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An Urban Ethnography of Race, Space & Place

Abstract: Student migration within U.S. urban school districts is now a central feature of policies that promote school choice to access a quality education. Policymakers also support the value of diversity in public schools, even as educational policies and legal decisions that redress racial inequities have receded into the political background. This paper draws from a four-year ethnography (2007-2011) to explore the intersections of race and the geography of school opportunity, and their impact on 15 African American male youth who leave their neighborhoods to participate in a diversity initiative [DI] at an elite public high school in Chicago. The ethnography conveys the visible and often invisible borders of race and place and the impact on youth's perceptual cartographies of the spaces in which their daily lives occur. As the issue of social inclusion gains salience, not only in U.S. cities, but also in cities everywhere, the relevance of these processes and their impact on disadvantaged groups are important to understand.

Keywords: Race, Geography of Opportunity, School Choice, Selective Schooling, Urban Studies

Student migration within U.S. urban school districts is now a central feature of policies that promote school choice to access a quality education, as the geography of opportunity often entails youth attending school outside of their neighborhood but within the same urban space. Policymakers also continue to support the value and benefits of diversity in public schools even as educational policies and legal decisions that redress racial inequities have receded into the political background. Expansion of the geography of opportunity now links education reform to a quasi-educational marketplace with a variety of alternative schools and programs that operate in juxtaposition to neighborhood public schools. These include magnet, selective enrollment and charter schools, gifted programs and special initiatives. As a consequence, the geography of school opportunity combines with a new politics of desegregation that relies on similar mechanisms to maintain diversity in public schools.

In Chicago, a veritable shopping mall of educational alternatives suggests a system that effectively accommodates its student population. However, the phenomenon of choice as a dominant component of attending these schools belies the reality of selective admissions processes and programmatic limits that restrict opportunities to a relatively small proportion of Chicago's students. This paper draws from a four-year ethnography (2007-2011) of an initiative designed to maintain diversity at an elite high school in Chicago, Selective Preparatory Academy [SPA]. The paper explores the intersections of race, space and place, and their impact on 15 African American male youth who left their neighborhoods to attend SPA. These youth describe how becoming a mi-

grant learner impacted their opportunities, their academic trajectories, their views of community, and even their views of race. The ethnography conveys the visible and often invisible borders of race and place, and how these borders shape identities and represent "critical moments" for youth, that is, events that individually or cumulatively signal transitional pathways (Wright, Standen & Patel, 2010). As the U. S. urban school agenda increasingly highlights school choice to access educational opportunity and promotes initiatives like those at SPA to maintain diversity, the consequences of becoming a migrant learner and agent of diversity, are important to understand.

1. Race, Space, Place & Chicago's Schools

The U. S. has shifted its focus on discrimination from an emphasis on equality of opportunity to one of achieving diversity. Maravasti and McKinney (2011) describe this new focus on diversity, and the banal multiculturalism it generates in our schools, as merely a softer form of cultural assimilation that fails to challenge existing structures of exclusion. SPA represents one example of what was once a racially isolated and comprehensive school space that has been appropriated into a diverse and selective enrollment school.

   The study of space and place is particularly salient for social scientists who study residential inequalities and the social problems associated with them. Patterns of housing and segregation in the U. S. convincingly explain much of the persistent inequalities in life outcomes, particularly for economically marginalized African Americans and Latinos who live in urban areas (Squires & Kubrin, 2005; Massey & Denton, 1993; Shapiro, 2004). One important consequence of segregated housing is the marginalization of youth in urban spaces, where risks related to crime, health, and education are pronounced. Indeed, African American and Latino students are more segregated today than ever before and this segregation typically translates into poor academic achievement (Orfield, 2006; Kozol, 2005; Clotfelter, 2004). In 2009, more than 50 % of students attended what the CPS defined as 'racially isolated' schools, meaning that 80-100 % of students in the school belonged to the same race or ethnicity (i. e., Black or Latino). Recent solutions to these seemingly intractable problems have involved alliances between urban planners, educational policymakers, scholars and activists. In addition to new physical and structural designs are the social goals of urban planners that now include rebuilding community, achieving equity, and preserving the ecology (Brain, 2005; Day, 2003; Talen, 2002). Like most of these urban planning initiatives, where mixed-income developments are argued to generate multiple benefits for the poor by living among higher income residents, the discourse surrounding transformation of schools is a feature of the Chicago urban agenda. The rhetoric of this agenda merges spatial arrangements with market-oriented school reform and promotion of diversity. A partial explanation of the mechanisms currently being used to achieve diversity is that approaches to desegregate schools are no longer supported at the federal level (Frankenberg & Debray, 2011). In fact, political scientist and school desegregation expert Gary Orfield cites the

U.S. Supreme Court as the leading engine of resegregation as its decisions regarding challenges to district integration plans have eroded racial balances in schools. The U.S. has also seen serioous shifts in discursive strategies that focus on school choice. However, these approaches have typically ignored the impact of student migration on how youth develop and maintain a sense of self and orientation to their physical and social worlds.

