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CIRCUITS AND CONSEQUENCES OF DISPOSSESSION: THE RACIALIZED REALIGNMENT OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE FOR U.S. YOUTH

As critical scholars of public education and mass incarceration, we witness in our daily work the soft coercive migration of youth of color, especially poor youth of color, out of sites of public education and into militarized and carceral corners of the public sphere. We watch as educators and youth try to negotiate conditions of systematic miseducation, criminalization, and the scientism of high-stakes testing. And we observe how ideologies about merit, deservingness, and blame drip feed into the soul, tagging some bodies as worthy and others as damaged. We write this essay to make visible this critical geography of youth development and dispossession. Signaling how public dollars, ideologies, and opportunities map onto adolescent bodies and redistribute their dreams and aspirational capacities, we draw from multiple sources and disciplines to articulate the raced and classed capillaries and consequences of this new imperialism at home on U.S. soil. Specifically we use a wide range of data sources, disciplines, and research methods to demonstrate the deep penetration of youth dispossession through state sanctioned policies or the state's oversight; either option having the same value outcome—the dispossession of Black, Brown, immigrant and poor bodies.

KEYWORDS: racial dispossession, urban education, high stakes testing, diploma penalty, incarceration, miseducation

INTRODUCTION

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) has written on the “educational debt” owed to generations of disenfranchised youth, their families, and communities. In this essay we extend Ladson-Billings trope of “debt” toward a recognition of the thick racialized dialectics of “merit” and “lack” cultivated in public education. With archival and ethnographic material we interrogate how neo-liberal educational policies unleash and legitimate a perverse distribution of educational opportunities and deprivations onto

racialized bodies. By focusing on what we call the “circuits and consequences of dispossession,” we problematize how educational policies laminate credentials of merit onto most White and Asian elite youth, while tattooing the material and psychic scars of “lack” onto most Black, Latino, immigrant, and/or poor students. With a focus on systematic mis-education and diploma denial, we queer the question of intent and turn instead to racialized consequences of state policy, in a nation intoxicated with a fantasy of the “postracial” society.

In an effort to resist the extremely worrisome post-November 4th, 2008 discourse of “postracial society,” we seek to make visible the sturdy neo-liberal policy matrix that reliably produces cumulative disadvantage for youth of color and academic water wings for most young people who are White, especially if they are wealthy. We are interested in how these policies simultaneously install in public institutions mechanisms for corporate and carceral profit while accelerating the disparagement of the public sphere; how they simultaneously inject in youth of color a deep sense of structural outrage and a shadow discourse of personal responsibility. We’re interested in the breadth of consequence, that is, how educational public policies move across sectors of economics, education, health, and criminal justice, carving a racialized geography of youth development and dispossession that appears to be so natural. The façade of “naturalness,” itself an expression of white privilege, anchors these *circuits of dispossession*. Because the search for racial intent routinely detours into a “color blind” cul-de-sac, we call here for an analysis of the racialized consequences of neo-liberal educational policy.

We work in schools and prisons and witness the soft coercive migration of youth of color, especially poor youth of color, out of sites of public education and into militarized and carceral corners of the public sphere. Educators, parents, and youth try to

negotiate conditions of systematic miseducation and the scientism of high-stakes testing, while ideologies about merit, deservingness, and blame drip feed into the soul, tagging some bodies as worthy and others as damaged.

A critical geography of youth development and dispossession tracks how public dollars, ideologies, and opportunities map onto adolescent bodies and redistribute their dreams and aspirational capacities (Appadurai 2004). Drawing from ethnographic experiences in schools, class action lawsuits, and research in prisons, we attend here to the racialized capillaries and consequences of this new imperialism at home (Harvey 2006a, b). The evidence amassed here suggests that new state formations are not simply dismantling public investments in low-income communities. To the contrary, massive infusions of public funds are today targeting poor schools and communities and circling back to private and/or carceral interests: in the form of standardized testing, military recruitment, abstinence-only-until-marriage, zero-tolerance, and subcontracted policing in schools and communities. The public sphere is being fundamentally realigned, but not significantly hollowed—which is what makes this too seem natural. And as public and private monies co-mingle, they map quietly onto teenaged bodies, colonizing dreams and overdetermining destinies of (il)legitimacy. As Arjun Appadurai argues, perhaps one of the most unjust distributions among youth, is the belief in a tomorrow—their aspirational capacity.

To cast our argument theoretically, in the first section of the paper we rely upon contemporary and historic critical race theory and writings on the sculpting of neo-liberalism (DuBois 1996; Harris 1993, 2006; Harvey 2006a, b). To interrogate our argument empirically, we draw upon focus group interviews Michelle and colleagues conducted with students attending underresourced schools in California, in preparation of expert testimony in a class action suit brought on behalf of these children and teens (see Fine et al. 2004). In addition, we report on what can only be considered a method of obsessive archival research across data bases and bodies of literature, cataloguing the racialized and classed consequences of diploma denial on young people's economic, educational, health, and criminal justice trajectories. The material available and interpretations proffered are obviously bolstered and limited by the racial, ethnic, and class classifications that are built into existent databases.

The strategic production of Whiteness as security, innocence, and merit teeters dangerously and precariously upon the exclusion and containment of

Black and Brown bodies, taxing communities and taxpayers, yielding an equally massive profit to elites. Our hope is to disrupt the racialized binary of merit and lack, materializing in the history of the present, before our very eyes.

