultaneously ensuring their children's position in what is perceived as a less vulnerable class segment. This must be seen as a targeted attempt on the part of those already advantaged both to instantiate deep difference within the middle class and to ensure that their own children fall on the right side of the anticipated and "locked in" class divide in a now

competitive global economic arena, an arena in which struggle over class positioning is ever more intense⁴.

Although some critically important and complementary work has been done in and on privileged educational sites (Cookson and Persell, 1985; Howard, 2008; Howard and Gatzambide-Fernandez, 2010; Horvat and Antonio, 1999; Khan, 2011; Proweller, 1998), and Annette Lareau (1989; 2003) has engaged important work on middle class child-rearing patterns in the States, such work is not located in the Weis-Fine theory of method. In line with our theory of method, we immerse ourselves ethnographically in the daily lives of people, while simultaneously stressing that constructed and lived-out individual and collective social practices must, at root, be understood and theorized in relation to deep structural constraints, and, as per our updated theory of method articulated here, substantially altered constraints in global economic context.

⁴ Elsewhere I argue that, as the middle and specifically upper middle class rearticulates itself in new context, the relationship between class and race becomes more complex. In contrast to maintaining White privilege in any kind of streamlined fashion, as the work of Reay and others in the UK suggests, I argue that upper-middle class construction in the US both pierces and *partially* dislodges historically rooted race lines, as privileged secondary and postsecondary sectors now embody somewhat democratizing impulses around race (Bowen and Bok, 1998). Such democratizing impulses in both state (Carnoy and Levin, 1985) and private education sectors, however, embody deep contradictions, both perpetuating and demanding the continued articulation of a particular kind of racial “other” that serves both to maintain Whiteness as privilege and simultaneously to distance Black students who attend relatively privileged institutions from their historic social and political base (Jenkins, 2011). This is coupled with the fact that increasing numbers of transnational migrants of color who possess “flexible citizenship” (Ong, 1999) also attend these schools and engage in comparable “class work”. Although race and class are now complexified, such complexity both rests on the affirmation of a particular kind of racial “other” and encourages the production of neoliberal subjectivity across privileged race and class lines. Perhaps ironically then, although the white working class fraction has been able to maintain itself as a class fraction based partially on its own assertion of whiteness as well as deep gender realignment (Weis, 2004), the carving out of a new upper middle class works across race/ethnicity in particular kinds of ways that both takes account of “flexible immigrants” in global context and somewhat democratizing impulses around race as embedded within quasi elite and elite secondary and postsecondary schools. Although the white working class as specially derived from the former industrial proletariat in the US may have been successful at maintaining its own whiteness as part and parcel of a distinct class fraction, the new upper middle managerial and professional class now works across race and ethnicity in unprecedented fashion. Perhaps giving credence to the “anxiety” noted by Reay and others in the UK around the perceived disintegration of a distinctly white middle class identity, in the US there is in fact important piercing of whiteness in the newly forged upper middle class as it pulls away from the broad based middle class in new global context. This will be the subject of intensive and further analysis in Weis, Cipollone and Jenkins (2013).

As noted at the beginning of this article, we suggest that theory and analyses can no longer afford to separate lives from structures. In particular, Lois's work underlines the "value added" when ethnographic and narrative material is deliberately placed into a *contextual and historic understanding of economic and social formations*. In the case at hand, such theoretically understood "limit situations" must be stretched to account for the fact that they are themselves becoming increasingly segmented. In this sense, then, what is happening in the global economy in concert with the increasingly segmented postsecondary sector in the US exerts particular kinds of pressures on youth, their families, and schools. Our updated method invites deeper understanding of both the pressures and response to such pressures on the part of those already privileged. In addition to "globalizing the research imagination" (Kenway and Fahey, 2008) by casting and situating this broad question inside a markedly changed global context, we must intentionally situate these processes within drivers linked to the increasingly segmented postsecondary sector itself.

With the exception of McDonough (1997), Horvat and Antonio (1999), Lareau and Weininger (2003), and Weininger and Lareau, (2009), there has been remarkably little attention paid to the specific secondary to postsecondary linkage and the ways in which entrance to increasingly valued postsecondary destinations in a now national marketplace must be theorized as an attempt to "maintain distinction" and mark class boundaries in new context. Only by blending our original formulation of "compositional studies" with what has happened both in the international context broadly and the particularly located and re-stratifying postsecondary sector in the US more narrowly, can we understand the action of these privileged parents, schools and students as anything other than an individualistically driven frenzy over the college search process among otherwise arrogant and spoiled individuals.

