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

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In this article, Lois Weis and Michelle Fine introduce critical bifocality as a way to render visible the relations between groups to structures of power, to social policies, to history, and to large sociopolitical formations. In this collaboration, the authors draw upon ethnographic examples highlighting the macro-level structural dynamics related to globalization and neoliberalism. The authors focus on the ways in which broad-based economic and social contexts set the stage for day-to-day actions and decisions among privileged and nonprivileged parents and students in relation to schooling. Weis and Fine suggest that critical bifocality enables us to consider how researchers might account empirically for global, national, and local transformations as insinuated, embodied, and resisted by youth and adults trying to make sense of current educational and economic possibilities in massively shifting contexts.

This article is an invitation to reflect on the current project of educational studies in times of rapid global transformation marked by swelling inequality gaps both within and among nations and aggressive neoliberal inscriptions on public education policy and practice. In so doing, we respectfully trouble educational designs that attend singularly to structural evUidence of oppression or autonomous safe spaces of resistance or individual lives of resilience/despair as divorced from structural constraints. We worry that such frameworks reproduce the fantasy that institutions or people survive in hermetically sealed spheres, that inequality gaps have no effect on teaching or learning, that good teachers and schools alone can narrow achievement gaps, and that the demise of segmented class and racial structures will inevitably follow.

We introduce a call for *critical bifocality* as a way to think about epistemology, design, and the politics of educational research, as a theory of method in which researchers try to make visible the sinewy linkages or circuits through which structural conditions are enacted in policy and reform institutions as well as the ways in which such conditions come to be woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals. We seek to trace *how* circuits of dispossession and privilege travel across zip codes and institutions, rerouting resources, opportunities, and human rights upward as if deserved and depositing despair in low-income communities of color. While critical bifocality is today a lens on neoliberal policies and practices, the commitment to bifocals—dedicated theoretical and empirical attention to structures *and* lives—can be adjusted to varied contexts, historic moments, and accompanying institutional arrangements. We begin to explore bifocality with a self-critical reflection on our own work launched a decade ago.

Almost nine years ago, in *Working Method* (Weis & Fine, 2004), we argued for a critical theory of method for educational studies that would analyze lives in the context of history, structure, and institutions and across the power lines of privilege and marginalization.

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

In what we then called "compositional studies," we highlighted the twinned importance of *critical theory and design*, in which ethnographic research on the daily lives of people must be theorized and researched in relation to deep structural constraints. In 2004, we were worried about the prevailing normative practice of studying individuals or groups as if those groups were coherent and bounded. We suggested, instead, that educational research make visible the linkages, leakages, tensions, and solidarities within and among groups across time and space. In particular, we stressed that ethnographic and narrative material be deliberately placed into a contextual and historic understanding of economic and racial formations.

Today, we find ourselves honored that our work has been so well cited. At the same time, we are concerned that essential elements of our framework have been overlooked. In particular, our commitment to a braided design attentive to *both* structures and lives has unraveled and split off into literatures on structures *or* lives, thereby eclipsing the critical interactions between socio-

political formations and what takes place on the ground. Our key point—that structures produce lives at the same time as lives across the social class spectrum produce, reproduce, and, at times, contest these same social/economic structures—has somehow gotten lost.

To offer a popular example of what we fear has been a misapplication of our writings, let us turn to the prolific research on safe spaces. More than a decade ago, and drawing on Evans and Boyte (1992), who attend to the myriad spaces in which ordinary people become participants in conversations about democratic life, we called for studies of safe spaces to mediate the debates over structure and agency. In these spaces, we argued, youth engage a "kind of critical consciousness, challenging hegemonic beliefs about them, their perceived inadequacies, pathologies, and 'lacks,' and restoring a sense of possibility for themselves and their peers, with and beyond narrow spaces of identity sustenance" (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. 3). Our specific contention was that such studies must be placed within a historic and structural analysis of injustice; that these spaces need to be recognized as permeable such that contentious dynamics of oppression beyond the group would undoubtedly leak within. That is, spatial membranes are, of course, semiporous, which is why such safe spaces are often terribly disappointing over time, as they cannot shield the group from the seepage of injustice.

Although we are often credited for methodological contributions to studies documenting sites of possibility or archiving counterstories alone, we were never interested in studying safe spaces as if these phenomena survived in isolation from their micro- and macro-environmental fields. In fact, we have long been concerned that the siloing of safe spaces requires the empirical whiting-out of key linkages, which constricts the analytic and political power of research on marginalized youth. Safe spaces reveal the miraculous ways people cope with oppression but do not easily shed light on the structural architecture of the problem.

Without such analytic and practical groundings, we critical scholars are weakened in our ability to contest the cumulative impact of sustained inequalities that produce marginalization and privilege. Consequently, we are left to advocate merely for more sweet, quiet spots of refuge rather than for structural change. We need research that can peer behind the drapes that hide the strategic coproduction of privilege and disadvantage, revealing the micro practices by which privilege and structural decay come to be produced, sustained, reproduced, embodied, and contested, even if safe spaces can protect a few, for a while, from the acid rains of oppression.

A decade ago, we knew—and we know even better today—that social theory and analyses cannot afford to separate lives or safe spaces or even conditions tagged as social problems from global and local structures. We cannot reproduce the conceptual firewalls separating present from past, resilience from oppression, achievement from opportunity, progress from decline. We believe now that critical scholars have a responsibility to connect the dots across these

presumed binaries and refuse to reproduce representations of individuals as autonomous, self-contained units dangling freely and able to pursue their life choices unencumbered by constraint. Following up on and simultaneously stretching our own 2004 work, we now advocate for critical bifocality, a dedicated theoretical and methodological commitment to a bifocal design documenting at once the linkages and capillaries of structural arrangements and the discursive and lived-out practices by which privileged and marginalized youth and adults make sense of their circumstances.

