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Neoliberal Blues and Prec(ar)ious Knowledge

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Abstract This essay explores the political economic roots of the notion of precarity and migrates the construct into critical educational studies, reviewing the literatures on structural dispossession and race; disruptive innovation and educational reform, and embodied precarity as narrated by youth of color, poverty and immigration. Implications for urban school reform and the significance of sustainable relationships and community schools are explored.

Keywords Education reform · Precarity · Poverty · Urban education

This essay is an assemblage of narratives from highly marginalized young people attending deeply disinvested schools, in conversation with the critical educational studies literature on disruption in urban education and the developmental and neuroscience literatures on the impact of severed bonds on vulnerable youth. We rely on the young people as canaries in the neoliberal mine, for they speak so clearly about precarity, the embodied residue of the racialized political economy and neoliberal logics in which they are situated, even if they don't know exactly the laws and structures that have fundamentally short circuited their (good) life expectancies. Rooted in what Weis and Fine (2012) have called critical bifocality, we examine the history, policies and also the subjectivities of structural and embodied precaritization as narrated by those most intimately affected by disruptive reform strategies

The names are simply alphabetical; the intellectual labor of research, writing, editing, theorizing has been shared and wonderfully generative among the three of us.

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including school closings, high rates of teacher turnover, heavy in school policing and rigid suspension policies.

Having gathered narratives and visual representations of structural contingency from adolescents of color dangling in poverty and the grey zones of "citizenship," further destabilized by school reform policies, we reflect on how current neoliberal educational policies accelerate the precarities already insinuated in the realignment of labor and housing, and the intensified criminalization of poverty, Blackness and immigration. We scan with awe how young people negotiate "neoliberal blues," in the scars embodied and wisdom narrated.

To establish a common working definition, let us assume precarity to be constituted through systemic disinvestment in opportunities and material conditions, chronic disruptions of living/learning and relational well being and the unnerving predictability of impending disaster, metabolized through racial and class hierarchies, with profoundly differential consequences for elites and those surviving in what Harney and Moten call the "undercommons." (Harney and Moten 2013). We want to be clear that precarity is deeply racialized, an extension of dispossession (Harvey 2003) in so far as it tithes corporeal uncertainty and fear to structural loss. Finally to the question of who is affected by precarity—let us notice, with intent, that we may all (excepting 1 % and corporate "lives") experience an existential sense of precarity in times of voracious global capital reach, but the structural consequences of precarity are deeply regionalized, raced and classed, and within the U.S. the pooling and coagulation of precarity-inducing-policies can be found most viscerally and viciously in the swollen ankles of communities of color, poverty and immigration.

Courting Stories and Flying Monkeys

Over the past 30 years I (Michelle) have been invited to testify in court as an expert witness in dozens of educational injustice lawsuits on gender/race discrimination, finance inequity, disparate impact of testing policies, zero tolerance and educational inadequacy in communities of poverty. Typically I am asked to be an "expert" when girls, children of color, or low-income children are suing as a class. I have testified in the Citadel case in South Carolina and Central high in Philadelphia—both cases where young women were litigating denied access to all male public institutions; in Wedowee Alabama where a principal canceled a prom because of mixed race dating and called a biracial woman a "problem" that shouldn't be replicated; in Williams v. California, a class action case brought by low income students of color and immigrants, attending schools that are profoundly inadequate; in Reed v. California, documenting the impact of attending schools with 40–60 % long term substitutes on students' academic and social psychological outcomes. Educational inequities constitute what planning designers Horst Rittel and Melvin Weber (1973) call "wicked problems"—entangled, crusty, reproductive, with many origins and mutations; but courts want what these same authors call "soluble remedies."

The courtroom is a wrestling match for dueling research and legal narratives, on a floor that is profoundly uneven. The dominant story enjoys well funded lawyers, can

mobilize lots of evidence and relax on a bed of manufactured "common sense" embodied by and probably comforting to judge and jury. The counter narrative calling forth educational justice has to chip away gently at the dominant story with legal logic, empirically demonstrate harm, need and capacity, and must promise that the prescribed remedy will miraculously resolve the scalding, historic and deep scars of injustice.

