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Contested Geographies of Education:

Neighborhood Schooling Struggles in Post-Katrina New Orleans

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Geography

by

Alice Elizabeth Huff

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Contested Geographies of Education:
Neighborhood Schooling Struggles in Post-Katrina New Orleans

by

Alice Elizabeth Huff

Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Helga M. Leitner, Chair

Through an analysis of contestation over neighborhood schooling in New Orleans, this dissertation examines how participation in collective action is impacted by the socio-spatial construction and negotiation of difference. New Orleans has been a testing ground for market-based school reforms that disproportionately affect black families and black geographies: the mass-firing of public school employees, the closure of nearly all of the city's neighborhood schools, and the institution of autonomous charter schools that are largely unaccountable to the communities they serve. These policies, the way they were instituted, and the narratives used to legitimize them, have provoked intense contestation even as they inhibit collective action. Existing geographic scholarship illuminates how education policy dovetails with other forms of urban neoliberalization to displace poor black and brown residents. In addition, geographers

have demonstrated how similar policies in other sectors have short-circuited political contestation. But geographers have not paid sufficient attention to the democratic implications of the racialized socio-spatial violence associated with contemporary school reform, nor to how those affected conceptualize and resist barriers to politics in the context of place-based schooling struggles. As a result, practical and ethical dimensions of an increasingly prevalent form of political struggle remain unexamined, and theorizations of democracy are insulated from potentially important empirical challenges.

I contribute to existing geographic work on democracy, pluralism, and the politics of race/place by refocusing attention on the understandings of participants in collective action, and the active (if always constrained) role that people play in shaping socio-spatial orders. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in New Orleans from 2010 until 2015, I examine how barriers to neighborhood-school politics are erected in New Orleans, how struggles to reopen and/or gain more control over neighborhood schools challenge these barriers, and how participants negotiate ethical conflicts within their own political communities. I argue that dominant school reform narratives deploy both neoliberal and plantation logics that specifically discredit black politics by depicting black places as bereft of value and black people as incapable of self-determination. Yet my research also demonstrates the incompleteness of these political barriers. I find that participants in black-led schooling struggles trouble dominant understandings of violence and failure by circulating counter-narratives that link school reforms to the evisceration of black geographies, the death of black children, and the repudiation of black political subjectivity. Using a Deweyan lens to analyze values conflicts within a political community, I illuminate the ethical complexities associated with participating in place-based politics and place-based practices that allowed participants to “learn to learn” from their engagements across difference.

The dissertation of Alice Elizabeth Huff is approved.

J. N. Entrikin

Eric Stewart Sheppard

John S. Rogers

Helga M. Leitner, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

For my parents.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

On a suffocating New Orleans summer afternoon in 2014, more than a hundred neighbors gathered on the cracked blacktop of their shuttered school. One by one, they described what the school closure meant for their majority-black working-class community, giving voice to what one participant called the “violence of school reforms.” When the words wouldn’t come, when the anger rose up and caught in someone’s throat, the crowd surged forward with encouragement, “Take your time,” someone called out as the woman at the microphone stopped mid-sentence to wipe away tears, “Just speak your heart.” For hours, people stood in the heat to grieve, to call out injustice, and to urge each other to fight for something different.

Such gatherings, and political campaigns that spring from them, have become more common as market-based reforms rework school governance and facilitate racialized school closures in cities across the US. In New Orleans, for example, contestation has been catalyzed by the post-Katrina establishment of a decentralized city-wide charter school market that cut off avenues for public oversight and precipitated the closure or charterization of nearly every neighborhood school in the city. The relatively few scholars who analyze the geographic dimensions of such reforms have described how market-based schooling policies work in tandem with a host of neoliberal experiments to facilitate private investment and make cities less livable for poor black and brown residents (Buras, 2013; Cohen & Lizotte, 2015; Good, 2017; Huff, 2013, 2015; Lipman, 2013; Peck, 2006; Pedroni, 2011), while geographers studying other sectors have emphasized the depoliticizing impact of similar governance strategies and narratives

(Blühdorn, 2014; Raco, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2014). Despite longstanding interest in democracy and place-based politics, however, geographers have not devoted much attention to grassroots struggles over neighborhood schooling in the wake of reforms that alter the possibilities for engaging in politics and community life. Existing work helps to illuminate the relationship between schooling and interlocking forms of urban neoliberalization that impede democratic change, but it tends to diagnose the nature of and remedy for urban injustices apart from the understandings of those whose direct experiences of school reform spur participation in collective action. As a result, dimensions of political struggle that preoccupy participants themselves remain unexamined and theorizations of democratic practice are insulated from potentially important challenges.

This dissertation draws on the scholarship of geographers and other academic theorists, but attempts to address the concerns described above by refocusing attention on how participants' understandings of neighborhood-school issues are formed, contested, communicated, and/or delegitimized. Through consideration of the relationship between participants' work in neighborhood-schooling struggles and broader democratic questions related to pluralism and conflict in political life, I hope to advance geographic conversations on social movements, democratic urban futures and the politics of place.

New Orleans Schooling Conflicts as Socio-spatial Struggles: An Historical Perspective

The early history of schooling struggles in New Orleans illustrates how control over schooling arrangements has been integral to cementing and challenging racialized power hierarchies, and to constructing spaces that support conflicting social visions. Before the Civil War, the education of black slaves was made illegal in recognition of the threat black education posed to the plantation

order that, I argue in Chapter 2, still persists in contemporary schooling arrangements. After the Civil War, as former slaves attempted to secure meaningful freedom and full membership in the polity, establishing the right to free universal schooling was central to demands for civil and political equality (Foner, 1987). These black-led efforts produced important gains including black representation in elected government and an integrated public school system in New Orleans. Yet locally and nationally, there was fervent white-led resistance to black self-determination and advances were both incomplete and tragically short-lived (Devore, 2015). By the late 1800s, policies were enacted that disenfranchised black New Orleanians through property requirements, literacy tests, poll taxes and grandfather clauses, effectively reversing most of the civil rights gains of Reconstruction.

Because during this period black political participation, economic autonomy, and social equality became more dependent on education, efforts to maintain white supremacy also focused on the schools. By 1900, not only had the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) resegregated city schools, but schooling past the 5th grade was discontinued altogether for black children. In 1917, black activists secured what would remain the city's only black secondary school until 1942, but this was a rare victory in the face of persistent efforts on the part of white officials and citizens to limit educational resources for black New Orleanians and preserve what school board members openly referred to as white supremacy (Devore & Logsdon, 1991).

This history demonstrates that the work of education policy was never merely to provide educational services, but instead served to impose and enforce social, and also *spatial*, orders. Because the provision of schooling in the US has been linked to neighborhood residence, as public education arrangements call particular social hierarchies into being, they also help determine who belongs where, they create spaces of inclusion and exclusion, they facilitate the

construction of “good” and “bad” neighborhoods (which are often racially coded), and they promote some ways of being in place while hindering others. In so doing they help to geographically construct and define race.

The goal of many grassroots efforts to shape education in New Orleans during the 20th century was therefore not just to control what was taught, or who was taught, but where schooling took place. Under Jim Crow, for example, decisions about where to locate schools often focused on the racial designation of schools in relation to the surrounding area. While during this period many neighborhoods in New Orleans were racially heterogeneous, white activists used school siting decisions as a way to define particular places as “white” or “black”. They argued that black schools sited in “the wrong place” were both socially and economically dangerous - no different than other forms of neighborhood blight (Stern, 2014, p. 21, 29). Post WW II, the Orleans Parish School Board allied with real estate interests and federal officials to build black schools in areas that would deter blacks from moving to locations slated for more profitable white development, thereby facilitating more concentrated racial segregation (Stern, 2014).

The socio-spatial work of defining racial difference in New Orleans has always involved violence against black persons and black places. In the 1890s an average of 187 lynchings occurred in the US each year, many of them staged as public spectacle (Hale, 2003). The form of violence against black people and places has varied, but as evidenced by countless examples (from state-sanctioned attacks on black protestors during the civil rights era to the police shooting of unarmed residents on Danziger Bridge in the wake of Katrina; from infrastructure projects like the siting of I-10 to cut through black neighborhoods to the recent razing of public housing) socio-spatial violence remains a potent tool for undercutting the basis for collective

action and for shaping the ways such action is perceived in public forums. In the words of historian Elizabeth Hale (2003), public violence ensures that a black man or woman is not just someone who may happen to be differentially affected by particular policies, “but also someone who [can] be tortured and killed, prevented from even being a person” (p. 229). As the logic of spatial segregation paradoxically threatened to distance black geographies from white surveillance and control, public violence restored prevailing racial orders by sending the message that the ability to enter black neighborhoods, to tear black people from their homes, to violate black bodies, indeed the ability to turn black death and humiliation into a public spectacle, was a constitutive property of whiteness. It reinforced the idea that there is no space beyond white command; that blackness is defined by an inability to control space and selves. School-related violence such as the physical expulsion of black students during Reconstruction or attacks on supporters of the four black first grade girls who were the first to integrate New Orleans public schools in the 1960s, were part of a long and brutal history of attempts to construct black people and black geographies as deficient, even inhuman.

I explore the contemporary resonance of this violent logic in Chapter 2. But in doing so, I also attempt to mark the fact that despite the politically debilitating nature of attempts to denigrate and eradicate black geographies and black personhood, these efforts have never completely silenced the voices of black New Orleanians involved in schooling struggles. In the face of legal hurdles and violent opposition, black activists, civic leaders, and neighborhood residents continued to work for schooling arrangements that reflected community needs and values. In the early 20th century, groups such as the Bayou Road Parents Club fought for decades over the condition and racial designation of their neighborhood school. Other groups such as the Seventh Ward Educational League spearheaded efforts to fund and build new

neighborhood schools for black students. In the late 1950s and early 1960s black 9th Ward residents were instrumental in forcing the city to comply with desegregation orders. Together with an active local community of black professionals, representatives of national organizations such as the NAACP, and white allies, these New Orleanians proved the power of collective action around public education (Buras 2014; Devore, 2015). As demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4, this legacy of collective action is also alive in contemporary New Orleans.

Post-Katrina School Reform in New Orleans

While attending to how reverberations of the past continue to echo in the present, this dissertation specifically considers de(politicization) of neighborhood-school issues surrounding post-Hurricane Katrina school reform. Schooling was a concern for many both before and after the storm (Boselovic, 2015; Chamlee-Wright and Storr, 2009). In the 1970s, the civil rights movement ushered in a new era of black political leadership in the city, including control of the Orleans Parish School Board. Yet deindustrialization and white flight spurred disinvestment and created conditions that undermined public schools' ability to meet the needs of the (increasingly black and poor) families they served, and several high-profile scandals eroded trust in the elected board. This put strain on what was already a complex relationship between New Orleans' public schools and black New Orleanians. Before the storm, schools staffed primarily by veteran black teachers and administrators who saw themselves as part of communities that extended beyond the school itself were a source of shared identity for proud alumni. Public schools anchored neighborhoods by providing secure employment, academic and social services, meeting space, as well as bands and sports teams for neighbors to rally around. Yet unsurprisingly given decades of disinvestment in schools and neighborhoods serving black New Orleanians, the promise of

emancipatory education for which so many black activists had fought was never fully realized despite the efforts of many competent and caring adults.

And then, just as children were returning to school from summer vacation in August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina swept through the Gulf of Mexico. The storm slammed into New Orleans early on the 29th. When the levees broke hours later, devastating floods inundated more than four fifths of the city. What happened next, and for whom, demonstrates how the racialized socio-spatial history described in the previous section reaches forward; compared to white residents, black residents were both less likely to have the means to evacuate and more likely to live in the low-lying areas where toxic water rose up to 14 feet in some places (Logan, 2006). Those stuck in the flooded city waited for days in the stifling heat for help that often came too late or not at all. Families were torn apart, wracked with uncertainty and grief. And after the floods receded, a whole new set of questions arose regarding whether and how to return to heavily damaged neighborhoods still without crucial services and institutions, where the dense and sustaining connections that bound people to the places and neighbors they had known all their lives had been compromised.

In the months following the storm it wasn't clear whether or how the city's neighborhoods, infrastructure, and public services would be rebuilt. All of the city's public school buildings sustained some damage; many were beyond repair. Teachers, administrators, staff, and students were scattered across the country. The influential Bring New Orleans Back Commission suggested that flood damaged neighborhoods would have to "prove their viability" by documenting significant return, or be converted to green space. Facing an uncertain future, and increasingly receptive to pro-charter influences, the OPSB fired all of its 7,500 employees (Dingerson, 2006). This decision, and subsequent refusals to give veteran teachers priority in

rehiring processes, effectively broke what had been a powerful teacher's union, severely damaged the city's black middle class, and created space for a dramatic cultural transition in the schools as the predominantly black local workforce was replaced with one provided by programs such as Teach for America: whiter, less experienced, and culturally disconnected from the communities they served, but also much cheaper to employ and easier to control given their transient and non-unionized status (Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014).

Katrina provided a rationale for the urgency of the state takeover and marketization of public schooling, but charter advocates had already laid the groundwork for this type of reform before the storm. In 2003, the Louisiana State Legislature passed Act 9, which allowed the state to seize control of failing schools, as determined by student performance on standardized tests. As a result of this legislation, the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) took over five of the Orleans Parish School Board's schools, and established a new non-elected entity called the Recovery School District (RSD) to supervise them (Dingerson, 2006). In June of 2005, a memorandum of understanding gave the State of Louisiana the authority to manage the Orleans Parish School Board's \$30 million deficit. The state turned over the financial management of this debt to the private accounting firm Alvarez and Marsal, which advised privatization of a variety of district-run operations including payroll and transportation services (Mirón, 2008).

Given this preparation, when Katrina hit, the intervention of free-market advocates was swift and sweeping. Backed by funding and support from a number of high profile philanthropic entities such as the Walton and Gates Foundations, proponents of market-based school reform saw an opportunity to completely restructure public school governance in New Orleans (Saltman, 2010). These advocates were members of what Rivlin (2016) calls the "shadow

government” of white elites. Many members of this shadow government met privately in Dallas just days after the storm hit to develop plans for overturning “the old order” so that New Orleans would no longer be “burdened by a teeming underclass, substandard schools and a high crime rate” but would instead “be very different...with better services and fewer poor people” (Cooper, 2005, p. A1). Less than two months after Katrina, Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco (D) issued an executive order that waived provisions in the state's charter school law requiring the approval of a school's faculty and parents before conversion of a traditional public school to a charter. Then, on Nov 30, 2005, the State Legislature passed Act 35. Act 35 raised the minimum standard for school performance on standardized tests, thereby immediately re-designating 114 of the city's 121 public schools as “Academically in Crisis” (Dingerson, 2006; Saltman, 2007). The “failing” schools were removed from the control of the OPSB, and placed under the auspices of the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which in turn shifted day-to-day governance of individual schools to autonomous charter management organizations. Neighborhood attendance boundaries were eradicated, so that theoretically students could attend school anywhere in the city, even if their neighborhood school was closed or refused them admission. Before Katrina, there were only nine charter schools operating in the city. The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) controlled all but five public schools in New Orleans. In 2013-2014, when the bulk of my research was conducted, the education landscape had changed dramatically.

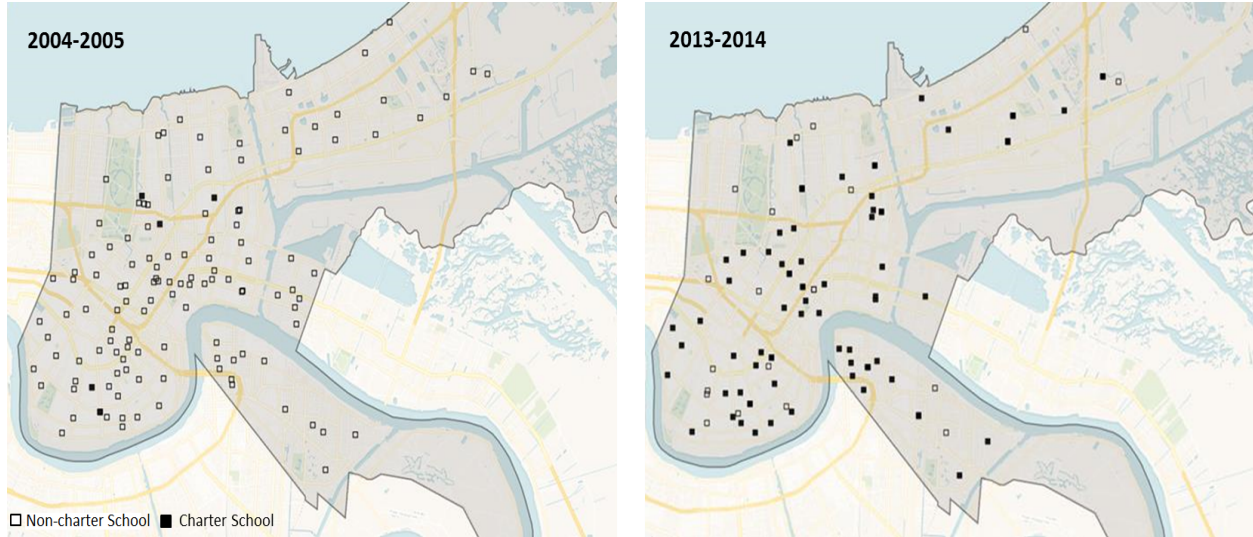


Figure 1: Non-charter and Charter Schools in New Orleans 2004-2005 and 2013-2014. By Erin Streff, 2017.

As Figure 1 shows, there were far fewer schools, concentrated in whiter, wealthier areas. The ratio of charter to non-charter had flipped. By the end of my study in 2015, there were 80 charter schools operating in the city, controlled by 46 different boards. Of these boards, only the OPSB was locally elected, and it was responsible for only six schools. In the ten years following the storm, the public school student population decreased from roughly 63,000 to 44,700. In 2015, over 90% of these students attended charter schools, the highest percentage in the nation (Cowen Institute, 2015).

The result of these reforms was a decentralized schooling “system” driven by market forces. After Katrina, school operations became controlled largely by non-elected charter school boards which received public funding based on school enrollment numbers, yet remained free to make decisions regarding admission, staffing, discipline, and curriculum with limited oversight

from the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. While in 2016, a decade of community pressure resulted in legislation aimed at initiating the process of returning school oversight to local control under the OPSB, operational control of schools seems likely to remain in the hands of individual charters (Dreilinger, 2016). Under this model, schools compete for the least-expensive students to educate in a city-wide educational market, while families must take on the work of securing the best available schooling options for their children without guaranteed access to their neighborhood school. In addition, many of the services (i.e. maintenance, curriculum development, enrichment, food service) once provided and managed by the OPSB were taken over by private companies (Saltman, 2015). The model also produces significant churn, particularly in the form of school closure. In this system, schools are treated as entities marketing a service rather than community institutions. Rather than providing extensive support for staff and students at struggling schools, the assumption is that if schools are not offering a good product they should close. From 2005 until 2015, 19 charter schools shut down, or were constituted under new management. In addition, the RSD and OPSB together closed 37 direct-run schools (Louisiana Department of Education, n.d.). Each of these closures involved scholastic and social disruption for hundreds of students, as well as a hole in the fabric of the neighborhoods they once served.

Most accounts of market-based school reforms assume either that the reforms function (and indeed are *meant* to function) primarily within the education sector, or that they are simply one of many forms of urban neoliberalization and should be contested on these grounds. The data presented in Chapters 2 and 3 challenge both of these framings by demonstrating the extent to which post-Katrina school reform narratives delegitimize black political participation in

shaping the relationship between neighborhoods and schools, and by presenting the range of grievances that neighborhood residents voice when contesting post-Katrina changes.

Narrative and policy have bound together schooling, democracy, and geography throughout US history, albeit in different ways and for different purposes in different places. Schooling has been described as a way to prepare citizens to make sound democratic decisions, and as a mechanism for keeping particular populations in particular places from full admittance to the polity. Schooling has been touted as a means of promoting the social and economic equality essential for democracy, and for ensuring that existing social and economic hierarchies remain intact. Despite wildly divergent aims, these narratives focus on access to schools and/or what students learn within them; their geographic resonance stems from the fact that because both students and schools are associated with particular places, access to quality education is a spatial problem with spatialized effects. In this dissertation, I decenter concerns regarding school quality (that is, how well schools serve students and their communities) and equity (the extent to which all children actually receive quality schooling) as isolated objects of analysis in order to investigate how these and other dimensions of schooling are *contested*. I examine the relationship between the (un)making of place and democratic practices associated with schooling struggles. The geographic relevance of this study is therefore not based on how school reform affects what happens inside schools in particular places, or even how school reform impacts the spatial distribution of and access to educational services, but rather, on how place is implicated in the post-reform framing and negotiation of neighborhood schooling issues.

Democracy as Peopled and Placed: Dewey and Experience as Method

In examining contestation over the relationship between neighborhoods, schools, and democratic life, the three of the papers included in this thesis argue for a more pragmatic sensibility in geographic analyses of place-based politics and prescriptions for democratic change. For John Dewey and other American pragmatists, democracy is necessarily practiced by people working in and on particular places. As we collectively use our diverse experiences to identify and attempt to ameliorate situations we find problematic, we are doing democracy. We learn from our experiences in the world, and use this knowledge to direct future actions that we hope will give us more of a hand in shaping our own lives. Democracy in this sense is experimental. We cannot know in advance the precise nature of future problems or the methods that will prove most useful for addressing them, but must instead use our collective (often conflictual) experiences to guide our actions, reflect on what happens, and change course as necessary. This understanding of democracy stresses the role of learning over particular forms of governance, which, as Dewey (1927) notes, are not essential to democratic life but only the best (imperfect) mechanisms we've developed so far for promoting an environment in which "all those who are affected by social institutions {...} have a share in producing and managing them" (p. 15–16).

Dewey's insistence on experience as a method for determining what should be done (what Fernando Pappas calls "radical empiricism") entails a similarly radical contextualism, which Dewey extends to both his political and ethical thought (Pappas, 2007, p. 41). On this view, problems do not exist as problems unless someone experiences them as problematic. Similarly, we can only evaluate our attempts at amelioration in relation to their impact on experience. While this does not mean that all actions are equally valid, it does mean that we must examine particular actions in light of their actual effects on particular (often unevenly shared)

contexts. Efforts to develop moral and/or political rules which transcend contextual experience are futile because the world is complex, dynamic, and malleable; the thorny problematic situations we face cannot be tamed by rules, even comprehensive ones. But more, such efforts are misguided because they attempt to circumvent situations like those discussed in Chapter 4 that force us to wrestle with ethical tensions and doubt – the very activities that provoke moral and political learning. While through experience we may develop certain principles that we use to guide moral deliberation, these must be held open to revision based on new experiences.

For geographers, these insights suggest the need for a greater attention than is sometimes given in accounts of depoliticization to the empirical details of people’s actual experiences in actual places, and to the ethical dimensions of political decision-making. This is not to suggest that as scholars we can or should ignore the significant body of theory that geographers and others have developed to explain depoliticization and prescribe ways to counteract it, but only that we might resist making assumptions about what the “real” problems and “best” solutions are apart from how people experience them. And more, that we might learn how to pursue our convictions without closing down essential avenues for learning. Because the experience of any individual or group is always limited, democracy requires active engagement with different others and a sense of fallibilism; we must develop the capacity to be affected by new experiences (Barnett, 2013). A willingness to revise even our strongest convictions ensures that beliefs formed out of individual experiences do not become disconnected from the experiences of others, insulated from challenge, and calcified.

As we attempt to address problematic situations together we alter the world, creating new circumstances to navigate. Democracy is therefore never fully accomplished, but must be constantly practiced in new and different ways. This way of thinking about democracy does not

provide a detailed plan of action, or even specific goals. Instead, it suggests only that the problems of democracy can never be solved once and for all, but must be continually revisited and reworked.

The “work” of democracy, and therefore analyzing democracy, requires consideration of geographic, political, and ethical concerns. Democracy in a Deweyan sense is geographic because experience is geographic; it is both place-shaping and structured by place. As such, it cannot be divorced from relations of power. But because the negotiation of power is attached to the negotiation of (sometimes irreconcilable) values conflicts, it is also an ethical practice; often a very difficult one. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, democracy is morally strenuous in the sense that living in a pluralistic society requires navigating tensions and trade-offs associated with multiple and often conflicting values. As people attempt to collectively address situations they find problematic, they inevitably encounter situations that require some form of action, but for which there is no objectively correct action to take, no ideological roadmap for proceeding. Instead, the way forward must be negotiated across various axes of difference in social groups responding to particular problematic circumstances. This dissertation’s concern for the democratic implications of neighborhood schooling struggles is therefore a concern not only for how groups are able to pursue their agendas in the public sphere, but how they produce and alter their agendas through the negotiation of ethical conflicts, and in the meaning that participants ascribe to their work.

In a 2002 article in the *Professional Geographer* interrogating geographic engagement with issues of race, racism, and potentially “dying” black communities, Clyde Woods asked, “Have we become academic coroners? Have the tools of theory, method, instruction, and social responsibility become so rusted that they can only be used for autopsies? Does our research in

any way reflect the experiences, viewpoints, and needs of the residents of these dying communities? On the other hand, is the patient really dead?” (p. 63). I see a geographic turn towards pragmatism, especially, as Eddie Glaude (2007) argues, when explicitly directed towards difficult questions surrounding race and democracy, as a response to Woods’ important challenge, and as a way to ensure that naming injustice does not become a way of reinscribing death on communities that are actually a source of significant and varied political work.

Methodology

The research deployed mixed ethnographic and qualitative methods and, drawing on Burawoy (1998), an extended case study design which emphasized the reflexive relationship between empirical data and theory (Burawoy et al 200, p. 27). The extended case method utilizes close analysis of the struggles of particular groups over space and time to reveal “discrepancies between normative prescriptions and everyday practices,” to “extract the general from the unique [...] and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory” (Burawoy 1998, p. 5). Such a method is well-suited for investigations of the relationship between emplaced political practices, education policy, and normative democratic theory.

Preliminary fieldwork for this project included 10 multi-week research trips to New Orleans between 2010 and 2014. During this time, I conducted exploratory interviews with community members, teachers, parents, non-profits, and key political figures, and participated in community and advocacy group meetings, including city-wide convenings around education-related topics and neighborhood-level community meetings of groups contesting school closures. I also developed a relationship with a black-run non-profit dedicated to amplifying community

voice in school policy decisions, which between the years of 2012 and 2015 resulted in contracts for the completion of qualitative research on how affiliates of the organization understood their work in school politics and for the facilitation of community meetings on schooling in New Orleans, all of which helped to deepen and expand my understanding of the impetus for participating in schooling struggles and of the opportunities and challenges associated with that work.

Building on my preliminary research, I carried out dissertation fieldwork between January 2014 and February 2016 as a full-time resident of New Orleans. A significant portion of my fieldwork involved participant observation, which was divided between city-wide public education-related forums such as the monthly meetings of the Orleans Parish School Board and the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and neighborhood-level meetings of groups attempting to gain more control over the schools in their neighborhoods. Observing forums such as school board meetings where participants publically aired grievances, made claims, and negotiated neighborhood-school conflicts with policy-makers, provided insight into how different schooling agendas were articulated and received. During such meetings, I paid particular attention to activities and testimony relating to groups attempting to influence the governance of neighborhood schools, including the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative (the focus of Chapter 4). As a participant observer at these city-wide public meetings, I collected data on how public officials and community members described their understandings and experiences of post-Katrina reform and struggles over school closure and governance, as well as normative statements regarding the relationship between community members, neighborhoods, schools, and democracy. More active participation in the neighborhood-level meetings of one group attempting to reopen a neighborhood school that had been closed for over two decades

(the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative), provided insight into how external events as well as internal conflict shaped the group's agenda. As detailed in Chapter 4, Pullman was a majority-black working-class neighborhood that had become more racially and economically diverse in the decade following Katrina. The Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative's (PNSI's) membership fluctuated from 2014-2015, and was augmented by hundreds of residents who participated in PSNI-sponsored neighborhood-wide meetings, events, and block-level organizing. But the Initiative itself was anchored by a core group of about a dozen Pullman residents, consisting of an equal number of men and women ranging in age from mid-twenties to late 80s. This core membership was relatively socio-economically diverse, including members who depended on state-sponsored social programs, those who worked in the informal economy, small business owners, service industry workers, and white-collar professionals. It included a near-equal split of black and non-black participants, and was equally divided between long-term residents and those who had moved into the neighborhood post-Katrina. While I did not live in the Pullman neighborhood, I spent time in the neighborhood on a daily basis and I became a member of the Pullman School Initiative in the spring of 2014, eventually serving as secretary for the organization. In this capacity, I was a participant observer in twice-weekly strategy sessions and numerous ad-hoc social and political gatherings where we shared meals and personal confidences in addition to discussing neighborhood-schooling issues and negotiated internal disagreements over values and strategy. Through extensive informal interaction with other group members I was able to collect data on practices and narratives that were less-rehearsed than those observable in larger meetings with policy-makers (Herbert, 2000). Unlike the larger meetings, the structure of neighborhood gatherings allowed for more of a back-and-forth between group members, who felt more comfortable disagreeing with one another in this

more intimate setting. Observing these interactions over time provided insight into messier forms of ethico-political work that are often overshadowed by efforts to mobilize support against a common adversary, and allowed me to identify subtle changes in practice and thinking over time. Whenever possible, I recorded conversations with and between group members, taking verbatim notes in a field diary, and adding my own reflections as soon as possible after each encounter. This data was then analyzed and coded for emergent themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Ethnographic data were triangulated with data from semi-structured interviews (n=51) with individuals actively involved in school-related public conversations and neighborhood schooling issues, as well as members of the PNSI. These individual interviews were designed to encourage participants to share stories of how schools and neighborhoods changed since Katrina, experiences that catalyzed their engagement with education-related issues and movements, challenges associated with their work, and their interpretations of the significance of particular policies, events, and interactions related to neighborhood schooling. These interviews, conducted in a place of the participant's choosing, were also recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded allowing me to enhance, clarify, and revise my interpretations of what I observed through my other ethnographic work.