The political and empirical splitting of structures from problems or marginalized lives has long plagued the social sciences in the United States. In 1899, Susan Wharton commissioned W. E. B. DuBois to study the "Negro problem" of Philadelphia. Determined to analyze the Negro problem as a "symptom, not a cause," of the troubling economic and racial order, DuBois dedicated himself to the systematic understanding of high morbidity, illness, crime, lack of education, and homelessness rates of Blacks by comparing them to Whites in the North and the South to Blacks in Europe during the period 1884–1890. Knowing that he had been hired to document "pathology" as if it were inherent in Black culture, DuBois nevertheless took the assignment. Determined to chronicle the details of Black life in Philadelphia, he knocked on doors, counted beds, and cataloged health conditions, educational opportunities, and criminal justice involvement in order to

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

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

Unfortunately, *The Philadelphia Negro* (DuBois, 1899) has largely been neglected in academic social sciences. When it is read, taught, or referenced, it is too often narrowly misconstrued as an early-twentieth-century study of Blacks in Philadelphia. DuBois's ambitious design of history, structure, and Black lives has been corrupted, funneled, and thereby miscast as the study of a group rather than an indictment of a twentieth-century America built structurally and historically on a foundation of racialized and classed oppression.

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

Since we wrote *Working Method*, much has changed. Inequality gaps have swelled; educational segregation and stratification have become more normative; the testing industry now dominates public schools; mass incarceration of Black and Brown bodies is well recognized as a national problem; "college for all" is the mantra while the tertiary-level sector itself becomes increasingly stratified; unemployment rates and student loan debt skyrocket; and the top 1 percent has gotten much richer in relation to the remaining 99 percent. The production and reproduction of economic and social inequalities are far more apparent both within and across nations, thereby threatening our collective well-being (Piketty & Saez, 2003, 2006).

We realize that attending to structures and lives is a weighty task; however, to paraphrase Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009), this is our scholarly debt to educational studies in times of swelling inequality gaps: to interrogate how deficit and privilege are made, sustained, justified, and reified over time and space, with a keen eye toward their unmaking. Given the production of ever deepening inequalities in local spaces and global contexts (Chauvel, 2010; Gilbert, 2003; Piketty & Saez, 2003, 2006; Sherman & Aron-Dine, 2007), we want to encourage designs that trace how widening inequality gaps penetrate lives and communities across and within nations; how the neoliberal realignment of opportunities and resources exacerbate race and class stratification; how the accumulation of privilege is implicated in the deepening of poverty; how the well-funded surveillance of working-class and poor communities effectively penetrates local institutions, community life, and young bodies; and how those who benefit and those who lose make sense of our contemporary economic and political circumstances.

Our purpose in this article is to revisit our *Working Methods* framework through two emblematic studies on the production and reproduction of privilege and the shadows cast on institutions and communities of cumulative disinvestment. Here we foreshadow findings from our own research to begin a conversation about how critical bifocality might enable and encourage researchers to examine how *specific* contextual elements operate on actors to produce outcomes. We realize we are opening up new epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and ethical quandaries about how to make claims about what is designed to be unseen (e.g., the invisible hand of capital or racism or neoliberalism) as it captures the aspirations of youth and engaged actions of adults; and yet we believe that this is our debt today, particularly as education scholars working from within public institutions on questions of educational justice, privilege, and dispossession.

In the two studies discussed below, both engaged since the publication of *Working Method*, we highlight deep structural shifts in the increasingly global economy and its linked educational institutions, deliberately theorizing how such massive realignment at the global level has attendant consequences for the local level with regard to lived-out social and economic dynamics of individuals and collectivities. First, we review Lois's recent work on privileged

secondary schools as linked to the massification of the postsecondary sector (worldwide) and the production of the brokering class of upper-middle-class professionals. Then we turn to Michelle's work with school closings/reopenings, tracking quantitatively and qualitatively what we have called *circuits of dispossession and privilege* that derive from neoliberal policy shifts. Both studies are designed to understand how wide sweeps of economics, politics, and policy circulate through educational institutions and are then refracted differentially in the consciousness and commitments of both privileged and marginalized parents and youth.

As we sketch these two studies, readers will notice that our writing convention shifts from *we* to *I,* or Lois or Michelle, and then at the end returns to *we,* signifying our detours into our distinct empirical projects and then a return to our shared theoretical framework.

Studying Privilege Inside New Global Realities: Working Inside the Press of the Global Knowledge Economy

In order to illustrate the ways in which critical bifocality, as method, can reveal important relationships between global and local dynamics that may be obscured by other methods, we turn first to an examination of the broad global context.

Structural Dynamics of Globalization

Since the 1970s, we have witnessed a massive realignment of the global economy, a point that we did not take into serious account when we authored *Working Method.* In the first wave of this realignment, working-class jobs—primarily in manufacturing—were increasingly exported from highly industrialized countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan to poor countries where multinational companies hired skilled and unskilled laborers at lower pay and without benefits. In the current second wave, middle-class jobs are also being exported, as members of a new and expanded middle class in countries such as India and China are educated as architects, accountants, medical technicians, and doctors and are willing to work for multinational companies at a fraction of the salary they would earn for the same work at corporate headquarters (Weis & Dolby, 2012).[1]

This evolving set of international economic and human resource relations affects the educational experiences, outcomes, aspirations, and apathies of younger generations in a variety of exporting and importing countries. Those who are educated, as well as those who are not, now live and work inside a globally driven knowledge economy that shifts the fulcrum of educational experiences and outcomes, whether students and families are aware of it or not. Additionally, the movement of peoples across national borders, including those who possess "flexible citizenship" (Ong, 1999) by virtue of possession of high-status knowledge—those who can transcend nation-state boundaries with

their inherited or earned cultural or intellectual capital (e.g., high-powered intellectuals, engineers, and medical professionals who are seduced to work in economically powerful nations)—bring new expectations and new demands both to their children and to the schools they attend (Li, 2005; Weis, 2008).

The point here is that the global knowledge economy coupled with the movement of peoples across national borders fundamentally alters both the context within which social structure seeps into the consciousness of students and families and the limit situations within which this all plays. Coupled with the economic crash of 2008, this set of drivers renders the economic future of the next generation highly uncertain. It is in this context, we argue, that families in first-wave industrialized nations seek to instantiate opportunities for their children at the same time as such opportunities are increasingly scarce (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011).