In 2014, we (Cory Greene, Sonia Sanchez and Michelle Fine) conducted preliminary research for a class action lawsuit contending that poor children deserve more, and enjoy less "instructional time" because of violence in and out of schools, over-policing in hallways, lock downs, interruptions, 40 % long term subs, immigration raids, over-reliance on testing, etc. A team of civil rights lawyers from California invited us to gather quantitative and qualitative data about disparities in instructional time, which affect students in schools of high concentration of poverty. They had already amassed statements from young people about the various intrusions in the day and wanted a more systematic analysis from young people in middle and high school, and their educators, about the kinds of events, dynamics, surprising and spontaneous activities that occur in low income schools that are vulnerable to frequent interruptions in teaching and learning. At the time, Rogers and Mirra (2014) had just begun a comprehensive analysis of disparities in instructional time in schools throughout California and have since concluded that students who attend extremely poor high schools lose, on average, 25 days a year—almost 14 % of the year—to in-school disruptions, including subs, lock downs, drills, immigration and police raids.

We were hired to gather a view from the ground, from students and educators attending/working in high poverty schools about "loss of" or need for "extra" learning time. We decided to conduct a quantitative and qualitative assessment of systematic disruptions of instructional time, as experienced by students and teachers in low-income schools. The lawyers contacted schools and university-based programs and a total of 49 students, and 17 faculty, from three cities, participated in the research. In total, four focus groups of students and three groups of teachers were pre-arranged by the legal team in Los Angeles, Oakland and San Francisco. All focus groups lasted approximately 120 min, and at the end of each group students and educators were provided with a $75 dollar gift card for participation in the study. Two of the sessions were conducted at multicultural, youth leadership programs on college campuses.

The students were all attending high schools of significant poverty, with the exception of two middle school students in transition from the 8th to 9th grade and three recently graduated high school students. Two of the student groups were held in summer programs on race/culture and education at major universities. Students identified as 11 White, one Asian American/Pacific Islander, one "other", nine bi-racial, 15 African-American, and 21 Latina/o/Chicana/o. Parental and students' consents were obtained for all focus group participants.

We facilitated the focus groups of teens, and educators, with a common protocol. First they completed a short quantitative survey about school/work life, checking off a list of "intrusions on time" and "frequency of occurrence" that we compiled from the depositions and from the existent literature. After completing the surveys, participants were given blank paper and magic markers and we asked them to draw

maps of “how time feels in your body in schools” and then participate in a group discussion about the maps, time and then, in the last 30 min, we asked them to describe or construct pedagogical moments “when time flies; when you feel like you are really learning and not even paying attention to the clock.” The cognitive/identity mapping prompt has been developed by Futch and Fine (2014), extending the work of Milgram and Jodelet, and Winnicott before them, in which maps are elicited as a creative, representational landscape of experience and affect, and the pedagogical exercise drew from the work of Theatre of the Oppressed.

The map prompt was simple: What does time feel like in your body in school? Of the near 50 maps we collected, students wrote poetry and drew wildly divergent images of hands flying high in advanced classes separated by perforated lines from heads on desks behind prison bars in remedial classes. Other young people sketched snails and clocks whose hands have stopped, long- term substitute teachers showing the films NEMO and JUICE to high school students in disinvested schools, question marks, talking with friends, heads on desks, enthusiasm and alienation.

In our first focus group, Carlos drew a picture of himself and his classmates walking along “the yellow brick road; we take tests, some of us do well and keep going, we have no idea where, and some fall off the road. But there are these flying monkeys that keep getting in the way.” The other students followed up:

“Yeah I get what you mean about flying monkeys”—Alicia interjected, “My brothers are both in prison but they call me every morning to make sure I am ready to go to school, they worry about me so much.” Jeanne chimed in: “Not to be, like you know, pity or anything, I just lost my little brother this summer, so um, and that was something that was really hard for my family to deal with. He was loved by a lot of people. He was only like twelve, and um…it, it, it all has to do with what you’re anchored in. So I just wasn’t sure if I should travel to Princeton this summer.”