Created to alter public perception of Chicago's failing schools, and to attract professionals and their families to the Chicago Public School district [CPS], Chicago's selective enrollment high schools are the gateway to college matriculation as more than 90 % of selective enrollment students attend college, while less than 50 % of neighborhood high school students even graduate, let alone attend college (http://www.cps.k12.il.us/schools/scorecard/ 09/13/2006). Admissions to selective enrollment high schools mirror those of private colleges and universities, with standardized tests and entrance exams, attendance records, and application statements that combine to form a process in which thousands of students apply for a limited number of openings each year. Until recently, selective enrollment and other magnet schools in Chicago maintained racial/ethnic diversity, due in large part to a federal desegregation mandate that required Chicago Public Schools [CPS] to keep enrollments balanced with the district's racial/ethnic composition. However, by 2009, a U.S. District Court judge declared that the last vestiges of past discrimination in the CPS had been eliminated, and thus, terminated the judicial consent decree to desegregate its schools. With the shifts in judicial support for court mandated desegregation, the abolishing of voluntary race-conscious student assignment plans, and increasing gentrification in urban neighborhoods, we witnessed significant declines in the racial/ethnic balance of these schools as greater numbers of white, middle class, and female students replaced low-income and underrepresented students. The SPA initiative was designed to limit the extent to which this occurred at the school. This paper presents the voices of the first cohort of participants in a diversity initiative as they transcended geography in search of educational opportunity and learned to redefine place, the meaning of academic and personal success, and even race.

2. SPA, African American Youth and Their Neighborhoods

One feature of the study that draws attention to student migration is the socioeconomic difference between the neighborhoods in which these African American youth resided and the neighborhood in which SPA was located. The neighborhoods from which the participants in this initiative were drawn include four low-income Chicago communities that were targeted by SPA to build pipelines for recruitment of students. These neighborhoods, which are also predominantly African American, are characterized by low incomes, high crime rates, and low educational levels, a stark contrast from the upscale life of the SPA neighborhood. Many of the homes in these areas consist of apartment buildings and freestanding small single-family units with front yards protected by high wrought-iron gates or chain link fences and bars on the windows. A number of aban-

doned and boarded-up properties also blot the landscapes of these neighborhoods, along with empty lots.

In contrast, Selective Preparatory Academy's neighborhood is located in a largely white affluent part of the city with a combination of single family homes, townhomes and high rise condominiums. The area also has a diverse dining scene, upscale businesses and shopping, and nearby access to museums and cultural venues. The differences in educational attainment further demonstrate the stark contrasts between the participants' neighborhoods and that of the SPA neighborhood as 65 % of people living in SPA's neighborhood have college degrees compared to an average of less than 6 % of the DI participants' four communities. U. S. Census data shows the median income of the SPA neighborhood to be more than three times that of the targeted communities (U. S. Census Bureau, 2007-2011).

Ranked a top high school in the U. S., Selective Preparatory Academy is a relatively modern multilevel building that is meticulously maintained. School walls are decorated with the paintings of local artists to create an aesthetically pleasing environment. When entering through the school's main entrance visitors see posters of prestigious universities such as Harvard, Stanford and Princeton, that visit SPA to recruit students. At the time of the study SPA had approximately 1200 students and was known for its racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. Nevertheless, in the past decade SPA had seen a significant change in its student population, particularly its African American male student population. As a result, the school developed a diversity initiative designed to stem the decline of this population.