The particular dynamics we outline here provide a guide for the kinds of questions that researchers might fruitfully engage through our method. We detail these specific dynamics as rationale for using a method that will enable and encourage exploration of the ways in which what is uncovered ethnographically at the local level is linked to the global, both emerging in relation to broad structural constraints while at the same time refracting back on such constraints over time. Although we highlight particular dynamics as linked to the two studies reported here, the specifics of structural dynamics change with time, and we urge researchers to be cognizant of such change as they employ our method. Additionally, broad structural constraints differentially affect varying groups (e.g., social class) within nations, at the same time that such nations are themselves differentially positioned in relation to the global economy. In this article, we target the ways in which broad, structurally rooted dynamics play in relation to differentially positioned class actors in the United States inside the instantiation of neoliberal policies and practices as linked to the massively shifting global context.

Situated Class Analysis: Insights Gained Through the Lens of Critical Bifocality

Based on recent work in the U.K., Diane Reay, Gill Crozier, and David James (2011) suggest that

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

The authors go on to state that "these insecurities are particularly evident in their children's education" (Reay et al., 2011, p. 2). For example, parents experience anxieties about where their children go to school as well as about

what they learn in school compared to what other people's children learn in different schools. As Lois argues elsewhere (Weis, Cipollone, & Jenkins, forthcoming), in the U.S. context, such parental insecurities are additionally linked to how specific secondary schools and experiences within these schools position their children for the global knowledge economy in which access to highly valued postsecondary destinations is seen as increasingly paramount.

This all sits, as Reay and colleagues (2011) contend, inside

> a growing sense of insecurity that was once the preserve of the working class but now permeates almost the whole of society. If this is the case, it can be further argued that just as the integrity and value of the working class was undermined over the last decades of the twentieth century (Skeggs, 2004), the beginning of the twenty-first century may herald the unraveling of white middle-class identity. (p. 6)

In fact, it may have begun earlier. In the early 1990s, Barbara Ehrenreich (1990) called attention to a version of psychic distress associated with such perceived disintegration. Tracing scholarly work on class anxieties even further back, these arguments regarding the expected disintegration of the middle class parallel statements that can be found twenty to thirty years ago by Gorz (1983), Aronowitz (1992), and others: that we must say farewell to the working class as well-paid male laboring jobs and accompanying working-class cultural productions would not survive what Bluestone and Harrison (1984) refer to as the "de-industrialization of the economy."

In contradistinction to the disintegration hypothesis, through intense ethnographic work in a working-class community in the United States over a fifteen-year period, Lois (Weis, 2004) argues that we cannot write off the White working class simply because White men no longer have access to well-paying laboring jobs in the primary labor market. Exploring empirically and longitudinally the remaking of this class, both discursively and behaviorally inside radical, globally based economic restructuring (Reich, 2001; Weis, 2004), she suggests that the White working class has staged its own "class reunion," having rearticulated itself as a distinct class fraction in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Such rearticulation embodies deep restructuring along gender lines coupled with the consolidation of Whiteness as privilege. This produces, for the moment at least, a working-class fractional collective that serves in part to challenge increased globally driven demand for the neoliberal subject (Weis, 2004). The lived reworking of class inside economic restructuring as chronicled and theorized in the particular locale in which data for *Class Reunion* (Weis, 2004) were collected highlights the importance of critical bifocal design: a design that enables scholars to uncover and explore the relationships between structural constraints and the micro-moves of people on the ground as they both respond to and simultaneously help shape social structure.

In the current context, and in light of charges of impending class dislocation of the relatively privileged, Lois's recent work, conducted in a privileged

secondary school, is also instructive. Drawing on data (Weis et al., forthcoming) from two years of ethnographic research in a National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), coeducational day school in a second-tier, nonglobal city, this research reveals the extent to which and the ways in which the altered global context reshapes imagined possibilities within and among middle- and upper-middle-class schools, parents, students, and teachers so as to exert particular class-linked forms of pressure specifically tied to the college preparation and admissions process in U.S. secondary schools.[2] In so doing, and drawing from the larger study, Lois offers a glimpse of what it looks like to apply our updated theory of method on the ground. In this case, she explores a specifically located and largely unacknowledged reworking of class as situated in an iconic, relatively elite secondary school while simultaneously focusing on the mechanisms through which observed, macro-level, globally induced phenomena are produced and reproduced at the lived level on a daily basis, whether by explicit design/work or by virtue of what Bourdieu refers to as "'habitus'—a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 18). Taking seriously the notion at the core of our updated theory of method—that the production of class as well as class structure more broadly must be studied and theorized in relation to differentially located class actors—our method and subsequently collected data pry open critical discussion with regard to the explicit work involved in maintaining advantage under massively shifting global conditions and as specifically linked to a now national and increasingly segmented U.S. marketplace for postsecondary education.

This larger study engages deep ethnographic work over a two-year period in three relatively privileged secondary institutions: two NAIS secondary day schools and one affluent suburban public school (Weis et al., forthcoming). The data reported here, drawn from one NAIS institution, are used to illustrate the power of method.[3] Full ethnographic research was comprised of participant observation in hundreds of classes and in-depth interviews with students in the top 20 percent of the class, teachers of these students, counselors, parents, and administrators. For current purposes, a few vignettes will suffice to illustrate the deepened concern and insecurity related to the potential demise of privilege within this class fraction and the extent to which such insecurity lands squarely on the space of obtaining entrance to *particular* postsecondary destinations. Reflective of critical bifocality, we must not presume that relatively rich people have a culture of anxiety but, rather, interrogate the underlying structural conditions that help to produce these expressed panics. In other words, we must pay close attention to the explicit linkages between collected ethnographic action and narratives and what is happening in broad context, including at the postsecondary level in the United States. These data must be understood as linked to larger social structural arrangements as they

simultaneously refract back on such arrangements, thereby creating, in part, *future* class structure and relative positionality of individuals and groups.