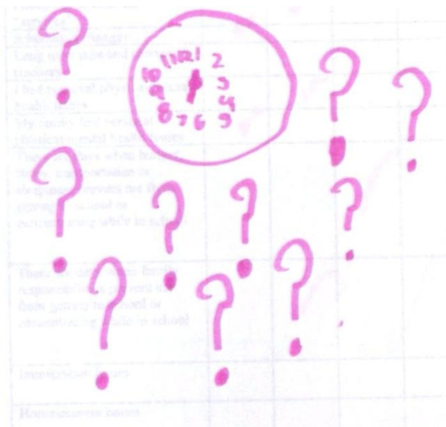
A few moments later, Marcello interjected, “My dad was deported last year and my life has been pretty rough since then.” The theme of “flying monkeys” became a telling metaphor for the structures and unpredictability from which their young lives dangled; a metaphor for precarity. Most of the young people we spoke with were

experiencing substantial difficulties at home, on the streets and/or in their families. A full 50 % of the youth whom we surveyed indicated that from once a month to once a year they did not attend school because they had to take care of family responsibilities; another 8 % answered the same question, "once a week, once a day or all the time."

Students wrote on surveys or told us in focus groups: "my brother was killed last year and my parents want me safe home"; or, "my mother has severe mental illness and I try to help her;" or "my father has cancer and I try to hang with him." Likewise, in focus groups students described siblings in prison, troubles at home, being adopted and/or in foster care, involvement with the juvenile justice system, participation in gangs. Even students who were flourishing academically, mentioned substantial life difficulties and yearned for support:

> **Alicia:** But like she said, we have a lot of problems like people who go to jail. Just like to be open, all my brothers are right now.[…] And they all, they're still calling me every day, like, "What are you doing?" I told them I was going to a meeting [the focus group of the current study] and they said, "No way, you don't have transportation." And I was like, "You guys, I need to be able to take the bus," and it's like yeah I'm going to go to school and it's like I need to focus here.

Asked to explain his map of time surrounded by question marks, Edward narrated a classic precarious subjectivity, anxious to imagine tomorrow.



Edward: But it's just a clock with a bunch of question marks, because how I think of time is, it's you never really know what to expect from it, …I don't know, I think you can never trust, you know. It's always unexpected.

It was as if he were echoing critical theorist Isabelle Lorey, "Precarization means living with the unforeseeable, with contingency… The conceptual composition of

'precarious' can be described in the broadest sense as insecurity and vulnerability, destabilization and endangerment." (Lorey, 2015, p. 10) These students were hyper-aware of the doubling of precarity—structural and educational—evident as they leapt from discussing crises at home and in their communities, to enumerating the constant changes of school structure:

> **Whitney:** Um, I was thinking that um, like, our school, alone R.H.S. has had ten changes in schedule and um yeah, and like um, we used to be a big school and then we had tracks, and then it went from tracks to learning academies, and then to small schools. So we have a lot of changes, we've been having changes for the past nine years, so um I think something that keeps us grounded is like—at least for me—family, but at school everything is like really unstable, at least for us. Not our teachers and stuff, because I do love my teachers but I see how they're stressing out about how they're going to be able to help us. Like how can they help us when they don't have a school to back them up. Like they're not sure if they're going to have their jobs the upcoming year…

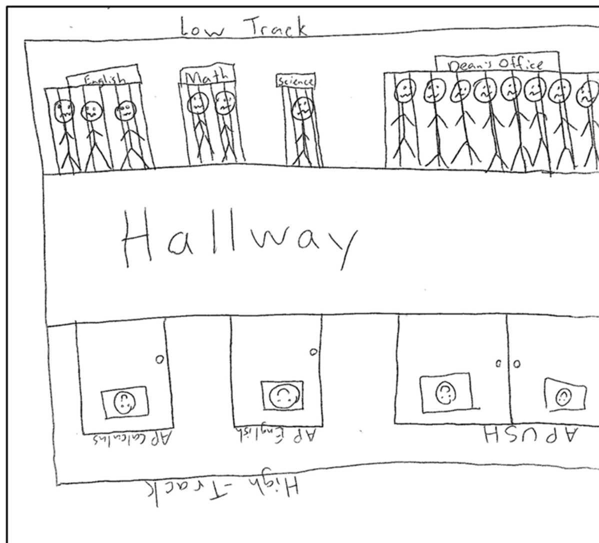
Youth know that lack of stability can affect students' grades, interrupt mentoring relationships and depress aspirations.