3. Research Methods & Analysis

To understand the experiences of participants in SPA's diversity initiative, a variety of methods were used. Descriptive data include school documents and other relevant historical, social, Census, and media data, such as newspaper articles, websites and other Internet sources. The study also included structured and focus group interviews that were designed to assess how youth viewed their neighborhood and school spaces, their cultural understanding and acceptance of other people, the role of family capital in facilitating school migration, perceptions of the school and racial identity, and future goals. Interviews were conducted annually with participants and averaged 1.5 hours. Key staff and teacher informants were also interviewed and interview contents were isomorphic to those of parents and children, with additional questions asked about instruction. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

The stories and narratives in this paper are derived primarily from informal conversations with students and school personnel about everyday life at SPA. My research assistants and I also observed formally and informally—classrooms, activities, lunchrooms, open houses, school meetings, monthly meetings, and various in-school and out-of-school events. Observations also included school committee meetings, receptions, and presentations. We spent several days a week in the school, every week, particularly

during the first two years of the initiative, not to mention part of our summers, after school, field trips, and weekend activities with the boys. We also worked with the boys as homework tutors who assisted them each week and as activity facilitators who met with them after school twice a month. It was during these times when stories were most likely to have been shared by students and staff members and became part of our field notes. Many of the stories were validated by other participants or our observations. To these efforts we added other materials that we also count as social data—our personal experiences at SPA and students speaking for themselves in video, spoken word, discussion groups, and presentations.

As McDermott and Raley (2011) point out, the analytic road of ethnographic work is rarely direct. In the case of SPA, it required the use of multiple methods to engage multiple levels of analysis and to determine how stakeholders confronted each other politically and sociologically. My research team included what France Winddance Twine and Jonathan W. Warren (2004) call "insider" and "outsider" perspectives, with an African American male and female research assistant and myself (a Latina). Engaged research guided our analysis making specific questions relevant to our approach for gathering data. For example, we asked such questions as, Who determines research questions and how will data be collected? What representations will be made of participants and who will make them? In this paradigm, voice, reflexivity, presentation, and feedback remained salient. As we struggled to balance our roles as engaged researchers we maintained ongoing weekly discussions with one another and wrote our reflections and emotional responses in journalistic fashion, keeping "notes-on-notes" to include in our project. Through iterations of interactional analysis, personal histories and narratives, and observations, the ethnography presents the struggles of Black male youth as they were embedded in a context ostensibly open to social inclusion. As such, it reveals how participants created and recreated race, social class, gender and privilege, and how these constructions changed over time.

4. The Impact of Being a Black Migrant Learner

Stories about people who experience suspicion, prejudice, and fear in unfamiliar contexts are all the more compelling when the unfamiliar context involves youth attending school outside of the neighborhood in which their family and social networks reside. This is what happened with participants in the diversity initiative at SPA. Each boy struggled to align his satisfaction with the school and recognition of the opportunities received, with his frustrations with schooling and a general unease experienced in the classroom. At the same time that attending SPA was viewed in a positive way, and the physical environment was regarded as a welcome change from the environment of neighborhood schools formerly attended, students conveyed ambivalence about schooling and occasionally a sense of isolation. Undoubtedly, their relatively new experience with diversity and the academic rigor of the school contributed to the boys' discomfort. Students believed that class and race shaped teachers' expectations of their achievement

at SPA, particularly in their first two years of the initiative. More importantly, the impact of being a migrant learner combined with the racialization processes that occurred in the school could be seen as changing students' perceptions over time.

Research points to the variety of negative views held about African American males that include perceptions of them as dysfunctional, dishonest, or dangerous (Noguera, 2003, 2008; Nasir, McLaughlin & Jones, 2009). The proliferation of these views, as displayed by images in the media, also serve to naturalize our assumptions about Black men, particularly young Black men. It is therefore not surprising that views that predominate in a number of domains would also find their way into the school context. Such views were often liminal, situational, and subtle in their expression. Nevertheless, they could be found in the stories told by youth and adults at the school. The director of the diversity initiative offered one such story.

> One day several of the boys [in the initiative] congregated in his office, talking, joking, and laughing with one another when the Assistant Principal entered and complained that the boys were "unruly." She told them to disperse. After the boys left, Larry [the director] asked the Assistant Principal why she had assumed that unruly behavior was occurring. When she responded that it was because of the noise, Larry reminded her that on the prior day, a number of other students had also been in his office visiting, and they had been even noisier. In fact, one student had been pushed against the wall (that separated his office from the Assistant Principal's office) and had knocked over boxes and a picture off of the wall. Larry also reminded the Assistant Principal that though she was in her office at the time, she had not responded to the noise, whereupon she expressed surprise and laughingly said that she did not understand why the noise of the prior day had not bothered her. Larry later expressed that this type of incident had occurred on several occasions. He also stated his belief that the primary difference between incidents resided in an interpretation of behavior based on race—that is, the students whose behavior did not bother the Assistant Principal were white males. The boys whose congregating typically resulted in a reprimand were members of the diversity initiative.