— Susan and Robert Larkin, Parents of Matthews Academy Twelfth Grader

Susan: So I would say the last eight to ten years that I've heard parents talking about it [college application process and entry]. Parents of the older children, I would say, maybe even into middle school, parents are contriving or conniving.

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

Susan: It intensified certainly.

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

— Ethan Sanderson, Matthews Student

Lois: Then you had to actually apply?

Ethan: Right.

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

Ethan: Yes, I was in contact with them about the choices I had made about colleges, and they told me whether they thought it was a good idea or not. They agreed with me on my choices. It was a mixture of sort of touring and seeing if I felt right there and academically what I was looking for.

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

Ethan: Yes.

Lois: So where did you end up applying?

Ethan: I applied early decision to Dartmouth and was deferred, and my strategy was sort of to apply to Brown but also get a good list. I applied to eleven schools, and I have my reaches, middles, and safeties.[4]

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

Ethan: Both. I applied early decision, though.

Lois: And then what?

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

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

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

— Joe Marino, Matthews Student

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

Lois: Really? And they saw you?

Joe: Yes.

Lois: How did you do that?

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

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

Joe: Uh-huh.

Overall, these data from the NAIS school reveal the targeted class work of a now highly insecure middle/upper middle class that "elects" to attend historically elite private secondary day schools and now engages in a very specific form of class warfare. Specifically, the middle/upper middle class individually and collectively mobilizes its embodied cultural, social, and economic capital to preserve itself in uncertain economic times while simultaneously attempting to instantiate a distinctly professional and managerial upper middle class through access to particular kinds of postsecondary destinations in a now national and increasingly competitive marketplace for postsecondary education. Affirming the notion that class position must now be won at both the individual and collective levels, rather than constituting the "manner to which one is born," data enable us to track and theorize the intensified preparation for and application to particular kinds of postsecondary destinations now taking place in elite secondary schools and, in markedly different ways and to varying extents perhaps, in affluent suburban and "star" urban public schools. Although the media have taken note of such an application frenzy around postsecondary destinations, there is little scholarly work that tracks and theorizes this frenzy as a distinct class process, one that represents intensified class work at the same time as class "winners" and "losers" become ever more apparent in the larger global and national context.

Using data from the current study, this research additionally forecasts the increasing contradiction between individual and collective struggles related

to the broader middle class. Affluent parents, schools, and students are now positioning for a more highly segmented postsecondary sector, one in which the number of available spaces at highly selective colleges and universities—and in this case specifically, the Ivies—remain relatively constant in relation to increased numbers of applicants who both wish to gain entrance to such institutions and are able to "see themselves there." Thus, stark contradictions emerge with regard to working on behalf of the class (e.g., working for the school as a whole so as to make all students more competitive) and working for one's children to make them more competitive in relation to other potential applicants. The Larkins's statement on the competitive and strategic nature of extracurricular involvement captures this well.

Given the stakes, the middle class increasingly turns on *itself*, thereby self-fracturing as a broad-based class while moving to consolidate an individually located position for the next generation and, specifically, for its own children. We argue that as the professional and managerial upper middle class now consciously exploits any and all opportunities to position its children for advantage, it effectively constricts access for the rest of the middle classes, thereby cutting itself off from any kind of larger class base.

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

Such class struggles, Lois argues, are more and more centered on secondary schools, where parents, students, and schools exhibit intense focus on positioning for entrance to an increasingly stratified postsecondary sector, which itself is falling victim to greater intensification around "winners" and "losers" (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004; Thomas & Bell, 2008). Not only are selective U.S. colleges and universities highly linked

to postsecondary persistence and completion patterns (Bowen et al., 2009; Hearn, 1990; Mortenson, 2003; Stephan, Rosenbaum, & Person, 2009; Thomas & Bell, 2008), but more highly selective institutions confer on their graduates both special entrée to the best graduate and professional programs in the country (Eide, Brewer, & Ehrenberg, 1998) and well-documented labor market advantages (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Rumberger & Thomas, 1993; Thomas, 2000; Thomas & Zhang, 2005). These relationships hold even when characteristics of entering students are held constant in the analysis. Only by employing critical bifocality as a method can we engage design and analysis that enable us to hear these parents' anxieties as more than elite neuroticism; by linking ethnographic data to relevant facets of overall structural context, we can theorize how the lives of those we study ethnographically carry the destabilizing tremors of broad social and economic arrangements.

While relatively privileged parents may have always worked on behalf of their children, there is deepened insecurity with regard to passing on privilege to the next generation, and middle-/upper-middle-class actors now engage in a very specific form of inter- and intra-class warfare. With increasing constriction of available good jobs in the U.S. economy and accompanying intensified segmentation within the postsecondary sector, struggle for class position is far more explicitly waged. On a day-to-day basis, these parents and children contest the formulations that class is "the manner to which one is born." In this context, relatively privileged parents, students, and schools individually and collectively mobilize all available class resources so as to situate their children for entrance to particularly located postsecondary institutions, namely those that are "highly selective" and, even more so, "most selective" on the ubiquitous and increasingly present ranking systems, thereby solidifying the border between the middle and upper middle, or professional and managerial, classes while simultaneously ensuring their children's position in what is perceived as a less vulnerable class segment in new economic context. This must be seen as a targeted attempt on the part of those already advantaged both to instantiate deep difference within the middle class and to ensure that their own children fall on the right side of the anticipated and newly "fixed" class divide in a now competitive global economic arena, an arena in which struggle over class positioning is ever more intense.[5]

Important work has been done in and on privileged educational sites (Cookson & Persell, 1985; Demerath, 2009; Howard, 2008; Howard & Gatzambide-Fernandez, 2010; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Khan, 2011; Proweller, 1998), and Annette Lareau (1989, 2003), in particular, has engaged important work on middle-class childrearing patterns in the United States. With great respect for this corpus of work, we suggest that individual and collective social practices, as documented ethnographically, can be even more deeply understood and theorized in relation to substantially altered constraints in a global economic context and, more specifically, the extent to which and the ways in which such constraints play on national and locally specific levels.