> **Raymond:** Um, she kept mentioning the changes in school, and um, I was—she said that um, there's changes and stuff, and if it works good then not, you know, they change it again. And if it works, like she said, it's good, but if it doesn't work we're the ones going through the changes, so we're the ones being affected.

As if they had read the Rogers and Mirra (2014) study on instructional time, the students operationalize "flying monkeys" as disruptions and inequity, teacher absences, emergency lockdowns and preparation for standardized tests as well as the intensification of policing when chaos reigns.

Perhaps it is no surprise that in schools of institutional instability, high teacher turnover, substantial rates of long-term subs and frayed relationships among educators and between students and teachers, as well as the steady presence of police and school safety officers, *banal chaos* permeates the air. While eager to lavish praise on "teachers who care," for the most part these young people characterize their schools as untrustworthy, experience some educators as disrespectful and they notice, astutely, the differential treatment between the AP students and the "regular" classes as noted in the map below. As if they were familiar with the academic literatures on school to prison pipeline, students describe the kind of triage we are accustomed to witnessing in an emergency room, where top students get dignity, inquiry and creativity and struggling students are contained and managed by punitive culture.

> **Meg**: "Big, ginormous rifles, like, on their back, just walking, 'Hey, good morning.' It's normal at our school."
> **Researcher**: What rifles?
> **Meg**: Like, there's a police station—yes, rifles.



Jalill: “Oh, I was just going to add onto the thing like talking about how our schools resemble jails… recently our principal that I guess came to the school just like two years ago or something like that, he just um brought in this new policy where they do random searches with like dogs”.

> **Chris:** “It’s not even random. They pick like the lower classes, and then—I swear, and they’re like, everyone count off numbers, one, two, three, they keep track, who picked number three? And they’re like, all the three’s step outside. And the dog will search you. And it’s never an AP class or anything like that. It’s always the lower—”
> **Jahill:** “Our school, they randomly search your locker and then leave a note in there that just says, ‘We searched your locker.’”

It is not only the police in schools who instill a sense of invasion, inequity and destabilization.

Young people (and their educators) described the human toll of school level disruption: teacher absenteeism, turnover and long-term subs. Some of these schools have, at points in the academic year, as much as 40 % teacher turnover, with an associated infusion of long term subs (see Fine et al. 2004). After many of our informants complained about long-term subs, Michelle asked, “So what’s wrong with long-term subs?”:

> **Misha:** In the ninth grade, I had this Spanish teacher, he was like the best Spanish teacher, I was going to do advanced Spanish, but he got fired towards the end. Um, so this substitute came in—[…]so we got this substitute […] He doesn’t know Spanish. He’s asking the students how to pronounce words. How are you a Spanish teacher and not know Spanish? So it was like—he messed up my whole Spanish experience…Subs are just awful.

Ivory: "They reject everything you tell them, but they're not present during your like, your daily routine. And I feel like when they're there for a long time, and you fall out of your routine, you fall out of your learning habits. they have like excess power issues going on in their lives."
Darren: "Yes! They do!"
Mocha: "I'm in control, I don't care what you say, you talk, I will—I don't care if you're like, you could be crying, I don't care, get out of my classroom," like they're just so….
Spring: I hate the subs that come in, try to take charge, standing over you the whole period—that just makes you want to be defiant, in my opinion. I hate that.
Darren: the good subs, they'll come in, like she said, they'll have an assignment, and like, "All right, I need y'all to just keep it down a little, don't get too loud, you can talk, do your assignment… And we'd be like, "All right, we're good!"

And one young woman admitted:

> I really liked my teacher who I didn't know was a long-term sub and then one day she said, "Tomorrow your real teacher will be coming." I felt so bad, I didn't even know she was a sub, why didn't she tell us? Couldn't she trust us?

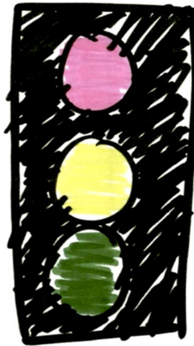
Students told stories about feeling hurt and betrayed when they started to develop relationships with "teachers," in some cases only to find out the day before the teacher departed that their "teacher" was a long-term substitute.