As one of a plethora of events this story begs the question of how the physical, social, and academic spaces of Black male youth are demarcated? If, as some researchers suggest, lack of trust and intolerance serve to limit the spatial worlds of youth in general, how is this exacerbated by race to regulate Black male youth in public spaces like SPA? The U.S. has increasingly witnessed the regulation of schools as police or security patrol school grounds, engage in random searches, and use technology to control youth (e.g., metal detectors, cameras, one-way mirrored detention rooms (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010). Added to the more stringent forms of regulating spaces are the subtle practices such as the one presented here.

This particular story encouraged us to examine the regulation of space by school agents and we learned that teachers and staff were not the only members at SPA who delineated appropriate physical and social spaces for groups of students, as peers explicitly

avoided certain spaces where African American boys would "hang out." Asim, a participant in the initiative, described the perceptions of some of his peers.

> There are people [students] in this school who say, 'aww you're Black, so I'm not going to go on the Fourth floor, because it's predominately Black. That's the Black floor. So it must be real loud up there. You must be talking about hip-hop, or smoking weed, or what not.' We're supposed to be all integrated and stuff, but it's just really racially discriminate.

Other examples of the responses to these young men [and the initiative] involved classroom interactions and offhand comments made by teachers. One of the teachers responsible for implementing the SPA tutoring program expressed his resistance to the initiative.

> I believe that we don't want to be privileging these students against the others here. Personally, I am concerned that providing whatever supports we're talking about, whether it's tutoring or mentors, or you guys [referring to the monthly activities in which we participated with students], just results in a sense of entitlement for these guys. It's not fair to the other students and frankly, it's not fair to them. It certainly won't prepare them for the real world.

Clearly, perceptions of belonging and attachment to the public space of the school require more than simple access. They are also a function of whether students perceive the environment as a welcoming one. The messages sent by such incidents and comments prompted us to ask whether participants in the initiative were seen as part of the SPA community or as a disruption or threat to it? Despite the mantra that public spaces are for everyone, these stories [and others like them] suggest that racial exceptionalism created an environment where some people were more welcomed in it than were others.

During their first two years most of the participants saw race and class as particularly salient features of their experiences at the school. However, over time these interpretations changed, and for some, dramatically. The following three young men illustrate the range of participants' responses.

Nathan, a reserved and soft-spoken DI member, was a slight figure who wore glasses and had a serious forbearance. Nathan was also a keen observer of the social dynamics at the school and he disliked the school from the start. His views did not change during his tenure at SPA.

> A lot of these white teachers make you feel like Blacks are unworthy of being here … Certain teachers, for example, the way that they answer different situations in the class. Say a group of Black kids are talking, they'll be like, 'Could you shut up?!' [raises his voice and imitates the teacher] A better example is Mr. Wright. He's our 4th period U. S. history teacher. He is a student teacher. Lawrence [a Black student] will go to sleep and Emily will go to sleep. Emily is a white girl. And he [Mr. Wright]

will sit in the back of the room and see Emily sleep, but he'll walk right past her and over to Lawrence and kick him and wake him up, while she sleeps during the whole class period. [Nathan, 2007]

Yeah, they think we're just a bunch of monkeys that are just dancing. One of them called us monkeys! … It's just no respect, like for any of the minorities or their organizations. Alas, they [minorities] have to do their own thing … For example, one of the biggest problems I had this year, specifically, was there was not one African American anything for Black history month. Not an announcement, not a thing. That really affected me. [Nathan, referring to the teachers and staff, 2011]

Kenny was a small guy who typically wore blue jeans and a white t-shirt. Kenny had good looks, a sense of humor and an easygoing manner that made him well liked by most of his teachers and popular among the students, particularly the girls. Kenny had no apparent difficulties socially, and though he struggled academically when he transitioned to SPA, eventually his academic performance was considered as among the best of the participants in the diversity initiative. As a freshman, Kenny preferred to be around white ethnic students and ended his time at SPA unwilling to discuss racial identity.