THE RACIALIZED GEOGRAPHY OF YOUTH CRIMINALIZATION AND CONTAINMENT

David Harvey writes on what he calls the “geographical dynamics of capital accumulation” and “uneven geographical development,” tracking the flow of capital across and within national borders (2004). He distinguishes *capital accumulation*, that is the growth of capital, from *accumulation by dispossession* whereby common goods are taken from people, and privatized, as in the case of privatizing water or, we would argue, public education. “Accumulation by dispossession is about dispossessing somebody of their assets or their rights . . . we're talking about the taking away of universal rights and the privatization of them so it [becomes] your particular responsibility, rather than the responsibility of the state” (Harvey 2004, 2 of 6).

We lean on Harvey domestically to trace how neo-liberal education policies slowly dispossess poor students of color from quality education and the high school diploma. As public educational funds are handed over to testing companies, publishing houses, private security, and policing organizations, the very conditions of teaching and learning degenerate and a discourse of individual responsibility for educational achievement permeates—especially in the most impoverished schools. With moves toward privatization, state responsibility for the provision of adequate education falls off the hook; testing companies', private vendors', and publishers' profits swell; police-in-school and military recruitment budgets grow, and youth of color slowly disappear. And as you will hear in their words, these young people pose a critique of dispossession and whisper a shadow discourse of personal responsibility.

With a public sector sleight of hand, there is perhaps no more vivid illustration of *accumulation by dispossession* than policies that infuse public schools with criminal justice surveillance, literally sucking out time, resources, relationships, and space from teaching and learning, redirecting these resources into criminal surveillance and pursuit. Consider the rise of zero-tolerance policies in predominantly, African American and Latino schools: “Zero tolerance has been defined by the American Bar Association as a specific response to student misbehavior where a school automatically and severely punishes students for a variety of infractions,

often resulting in expulsion or suspensions and criminal charges” (Noam, Warner, Van Dyken 2001). In 1998, a series of New York City “Impact Schools” were placed into the hands of the New York Police Department, which has the authority to permanently assign armed police officers to targeted schools, institute a zero-tolerance policy for infractions, and “expedite the removal of students via suspension procedures such that a student with two suspensions on his [her] record who then receives one additional suspension is sent to an alternative school” (9).

The New York Civil Liberties Union (Mukherjee 2007) launched an investigation of this initiative and determined that:

The city has deployed large numbers of police personnel and adopted aggressive policing tactics in schools as a way of trying to create a safe educational environment for students and teachers. Unfortunately, however, these practices are frequently excessive and dysfunctional . . . over 93,000 city children can not get to classes without passing through a gauntlet of metal detectors, bag-searches and pat-downs administered by police personnel who are inadequately trained, insufficiently supervised and often belligerent, aggressive and disrespectful. Moreover, any middle school or high school without permanent metal detectors might—on any day—be unexpectedly forced to subject its students to mandatory scans and searches that would consume as much as three hours of class time. [7]

Permanent metal detectors are targeted at schools that are disproportionately large, overcrowded, and serving low-income youth. Mukherjee et al. find that 70 percent of the large high schools with metal detectors fall into the category “drop out factories,” with graduation rates of fewer than 60 percent of ninth graders entering the school. The NYCLU researchers (Mukherjee 2007) document discriminatory and abusive comments and conduct by police officers; intrusive searches and confiscation of personal items; intrusions on instructional time and, most significantly for our purposes, substantial arrests for minor noncriminal violations of school rules. Indeed, “77% of police personnel interventions . . . are [for] non-criminal incidents” with 4 percent crimes against persons, 2 percent major property crimes, 17 percent other crimes. “[P]olice get involved in more than twice as many non-criminal incidents at schools with permanent metal detectors than at a typical similarly sized school”

(20) with children being handcuffed, arrested, and hauled off to precincts. The heightened presence of police in schools increases the likelihood of adolescent arrest, loss of time from schooling, and involvement with the criminal justice system. Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that a number of educators have, of recent, been arrested for trying to intervene when their students were being arrested in school; that is, these educators were actively resisting the dispossession of schooling (see NYCLU and Public Education Network).

National statistics bear out racialized patterns of suspension and arrests, with African American students being disciplined, suspended, and expelled more frequently and for less serious, “miscellaneous” and more subjective reasons than their white counterparts (Browne 2003; Skiba et al. 1999). A study of twelve cities found that African Americans were suspended or expelled at a rate between 14 percent and 296 percent higher than their representation in the population (in Skiba et al. 1999). In 2000, the arrest rate for Black youths was 74 percent higher than for whites (Browne 2003). The annual detention cost for one youth in secure detention in New York City in Fiscal Year 2006 was \$170,820, while the average annual cost per pupil in a New York City public high school is \$11,844 (Office of the Mayor 2006). Incarceration of youths costs over fourteen times more than education. Dispossession is motivated state policy, carved very precisely, and with a very sharp edge, around the contours of race, ethnicity, and class; ironically in the name of public safety, educational accountability, and personal responsibility.

Criminalizing youth of color in their schools is a blunt strategy of educational dispossession. We turn now to consider a more naturalized strategy that splinters the soul more slowly, delicately, less aggressively: the strategy of systematic miseducation. To make vivid the kinds of educational experiences young urban youth of color endure, we offer up evidence gathered by Fine et al. (2004) as we prepared expert testimony in *Williams v. California*, a class action suit brought on behalf of California youth attending schools that are systematically under-resourced and failing to provide adequate education to poor children of color (for full report, see Fine et al. 2004).