Finally, focusing on how reform advocates and those contesting school closures publically articulated the “story” of post-Katrina school reforms, I gathered data from primary and secondary sources, which included archived legislative records and school board meeting minutes, school district policy briefs, state-reported data on schools, reports generated by non-profits, education blogs, news articles from local and national sources, videos produced for internet release, and organizational literature and websites.

The extended time I spent in New Orleans was essential to my successful completion of the dissertation project. My very first interview in the city was with a white woman running a neighborhood-based arts non-profit. I asked her about an article she had written about the neighborhood association she had helped found; in the article, she described coming through the storm to find that many of the relationships she had built with black neighbors and friends had become strained in the wake of Katrina. I had asked her to tell me more about the end of a relationship with one of her organization's co-founders, who had been a close friend. Too late I realized that while I had been treating her story as part of an intellectual puzzle, she was living it as a profound personal loss. "Look," she said, "This man, he stood up at my wedding, he held my first baby, and now...I don't think you understand. You can't just come in here and ask me these things like it's nothing. I don't even know who you are." And then, as I struggled to respond, she said, getting up, "Why don't you, um, come back when you have something more to contribute" (Field notes, 7/31/2010). I am ashamed of that interaction, but it changed how I approached this project, and I suspect, my practice going forward. It made me aware of how little I understood the lived experiences of New Orleanians when I first arrived, even the impossibility of ever being able to fully understand and convey some of these experiences. It foregrounded the ethical demands of my position as a researcher in post-Katrina New Orleans, and it convinced me that I needed to build more reciprocal relationships with the people I met.

Dramatically different experiences of Katrina and subsequent efforts to reform the city exacerbated racial divisions, mistrust, and rancor that existed in New Orleans long before the storm. School reform was a particularly painful and polarizing subject. While several surveys show that the majority of white New Orleanians (who were far less likely to be immediately affected by public school policy) saw the reforms as a major improvement and a much-needed

fresh start, black New Orleanians (who were more likely to be directly affected by mass firings, school closures, and hardships associated with accessing attractive schooling options) felt otherwise (Hamel et al 2015; Henderson et al 2015).

As described in Chapter 3, black New Orleanians involved in schooling struggles often characterized the reforms as a racist project perpetrated by white charter advocates aiming to control schools serving black neighborhoods while pushing out black educators and administrators. As a newly-arrived white academic, I was viewed with suspicion by many involved in neighborhood-school politics. New Orleans has always been a who you know, where'd you go to school city; I knew no one when I arrived, and couldn't claim a high school that meant anything to anybody. My race, age, and gender led many people in the meetings I attended to assume that I was a reformer or a charter school teacher. But even after it became clear that I was neither, there was significant distrust, anger, and fatigue associated with being asked by a white outsider to share, again, what for many were deeply painful experiences. These feelings were amplified by the fact that New Orleans became an intensely documented city in the wake of Katrina. This work was often done by white scholars and journalists with no immediate personal stake in the events, places, and people they described for far-away audiences. For New Orleanians whose complex ties to the city were formed through lifetimes of contradictory experiences (of no place like home safety and unpredictable violence, of unfettered joy and immobilizing hardship), hearing half-recognizable versions of their stories told by people with a tendency to come in, get what they needed, and then leave again was hard to stomach. The need for a more committed and reciprocal scholarly practice was only reinforced by interactions with people who asked, with varying levels of hostility: "Why are you here?" (Field notes, 6/7/2014). Realizing that my initial answers to this question were not sufficient did not make navigating the

highly charged environment of post-Katrina New Orleans easier, but it did help me to listen more carefully, to assume less, and to realize that I had to risk more myself if I asked as much from others.

Moving to New Orleans, living in the neighborhoods where I worked, showing up, again and again, to deeply uncomfortable meetings; all of these practices took time, and all were critical to my ability to enter into communities that were not my own, develop lasting relationships with those involved in neighborhood schooling struggles, formulate research questions of import to both geographers and community members, and interpret the empirical data I subsequently gathered. And yet. In response to a comment I made regarding money being made off of the privatization of public schooling in the city, one black community leader told me pointedly, “It’s not just money being made, it is *careers*” (Field notes, 6/13/2013). She was right. It was not only free market advocates who were profiting off of the disaster, but academics as well. I cared deeply about the struggles I participated in and analyzed, but I was more removed from them than the people I worked with, and in the end I left. This very document is proof of how I am using people’s stories for my own advancement even as I seek to shed light on what I think are crucial geographic problems. I am still wrestling with the fact that continuing to do this work will mean continually struggling with similar ethical quandaries.

I did not figure out a solution to these problems while I was in New Orleans, but I have gained two insights: first, I found I had to become more involved in the political work I studied, rather than less. This gave me a place to stand which was discernable and challengeable, and allowed me to know others and be known through meaningful work. Second, and related, participating actively in schooling struggles allowed me to break out of a relationship predicated on providing groups with academic services in exchange for access which did not fundamentally

disrupt the power dynamics associated with being an academic “expert”. As a participant, I was called upon to contribute in a variety of ways that made me feel vulnerable and uncomfortable precisely because my prior experiences had not provided me expertise in the tasks at hand. This in turn allowed me to see the potential contributions of my co-members in new and different ways, particularly as sources of theoretical insight, rather than just practical knowledge.

Outline of Chapters

The dissertation includes five chapters. This introductory chapter lays out the project’s purpose and objectives, describes the case, situates it in historical context, and provides a detailed account of the methods I utilized.

The second chapter, “Neoliberalization and the Plantation: Depoliticizing Post-Katrina New Orleans School Reform” interrogates the depoliticization mechanisms embedded in post-Katrina reform narratives. In this chapter, I identify similarities between depoliticization mechanisms and those described by post-political theorists. I argue, however, that in New Orleans, reform proponents combine discursive elements associated with neoliberalization with tropes of racialized failure that are rooted in the logic of the plantation. I examine how the negation of black political subjectivity, reinforced by depictions of black geographies as bereft of value, undergird a range of neighborhood-schooling strategies for “solving” the so-called problems with so-called black failure. But beyond the particular strategies employed, I am particularly concerned with how the marriage of neoliberal and plantation logics in reform narratives makes it less possible for the perspectives of those associated with black geographies to be heard in the public sphere.

If Chapter 2 explores the means by which the voices of those associated with black geographies can be made illegitimate, unintelligible, and/or unimportant, Chapter 3, entitled “Calling up the Ghosts of Racialized Socio-spatial Violence: Narratives of New Orleans School Reform and the Formation of Counter-publics” examines major themes in *counter*-narratives of reform produced by participants in black-led struggles to reopen or gain control of neighborhood schools. Drawing on ethnographic data gathered at public meetings, I analyze how participants link reforms to a haunting legacy of racialized socio-spatial violence and political delegitimization. I find that participants’ grievances included, but also exceeded concerns articulated by geographers who have framed post-Katrina reform as a form of urban neoliberalization (Huff, 2013, 2015). I argue that these counter-narratives create moments of rupture that potentially allow for reconsideration of the dominant reform narrative, and the construction of counter-publics around the racialized evisceration of black geographies, the mortal consequences of this violence, and the repudiation of black subjectivity.

Delving further into the practice of place-based politics, Chapter 4 “Learning from Difference in a New Orleans Schooling Struggle: Politics of Place from the Inside Out”, presents a fine-grained analysis of one neighborhood group’s negotiation of internal values conflicts. Highlighting the need for empirically-grounded geographies that focus on participants’ political understandings and practices, I contrast my observations of the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative’s negotiation of difference, with the normative views of pluralism espoused by Chantal Mouffe and John Dewey. I argue that using a Deweyan lens to analyze ethical conflicts such as those experienced within the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative provides a way of thinking about conflict as not just an inevitable reaction to difference to be channeled into adversarial relations, but as the impetus for learning how to tolerate (some amount of) difference without

resorting to forms of political exclusion that are less feasible and/or attractive for participants in place-based political communities. Using this lens, I demonstrate how group members' attachments to place allowed them to "learn to learn" from one another.

The fifth chapter concludes with a discussion of the main findings of the dissertation in regards to broader geographic conversations on schooling struggles, the politics of place, and democracy, and suggests avenues for future exploration.

Chapter 2:

Post-Politics and the Plantation: Depoliticizing Post-Katrina New Orleans School Reform

Abstract

This paper explores the depoliticizing effects of school reform narratives in post-Katrina New Orleans. Post-political theory provides insight into the apocalyptic and technocratic elements of such narratives, yet this theoretical perspective is limited by an overly narrow conception of depoliticization processes and insufficiently attuned to the dynamics of actually-existing struggles, particularly as they are affected by racialized socio-spatial violence. Drawing on theoretic descriptions of the co-construction of race and place, and more specifically on the logic of the contemporary plantation, I argue that post-Katrina school reform narratives of racialized failure intersect with neoliberal strategies in ways that differentially impact the ability of citizens to pursue their schooling agendas in the public sphere. Yet despite their efficacy, I suggest these intersecting depoliticization mechanisms also produce contradictions that potentially open space for the construction of new political subjectivities and geographies.

Introduction

In recent years, geographers have argued that dynamics associated with neoliberalization produce urban strife while simultaneously short-circuiting the means to respond to such problems politically (Blühdorn, 2014; Raco, 2009; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). Yet these

accounts tend to rest on a truncated historical perspective that ignores specific histories of racialized socio-spatial violence (McKittrick 2009, 2011). In this paper, I examine how narratives legitimizing market-based school reforms in post-Katrina New Orleans depoliticize neighborhood-school issues. I argue that reform narratives reveal the influence of a plantation logic that attempts to dehumanize black people and denigrate black geographies. This logic intersects with depoliticizing dimensions of neoliberal rhetoric in dominant reform narratives to particularly discredit black political engagement in neighborhood-school issues.

The use of plantation logic often supports, but sometimes troubles, post-political mechanisms associated with neoliberalization, creating daunting if incomplete barriers to black politics. My review of the literature suggests that both political barriers and political possibilities are obscured by post-political theory that trains attention on a set of concerns that is both narrow and disconnected from worldly political practices. I therefore join other geographers advocating for analyses of democratic politics that pay more attention to actually-existing struggles, and in particular to the political openings created by people involved in such struggles create.

My argument is developed in several stages. First, I briefly review work by scholars of post-politics who describe how the logic of neoliberal depoliticization is manifested in fear-based narratives before outlining critiques of this literature's tendency to flatten the particular contexts, subjectivities, and practices that shape depoliticization and repoliticization (Bettini, 2013; Beveridge, 2014; Chatterton, Featherstone, & Routledge, 2013; Featherstone, 2012; Featherstone, 2013; Clarke, 2015). Turning to scholarship on race and place for additional insight, I then consider how the delegitimization of black political subjectivity and the denigration of black geographies via what Katherine McKittrick (2011, 2013) calls "plantation logic" serve as mechanisms of depoliticization. After briefly describing the New Orleans school

reform context, in the third section of the paper I identify the mutually-reinforcing use of both neoliberal and plantation logics in narratives supporting post-Katrina school reforms. This empirical investigation indicates that both neoliberal and plantation logics are amplified through depictions of black failure (personal, institutional, and geographic) embedded in reform narratives. Yet my analysis suggests that in drawing on the logic of the plantation, these depoliticization strategies make visible some mechanisms and forms of injustice that were previously more opaque, and call up histories not just of subjugation but of resistance. In conclusion, I outline two possibilities for renewed political engagement in this environment.

Conceptualizing Depoliticization

Fear-based narratives

Drawing on the work of radical democratic theorists such as Rancière (1999), Mouffe (2005), and Žižek (2008), geographers have described the attenuation of democratic politics as a constitutive feature of neoliberalization. They argue that the political possibility of conflict is disavowed, sutured, even foreclosed as overlapping forms of governmentality produce policy environments that appear democratic but are increasingly insulated from public scrutiny and dominated by private interests (Blühdorn, 2014; Raco, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2009; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). Such work demonstrates how the possibilities of politics are further undermined by technocratic management techniques that concentrate attention on a narrow set of technical solutions for supposedly external threats (Purcell, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2009; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 223; Žižek, 2006, p. 555). Under these conditions, the *consequences* of global capitalism become the subject of political negotiation, but the principles and systems that

give rise to injustice remain safely beyond the scope of deliberation and/or contestation (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1998; van Puymbrook & Oosterlynck, 2014).

The use of fear-based narratives that present crises as all-encompassing and divorced from particular political-economic arrangements has been of particular concern to scholars investigating post-political strategies (MacGregor, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2010). These narratives gloss over significant unevenness in the experience and production of crisis, describing a situation that is too urgent for time-consuming and unpredictable democratic processes (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 214). Crisis calls for immediate solutions; the nature of the crisis itself is treated as settled and/or beyond the scope of politics. In these narratives, salvation is secured through technical procedures defined and legitimated by experts (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 270). Public attention is therefore focused on that which is measured and reported by specialists, who in turn often delegate to the public the task of disciplining themselves out of danger. Data generated through ever-evolving forms of accountability fuel public debate, but because data are the product of rarely articulated assumptions and values, they naturalize the generators' political positions and define the parameters of legitimate discussion and debate (Crouch, 2004).

At the same time, a suite of complementary strategies works to foreclose political possibilities before they even arise. The shift towards technocratic expert-legitimated solutions to manufactured crisis lends itself to governance by constellations of quasi-private entities that operate under the banner of flexibility, efficiency, and best-practices. As Mike Raco (2014) argues, when the negotiation of complex social issues is transformed into technical processes that “can be broken down, managed, accounted for, and contractualised...contracts can then be farmed out to those with ‘expertise’ to implement new modes of policy” (p. 26). This creates new networks of elite private actors able to shape policy in environments that are inaccessible to

the public. If complaints arise they can be accommodated, but only as expressions of individual rather than collective concerns (Žižek, 1998). In this scenario, politics itself is tacitly portrayed as the problem – a barrier to doing what needs to be done, rather than a way to negotiate what *should* be done.

Notwithstanding the power of these arguments, several strands of criticism identify a tendency in the post-political literature to ignore the worldly practice of politics in ways that weaken its analytical possibilities (Barnett, 2012; Barnett and Bridge, 2012). When the post-political is treated as a disembodied universal and defining condition, critics argue, this downplays the significant role that contestation can play in altering the terrain of politics is downplayed (Darling, 2013). Analyses overly committed to neoliberalization as a framing device for depoliticization may obscure impediments to politics, and forms of repoliticization, that exceed neoliberalism (Featherstone, 2013; Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007). Furthermore, because post-political theorists recognize the impossibility of completely foreclosing politics, while also observing that much of what passes for politics is now merely a charade, they can be both narrow and over-vigilant in defining what counts as “properly political,” privileging adversarial resistance to global capitalism and sidelining empirical examinations of actually-existing political struggles (Gill, Johnstone, & Williams, 2012). Finally, there is a concern that too much of a revolutionary burden is placed on individual acts of rupture, thereby discounting more modest political activities (Darling, 2012). Together, these criticisms argue for theorizations of democratic politics that are more responsive to actually-practiced forms of politics, and to how particular contexts shape and are shaped by political action.

Depoliticization and the co-construction of race and place

Geographies that examine the co-construction of race and place provide a useful counterpoint to the ontological bent of post-political theory, while maintaining a focus on processes that shape the possibilities for political action. From this perspective, race is theoretically and practically dynamic— always embedded within, and productive of, relations of power and politics (Omi & Winant, 2012). As broader social, political-economic, and cultural contexts are contested, difference is marked as racial in material, ideological, and discursive ways, which are central to the production of both vulnerability and resistance (Singh, 2012). Places such as neighborhoods, schools, and regions do not “become racialized” simply through the presence of racialized bodies, or as a result of the spatial distribution of the consequences of racism. Racial meanings are [re]constructed as differently-positioned individuals and communities attempt to shape how places are experienced, understood, and valued through framing, narrative, and practices such as redlining, racially restrictive covenants, federal support for suburbanization, and racially differentiated access to employment and education (Delaney, 2002; Hankins, 2007; Hankins, Cochrane, & Derickson, 2012; Kobayashi & Peake, 2002; Marston, 1988; Marston, 1990; Martin, 2003; Nagar & Leitner, 1998; Till, 2012). Differentiated landscapes in US cities are then taken as proof of black disorder and white supremacy, encouraging further disinvestment in non-white areas and institutions, and the mobilization of white privilege in securing spaces that are read as clean and safe (Denton & Massey, 1991; Gregory, 1999; Hirsch, 2000; Holloway and Wyly, 2001; Lipsitz, 2011; Pulido, 2000).

Elaborating on the co-construction of race and place, Katherine McKittrick’s (2011, 2013, 2014, 2016) account of “plantation logic” shows how the plantation reaches forward into the present to dehumanize black people and denigrate black geographies in ways that undermine

black politics. McKittrick conceptualizes “plantation logic” as a socio-spatial order rooted in the violences of slavery that is meant to produce racialized geographies and subjectivities, and specifically to divide the human from the non-human (McKittrick 2013, 5-6). The plantation ensures that black people are constricted in their ability to engage in the essential human activity of place-making. The resulting “failure” to create fruitful places can then be produced as proof of black less-than-humanness. Within plantation contexts, black geographies (from Africa to the slave cabin) become unlivable; unlivable places become black; and black life becomes theoretically, discursively, politically, and often physically, impossible.

Denied opportunities to assert personhood and engage in place-making on the plantation, black people were subjected to what Achille Mbembe (2003, p. 21) calls “death-in-life”, and depicted as inherently lazy, savage, immoral, dependent, and disorderly; unfit for inclusion in the polity (Dennis, 1998). In such environments, to be marked as black was therefore not merely to be deprived of the right to participate in politics; it was to be understood as fundamentally incompatible with political citizenship. As political non-subjects, on the plantation black people may *be* a political problem, but they cannot themselves articulate their own problems politically. Whiteness, in contrast, becomes inextricable from the ability to control self, others, and environment; to act as architect and arbiter of socio-spatial orders (McKittrick, 2013; Hale, 1998).

My purpose here is not to argue for the primacy of the plantation as an overarching explanatory framework for the depoliticization of neighborhood-schooling issues post-Katrina. As the following explanation of reforms clearly demonstrates, the impetus and the impact of the reforms cannot be understood apart from their relationship to urban neoliberalization. Yet McKittrick’s theorizations are an important entry-point for examining how the intersecting logics

of neoliberalism and the plantation in post-Katrina education narratives erect unevenly experienced barriers to political participation, and particularly black political participation, in democratic urban politics.

I utilize the plantation framework with the realization that it presents researchers with its own set of challenges. McKittrick argues that in identifying manifestations of plantation logic, scholars reproduce narratives in which enslaved peoples are “normally lifeless” and un-geographic. She contends that focusing on urbicidal tactics can normalize the conception of black geographies as spaces of absolute otherness which are always already dead and dying, always classified as imperiled (2013, p. 9). Rather than fundamentally altering the racialized logic that associates blackness with degradation and non-blackness with health, the destruction of black geographies in these accounts of urbicide is often implicitly defined in negative relation to that which is non-black; as a lack/erosion/stripping of what the non-black analyst or protagonist has or is. Even analyses that seek to remedy injustice tend to reinforce the Darwinian idea that the fittest places and peoples survive. Because these are often marked as non-black, the implication is that one must also escape blackness in order to escape peril, or aspire to that which is not-black (McKittrick 2013, p. 9-10).

Not only do such analyses obscure forms of place-making and political agency that enact black life, they presume that those who suffer injustice have nothing to offer geographic analyses *except* for their suffering, which is simply catalogued as further evidence of unjust social orders. This line of thinking constructs an artificial division between those who are most directly affected by urban dynamics and those who are capable of imagining and instantiating alternative urban futures. The dead and dying may provoke pity or anger, but they are not intellectual or political partners. Thus, scholarly negation of black political subjectivity enacts an additional

violence, condemning particular communities to death, over and over again (McKittrick 2011, p. 954).

As an alternative strategy, McKittrick foregrounds the relational nature of the plantation, and the emancipatory possibilities that exist therein. She maintains that such spaces are never outside of life; the plantation holds within it the possibility of agentic action and multiple ways of living, produced within the plantation, yet outside the normalcy of black death (2013, p. 14). Similarly, while I focus on barriers to politicization in post-Katrina New Orleans in this paper, I attempt to hold space for life that has existed and continues to exist through black political and place-making practices. I return to this line of thinking in concluding comments.

Dominant Narratives of Post-Katrina School Reform

School reform dynamics in New Orleans

Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29th, 2005. When the levees broke, floodwaters covered 80% of the city. Seventy-five percent of residents in areas damaged by the disaster were black (Logan, 2006). In the midst of this disaster a small group, comprised mostly of local white elites and powerful external funders, wrested control of the city's schools from the black-led local school board. The result was a city-wide education market monitored by the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), but managed primarily by autonomous charter school operators and other non-elected organizations.

The groundwork for this takeover had been laid well before the storm with the passage in 2003 of Act 9, which allowed the state to seize failing schools and established the Recovery School District (RSD) to oversee them. After the storm, efforts to remake schooling in New

Orleans were facilitated by an executive order that nullified requirements for community input on charter conversion and lifted the cap on the number of schools that could be chartered. Then, in November 2005, Act 35 redefined the school performance threshold for state takeover, in such a way that all but four high-performing OPSB schools were declared “Academically in Crisis” without any change in performance. The governance of these schools was transferred to the state, which in turn transferred operational control of many of these schools to charter management organizations. The impact of this suite of reforms was far-reaching: by 2016, over 90% of public school students in New Orleans attended charter schools, i.e., schools that receive public monies but are run by privately appointed boards and are largely free from operational oversight so long as they maintain minimum levels of student achievement (Harris and Larsen, 2016).

Post-Katrina shifts in school governance were accompanied by other significant changes. Under financial and political pressure in the aftermath of the storm, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) fired all its employees. This effectively broke the local teachers’ union and facilitated the widespread use of cheaper, whiter, and less experienced recruits from alternative teacher preparation programs such as Teach for America, striking a major blow to the black middle class (Dingerson, 2006). Attendance zones were dissolved, forcing families to compete for schooling opportunities without the safety net of a guaranteed spot in a neighborhood school. Neighborhood schools were shuttered and/or disconnected from communities, the names of black leaders and community members on their marquees replaced with unfamiliar charter logos.

These changes have resulted in an environment that was bereft of many previously available opportunities for addressing schooling issues through collective action, yet also fraught with tension. It is not easy to depoliticize school reform; schooling touches too many areas of

too many people's lives: In New Orleans, firings, school closures, and concerns over governance and equity issues all have sparked contestation (Henry and Dixson, 2016; Huff, 2015).

In order to insulate post-Katrina reforms from grassroots challenges, market-based reform advocates have developed strategies designed to curtail or preclude political resistance (Peck, 2006; Lipman, 2011; Huff, 2015). In the next sections of this paper I examine legitimizing reform narratives produced by state and non-state actors that critical education scholar Kristen Buras (2011) includes in the 'policy ecology of New Orleans Public Schools'. Of the reform advocates whose statements I include in this paper, only two (former RSD Supt. Patrick Dobard and education activist Howard Fuller) are black. This reflects the dearth of high-level black leadership in the post-Katrina New Orleans reform movement, even though black teachers and principals continue to work within the new system.

In the following sections, I identify three shifts in the dominant reform narrative as reform advocates sought to justify, enact, and preserve policy. Attention is given to how reform advocates described the impetus and purpose for school reforms, how the reforms were instituted, and the benefits, challenges, and impacts associated with maintaining post-Katrina policies. I analyze how the tropes mobilized during each phase depoliticize school reform in ways that particularly delegitimize black politics.

The data are drawn from a five-year qualitative study of contestation over neighborhood-school issues in post-Katrina New Orleans. Focusing on how reform advocates articulated the "story" of post-Katrina school reforms and how those narratives were translated into policy, I gathered data from primary and secondary historical sources, including school district policy briefs, state-reported data on schools, reports generated by non-profits, education blogs, news articles from local and national sources, videos produced for internet release, and organizational

literature and websites. In addition, from 2010-2015 I attended community meetings, conferences, state and local school board meetings, city council meetings, and other education-related public events as a participant observer.

Justifying reform through narratives of racialized failure: Denigration of black subjectivities and geographies

The dominant reform narrative suggests that market-based reform is the only viable alternative to failing systems, schools, and neighborhoods. Accounts often begin with lurid descriptions of neighborhood schooling before the storm, when children were “trapped in failing schools because of their ZIP code” (Vanacore, 2011). In these accounts, black geographies (including both neighborhoods and schools) are depicted solely as places from which to escape. “Before the storm,” recalls Patrick Dobard, who served as the first black Superintendent of the RSD from 2012 until 2017, “we had a public school system that was really in total dysfunction and disarray” (ReasonTV, 2015). Paul Pastorek, State Supt. of Schools during early reform efforts agreed, calling the district “financially bankrupt, morally bankrupt, academically bankrupt, and facilities bankrupt” (Katrina’s Silver Lining, 2010). In the words of Scott Cowen, Tulane President and one of the architects of the post-Katrina model, the public education landscape pre-Katrina was a “wasteland” (Cowen & Seifter, 2015).

These narratives portray those associated with pre-Katrina schooling as incompetent, lazy, and immoral; the schools themselves as “toxic” and unclean (Reidlinger in Gurwitt, 2006). “I felt incompetence was harder to fix than corruption, and in Orleans Parish there was both,” proclaimed Leslie Jacobs, a businesswoman who served on the state and local school boards before the storm and who was a major force in passing the state take-over legislation (Their and

Good 2011). Sarah Usdin, another OPSB board member, former TFA Louisiana executive director, and founder of the influential non-profit New Schools for New Orleans, described school failure as “criminal.” Former OPSB member Jimmy Fahrenholtz agreed, “Why we allowed [teachers] protection in the past for their failures is beyond me.” The Times-Picayune newspaper portrayed pre-Katrina public schools as “infamous for corruption, rock-bottom academic performance and feces-smearred restrooms” (Chang, 2010), while other media outlets described, “The smelly, decrepit buildings...bathrooms littered with bloody rags. The students made to kneel on rice as a form of punishment...” (Gurwitt, 2006). In fact, Cowen argues the entire city was afflicted by “corruption, mismanagement and general ethical malaise” (Wall Street Journal, 7/25/2014). It was this moral rot, the reform narrative implies, that was at the root of the community’s unconscionable disregard for their own children. Despite deplorable conditions, says Jacobs, there was “No outrage. There wasn’t a civil rights march. There was no religious, political, civic, or parent outrage” (Merrow, 2011).

Having laid this groundwork, the dominant reform narrative portrays the flooding as an almost merciful act of God, a unique opportunity to address the abject failure of pre-Katrina public schooling by purging the city of its most unclean elements (Klein, 2007). Conservative commentators pronounced: “It seemed that Katrina accomplished in a day—dismantling a derelict school district—what Louisiana school reformers couldn’t do after years of trying” (Newmark & de Rugy, 2006). Building on this sentiment, market-based reform advocates have insisted on describing the dismantling of public schools as the “silver lining” of Katrina. The State Supt. of schools when the Hurricane struck said, “We think this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. I call it the silver lining in the storm clouds” (Saltman 2010, p. 26-27). Then-Governor Blanco (D) called the reforms, “A golden opportunity for rebirth” (Saltman 2010, p.