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

With the exception of McDonough (1997), Horvat & Antonio (1999), and Weininger & Lareau (2009), there has been remarkably little ethnographic attention paid to the *specific* secondary-to-postsecondary linkage. Such existing research was largely conducted prior to the current iteration of neoliberalism, with all its attendant swelling inequalities. Generally speaking then, this body of otherwise excellent work cannot engage the ways in which entrance to increasingly valued postsecondary destinations in a now national marketplace must be theorized as an attempt to maintain distinction and mark class boundaries in a new context. Only by blending our original 2004 formulation of compositional studies with what has happened both in the international context broadly and in the particularly located and restratifying postsecondary sector in the United States more narrowly, can we understand the action of these privileged parents, schools, and students as anything other than an individualistically driven frenzy over the college search process.

In this sense, our updated theory of method—what we now call critical bifocality—encourages and enables us to move beyond the notion of individual parent and student pathology and/or the overmonitoring of children as a class-linked form of love. By employing the lens of critical bifocality, we move toward an understanding of new and distinctly located class processes that, whether consciously or not, are designed to stake out or preserve privilege in a new context. This is particularly useful in light of the deafening media-driven construct of the "helicopter parent" that, although practically powerful in the sense that it has a kind of broad appeal and therefore sells, positions individual parents as largely crazy and individual children as largely unwilling or unable to grow up. The power of our expanded theory of method is that it opens space for important and continuing conversation around fundamental class processes in new context. Additionally, it demands that we reposition parents *as class actors in very specific and constricting environments,* both in a global economic sense and with regard to the postsecondary sector, as parents have

been convinced that quality education is a scarce resource. This is the juncture where our (Lois's and Michelle's) work intersects. Employing critical bifocality demands that we reposition the work of parents as the targeted class work of specifically located actors in a particular time and space rather than individuals who hover over their children neurotically much longer than they should if the next generation is to grow into healthy forms of adulthood.

Dispossession Stories: How Public Space Becomes a Private Commodity

While Lois has been studying privileged parents and youth in a second-tier, nonglobal city as they absorb and embody class work in the shifting tides of global political economy, Michelle, with colleagues Maddy Fox and Brett Stoudt, has been gathering dispossession stories. These are empirical accounts of how public opportunities, institutions, and resources are being redesigned in law, policy, and academic practices that further tip educational advantage in the direction of children of privileged families, while an array of equally expensive public policies—testing, policing, and surveillance—are being unleashed within low-income communities, widening the inequality gap that already characterizes urban America.

Across a variety of communities and public sectors, Michelle and other researchers at the Public Science Project have been tracking what we call *circuits of dispossession and privilege* (Fine & Ruglis, 2008)—how changes in law, policy, and institutional practices on the ground are realigning educational goods once considered public toward limited access primarily for the children of elites and a few token working-class children of color. We are interested in the social psychological circuits through which economic and political shifts move under the skin of parents and youth living in privileged and marginalized communities.

Theoretically, our work on dispossession draws on critical race theory (DuBois, 1903), the epidemiology of inequality gaps (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), political theory on neoliberalism (Harvey, 2004), and critical psychology focusing on how injustice penetrates the ways in which young people make meaning, make protest, and make due (Fine & Ruglis, 2008; Fox et al., 2010; Sirin & Fine, 2008). These dispossession stories are always situated within a political economy, usually in the context of swelling inequality gaps, examining the cross-sector impact of being denied a quality education in terms of health outcomes, psychological well-being, civic engagements, economics, and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Critical Economic Structures: Inequality Gaps

In *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Strong* (2009), British epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett demonstrate that more unequal societies, with larger income and wealth disparities between top and

bottom class fractions, experience higher rates of "social pain" across a variety of indicators, including school dropout rates, teen pregnancy, mental health problems, lack of social trust, high mortality rates, violence and crime, and low social participation. Their volume challenges the belief that the extent of poverty in a community predicts negative outcomes, and they assert instead that the size of the *inequality gap* is associated with various forms of social suffering.

Wilkinson and Pickett document how place matters. The inequality gap of the United States ranks among the largest in their international comparisons, with New York posting the largest among all U.S. states. The Congressional Budget Office provides evidence that time matters too. In 2011, the richest 1 percent of households captured 20 percent of the nation's pretax income, up from 10 percent in 1979. During the same period, everyone else's share—the 99 percent—went down. At the intersection of place and time, in 2011, New York City was, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the least equal city in the nation. Thus, New York City dispossession stories chronicle a very particular history of the present, documenting the redesigned landscape of educational opportunities and trajectories in a city already saturated in stratified educational options (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Critical Political Structures: Neoliberal Policies Woven into Local "Education Reforms"

Layered atop and sewn into a nation, a state, and a city with extraordinary and compacted inequality gaps, New York City educational policy over the last three decades has been shaped by federal, state, and local neoliberal policy initiatives, ranging from the Reagan era through to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top, and, in New York City, mayoral control. Neoliberalism (Harvey, 2004) is a political, economic, and ideological system that privileges the market as the most efficient platform for distributing social goods, minimizes the role of government responsibility in ensuring collective well-being, and highlights instead individual responsibility for individual well-being. By facilitating market-driven reform to determine how and for whom opportunities and burdens redistribute, neoliberal policies tend to facilitate the upward flow and control of resources, opportunities, and power toward wealthy communities, privatization, and corporate interests and a downward drip of surveillance in the form of testing, policing, and restricted access to quality institutions for working-class and poor youth.

Neoliberalism operates through various mechanisms of material and power consolidation. Harvey (2004) distinguishes "capital accumulation," the processes by which elites and corporations generate, sustain, and consolidate power, from "accumulation by dispossession," a set of practices by which elites/corporations repossess formerly public goods or services and convert them into individually held private goods. Once these processes are unleashed and inscribed in law or policy, Harvey argues, those who are dispossessed are typically left to fend for themselves, as if their misfortune were self-induced.