EVIDENCE FROM A CLASS ACTION LAWSUIT: MISEDUCATION AS DISPOSSESSION

Every day, every hour, talented students are being sacrificed . . . They’re [the schools] destroying lives.

Maritza, college student, speaking about her urban high school

The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples.

(Woodson 1993)

To prepare expert testimony for the *Williams v. California* lawsuit, brought by a class of California youth attending severely underresourced schools, Fine et al. (2004) conducted focus groups and gathered survey material from more than 100 students and graduates of plaintiff schools. These elementary, middle, and high schools met the litigation's criteria for underresourced schools in terms of: substantial rates of long term subs for educators, high teacher turnover, inadequate books and materials, health and safety violations in their facilities. The data we collected from youth about their experiences of these conditions are compelling on a simple point: their schools are public institutions that convey unequivocally to poor children and youth their fundamental disposability. Embodying disposability has serious psychic, social, and health consequences (Woodson 1933).

Our interviews sought to study how these conditions come to be inscribed on, embodied, explained and contested by poor and working class youth. We document specifically how they view material injustices, procedural injustices and what Iris Marion Young (1990) calls the (in)justice of being denied recognition. While we have no illusions that schools alone convey these insidious messages or that schools alone could dismantle the gross racial and class inequities that characterize our nation (see Anyon 2005; Lareau 2003; Rothstein 2004), we do know that schools—as public institutions—whisper intimately the words that land on and saturate the souls of youth. In these places we call schools, poor and working-class youth, typically African American, Latino, Native American, and/or immigrant, come to see how class and race/ethnicity fundamentally organize our nation; how hollow the promise of meritocracy rings; how vast and enduring social inequities are, and how written off they and their peers have become by adults in positions of public authority.

We take the California schools in question to be emblematic of a growing set of public schools, located in communities of poverty and communities of color, increasingly segregated and obsessed with

testing and classification; in which facilities are in desperate disrepair, faculty are undercredentialed and turning over at alarming rates, and instructional materials are fully inadequate to the task of educating for rigor and democracy. These young people have learned that the blades of race, class, and ethnicity cut the cloth of public resources, to determine who receives, and who is denied, a rich public education. Like children who learn to love in homes scarred by violence, they are being asked to learn in contexts of humiliation, betrayal, and disrespect. Neither fully internalizing the evidence of their dispossession nor fully resisting it, these children are learning their perceived worth in the social hierarchy. They are learning, further, that public services are inherently inferior to private ones; that cumulative disadvantage and disinvestment are systematic moves of the state. And then, too, they speak in a voice of personal responsibility. The neo-liberal agenda prevails.

Methodology

To prepare the expert report, Fine et al. (2004) collected data from a broad range of students attending schools in the “plaintiff class.” Jury research firms were hired to conduct random digit dialing in affected neighborhoods, in order to generate the survey and focus group samples. Four criteria were specified: respondents needed to be current students, not dropouts; respondents need to be reached via random digit dialing, no friendship or snowball nominations; respondents should not be connected to, or made explicitly aware of the litigation until after the interview; and parental consent is essential. Approximately four hundred calls were placed to generate each focus group of ten to twelve young adults. Interviewed students were educational “survivors” (not dropouts), randomly identified, and not selected from within peer or friendship patterns.

A multimethod research design was undertaken: surveys were completed anonymously by eighty-six middle and high school focus group members, prior to their involvement in the focus group discussion; eleven focus groups were facilitated with 101 youth attending plaintiff schools in the San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles areas, as well as a group (of peers) in Watsonville; and eleven telephone interviews were held with graduates of California schools that fall with the plaintiff class. All of these graduates are currently in attendance at college.

Survey-based gender and race/ethnicity data on eighty-six students indicate: 44 females and 42 males; four students who identify White, one Biracial, 25

Latino/Hispanic, and 56 Black. Parental and student consent were obtained for all focus group participants. In a few cases in which there was no parental consent, participants were turned away. We offer below a capsule review of the learnings gleaned from these youth, to convey the depths of desire narrated and betrayal embodied by urban youth attending severely underresourced public schools (for full analysis see Fine et al. 2004).

From Yearning to Anger

Right now I have this one teacher that's like, he's my English teacher and *he's like really trying to help the students right now*. We're looking into colleges and stuff. He's really trying to help us, like learn things, because it's like, he'll pull you out of class for a reason. It will be like to learn the stuff.

[Sabrica, high school girl]

The students we interviewed know what good education looks like. And they want it. Across focus groups and surveys, the students were very clear that they want teachers who care and demand rigorous work. We asked the students, "What does a teacher who cares look like?" Students described a "good teacher" as someone who holds high standards and helps students reach those standards. Someone who listens, asks questions, and listens to student answers. Students were excited about teachers who want to know what students think. Some praised faculty who assign lots of homework, if they provide support and time to finish.

Jamel: Like he said, we got a lot of substitutes right now. . . . Some of them cap [put you down], some of them play football. That's not what we come to school for. So we got our teachers there that are pretty cool. But last year we had all our teachers. *I love the good teachers*, but the best ones are like . . .

Tarik: *They change the whole school around.*

Patricia: They change the whole school.