In this sense then, our updated theory of method—what we now call bifocality—encourages and enables us to move beyond the notion of individual parent and student pathology towards an understanding of new and distinctly located class processes that, whether consciously or not, are designed to stake out and/or preserve privilege in new context. This is particularly useful in light of the deafening media driven construct of “helicopter parent” which, although “practically powerful” in the sense that it appeals in a broad based kind of way and therefore “sells,” positions parents as largely crazy and children as largely unwilling and/or unable to grow up. The power of our expanded theory of method, then, opens space for important and continuing conversation around fundamental class processes in new context.

Dispossession Stories: How Public Space Become A Private Commodity

While Lois has been studying privileged parents and youth in a second-tier, non global city as they absorb and embody “class work” in the shifting tides of global political economy, Michelle, with colleagues Maddy Fox and Brett Stoudt, has been gathering Dispossession Stories: empirical accounts of how public opportunities, institutions, and resources are being redesigned in law, policy, and academic practices that further tip educational advantage in the direction of children of privileged families, while an array of equally expensive public policies—testing, policing and surveillance—are being unleashed within low-income communities, stretching the inequality gaps that already characterize urban America. Across a variety of communities and public sectors, Michelle and other researchers at the Public Science Project have been tracking what we call *circuits of dispossession and privilege* (Fine and Ruglis, 2009)—how changes in law, policy, and institutional practices on the ground are realigning

educational goods once considered “public,” toward limited access primarily for the children of elites and a few token working-class children of color. We are interested in the social psychological circuits through which economic and political shifts move under the skin of parents and youth, living in privileged and marginalized communities.

Theoretically, our work on dispossession draws on critical race theory (DuBois, 1903), the epidemiology of inequality gaps (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), political theory on neo-liberalism (Harvey, 2004) and critical psychology focusing on how injustice penetrates how young people make meaning, make protest and make due (Fine and Ruglis, 2009; Fox, Mediratta, Stoudt, Salah, Ruglis and Fine, 2010; Sirin and Fine, 2008). These dispossession stories are always situated within a political economy, usually in the context of swelling inequality gaps. In *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Strong* (2009), British epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett demonstrate that more unequal societies, with larger income/wealth disparities between top and bottom class fractions, experience higher rates of “social pain” across a variety of indicators including school drop-out, teen pregnancy, mental health problems, lack of social trust, high mortality rates, violence and crime, low social participation. Their volume challenges the belief that the extent of poverty in a community predicts negative outcomes and they assert instead that the size of the *inequality gap* is associated with various forms of social suffering.

Wilkinson and Pickett document how place matters. The inequality gap of the US ranks among the highest in their international comparisons and New York the highest state in the nation. The Congressional Budget Office provides evidence that time matters too. In 2011, the richest 1 percent of households captures 20 percent of the nation’s pre-tax income, up from 10 percent in 1979. During the same period, everyone else’s share—the 99 percent—went down.

At the intersection of place and time, in 2011, New York City is, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the least equal city in the nation. Thus, New York City dispossession stories chronicle a very particular history of the present, documenting the redesigned landscape of educational opportunities and trajectories in a city already saturated in stratified educational options (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

Layered atop and sewn into a nation, state, and a city with extraordinary and compacted inequality gaps, New York City educational policy over the last three decades has been shaped by federal, state, and local neo-liberal policy initiatives, ranging from the Reagan era through to NCLB, Race to the Top and in New York City mayoral control. Neo-liberalism (Harvey, 2004) is a political, economic, and ideological system that privileges the market as the most efficient platform for distributing social goods, minimizes the role of government responsibility in assuring collective well being and highlights instead individual responsibility for individual well being. By facilitating market-driven reform to determine how and for whom opportunities and burdens re-distribute, neo-liberal policies tend to facilitate the upward flow and control of resources, opportunities and power toward wealthy communities, privatization and corporate interests, and a downward drip of surveillance in the form of testing, policing and restricted access to quality institutions for working class and poor youth.

Neo-liberalism operates through various mechanisms of material and power consolidation. Harvey distinguishes *capital accumulation*, the processes by which elites and corporations generate, sustain, and consolidate power from *accumulation by dispossession*, a set of practices by which elites/corporations re-possess formerly public goods or services and convert them into individually held private goods. Once these processes are unleashed and

inscribed in law or policy, Harvey argues, those who are dispossessed are typically left to fend for themselves, as if their misfortune were self-induced.