Dispossession Stories: Narrations Cultivated in Inequality Gaps

Across the past twenty years, we have been gathering dispossession stories to track, contest, and interrupt the enactment, justification, and racial/classed consequences of public policies that have explicitly or more subtly facilitated an upward redistribution of educational resources and a diminution of opportunities/resources to those most in need. In our research, we distinguish three strategies of dispossession:

- *Dispossession by categorical denial* is perhaps the most straightforward strategy by which specific groups are denied educational access or threatened with denial because of a contested or suspect status (e.g., unauthorized students denied federal aid via the Dream Act; Latino immigrants in Alabama; incarcerated or formerly incarcerated college students denied Pell Grants) (see Fine et al., 2003).
- *Dispossession by cumulative, cross-sector disinvestment* has been studied by documenting the differential impact of citywide policies of disinvestment or surveillance (e.g., high-stakes graduation requirements, policing in schools, stop-and-frisk policies) on distinct groups of youth. Polling for Justice (see Fox et al., 2010; Fox & Fine, 2012), a large-scale youth participatory action research survey of 1,100 young people in New York City, has cataloged how various education, health-care, housing, and criminal justice policies in New York City differentially affect youth by race/ethnicity, class, immigration status, sexuality, and gender. That is, we have been studying the swelling precarity of urban youth, the extent to which young people as a generational cohort, and by race/class, are now situated in risky relation to education, economics, health care, and housing, with social contracts for mobility and possibility broken most systematically for poor and working-class youth.
- *Accumulation by dispossession* involves an elaborate process by which public buildings, opportunities, or resources once generally available, or specifically dedicated to a working-class/poor community, are being repossessed by/for elite interests, private profits, or selective children.

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

We offer below a glimpse of a critical ethnography of a school that once served poor and working-class youth of color, that was closed and reopened for a new class of students on the newly gentrifying Upper West Side of Man-

hattan. A structural response to the class anxiety that Lois identifies in the earlier section, this slide show of accumulation by dispossession reveals the effective circuits of precarity felt even by the upper middle class and elites of Manhattan. If Lois's project documents how privilege reproduces institutionally, then the Brandeis-McCourt ethnography reveals how the public sector is being made over to serve the children of elites using a language of neutrality and educational accountability.

Out of "Crisis" and on the "Rise": The Biography of a School Being Dispossessed

In 2009, the *New York Times* broke the story that Brandeis High School would be one among ninety-six schools slated to be closed that year.

> Brandeis, with 2,251 students, is an increasingly endangered species of school—a large general-curriculum institution rich in course offerings but short on personal interaction. These big high schools, once staples of the city's educational map, have been overhauled by the Bloomberg administration, and other urban education reformers who promote more intimate *learning* environments as an antidote to poor performance.
>
> Opened in 1965, Brandeis is the 15th school to be marked for closing this year; others include the Bayard Rustin High School for the Humanities in Chelsea, another large high school. Since Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg took over control of the city school system in 2002, 96 schools have been ordered to close, including more than two dozen large high schools. (Hernandez, 2009)

Brandeis was the school where I, Michelle, had conducted an ethnography of dropouts/pushouts twenty-odd years ago, when I published *Framing Dropouts* (1991). I never used the official name of the school out of respect for the hard work of the educators and youth struggling in a building structurally doomed to fail because of underinvestment of all sorts. But now, reading the institutional obituary, I knew that Brandeis would be buried and a complex of small schools would be resurrected in its place. I pulled *Framing Dropouts* off the shelf to remember the effect it had on me and the thoughts circulating within me almost a quarter-century ago.

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

My field notes read, "I just want a moment of silence for the five hundred missing." In a school of three thousand, barely one-twelfth graduated. Where are the "disappeared"? If this were a school with middle-class White students, everyone would be outraged; it would be closed. What we tolerate for the poor would be unthinkable for elites. At Brandeis, in the 1980s and certainly since, I learned that it was normative for Black and Brown bodies to drain out of public institutions without diplomas and without setting off alarms. Progressives

and conservatives may explain the leakage differently—racism/capitalism versus poor motivation/inadequate intelligence/bad mothering—but too many agreed that it is inevitable.

Little did I know that in the late 1980s, mass incarceration was seeping into the darkest neighborhoods of New York State. The state coffers were quietly realigning budgets and transferring monies and bodies of color from schools to prisons. In 1973, the state's prison population was ten thousand; by 1980, it had doubled to twenty thousand; by 1992, it had more than tripled again to almost sixty-two thousand.

As I sat in that gymnasium, I didn't realize that the state had other bids on their bodies. Only later would I learn that "since 1989, there have been more blacks entering the prison system for drug offenses each year than there were graduating from SUNY with undergraduate, master's and doctoral degrees—combined" (Gangi, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 1999, p. 7). In the 1980s, I didn't have my bifocals on.

Almost twenty-five years later, after generations of disinvestment and disproportionate placement of difficult-to-teach, overage, undercredit students into the building, in the midst of a swelling inequality gap in wealth, income, real estate, and human security, the *New York Times* reports that a "crisis" is finally declared. The solution is to close the school and reopen it for "better" students who live in and beyond the district.

New York 1, a local television station, reported some tension between the Department of Education and Gale Brewer, the local city councilwoman:

> The Department of Education says the biggest problem is that students just do not choose to enroll in the school, which currently has 2,200 students and 200 teachers. City Councilwoman Gale Brewer, who represents the district, accused the DOE of making a snap decision based on poor information. "They have no history of being in the building. They don't know the neighborhood," said Brewer. "I don't think this is the right approach." The majority of students at Brandeis, which opened in 1965, are black and Latino and reside outside the school district. Many are special education students or speak English as a Second Language. Brewer said the school's principal faces adversity like few others. "The problem is that she gets many, many students reading way below level," she said. "It's very hard to get a student who may not speak English or who writes in another language, to be able to graduate Regents in four years." The councilwoman believes that giving students more years to graduate would make the school's rating increase. However, the DOE says that even when incorporating those who graduate in six years, the graduation rate is still only slightly more than 50 percent. (NY1 News, 2009)

Based on test scores, graduation rates, and cumulative disregard, it was decided in 2009 that Brandeis, like so many other comprehensive high schools serving Black and Latino youth, would be closed. The new building will be a complex of four small schools—two "non-selective" high schools, designed late in the summer to open in the fall; one "second-chance" school; and the

new Frank McCourt High School for Journalism and Writing, sponsored by Symphony Space and adorned with the support of local parents and community. Ironically, in his name, the Frank McCourt School was being designed, by some, for the newly gentrifying families of the Upper West Side.