Miguel: *My favorite is all the good teachers.*

These students know the difference between "substitutes" who "play football" and teachers who "change the whole school around." They appreciate a caring teacher who is responsive when they are confused. A good teacher wants to know the students and provides lots of red marks on their papers. Trouble is, few of these students encounter and enjoy "good" teachers on a regular basis. Most explain that they have had a range of teachers. Too many, however, have disappeared midyear, are long-term substitutes or don't know their content areas.

In the plaintiff schools, the percentage of fully certified teachers ranges from 13 to 50 percent. In the State of California, the percent of undercredentialed teachers is directly related to percent students of color and students eligible for free/reduced price meals, rising to an average of 25 percent noncredentialed teachers for 91–100 percent of students eligible for free/reduced lunch. Teacher turnover rates are reported by some principals to be as high as 40 percent in a matter of two to three years.

From disinvestment to embodied shame. While the elementary and middle school youth explained away their school problems as idiosyncratic or fixable, by high school, students' yearning for quality educators bumped into the realization that they were being systematically and routinely denied. Kyle explained: "When I ask for help, and there's too many kids and I know the teacher can't pay attention to me, I'm ignored. *That makes me mad. They blame kids when they can't fix things.*"

With the wisdom of "dual consciousness" (du Bois 1908), these young men and women critique public disinvestment in urban schools and prophesize the behavioral consequences. As Jamie states:

I'm in tenth grade. And what I like about my school, or what I don't like about my school is how they teach us like animals, like they cage us up and like they keep putting more gates and more locks and stuff and then they expect us to act like humans and I feel like if you treat us like animals that's how we going to act. . . .

Chantel extended Jamie's argument:

"Yes, that be like *putting all the bad kids in one school, that's just like putting, you know, just like putting them in jail*. They going to be crazy . . ." As we listened we could hear how these external conditions moved into the skin; how shame, filth, and state neglect crossed membranes from what was outside the child, in the building, to what *was* the child.

Toward the end of each focus group we asked each student to suggest one element of their "ideal school." It was striking when a young girl, Marisol, whispered with some initial hesitation:

"If I could have my ideal school, I guess I would have *seats on the toilets and enough paper in the bathroom to clean yourself*" (abbreviated quote in Fine's notes, not transcript).

Another young man, Roger, interjected, saying “If you go to a dirty school, *you feel like you’re dirty*, you know, not clean.”

Schools, like other contexts of childhood and adolescence, are not simply the places where development happens (Moore and Lackney 1993; Proshansky and Wolfe 1975; Rivlin and Wolfe 1985). They are intimate places where youth construct identities, build a sense of self, read how society views them, develop the capacity to sustain relations, and forge the skills to initiate change. These are contexts where youth can grow or they can shrink. Environmental psychologists Werner and Altman (1998) argue: “[C]hildren are not separate from their actions or feelings, nor are they separate from other child or the physical, social and temporal circumstances that comprise unfolding events. They are so interconnected that one aspect can not be understood without the others The street . . . is not separate from its inhabitants” (125).

Buildings in disrepair are not merely a distraction, they are identity producing and self-defining. Since the early part of the 20th century, psychologists and sociologists (DuBois 1935, 2005; Fanon 1967; Goffman 1990; Mead 1967) have argued that children and youth develop a sense of self from the messages they gather from adults and peers, structures, and institutions around them. What the culture says about the child, his or her family and community comes to be internalized, in part, by that child. Children who are valued tend to be more positive in self-concept than those who are disparaged (DeLuca & Rosenbaum 2001). This value may be communicated in what people say about and to them. But just as powerful, the quality of the contexts in which they are growing “speaks” to youth about how they are viewed and valued (Maxwell 2000; Maxwell and Evans 2000). If surrounded by decay, disrepair, and filth, and no adult intervenes to protect, a child may come to see himself or herself as worthy of little more or at least that adults see him or her as unworthy.

Student Alondra Jones described the corrosive effects of a negative structural context on the developing selves of young students:

It makes me, you know what, in all honesty, I’m going to break something down to you. *It make you feel less about yourself*, you know, like you sitting here in a class where you have to stand up because there’s not enough chairs and you see rats in the buildings, the bathrooms is nasty, you got to pay. And then you, like I said, I visited Mann Academy [an elite school], and these students, *if they want to sit on the floor*,

that’s because they choose to. And that just makes me feel real less about myself because it’s like the State don’t care about public schools.

Swirling within the collective fumes of anger and guilt lay a complex splitting of pride and shame. As if characters in Sennett and Cobb’s *Hidden Injuries of Class* (1993), many students spoke of the “lacks” that their education has instilled in them; as if they embody the inferiority of their schooling. As Roger states:

[If kids from a wealthy school came in here right now,] I wouldn’t talk because *they would be more sophisticated* or something, and understand words I don’t know *and I don’t want to be embarrassed.*” (abbreviated quote in Fine’s notes)

A discourse of personal responsibility and shame. As educational policies enforce substandard facilities and faculties for poor and working-class youth, students narrate anger and shame, and also a more hidden transcript (Scott, 1992) of personal responsibility for their failures. Across the focus groups we could hear a fleeting, infrequent but emotionally powerful discourse of self-blame for past mistakes.