26-27). Five years after the storm, then-Secretary of Education Arne Duncan continued to voice a very similar narrative on the national stage:

I've spent a lot of time in New Orleans, and this is a tough thing to say, but let me be really honest. I think the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina. That education system was a disaster, and it took Hurricane Katrina to wake up the community to say that we have to do better. (quoted in Anderson, 2010)

As described in post-political theory, early iterations of reform narratives decoupled crisis from its structural origins. By constructing a story that blamed schooling difficulties on the moral and professional weaknesses of those involved with schooling before the storm, these accounts diverted attention from decades of urban policy that, from the 1970s onward, created and exacerbated the effects of poverty and undermined public goods in New Orleans. During this period, elected officials in New Orleans (many of them black) allied with economic elites (most of them white) to implement market-based “solutions” for problems associated with deindustrialization and white flight, including massive layoffs, cuts to social services, wage reduction, and caps on spending in the public sector (Gotham & Greenberg, 2014, p. 49). As the wealth gap grew, punitive welfare “reforms” and attacks on public housing deepened the misery of many poor families (Woods, 2009). These dynamics placed a greater burden on the schools, while also reducing the resources available for supporting students. By the late 1990s, per-pupil spending in New Orleans was 26% below the national average, and 16% below other urban school systems (Saltman, 2011). The result was a system that could not consistently meet the

needs of the families it served, despite the hard-won successes of many dedicated professionals who constantly were asked to do more with less.

Reform mechanisms suggest that failing schools can be saved by forcing parents to compete for schooling opportunities, stripping unionized employees of their jobs, discontinuing neighborhood schooling, raising standards, reducing barriers to competition, increasing accountability, disempowering the elected school board, and streamlining governance. Each of these solutions implies (but does not state outright) a particular problem, framed in neoliberal terms: lackadaisical parents, entitled teachers, deficient communities, market constraints, lack of personal responsibility, and incompetent bureaucracies. Such tropes are well documented in accounts of the depoliticizing impacts of urban neoliberalization.

Post-Political theory has less to say, however, about forms of depoliticization that spring from the exclusion of those whose experiences might engender political conflict if voiced in the public sphere. Early reform narratives justified reform by denigrating black people and geographies, calling into question the democratic fitness of black New Orleanians and associated with black New Orleanians. In post-Katrina New Orleans, statements regarding parent, school, community, and board failure (as well as the need for reform by more responsible parties), carry a racial subtext, if only because post-Katrina school reforms are directed at black New Orleanians and what are seen as black institutions, while the majority of the initial reform architects, advocates, funders, and enactors were white elites who educated their children elsewhere (Buras, 2014).

In this environment, the list of problems suggested by post-Katrina reformers is read as: lackadaisical *black* parents, entitled *black* teachers, deficient *black* communities, market constraints imposed by *black* obstructionists, lack of *black* personal responsibility, and

incompetent *black*-run bureaucracies. The racial modifier is both contextually obvious and rarely explicitly stated, allowing reformers to exploit structural inequities by implying that they are the result of racialized failure while simultaneously denying the salience of race (Bonilla-Silva, 2015).

While they do utilize crisis narratives to circumvent political engagement, in constructing their narrative around racialized failure, school reform advocates in New Orleans depart in critical ways from post-political accounts of what Swyngedouw calls “apocalypse forever.” Swyngedouw describes how fear-based narratives drum up consensus around responses to a disaster that is always just on the horizon (Swyngedouw, 2010, pp. 219, 223). In this scenario, the threat of apocalypse is a powerful tool for pacifying social antagonisms and constructing a populist narrative that forecloses political possibilities. The enemy is always both external and objectified, uniting a global “us” against a threat that is presented as universal (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 222). In Swyngedouw’s view, this framing disavows existing antagonisms and displaces conflict into the realm of consensus-building engagement processes and expert-driven problem management (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 225).

In the initial justification for reforms there was an articulated need for urgent response to crisis. But crucially, there was little attempt to include black New Orleanians (physically or discursively) in the “we” that was supposed to unite against an existential threat. Instead, in the story market-based school reform advocates told, the threat emerged from within, in the form of black dysfunction. Given this enemy-within, in dominant reform narratives the apocalyptic flooding event turned out not to be a threat at all. Instead, Katrina was an *opportunity* to wash away the people who ruined the city and its schools, so that more capable leaders could rebuild.

It is significant that rather than transcending social antagonisms, this framing seems to feed them, especially when deployed in a place with a specific history of racialized socio-spatial contestation over schooling that predates neoliberalization by hundreds of years (Devore, 2015, Anderson, 2015). While post-political theory identifies many forms of depoliticization associated with post-Katrina school reform, it is not sufficiently attentive to mechanisms of depoliticization that function not by insulating the production of social crises from general public scrutiny, but by particularly discrediting black political subjectivity.

By characterizing pre-Katrina public school employees as either incompetent shirkers or morally-deficient criminals, reform advocates draw on representations, circulating since slavery, in which black people are portrayed as dependent on whites, disordered, morally weak, and incapable of wholesome place-making (Dennis, 1998). Similar depictions circulated in the decades after Emancipation, when a surge of black political participation was beaten back by violent force and racist policy supported by academic narratives explaining that blacks were “far from being fully developed men capable of exercising the duties of citizenship” (Cutler, 1905), as evidenced by the “fact” that “Here as in the Old World, Negroes have not only failed to exhibit a capacity for indigenous development, but when uplifted from without, have shown an obvious tendency to fall back into their primitive state as soon as the internal support was withdrawn” (Williamson, 1986). Similar rhetoric was deployed again in the 1960s, when anti-integrationist senators explained that the “habits” of Negroes “indicate inherent dishonesty, laziness, slothfulness, etc.” and that “as a business and professional man, the Negro is sub-mediocre,” (quoted in Fairclough 2008, 168). In deploying historically rooted representations of racialized failure, contemporary school reformers are choosing to base their legitimacy claims on

a logic that racializes fitness for self-determination and deems black people unwholesome, likely to contaminate the places they inhabit.

Geographers who theorize the relationship between race and place suggest that the reform narrative of racialized failure relies on the degradation of black places. Narratives of racialized failure justify the gutting of black neighborhoods and schools through neoliberal policy that strains public institutions and entitlements. The results provide further proof of black failure to create and shape life-sustaining geographies, leading to further disinvestment. But narratives of racialized failure did not appear with the onslaught of neoliberal policy. This logic was perfected through the plantation system more than a hundred years earlier, when black people were enslaved and then castigated for their dependence. A time when “the lands of no one” were bound to a geographic language of racial condemnation, and “the occupants of the uninhabitable, indigenous to Africa and the Americas, were cast as barbarous and irrational, while their lands were transformed into profitable colonial outposts and settlements” (McKittrick 2013, 6-7).

Without ignoring the economic implications of such strategies, McKittrick’s analysis emphasizes the death-dealing, dehumanizing ramifications of apocalyptic redemption narratives that dismiss black geographies as “toxic” and “decrepit” “wastelands” in which students were “trapped”, while hailing deadly floods as a cleansing force. Through this lens, the dominant reform narrative is depoliticizing not just because it valorizes technocratic and/or marketized interventions rather than political ones, but because it cuts off black political participation by denying the very humanity of those who might seek to contest post-Katrina schooling arrangements.

Enacting reform: Teaching responsibility through remedial inclusion

Enacting long term and large-scale public school reform in New Orleans required narratives that not only denigrated what had come before, but also framed the work of *post*-Katrina actors in ways that facilitated ongoing control of the public schools. In apocalyptic reform narratives Hurricane Katrina washes away black failure, but the reformers are the heroes who capitalize on this “golden opportunity” to save “New Orleans school kids from their broken public-school system” (Kinnan, 2005). For example, Leslie Jacobs explains how she and other white power-brokers had to make sure the schools did not reopen under local control:

After the levees broke, the city is shut down, and the conversation in Baton Rouge [the unflooded state capitol] is really, ‘We cannot let the [Orleans Parish] School Board open up these schools again. We have the opportunity for a much broader fresh start.’

(Katrina’s Silver Lining, 2010)

As noted earlier, the “fresh start” involved firing all the district’s teachers, necessitating an influx of new “talent.” Some of the majority-black veteran teaching staff and administration embraced the new model and/or found ways to work within it. But the dominant reform narrative contrasted the “old” (black) teachers and their “criminal” (black) ineptitude with mostly young, well-educated and energetic (white) saviors. As Scott Cowen tells the story, after the old impediments were washed away,

Talent immediately began to arrive in droves. Educators from across the country, fresh-faced TFA teachers, charter entrepreneurs, the successful Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) organization, all came to help the city in its moment of crisis. (in Cowen & Seifter, p. 74)

But what kind of schooling environment did this “help” produce? Reform narratives describe a model based on choice. In these narratives, however, choice is linked to the need for systems that will regulate the behavior of parents, students, and teachers.

Charter advocate Neerav Kingsland has spoken animatedly about the opportunities the New Orleans model provides parents. In most cities, he says, “the government looks at your address and says, ‘We know the school for you.’” But in New Orleans, “Every year a parent gets to look at all the schools in the city and say, ‘I’m going to pick the school that will best serve my kid’” (Field notes, ERA Conference Commentary; June 20, 2015). While the choice model is portrayed as emancipating parents from the constraints of bureaucracy and geography, it is also recognized as a form of discipline, teaching parents that they must be actively involved in their children’s education – researching schools, competing for spots in the best ones, and choosing another if the first (or second, or third) doesn’t work out. As former OPSB school board member Lourdes Moran said approvingly, “Our parents are forced to be engaged” (Field notes, ERA Conference Commentary; June 19, 2015).

Similarly, post-Katrina schools are often described as instilling students with a sense of responsibility. While charter schooling denotes a form of governance rather than a particular pedagogical or student management style, market-based reform in New Orleans has been accompanied by the rise of “no excuses” schooling. This model insists that through pervasive student monitoring and comprehensive behavior control, academic performance of urban youth can be raised without addressing the economic, social, and political dynamics affecting school funding, family security, and neighborhood life (Goodman, 2013). Indeed, on this view, pointing to these outside-school dynamics as potential factors in student performance (and therefore potential targets of reform efforts) is tantamount to excusing the personal failure of poor

and minority students. Instead, to compensate for supposed home-life deficits, “no excuses” schools focus on instilling personal responsibility through strict academic and behavioral expectations. Principal Heidi Campbell explains: “We know that many of our kids, coming from poverty backgrounds, have very chaotic lives. When they come here they know what we expect when they walk on a line” (Katrina’s Silver Lining, 2010).

Students in “no excuses” schools are made to own their successes and their failures. Scott Cowen quotes a student at Warren Easton HS, who explains,

Every student has their struggle. But when you walk through that door it doesn't matter anymore. No excuses. They tell you, we know you don't have a parent at home. What are you going to do so your children won't have to go through it like you? (in Cowen & Seifter, 2014, p. 79).

This emphasis on personal responsibility also impacts teachers. A report on New Orleans style reform, prepared as a guide for other cities, claims: “Educators, not bureaucrats, are best positioned to find the answers to our nation’s most complicated educational problems... Educators should have choices in employment” (Brinson et al. 2012, p. 11). On the surface, this sounds empowering. And yet, market-based reform advocates are also clear that these empowered teachers need to be kept “on their toes” (Jacobs, 2011) by high-stakes test-based accountability measures and minimal job security protections (Sondel, 2014). Former OPSB member Jimmy Fahrenholtz puts it this way:

The non-union environment is the best thing that could have ever happened to us. Make teachers responsible for what they say they are doing. Now everyone has to perform, or they're gone. (Schachter, 2006, n.p.)

The call for personal responsibility rarely extends to reformers themselves. In the years since Katrina, reform advocates have begun to acknowledge there were human costs associated with the implementation of their model. However, in the story they tell, the difficulties associated with job loss, social upheaval, long commutes, struggles to locate schools for students with special needs, and punitive discipline are the price of creating a more nimble and productive system. Yet perhaps because the people crafting the dominant narrative rarely bear the weight of these hardships, painful dimensions of reform are often breezily described as the inevitable result of forced change; they prove that real reform is happening. Discussing KIPP, a national charter school network with a large market-share in New Orleans, Scott Cowen describes the boot camp-like atmosphere of a New Orleans KIPP school he visited. Cowen recounts his wife's sense that "there was a cruel thread" running through the school's rigid requirements for student behavior and severe penalties for minor infractions (Cowen & Seifter, 2014, p. 86). Many no excuses schools forbid students to speak in public areas such as lunchrooms or in classrooms, require them to walk single file on painted lines in the hallways, to sit with spine straight while in class, and to adhere to strict dress codes. Cowen tells his wife to "think about the backgrounds [the students] come from. They may need more structure to concentrate." Cowen also admits their visit raises questions, "Is KIPP more factory than school? Does it cherry-pick its students? Is tough love still love?" In answer to these questions, however, Cowen says only: "No benefit without cost" (Cowen & Seifter, 2014, pp. 83-84).

Neerav Kingsland echoes this sentiment:

There's always a 'but'. There's always going to be trade-offs. There's no real reform effort that's not going to have real cost. And for me, it's 'What's the cost of not doing reform?' I can tell you what it would have been in New Orleans; it would have been

disastrous. So when I'm talking to communities across the country and I'm saying, 'Yeah, you do need to go bold. You do need to go big. You are going to get in political dog fights, and people are going to get fired. But at the end of the day your kids are going to get a fundamentally better education. (Field notes, ERA conference commentary; June 20, 2015)

As anticipated by post-political scholars (e.g. Swyngedouw, 2010, pp. 225, 227), the elite networks of “responsible partners” who design and manipulate the New Orleans school policy landscape wield great power with little public accountability. They often operate from within the private and quasi-private sector, and/or are insulated by a decentralized market-based governance model. Their choices shape the realm of possibility for others who are bound by the range and accessibility of the options elites create (Pattillo, 2015). Teachers and parents are supposedly empowered by the choice model, yet both groups must compete for advantages, spurred on by the knowledge that should they fail, the blame and the consequences will be theirs to bear. No safety net, no excuses (Cowen, 2014). Scholars such as Wendy Brown (2016) have described how neoliberalism operates through this kind of responsabilization: “The state disinvests in education or mental health; the cuts are handed down to localities; localities devolve them to individual schools or facilities which in turn devolve them to individual departments or managers; who then have something called ‘decision-making authority,’ without, of course, the resources to exercise this ghostly autonomy...this false freedom to choose” (p. 9). According to Brown, such an arrangement places the responsibility for addressing large-scale problems (such as crises in urban education) on the shoulders of entities “wholly unable to cope with them

technically, politically or financially” (p. 9). The resulting precarity is depoliticizing in the sense that it keeps people focused on negotiating high-stakes personal choices, while carving away at the resources necessary for collective confrontation of systemic problems.

Theorizations of post-political dynamics capture these important depoliticizing dimensions of post-Katrina school reform narratives. But they do not give enough attention to how *irresponsibility* comes to be defined in racialized and politically debilitating ways, nor to how those who fail to operate successfully in this system continue to be included. The post-Katrina reform narrative associating black subjectivity with problem-creation discredits black people as “responsible partners” in problem-solving. Sometimes (as in initial iterations of reform narratives) this results in calls to eradicate/remove irresponsible parties, but often it registers as conditional and/or remedial forms of inclusion. School choice and “no excuses” schooling are portrayed as racial uplift projects, providing structure and instilling habits that are assumed to be lacking in black neighborhoods so that the behaviors that ruined schools before the takeover do not resurface. To the extent that black parents and children operate effectively within the schooling market, they may by their adherence to market values be made acceptable as consumers and validators of the new schooling model. But they are never portrayed as viable architects/destroyers and/or shapers of schooling system or their own places. Instead, black residents remain irresponsible supplicants who through reform may develop better habits, but who are nevertheless always suspect.

This is not a new idea, especially in relation to schooling. In a situation startlingly similar to the contemporary moment, black schooling in New Orleans became the post-Emancipation project of missionaries, industrial philanthropists, and education professionals. As

is true today, many believed they were working for the betterment of black lives. According to a representative of a Rockefeller-backed charity:

In our dreams, we have limitless resources and the people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hands...The task we set before ourselves is very simple as well as a very beautiful one, to train these people as we find them to a perfectly ideal life just where they are. So we will organize our children and teach them to do in a perfect way the things their fathers and mothers are doing in an imperfect way. (General Education Board 1913, p. 6)

Then, as now, many in the black community rejected this brand of “help.” An editorial in a black newspaper from the same period argued:

If we are men as our friends say we are – we are able to attend to our own business. There is no man in the world so perfectly identified with our own interests as to understand it better than we do ourselves. We must deliberate and decide for ourselves...We need friends, it is true; but we do not need tutors. (Blasingame, 2012)

Embedded in this call for self-determination is the assertion that plantation logic, even in its most benevolent forms, is politically dangerous. Policies that claim to work in service to marginalized groups while denying such groups access to the means to shape the nature of intervention may or may not produce socially just outcomes, but they cannot be democratic (see Purcell 2006). Remedial forms of inclusion deny to those deemed incapable of self-determination the ability to control the meaning of social justice or the means of social reproduction.

Preserving post-Katrina reform: Privatizing claims and appropriating change

Although many structural and rhetorical forms associated with reforms retard black political action, challenges to post-Katrina school reform have continued to surface. In the years since Katrina, market-based reform advocates have had to develop new strategies for addressing these challenges. By 2015, a narrative had emerged that more directly acknowledged early shortcomings of New Orleans reform. The new story line referenced the equity challenges associated with a decentralized model – mentioning concerns over enrollment procedures, services for students with special needs, and uneven discipline policies/oversight (Cowen Institute, 2015). New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO), founded by Sarah Usdin, the former executive director of Teach for America in Louisiana, has been an influential producer of such narratives. A 2015 retrospective NSNO report touted the success of reform efforts while conceding that the way the reforms were instituted strained the trust of many in the community: “After a decade of unprecedented growth and irrefutable evidence that schools are getting better, many in our community remain frustrated with how reform in New Orleans happened, how decisions are made, and who makes those decisions” (NSNO, 2015, p. 58).

In regard to concerns over community voice in schooling decisions, NSNO writes:

There is a pervasive feeling, especially within many black communities, that reform has happened ‘to’ and not ‘with’ the students and families served by New Orleans schools. This leads some to ask the question, ‘Was it worth it?’ Our answer is definitive: Yes. Student outcomes must be the lens through which we judge reforms. Our students are, without question, better off than a decade ago...” (NSNO, 2015, p. 58).

This report goes on to suggest that despite “undeniable” accomplishments, it will be important for leaders to be more responsive to community complaints in the future, noting that:

Transformative change generates vocal and passionate criticism. Constructively channeling this dissent can lead to improvements in how the system serves students and families... Within the framework of decentralization, substantive critique needs to find receptive ears among [school] leaders..., and the nonprofit community. Wholesale opposition to the entire package of New Orleans public education reform, on the other hand, is not constructive. (NSNO, 2015, pp. 66-67)

These emerging narratives depict charter operators as responsible, collaborative, and responsive to the needs of children. For example, by “building on work by parents and non-profits,” the Reform School District is described as having “initiated a centralized, single-application system called OneApp” in 2011 (Cowen Institute 2015, p. 16). And in response to a few “bad apples” who “denied enrollment to students with severe special needs and expelled students for low-level infractions,” charter authorizers worked to become “better regulators” (Kingsland 2015, 4), developing a common hearing system for expulsions in 2013 and plans for changes to special education funding and oversight in 2014. In these narratives, “governmental leaders and educational entrepreneurs” choose to impose restrictions on themselves because “perhaps more so than most charter sectors, New Orleans educators have internalized the moral imperative to serve every child” (Kingsland, 2015, p. 5).

Despite more acknowledgement in the dominant reform narrative that some changes to the model were necessary, the primary remedy for dissatisfaction remains individual school choice. Parents are encouraged to “vote with their feet”, moving to a new school rather than engaging in slow and unpredictable democratic work. Neerav Kingsland explains:

We’ve reinvented how schools run. If I am unhappy with service I’m getting in a school, I can pull my kid out and go to another school tomorrow. I don’t have to wait four years

for an election cycle so I can vote for one member of a seven-member board that historically has been corrupt. (in Layton, 2014)

Crucially, however, those who do not accept this form of agency are described as obstructive, irrational and self-serving. As outlined in previous sections, such pejoratives are racially charged, yet frequently issued without direct reference to race. Only occasionally does the veneer of color blindness slip, as when Leslie Jacobs dismissed the concerns of black activists saying, “They want the schools returned to the OPSB, they resent charter schools, they’re not supportive of the RSD, and they’re angry. It’s the same group of people who feel that their power has been taken from them, and what happened post-Katrina is a white conspiracy against them” (in Osborne, 2012).

This characterization fits into a broader narrative in which those who engage in politics are the enemy of change and children, whereas the work of reform is moral, a-political, and data-driven, focused only on the successful implementation of what’s best for kids. Former Secretary of Education Duncan’s remarks to the NAACP exemplify this evasion (even derision) of politics:

My only goal is success. If we want our children to compete in the global economy, we cannot tolerate failure any longer. We must demand excellence and not get sidetracked by ideology or politics... (Duncan, 2010)

In this narrative, reformers set ideology aside to do right by kids; they simply follow the data. Of post-Katrina reform in New Orleans, Neerav Kingsland writes, “It is unclear why pragmatism has triumphed over ideology. Perhaps New Orleans has simply been lucky to be led by pragmatic individuals. Perhaps the charter structure combines empowerment and accountability in a manner that forces leaders to respond to data rather than ideology (Kingsland, 2015, p.13).” While according to proponents of market-based models, “political and constituent

pressures make turning around failing schools difficult” in traditional districts (Brinson et al., 2012, p. 22), the new system is described by reformers as circumventing inefficient and unpredictable political wrangling. As State Supt. Pastorek declared, Hurricane Katrina “took politics out of the school system” so that now, “You can do what you want to do” (quoted in Burns & Thomas, 2015, p. 90). Paul Vallas, who served as Superintendent of the RSD after the storm, described a trade-off between democracy and running an education system, dismissing the former because, “Democracy moved slowly” (quoted in Burns & Thomas, 2015, p. 91).

Exigencies associated with the reforms are framed in terms of doing the “right thing” even under political, social, and environmental pressure. Lourdes Moran, a member of the board that fired all OPSB employees in the wake of the flood, describes that time as a “devastating period.” And yet, she says, “Out of devastation comes renewal. And it was an opportunity for us to make a change, and so we did. Those changes were not embraced. But they had to [be made]” (Field notes, ERA conference commentary; June 19, 2015).

The crisis required all involved to act decisively, often at the cost of excluding community involvement. Rick Hess, a national commentator on education policy associated with the American Enterprise Institute, explains:

It's incredibly uncomfortable to talk about, but...one way to think about New Orleans is, it was a train that bolted out of the station; limited number of people jumped on the engine, they started driving it...Everybody did not feel invited into making those decisions about when it was leaving or where it was going. Everybody said, 'Heck, the train's going and we gotta clamber on board.' And now...it may be that's the only way to really go. It may be that the only way to really go into a large system that's not working for kids, is you gotta get the train started, and then have the conversation once it's

moving. It may be that if everybody is sitting around trying to get a say, trying to get heard, trying to feel listened to, then it may be that we just actually never actually are able to summon the energy necessary to focus to get the train out of the station. I think that's an incredibly uncomfortable thought, for all the obvious reasons. But I think in the spirit of lessons learned and honesty, it's one worth reflecting on. (Field notes, ERA conference commentary; June 20, 2015).

Compared to representations of crisis in early reform narratives, these more recent iterations place less overt emphasis on the supposed toxicity of black people and black geographies, or even the need for black remediation. Instead, reform advocates have moved towards justifying their avoidance of democratic engagement and equity shortcomings with more general references to the urgency and value of their mission. In such narratives the ends of reform (freedom of choice, improved outcomes) justify the means. What “works for kids” and what is “not working for kids” (and thus the work of market-based reform itself) is depicted as self-evident: measurable, value- and context-free, and race-neutral.

In the face of crisis, claims regarding neutrality and the need for pragmatic action make it difficult to contest the ideological commitments grounding reform strategies. Politicizing the ends or means of reforms is depicted as a self-serving act. Democracy is described as a lethargic process incompatible with the pressing need to act decisively on behalf of kids. These tactics closely resemble those Swyngedouw (2010) describes in which crisis narratives facilitate efforts to circumvent inefficient political solutions, and to curtail debate on the nature of the crisis.

In answer to critique, newer versions of the New Orleans school reform narrative are less likely to ignore or deny claims outright. Instead, they frame and contain criticism by

accommodating that which can be cast as personal and appropriating the language of critics in relation to more substantial reforms. In the first instance, criticisms of dynamics intrinsic to the post-Katrina model (such as the transfer of risk to individual families) are portrayed as stemming from the particular circumstances of particular families. In such cases, a family who is struggling with the placement of siblings in different schools might be given a special dispensation in the application process, but the structural mechanisms that produced this situation are never publically debated. In the second instance, groups of citizens who recognize their shared interest in contesting a particular aspect of the model may be invited to participate in community engagement processes. As Gill, Johnstone, and Williams (2012, p. 512) explain:

Disagreement is allowed here, but only over questions that are sanctioned and permitted within a dominant order of things. Attention to subjugated groups then appears to be given because their questioning is seen as legitimate, yet all the while they are only able to occupy a limited set of positions within a terrain that is composed of already delimited possibilities.

In such situations, community member voices appear to be heard, but power to make binding decisions on policy remains in the hands of a limited number of politically-insulated individuals. Finally, post-Katrina reform advocates have occasionally been forced to alter their model in more substantial ways. In these cases, reform advocates have tended to appropriate the motivation and logic of their critics. This strategy involves taking credit for acknowledging flaws and responding with changes that have made the model more livable, when in fact proponents were forced into the alterations by lawsuits, public shaming, protest, and so on. For instance, although they have not necessarily been enforced, provisions for more equitable city-wide special education were finally negotiated in 2013, eight years after the storm. This gap suggests

that equity measures came about less as a function of an internalized “moral imperative” and more because of a lawsuit brought by the Southern Poverty Law Center on behalf of ten special education students in 2010. Moreover, appropriation of the gains made through citizen-led contestation preserves the (racialized) roles of architect and irresponsible supplicant.

Crucially, even when large changes seemed inevitable, the basic logic and structure of reform has remained unaltered. In 2016, for instance, legislation in the form of Senate Bill (SB) 432 initiated the return of New Orleans schools to OPSB governance. While this bill may seem like a move towards more democratic governance, it stipulates that the local district “shall not impede the operational autonomy of a charter school under its jurisdiction,” including decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, and management. In addition, SB 432 preserves city-wide enrollment procedures. While substantive change is minimal, the dominant reform narrative turns these developments into proof that the market model is responsive to perceived community needs (but not community voice). In this way, the political charge attached to systemic failure is dissipated.

While post-political analyses of depoliticization include many aspects of the dynamics described above, they rarely delve into the contingent and uneven nature of the processes by which different members of marginalized groups gain and lose access to accommodation. Black disorder is still implicated in these narratives; but, as outlined by Bonilla-Silva, it operates more and more through supposedly neutral market-driven policy and “slippery, apparently contradictory, and often subtle” rhetorical strategies that decontextualize liberal values, naturalize racially uneven policy outcomes, and attribute inequality to racialized cultural deficiencies (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, p. 41, 2015). The old tropes of black incapacity for self-governance do not cease to resonate merely because they are used less frequently or less

obviously, however. When reformers suggest, “You gotta get the train started, and then have the conversation once it’s moving,” rather than attend to those who are “sitting around trying to get a say, trying to get heard, trying to feel listened to,” they not only dismiss democratic practice in general and bracket out any discussion of how those driving the train attained their positions, they reduce black politics to a self-serving petulant need to “feel listened to” (Field notes, Rick Hess, ERA conference commentary; June 20, 2015). To avoid being labeled as one of those irrational or petulant obstructionists who populate dominant reform narratives, black community members must present themselves in ways that demonstrate their willingness to abide by an unjust racialized order. In particular, they must not be angry and they must not mention racial bias. But more concretely, they must prove willing to accept the parameters of reform rather than engage in “wholesale opposition,” (NSNO, 2015, pp. 66-67).

Conclusion

Having focused primarily on depoliticizing discourses associated with intersecting post-political and plantation logics, in conclusion I want to explore how these strategies might carry within them the means for repoliticizing schooling issues. Here I return to Katherine McKittrick’s insistence that even the most violent and oppressive social orders contain life. Two contradictions in particular, while certainly not to be wished for, may nevertheless allow for new political practices.

First, the denigration of black subjectivity and geographies has placed stress on existing social fissures and created new ones. The very strategies reform advocates used to naturalize the destructive force of Katrina and subsequent changes in policy have promoted racial animosity. After casting reforms as a remedy for the deficiencies of black people, advocates have had an

uphill battle convincing black New Orleanians that the reforms are non-ideological and universal expressions of “what’s best for kids.” The denigration and delegitimization of black adults and black geographies, even (if you take the reform narrative at face value) in service of the uplift of black kids, reveals what Avery Gordon calls haunting: the demanding presence of the plantation as something that is supposed to be over and done with, but is not (Gordon, 2011). By drawing on and extending plantation logic, reformers expose the extent to which contemporary market-based reforms rely on racialized socio-spatial violence. As much as the reformers tried first to externalize and vilify black New Orleanians, and then to construct worthy and unworthy racialized categories, the wounds associated with the humiliation of black professionals and the annihilation of black neighborhoods has stymied the populist appeals of fear-based narratives that work to depoliticize policy shifts in other contexts (Buras, 2014).