This embodied sense of uncontrollable and persistent change has been called "root shock" by psychiatrist Mindi Fullilove (2009), who has studied the intimate psychic consequences of uprooting, disruptions of relationships, and erosion of communities of meaning, particularly within communities of color. She argues that people who have been displaced and surrounded by constant change experience "root shock," defined as the traumatic stress reaction to loss of some or all of one's emotional ecosystem. These psychological concerns for Fullilove transpire not only because communities are changing but, more importantly, because residents feel they have no control over the vast changes in their lives, which threaten the intimate webs of social relationships that help people endure hard times. Unfortunately the institutional conditions that predominate in high poverty schools are precisely the conditions that threaten the thin, fragile bonds that might protect children and might support their educators.

Even when the teachers are "real" and "certified," students explained that most of the day is consumed with test prep. Students experience the hyper focus on testing to be a betrayal of teaching as a relationship built on rich, inquiry based, culturally rich practices. When educators feel pressured to "deliver" content that students are supposed to "learn" and reproduce as a correct answer, the elegant choreography of pedagogy is disrupted; the give and take is shattered; the synchronicity and serendipity of learning flattens:

Researcher: How much of your day is spent on test-prep?
Raiza: I feel like the whole year, we're preparing for tests.

***Others*:** Yeah. Yeah, the whole year.
Sandra: Well do you mean actual by yourself, studying for a test?
Carlos: I feel like it's used as an excuse sometimes.
Researcher: Can you say why?
Carlos: Like, we're in class, and then like you're questioning why are we doing all this? "Oh, the test." "Oh, this test." "Oh, you have to study for this." And then it's like, what, and then you get to the test, and then you just get it over with, and then you're like, you're done, but you move onto the next one.
Lunnette: I feel like my teachers are kind of different. Like my AP…US history teacher, Ms (?), she's like, "I hate that I have to prep you for this test because I want to be able to break this content down and really get into it," like we'd have Socratic seminars and everything she's like, "I wish we could spend more time on one thing," she's like, "But I'm on schedule and my first like priority" even if it's not her own, "is to make sure that you score well on this test," like that's what the class is for, right, an AP class, so you can take um, an AP test and get college credit, but she's like, "If we had more time, like I would dedicate more time to make sure that you guys are learning everything not that—" because we have to rush, it's a lot of content that we have to fit into the time you start until like the AP test, so yeah.



sometimes it goes fast, slow, or regular.
it changes.

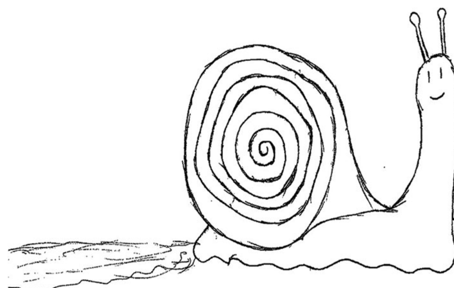
Economic, familial, political, embodied and academic precarity saturated these young lives. Young people who were most vulnerable to the material dislocations of family, home, school, language, nation and relationships were also hyper-vulnerable to neo-liberal educational reforms in which teachers had been removed or transferred, schools closed, long term subs are common place. Despite all that has been written on the fundamental importance of trust, stability, continuity and sustainability of relationships in school, particularly for the most marginalized students, urban educational reform has been characterized by disruptions for the

poor and continuity for the rich. It was astonishing to listen as these young people narrated with eloquence the predictability of the unpredictable.

We spent the last 30 minutes of our focus groups, asking the youth (and the educators), to describe times when they felt that time in school "flew"; when they were "so engaged you forgot to look at the clock." In some groups people answered individually; in others they worked in small groups and performed experiences when instructional "time flies." Across focus groups, students described spaces in which "the traffic light is on green," it feels like things "just flow," "teachers stand in the back of the classroom as students direct their learning" or times when" students are enjoying what they're doing so much we all forget it's lunch time."