Kate: When I was in middle school, . . . I skipped that grade, went right to the ninth grade from seventh grade. I chose to mess that ninth grade year up. I chose to cut and shoot dice and be doing other things that I’m not supposed to do, you know. *So that was my mistake, my fault.* You know, in my tenth grade year, I destroyed it, you know. I made nothing of it all, nothing. I passed, I don’t know how I passed, you know. So when I look at my transcript, I look at it and say *this is where I failed. I know I won’t be able to make it into a university because of me, not because of what peer pressure or what this principal said or what this teacher was teaching me.*

While the students discussed, in the aggregate, structural problems of teacher turnover, overcrowding, absence of books, ineffective guidance counselors, etc. they also reproduced, discursively, neo-liberal rhetoric about their personal responsibility for their negative outcomes. Students who offered such analyses typically asserted a very judgmental perspective on their own biographies. “I’ve made mistakes and so I have to pay the price.”

Students who view educational difficulties as largely their own fault have little belief that school can/will help them achieve positive educational outcomes (Fine et al. 2004). Low expectations for adults convert into self-defeating attitudes by which students

hesitate to ask for help they need. One young man expressed it well, “*I don’t ask the teacher for nothing. I do it all on my own, or ask my friends for help.*” “I don’t ask the teacher for nothing” is of course a defensive posture, rejecting educators’ help before educators refuse his request. These students then convert this defense into an internalized and unrealistic belief in personal responsibility, which colludes with a larger social ideology about “their” fault. In the end, these students do not learn how to ask for or receive help, do not get the help and, in the likely event of failure, they conclude that it is “my fault.”

Even the graduates, survivors who beat the odds, offered up a discourse of personal responsibility—guilt for those left behind:

Leaving my high school was sad but *I didn’t do enough at [my high school]* to make it better. It pains me to see what my younger brothers and sisters go through at [my high school]. *I feel guilty about my opportunities, compared to others in my community and seriously considered dropping out of college several times. . . . You know, it’s hard to know that I am getting an education while other people I know aren’t. I guess I’m the lucky one, given all of the students who couldn’t beat the stacked odds* (Carmita, graduate, now in college).

Perhaps most damaging with respect to future outcomes, some of the youth have elaborated a very punitive ideology that mistakes they have made in the past will and should predict negative future outcomes. While the taking of responsibility for personal problems is certainly a developmental task, these young people seem to have internalized the broader societal message about poor youth: that they deserve bad outcomes for past “mistakes” (Jan-off-Bulman 2002). Poor children, especially poor children and youth of color, tend to be held personally accountable for “mistakes” for which other children are given “second chances” (see Lefkowitz 1998; Poe-Yagamata and Jones 2000), with dire consequences that can last a lifetime (see Ayers et al. 2001). Pierre Bourdieu (1998) comments on the “magic”—what we might call damage—by which institutions move into bodies and identities:

the act of institution is an act of magic (119). . . an act of communication but of a particular kind: it signifies to someone what his identity is, but in a way that both expresses it to him and imposes it on him by expressing it in front of everyone and thus informing him in an authoritative manner of what he is and what he must be (121) this is also

one of the functions of the act of institution: to discourage permanently any attempt to cross the line, to transgress, desert or quit (336).

And when they resist . . .

For years, critical scholars of education have heard poor youth and youth of color who attend inadequate public schools, who tell us that some teachers who don’t care, schools that don’t educate, and the resultant anger, shame, stress, and anxiety (Fine 1991; Valenzuela 1999; Weis 2008; Willis 1981). These California youth were no exception. As one young man described his concern:

Because before we had a teacher for like the first three weeks of our multi-culture class and then the teacher didn’t have all her credentials so she couldn’t continue to teach. And since then we’ve had like ten different substitutes. And none of them have taught us anything. We just basically do what we wanted in class. *We wrote letters, all the class wrote letters to people and they never responded. We still don’t have a teacher.*

As these comments reveal, the youth want nothing more than what most adults ask for today: public accountability. They want someone to assure that the State and the adults will fulfill their legal obligations to educate. They want someone to monitor inequities, to intervene, and to deliver remedy. The focus group and survey data suggest that students in California’s most disadvantaged schools are being educated away from these enactments of critical citizenship and toward civic alienation. They are learning that their needs are irrelevant to policy makers and government leaders. These youth reveal a broad based, sophisticated, and critical consciousness of class structures, the stability of inequity, the illusion of mobility and their “place.” They speak through a sophisticated discourse of public critique but don’t believe that any one is listening.

What was striking and distinct about the California focus groups was the powerful voice of institutional betrayal that these youths expressed to audiences who refused to listen. It was not simply the case that these youth, like so many across the United States in under-resourced schools, were denied adequate education and felt helpless. Many of the youth had, in the face of overwhelming odds, tried to secure help. They had spoken up, protested, asked for a “real” teacher or raised an academic concern. What broke their hearts and their spirits was that few adults listened. Even fewer acted.

We all walked out, 'cause of the conditions, but they didn't care. They didn't even come out. They sent the police. The police made a line and pushed us back in. Don't you think the principal should have come out to hear what we were upset over? But when the state is coming in, they paint, they fix up the building. They don't care about us, the students, just the state or the city.

These youth describe a doubled experience of disappointment and betrayal. Disappointed by the relative absence of quality faculty and materials, they feel helpless to master rigorous academic material and powerless to solicit effective help. Were that not enough, when these youth do complain, grieve, or challenge the educational inequities they endure, they confront a wall of silence, an institutional refusal. In such settings, youth report high levels of perceived betrayal by, resistance to, and withdrawal from persons in positions and institutions of public authority (Fine et al. 2004). Especially, but not only, White persons in positions of public authority. These schools are helping to blunt civic engagement and produce, instead, civic alienation.