Representations of black incompetence and moral decay were convenient rallying points for the initial takeover. But after the purge, reform advocates found that their future was still tied to black residents and communities in complicated ways. Reformers needed customers for their charter-based model, partners in the education of youth, scapegoats for their own failures, legitimators of post-Katrina changes, test-subjects for experimental social, political, and economic strategies, outlets for their own perceived benevolence. These contradictions are reflected in the narrative shifts described above. In the movement between legitimization, enacting, and preservation strategies outlined in the previous section, some of the underlying mechanics of depoliticization are exposed, and thus more easily politicized.

Second, the long history of the plantation provides fodder for the construction of dehumanizing racialized socio-spatial orders, but it also contains a deep knowledge and consistent practice of struggle. The subject positions available for black people in reform

narratives are extremely limited. Even when these narratives focus on the remediation of black New Orleanians rather than their eradication, there is no place for the kind of black-led activism that has in fact flourished in New Orleans for centuries. In particular, post-Katrina reform narratives obscure the long history of struggle associated with black public schooling in New Orleans.

This history exposes the mendacity of narratives that portray black New Orleanians as apathetic towards schooling concerns and incapable of self-determination. In spite of a school board that from the late 1800s well into the 1960s was publically committed to maintaining white supremacy through the schools (Devore & Logsdon, 1991), black New Orleanians have shaped public education in the city. When the Orleans Public School Board curtailed black education after the 5th grade in 1900, when they bowed to white parental pressure and ejected black children from neighborhood schools, when they refused to provide appropriate facilities and materials to black students, when they would not pay black teachers equitably, black activists, civic leaders, and neighborhood residents organized for equitable schooling arrangements that reflected community needs and values (Devore, 2015; Stern, 2014). In the years preceding Katrina, youth-led organizations and coalitions of students and teachers such as Fyre Youth Squad and Students at the Center worked to amplify the voices of those most directly impacted by public schooling arrangements. Through this work, black New Orleanians laid claim not only to educational opportunities, but also to the city itself.

This tradition of activism remains a vital force in New Orleans today (Buras, 2014; Devore, 2015). In the years following Katrina residents of neighborhoods from the 9th Ward to the 17th agitated for more community-responsive schooling options. Alumni of the city's historically black high schools fought to preserve the legacies of their alma maters. Neighborhood

association members rallied to reopen shuttered institutions. Parents protested punitive discipline policies and demanded accessible student services.

These struggles have not always been successful; there have been many painful losses. And then, given the complexity of schooling dynamics, it is not always easy to determine what success actually looks like. The existence of activism does not guarantee justice. But it does imply a starting place that is different from analyses that conceptualize contemporary plantation spaces, such as urban centers, in terms of their inescapable separateness from humanity, from life. The challenge and the benefit of calling out the plantation in analyses of contemporary policy contexts is that if the plantation is a blueprint for contemporary forms of socio-spatial violence, it also provides patterns of resistance, refusal, care-taking, and radical openness that currently shape the contours of citizenship in New Orleans.

Chapter 3:

Calling up the Ghosts of Racialized Socio-spatial Violence: Narratives of New Orleans School Reform and the Formation of Counter-publics

Abstract

Across the United States, recent waves of urban school reform have re-worked public education governance and altered the relationship between geographic communities and schools. In New Orleans, post-Katrina reform resulted in the closure or reconstitution of nearly all of the city's direct-run neighborhood schools and the imposition of an all-charter school model in which residence in a particular neighborhood no longer guaranteed access to a particular school. Critical geographies of education have challenged dominant pro-reform narratives (and the policies such narratives legitimize), by demonstrating how market-based reforms dovetail with other forms of urban neoliberalization to detrimentally affect communities of color. While they present compelling accounts of injustice, geographies of education have not been as attentive to how participants in reform-related contestation publically communicate the purpose of their work. In this paper, I examine public testimony on reform-related injustices produced by participants in black-led efforts to reopen or gain control of neighborhood schools in post-Katrina New Orleans. I find that participants' grievances included, but also exceeded, concerns regarding the marketization of public education. Addressing this issue was described as part of a larger fight for spatial self-determination: an effort to build and maintain sustaining communities in the face of reforms that perpetuate a haunting legacy of racialized socio-spatial violence and political delegitimization. I argue that participants' counter-narratives create moments of rupture

that potentially allow for reconsideration of the dominant reform narrative, and the construction of counter-publics around the racialized evisceration of black geographies, the mortal consequences of this violence, and the repudiation of black subjectivity. In order to centralize the situated experience and political understandings of those most directly affected by post-Katrina reform, I call for more pragmatic geographies of schooling.

Introduction

In recent years, waves of reform have deployed market mechanisms to regulate urban education in cities across the U.S. These reforms have encouraged disinvestment in public school systems, insulated school governance from public oversight, facilitated selective school closures, displaced communities of color, and eased the way for speculative real estate investment (Lipman, 2013). Critical geographies of education have been instrumental in conceptualizing schooling as a geographic endeavor with geographic consequences, and in naming savage forms of injustice that are obscured in dominant pro-market reform narratives (Cohen & Lizotte, 2015; Good, 2017a, 2017b; Hankins, 2005, 2006; Hankins & Martin, 2006; Huff, 2013, 2015; Lipman, 2011, 2013; Nguyen 2014, 2017; Pedroni, 2011). However, this scholarship has tended to pay more attention to the evolving relationship between market-based school reforms and processes of urban neoliberalization than to the understandings of injustice developed and publically disseminated by those most directly involved in schooling struggles (Nguyen, Cohen, & Huff, 2017).

Responding to calls for more ethnographic attention to the mechanics of social justice movements (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Cloke, 2010; Sziarto & Leitner, 2010) and the

embodied emotional, ethical, and spiritual practices that work through space to shape political subjectivities, initiate publics, and construct solidarities (Arenas, 2015; Bosco, 2006; Cloke, 2010; Nussbaum, 2013; Pulido, 2003), in this paper, I analyze how participants in black-led efforts to re-open and/or gain more community control of New Orleans public schools narrate injustices associated with post-Katrina school reform. In doing so, I pay particular attention to how these accounts challenge dominant school reform narratives, which portray market-based reforms as the only alternative to the failures of black families, neighborhoods, and institutions. I argue that by making visible (and therefore contestable) forms of racialized socio-spatial violence that are repressed in dominant reform narratives, activist counter-narratives facilitate the formation of counter-publics around the racialized evisceration of neighborhoods and community life, the mortal consequences of this violence, and the repudiation of black self-determination facilitated by reform mechanisms and narratives.

Centering my analysis on the understandings of injustice forwarded by those contesting it, I aim to contribute to conversations on the geographies of urban schooling, and to discussions on democracy and the politics of place more broadly, while remaining attentive to disciplinary questions regarding how to investigate and address racialized socio-spatial violence without replicating the logics that produce it (McKittrick, 2011, p. 954). With this paper, I join other geographers in exploring how the application of predetermined normative schemas to urban contexts can obscure democratic possibilities associated with actual (not entirely punitive) enactments of policy, and with forms of insurgent citizenship (DeVerteuil, 2014; May & Cloke, 2013; Leitner & Strunk, 2014; Holston, 2014; Staeheli, Ehrkamp, Leitner & Nagel, 2012).

I develop my argument in four stages. Following this introduction, I briefly summarize dominant pro-market framings of school reform and outline the critiques of this narrative

forwarded in critical geographies of education. Given the interlocking forms of social, political, and economic oppression that many geographies of education describe, I draw on the work of several scholars (particularly Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), Katherine McKittrick (2011, 2013), and Avery Gordon (2011)) who provide insight into how geographers might acknowledge death-dealing dynamics associated with school reform without ignoring or isolating that which insists on life. I suggest these scholars shed light on how to come to grips with the dehumanizing, often fatal, but never complete work of racism and socio-spatial violence, while simultaneously insisting on the interconnected workings of black life which continues to shape places, things and selves. Placing these ideas in conversation with scholars working in the tradition of American pragmatists, I present a framework for analyzing counter-narratives that emphasizes situated experience as a basis for ethical action and public formation. The following section introduces empirical evidence of black activists' public articulations of the impetus for, and effects of post-Katrina school reform and draws out recurring themes in activists' testimony. Next, I consider the democratic work accomplished by these public articulations of injustice, and particularly their relationship to the formation of counter-publics. In light of the difficulties of addressing the socio-spatial violences of school reform without naturalizing them, I conclude with a discussion of the implications of the case for critical geographies of education and scholarship on the politics of place.

Conceptualizing School Reform

Over several decades, market-driven reforms have transformed public education in the United States. These reforms have expanded charter schooling and high-stakes testing regimes, weakened unions and elected boards through mayoral/state takeover of public schooling, and

destabilized institutions and neighborhoods through teacher turn over and selective school closure/reconstitution (Lipman, 2011; Huff, 2015; Karp, 2010). Urban school districts have suffered decades of disinvestment while attempting to meet the complex needs of communities that are also under economic strain; these districts, and particularly schools serving poor black and Latino families, have been testing grounds for this suite of reform strategies.

Dominant pro-market reform narrative

Proponents of the measures described above typically insist that social justice is achieved through individual advancement, effectively divorcing schooling from its geographic, economic, and social contexts (Scott, 2013). Instead of addressing broader structural concerns, the “no excuses” narrative that has become intertwined with charterization maintains that market mechanisms such as school choice combined with severe consequences for “irresponsible” behavior will produce academic excellence by simultaneously empowering and disciplining poor black and Latino families. From this perspective, poverty should not impede individual success as long as students, parents, and teachers have the fortitude to refuse failure and overcome cultural deficits (Cheng, Hitt, Kisida & Mills, 2014; Thernstrom & Thernstrom 2004). Low school quality is conceptualized as a function of student achievement on standardized tests; its existence the result of a lack of market pressure and personal/cultural weakness. Justice is defined in terms of a narrowed testing gap; it is the function of freedom to compete and access to opportunity, rather than the provision of that which is necessary to secure positive outcomes for neighborhoods, schools, teachers, and/or students.

Critical geographic perspectives on school reform

While increasingly ubiquitous, market-driven policy and its attendant narratives have also garnered intense criticism. Education policy scholars have demonstrated how market-based reform contributes to the narrowing of curriculum and notions of citizenship, the production of increasingly punitive and militarized schooling environments, the push-out of low-testing students, and the loss of union protections, while providing weak and/or illusive forms of parental empowerment (Apple, 2005; Au, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Giroux, 2011; Pattillo, 2015; Rogers, Lubienski, Scott, & Welner, 2015, Nguyen, 2014; Saltman, 2015; Sondel, 2015). Looking beyond the confines of schools themselves, a growing critical geographies of education literature treats the marketization of schooling as a driver of urban neoliberalization, demonstrating how crisis opens opportunities for entrepreneurialism, undermines the public sector, recasts the role of the state, insulates governance from democratic intervention, and replaces social values with those of the market (Akers, 2012; Basu, 2007; Cohen & Lizotte, 2015; Good, 2017; Hankins & Martin, 2006; Huff, 2013, 2015; Klein, 2007; Lipman, 2011; Mitchell & Lizotte, 2016; Peck, 2006; Nguyen, 2017; Saltman, 2007; Thiem, 2007).

This analysis underscores the fact that urban schooling arrangements do not just affect the students, families, and teachers associated with particular schools. Instead, school policies “have implications for union jobs, wages, benefits, local democracy, housing, and neighborhood vitality” (Lipman, 2011, p. 72). Drawing on extensive work as a scholar-activist in Chicago, Pauline Lipman (2011, 2013) demonstrates how in that city and others (such as New Orleans), selective school closure and the restructuring of governance are used in conjunction with strategies such as the demolition of public housing and selective disinvestment to displace poor

people by narrowing access to public institutions in central city areas ripe for speculative development. Similarly, Tom Pedroni (2011), shows how in Detroit disinvestment and outright termination of public services such as schooling allows agencies to “clear-cut” or “wipe clean” black neighborhoods “‘contaminated’ by a population ‘in need of containment’” (p. 210). Pedroni argues that once neighborhoods have been emptied of their “problematic” residents, the land can be mothballed, perhaps turned into green space, until the stigma of their association with black communities has faded and it can be returned to commerce. The shift of decision-making power to non-elected boards, the institution of mayoral control, and a reliance on public-private partnerships and corporate involvement in school funding all reduce opportunities for already-disenfranchised residents to influence policy decisions that directly affect their neighborhoods.

Lipman and Pedroni join other scholars addressing political economic issues who conceptualize neoliberalization as an enacted, embodied process necessarily entangled with dynamics of race and racism, taking seriously the experiences of those most directly affected by the mechanisms they study (For explorations of these dynamics in other contexts see also Basu, 2013; Elwood, Lawson & Nowak, 2015; Gilmore 2007; Lawson et al 2008; Roberts & Mahtani, 2010). Still, there is a tendency in some accounts of school reform to treat market-based policies as just one more example of the inexorable deepening of urban neoliberalization, downplaying the role of contestation and public formation in shaping schooling arrangements and urban contexts more broadly (especially when contestation does not refer directly to dynamics of neoliberalism) (for critiques of this phenomena see Nguyen, Cohen, & Huff, 2017 and Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007; for analysis of public engagement for public education, see Orr & Rogers, 2011). Furthermore, even geographies of education that do focus on experience and

contestation tend to analyze the democratic potential of contestation using normative frames that are both relatively insulated from interrogation and developed apart from the understandings of those doing the contesting. As Clive Barnett (2011) argues, such work proceeds from the assumption that:

“one always already knows that distributive concepts of justice and rights simultaneously obscure and sustain the more fundamental sources of injustice generated by modes of class power, property relations, accumulation by dispossession, and exploitation, albeit mediated by dynamics of gender, race or sexuality, and state formation...[N]ormative questions of justification never really arise, since theories of the production of space or of relational spatiality provide explanatory frameworks which presume to reveal fundamental sources of injustice...” (p. 249).

I suggest that these tendencies limit the theoretical and practical purchase of geographies of education and raise broader disciplinary questions regarding how geographers interested in democratic change think about their work in relation to the work of those involved in social movements and the politics of place. In order to flesh out these questions and provide a framework for beginning to address them in conversation with my empirical case, I turn now to scholarship that focuses on interactions (such as the affective impacts of racialized violence on black personhood and black geographies) that are sometimes difficult to discern in both existing geographies of education and, I suggest, accounts of urban neoliberalization more generally.

Life, death, and ghostly presence in the politics of place

In her powerful work on the proliferation of prisons in California, Gilmore (2007) emphasizes the mortal stakes of racism, defining it as “the state sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (p. 247). For Gilmore, addressing the production and effects of this vulnerability involves “coming to grips with dehumanization”, which she argues includes “the deliberate, as well as the mob-frenzied ideological displacements central to any group’s ability to annihilate another in the name of territory, wealth, ethnicity, religion” (p. 243). In the contexts of everyday lives, she contends, “racism is the ordinary means through which dehumanization achieves ideological normality, while at the same time, the practice of dehumanizing people produces racial categories” (p. 243).

For geographers of education and scholars working on the politics of place more generally, the challenge and the force of Gilmore’s work lies in her insistence on drawing out the living, peopled relationships that both constrain action and produce it. By anchoring her political economic analysis of prison expansion to the experiences of a Los Angeles-based group (Mothers ROC) comprised mostly of black mothers dedicated to fighting for justice in the face of racist and predatory incarceration policies (Gilmore, 2007, pp. 5, 182), Gilmore demonstrates how prisons are inextricable from human life, rather than isolated from it; how “being locked in and being locked out are two sides of the same coin, edges are interfaces, borders connect places into relationships” (McKittrick, 2011, 959). One’s position in these relationships matters, but Gilmore’s work demonstrates that “the racialization of space, the political economy of expansion cannot be understood without particular life forces, be it politicians and workers, or townspeople and activists...the regional negotiation of crisis, unemployment, and poverty [are] a terrain of human struggle” (McKittrick, 2011, p. 959). This way of thinking opens up space for new forms

of political action and association. As Gilmore (2007) notes, “Ordinarily, activists focus on taking power, as though the entire political set up were merely a matter of “it” (structure) versus “us” (agency). But if the structure-agency opposition isn’t how things really work, then perhaps politics is more complicated, and therefore open to hopeful action” (pp. 247-248).

Katherine McKittrick’s (2011, 2013, 2016) scholarship shares Gilmore’s focus on relationality and on placing life at the center of work that addresses socio-spatial violence. McKittrick enriches and historicizes political-economic accounts of injustice by linking contemporary urbicide (that which chokes the life out of urban places through mechanisms such as economic deprivation, environmental hazards, mass incarceration, etc.) to a centuries-old plantation logic designed to make black geographies appear incompatible with human life (McKittrick, 2013, p. 4). McKittrick (2013) argues that this logic continues to operate in the present. Black people are condemned to physical, social and political death by virtue of their association with so-called battleground geographies described as “burned, horrific, occupied, sieged, unhealthy, incarcerated, extinct, starved, torn, endangered”, (p.7). Racialized geographies become evidence of black placelessness, disorder and dependence and thus the black incapacity for placemaking, self-determination and political citizenship.

Despite the value of recognizing the contemporary grasp of plantation logic, McKittrick herself contends that it can be mobilized in ways that remain politically debilitating. Catalogues of injustice tend to squeeze out the fact that life within oppressive systems can engender creative and geographic practices that challenge systemic violence (2013, p. 10). Instead of recitations of injustice, McKittrick, like Gilmore, calls for analyses that recognize how “spaces of absolute otherness, so often occupied by the racially and economically condemned, are geographies of survival, resistance, creativity, and the struggle *against* death” (McKittrick, 2013, p. 14).

In thinking about how to construct geographies that acknowledge racialized death without normalizing it or, more insidiously, relying on it to make analytical points, I suggest that Avery Gordon's conception of haunting might be a useful starting place. Coming out of a Marxist tradition (yet parting company with those who refuse to acknowledge racial capitalism) Gordon (2008, 2011) uses the term *haunting* to describe how abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt, "especially when they're supposed to be over, or when their oppressive nature is denied" (2011, p.1). Being confronted with the haunting presence of suppressed social violence produces "those singular and yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind field comes into view" (p 2). In creating a scenario in which the present wavers, haunting suggests that what presently exists is not inevitable or immutable. As places are made strange, things shift from their assigned places, and people who had been invisible appear, the resulting turmoil may allow us to see "cracks and rigging" that were previously neatly papered over (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). Haunting therefore presents us with a "critical analytic moment" and a call to "re-narrativize" present conditions (Gordon, 2011, p. 3).

The demand for an active response is a crucial component of haunting, as Gordon defines it; haunting for her always requires a "something to be done". This something is urgent. But it must be to some degree both autonomous from and unsanctioned by the hierarchical structures that generate the need for urgency; action must be directed towards ends not entirely given or permitted by such a system's logic and crises, but instead must be "invented elsewhere and otherwise" (Gordon, 2011, p. 8). For Gordon, the something to be done does not always operate as "an absolute break between now and then, but is...a way of being in the ongoing work of

emancipation, a work which inevitably must take place while you're still enslaved, imprisoned, indebted, occupied, walled in, commodified, etc.” (2011, p. 16).

Gordon's discussion of a “something to be done” that both rises out of currently existing situations and develops aims that transcend them, suggests potentially generative linkages to the work of American pragmatists and geographers interested in pragmatic strains of democratic thought. Gordon describes the never-ending process by which present conditions are radically transformed so as to resist suffering and make our lives together more fruitful. Similarly, Dewey argues that experiences (direct and indirect) generate political will and action which in turn contain the potential to call new realities into being: “Need and desire – out of which grow purpose and direction of energy – go beyond what exists, and hence beyond knowledge, beyond science” (Dewey, 1940, p. 229). Dewey calls this process democracy: an ongoing, never-perfected yet self-correcting process of social inquiry and action, which necessarily springs from the demands of everyday contexts as we encounter situations we find problematic and experiment with ways to transform them (Pappas, 2007, p. 98).

But in order to make political use out of needs and desires, people must recognize the publicness of their problems. Dewey argues that publics are formed when people both perceive how the consequences of a particular situation extend beyond those who are directly impacted, and then come together to address these problematic situations (Dewey, 1927). Counter-publics require a similar recognition of problematic situations, but they constitute “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses” in a semi-protected environment (Fraser, 1990, p. 67; Sziarto & Leitner, 2010). From this formulation come two insights. First, publics and counter publics do not exist apart from a context; publics come into being in response to attempts to address particular problems, which

only become problems when they are identified as such by people experiencing them (Glaude 2007, p. 143). Second, the democratic power of publics rests on insistence that people, in all kinds of circumstances and always under constraint, have the ability to identify problematic circumstances and act to transform them. By insisting that “inquiry and judgement of better or worse are controlled by reference to a situation,” Deweyan pragmatists circumvent the pitfalls of both subjectivism and objectivism, instead anchoring ethical work to contextual experience (Pappas, 2007, p. 120).

A lingering question for many critics of pragmatism, however, involves the difficulty of knowing *how* to act in the absence of an enduring moral code. Some geographers, for example, have worried that the pragmatic faith in experience to generate ethical action prevents the utilization of justice norms and/or that it might lead researchers to romanticize the often deeply problematic justice sensibilities of ordinary citizens (Fincher & Iveson 2012, p. 237; Orzeck, 2014). Yet the pragmatic conception of normative evaluation does not preclude interplay between normative principles and worldly experience (Pappas, 2007, pp. 51-60). Nor does it suggest that intuitions of injustice are equally socially desirable (Westbrook, 2005). On the contrary, pragmatists see the constant experiential and deliberative testing of principles as central to democracy; they only insist that such principles have no foundation outside of experience and that, no matter how tightly held, they must remain open to revision in light of new experiences. On this view, our ethical commitments are strengthened by engagement with a multiplicity of perspectives/experiences/intuitions which are bound to clash (Bernstein, 2005). But rather than settling such conflicts through appeal to tradition, foundational “truths”, abstract principles, or majoritarian rule, a pragmatic sensibility holds that justice can only be understood, let alone produced, through worldly struggle and experience. Because the world presents us with complex

and ever-changing problems, ethical judgement regarding the value of a particular action or policy or system does not require, nor can it be accomplished by, adherence to a fixed set of universal moral principles (Barnett, 2011, 2014). For pragmatists, in order to determine what is (un)just, it is necessary to work from the messiness of situated problems and the sometimes-unresolvable tensions they produce.

Despite barriers to effective deliberation and action, pragmatists argue the people regularly engage in this kind of democratic work. They develop normative rationales which “concern what is of value, how to live, what is worth striving for and what is not” (Sayer, 2005, p. 6). This perspective resonates with the work of Gilmore, McKittrick, and Gordon because it insists on viewing people as capable of ethical deliberation and ameliorative action, even under severe constraints (Derickson, 2016), and because it insists that their work grows out of their experiences in the world. “Most of those fighting in the trenches have little time for activism motivated solely by abstract political or ethical rhetoric,” Gilmore writes. “Rather, they are fighting for their lives, their families, and their communities...A principled sense of mortal urgency gets grassroots activists to go to meetings, makes them board busses, and inspires hope” (Gilmore, 2007, p. 251).

Counter-narratives

In this section I briefly describe the enactment of post-Katrina reforms and provide a synopsis of the (evolving but relatively cohesive) narratives circulated by proponents of post-Katrina school reform to legitimize the changes. I then draw out four recurring themes associated with post-Katrina reform grievances publicly articulated by participants in black-led schooling struggles: the evisceration of black geographies, the mortal stakes of school reform, the denigration of

black political subjectivity, and the need for resistance. My purpose in this paper is not to “prove” the veracity of the claims made. Rather, by drawing out thematic threads running through publicly circulated counter-narratives, I call attention to dimensions of New Orleans reform experiences and contestation that might otherwise be overshadowed by the language of test scores and accountability on one hand, and neoliberal experimentation on the other.

The evidence comes from a larger project analyzing neighborhood-based efforts to gain greater control of public schools in New Orleans from 2012-2015. I draw on data collected from participant observation at over 100 community meetings, conferences, state and local school board meetings, city council meetings, neighborhood association meetings, and other education-related public events between 2010 and 2015. In addition, I spoke to more than 50 people in semi-structured and informal interview contexts. The quotes reported here are from 23 different individuals engaged in local schooling conflicts across the city, recorded at 17 public meetings in 2013 and 2014, when reform mechanisms were firmly entrenched.

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In 2005, immediately following Hurricane Katrina, proponents of market-based school reform dismantled neighborhood schooling in New Orleans and installed a city-wide education marketplace. Prior to the storm, decades of deindustrialization, cuts to social services, and white flight resulted in severe financial and social disinvestment in the public schools (Gotham & Greenberg, 2014). Despite the best efforts of individuals within the system, this disinvestment made it difficult for public schools to meet the needs of the primarily poor, black families they served.

The confluence of natural and man-made disasters surrounding the storm gave proponents of market-based reform an opportunity to strip operational control of New Orleans public schools from the locally-elected, black-majority school board. Through executive orders and legislative acts which redefined school performance standards, all but four Orleans Parish schools were declared failing and taken over by the state.¹ The governance of these “failing” schools was then transferred to the non-elected Recovery School District (RSD), which in turn devolved control of schools to autonomous non-elected charter boards. These boards receive public funds based on enrollment numbers, but are largely free from operational oversight. Legislation passed more than ten years after the storm makes it likely that New Orleans charter schools will eventually be authorized by the locally elected Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), but operations will continue to be managed by individual charter boards (Dreilinger, July, 15, 2016).

Abolishing neighborhood attendance zones and establishing a decentralized charter model significantly altered the experience of public schooling in New Orleans and facilitated “churn” associated with school closure and management shifts (Buras, 2015; Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2017).² Living in a particular neighborhood no longer guarantees students a place in a particular school. Instead, families must apply for admission to charter schools which can tailor their student population via enrollment caps, parent involvement requirements, support services offerings, etc. Families may *theoretically* send their child to any school, relieving the state of the

¹ Act 9, passed before the storm in 2003, allowed the state to seize “failing” schools and established the Recovery School District (RSD) to oversee them. Only months after the storm, an executive order nullified requirements for community input on charter conversion while Act 35 redefined the performance threshold for state takeover. Schools that had previously had satisfactory ratings were designated failures overnight, and made eligible for state takeover.

² From 2005 until 2015, 19 charter schools shut down, or were constituted under new management. In addition, the RSD and OPSB together closed 37 direct-run schools (Louisiana Department of Education, n.d.b).

obligation to ensure that every neighborhood has a designated school nearby. Since the storm, many shuttered schools have been “landbanked” – put onto a surplus property list to be sold to charter management organizations or real estate developers. Of the schools that remain, all but a handful open and close in response to market pressures and test-based accountability measures.³

Post-Katrina reforms also affected school culture and staffing. Facing an uncertain financial future in the aftermath of the storm, the OPSB fired all 7,500 of its unionized employees (Dingerson 2006). This was a huge blow to the city’s black middle class and organized labor, and it precipitated a racial and cultural shift in schools as a teaching force comprised mainly of local black veteran educators was replaced by young white recruits who signed up for short-term teaching service in New Orleans schools through programs such as Teach For America (Buras, 2014; Sondel, 2015). Despite popular framings of the charter vs. public school debate that hinge on whether charter schools produce better educational outcomes for kids, charter reform mandates a mode of governance rather than a particular type of educational environment. Nevertheless, post-Katrina, many New Orleans schools adopted a “no excuses” model which attempts to address urban schooling problems by focusing entirely on what happens inside the school itself – no excuses regarding the difficulties of poverty or disinvestment, only a strident emphasis on data-driven instruction and test-based accountability combined with strict behavioral/bodily control and an extended school day (Cheng, Hitt, Kisida, & Mills, 2014). Despite recent efforts to address city-wide suspension and expulsion concerns in New Orleans, the post-Katrina decentralized charter system allows schools significant latitude to eject students who do not conform to expectations (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

³ As of the 2016-2017 school year, there were 82 schools open in New Orleans; only 5 were slated to reopen in 2017 as traditional direct run schools.

The impact of these reforms has been hotly contested, yet few dispute that the changes were instigated mostly by white elites who capitalized on the chaos surrounding Katrina to rework schooling in the city (Field notes, Howard Fuller, ERA conference commentary; June 20, 2015; Buras, 2014). When the levies broke, over four fifths of the city was flooded. The city's low-lying historically black neighborhoods were particularly devastated. Over one thousand people died. Families were torn apart and communities uprooted (Logan, 2006). While the majority of white New Orleanians were able to return home within a year of the storm, a disproportionate percentage of black New Orleanians were unable to do so, including many public school teachers and families.⁴ For proponents of market-based education policy, the disaster therefore provided “a golden opportunity” to “wash away” the “problems” attributed to black New Orleanians and bring about rapid and sweeping school “reform” (Saltman, 2015). Poor, and especially poor and *black*, New Orleanians were largely cut out of the planning process. Instead, proponents justified reforms by portraying black educators, black-run institutions, and black communities as inept and disordered, as suffering from a general ‘ethical malaise’ that prevented them from caring about, or effectively intervening in, their failing neighborhoods and schools (Cowen & Seifter, 2014; Mellow, 2011a). In mobilizing these tropes, reform advocates called upon and extended a centuries-old narrative depicting black people as incapable of self-determination and unfit for participation in “public” life, as well as “naturally” ungeographic, that is incapable of fruitful place-making (McKittrick, 2011, 2013).