Across 20 years, we have been gathering dispossession stories to track, contest, and interrupt the enactment, justification, and racial/classed consequences of public policies which have explicitly or more subtly facilitated an upward redistribution of educational resources, and a diminution of opportunities/resources to those most in need. It may be useful to distinguish three strategies of dispossession:

- *Dispossession by categorical denial* is perhaps the most straightforward strategy by which specific groups are denied educational access or threatened with denial because of a contested or “suspect” status (e.g. unauthorized students denied federal aid via the Dream Act; Latino immigrants in Alabama; incarcerated or formerly incarcerated students in college denied Pell Grants, see Fine et al, 2003).
- *Dispossession by cumulative, cross sector disinvestment* has been studied by documenting the differential impact of city-wide policies of disinvestment and/or surveillance (high stakes graduation requirements, policing in schools, stop and frisk policies) on distinct groups of youth. Polling for Justice (see Fox et al, 2010; Fox and Fine, 2012), a large scale youth participatory action research survey of 1100 young people in New York City, has catalogued how various education, health care, housing and criminal justice policies in New York City differentially affect youth by race/ethnicity, class, immigration status, sexuality, and gender. That is, we have been studying the swelling “precarity” of urban youth, the extent

to which young people as a generational cohort, and by race/class, are now situated in “risky” relation to education, economics, health care, and housing, with social contracts for mobility and possibility broken most systematically for poor and working class youth.

- *Accumulation by Dispossession* involves an elaborated process by which public buildings, opportunities, and/or resources once generally available, or specifically dedicated to a working class/poor community, are being re-possessed by/for elite interests, private profits or selective children.

With little regard for histories or structures of oppression, and often enacted in the name of reform or progress, neo-liberal policies of dispossession are typically implemented as if they are “demographically neutral” or “color blind.” In terms of consequences, however, they tend to benefit, or widen options for those already privileged and deny access, or burden those already limited. But these advantages are not necessarily apparent in the discourse and consciousness of those who benefit—even if the gaps are often deeply apparent to those on the losing end of political arrangements. This is why it is so important to track structures, discourses, and practices to fully theorize a history of the present.

We offer below a glimpse of a critical ethnography of a school that once served poor and working class youth of color, was closed and reopened for a new “class” of students on the newly gentrifying Upper West Side of Manhattan, New York. A structural response to the class anxiety that Lois identifies in the earlier section, this slide-show of accumulation by dispossession reveals the affective circuits of precarity felt even by the upper-middle class and

elites of Manhattan. If Lois' project documents how privilege reproduces institutionally, the Brandeis-McCourt ethnography reveals how the public sector is being made over to serve the children of elites, in a language of neutrality and educational accountability.

Out of “crisis” and on the “rise”: the biography of a school being dispossessed.

In 2009, *The New York Times* broke the story that Brandeis High School would be one among 96 schools slated to be closed that year (Aggarwal and Mayorga, forthcoming):

Brandeis, with 2,251 students, is an increasingly endangered species of school — a large general-curriculum institution rich in course offerings but short on personal interaction.

These big high schools, once staples of the city's educational map, have been overhauled by the Bloomberg administration, and other urban education reformers who promote more intimate [learning](#) environments as an antidote to poor performance.

Opened in 1965, Brandeis is the 15th school to be marked for closing this year; others include the Bayard [Rustin High School](#) for the Humanities in Chelsea, another large high school. Since Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) took over control of the city school system in 2002, 96 schools have been ordered to close, including more than two dozen large high schools. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/04/education/04brandeis.html>)

Brandeis was the school where I (Michelle) had conducted an ethnography of drop outs/push outs 20-odd years ago, when I published *Framing Dropouts* (1991). I never used the official name of the school because of respect for the hard work of the educators and youth struggling in a building structurally doomed to fail because of under-investment of all sorts. But now, reading

the institutional obituary, I knew that Louis Brandeis would be buried and a complex of small schools would be resurrected in its place. I pulled *Framing Dropouts* off the shelf to remember the affect and thoughts circulating within me almost a quarter century ago.

It was 1988 when I sat in the back of what I called Comprehensive High School auditorium and cried. Salty tears of joy and rage. Two hundred and fifty young people walked across the stage, with flowers and corsages, cheers and the rapid lights of cameras flickering for the survivors. Mothers, aunts, fathers, siblings, grandparents gathered from the Bronx and Harlem, Puerto Rico, and the DR to celebrating their babies graduating high school.