The youth whom we surveyed and interviewed are the academic "success stories" of impoverished neighborhoods. These are not young women or men who have dropped out. They are the survivors; the believers, whom we are slowly deleting from the moral community of the deserving (Katz 1997). Given the political economy of the United States, the racial stratifications and the broad base of social inequities that confront poor and working-class youth, and youth of color, the question for this case asks to what extent do these schools reproduce broad social inequities, worsen them, or reduce their adverse impact (cf. Anyon 2005)? The evidence presented here suggests that these schools substantially worsen already existent social inequities with psychological, academic, and ultimately economic consequence.

Coda: Dispossession in Action

In 2004, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger settled *Williams v. California*, acknowledging: "Today is a great victory that we celebrate here for California's neglected students. And I am here to tell you that we will neglect our children no more." A year later, a Rand Corporation report (see Fine et al. 2004 for details) found continuing inequalities in both capital and human resources available to schools in poor communities.

During this same time period, the State of California instituted a high-stakes exit examination

(CAHSEE) which would deny a diploma to any students who could not pass. In 2005, the Human Resources Research Organization (2005) published the *Independent Evaluation of the California High School Exit Exam* where they found significant and disproportionate adverse impacts of CAHSEE, on youth of color and immigrant youth. By 11th grade, only 35 percent of special education students, 51 percent of English Language Learners (ELLs), 63 percent of African Americans, and 68 percent of Latinos passed both parts of the exam. By the end of their junior year, nearly 100,000 members of the Class of 2006, in the Williams schools alone, had not passed the CAHSEE, and up to half of these young people were expected to not satisfy the requirement prior to graduation, including "nearly half of English language learners and two thirds of students with disabilities."

These demographic disparities reveal the stubborn institutional and political conditions in which failure has been produced. Students of color, immigrant youth, ELLs, and economically disadvantaged students are highly concentrated in schools with lower pass rates and fewer credentialed educators. They disproportionately attend those schools with some emergency-certified math and language arts teachers. Students who receive special education services are more likely to be taught by educators credentialed in neither English Language nor math instruction; the rate of certified English Language teachers is far lower in schools with high concentrations of African American students than district-wide.¹

Despite a series of court decisions against the State, on May 24, 2006 the California Supreme Court reinstated the CAHSEE as a condition for graduation. All students in the Class of 2006—even those who have admittedly been deprived of a thorough and adequate education—had to pass the examination in order to receive a diploma (see Valenzuela 2005, Mc Neil 2005 for parallel analysis of Texas).

The children of California have been thrice betrayed: disproportionately youth of poverty, youth of color, and immigrant youth struggling to persist in some of the worst schools in the nation, asking for justice, enjoying a momentary State Supreme Court victory and then denied a diploma. To worsen matters, California, for the first time (and setting a precedent for the nation's large states), will spend more on prisons than on public higher education. Over the next 5 years, the state's prison budget will increase by 9 percent, while the budget for its university system will increase by only 5 percent (Harris

2007). “More prison spending will mean better pay for the highest paid, most politically influential prison personnel in the nation, as well as more prisons, but no one is certain it will result in a better corrections system . . . we not only continue to feed the prison system at the expense of funding education, we’ve also blurred the lines separating the educational and criminal justice systems, creating a school-to-prison pipeline *with a predictable and steady flow*” (Harris 2007:B5—emphasis added).

EVIDENCE FROM THE ARCHIVES: DIPLOMA PENALTY: CREATING FAILED STATES AND FAILED BODIES

California is of course not the only state to be engaged in this relentless rhythm of miseducation and then diploma penalty. High school exit examinations are becoming normative throughout the country, a racialized and classed assault on adolescent trajectories framed as “accountability.” Indeed, the Center for Educational Policy (CEP 2003) reports that 26 states now have exit examinations. CEP also reports that states with disproportionately high rates of Black and Latino students are far more likely to have exit examinations than states that are disproportionately White.

A 2005 report released by the Educational Testing Service indicates that in the decade from 1992 to 2002, California was one of only seven states in the United States to have an improving graduation rate, rising from 64 percent to 71 percent. None of these seven states had exit exam requirements for students to receive a high school diploma.

States that have high-stakes testing policies—policies that use a test score(s) as a requirement for graduation or grade promotion—have significantly higher rates of both ninth grade retention and attrition between grades 9 and 10 (Abrams and Haney 2004). The former finding is significant because it illuminates the body of literature demonstrating that being held back in school is one of the strongest predictors of school dropout (Abrams and Haney 2004; Fine 1991); while the latter points to what is now currently the largest leak in the educational pipeline. “Increasing attrition of students . . . is clearly associated with implementation of new high stakes tests” (Haney 2003:8).

In an expert panel convened in March 2003 to discuss and review the literature on the effects of exit exams on high school dropout, it was stated that; “it is true that exit exams are more prevalent in states with higher percentages of Black and Hispanic students, as well as states with the greatest degrees of poverty” (Center on Educational Policy 2003:3).

Parallel data show school districts in central cities, with high percentages of ELLs, with high percentages of students with disabilities, and with high poverty levels are all more likely to have lower graduation rates (Orfield 2004; Swanson 2004).