You have all kinds of people, you know? You have 'white' Black people and you have 'Black' white people. I do notice though that white people are a lot happier and more energetic. Yeah, I like white people. They make me happy and energetic. [Kenny, 2007]

I feel I now have a lot of different viewpoints on race. I know now that I don't categorize by race but by type of person. I mean I'll categorize people by personality and attitude, not by race. I wouldn't even answer a question about what race I am … I'm hoping that race is becoming less important. I'm hoping that. [Kenny, 2011]

In his first year at SPA, Claude spoke openly about his feelings of inferiority as a Black person. Eventually, Claude moved from racial self-deprecation to a more positive view of being African American. Nevertheless, Claude maintained the need to identify himself as not "typical" of African Americans.

I think that the world does not want Blacks in its population because mostly Blacks commit all of the crime and do everything wrong. [Claude, 2007]

I remember I used to be ashamed that, like if I'm an African American, then people would already put me in a stereotype. They already put me in a box. I've learned that you have to be more bold and be more comfortable in your own skin because you're going to have to live in it for the rest of your life, so you might as well … Like I'm not the typical African American. I'm different. I'm not what you think Af-

rican Americans should be. I'm totally different, and if you get a chance to let me prove myself, then you're gonna get to love my personality. [Claude's views of himself, 2011]

Shifts in the boys' assessments regarding race practices were visibly linked to their views of self and racial identity as they struggled with being students at an elite institution. Academic setbacks impacted students' understandings of the initiative's effectiveness but not their willingness to associate with it or with each other. These young men spent a fair amount of time together engaging in social and academic activities, monthly meetings, and just "hanging out", as they were socialized into SPA. Indeed, it was the collective experience of being part of the initiative that helped students to create what Patricia Hill Collins (2009) calls *free spaces,* in which students could share experiences, validate realities, establish a sense of we-ness, and manage diversity.

Soon SPA will have an altered composition as a delimited number of seats will be reserved for "neighborhood" students. Thus, a school supposedly once based solely on academic "merit" will now take on the dual label of *selective* and *neighborhood* school. Last year the SPA's school board passed a nonbinding resolution to retain its diversity initiative. However, this non-binding support of the initiative could be strategically motivated at a time when the school is being transformed to accommodate an affluent clientele who will not be required to compete with the thousands of other students who seek entrance to SPA. In short, nominal support for a nominal program could be regarded as part of an effort to secure the reproduction of class advantage while controlling exposure to various populations. It reflects one of the ways that the privileged of the city are competing with one another.

5. Discussion

Narratives of urban life and Chicago's neighborhood schools situate underachievement within a spatial landscape in need of renewal or regeneration. These descriptions are juxtaposed with educational experiences that represent all that is advantageous, as the result of diversification of schools, school choice, and merit-based public education. This ethnography captures the often contradictory aspects of youth's experiences as they migrate from an impoverished neighborhood to an elite school located in an affluent part of the city. Despite their recognition of the opportunities they had acquired, several of these boys spoke equivocally about their school, and eventually, their identities. And though they were young, it is easy to sense that their educational opportunities were accompanied by personal dissonance. The extent to which the social relations of community were modified by student migration also remains unclear, and yet there was indication that at least a few of the boys experienced a cultural distancing from their communities of residence and their racial community. For example, when asked if he saw himself as different from other Black males in his community, James responded,

> Uh definitely … I didn't skateboard before I came to SPA … Black people don't skateboard and stuff like that. Like if I dress in a certain way, it's "You tryin' to be white"? It's not trying to be white. It's just an ignorant way of saying things. And I guess that made me notice that I have a different way of thinking about it and they're just like close-minded, but it's not their fault that they don't know any better, that that was an ignorant way of doing things. They just don't think in a certain way because they only think about what they know. But SPA …, everyone that's been involved in our four years in high school has taught me that I don't need to think of things in that way. I think of it in a way that everyone can view it.

Examination of initiatives like the one at SPA, are relevant not only to the U.S., but also to European cities where the processes of globalization have exacerbated the dilemmas of social inclusion of marginalized groups in urban schools. Studies of the geography of opportunity in England have suggested that education is one of the primary mechanisms by which the increasingly vulnerable middle classes protect their material and cultural distance from the poor and working classes [see Reay, 2007]. However, the lines that distinguish poor and working class from middle and upper middle class educational consumers are not just geographic, economic, or spatial, they are also cultural and racial. As urban planners and educational policymakers try to address sociospatial segregation in cities by managing diversity, it is important to remember that just as exclusionary processes serve to marginalize groups, activities that involve social inclusion must also be examined critically to avoid confusing access to resources with successful outcomes. This is particularly important when the dimensions of race and class are involved.

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