The dominant reform narrative and the policy mechanisms it triggers work to depoliticize schooling concerns and stymie collective action (Huff, 2015, 2013); nevertheless, over the last ten years, residents have organized in response to felt injustices associated with the reforms. In

⁴ Half of white residents had returned to New Orleans within 3 months of Katrina. Fewer than half of black residents had returned 14 months after the Hurricane (Fussell et al 2010, p. 31)

particular, community groups have attempted to reopen and/or influence the operation of neighborhood schools. In this section, I examine the counter-narratives that members of these groups construct and circulate regarding motivations for and impact of reforms. Collective attempts to shape schooling preceded Katrina and have never been limited to black neighborhoods and communities (Beabout & Boselovic, 2015; Boselovic 2015). Here, however, I focus on counter-narratives produced by those participating in black-led schooling struggles in the decade following the storm. Unless otherwise indicated, all of the people whose testimony appears in this section are black New Orleanians.

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On a workday in the fall of 2014, several car loads of New Orleanians made the trip to Baton Rouge, hoping to be heard at the monthly meeting of the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. After hours of technical briefings, their agenda item was called, and a formidable elder from the Seventh Ward made her way to the front of the auditorium. Sitting before the board, she took a moment to look into the eyes of each board member before declaring in a voice that rang with certainty, “*Racism...*,” she drew the word out, enunciating each syllable, “*is a MONSTER.*” The room fell silent. In a forum dedicated mainly to the minutia of test scores and funding formulas, her words sounded strange. Almost obscene. The men and women on the majority white, majority pro-charter Board shifted in their seats but sat stone-faced as the elder continued:

I'm not on no committee. I live in the community. I live by [a shuttered neighborhood High School]... And I've never seen this many people concerned about education until it becomes about a dollar. Our babies are not for sale!

It takes bravery to be honest. What you did ain't working. I don't need to go get nobody to measure it one way up or down. I live it. I'm telling you, what you're doing to our children and the buildings that are significant to us, so they can have some relevance to our children, none of that is working.

She went on, voice rising:

They on the ground! Angola [Louisiana State Penitentiary] full of our children! What are you doing? How you all make those decisions? Was you with us last week when we cried, cause we lost another one? Are you going to be there, now we're fundraising for a funeral for two? Y'all got...y'all got something you want to contribute to that?

From the seats behind her, New Orleanians who had taken off work and travelled 80 miles to the State Capitol for the meeting that day, called out, “No!”

The elder from the Seventh Ward shook her head and declared,

“We're not understanding this. We're not understanding, 'line item this' or 'who's going to get this,' and whatever you're going to do.

Leaning forward, hands gripping the table in front of her, the woman nearly hissed,

“It's not about a dollar! It's about humanity...Take the money and go! We'd do better. Just take the money, divide it up between whoever's gonna take their little piece, and get away from us! These are human beings. They have the right, the God-given right, to be treated like everybody else.

(Field notes, BESE Meeting 10/14/2014)

Another meeting that same fall: In New Orleans on a cool evening, light spilled out from inside the church where the town hall was to take place, filtering out onto the street. Inside, the

pews were filled with people worried about their neighborhoods and schooling in the city. Black men and women, mostly, of varied ages and social classes, as well as children. In the sanctuary were neighborhood residents involved in struggles over school closures, kids who had come to talk about the punitive environment they endured in the city's classrooms, alumni concerned about the fate of beloved institutions, and citizens who felt that something was wrong with the way people had to shop around for educational opportunities. Many came to the meeting that night still dressed in their work clothes and school uniforms, missing dinner so they could hear what each other had to say.

The church and its members had a long tradition of fighting for black community education. On that night, the pastor opened the meeting with a prayer, reminding the crowd of this legacy and asking God for guidance and strength in carrying the tradition of struggle forward. Then she began to speak about her experiences working for community control of a historic high school that had been chartered and, later, closed:

"This is real," the pastor said, gripping the microphone in one hand, and pressing the other against her chest. *"Now, I have been involved with the school situation since we got back after Katrina. I've seen too many of our kids and young people – the kids at [the high school that had been closed] - so many of these kids that have been to [...] meetings with us...Those kids are dead today."*

The crowd murmured and nodded. The pastor went on, her voice choked with emotion:

We've got kids who are giving up!... So you... See we've had a...a betrayal of our young people. So when you have this kind of trauma, and lies, there is a violence that has been perpetuated on us.

Several people called out their support and the pastor's cadence quickened:

Now we talk about the children and their violence, but we got to recognize that this is violent, what is happening to our communities. We had our mental health hospitals closed. Our health care has been taken away. We were not supposed to be here!

(Field notes, Community Meeting, 10/30/2014)

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Woven through the testimony recorded here are themes that animate many of the post-Katrina school reform counter-narratives constructed by participants in black-led New Orleans schooling struggles: condemnation of the interplay between racism and greed associated with city-wide charterization and the sense that such reform was part of a larger project to make the city unlivable for black people, an urgent articulation of the mortal stakes of school policy decisions and a reminder that these decisions were made by people insulated from the effects of their actions, and finally, the insistence that reforms be recognized as an attack on political voice and capacity for self-determination. In the remainder of this section, I elaborate on how these themes were expressed in narratives constructed by participants in black-led struggles to reopen and/or gain control of neighborhood schools, and how they challenge crucial aspects of dominant reform narratives.

Theme 1: Destroying, usurping, and re-defining black geographies

In contrast to dominant reform narratives that depict post-Katrina reform as a heroic effort to save the city and its children from worthless, even toxic, pre-Katrina schooling (Reidlinger in Gurwitt 2006), counter-narratives describe the motivation for reform in less altruistic terms. In a direct challenge to the dominant reform narrative, which claims that reform is focused only on “doing what’s best for kids” (Field notes, Kingsland, ERA conference Commentary, 6/24/2014),

counter-narratives ascribe a profit motive to those associated with instituting an all-charter model in New Orleans. Counter-narratives point to changes in the very purpose of governing bodies such as the Orleans Parish School Board and the Recovery School District, which through state-takeover and charterization came to function as property brokers rather than educational stewards. As two community leaders from the Ninth Ward explained:

They [the non-elected Recovery School District officials] are now in the building business... {T}hey went from academics... to now they are [...] managing the facility. That's where the money is. So let's not be fooled by what the reformers are coming in and telling you, that this is about, "We want your children doing better." No. It's not about your child doing better.

(Field notes, New Orleans Schooling Conference 8/4/2015, male speaker A)

"This is about money. And I don't want nobody to confuse the issue. This is about money...The last hanging fruit was the schools."

(Field notes, New Orleans Schooling Conference 8/4/2015, male speaker B)

Counter-narratives condemned schooling motivated by profit, not just on principle, but because of tangible effects on black geographies which were compounded by attacks on other public goods. After the storm, amid torrents of protest, families were ejected and/or barred from returning to the city's "Big 4" housing projects (Arena 2012). Charity Hospital, which served the vast majority of uninsured New Orleanians, was shut down (Woods 2009). Housing costs in the city rose sharply, nearly doubling by 2015 (Dietz and Barber 2015). Combined with school policies that allowed manipulation of school placement and access, these changes

significantly impacted neighborhood composition. As one young woman worried about gentrification in her neighborhood asserted:

This is a real estate science market. [...] If we're not going back to the root of what's going on, we're not seeing the real issue here. This is about the control of the city. This is literally about moving families and people out to the East. [...] They are using our children as an impetus for moving us throughout the city.

In my instance, I saw a community fight for...years to have a school open in their neighborhood that was closed. And in my opinion, the reason why it was closed, was because you have a historically African American community, next to a historically white community, and there was a problem with that. And the quickest way to close a community is you close the school.

(Field notes, Community meeting, 10/30/2014, female speaker)

Also, in contrast to the dominant school reform narrative, counter-narratives emphasize the positive dimensions of relationships between black community members, geographies, and schooling, and the profound sense of loss and anger that closure and reconstitution provoked. New Orleans public schools have never been in a position to live up to their emancipatory promise for black New Orleanians (Devore and Logsdon, 1996). Nevertheless, they have been woven into the fabric of neighborhood life, especially in black communities. Through alumni organizations and social networks, association with marching bands and sports teams, and the relationships forged between generations of educators and students, schools provided common experiences to which neighborhood residents could anchor themselves and their communities.

Counter-narratives reflect the sense of injury associated with school closure, charterization, and shifts in school identity that strained the bonds between neighborhoods and schools. In the words of a Central City resident:

*So, the dynamic in New Orleans that everybody's familiar with, where people don't ask you what college you went to, they ask you what high school you graduated from...There's a familiarity that is expected around schools. And so when that dynamic shifted? When that changed? Because not only were schools not being brought back...there was this major shift with charter schools etc., and even the naming of the schools changed....and people were...People felt some kind of way. There was a shock [...] about 'They took my school. My school!' 'What you mean they not gonna rebuild my school?' You know, there was...I can't even explain all of the...roads that led into ...the concentrated thing that we call school. So when you look in a neighborhood at a school perhaps generation after generation after generation families sent their children to a particular neighborhood school because that was the family's tradition...And that school just wasn't going to **be** anymore... {Shakes head}. We had to learn a whole new ideology around schooling. We are still learning it.*

(Field notes, Community Meeting, 7/12/2013, female speaker)

Others expressed concern for how this severing of neighborhood-school connections affected not only communities, but the relationship between students and teachers:

The community changed when Katrina hit. I was with Orleans Parish [School District]. We had what we needed, when we were with the district. And we knew people...the same postal workers went around the neighborhood, to your home and your school. Now RSD has come in, and kids come in from as far as Kenner and the West Bank. We're having

trouble coming together in, like, a singleness. Now I got kids from Kenner, but I don't know nothing about Kenner. I don't know nothing about the West Bank. I know about the 7th Ward. I'm from the 7th Ward. When the kids say something, I know what they're talking about. But other kids, I don't know. Now I'm at [a charter school]. I'm trying to be consistent with where I'm at. But before, parents would need something, help with something, you know. And they would say, 'Go to [Ms. X]. She been here, she won't think...' And if I got to go into my pocket, if I got to let a bill past, I do it. When we didn't district them no more, we lost something. And maybe it had to be at first. But now we're home. We're here, and I don't see why we're still doing it like we're doing.

(Field notes, City-wide Community Meeting, 3/26/2013, female speaker)

Activist counter-narratives often directly attributed the loss of communities and schools to racism. The fact that there was a dramatic racial and cultural shift in public school teaching staff and administration in New Orleans, a city in which over 95% of children attending the non-selective state-run schools are black, only added to the concern that the values of black community members are being ignored or denigrated:

We got racism that we deal with in how these people are taking our communities...Cause if you're from New Orleans, you know the first thing that people gonna ask you is what school you went to. That tells you where you're from. They destroying that.

(Field notes, Town Hall Meeting, 10/30/2014, Male speaker A)

The “taking” of public schools is all the more galling for those contesting post-Katrina reform in light of the fact that black New Orleanians have been fighting for more than a century to secure and shape public schooling in the face of white opposition and “charity”. Black New

Orleanians designed and instituted the city's first public schooling system after generations of enforced illiteracy. Under Jim Crow, black New Orleanians developed teacher training programs and supportive pedagogical environments despite the Orleans Parish School Board's systemic under-resourcing of black education. Black residents organized to save schools sited in mixed-race neighborhoods when white parents insisted that the real estate would be more desirable if the buildings were converted to white use. They organized integration efforts in spite of white-led violent protest. And in the six decades since the schools were integrated, black residents fought to replace the names of slaveholders on the city's schools with those of black leaders and spearheaded initiatives aimed at shoring up a system that white New Orleanians abandoned (Stern 2014, Logsdon and Devore 1996, Buras 2014, Dixson et al 2015).

Counter-narratives cast efforts to close, re-name, and/or take over schools as deliberate and racist attempts to erase the contributions of black-led political and social movements, eradicate material, spiritual, and symbolic sources of black communal strength, usurp power over black geographies, and profit off of the resulting pain (Buras 2011). On this view, educational institutions are crucial sites of conflict because they have the power to nourish or damage the spirit and life chances of those who are intimately connected to them.

Our local, African American schools, all of them have important community history.

This is why people are willing to sit here [in public meetings on school closure] for

hours. Booker T Washington is essential to our history. Clark. Every one of them that

you have landbanked. Every name on those buildings contains the name of one of our

leaders. Most of those stories are not in the history books because of historic racism.

(Field notes, BESE meeting, 7/30/2014, Female Speaker)

And, and, let me talk about the racism part so you'll know. Growing up, I'm in my early 50s, but Walter L. Cohen, George Washington Carver, Booker T Washington, Joseph S. Clark, L.B. Landry, these were the five high schools named after black men in this city. And they were prideful communities. Those schools weren't just high schools, they were prideful communities. They still are, [but] ...that's the thing that [the reformers have tried to do] away with.

(Field notes, Town Hall Meeting, 10/30/2014, Male speaker A – part 2)

If dominant narratives suggest that severing the relationship between schools and neighborhoods is essential to “freeing” children from failing neighborhoods, *counter*-narratives describe schools as vital community institutions that reforms “took away” from neighborhood residents. Through school closure and privatization, not only do neighborhoods lose residents and educational opportunities for their children, but also important public spaces which residents of all ages used for recreation, socializing, and meetings. Relationships between geographic communities and schools are built over time; simply reopening another school elsewhere in a particular neighborhood, or using the same school building but changing the name, staff, philosophy, and/or governance structure does not address the nature of these grievances.

Before the storm, neighborhood schools were owned and operated by a public school district with a public mission; they were tied to the lives of residents in their immediate vicinity. School administrators could be called upon to open school facilities and programs up for broader community use. Charterization meant that many schools became owned and operated by non-publicly accountable entities only minimally accountable a school-site community drawn from neighborhoods across the city. As a result, those engaged in schooling struggles describe a

disturbing and deliberate exclusion of community members, their ideas, and their values from schools:

It seems to me in many of the charter schools, we do not have a community connection. And it seems like a lot of people running charters, does not want a community connection.

(Field notes, Plessy Day 2014 Panel, 6/7/2014, male speaker)

They think they're renting a building and they don't have any responsibility to the community. They don't have any interest in working with the community.

(Field notes, Neighborhood Association Meeting, 4/3/2014, male speaker)

Again, many of those involved in schooling struggles were not fighting against charters per se, but rather for schools that were connected to neighborhood communities and accountable to them in meaningful ways:

We want schools that are gonna be integrated into our neighborhood, provide services to our neighborhood...But there hasn't been any attempt to network the schools so that we get the 24-hour school we need. If people want to come here and make their money, then we need them to invest properly.

(Field notes, Neighborhood Association Meeting, 4/3/2014, female speaker)

The disconnection between neighborhoods and schools is not portrayed as merely a quality of life issue. Counter-narratives assert that the severing of use-based ties between neighborhoods and schools has also impacted the basis for political organizing; for the ability to affect the trajectory of schooling into the future. This is in part logistical:

There is no such thing as a neighborhood school anymore, and so what that does is it takes out an element of community that once was...so key. People had an automatic, um, circling of the wagons around the schools in their neighborhoods, because it was... there was an ownsmanship. If you went to school xyz on #1 street, and you lived on #3 street, that was your school. And so there was an automatic...without it been organized, there was an organic comradeship, or a...ownership for the school in that neighborhood. You wanted it to be the best, or you could go in and talk to the principal because everybody's kids in the neighborhood went there. You didn't have to look to organize parents in any ... special way because the special interest was, these are the kids that go to school in this neighborhood. And so anybody could go and speak for those kids. Right now, divide and conquer is the axiom that comes to mind around what that has done. The...personal agency that community has to demand better for the schools in their neighborhood, has been summarily wiped away as a result of how schools are populated now. Get what I mean?

(Field notes, Community Meeting, 7/12/2013, Female Speaker, Part B)

But the sense of diminished political agency is also linked to a sense of fear and alienation resulting from the sometimes aggressive enforcement of boundaries between neighborhood and school communities:

I went to [the neighborhood] school. Graduated in 1972[...]It's not that the community can't come together, it's that they scared...When we were here, in the gym, playing basketball or whatever, we get run out [....] The police would come. They say they gonna arrest us. I would talk to some of them [the police officers], because I went to school with them. They'd say, 'Hey, I'm just doing my job.' Your job? What about what's

right? *So it ain't that easy. If you got access to a place, you start to fall in love with the place. But when you get run outta there...Once you have been pushed away from something or someplace, then you start to lose your feeling for it. Then the hope is gone. People are afraid, you understand me? And then there's no hope.*

(Field notes, Community Meeting, 6/24/2014, male speaker)

Theme 2: Life and death

Counter-narratives convey the need for a renewal of the bond between communities and schools in terms that leave no doubt as to the urgency of this project. Many residents described it literally as a matter of life and death. When narrativizing their grievances, those contesting post-Katrina school reforms spoke of multiple kinds of death, including the death of people, places, institutions and hope. Some counter-narratives described the relationship between schooling and violence in fairly instrumental terms, where access to quality schools would lead to aspirations and opportunities for youth that would keep them from having to participate in illicit activities and the violence that surrounds them. This perspective was voiced by a community member from the 17th Ward:

I had my first child when I was 18. Four days before my 18th birthday. How was I gonna take care of a child except being out there on the corner? My parents couldn't help, they was on drugs. My baby's mom's mom was going haywire, putting her out. So I had to step out and, you know, figure out what was I gonna do. But that's why we need [to reopen the neighborhood school]. We need a school so kids don't have to make those kinds of choices. They should just have a straight path.

(Field notes, Community Meeting, 6/28/2014, male speaker)

While these counter-narratives tended to be more compassionate, this strand of narrative can sometimes seem to resonate with the dominant narrative which portrays schooling as single-handedly capable of transforming the life trajectories of youth, regardless of the powerful social, political, and economic relations that also shape life chances.

Let's deal with all the problems in the community. They say people go to jail, come home and commit the same crimes. Why is that happening? Because! This man ain't got no work, he can't pay his bills, he can't afford his high rent. You know what I'm saying? ... For [the neighborhood] we need to try to push this [community school] movement, you know.

(Field notes, interview for neighborhood publication, 8/8/2014, male speaker)

Crucially, however, counter-narratives presented by those contesting post-Katrina reform are more geographic in articulating the ripple effects transformative schooling would have on neighborhoods (rather than just individuals). This discrepancy reflects a profound difference between the dominant reform narrative and counter-narratives produced by community members involved in efforts to reopen or gain community control over neighborhood schools: whereas in dominant accounts of school reform, charter schools rescue kids from the unsalvageable neighborhoods and institutions that black adults have created, counter-narratives insist that stronger relationships between neighborhoods and schools can help strengthen both – that black geographies can be a valuable resources for schools and vice versa.

But beyond this instrumental view of how better, more community-connected, schools might help youth to avoid violence and thus strengthen neighborhoods, many counter-narratives describe a causal relationship between the violence of school reforms and the violence suffered and committed by youth. These counter-narratives insist that the problem is not, as often implied by reform advocates, black cultural deficiencies (poor single parenting, lack of self-discipline, insufficient work-ethic, etc.). Instead they describe youth violence as the product of violence perpetrated *on* them and communities of color more broadly. Counter-narratives call out the inhumane dimensions of “no excuses” schooling:

Our children...aren't allowed to go out in the yard or even talk to each other at lunch.

They are not allowed to comfort each other, hug their cafeteria worker that the children live next to. Our children are being told that everything about them, their humanity, their culture, their hair, is wrong. And if we don't do something, if we don't stand up for our children...we can't be surprised by the chaos that happens.

(Field notes, NAACP Meeting, 9/6/14, female speaker)

But counter-narrative also speak to the violence that has been visited on geographic communities as well: long-term disinvestment, flooding, the devaluation of black expertise and capacity, the denigration of cultural institutions, the privatization and/or destruction of communal places and routines, the destruction of social bonds, barriers to essential social services and employment options, rising rents, etc. In these narratives, violence is a tragic, but understandable response to life in communities that have been traumatized several times over. When schools close, communities experience the loss not as one discrete event, but as part of a nearly overwhelming cluster of assaults:

After a school closes, there's a lot of violence. Because, you know, the community that surround the schools, they're you know, in crisis... A school is not just a building with people in it. It's broader than that.

(Field notes, City-wide Community Meeting, 3/26/2013, male speaker)

Some counter-narratives describe this loss in physical terms – as ripping the heart out of neighborhoods. When neighborhood residents lose sites of common interest and shared experience, they argue, the result can be a diminished sense of public concern, and thus increased violence.

[The intersection where the shuttered school sits] is the busiest drug corner in America. In America. There's traffic jams. Can't even get by sometimes. But if they had never closed [the school] down, that never would have happened. You close a school, you rip the heart out of a neighborhood. People don't...they stop watching out. Caring. The emotion I felt like when I was a kid going to public schools? We were all a part of it... Now it's like, we're losing that togetherness.

(Field notes, Neighborhood Meeting, 7/13/2013, white male speaker)

The pain of these shifts in neighborhood life is all the more acute because it has deadly impacts on youth, and frays the relationship between young people and others in the community:

You know my wife said, 'Why you fight so hard? You don't even have kids in the system.' And I'm like, well I live in the neighborhood. My parents can't even sit on the porch anymore 'cause they worried about getting hurt. Are we all going to be afraid of our kids?

(Field notes, Community Meeting, 10/30/2014, male speaker)

Counter-narratives emphasize that young people who are subjected to the kind of violence that reform has visited on communities of color cannot emerge unscathed. They begin to feel hopeless, to lose a sense of their own value and humanity (as well as others'). This of course has broad implications not only for parents, but for all New Orleanians. Counter narratives thus position community-controlled schooling as a project with goals that extend far beyond improving test scores. Instead, in these narratives, schooling becomes a site around which to simultaneously fight deadly forms of racialized socio-spatial violence *and* political marginalization.

Theme 3: Dehumanization and negation of black political subjectivity

Reform counter-narratives are generally not rooted in anti-charter or anti-reform ideology. Instead, participants in schooling struggles ground their claims in concrete experiences of injustice, such as the paucity of desirable choices in a supposedly choice-based system (c.f. Barnett, 2014).

We have no choice in Orleans Parish. The only choice we have is charter school. We as a community, as a parent, as a grandparent... I want my grandchildren to have a choice. If they choose to go to a charter school then that's fine. But if they choose to go to a direct-run school, I think they should have that choice.

(Field notes BESE Meeting, 11/12/2014, male speaker)

Influencing schools politically is made difficult, however, by the new governance model, which intentionally circumvents political engagement by disempowering the locally elected school board, and placing the schools under the control of over 40 autonomous non-elected boards (Huff 2015). The logistical obstacles associated with monitoring the activities of these boards

have further insulated policy-makers from public scrutiny. Many counter-narratives describe this marginalization of black voices in geographic terms:

... What I see happening here, is this is not just about closing schools. It's about disenfranchising a neighborhood. The neighborhood no longer has a voice in the school. We can't say who go to the school. We can't say who works at the school... we can no longer say who works on the schools.

(Field notes, New Orleans Schooling Conference, 8/29/2015, male speaker A)

Lived experience of these shifts is recorded in counter-narratives that link them specifically to the need for community-determined policy decisions.

These are our buildings, these are our resources. We have the right to decide how they are handled and what is supposed to happen with them. That has been taken away.

(Field notes, BESE Meeting, 11/12/2015, male speaker)

The disempowerment of the local school board and a lack of concern for community input into schooling arrangements convey a lack of faith in black competence that continues to anger many community members, especially when coupled with the firing of professionals who were the backbone of the city's black middle class:

All of this [reform] is predicated on the notion that a publically run board that's predominately African American is ineffective.

(Field notes, NAACP Meeting, 9/6/14, female speaker)

The way [school employees] were treated, the language was so visceral and derogatory. It was disgusting. By no means am I the person to say the union was the greatest thing since sliced bread...but the way they were treated...vilified...It was appalling.

(Field notes, Community Meeting, 5/27/2014, Female Speaker)

The denigration of black expertise does not strike those involved in post-Katrina schooling struggles as new.

We can't suffer from historical amnesia and forget where we are. There was a period of time when the black community was told we didn't deserve to have an education. Now we're told we don't deserve to have a public education, we should have this private education ...Don't forget, it was by law of the US government that black people couldn't read at one time. Not just denied an education, but you weren't, we weren't allowed to read a book! And the message I'm sending to black people here, is if you think that just by passage of a civil rights bill or an amendment that automatically make the exploiters to your advancement all the sudden be your friends and loved ones, then you a fool.

(Field notes, Community Meeting, 10/30/2014, male speaker)

Given this legacy and its resonance with their contemporary experiences, citizens involved in schooling struggles understand the reforms as rooted in a long history of attempts to politically marginalize Black New Orleanians by dehumanizing them; systematically stripping them of educational, cultural, social and spiritual resources and relegating them to socio-economic subservience. “We’ve been colonized,” one member of a group dedicated to

reopening a community school said (field notes, community meeting, 10/30/2014, female speaker). Another woman commented:

We're just - and I hate to say this, but I'm going to say it - we are living on the plantation down here. Still. This the plantation and they want us to know that we are not in charge.

(Field notes, City-wide Meeting, 3/26/2015, female speaker)

Even for some black leaders who were initially hopeful about the reforms, the racialized denigration of black personhood and black competence has been galling. Counter-narratives emphasized:

[A] visceral divide that was created by how the reforms were rolled out and the utter lack of concern for the humanity of other people. From the beginning it was very clear that it was about doing something "to" and not "with" this city. It was just very paternalistic, 'We gonna set you free!' But I don't know of any liberatory democratic movement that works that way.

(Field notes, Community Meeting, 5/27/2014, Female Speaker)

Reformers have really disrespected many people in this room. Many of our ideas that we brought to the table were pushed to the side, when ideas that came from the outside were welcomed in. It's like teaching a child how not to burn their hand. So many times we may say, 'Okay, if you have all the answers, then you go ahead and go on.'

(Field notes, City-wide Meeting, 3/27/2013, Female Speaker)

The problem with public education in New Orleans, is that the public is not involved.

The problem is also with the reformers. They have a vision; they expected that the community would be there when needed and then go home. There is not shared governance. There is not a shared vision.

(Field notes, City-wide Meeting, 3/27/2013, Male Speaker)

Cutting black people out of decisions regarding their own lives and the lives of their children was more than just an affront to the professionalism of black educators; articulations of injustice such as the one below read as a failure to accept that black New Orleanians have the human capacity to understand their own needs and to act upon them in socially constructive ways. A community member presented this view in testimony before the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education:

I don't know how other people have their babies, but we do the nine month thing, and they come through the birth canal. Do y'all come from somewhere else? Why aren't we supposed to feel about our children like everybody else feel about their children? [...] Are we really going to be told we got 3 minutes to discuss our children while y'all sit and make immoral decisions about what you gonna do? We tired. We tired of you all making decisions about our children. Not yours. Our children... When do you think you're going to accept and respect our opinions about our children?

(Field notes, BESE Meeting, 10/14/2014, Female Speaker)

At a basic level, counter-narratives argue, by casting black New Orleanians as deficient and cutting away at life-sustaining neighborhood resources, the reforms attempt to delegitimize and enfeeble black politics. Pointing to what he described as “racist policy that...devalue[s] the

lives of our children, [and] our parents,” one former educator described the damage that reformers and their allies had inflicted, “They have failed to recognize the humanity of our citizens and our community,” he said, “And I’m telling you, this is spiritual warfare” (Field notes, OPSB Meeting, 12/16/2014, Male speaker).

Theme 4: Resistance

Dominant reform narratives cast black New Orleanians as apathetic and detrimental to the education of youth as compared to reformers who are depicted as the heroic saviors of New Orleans public schools. In opposition to this narrative, participants in black-led schooling struggles emphasize centuries of black-led resistance to injustices associated with racialized socio-spatial violence and economic predation, and the self-authorship of the direction of change:

Now, New Orleans is important to the cultural heritage of America and we have 200 years of struggle for the education of our people. The teachers and students have been at the forefront of these struggles. We are not giving up now. We stand on behalf of our ancestors who built these institutions. You do not have the authority to tell this community which schools we can have and which schools we cannot have. That law is unjust. We have a moral obligation to resist it. So I come to tell you tonight that you’re operating under unjust laws that were motivated by economics and racism. So as human beings, I appeal to you on moral grounds to do the right thing.