High-stakes exit examinations tend to be mandated in cities with high rates of 9th grade retention, diminished graduation rates, greater incidences of discharges and dropouts, younger students in GED programs, and increased dropout/push out rates for ELLs, Black, and Latino students (see Haney 2003; Valenzuela 1999; McNeil 2001; Center on Education Policy 2005).

Needless to say, there is nothing “natural” about this loss of bodies, minds, or dollars: it is policy induced and bears severe disparate impact on poor and immigrant communities (although apparently some community colleges are now accepting students without high school diplomas; see Arenson 2006). A State’s delivery of inadequate education to urban youth and then its insistence on a single, high-stakes examination required for graduation represents a profound betrayal of the youth who have attended underresourced schools. While the young people have completed what they have been expected to do in particularly adverse circumstances—attend school, pass classes, complete the curriculum—the State has failed to deliver what was promised: high quality educational contexts. In an insidious reversal of accountability, these tests reveal widespread failure as if the source of the failure lay in the students, obscuring the fact that schools and school districts have failed to deliver opportunities to learn and have shattered the contract between our nation’s students of color and poverty and the State.

Consequences of diploma denial

The costs of miseducation and diploma denial are substantial, exacerbating educational attainment gaps already present, between racial and ethnic groups. Below we skim the far-reaching raced and classed consequences of diploma denial to encourage further interrogation of how fundamentally and full-bodied is the reproduction and embodiment of privilege on the one hand and dispossession on the other.

While we understand that skill level and academic credentials are conflated, even young people with low skills and a diploma have more positive outcomes in terms of economics, health, and criminal justice than similarly situated youth without diplomas. The diploma, itself, confers positive outcomes across economic, health, and criminal justice sectors.

Economic and social consequences

The economic consequences of a high school diploma are, of course, most obvious. Students who do not graduate from high school earn an average of \$9,200 less per year than high school graduates (Bridgeland et al. 2006), equating to approximately \$270,000 less than high school graduates during their lifetime (The Civil Rights Project 2005). The gap widens exponentially in comparison to college graduates, where high school dropouts earn roughly \$1 million less over their lifetime than college graduates (Bridgeland et al. 2006).

Students who do not graduate from high school are also more likely to live in poverty and receive public assistance (Bridgeland et al. 2006). Failing to complete high school has profound consequences for communities, states, and the nation, stemming from losses of economic productivity, and “the higher costs associated with increased incarceration, health care, and social services” (Bridgeland et al. 2006:2). In fact, 40 percent of 16–24 year olds without a high school diploma receive government assistance (Bridgeland et al. 2006). Failing to graduate from high school has significant intergenerational impacts—children of dropouts are more likely to attend inadequate schools (like those in the Williams case) and to not complete high school themselves—ultimately contributing to social problems of communities at large (Orfield 2004:2).

In terms of economic consequence, diploma penalty intersects significantly with race/ethnicity and gender. Consider, for instance, median income data, by race, ethnicity, educational attainment and gender, available from the 2004 U.S. Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov.cps2004>).

Across all levels of education, White males earn more than other demographic groups. White males without a HS diploma, on average, earn more than White, Black and Hispanic female high school graduates (and more than Hispanic females with some college). And these figures exclude men and women who are considered discouraged workers, out of the labor force. Ron Mincy (2006) has found that “In

2000, 65 percent of Black male high school dropouts in their 20s were jobless—that is, unable to find work, not seeking it or incarcerated. By 2004, the share had grown to 72 percent, compared with 34 percent of White and 19 percent of Hispanic dropouts” (cited in Eckholm 2006).

Diploma penalty, interacting with institutional and systemic racism, bears substantial and disproportionate impact on communities of color, in terms of employment, income, and, as you will see below, health and involvement with criminal justice system. There is no safety net if public educational institutions turn their backs on poor communities, particularly African American, Latino, and immigrant communities.

Health consequences

Diploma penalty affects not only the obvious outcomes of education and economics, but there is substantial evidence to suggest that diploma denial also affects health outcomes. While the mediators of this relationship are yet to be determined, studies consistently find that fewer years of formal education predict incidence of chronic illness, injury, communicable diseases, and shorter life span (Fiscella and Franks 2004; Molla et al. 2004; National Center for Health Statistics 2004). In 2002, U.S. residents aged 25–64 with fewer than 12 years of education had an age-adjusted death rate—for all health causes—17 percent higher than people who had completed high school and almost three times higher than people who had finished at least 1 year of college.

People with less formal schooling have been found to suffer from higher rates of a wide range of health problems including heart diseases, high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, cancer, obesity, having low birth weight babies, higher mortality, higher health-risk behaviors (National Center for Health Statistics 1998), disability (McNeil 2001), activity restrictions/limitations (Molla et al. 2004), and being both under-and overweight (Lantz et al.

Table 1 Median income of men and women, 18 and older, by race, ethnicity, gender and educational attainment (in U.S. Dollars)

	< HS Graduate	HS Graduate	Some College	AA	BA
White male	16,665	28,174	30,600	38,885	50,500
White female	9,800	15,500	17,289	24,197	30,082
Black male	11,500	22,000	23,800	35,000	42,000
Black female	9,590	15,160	18,717	21,869	33,142
Hispanic male	17,000	22,000	26,417	29,263	37,083
Hispanic female	9,522	15,163	16,610	22,295	30,360

1998). Research on teen pregnancy suggests that young women without high school degrees are significantly more likely to get pregnant, stay pregnant, and have a second child than high school graduates (Fine and McClelland 2006).