Community activists and educators were deeply engaged in challenging Brandeis's makeover. Interested in documenting the shifts and introducing the historic debt of the building, I started attending community meetings about the Frank McCourt School. Most of the sessions were cordial and seasoned with public commitments to "diversity." But the slippery discourse of classed and racialized deservingness was leaking through the doors.

"I guess this school will be for 3s and 4s?" asked one parent, referencing test score signifiers (1–4, with 4 being the highest) burned into the consciousness and identity of New York City youth.

"If we are serious about getting these kinds of students into that building, we'll have to remove the metal detectors," explained another parent.

And a woman facilitating the discussion elaborated, "If the other schools want to keep the metal detectors, or need them, we might want to use a different entrance."

And soon the discursive architecture of separate and unequal was flooding the room, being spoken by White and Black prospective parents who seemed to be among the new gentrifiers. A number of old-time community members spoke, one saying, "This school has betrayed Central and East Harlem for at least thirty years. It would be a cruel joke to clean it up, invest in transforming the school, and then opening it for local elite children. That would, of course, constitute just another betrayal of Black and Brown students in New York."

The New York City Department of Education representative explained that "any child would be welcome to the school . . . They will submit attendance, grades, and test scores and the computer will choose those who are eligible. Then we'll interview."

"But how about a preference for the siblings—or the children—of Brandeis's graduates?" someone asked.

"No, the building will be open to children citywide, using criteria that are *demographically neutral.*"

Here is how it works. Students who satisfy the published criteria—score a 3 or 4 on standardized tests, submit a writing sample in English, have good attendance, and post a grade point average of 3.0 in middle school—have their parents submit their names into a lottery. As a lottery, the process is fair, but all of the preconditions are coated in relative privilege. Test scores in New York are highly correlated with race and class; privately paid tutors often coach writing samples in English; and regular attendance and GPA are, of course, associated with stable homes and hard work. Who has parents who are savvy, informed, and entitled enough to submit their child's name into a lottery? And therein lies a piece of the makeover couched in a language of open access and justice, even as the evidence suggests that students in the lot-

tery vastly underrepresent the poorest of the poor, English language learners, and students in need of special education. Like color-blind ideology (Neville, Yeung, Todd, Spanierman, & Reed, 2010), the language of demographic neutrality shrouds accumulation by dispossession. Attending to the disjuncture of policy discourse and collateral damage on the ground, one can begin to decipher the racialized and classed consequences of a policy presented as demographically neutral.

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

An exceptional piece of research was undertaken in 2009 by the Consortium on Chicago School Reform to document the academic and social consequences of school closings on urban elementary school students in Chicago (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009). Tracking 5,445 K–8 students who had attended forty-four Chicago Public Schools closed for poor academic performance or underutilization between 2001 and 2006, Consortium researchers found that most displaced students were transferred to equally weak schools—public, charters, and for-profit contract schools. One year after the closing, no significant improvements in math or reading scores could be determined for the displaced students. In fact, the greatest loss in mathematics and reading achievement occurred *during* the chaotic year prior to the school closing, when plans were just announced and when the schools were filled with the angst of institutional death and displacement. Achievement levels (as measured by test scores) of a small group of displaced students did, however, improve. *Students who transferred to schools with high academic strength and high levels of teacher trust and efficacy showed marked improvements in math and reading.* However, only 6 percent of students transferred into such schools. A full 42 percent of students transferred into schools with low levels of trust or efficacy. Overall, then, in terms of academic improvement, these researchers found few positive or negative effects of school closings on the academic achievement of students who were forced to find new schools (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009). Moving analytically with bifocals between a policy that seems to make sense—close a failing school—and on-the-ground realities of the city's most vulnerable students who

now have to scramble for a new school, we must contend with the evidence that dissembles the story of school closings as educational progress.

In November 1910, W. E. B. DuBois published the first issue of *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, insisting that a record be kept of the ongoing crisis of "the darker races." DuBois recognized that crisis, for poor people and Blacks in the United States, had been woven deeply into the fabric of our nation's history; that public schools had served as an institution through which crisis festered and was washed over, structured primarily in ways that reproduce class and racial stratifications (Anyon, 1997; Bell, 1993; Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Delpit, 2006; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 1972; Woodson, 2010). Like his colleague Carter Woodson, DuBois wrote on the searing capillaries through which systemic miseducation of children of color stains our national history (Woodson, 2010). Most significant for our purposes, DuBois noted that the structural and historic educational crises of the "darker race" would be routinely ignored *until they are not.* Today, we hear the calls of "crisis," and the wise ghost of DuBois asks us to be suspect.

While *Framing Dropouts* and scores of texts on urban schools have documented the deep and sustained inequities that have historically characterized the struggle in poor communities of color for quality education, these crises of public education have been produced by structural disinvestment in low-income communities, the global flows of capital, and the racial stratifications that define our inequality gaps. The ideological/cultural declaration of crisis paves a path for the dispossession and privatization to roll into, and over, poor communities of color (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Fine, 1991).

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

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

We are reminded of Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine: Disaster Capitalism* (2007), in which she argues that often immediately after neoliberal or imperial intervention, crises are often declared—in Iraq, Afghanistan, New Orleans—and

public assets as well as functions are systematically transferred from government to private, corporate interests. By linking DuBois and Klein, one can track the perverse linking of Black pain and elite profit then and now. The narrative of progress and a new beginning for Brandeis makes a kind of sense to those parents, students, and educators yearning for a good public school that feels safe, smart and engaging, respectful, and intellectually exciting to replace what has long been viewed as a problem institution. We can have no judgments about parents seeking the best school they can get for their children (see Aggarwal, Mayorga, & Nevel, forthcoming).