My field notes read, “I just want a moment of silence for the 500 missing.” In a school of 3000, barely 1/12 graduated. Where are the disappeared? If this were a school with middle class, White students, everyone would be outraged; it would be closed. What we tolerate for the poor would be unthinkable for elites. At Brandeis, in the 1980s and certainly since, I learned that it was normative for Black and Brown bodies to drain out of public institutions, without diplomas, with few alarmed. Progressives and conservatives may explain the leakage differently—racism/capitalism vs. poor motivation/inadequate intelligence/bad mothering—but too many agreed that it’s inevitable.

Little did I know that in the late 1980s, mass incarceration was being drip-fed into the darkest neighborhoods of New York State. State coffers were quietly realigning budgets, migrating monies and bodies of color from schools to prisons. In 1973 the state’s prison population was 10,000; by 1980 it doubled to 20,000. By 1992 it more than tripled again to almost 62,000.

As I sat in that gymnasium, I didn’t realize that the state had other bids on their bodies. Only later would I learn that “since 1989, there have been more blacks entering the prison

system for drug offenses each year than there were graduating from SUNY with undergraduate, masters and doctoral degrees – combined,” (Gangi, Schiraldi, and Ziedenberg 1999, p.7).

Almost 25 years later, after generations of disinvestment and disproportionate placement of difficult-to-teach, over-age, under-credit students into the building, in the midst of a swelling inequality gap in wealth, income, real estate, and human security, the New York Times reports that a “crisis” is finally declared. The solution is to close the school and re-open it for “better” students who live in, and beyond, the district.

New York 1 reports some tension between the Department of Education and Gale Brewer the local city councilwoman:

The Department of Education says the biggest problem is that students just do not choose to enroll in the school, which currently has 2,200 students and 200 teachers. City Councilwoman Gale Brewer, who represents the district, accused the DOE of making a snap decision based on poor information.

"They have no history of being in the building. They don't know the neighborhood," said Brewer. "I don't think this is the right approach."

The majority of students at Brandeis, which opened in 1965, are black and Latino and reside outside the school district. Many are special education students or speak English as a Second Language. Brewer said the school's principal faces adversity like few others.

"The problem is that she gets many, many students reading way below level," she said.

"It's very hard to get a student who may not speak English or who writes in another language, to be able to graduate Regents in four years."

The councilwoman believes that giving students more years to graduate would make the school's rating increase. However, the DOE says that even when incorporating those who graduate in six years, the graduation rate is still only slightly more than 50 percent. (<http://www.ny1.com/content/93362/struggling-manhattan-high-school-to-close>)

Based on test scores, graduation rates and cumulative disregard, it was decided in 2009 that Brandeis like so many other comprehensive high schools serving Black and Latino youth, would be closed. The new building will be a complex of four small schools—two “non-selective” high schools, designed late in the summer to open in the Fall; one “second chance” school and the new Frank McCourt high school for journalism and writing, sponsored by Symphony space, adorned with the support of local parents and community. Ironically, in his name, the Frank McCourt School was being designed, by some, for the newly gentrifying families of the Upper West Side.

Community activists and educators were deeply engaged in challenging Brandeis’ make-over. Interested in documenting the shifts, and introducing the historic debt of the building, I started attending community meetings about Frank McCourt. Most of the sessions were cordial and seasoned with public commitments to “diversity.” But the slippery discourse of white deservingness was leaking through the doors. “I guess this school will be for 3s and 4s?” asked one parent, referencing test score signifiers (1 – 4 with 4 being the highest) burned into the consciousness and identity of New York City youth. “If we are serious about getting these kinds of students into that building, we’ll have to remove the metal detectors,” explained another parent, a father of color. And a woman facilitating the discussion elaborated, “If the other

schools want to keep the metal detectors, or need them, we might want to use a different entrance.”

And soon, the discursive architecture of separate and unequal was flooding the room, being spoken by White and African American prospective parents. A number of community members spoke—“This school has betrayed central and East Harlem for at least 30 years. It would be a cruel joke to clean it up, invest in transforming the school and then opening it for local elite children. That would, of course, constitute just another betrayal of Black and Brown students in New York.”

The DOE representative explained that, “any child would be welcome to the school... They will submit attendance, grades, and test scores and the computer will chose those who are eligible. Then we’ll interview.”

“But how about a preference for the siblings – or the children – or Brandeis’ graduates?” someone asked.