Of the three components of socioeconomic status (education, income, and occupation), only education independently predicts risk factors for cardiovascular disease (Winkleby et al. 1992). In fact, not graduating high school is as strong a predictor of death from coronary heart disease as having a high cholesterol level or high blood pressure (Fiscella and Franks 2004). Since education is the predictor of future occupation, it has a surmounting impact on health because employment, in turn, influences income, access to insurance, a person's ability to access health information, facilities, resources, support, nutrition options, and food security (Adler and Newman 2002).

Criminal justice consequences

Bridgeland et al. (2006) find that people who do not graduate from high school are also eight times more likely to end up in prison or jail and to be on death row than a peer with a high school diploma. Harlow (2003) reports that: fifty nine percent of all federal prison inmates and 75 percent of all state prisoners do not have a high school diploma. A single year increase in average education levels would decrease arrest rates by 11 percent (Alliance for Excellent Education 2003). Over time, the lifetime cost to the U.S. for *each youth* who does not graduate from high school and later enters the criminal justice system ranges from \$1.7 to \$2.3 million (emphasis added, Bridgeland et al. 2006:2).

While diploma penalty affects all demographic groups in terms of incarceration, again we see significant, disturbing interactions with race/ethnicity. For instance, 12.6 percent of White males age 30–34 in prison are high school dropouts while 52.1 percent of African American men aged 30–34 are high school dropouts. Drawing again from Ron Mincy's analyses (2006), by their mid-30s, six in 10 black male dropouts had spent time in prison.

A recent analysis by Pettit and Western (2004) finds that “The novel pervasiveness of imprisonment indicates the emergence of incarceration as a *new stage in the life course* of young low-skill black men” (151), [while historically] “going to prison was a marker of extreme deviance . . . the novel normality of criminal justice sanction in the lives of recent cohorts of disadvantaged minority men is now widely claimed” (2004, 156). Low income Whites without a

Table 2 Likelihood of death or incarceration by ages 20–24 By race, educational level and year

	Less than high school	High school	All non-college	Some college
White men				
1979	7.8	3.5	4.9	1.5
1999	14.0	5.5	7.7	1.7
Black men				
1979	23.8	11.6	17.8	8.7
1999	61.8	21.9	33.9	7.4

high school diploma fare much better than their counterparts in other demographic groups. As Table 2, from Pettit and Western (2004) documents, the cumulative risk of death or incarceration by ages 20–34 is deeply and increasingly affected by educational level and race—particularly for African American men without college.

These researchers conclude that “imprisonment now rivals or overshadows the frequency of military service and college graduation of recent cohorts of African American men. For Black men in their mid thirties at the end of the 1990s, prison records were nearly twice as common as bachelor's degrees” (Pettit and Western 2004:164).

CONCLUSION: WHITENESS AS PROPERTY; DISPOSSESSION AS RACISM

Whiteness and property share a common premise—a conceptual nucleus—of the right to exclude. This conceptual nucleus has proven to be a powerful center around which whiteness as property has taken shape . . . After legalized segregation was overturned, whiteness as property evolved into a more modern form through the law's ratification of the settled expectations of relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline.

[Harris 1993:B5]

Critical race theorist Cheryl Harris (2006) has more recently argued that the “dialectical phenomena of White accumulation and Black disaccumulation—the incremental economic and social advantage for Whites and corresponding disadvantage for Blacks . . . aggregate[s] and compound[s] across generations” (913; see also Harris 1993). In law, politics, education, and varied lines of public policy, the development of White and elite privilege in the United States has historically and fundamentally relied upon the systematic underdevelopment of African Americans.

Our analysis extends this insight to the contemporary, relatively invisible, and insidious moves of dispossession and development. Today most middle-class and wealthy youth, who are overwhelmingly White, have at their disposal a public sphere that enables their development, offers protection, and provides supports. With their cultural ideals proliferated in the mainstream culture and media, an invisible public sector of support is supplemented by substantial private scaffolding by family and community (Burns 2004). Elite, White youthful bodies un-self-consciously come to represent merit and a worthy investment. At the same time, and on the other side of the same public policies, many African American, Latino, immigrant, poor, and increasingly Muslim and queer/trans youth are being read as disposable, embodying danger, worthy of dispossession, or in need of containment—in order to protect “us.” This story is no news to our nation; we were founded on this narrative. The walls of exclusion slide like glass doors, oiled by public dollars, moving between structure and psyche, between politics outside and the interior of the soul. Cumulative evidence of dispossession bleeds between public and private sectors and onto the next generation, threatening and bolstering young people’s sense of competence and possibility for a different tomorrow.

In this paper, we discuss the historical architecting of oppression and degradation. We discuss the sociopolitical parasitism of racism, in which the overdevelopment of Whites relies directly upon the underdevelopment and sustained dispossession of Black and Brown students. If indeed, with the Obama nomination, we are at the dawn of a new day, the deeply entrenched policies and consequences of neo-liberalism deserve urgent redress. Racism will reproduce with no intent. The reversal of dispossession, however, demands a fierce and radical intentionality to stop the bleeding, within and beyond schools.

NOTES

1. A second lawsuit was launched because of a 1999 Legislative mandate for the State Board of Education to “study” alternatives to the exit exam, which the Superintendent and the Board have refused to undertake.

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