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

Critical Bifocality and Circuits of Privilege: Concluding Thoughts

We are currently witnessing intensifying inequality gaps: the significant accumulation of wealth and privilege by a few and the devastating swelling of disadvantage and despair in poor, working-class, and increasingly middle-class communities. Some of us engaged in educational research focus on the local micro-enactments of these dynamics, while others sketch the structural landscape of class, race, and geographic disparities. Some of us publish research on the reproduction of inequality, and others highlight the resilience of those who are most oppressed. But all of these stories are too partial and, when told alone, distort the project and problem of educational injustice. Although each form of research may make a significant contribution, theoretically separating structure from lives, global from local, and privilege from marginalization is no longer sufficient. The interlocking circuits of dispossession and privilege are theoretically, politically, and methodologically critical if we are to understand current inequities and reimagine education for the collective good.

In this article and across the two studies highlighted here, we argue that circuits of dispossession and privilege carry both fiscally significant material and culturally effective resources. That is, these circuits redistribute capital and opportunities, but they also intensify the effects of scarcity, insecurity, and class anxieties. As we can see in the two cities highlighted here—one second-tier and one global—the well-oiled machine of class work is fueled by fiscal practices of disinvestment as coupled with differentially located real and consequently lived-out ideological circulations of economic scarcity. These dynamics attach to the global economy and work across racialized paths toward mass

incarceration, more testing, and heightened policing in low-income educational institutions, further emptying them of any real educational capital while fueling insecurities within the middle class. Such class insecurities, in the latter instance, press toward the increased intensification of efforts within the middle/upper middle class to carve and solidify distinction and separation in relation to those left behind. This ultimately means that those already relatively privileged run harder and faster in relation to poor, working-class, and increasingly middle-class students and parents, thereby ensuring that class inequalities will be maximally maintained at one and the same time as the circuits of dispossession and privilege are hardened. Through what we call critical bifocality, we can begin to document the implications of far-away policies and up-close decisions by, for, and against the interests of privileged and marginalized youth in terms of the kinds of curricular knowledge to which they are exposed, their real and imagined short- and long-term educational and material options, and the subjectivities they embody over time in relation to education, economics, and trust in the fabric of a multiracial and highly classed democracy.

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

With a sense of critical optimism, we believe that by interrogating and filling in the linkages that bond global to local, history to present, and elites and quasi-elites to marginalized communities, we might begin to understand the circuits of solidarity that need to be connected for educational justice to be realized.

Notes

1. Further altering broad context is the fact that a form of "financialization" now sits at the center of our increasingly globalized and knowledge-based economy, with substantial implications for class processes in nations across the globe. As Kenway and Fahey (2010) note:

   > Ultimately another manifestation of the capitalist accumulation process emerged in the form of "financialization" with the USA as epicentre, but which swiftly spread around the world. Foster and Magdoff (2009: 45) call this the "monopoly capital" phase of capitalism. This involved Money-to-Money (M-M) rather than Money–Commodities–Money (M-C-M) in Marx's terms. The "new outlets for surplus were in the finance, insurance and real estate (FIRE) sector," mainly though not exclusively, in the form of financial speculation in securities, real estate and commodities markets rather than investment in capital goods (Foster and Magdoff 2009: 67) Financialization involves a situation where "the traditional role of finance as a helpful servant to production has been stood on its head, with finance now dominating over production." (pp. 719–720)

   Such financialization has critically important implications for class production worldwide, as it fundamentally rearranges the kind and amount of paid labor that people have access to in varying nations and the linkages between educational credentialing and class-cultural productions.

2. According to NAIS, the median tuition for their member day schools in 2008–2009 was $17,441. Tuition in the particular school under investigation here ran $18,250 for the 2008–2009 school year. Tuition for boarding schools during the same period was approximately $37,017. Out of 28,384 U.S. private (not public/state) schools, about 1,050 are in NAIS. Average tuition for other private schools is substantially less, with day schools running about $10,841 and boarding schools approximately $23,448. See http://www.greatschools.org/find-a-school/defining-your-ideal/59-private-vs-public-schools.gs.

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

4. Actual colleges have been altered to protect anonymity. The alternate colleges named approximate the original in rank and tier (Barron's, 2009).

5. Elsewhere Weis, Cipollone, & Jenkins (forthcoming) argue that as the middle and specifically upper middle class rearticulates itself in new context, the relationship between class and race becomes more complex. In contrast to maintaining White privilege in any kind of streamlined fashion, as the work of Reay and colleagues (2011) and others in the United Kingdom suggests, we argue that upper-middle-class construction in the United States both pierces and partially dislodges historically rooted race lines, as privileged secondary and postsecondary sectors now embody somewhat democratizing impulses around race (Bowen & Bok, 1998). Such democratizing impulses in both state (Carnoy & Levin, 1985) and private education sectors, however, embody deep contradictions, both perpetuating and demanding the continued articulation of a particular kind of racial Other that serves both to maintain Whiteness as privilege and simultaneously to distance Black students who attend relatively privileged institutions from their historic social and political base (Jenkins, 2011). This is coupled with the fact that increasing numbers of transnational migrants of color who possess "flexible citizenship" (Ong, 1999) also attend these schools and engage in comparable class work. Although

race and class are now complexified, such complexity both rests on the affirmation of a particular kind of racial Other and encourages the production of neoliberal subjectivity across privileged race and class lines. Perhaps ironically, although the White working-class fraction has been able to maintain itself as a class fraction based partially on its own assertion of Whiteness as well as deep gender realignment (Weis, 2004), the carving out of a new upper middle class works across race/ethnicity in particular ways that take account of both "flexible immigrants" in global context and somewhat democratizing impulses around race as embedded within quasi-elite and elite secondary and post-secondary schools. Although the White working class as specifically derived from the former industrial proletariat in the United States may have been successful at maintaining its own Whiteness as part and parcel of a newly forged and distinct class fraction, the new upper-middle managerial and professional class now works across race and ethnicity in unprecedented fashion. The interconnections between class and race/ethnic productions, particularly as linked to the class form under consideration here, are quite complex, and will be the subject of intensive and further analysis by Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins (forthcoming).

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