(Field notes, BESE meeting, 7/30/2014, female speaker)

The ability to change present circumstances is at stake in any political struggle. But in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans neighborhood-school struggles, where there have been so many losses, participants speak of the ability to *hope* as an important prerequisite for change; especially in relation to the assertion of humanity. For some, the world seems so set, so impervious to their attempts to shape it that they hope must be nurtured through intense engagement with minute aspects of the world. For many, hope grows through work with others on problems that matter:

It's a spiritual thing, man. But that's our power. Being able to talk about [what's happening with our neighborhood and our school]. Discuss it. And just spiritually, things could happen with it. It don't have to be money all the time...I mean, it may look like it's just us. We can't see global. But there's people all over that's talking the same way that we're talking. And feeling the same shit that's going through like we going through. They trying to take over something. They're trying to come together and get something going on, just as was happening here.

(Field notes, Community Meeting, 9/24/2014, male speaker)

Discussion

The dominant reform narrative depicts black neighborhoods as toxic; unsalvageable. The circulation of school reform narratives describing black incapacity for fruitful placemaking, echo centuries-old depictions of blacks as naturally place-less and, thus, less than human. In forwarding these tropes, contemporary reform narratives do not just cast doubt on black political subjectivity, they depict it as absurd.

The counter-narratives produced by participants in black-led struggles to reopen and/or gain more community control over neighborhood schools challenge the assumptions of the dominant narrative in several important ways. Counter-narratives describe contemporary schooling struggles as extending the work of generations of black New Orleanians who shaped schooling and the city itself through collective action. They portray a reciprocal relationship between neighborhoods and schools, where black geographies are an important resource for the education of black youth, while schools serve as important centers of community life. Given this formulation, counter-narratives describe school reforms that attempt to sever this relationship as violent attacks on black places and people, engendering more violence as they destabilize black neighborhoods. In the face of reforms that profit from black displacement and denigration, counter-narratives assert that black New Orleanians themselves have important expertise that should be taken into account in schooling decisions that directly impact their lives: they have a lived experience of public schooling and reform in New Orleans that most policy-makers do not. Each turn in this counter-narrative, indeed the fact that it was crafted and circulated by those involved in black-led struggles, rebukes attempts to dehumanize, denigrate, and/or discipline black New Orleanians through schooling narratives.

The testimony of black activists demonstrates the felt reality of Ruth Wilson Gilmore's assertion that racism produces a vulnerability to premature death, precisely because it functions as a tool for making the dehumanization of others seem natural, inevitable (Gilmore, 2007, pp. 247, 243). There has been so much damage to the places, institutions, and relationships that nourish community life in New Orleans; it is tempting to focus on the nature of the wounds. Yet, McKittrick warns against such impulses, arguing that "analyses of racial violence [that] leave

little room to attend to human life...disregard narratives that bring into sharp focus practices that politicize place–life and place–death differently” (2009, p. 954).

I suggest that one way to avoid this trap is to think about the political work that is accomplished by community members voicing their own grievances in public. From this perspective, the counter-narratives presented here can be read as attempts to give voice to the haunting presence of violent dynamics which are repressed in dominant reform narratives. By calling out the discrepancies between dominant accounts of post-Katrina reform and the lived experiences of New Orleanians who have been impacted by the policies, activists cause the reality produced by dominant reform narratives to waver, allowing for new insight to emerge. As Gordon (2011) argues, “When the repression isn’t working anymore the trouble that results creates conditions that demand re-narrativization. What’s happening? How did it come to pass? What does it mean?” (p. 3). Crucially, Gordon suggests that the troubling experience of being confronted with violences (like those associated with the plantation) that are supposed to be over, but are not, catalyzes action. By attempting to raise these hauntings in public, those engaged in schooling struggles help to create and sustain a “critical analytic moment” that invites those who hear these counter-narratives to reflect on the reasons for such action and the direction it might take (Gordon, 2011, p.3).

If, following Dewey (1927), we think about democratization as something that cannot be bestowed from outside but must be enacted in everyday life as people come together to address common problems, the analytical moment that these counter-narratives produce is a crucial step towards democratic change. Just being directly affected by a process is not enough for issues to be perceived as a shared concern; affectedness must be made into a political (rather than personal) problem (Barnett and Bridge, 2013, p. 1028). By denaturalizing the narrative

forwarded by post-Katrina reform advocates, counter-narratives create conditions under which people can recognize the (potentially problematic) political consequences of particular social arrangements.

The geographic dimension of this process is three-fold. Grievances arise from experience in particular places, and the work of democratic politics is to alter places. But people coming together in counter publics create space for renegotiating the gaps between lived and possible places (Entrikin, 2002). Viewed through this lens, the democratic value of the counter-narratives discussed in this paper is not that they convince policy-makers to change course. Nor is it their connection to any particular program of action moving forward. Rather (in part by the simple fact that they are spoken by those who “are not supposed to be here”), the work of such counter-narratives is to expose the “rigging” of violent mechanisms that are papered over by pro-reform rhetoric, thus providing the basis for creating places of engagement.

This, of course, is a modest step. It is not the end of change, but a potential beginning. In freely admitting this, I return again to Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) who suggests, “If we take to heart the fact that we make places, things, and selves, but not under conditions of our own choosing, then it is easier to take the risk of conceiving change as something both short of, and longer than a single cataclysmic event...With persistence, practices and theories circulate, enabling people to see problems and their solutions differently – which then creates the possibility of further, sometimes innovative, action” (p. 242-243).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that by giving voice to repressed violences haunting post-Katrina school reform, counter-narratives create conditions for the formation of counter-publics. But I

suggest that these counter-narratives also contain a message for geographers of education, and others interested in democracy and the politics of place. By way of conclusion, then, I ask how they speak back, not to the dominant pro-reform narrative, but to the narratives presented by existing geographies of school reform.

When market-based reform advocates abolished the neighborhood schooling model in New Orleans and instituted a city-wide educational market comprised almost exclusively of charter schools, the city became a testing ground for the nation's most radical experiment in market-based schooling (Huff, 2013). As such, New Orleans has been an important site for the investigation of urban neoliberalization via school reform. It follows that geographers and others interested in contesting such dynamics would see post-Katrina schooling struggles as grassroots resistance, not only to the privatization of education through charter schooling and urban neoliberalization more broadly (Huff, 2013, 2015; Lipman, 2011b).

The empirical evidence presented in this paper suggests, however, that participants in schooling struggles understand the injustices of school reform in ways that simultaneously support and challenge existing geographies' framings of the market-driven school reform "problem". In particular, the counter-narratives described in this paper suggest that for those involved in black-led struggles to reopen and influence neighborhood schooling, political-economic issues are often just one (important) set of concerns in a larger effort to nurture that which makes life in particular places more humane – more conducive to communal neighborhood relations and more amenable to collective action. For instance, a rejection of the profit motivation is clear in counter-narratives that insist schooling is "not about a dollar". But counter-narratives situate this grievance within concerns about the impacts of racism and dehumanization in relation to place-making and political subjectivity.

These relationships are relatively underemphasized in existing geographies of education. While race is certainly a central concern within this literature, it is sometimes treated as a fixed category: a variable that exacerbates the inequities produced by market-based reforms (as in discussions of the disproportionate impacts of school closures and speculative investment on communities of color, or racial inequities in schooling opportunities) rather than a relationship that is actively constructed through experience in place, schooling arrangements, and contestations. The range of racialized emotional, spiritual, psychic, social, spatial, and bodily violences described in the counter-narratives of those involved in schooling struggles, and the toll of such violence on black personhood and black places, and in particular black politics, is rarely centralized (Huff, 2013).

I suggest that the discrepancies between the narratives produced by New Orleans residents involved in schooling struggles and those circulated by geographers who investigate the democratic possibilities/deficiencies of actually existing politics, point to a problematic disciplinary tendency: the maintenance of a hierarchical division of labor in which experts develop normative theories of politics/justice/democracy, while those involved in political struggles are defined by their ability to intervene in always-uneven power relations, or at the very least their ability to orient themselves towards the objectives defined by researchers' normative commitments. Geographers' experiences position them to make important contributions to understandings of the democratic potential of political work. Yet the imposition of pre-formed understandings of what particular struggles are "really" about, telegraphs an uncertainty regarding the meaning-making capacity of those most directly involved in schooling struggles that is incompatible with the basic tenets of radical democracy: it suggests that participants are objects of analysis and normative evaluation, potentially important agents of change, but not co-

producers of intellectual and ethical meaning (Derickson, 2016; Lake, 2014). Defining the relationship between researcher and activist in this way cuts off opportunities for reciprocal learning, narrows geographic knowledge of democratic practices, and ultimately limits the analytical power of analyses which purport to explicate urban schooling struggles.

A pragmatic perspective, in contrast, insists on the primacy of experience in particular contexts. On this view, there is no universal abstract conception of justice to apply, and a situation is not unjust until and unless it is experienced as such. The implication being that as scholars interested in democratization, we must engage in more substantive conversations with political participants because they have important knowledge of their own suffering and striving (Dewey, LW 14:229, Barnett, 2014a). This line of action is predicated on the assumption that at a “fundamental level, the competencies of acting subjects are not only worth taking seriously, but they might also be perfectly adequate” (Barnett, 2014b, p. 155).

By adopting an understanding of democracy as something that cannot be bestowed once and for all but is constantly constructed, challenged, and reconstructed through iterative experimental processes, pragmatic scholarship helps to direct attention toward not only what participants in political struggles do and how they do it, but also why they do what they do and how they understand the importance of their efforts. This orientation lends itself to peopled, agentic geographies. It also forces scholars to check their normative assumptions regarding the purpose of political struggles against their own experiences, and those of other people involved in social movements. Such reciprocal interactions broaden the scope of what can be heard and seen, of what is interesting, of what might be considered transformative, thereby encouraging more creative and sensitive political work.

Chapter 4:

Learning from Difference in a New Orleans Neighborhood Schooling Struggle: Politics of Place from the Inside Out

Abstract

In New Orleans and across the US, market-based school reforms and selective school closures have sparked conflicts over the relationship between neighborhoods and schools. These conflicts have forced participants to confront sharp differences within political and geographic communities, foregrounding tensions associated with pluralism in democratic life. In analyzing these tensions, geographers have tended to employ agonistic theories of democracy that frame political struggles as adversarial clashes between groups attempting to enact opposing value structures. Drawing on a case study of one group's attempts to reopen a school in their New Orleans neighborhood, I argue that this framework diminishes the ethical complexity of participation in local place-based politics. It ignores the extent to which citizens engage in political struggles without subscribing to rigid ideologies. And it downplays the fact that members of the same political community often hold multiple (potentially conflicting) values that shift in response to new experiences. In short, democratic frameworks which valorize adversarial conflict obscure the political work involved in negotiating values tensions and discount place-based relational practices that allow people to learn from difference. I suggest that using a Deweyan lens to examine conflict 'from the inside out', allows geographers to better analyze the relationship between emplaced experience, the negotiation of ethical dilemmas, and political learning-across-difference.

Introduction

Geographers of urban social movements have developed a rich literature on neighborhood conflicts and the politics of place more generally (Carpio, Irazábal, & Pulido, 2013; Cumbers & Routledge, 2013; della Porta, Fabbri, & Piazza, 2013; Featherstone, 2008; Gibson-Graham, 2016; Hankins & Martin 2012; Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007; Martin, 2013; Purcell, 2001; Pierce, Martin, & Murphy, 2011; Routledge & Cumbers, 2013). Yet much of this work has tended to emphasize the spatialities *of* conflicts, rather than how participants themselves think and act in relation to place (Martin, 2013, p. 85; for exceptions see Arenas, 2015; Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Hankins, 2017; Martin, 2014; Routledge & Derickson, 2015; Sziarto & Leitner 2010). The focus has been on conflicts between entities defined by their ideological differences.

While this literature is useful, I suggest that given the centrality of conflict in political life and theory (Mouffe, 2005, 2000; Rancière, 1998, 2000, 2014), there is a need for empirically-grounded geographies that explicitly interrogate how activists understand and negotiate difference, both externally *and* internally. Drawing from a larger project on the geographies of schooling struggles in post-Katrina New Orleans, I analyze three values conflicts that surfaced during a neighborhood group's struggle to regain control of a closed school. I suggest that these conflicts illustrate how examining the negotiation of difference "from the inside out", and using a Deweyan lens to do so, might help geographers to better account for the ethical dimensions of place-based political conflict. This, in turn, does two things. It reveals forms of engagement with difference that might otherwise be ignored or denigrated. And it focuses attention on the role of learning in political life, providing a much-needed bridge between the world that is and the ones we might create.

I develop this argument in four stages. First, I situate New Orleans schooling struggles within a broader literature on the democratic implications of place-based conflicts. Second, I compare two prominent ways of theorizing conflict and difference in democratic life: Chantal Mouffe's agonistic democracy and John Dewey's inquiry-based conception of democracy as experience. Next, I draw on geographical work on the politics of place to demonstrate the benefits of attending to how participants understand their political struggles (Martin 2013, 85). I then analyze how residents of one New Orleans neighborhood understood and negotiated their own values conflicts regarding ownership, contention, and inclusion, highlighting the insights that Dewey's model of engaged pluralism provides. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of using Deweyan pragmatism as a normative guide for analyzing place-based struggles.

New Orleans Schooling Struggles, Pluralism, and the Politics of Place

Since Reconstruction, schools have been the focus of black-led collective action to alter the social and economic geography of New Orleans (Anderson, 1988; DeVore & Logsdon, 1991). Before desegregation in the early 1960s, white campaigns to maintain control over New Orleans schooling were often framed as necessary for defining "the Negro's place." Dictating where different groups of people could attend school and under what conditions gave white New Orleanians an important mechanism for shaping the social, economic, and political dynamics of the city (Stern, 2014; 21, 29). Because school siting, funding, and policy shaped racialized understandings of place and placemaking, black-led schooling struggles were explicit bids for more control over black geographies. But they were also assertions of self-determination and

political capacity. The very act of pushing a black schooling agenda in the so-called “public” sphere was itself a challenge to white supremacy.

When white proponents of market-based school reform used the chaos surrounding Hurricane Katrina to abolish New Orleans’ neighborhood schooling model in favor of a city-wide charter school market in 2005, they reopened old wounds and created new ones. Almost all of the city’s schools became operated by autonomous charter management organizations which were not governed by one locally elected school board, but instead run by more than 40 privately appointed boards (Dingerson, 2006; Huff, 2013). In the process, the teachers’ union was broken and all public school employees were fired; much of the majority-black unionized teaching force was replaced by hastily-trained Teach for America recruits who were younger, whiter, and cheaper to employ (Buras, 2011; Cook & Dixson, 2012; Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014). In addition, geographic attendance zones were abolished. This gave some families access to a broader range of schooling options and schools more freedom to tailor their student bodies. It also left parents without the security of guaranteed access to a neighborhood school and created an atmosphere of instability as institutions that had once been community anchors opened and closed based on their ability to attract students, remain solvent, and maintain test scores (Buras, 2015).

Pro-market think-tanks, venture philanthropists, and other advocates of school choice celebrated the “New Orleans Experiment” as the most comprehensive attempt to marketize public schooling in US history (Saltman, 2015). Some New Orleanians, disillusioned by the pre-existing under-resourced and over-burdened public school system, welcomed reform as well. But especially in the historically black neighborhoods most impacted by post-Katrina reforms,

the experiment catalyzed collective action for control over how schools operate in and on neighborhoods.

Geographic insights into school-based struggles

Although they have not tended to focus on schooling struggles per se, geographers provide crucial insights into the dynamics of post-Katrina schooling struggles by illuminating how people's political lives are tied to their experiences and imaginaries of place (Leitner, 2012; Nicholls, Miller, & Beaumont, 2013). As Dikeç (2012) argues, people operate from and on their spatial conditions when they engage in collective action (p. 674); emplaced experiences provide the impetus for contesting injustice and the basis for instantiating alternatives (Escobar 2001). In acting on the shared feelings of injustice provoked by the lived experience of school reform, neighbors form what Clive Barnett and Gary Bridge (2014) call "communities of affected interest"; they identify a common interest in addressing a particular problem and engage in claims-making.

In addition to being the catalyst and object of collective action, place is also a mode of political activity. Participants in collective action, and especially territorially-based contentious politics, mobilize understandings of place to articulate their agendas and identities (Martin 2003; Martin 2014; Pierce, Martin, & Murphy 2010). Martin (2014) uses the concept of *place-framing* to describe how participants "produce places as bases for and sites of contention" (p. 90). In the course of contentious politics, participants may develop various place frames that narrate the geographic dynamics motivating action, diagnose problems in relation to places, and identify actions to be taken (Martin, 2014, p. 89). By deploying place frames in the public sphere,

neighborhood activists such as those involved in conflicts over the proposed hospital expansion that Martin analyzes, or those in Purcell's (2001) study of suburban Los Angeles homeowners' exclusionary activism, construct and circulate normative notions of place that support their political agendas.

As these examples demonstrate, contentious politics is constituted in and through relationships with place, and vice versa, as the meaning and structure of place is produced through contestation (della Porta, 2014; Featherstone & Painter, 2012; Nolan & Featherstone, 2015). Contestation over 'terrains of power' allows activists to construct 'practical moral knowledges' about how the conditions of their lives are generated and ordered (Featherstone, 2008, p. 54; Shotter, 1993, pp. 6-8). And crucially for geographers interested in the transformative potential of contentious politics, without conflict, politics is debilitated and prevailing (unjust) orders remain unchanged (Massey 2014, 2034; Mouffe, 2005; Purcell, 2008; Swyngedouw & Wilson, 2014).

Politics from the inside out

There remain, however, important distinctions between analyses that focus exclusively on the spatialities *of* conflict and those that "examine place negotiations in activism: the understandings, discourses, norms, and perspectives of activists" to expand "understandings of how contention comes about; what sort of activists are included; who is excluded; why activists focus their contention where they do; and why alternative narratives, sites, or claimants of contention are not pursued" (Martin, 2014, p. 90) Moreover, despite convincing calls for empirical work that engages with the geographic understandings that activists themselves utilize

(Barnett & Bridge, 2014; Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Derickson & MacKinnon, 2015; Harney, McCurry, Scott, & Wills, 2016; Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007), relatively few geographers have focused on the role of conflict *within* political communities.

An exception is Sziarto and Leitner's (2010) work on the negotiation of difference through the Immigrant Workers' Freedom Ride (IWFR). Sziarto and Leitner demonstrate how a multi-ethnic group of activists formed a counterpublic, forging relationships and a shared identity over the course of their cross-country journey. Riders worked across race and power divides to tell personal stories of struggle and listen to memorializations of others. The space of the bus facilitated "alternative inter-personal modes of communication, learning, and articulations of visions" that ultimately allowed riders to develop solidarities without subsuming the differences within the group (2010, p. 389).

In contrast to Sziarto and Leitner, who focus primarily on internal divisions associated with race, in this paper I examine conflicts stemming from the multiple and sometimes conflicting values guiding participants in neighborhood-schooling struggles. Values conflicts regularly arise in schooling struggles due to the multi-dimensional purposes and people schools serve; acting collectively thus often involves not just conflict between groups with different values, but conflict between people *within* political groups who themselves hold multiple and conflicting values. For instance, residents of neighborhoods impacted by school closures may feel underserved by their old neighborhood school without endorsing charterization; community members who are no longer welcome in the school down the street may not know or care about the political economic implications of market-based school reform.

Agonistic vs. engaged pluralism

Geographers concerned with neoliberal governance strategies that “vanquish a vocabulary of power, and hence power’s visibility from the lives and venues that governance organizes” (Brown 2016, p. 5), have argued that increasingly, politics is portrayed as the enemy of consensus-driven, technocratic, and/or privatized decision-making processes (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Gill, Johnstone, & Williams, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2009, 2014). For geographers concerned with the democratic implications of contentious politics, Mouffe’s agonistic vision offers a much-needed normative challenge to neoliberal governance models by centering conflict as a constitutive feature of the political and discrediting the ideal of a unified social whole (Derickson & MacKinnon, 2015; Featherstone, 2008; Purcell, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2009). Mouffe (2013) argues that as we demarcate the difference between ourselves and others, we create the basis for both (provisional) internal unity and external conflict based on values differences. Because every “we” must have a constitutive “they”, there can be no joining together without exclusion and the possibility of antagonism is ever-present.

Her model suggests that if members of a political community find their values at odds with those of other group members, they should simply redraw the boundaries of political identity: those who hold incompatible values would cease to be part of “us”, and instead be viewed as political adversaries (Mouffe, 2002). Mouffe admits that people’s values shift, but she describes the process as a wholesale transformation, requiring exiting one political community and joining another. “To accept the view of the adversary is to undergo a radical change in political identity. It is more a sort of conversion than a process of rational persuasion” (2000, 15).

Mouffe's model is compelling given the depoliticizing mechanisms embedded in post-Katrina school reforms (Huff, 2015), but, as I will demonstrate, her normative vision of constant conflict between clearly defined adversaries is difficult to map onto actual neighborhood schooling struggles. These struggles often include participants without strong allegiances to particular ideological positions, whose strong sense of community make treating their neighbors as adversaries unfeasible. A significant portion of their work involves the ethical labor of negotiating the "right" way forward when members themselves must prioritize multiple and conflicting values in response to the demands of particular situations.

An alternative understanding of democratic work is provided by John Dewey. Like Mouffe, Dewey believes that pluralism entails the negotiation of conflicting and potentially irreconcilable values. But Dewey is a contextualist: he insists on an emplaced "view from somewhere" that resonates with calls for more empirical work on the internal politics of place. For Dewey, democracy is the ongoing practice of collective inquiry into shared problems that are necessarily dynamic and unique (Barnett, 2014; Lake, 2014; Pappas, 2008). He does not, therefore, prescribe a set method (such as adversarial engagement) for dealing with difference. Instead, Dewey relies on the human capacity to use experience as both a guide and a measure of success in attempts to shape and reshape problematic conditions (LW 14:229; MW 14:195). For Dewey, there can be no universal guide for ethical action. Instead, we have to use our experiences to help us to decide what to do when we encounter situations we find problematic; as our actions take effect, the quality of resulting experiences tells us when we need to change course.

Dewey's version of democracy calls for an engagement with difference that is morally strenuous. Like Mouffe, Dewey asks citizens to act on convictions in a pluralistic context. But unlike Mouffe's model, Dewey's acknowledges the fallibility of individual experience by demanding "a genuine willingness to test one's ideas in public, and to listen carefully to those who criticize them. It requires the imagination to formulate new hypotheses and conjectures, and to subject them to rigorous testing and critique by the community of inquirers" (Bernstein, 2005, p. 65). Dewey's engaged pluralism does not demand compromise or acceptance, but rather openness; active and critical inquiry... "and the courage to revise, modify, and abandon our most cherished beliefs when they have been refuted" (Bernstein, 2005, pp. 34-35, 29).

There are dangers associated with this orientation towards pluralism, especially for those involved in contentious place-based politics. Dewey's openness may not provide a firm enough basis for resisting the systemic predations of existing arrangements (Grattan, 2016). Given uneven power relations, the imperative to engage across difference leaves those with fewer resources vulnerable to being silenced or coopted (Purcell, 2008). In the context of neoliberal governance regimes, attempts to address problematic situations locally can "take the form of the lowest link on a chain yanked from above" (Brown, 2015, p. 10).

Dewey recognizes that deep engagement with difference involves wrestling with sometimes irreconcilable values and he is not unaware of the dynamics (including unequal power relations and the increasing opacity of governance arrangements) that impede such efforts (Pappas, 2008, pp. 269-285; LW 2:347-348). He acknowledges the ever-present potential for violence sparked by increased interaction across difference (LW 7:231). And he admits that not all conflicts can be resolved without real loss (LW 1:45).

Dewey nevertheless advocates engaged pluralism because, unlike adversarial conflict that bypasses the possibility of learning from one's opponents, openness to difference prods ethical inquiry, keeping political commitments alive, relevant, and attuned to new situations and contingencies. A Deweyan perspective does not foreclose conflict or exclusion. It merely demands a sensitivity to context and a faith in people's ability to negotiate situational demands. Dewey's proposition is that engaged pluralism gives people a better shot at reconstructing their present situations than do other ways of dealing with difference because it helps ensure that beliefs do not become rigid, but are justified by experiences in particular contexts (LW 6:21). For Dewey, "Every way of life that fails in its democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched" (LW 14:229-30).

Using a Deweyan lens, I examine conflict within a group attempting to reopen a neighborhood school in New Orleans. This analysis is based on data collected as part of a five-year project on neighborhood-school contestation in Post-Katrina New Orleans. The data presented here is drawn specifically from participant observation that I conducted as a member of the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative, a neighborhood-based group attempting to gain control of a shuttered school. Participant observation included weekly Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative (PNSI) meetings, ad hoc PNSI meetings, public events related to the struggle, school board meetings, public events sponsored by the group, and informal gatherings that occurred from April to September of 2014. To protect the anonymity of group members, some identifying details have been changed; the names of the neighborhood, school, initiative, and participants described in this paper are pseudonyms.

Pullman Neighborhood School Struggle

In 2013, the people whose struggle I analyze in this paper came together to form the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative, dedicated to reopening Pullman School as a neighborhood-controlled institution. The conflicts described occurred in the summer of 2014 as a charter school with selective enrollment criteria attempted to buy the Pullman School building, effectively curtailing the possibility of neighborhood usage and control of the school.

The neighborhood and the school

Pullman School is beautiful, in an imposing institutional way. Three stories tall, red-orange brick with wide paned windows. It was built in the 1930s and meant to last forever. Except Pullman School was boarded up decades before Katrina in an earlier wave of racialized school closures. By the summer of 2014, as the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative attempted to fight the sale of the school, windows gaped open and ferns grew out of the cracks in the brick. Portions of the roof had fallen in or been torn away. A rusty chain-link fence encircled the grounds, but neighbors used Pullman School anyway. Men played basketball in the gym. No lights, no air, but the hoops were still there if you could find a way in. A makeshift mechanic shop operated under the trees at one end of the yard. Kids chased each other through the weeds and across the blacktop.

The Initiative members I describe in this section had different ways of thinking about the struggle, but they shared a sense that Pullman could and should be integral to neighborhood life. **Ms. Rose** was 87 years old in 2014, but you wouldn't know it. At her 80th birthday party, her DJ made daiquiris for a crowd that was still up and moving at 5am the next morning. Ms. Rose

owned her home; a side hall shotgun with a riot of flowers lining the driveway. She did a lot of fighting in her younger days. As an older woman, she put her energy into her bible study, her neighborhood association, and getting Pullman School open again. Ms. Rose laughed a lot, but when conversation turned to Pullman School, her mouth drew into a tight line. It had been a long time and she was tired of being ignored. Her grown children did not attend Pullman School, but she still thought of it as her neighborhood school. “It’s ours because we need it back up in here,” she said.

Pullman School sat way back in the neighborhood; to get from the main avenue to the school you had to turn down streets riven with holes and patches. Brightly painted shotguns sat atop brick pillars on skinny lots. Plants grew lush against low fences: azaleas, hibiscus, lantana. Citrus and pecan trees provided gifts for neighbors in the winter. There was a privately-run community center with bars on its darkened windows. A beer parlor and a sewerage plant. Small markets and plain churches anchored many corners; men often stood around the market doorways, some laughing and drinking, and some quietly waiting to make their next sale.

Marcus was a life-long Pullman resident. At one time he had a corner too – right down the street from Pullman School. “I used to sell drugs on that corner,” he said, “daydreaming about what if we could put in a daycare right there. That lot, it was always overgrown. I even tried to grow a few plants there myself one spring. There was all these weeds, trash; you could hide just about anything back up in there. Guns, whatever. But that was my first dream, opening up a daycare there for the neighborhood.” That was long before he joined the Initiative. In 2014, Marcus’s passion was trying to help young men in the neighborhood find a solid path into adulthood. Nearly 40, Marcus was a big man with a big voice. But when he spoke about

Pullman School, he sounded almost like a kid himself; his tone got soft. “If I had a million dollars...” he trailed off shaking his head, “I know contractors, electricians, mathematicians, social workers, teachers, musicians. That place could be something important for these kids.”

After Katrina, the school board put Pullman School on the surplus property list. Charter school management organizations got priority to buy, but otherwise, the surplus designation turned Pullman School from a neighborhood school into a piece of property to be bought and sold like any other. The price tag was nearly \$400,000. Marcus didn’t have it. But he didn’t give up hope entirely. “I play the Lottery [for] Pullman School. I do. I play the Lottery, just hoping one day I might get the money I would need to make Pullman School happen.”

During the pee-wee football season, the broad street that ran past Pullman School was packed with cheering families. Long-time residents greeted each other. Commiserated and congratulated. But people didn’t walk easily; they were aware of their surroundings. **Tonya** was 44 years old. She’d lived in Pullman a long time; attended Pullman School herself as a child. Her mother was a woman of God, and so was Tonya. Her faith was wound up in everything she did, in the personal way she spoke to Jesus throughout the day. Since her parents died, Tonya had lived in one half of her mama’s house, two blocks from the school. Tonya’s sister was murdered right there, just in front of the raised house, with its wide cement staircase and cheerful blue paint. Tonya had been sick. Cancer. She didn’t own a car. But in the summer of 2014 she regularly bought a ride from a neighbor or took the circuitous cross-town bus trip to the courthouse where the men who killed her sister were on trial.