“No, the building will be open to children city wide, using criteria that are **demographically neutral.**”

Here’s how it works: students who satisfy the published criteria (scoring as a 3 or 4 on standardized tests, submit a writing sample in English, good attendance, grade point average of 3.0 in middle school) have their parents submit their names into a lottery. From this lottery, indeed the process is fair. But all of the pre-conditions are coated in relative privilege. Test scores in New York are highly correlated with race and class; privately paid tutors often coach writing samples in English; regular attendance and GPA are of course correlated with stable homes and hard work. The most profound imbalance, unfortunately, asks who has parents who

are savvy, informed, and entitled enough to submit their child's name into a lottery? And therein lies a piece of the makeover, couched in a language of open access and justice, even as the evidence suggests that students in the lottery vastly under-represent the poorest of the poor, English language learners, and students in need of special education. Like color-blind ideology (Neville, Yeung, Todd, Spanierman, and Reed 2010), the language of demographic neutrality shrouds accumulation by dispossession.

The well-oiled infrastructure and felt necessity of testing and policing, situated inside a school carved by generations of cumulative inequalities (in terms of finance equity, facilities, resources, teacher experience, distribution of high need students, graduation rates, rigorous curriculum, science equipment, and technology), has now “earned” an empirical data base that reasonably justifies the designation “failure,” unleashing processes that would result in a school closing. This strategy of educational reform—segregate children by race/ethnicity, class and academic history into varying strata of schools, measure and publicize differential outcome data, declare crisis, close school, re-open for more selective public/charter students, is a national trend built into federal, state, and local policy. And while the intervention is presumably designed to improve education for the children who were attending the failing schools, the scant evidence available on school closings suggests something quite different.

An exceptional piece of research was undertaken in 2009 by The Consortium on Chicago School Reform to document the academic and social consequences of school closings on urban elementary school students in Chicago (de la Torre and Gwynne, 2009). Tracking 5,445 K-8 students who had attended 44 Chicago Public Schools closed for poor academic performance or underutilization between 2001 and 2006, Consortium researchers found that most displaced students were transferred to equally weak schools—public, charters, and for-

profit contract schools. One year post closing, no significant improvements in math or reading scores could be determined for the displaced students. In fact, the greatest loss in mathematics and reading achievement occurred *during* the chaotic year prior to the school closing, when plans were just announced and when the schools filled with the ‘angst’ of institutional death and displacement. Achievement levels (as measured by test scores) of a small group of displaced students did, however, improve. *Students who transferred to schools with high academic strength and high levels of teacher trust and efficacy showed marked improvements in math and reading.* However, only 6% of students transferred into such schools. A full 42% of students transferred into schools with low levels of trust or efficacy. Overall, then, in terms of academic improvement, these researchers “found few effects, either positive or negative of school closings on the achievement of displaced students” (de la Torre and Gwynne, 2009).

In November of 1910, W.E.B. Du Bois published the first issue of *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, insisting that a record be kept of the ongoing crisis of “the darker races.” Du Bois recognized that crisis, for poor people and people of color in the U.S., had been woven deeply into the fabric of our nation’s history; that public schools had served as an institution through which crisis festered and was washed over, structured primarily in ways that reproduce class and racial stratifications (Anyon, 1997; Bell, 1993; Bowles and Gintis, 1977; Delpit, 2006; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 1972; Woodson, 2010) Like his colleague Carter Woodson, Du Bois wrote on the searing capillaries through which systemic mis-education of children of color stains our national history (Woodson, 2010). Most significant for our purposes, DuBois noted the structural and historic educational cris(es) of the “darker race” would be routinely ignored *until*

they are not. Today we hear the calls of “Crisis,” and the wise ghost of DuBois asks us to be suspect.

While *Framing Dropouts*, along with scores of texts on urban schools, have documented the deep and sustained inequities that have historically characterized the struggle in poor communities of color for quality education, these ‘crises’ of public education have been produced by structural disinvestment in low-income communities, the global flows of capital, and the racial stratifications that define our inequality gaps. The ideological/cultural declaration of crisis paves a path for the dispossession and privatization to roll into, and over, poor communities of color (Fabricant, 2010; Fine, 1991).

There is, then, a doubled crisis at the heart of this analysis. The *structurally-induced crisis* in education recognizes the deep historic neglect and mis-education of poor, immigrant, and children of color, a long festering enactment of internal colonialism. The *ideological crisis* references those moments in history when failure is declared and working class/poor communities lose access to a precious community resource.