Describing the neighborhood, Tonya said, “You know the next street over? [Murrow]? They used to call it Murder Row. It was crazy. Baby, those boys just started shooting ‘til they

wasn't anybody left. It was a time when all you would hear was mamas crying from they porches all up and down that street." It had gotten quieter. But that's not a puzzle, Tonya said. "All the boys and men between 15 and 25 are gone." Before she joined the fight for Pullman School, Tonya had been scared to spend much time outside. As she told some of the other women who were working to get the school open, "I was a prisoner in that big house. I never went nowhere but to church and back. Because I didn't trust people in the neighborhood... But I found trust in y'all."

White people didn't usually come back by Pullman School. But **Susan** and her partner **John** did, mostly to go to their neighborhood association meeting – the same one Ms. Rose attended. The group was formed to bring the wider neighborhood together, especially across racial lines. Susan and John lived in a whiter, more middleclass area at the edge of Pullman. Reaching retirement age, they'd been there most of their lives - John's family had lived in the neighborhood for over 100 years. Unlike most members of the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative, who had never before participated in collective action, Susan and John had been in neighborhood-school politics for over 20 years. In that time Susan had worked with multiple groups to get Pullman School open. She'd learned the most important part of the work was building relationships and trust. When you do that, "You're gonna know the people who will stick with you."

Despite reluctance to venture far back into the neighborhood, people of different ethno-racial backgrounds did move in after Katrina. With neighborhood change came rising property taxes and the loss of stores fulfilling long-time residents' basic needs. But also an influx of young people who wanted to be engaged in neighborhood life. **Alex's** parents were from Cuba.

He had recently bought a house and moved to the neighborhood with his young family. Alex had professional experience in the education sector, but he saw the Pullman School project as primarily about developing the pre-existing political and social resources of the neighborhood. “The capacity of this neighborhood exists,” he said, “We have everything we need. We just need to... like, flame the fire to get things going.”

Ian was also relatively new to the neighborhood, but he’d put down roots quickly. In his early 30s, Ian had grown up in a Filipino family on the outskirts of New Orleans. He had gotten into some trouble when he was younger. But he’d always hustled and the hustle had paid off. He owned his own business and was raising his 12 year-old son alone, both of which made him more committed to Pullman.

The neighborhood wasn’t as famous as some others in New Orleans, but many artists and musicians had come up there; the streets were filled when the neighborhood Social and Pleasure Club paraded. At 25, **Jess** was always in the mix, talking with neighborhood folks about the struggle to reopen Pullman School. White, but with ties to a local Native American tribe, she’d grown up across Lake Ponchartrain, moved away, been married and divorced twice, and made her way back to the city. She was charismatic and busy – making videos of neighborhood perspectives on schooling, studying for her undergraduate degree, and waitressing at a gentleman’s club on Bourbon Street. Jess was a passionate advocate for Pullman School as a catalyst for social change, “The neighborhood has been jacked around and put into a reactionary state time and time again,” she wrote in an open letter, “No better time than now to be proactive and take authority over our space and land that the city would like for us to abandon.”

All of the people mentioned above and several more formed a core group of about a dozen Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative members. The core group included an equal number of men and women ranging in age from mid-twenties to late 80s. This core membership was relatively socio-economically diverse, including members who depended on state-sponsored social programs, those who worked in the informal economy, small business owners, service industry workers, and white-collar professionals. The majority of the core group members were homeowners, but a substantial proportion rented. This group met at least once a week during the time period described in this paper, with 10 times as many people attending outreach events. While the core group included a near-equal number of black and non-black participants, and was equally divided between long-term residents and those who had moved into the neighborhood post-Katrina, those who attended neighborhood events were primarily black long-term residents. This mix reflected the demographics of the broader area, if not the Pullman neighborhood specifically.

For all their effort, the Pullman Initiative was unsuccessful in their attempts to reopen the school under neighborhood control. To be clear: this case does not illustrate how grassroots struggles can overcome the forces of neoliberalization and entrenched racism. But I do think their work sheds light on democratic questions surrounding pluralism, and this is what I will focus on in the remainder of this paper. While PNSI members shared a belief in the capacity of neighborhood residents to decide how Pullman School should be used, their understandings of the Pullman struggle were mediated by very different experiences and conflicting values. The following sections describe three of the group's internal conflicts over the meaning of school ownership, the extent to which the struggle should be linked to broader issues of racial injustice, and the conditions for exclusion from the group. In each case, I draw attention to how the group

negotiated values differences, and how they called on their individual and collective experiences to do so.

Does Pullman School belong to Pullman?

One of the earliest conflicts the group faced involved different interpretations of ownership in relation to Pullman School. At a packed meeting, a member of the Orleans Parish School Board explained the Board's position:

This Board has no educational purpose for that building...And so right now, it's time that we...uh...surplus that building and, you know, so once we surplus it, it's put out to bid.

Then it's open to whoever want to bid on the school, on that building, and then convert it to whatever use they so desire. Okay?

So we can't tell anyone if they buy that building, that they can only use it for [community proposed purposes] or anything else. Okay? (Field notes, OPSB Meeting, 7/22/2014)

In contrast to this framing in which only those who have legally purchased a school building can determine how it will be used, the Pullman group insisted that because the school was integral to neighborhood life, residents had a right to have a hand in shaping its future. Letters to city council and school board members described the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative's grievances in these terms, linking the injustice of economizing Pullman School's value to the political marginalization of neighborhood residents:

Pullman School has been the heart of this neighborhood. But for thirty years, residents have been shut out of the school and excluded from the decision-making processes that determine its fate.

This is a civil rights issue. The potential sale of Pullman School, without the expressed consent of Pullman residents, amounts to land-theft: it takes a public institution that was once a center of community life and puts it in the hands of the highest bidder, regardless of the impact on neighborhood children and families. (PNSI open letter to Orleans Parish officials, 6/26/2014)

Handbills circulated in the neighborhood amplified the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative's public framing of the issue, in which the school is a "public space" that must be not only accessible to, but controlled by, the neighborhood community:

*What good does it do to re-open the school if our children will not be able to attend it?
How does renovating the school benefit our community, if community members are denied access to what should be a public space?*

*When decisions affecting schools are taken out of the community, the community loses.
Our voices must be heard.*

We're gathered here today to tell the school board to delay any vote on the future of the school until we can develop our own proposals for the future of Pullman School.

(Circulated 6/28/2014)

The project's message of public ownership and control of Pullman School also were evident in highly visible public expressions. Posters on telephone poles read "THIS LAND IS OUR LAND". A hand-painted drop cloth banner on the school's chain-link fence declared, '*We the people demand that the sale of the Pullman School be delayed until community-based proposals are developed.*' T-shirts bore the slogan "Pullman School Belongs to Pullman" in bold black letters. Graffiti painted on the side of the school gym spelled out: "Land Theft."

The cohesiveness of this public framing belies the significant internal conflict associated with producing and enacting it. People who came to the Pullman Initiative meetings shared a desire to see the school opened for community use. But this desire often conflicted with other values – such as the desire to be, and be seen as, a certain kind of "good citizen" - competent, law-abiding, and reasonable. This tension was enacted through conflicts over the appropriate way to talk about and demonstrate neighborhood "ownership" of the school in the context of the planning and execution of a community protest picnic on the school grounds.

For many members of the group, coming together as a community on the Pullman School grounds was an act of defiance and a way to prove a point that seemed self-evident: Pullman School belongs to Pullman. The fence, the locks, the official closure - all were immoral in the first place. So reclaiming Pullman School may have been illegal, but it wasn't wrong. In fact, it was a necessary step in taking control of neighborhood institutions and space.

However, a vocal minority felt that while Pullman School *should* belong to the community, the group had a moral obligation to acknowledge the School Board's ownership and to obey injunctions against trespassing. These disagreements were especially pointed leading up

to the protest picnic. An exchange between Jess and Glenda illustrated this conflict. Jess, although neither black nor a long-term resident of the neighborhood, was a driving force in the group. Glenda was a middle-aged black woman with a powerful interest in community politics who worked a clerk at a neighborhood store and sporadically attended Pullman meetings.

Glenda: *Technically, let's deal with this: Who owns that building? Let's deal with the facts. Who owns that building? It's in that neighborhood, but who owns that building?*

Jess: *We all know the answer to that question. I don't understand why-*

Glenda: *[cutting Jess off] Answer my question. Who owns the building?*

Jess: *Obviously we know the answer to that question. The New Orleans Parish School Board.*

Glenda: *That's my point. No wait, that's my point. You don't own the building. You can't say that the neighborhood owns that building. The neighborhood does NOT own that building. If you tell people things, tell them the truth. Don't tell them what you want them to think. Tell them the truth...The school building is property. And you want to do something on that property. That is considered technically, legally, trespassing unless you have the permission of the people who own the building. That's it.*

Jess contested Glenda's version of the "truth" regarding Pullman School's ownership, arguing:

Our big moral juncture with the Orleans Parish School Board is that they have created an environment and a circumstance that public property, and access to public property has become a crime. And it has created a culture of crime. [We're doing this so] that the neighborhood can have a sense of belonging, they can feel like the space that their

tax dollars have publically funded does belong to them. Although the school board has jurisdiction over what happens to that, we're calling negligence! (Field notes, PNSI Meeting, 8/6/14)

Ian agreed with Jess regarding the importance of asserting the use value of the school and the injustice of being shut out of it:

... Our whole point is that's public property and we're standing on the grass in our neighborhood, you know, that we live in. And the only reason it looks like we shouldn't be there is that there's this rusty-ass fence around it. [...] I mean, that's the whole point is that, yeah, it is a little bit of civil disobedience. (Field notes, PNSI Meeting, 8/6/14)

This exchange illustrates substantive differences in how people imagined the community in relation to the school, and the role of “responsible” citizens in defining that relationship. As demonstrated in the exchange between Jess and Glenda, such conflicts were not a matter of clearing up misunderstandings over facts. Both acknowledged that the School Board had legal ownership the school. Without appealing to pre-defined moral codes, the women forwarded conflicting interpretations of what doing the right thing required under the circumstances they were in.

There was no formal process for assessing the will of the group, but as they discussed the issue, momentum built and the picnic went forward. The conflict was not extinguished by this decision, however. If anything, internal rifts were made more visible by the fact that some people who wanted to support efforts to reopen Pullman School nevertheless refused to enter the property. The group was thus physically divided by the chain-link fence that surrounded the school.

Although the conflict led to some members dropping out of the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative, or becoming less involved, most stayed connected to the group. They did not cease to believe that trespassing was wrong, but by remaining outside the fence they found a way to participate in the event without violating their principles. Those in support of trespassing did not seem interested in treating those on the other side of the fence as adversaries. People on the inside brought plates loaded with chicken and mac n' cheese to those outside the fence. They set out chairs for the elderly, and passed out water bottles. Some people switched sides as residents began to speak on the history of Pullman School and what it meant to the neighborhood.

“The right way”

Conflicts over political practices surfaced again as members clashed over how to describe and pursue the Pullman agenda. Members of the School Board weighed in on this issue directly in a public exchange with Jess, where they admonished the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative for irrational, confrontational, and time-wasting behavior. The Board informed the Initiative that instead of being contentious, PNSI should try to reopen Pullman School in “the right way.”

Jess: I'm not trying to bulldog any of you. I'm just here to ask, humbly... You're a public school board, correct? ...What does the public have to do to have communication with the public school board in regards to public property that we believe due to a civil rights injustice has been forcibly abandoned for 34 years? What does the public do if they want to open up a community school? A public school? A neighborhood school? A vo-tech school? What do we do when the building we desire is on the surplus list? Do we ask for

a year to fall within the grace period to create an adult and child charter? Do we have to go beg the mayor to intercede?

School Board Member: I don't want to get into a back and forth. [...] Put your plan on paper. Don't send me a diatribe at 11 o'clock on a Sunday night with a lot of, you know, back and forth crazy talk. I don't particularly care for the tone, on and on, about this.

Jess: Maybe it's not a civil rights injustice for you [calling the School Board member by his first name] but [it is] for the people in my neighborhood-

School Board President: [Interrupting Jess] Please. Please. I'm going to close with this. We have other charters here. And they've all been approved; they've all gone through the right way. You don't first select a building and then build a program because you want that building. Okay? You have a project. You put it on paper. You get financing for your project. You do all of those things and you make your presentation. Okay? We've had this conversation about what you need to do, but you keep wanting to do it in public, and just by the force of the will of the public make us do things that first of all we're not legally able to do. We need to move on with the agenda... (Field notes, OPSB Meeting, 7/22/2014)

Under an educational policy regime that explicitly devalued the relationship between neighborhoods and school (Huff 2013, 2016), board members were dismissive of claims based on Pullman School's role in neighborhood life. They emphasized that business concerns must drive the process, rather than the desire to open a particular school in a particular place. Acting in "the right way" required abandoning "crazy talk" of racism and gentrification. Moreover, it meant abandoning *any* public assertion of and/or contestation over the neighborhood's needs.

The School Board's demands directly contradicted the values many Pullman Initiative members used to guide their work. Publically, the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative framed the struggle for Pullman School in terms of the need for neighborhood control over neighborhood spaces and institutions. They placed this struggle within a broader fight for economic and social justice, calling on a long history of resistance to racist policy. An article the group wrote for a neighborhood circular outlined the gentrification efforts underway in Pullman and linked the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative's purpose to resident-led efforts to impact decisions that affected neighborhood:

The politicians have the nerve to advertise the city to investors and developers as a "blank slate". We all know that the city's history is far from a blank white page. Our history is dirtied with genocide, slavery, segregation, oppression, violence, and injustice. That history is still with us. But so is the strength and spirit that have always defined us, that cannot be washed away, cannot be bought out, cannot be co-opted. We have to show the people in power that our neighborhood is not for sale. That we are not for sale.

And that is why we are here. We are here for justice. We are here because we believe that it is criminal to sell off public property to private developers that do not care about who we are, what we need, or what we've built up here over generations. (Circulated 5/27/2013)

But while all group members acknowledged the destructive historical legacies of racism and threats associated with outside development, not all the members of the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative agreed with the decision to explicitly link the struggle for Pullman School to struggles against these systemic threats. Several wanted to scale back the

aims of the project. In the words of one white middle class father, “Whoa. Those are a whole lot of complicated BIG social issues...You cannot hope to fix all that, to fight gentrification with just this site.” Others doubted that school closure was a *deliberate* enactment of racialized dispossession/disenfranchisement. “Ok,” a white male who had recently arrived from Los Angeles said, “let’s not bring in conspiracy theories.” Several other white members felt it would be strategic to avoid bringing up race and racism altogether. “We can talk about that stuff in here,” another white male at a Pullman gathering said, “but we’re going to turn people off if we go in the race direction on Friday [at the OPSB meeting].” For other members, the injustice of racist policy was simply not a priority: “We can allude to it, maybe...but it shouldn’t be the main focus. The focus is Pullman School.” (Field notes, PNSI Ad Hoc Meeting, 6/24/14)

Like other Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative conflicts, divisions over this issue were inflected by racialized experience, but did not cut neatly along racial lines. Several black group members voiced a desire for the group to counter racialized narratives of irresponsibility by appearing respectful, professional and self-possessed when addressing public figures. A black pastor who was himself used to garnering respect, encouraged the group to behave in a decorous manner when they attended board meetings – indirectly admonishing one white female group member who had launched accusations of racism at the board the previous month:

I have noticed that when you go to these, uh, meetings at the school boards, or any other meeting, I’ve noticed that the people who get the results, or get what they want from the School Board, are those who go before the School Board with a meek, you know, humble, uh, grateful, you know...disposition. (Field notes, PNSI Meeting, 7/23/2014)

However, Ronald, a black life-long resident of Pullman pushed against the idea that the group should soften their message to appease Board members who might be uncomfortable with a straightforward discussion of the racial dimensions of the Pullman School struggle.

One thing I've learned in my life: Truth. Truth. And you stand on truth. But you can't go in there with no shenanigans. You got to go in there with actual facts...But [you're] not trying to straddle the fence. [You're] a little aggressive....sometimes you have to be aggressive. [But] It's based on facts. (Field notes, 8/18/2014)

As a compromise, Alex suggested that the group could tackle issues of racism and the appropriation of black geographies using a less inflammatory vocabulary:

If you use a different phrase – the phrase is, 'We're going to raise the quality of life' – you're going to tackle all of those [other issues]. The quality of life is the heartbeat of what we're doing. It's what...I mean, when those kids, like my kids, and your kids and everybody's kids, when those kids start to...participate in pro-social activities? The quality of life is going to change immensely for them and for the adults around them. So I think quality of life is the same thing. (Field notes, 8/18/2014)

Ian agreed that the group could maintain their ethical commitments while still being flexible enough to engage different groups effectively. He argued that the group's "moral" base wouldn't be affected by presenting their case to authorities in a more palatable way. But Mike, a middle-aged black Pullman alum, pointed out that often those in power denigrated neighborhood residents no matter how respectfully residents communicated. The two men went back and forth on the issue:

Ian: I mean, in my opinion, in every situation there's a certain way to go about things. You know, when you step into somebody's office in City Hall, there's a different trigger than when you tell somebody on the corner that's gonna activate them to get behind the case, you know? [...] And so I think in every situation it's like a triangle. The bottom [is the] true, like moral reason {for what you're doing}. But you're {speaking in} the way they react to. You're just doing it the way that makes them react, you know. And I think there's nothing wrong with that, you know what I'm saying?

Mike: At the same time, those people [on the school board] are conditioned already. You can stand up there on your toes, and being polite, and they will slam you after they listen to all that.

Ian: Then that's when you go off, then. If you approach them in the right way and it doesn't work, then that's when you approach them from the other way, the way that you know how to basically make noise. (Field notes, PNSI Meeting, 8/13/14)

This conversation highlights how the positionality of different members impacted their understandings of how to conduct the fight. Mike brought his experiences as a black man trying to work within white-dominated systems to this conversation. He had little confidence in established orders overall and specifically had seen black residents who tried to make their voices heard be shut down in public spaces. Ian acknowledged that the group might have to “make noise” if the School Board was unresponsive to Pullman’s attempts to communicate in “the right way.” But as a business owner who was neither black, nor a long-time resident of Pullman, Ian was willing to, as he called it, “play ball.” He felt that speaking the language of business would legitimize the group’s moral claims, and show those in power that Pullman was

savvy enough to be taken seriously. Tailoring the approach to a given audience didn't seem wrong to Ian, but rather strategic - as long as it didn't compromise the moral underpinnings of the work.

It was that last caveat that was the sticking point for several Pullman members. As Jess's exchange with the school board outlined above suggests, normative judgements regarding the appropriate *style* of communication were often fused with judgements regarding the *content* of communication. Conflicts over how much to publically link the Pullman School struggle to issues of racism, gentrification, and injustice converged with disagreements about the "appropriate" way to talk and behave in public meetings. Jess and others group members who felt strongly that the project must contest broader forms of racialized injustice did understand that their agenda made many people uncomfortable. Rather than castigate those who shied away from these broader discussions, however, Jess hoped that such confrontations could be educative:

Jess: I feel like we almost need a declaration of truths, where we say, 'If you're uncomfortable talking about this, and you don't see the big picture, then you just hang tight, because we know why we're here. And you'll have your own time to figure it out. This is going to be a learning process. (Field notes, 8/18/14)

In negotiating this conflict, the group took up Jess's suggestion; individual members continued to "speak their hearts" at public meetings. Especially early on, this testimony often communicated divergent, if not contradictory, values. But members did not attempt to produce a more unified front. Instead, they hoped that the experience of collective action would provoke co-members to re-evaluate their positions.

The limits of inclusion

Despite efforts to allow for a multiplicity of values, conflicts over how much to conform to expectations of entrepreneurial citizenship (and indeed the value of inclusivity itself) were heightened when Aubry, a young black entrepreneur from out of state who had been involved with previous attempts to renovate and reopen Pullman School, began coming to the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative meetings.

Before Aubry joined the group, Pullman's plans were focused on neighborhood engagement and organizing. Aubry was frustrated by these efforts and with talk about justice. In Pullman School, Aubry saw an opportunity to profit both himself and the community. But he believed that gaining control of the school was a financial matter, not a political one. He wanted the group to construct a business plan for the redevelopment of the Pullman School site, which would ideally involve his company, and derided the group for being unprofessional when they balked. "The first day I got here, the first meeting, I said," Aubry paused, clapping his hands once and holding them out palms up, "'What's the plan?'" He paused again, and shook his head slowly, eyebrows raised. "No plan." Aubry went on, "The second meeting I got here, I said," Pause. Clap. "'What's the plan?'" Ian interrupted him, "You're wasting our time with this naysaying. We... We're past the point. We *have* a plan." The exchange continued with voices raised:

Aubry: If you do not have an alternative plan that is viable, we are all wasting our time!

What does Pullman want to do?

Ian: What we want to do is to make the neighborhood aware of what is about to happen to this space in the neighborhood, because a lot of people do not understand what is about to happen, and it's going down.

Aubry: The bottom line is that if you don't have \$360,000, you can't have Pullman School. If you don't at least have this, you're wasting everybody's time right now. Including the School Board. Including your neighborhood. If you don't have \$360,000 you're not getting this school. Period.

[...] Right now? Right now the plan is to rabble-rouse [...] That's the plan. And that's a BAD plan. Because nobody wants the obstructionist. If you don't have a better plan then shut the hell up... (Field notes, PNSI Meeting, 8/6/14)

Aubry refused to recognize the value Pullman Initiative members placed on political participation and community control of Pullman School. Instead he characterized them as juvenile: idealistic, irrational, and unproductive because they kept the business of professionals from running smoothly.

[Elected officials] have said to me [about the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative], 'Those people are crazy.' Not just one elected official. Five. They have said to me, 'Those people are crazy.' (Field notes, 8/7/14)

Aubry's criticisms of the group's priorities provoked increasing tension, and some called for him to be excluded from the meetings. Recasting Aubry as an adversary was not easy, however. Aubry was not a stranger; he showed up, people saw him on the street, they had met his mother. He was black, giving him credibility in working to reopen a school in a

predominately black neighborhood that some white Pullman members felt uncomfortable claiming. As someone who had worked in the neighborhood pre-Katrina, he had more longstanding ties to the community than some other members of the group. Moreover, Aubry's goals and values genuinely resonated with many participants. He offered clarity, efficiency, and a chance to feel successful. Even if his framing discounted the value of neighborhood participation and control in the process, Aubry wanted Pullman School open and he seemed to have the expertise to get it done; excluding him meant abandoning what many members felt was the best chance of actually doing so.

Trying to address Aubry's concerns split the group's focus between efforts to identify investors and efforts to create more space for neighborhood residents to make their voices heard. The two strategies often worked against each other, sapping momentum and sparking animosity. John went so far as to walk out of a Pullman Initiative meeting in response to Aubry's comments. The following conversation took place at a meeting called explicitly to discuss the group's values conflicts without Aubry present (Field notes, PSNI Ad Hoc Meeting 7/29/14).

Ms. Ida was an elder in the neighborhood's black community; the matriarch of a family with deep roots in the area. She felt the group needed to be inclusive. "I'll tell you like this," she said, "It comes to Pullman, I don't see nothing wrong with community. Why everybody don't just come together and work together with new ideas? You know? Because it should be open to everybody." Jess elaborated on Ms. Ida's point:

I feel like every person who shows up at the table needs to be at the table. I have like a puzzle-piece mentality to this. I think that every single person is part of building the large puzzle. I think it's irresponsible to say that there's this person can't be trusted

because they spoke in this way. You know, and because we've had this negative experience.

As a veteran of community-led efforts to reopen the school, Susan agreed, emphasizing the fact that neighborhood organizing necessarily throws different kinds of people together:

We are going to have people in our neighborhood, that I'm gonna sit there and go, 'Oh my God. Do I really got to sit in the room with this person and deal with them?' But yes I do! Because if we're gonna make this work, we all got to learn... how to deal with... [each other].

However, Susan qualified her willingness to work with Aubry, citing her past experiences as a reason why she might not want to do so again. "I don't have to marry Aubry and live with him," she said, "but I do have to have some trust level there."

For Alex, that trust was missing because Aubry did not see himself as part of the "we":

Alex: The way that Aubry was addressing us – there was a distinction: [imitating Aubry] "I'm here, you are there...I am not part of this group." Just by the words he's using. And that is not how I feel when we sit at the table with us. When we eat, when we break bread together, when we're talking about Pullman – we're all saying "we" and "How do we do this? How do we do this?" And we say "we" all the time.

Jess acknowledged Alex's point that all group members should be committed to the group, but for Jess, that required treating everyone, even Aubry, as a full human being:

I think that we all live 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, and that we all have a tremendous amount of emotion. I think that Aubry [...] has seen himself as given the

opportunity to participate in a struggle that we're all a part of. He wants to be a part of it. I think, if I was going to make an assumption, I think he was acting like an outsider because he knows that he is.

Interestingly, given that critiques often characterize engaged pluralism as “soft”, both Jess and Marcus saw remaining engaged with Aubry as the more difficult, yet more rewarding path. For them, John’s walking away from the table was the easy way out - not only an avoidance of discomfort, but also unwillingness to help the group negotiate the best way forward. Jess emphasized the conflictual dimensions of any organizing effort, and the need to both stay unified and confront painful disagreement head on:

I mean, I'm trying to make sure that we all keep coming back to the table again. [...] You know, if we're to have any sort hope in the future of trust between us, it's going to involve saying the difficult things. It's going to involve saying the difficult things in a compassionate way. And it's going to involve a level of honesty that's going to leave the sting of uncomfortability for a moment [...] John, this is the shit that I've been learning from YOU!

Marcus thought Aubry might have important information for the group. But regardless of what the Pullman Initiative decided to do, Marcus was adamant that the group needed to be able to engage with different ideas. Marcus’s explanation of how he negotiated difference demonstrates a faith in his own ability (and that of the group) to evaluate alternative viewpoints:

Life to me is serious. I've said that since I was a kid. You can tell me anything. I can...I can funnel it. I can adjust to it, or I can just leave it alone. I...I heard harsh stuff all my life. So to me, it was nothing threatening about what Aubry was saying, because he can't

even weigh in on anything if it's a collective, if it's a collective thing that we have going on. He can talk all all all day. He can say whatever, you know? In the end, [...] I thought, [we could say] 'Okay, yeah, we gonna x that out and move forward to this way.' That's why I wanted you to say exactly what you were going to say, John. Just, you know, SAY it. And let us hear it. If you hold it in and we don't hear it - we don't know what's your feelings... if you say what you got to say then we can weigh like - 'Well, John has some key points and I...I... think this outweighs what Aubry is saying.'

Implicit in Marcus's words is the belief that everyone in the group brought unique experiences and perspectives that should be shared with the others. His argument is essentially about the political learning that comes out of engagement with difference – he thought the group would benefit from being actively engaged with each other's ideas. But as the group continued to work with Aubry's demands, even Marcus began to think Aubry might have to be excluded: He and Ian discussed their misgivings:

Marcus: There's something wrong with Aubry.

Ian: The way I'm seeing it now is that I don't know if he necessarily believes in what we're trying to do...I think really, ultimately he doesn't care what happens to Pullman School as long as he's the one that gets the contract to rebuild the building. That's how I feel.

.... I don't think he has a position in his heart on what is right, you know what I'm saying? ...I think his position is that – follow the money. Like whoever gets the permission, he wants to be where the money's at. (Field notes, 8/9/2014)

Alex and Mike felt similarly:

Alex: All this dude's talking about [is money]. I sniffed that shit out from day one.

Mike: Yeah, [when Aubry's at the meetings] we ain't talking about people. We ain't talking about children. We talking about money. [He's] scared the money will come, and [he] won't be included! (Field notes, 7/30/2014)

In the end, the group distanced themselves from Aubry. This was not necessarily a rejection of his entrepreneurial commitments, however. As demonstrated in the earlier examples, before Aubry joined, group members had continued forward together despite serious values conflicts. The break was based on a sense that Aubry was not actually part of the project, but rather was trying to use the group as a means to a self-serving end.

Discussion

Pullman members knew they wanted their school open. But this belief did not constitute a blueprint for ethical or political decision-making. It did not provide guidance on whether or not trespassing was the right thing to do, for instance, or the extent to which they should publically reference broader patterns of socio-spatial violence. Answering these ethical questions was not just a matter of determining which course of action was more aligned with mutually agreed-upon and relatively fixed ideological commitments. Each new dilemma highlighted the group's internal diversity, requiring members to reassess their own values in light of new experiences and interactions.

This form of political work, the ethical labor of engaged pluralism, is difficult to discuss using Mouffe's agonistic vocabulary. Although Mouffe's understanding of adversarial conflict rests on the idea that social orders (including we/they distinctions) are neither eternal nor based on some foundational essence, her descriptions of agonism suggest perpetual struggle between clearly defined (although not immutable) partisan groups who are *internally* united by common ideological commitments. In this sense, the political entities discussed in her normative model seem disconnected from the Pullman Initiative which included participants who, while passionately engaged in a struggle with the potential to trouble existing hierarchical orders, were not united by common partisan commitments.

In addition, for Mouffe, conflict arising from difference in a pluralistic society is an inevitability to be managed through agonistic struggle. It is not, as Dewey would have it, an opportunity for learning. And yet, the examples presented in this paper demonstrate that the negotiation of values conflicts *did* shape Pullman's participants and practices. Ian's conversation with Mike about the group's communication style demonstrates how interaction between members with different experiences provoked new understandings. Ian's argument for approaching elected officials "in the right way" reflects the value Ian placed on responding "appropriately" to the normative demands of disparate contexts. Ian saw his own business success as dependent on this ability. But in response to Mike's counter-experience, Ian agreed that more contentious forms of citizenship might be necessary should approaching board members "in the right way" fail to achieve results.

Values shifts also resulted due to direct experiences with collective action. While the Pastor originally exhorted group members to display a "meek" and "humble" attitude towards

the School Board, after having tried unsuccessfully to be heard in public meetings and listening to the stories of other neighborhood groups fighting school closure, he later spoke quite differently about the obligations associated with citizenship:

[The school board] have plans for tomorrow. They have plans to filibuster and to draw things out so we can't speak. But [...] we have to demand: 'No, you're going to hear our voice. "

"[P]eople in power use the law to manipulate other people to abuse the law. So if they're going to tell us that we can't break the law but yet you're breaking it and have done it, publically? Then, [...] if you live in a glass house don't throw a stick or a stone." (Field notes, PNSI Meeting 8/13/14)

As the group's handling of Aubry indicates, engagement with difference may have its limits. But even in this case, the group used their experiences in previous conflicts to deploy a new strategy for managing difference (exclusion) when they were faced with a situation that couldn't be resolved using toleration, compromise, or consensus-building.

The learning that took place did not center on the transfer of knowledge from expert to novice. Instead, it involved developing a willingness to revise values and strategies based on new experiences (including interaction with others), to consider the impact of these changes, and to revise again if necessary. In other words, through their work, Pullman members were learning how to learn from difference.

As outlined earlier, Dewey's radical empiricism calls for an attention to context, geographic and otherwise, which geographers are uniquely equipped to address; in the Pullman

case, I suggest that group members' shared attachments to their neighborhood supported their ethico-political learning in several ways. In an environment that devalued claims and claimants associated with black geographies and privileged individualistic competitive behavior more generally (Dixon, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015), attachments to place helped Pullman residents recognize each other as co-members of a political community. As participants continued to work together, their connections to Pullman allowed them (and sometimes forced them) to be generous with each other in disagreement, to endure the tensions that values-difference produced, and to create new ways of being together politically.

Lived experience of the neighborhood provided a sense of a shared problem; the school closure and the school board's refusal to recognize neighborhood residents' capacity for self-determination constituted a felt injustice. Most participants had not previously been active in politics and didn't conceptualize their work in partisan terms. Yet, dependence on and care for their neighborhood provoked participation and helped residents to develop what Martin might call "motivation and diagnostic place frames", articulations of everyday emplaced experiences that made reopening of Pullman School under neighborhood control necessary. Framing schooling issues in terms of their relationship to the neighborhood, rather than as technical or even ideological matters, opened the issue up to negotiation by the broader neighborhood.

Beyond facilitating the initial recognition of a common concern, shared attachments to the neighborhood (and not just to the struggle) facilitated interactions across difference that might not otherwise have been possible. The Initiative's goal was specific to Pullman. Initiative members could not just find another neighborhood or another school to focus on and there were a limited number of neighborhood residents who were initially willing and able to commit to the

project. Participants were stuck with each other. This caused severe frustration when values differences threatened to derail particular initiatives. But it also forced participants to remain longer in spaces of discomfort, encouraged them to deal with differences in durable ways and to treat each other as more than just adversaries when their values differed and their ideas about how to proceed clashed.

There was no shortage of conflict within the group. But there was also more than conflict. The place-based nature of their project allowed group members to know each other in ways that bound together their economic, social and political lives. Their interactions exceeded casual encounters, extended beyond the immediate organizing context, and were strengthened by the fact that they would all continue to live together even after this particular struggle ended. Committing to the diverse “we” was more than just a tactical decision, or a way to ensure that political practices were ethically grounded. The association of the group became a much-needed source of emotional and material support; the semi-sheltered environment of the Initiative allowed members to *cease* fighting, to find common ground, and to imagine alternative worlds together.

In this sense, perhaps this discussion misrepresents place as merely a nourishing/constraining factor on the Pullman Initiative’s work. As Entrikin (2002) argues, “place is both lived and dreamed” (20). *Through* their work, by negotiating the tension between imagined and real geographies, the group brought new places into being (Entrikin 2002, p. 24).

The potential limits of learning: negotiating difference through a politics of place

Despite the potential benefits to democratic practice outlined above, there are also dangers associated with attachments to place. Attempts to define and police the “essence” of places claimed by particular groups frequently lead to the kinds of antagonisms that worry Mouffe. From the perspective of those hoping to build broad-based ideologically-driven movements, attachments to place can be limiting and distracting, a barrier to the kind of networked multi-scalar relationships that are required to combat anti-democratic policies. While place is of course always dynamic and interconnected, it is not always recognized as such. If people’s experiences in particular places are the basis for democratic work, the dependencies outlined above may restrict needed resources and perspective.

These concerns are related to another set of more general questions regarding issues of power and the systemic barriers to engaged pluralism that constrain efforts to transform present conditions. While Dewey has been criticized for not taking these challenges seriously enough, using a Deweyan perspective to examine politics from the inside out does not mean ignoring mechanisms that inhibit and subvert politics. Dewey’s focus on experience may compel geographers interested in the politics of place to ask what people did and why, but it also compels us to ask why people did not or could not do *other* things. Grounding analyses in empirical cases, and working from the inside out provides insight into that which impedes the actual practice of politics; it requires treating political entities not as discrete and autonomous organisms, but rather paying attention to the relationship *between* inside and outside, and how they constitute each other through interaction not just opposition.

The Pullman Initiative, for example, was hampered by a number of depoliticizing mechanisms. As I have argued elsewhere, OPSB Board members played upon centuries-old narratives of black irresponsibility to cast Pullman members as unable to construct and articulate their own plans for their neighborhood. In the context of neoliberalism, these narratives take on new dimensions as market-based school governance strategies intersect with broader post-political discourses that disparage the inefficiency and unpredictability of democratic processes, as when the OPSB president chastised the group for wanting to press their agenda “in public” rather than handling it “the right way”, as a set of business concerns.

These depoliticizing mechanisms did not just operate on systems; they operated on the people in the Initiative, affecting how they understood themselves, their work, and their values. In line with Lester Spence’s analysis of the neoliberal turn in black politics, black New Orleanians have been pushed to adopt neoliberal subjectivities – to “problem-solve their own conduct” and hustle to manage the effects of racial capitalism (Spence 2012, 140; Spence 2015). But more insidiously, as Spence points out, “This is increasingly what we *want* to do. Who doesn’t want to take care of their families? Who doesn’t want to be successful in life? And as it becomes increasingly harder to make ends meet, who doesn’t want to be resilient? Who doesn’t want to have the required discipline?” (2015, 114-115). Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative interactions showed that many group members held values that mirrored those of the ideal neoliberal subject Spence describes. But in every case, such values coexisted with others, as evidenced by the time and energy members spent working on the public project of reopening Pullman School.

Because members held multiple and often conflicting ideals, they faced choices, not necessarily between right and wrong, or right and expedient, but rather between their own deeply held values, i.e. they wanted to both disrupt institutional arrangements and also be recognized as competent actors within them. The tension between potentially irreconcilable values set the stage for internal conflicts that democratic theorists call “tragic”, in that they cannot be resolved without the loss of a cherished ideal (Glaude 2007). As such choices are negotiated through the politics of place, the relationship between broader structural dynamics and seemingly localized dynamics comes into focus, making visible mechanisms of de-politicization that might otherwise be obscured. At the same time, however, where people struggle to negotiate tragic choices we may glimpse political practices that both draw on places and transform them. I suggest that using a Deweyan lens might help us to better understand the conditions under which such practices are developed.

Conclusion

In their investigation of the workings of autonomous geographic organizing, Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) describe a tendency on the part of left intellectuals to look for “evidence of a heroic local David who will resist and take on the neoliberal Goliath” rather than examine “the messy particularities of activist place projects” (p. 486). The Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative was not that David. Pullman was not able to win - and winning is important. It matters to the people involved, and it matters in terms of broader democratic projects. The ethical labor of engaged pluralism and the learning that accompanies it can seem weak and unreliable counters to the powerful forces that undermine democracy. Why then should we pay attention to the

mundane details of place-based politics and the messy work of learning from internal conflict? Dewey's model suggests that we do so because more than any particular result achieved, it is the experience of framing problems and experimenting collectively with ways of addressing them that in fact *is* democracy.

This way of thinking about democratic work broadens the field of relevant action to include the nurturing of subjective democratic habits, attitudes, capacities, and desires - a broadening which in turn brings up a new set of questions for geographers interested in democracy and the politics of place. In particular, what conditions (geographic and otherwise) nurture this kind of learning? And, how can we as geographers be more attuned to everyday political practices that may appear to be less-than-radical?

In answer to the latter question, I have argued that Dewey's formulation of engaged pluralism is a useful corrective to narrow conceptions of properly political behavior. Many place-based struggles involve constellations of people whose values differ from each other and from those embedded in many normative accounts of radical democracy. Given the complexity and interconnectedness of place, the ethical ramifications of "local" grassroots action are often difficult to tease out (Purcell 2006). Struggles over public schooling are a case in point (Hankins, 2005). Dewey's emphasis on learning from difference allows us to see negotiations of internal values conflicts like those described in this paper not as an unfortunate distraction from the fight for more democratic arrangements, but as a way to decide what those fights should be about. Rather than treat the purpose of democratic struggle as self-evident or presume that it can be determined ontologically, Dewey insists that it must be continually and contextually defined.

Political learning is not always easy to identify as an outside observer. As others have argued, there is a need for geographies that examines the internal workings of political communities (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Martin, 2013). This orientation allows insight into how participants themselves understand their work and how understandings shift in response to their experiences. Of course, experiences are always tied to places. As geographers, we might further investigate the relationship between emplaced experience and democratic practices. My research, for instance, suggests that in the Pullman case, attachments to place helped participants to identify themselves as a political community. It helped them to endure the discomfort of maintaining the diverse “we” of the group, and to “learn to learn” from one another in the Deweyan sense of revising one’s understandings in light of new experiences.

But just looking inward is not enough. This case also demonstrates that people hold multiple and sometimes conflicting values that shift in response to the demands of particular situations. As neoliberalization and racialized discourses of political, cultural, and spatial failure shape how people understand themselves, political struggle, and neighborhood space, they create even greater dissonance within individuals and between co-members of political organizations. Dewey’s model of experiential inquiry provides a rationale for both examining these conflicts as potential opportunities for learning across difference, and for inquiring into the dynamics that hinder learning. As Laura Grattan argues, while radical democrats “cannot afford to shout with a disembodied voice, vocalizing the people’s outrage at detached, dangerous configurations of power,” those eschewing outrageous protest in favor of long-term grassroots building and learning work also need to realize that “[t]he annals of history will record the minutes of very few church-basement meetings or city council negotiations unless they find ways to connect the labor of local, immediate political organizing to more far-ranging mobilizations of radical

critique and imagination” (2016,20). Future work on democracy and the politics of place might ask how long-term and mundane building-work can be connected to more eruptive and episodic forms of resistance, and/or to the kind of constant adversarial hegemonic politics that Mouffe prescribes.

But taking Grattan’s point, we might also look into how these modes of action are in fact already being used in combination by grassroots organizations. As the Pullman case indicates, groups such as those contesting neighborhood schooling policies often face situations that require them to consider a range of political strategies (from violent protest to deliberation) in light of their values and the demands of particular situations. They learn as they go. Focusing on political learning foregrounds dynamic, agentic, and emplaced qualities of democratic life, providing avenues for analyzing how people work within the world that presently exists to change it. These aren’t the only dimensions of democracy to interrogate, but they are important if one believes that democracy must be enacted continuously, by people in their everyday lives, in actual places.

Chapter 5:

Conclusion

Drawing on radical democratic theory, geographers have tended to think about depoliticization in terms of structural and discursive barriers associated with neoliberalization that obscure the root causes of urban problems, privatize decision-making, and channel political will into non-contentious outlets. Re-politicization presumably involves creating more transparent and publically accountable governance systems, reworking narratives that attempt to frame political problems as technical ones, and rejecting a politics of consensus. Implicit in these problematizations and solutions is the fact that democratic change is accomplished by actual people in actual places – somebody (or group of somebodies) somewhere, has to do the creating, reframing, and contesting. Yet geographic analyses of depoliticization have not paid sufficient attention to how people actually identify, construct, experience, and resist barriers to politics in the context of place-based struggles. In glossing over the experiential dimensions of (de)politicization, scholars may discount political dynamics that do not entirely fit the model that radical democrats have constructed, they may miss additional mechanisms (such as the racialized socio-spatial violence highlighted in Chapter 2) that hinder people’s ability to negotiate concerns in the public sphere and they may fail to recognize democratic practices that have not (yet) given rise to political “wins”. Moreover, to the extent that they disregard the meaning-making capacity of those involved in political contestation, scholars interested in radical democratic change risk perpetuating the sense that the ethical and intellectual dimensions of democratic work are not the province of everyday people, thereby potentially reinforcing the hierarchical dynamics they wish to challenge.

In making this argument, I do not want to downplay the effects of depoliticizing mechanisms described by theorists of the post-political. As outlined in Chapter 2, the dramatic shifts in New Orleans' school governance following Hurricane Katrina and the dominant school reform narrative that supported these changes constituted a near-textbook example of how collective action might be short-circuited via neoliberal governance strategies and narratives. In the wake of Katrina, crisis narratives presented schooling in New Orleans as a disaster-scape requiring immediate (and non-democratic) intervention. Power shifted from the locally-elected school board to quasi-public nonelected entities insulated from community oversight. School success became defined and measured by a new group of "experts", discounting the wisdom of veteran teachers and community members. When neighborhood residents agitated for more input into schooling decisions, they were enrolled in engagement processes that were ultimately controlled by various entities not accountable to local communities.

Focusing only on governance structures, however, ignores depoliticization stemming from the denigration and/or silencing of the actual people who attempt to contest them in the public sphere. Chapter 2 demonstrates how the narratives constructed by market-based reform advocates justified technocratic solutions to schooling problems by mobilizing plantation logic, negating black New Orleanians' capacity for self-determination, and casting black geographies as irredeemably toxic. In doing so, school reform advocates not only cut off avenues for political participation in general, they practiced "depoliticization by denigration"; they particularly delegitimized concerns raised by black New Orleanians by undermining the viability of black geographies and constructing "public" spaces and narratives that denied black political subjectivity.

This constitutes depoliticization, and not just injustice, because problems can only be politicized if they are named as such in public, and people's racially inflected and emplaced experiences determine how (and if) they understand particular situations as problematic. Histories of racialized violence and existing hierarchical social arrangements differentially impact the ability of black neighborhood residents to be heard in public forums, to have their perspectives recognized as valuable, and to pursue their schooling agendas. Eliminating or discrediting these perspectives radically shapes what can and cannot be politically negotiated. These dynamics suggest that repoliticization may require more and different kinds of solutions than typically suggested by post-political scholars.

While the racially differentiated ability to press schooling concerns in the public sphere may well produce inequitable geographies of school quality and access, the point I want to emphasize in this dissertation is that resolving these inequities cannot be the sole aim of democratic politics. Without naming and dismantling that which allows some groups to determine what justice looks like while others are merely affected by these determinations (for good or ill), hierarchical power relations are not fundamentally troubled. This argument is supported by evidence in Chapter 3 on how participants in New Orleans schooling struggles understand the purpose of their work. Although this data indicates that participants feel compelled to address many of the problematic dimensions of neoliberalization that concern urban geographers, their reasons for becoming involved in neighborhood-school conflicts extend beyond the desire to contest the privatization of public education and charter schooling, for instance. Instead, participants' public explanations of their work draw out the relationships between neoliberalization and racialized socio-spatial violence.

The counter-narratives of school reform produced by those engaged in struggles to reopen or gain control of neighborhood schools centralize the evisceration of black geographies via school closures, the mortal stakes of school reform, and the negation of black political subjectivity, as well as the long history of black-led collective action that nourishes contemporary struggles. In doing so, they call attention to the haunting presence of violences that “are supposed to be over, but are not” (Gordon, 2011). In an environment that insulates policy from political intervention (and particularly black political intervention), the circulation of these counter-narratives creates a rupture; a moment when the “riggings” of reform become available for public scrutiny. This in turn creates conditions under which people can recognize the (sometimes violent) consequences of existing social arrangements and, potentially, begin to construct counter-publics around these concerns.

The counter-narratives of post-Katrina school reform presented in Chapter 3 highlight the emphasis participants in schooling struggles place on their ability not just to be provided with multiple schooling choices, but to build sustaining communities through engagement in the politics of schooling. This distinction should sound a caution for market-based reformers who (regardless of their intentions) have imposed their will on schooling systems without regard for the ideas of those most directly affected by school reforms. But it should also give pause to those on the left who critique post-Katrina reforms on ideological grounds, especially to the extent that proposed alternatives proceed from normative ideals that are equally disconnected from the understandings and experiences of those closest to particular problems. Such solutions may succeed at providing a more equitable distribution of schooling resources without actually disrupting the barriers that prevent people from articulating and addressing that which concerns them. This way of pursuing justice, again regardless of intention, is non-democratic. It

reinforces the assumption that those who are most directly affected by urban policies, even those actually embroiled in conflicts over these policies, have no significant role in conceptualizing the meaning and goals of their struggles.

Framing problems associated with urban arrangements and negotiating ways to address them is certainly difficult, but it is not, and I suggest it cannot, be the sole province of “experts”, whether they be school choice technocrats or left academics. The normative democratic models I have explored in this dissertation all take democracy to be an ongoing endeavor; a never-completed effort enacted in people’s everyday lives. For Dewey and other pragmatists, this task involves collectively inquiring into the situations we find problematic, and experimenting with ways to ameliorate those situations. If we admit, as Dewey does, that the world does not operate according to any fixed external plan but is always in some sense still in the making, we must also admit that the very openness that underpins hope also makes democratic practice ethically strenuous. What exists now cannot last forever; in an ever-changing and complex world, we cannot rely on any given set of moral principles to carry us through the unique and shifting circumstances of our lives. As demonstrated by Chapter 4’s discussion of the Pullman Initiative’s ethical dilemmas, daily life (and certainly engagement in the politics of place) sometimes requires the negotiation of multiple and conflicting values. In order to act ethically, we have to bring our collective experiences and imaginations to bear on considerations of the likely consequences of different actions.

In short, democracy involves precisely the kind of creative and ethical work that technical routines are meant to circumvent. I have argued, however, that rigid a-contextual prescriptions for engaging with difference (as in radical democratic theorist Chantal Mouffe’s insistence on adversarial conflict) also sidestep essential ethical work by insulating participants from having to

reconsider the ethics of their own positions in light of new interactions. Dewey's articulation of democracy as experiential and contextual may help geographers to think of the democratic role of conflict in new and more nuanced ways. For Dewey, democracy is the continual attempt to collectively address problems by experimenting with new ways of thinking about and reconstructing our conditions. It is synonymous with learning. Conflict is essential for this process in that it goads reconsideration of present understandings. When my understandings conflict with someone else's I am obligated neither to concede nor to contest. But if I see democracy as experimental, then I must be willing to alter even my most deeply held beliefs in light of new experiences and information. This way of thinking about democracy centralizes situated learning; as a lens through which to analyze the politics of place, it provides geographers with a way of understanding political interactions that allow for change over time and the valuation of non-conflictual relations.

Chapter 4 suggests that political learning is affected by attachment to place. Place-based politics carries with it a set of potential limitations (such as issues of scale and connectivity), as well as dangers including a tendency to anchor politics to notions of community that are rigid, exclusionary and/or oppressive. But the case of the Pullman Neighborhood School Initiative suggests some benefits as well. Participants' attachment to a particular school in a particular neighborhood provided both motivation and resources for political struggle. It was their experiences in Pullman that brought residents together and helped them to continue struggling against steep odds when they were tired, depressed, and uncertain. Participants' shared relationship to the neighborhood made it difficult for them to exit the group even when they were angered by those with radically different values. While the need to engage with different others at times sapped the group's political momentum, barriers to adopting adversarial

postures also created time and space for “learning to learn” from difference. Moreover, by drawing explicitly on place imaginaries and attachments and reframing schooling as a neighborhood issue, participants highlighted a form of expertise based on experience in and care for place, suggesting that politicized place-based experience may provide a counter to technocratic and denigrating forms of depoliticization.

I argue that examining collective action “from the inside out”, through ethnographic analysis of the internal workings of political communities, offers useful ways of thinking and talking about the politics of place. From this perspective, we get insight not only into how political work gets done, but also the (often dynamic) meanings that it holds for those involved. In particular, it foregrounds the fact that politics is always enacted by complex people with sometimes conflicting desires and values. By interrogating how that work is shaped and stymied, we can also get a sense of its relation to outside operations, entities, and barriers. Finally, looking at politics from the inside out provides insight into the interplay between dynamics that are adversarial and deliberative, contestatory and constructive – the coexistence of which is often obscured in normative democratic theory that privileges one or the other.

Taken together, the papers that comprise this thesis suggest that schooling struggles are valuable contexts for inquiry into the politics of place. They argue for increased engagement with subjective processes of politicization and depoliticization, with the negotiation of ethical dilemmas and learning in place-based struggles, and with how meaning is constructed in and through political work. In cities across the US, people are engaging in a variety of political activities aimed at reshaping schooling and its relationship to geographic communities. While the subfield is growing, more sustained and comparative scholarship on the geographies of schooling and school reform will help geographers to better understand the patterns and

particularities of increasingly common struggles in different contexts. Along these lines, while the Pullman case suggests that shared attachment to place might facilitate learning across difference, more work is needed on the conditions under which such connections foster democratic practices (and outcomes), rather than undermining them (as has certainly been the case elsewhere). Finally, this dissertation has been concerned mainly with processes, which I have argued are the “stuff” of democracy, rather than particular results. It would be useful to explore more fully the relationship between democratic practices and their ability to instantiate more just geographies in light of existing hierarchical arrangements, and the tensions (especially visible in populist movements) between different kinds of democratic practices and notions of justice.

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This project was guided by big questions, all of which have to do with better understanding the conditions for transformational change (in New Orleans and elsewhere). How do (imperfect) people working within sometimes brutally confining, but always unchosen, circumstances act across difference to transform those circumstances in ways that make our lives together more fulfilling? Working from what exists (because there’s nowhere else to work from), how do we develop aims and strategies “not permissioned” by existing arrangements? How do we figure out what to do when the (also embodied and enacted) logics of the plantation and neoliberalization instigate material precarity and make it ever-more difficult to act ethically, collectively?

These larger questions are, of course, not answered in these pages. My research does indicate, however, that some approaches to addressing them might open more space for future

exploration than others. In light of my findings, I've advocated for a Deweyan model of democratic practice and a Deweyan lens for geographic analysis.

I have done so in part because I remain deeply committed to addressing these big questions in theory and in practice, and a pragmatic orientation provides room for (even demands) my own doubts, my continuing struggle to create new political possibilities. The thing is, I am not entirely sure that a democratic practice based on situated collective inquiry and experimental action can overcome the political impediments I've outlined in this thesis. "What are our kids going to say about us? What are we doing?" a man asked the assembled crowd at a meeting on the future of schooling in New Orleans. In the room were the descendants of Plessy and Ferguson, coaches, former teachers, clergy, neighbors, parents, and students. The man went on, answering his own question. "Me? I'm going to funerals. I just went to the funeral of a 15 year-old shot at a graduation party. We need to make history," he said. "I'm tired of going to funerals." What if the kind of democracy I've advocated does not provide enough of a foundation for fighting against the sources of this violence? What if it takes too long? What if it is too susceptible to compromise and co-optation?

These are real and open questions. But I come back to the self-correcting dimension of Deweyan democracy that sets it apart from other ways of being in the world. If democracy is the ongoing task of trying to live more democratically, and if we learn how to do this better through practice, there must be congruence between our political means and ends. That means we can't be waiting on a revolution, some great wave that will wash away the imperfect structures of the past so that we can then begin to be democratic. And it means that we must think carefully about whether we can imagine a lifetime filled with the practices suggested by different models of democracy - because the practices are all there is. Myself, I'm willing to sign on to a lifetime of

unending work if that work includes pleasure as well as struggle in the present, as long as it involves learning. I don't think I could endure a life of uninterrupted adversarial conflict. As I suggest in Chapter 4, even those who are ready to fight to the end don't want to have to fight all the time. It's hard to build if you're only fighting; hard to imagine, hard to love, hard to question. This last difficulty is an important one, I think. A democracy based on hegemonic struggle requires a lot of confidence in one's own perceptions of the world. If my task is only to struggle against my adversary so that I might institute a new hegemonic order, how do I know what kind of order to fight for? How would I know if I was wrong?

I do not know the architects of post-Katrina school reform; not in the fullest sense. People are complicated, and their values, as I have tried to demonstrate, are multiple. I have only their public actions and their public statements to go on, and in those narratives are repeated attacks on black geographies and black capacity for self-determination, both of which do violence to people and places. Regardless of intent, that fact remains. But in addition to violence (amplifying it, extending it), there is something else that characterizes the narratives of post-Katrina reformers: certainty. Certainty that they did the right thing, certainty that despite some bumps in the road they'll get it right, certainty in their own interpretations of the world. Racism may be a monster, but certainty keeps it fed.

In some of the theory we on the left use, I hear echoes of the certainty (and the insularity) that has characterized post-Katrina reform. And that is terrifying. But what to do? I have convictions based on my own situated experiences, which I do not foresee abandoning. So do most of the people I worked with in New Orleans. Without such strong conviction, how do we muster the strength required for political struggle? The way forward, I think, is not to give up on our commitments (certainly, pragmatism does not demand this), but rather to be attentive to the

(ethical, practical) demands of particular situations and work from there to experiment with the linkages that can be made between various kinds of political practices, including both deliberative and adversarial modes of interaction. While Deweyan democracy is often (including in this thesis) contrasted with conflictual forms of radical democracy, the major difference between the two is not their orientation towards conflict. Conflict (even violence) may well be necessary. The difference is that pragmatists are unwilling to prescribe any particular practice in advance and outside of situated problems. In relation to schooling in New Orleans, then, we might imagine and experiment with political practices including the “outrageous” protest and more deliberative relational work that Laura Grattan (2016) describes, the acknowledgement of the ghosts that haunt us and the construction of counter-publics to address not-so-hidden violences, the use of place-based connections to work across difference – as well as forms of sabotage like those employed by members of the black working class under Jim Crow (Kelley, 1993), refusing to allow the regulation of emotion by practicing caring-as-rebellion (Harris, 2011), the construction of new assemblages and the reconfiguration of multi-scalar relationships (Cumbers et al., 2008; McFarlane, 2009), to name just a few possibilities already in the works.

Included in this experimental orientation is the imperative to be rigorous in the consideration of contradictory ideas and experience. In this thesis, I have argued that for geographers, this means figuring out how to develop geographic/democratic theory in conversation with those closest to the dynamics we hope to understand. In making this claim, I do not propose to privilege the understandings of activists and/or non-academics, or to deny the value of scholarly insight. I only insist that democratic scholarship on the politics of place demands reciprocal engagement with those involved in struggles, and with the whole range of activities that go into political work (from mobilization to meaning-making). These interactions,

I suggest, are an important way of remaining less-than-certain, of ensuring that our theories and beliefs are connected to, and shaped by, the emplaced experience of politics.

These suggestions come out of the work contained in this dissertation, but more and ongoing experimentation will be needed to test them. In the end, the conclusion I come to is that there is no conclusion: no end to the task of democracy. Every new arrangement will bring new problems, new ethical dilemmas. There will be real and unresolvable conflicts between things held valuable. And that means there will always be losses. All we can do as activists and as scholars is to try to transform the contexts of this work so that we can (all of us) do it more thoughtfully and fruitfully, so that we gain more of a hand in shaping the places and institutions that matter to us, so that forms of unnecessary suffering are addressed, so we can experience joy; so that we can work against that which cuts away at our humanity.

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