With the tools of critical theory, history, and design, the Brandeis-McCourt analysis is, by now, a remarkably familiar urban cautionary tale circulating in New York City and around the country, particularly in schools historically attended by low-income African American, Latino and immigrant youth. Each move in this story is laminated in color—that is, the colors of race and class. These are the moves of dispossession: the original mis-education that circulated in the building; the cumulative generations of push outs; the introduction of metal detectors and police; the closing of the building, only to be cleansed, and reopened for the deserving. These are circuits of privilege and dispossession; power lines that meet dangerously in gentrifying neighborhoods.

We are reminded of Naomi Klein's writing in *Shock Doctrine: Disaster Capitalism* (2007) where she argues that immediately after neo-liberal or imperial intervention crises are often declared—in Iraq, Afghanistan or New Orleans—public assets as well as functions are systematically transferred from government to private, corporate interests. By linking DuBois and Klein, one can track the perverse linking of Black pain and elite profit, then and now. The narrative of progress and a new beginning for Brandeis makes a kind of sense to those parents, students, and educators yearning for a good public school that feels safe, smart and engaging, respectful, and intellectually exciting, to replace what has long been viewed as a “problem” institution. We can have no judgments about parents seeking the best school they can get for their children.

One might worry, however, that public policies framed as educational progress and accountability are actually widening inequality gaps and exacerbating the cumulative segregation and exclusion of children already plagued by rising poverty, destabilized lives, disrupted families and housing situations. Public policies which facilitate dispossession are instituted as if demographically neutral. Young bodies of color have been exiled, and no one is tracking where they go—or don't go—after 8th grade. Twenty years after *Framing Dropouts*, I am still asking: “Where are the missing bodies?”

Critical Bifocality and Circuits of Privilege: Concluding Thoughts

We are currently witnessing intensifying inequality gaps: the significant accumulation of wealth and privilege by a few, and the devastating swelling of disadvantage and despair in poor, working-class and increasingly middle-class communities. Some of us engaged in educational

research focus on the local micro-enactments of these dynamics while others sketch the structural landscape of class, race and geographic disparities. Some of us publish research on the reproduction of inequality and others highlight the resilience of those who are most oppressed. But all of these stories are too partial, and when told alone, distort the project and problem of educational injustice. Although each form of research may make a significant contribution, theoretically separating structure from lives, global from local, and privilege from marginalization, is no longer sufficient. The interlocking circuits of dispossession and privilege are theoretically, politically, and methodologically critical if we are to understand current inequities and re-imagine education for the collective good.

In this essay and across the two studies highlighted here, we argue that circuits of dispossession and privilege carry both fiscally significant material and culturally affective resources. That is, these circuits redistribute capital and opportunities, but they also intensify affects of scarcity, insecurity, and class anxieties. As we can see in the two cities highlighted here—one second-tier and one global, the well-oiled machine of class work is fueled by fiscal practices of disinvestment as coupled with differentially located real and consequently lived-out ideological circulations of economic scarcity. These dynamics attach to the global economy and work across sectors to mass incarceration, testing, and policing in particularly located educational institutions, further emptying them of any “real” educational capital. Through what we call methodological bifocality, we can begin to document the implications of far away policies and up close decisions by, for and against the interests of privileged and marginalized youth in terms of the kinds of curricular knowledge to which they are exposed, their real and imagined short and long term educational and material options, and the subjectivities they

embody over time in relation to education, economics and trust in the fabric of multi-racial democracy.

Our proposed theory of method takes up the difficult theoretical and empirical work of tracing these circuits by connecting global flows of capital, bodies, ideas, and power with local practices and effects. It does so by tracing new linkages between educational policy and everyday life in schools, elite and “failed” institutions, the transformation and privatization of public space, and the everyday discourses of possibility and despair that saturate, in varying ways and to varying extent, middle and upper middle class, and struggling communities. More than ever before, our work on the production and reproduction of privilege suggests that it is important for researchers to situate ethnography and discursive analyses within history and structure so that these distinct stories can be told in (dis)harmony. We offer “bifocality” as an alternative to the structure/agency split; as a corrective to simplistic resilience on safe spaces and the at times over-determinism of a wholly structural focus. By nesting lives within structures and histories, we document the strategies by which parents, across neighborhoods, are encouraged to seek quality education, which has increasingly become scarce, competitive, and seemingly zero-sum. We therefore theorize and simultaneously humanize the “class work” of those across our ever more contentious economic and social structure in shifting global context.

With a sense of critical optimism, we believe that interrogating and “filling in” the linkages that connect global to local, history to present, and elites and quasi-elites to marginalized communities, that we might begin to understand the serious solidarity work that needs to be undertaken for educational justice to be achieved.

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