Existential philosopher of education Maxine Greene (1977) has written thoughtfully about the distinction between *anesthetic experiences*–which are deadening, numbing and put us to sleep–and *aesthetic experiences,* which are provocative and awakening. In our focus groups, we heard about many experiences both anesthetic and aesthetic. In one group of quite economically depressed and affectively depressed youth, the maps were shockingly consistent sketches of heads on desks, sleeping, teachers showing movies, one perfectly still snail.

But when asked to describe situations when class time flew, when meaningful teaching and learning filled the air, students and educators alike offered up stories that sound like what psychologist Mikel Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow." "Flow" involves the "subjective phenomenology of intrinsically motivated activity." "Viewed through the experiential lens of flow," Csikszentmihalyi and his co-author Nakamura have argued, "a good life is one that is characterized by complete absorption in what one does" and involves "intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment, merging of action and awareness, loss of reflective self-consciousness, a sense that one can control one's actions, a sense that time has passed faster than normal; experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding…" (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 89-90).



Just as a culture of trust requires a community of dignity and support for educators, so too "flow" for students is not simply internal to an individual person but requires a "dynamic system of person and environment" among adolescents and adults (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 99). Fortunately we had the opportunity to hear about, and witness rich engagements in a number of multi-cultural, activist

learning spaces including a group of students from the Bay Area who, at the time, were attending a summer program on Ethnic Studies at a local university. In a community center in Oakland, Marisol broke the ice to speak about moments of meaningful learning, and these moments pivoted on developing critical literacies to read the world:

> **Marisol**: Well, I wrote that in some classes it feels like they're never going to end… [but] for like a class that I really enjoy was, um…my ethnic studies class. Yeah, it was interesting. […W]e got to learn about other people's like ethnicities, and like the history of like people of color and why—what they went through, and like, the things that…like, we got to learn the counter-narrative about how they like actually did good things, and sometimes like how white—like, how people[….] how white people like took like credit for people of color's ideas and stuff. So I actually got to learn all about like that […M]y teacher recommended this book, The New Jim Crow, so I tried to get it. So yeah, I'm going to read it.

At Berkeley, when asked about their schools, the students narrated and drew the kinds of schools we had been hearing about: few windows, low expectations and a grueling history of rotating long-term subs. However, prior to the group interview, we had unwittingly walked through one of their Youth Leadership sessions at the MultiCultural Center. Standing beneath a colorful mural of Cesar Chavez, Huey Newton, and varied youth of color, the young people gathered in a circle discussing history, challenging one another, asking questions of peers and mentors.

The enthusiasm expressed to "learn my history," to challenge "excuse me, but what we are learning is Caucasian history," to bathe in the history of ancestors who struggled for justice, was most breathtaking in our conversations with young people enrolled in Ethnic Studies, Youth Leadership and Critical Pedagogy classes at UCLA and UC Berkeley. While most of these students attend relatively traditional schools, they came alive in their discussions of summer engagement with critical literacies, contesting what Damien Sojoyner recognizes as "technologies of control and enclosure" that dominate contemporary public school classrooms in communities of color (2013). Sojoyner argues that the heightened securitization of public schools, the erasure of ethnic studies/whitening of the curriculum and hyper-dominance of testing and sorting, dull and exile Black and Latin@ students and dampen embers of critical consciousness. Our evidence confirms Sojoyner's argument and yet demonstrates that the strategic stripping of critical education, inquiry and freedom within schools, does not extinguish young people's thirst for cultural history, analyses of injustice and struggle or their hunger to be recognized and educated as worthy subjects of survivance (Vizenor,1994). Their appetites are whet by simple openings of summer engagements with critical pedagogy and organizing.

> **Carter**: All right. So since I'm a public speaker, I'm good at—or I often write speeches, so [I will] start off with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr.: "We shouldn't repent for the acts of bad people, but instead for the silence of those

> who are good." I feel the time I waste submitting to the educational system could instead be used to learn. To learn my culture, properly. To learn how to empower my people and myself. Time to learn how to create change. But unfortunately, I must get back to my homework. So.

As Carter describes, young people are thirsty for an education that helps them analyze critically their current circumstances, values their critique and feeds their desire, introduces them to histories of struggle and possibility, equips them with skills to build a different tomorrow, even in the swamp of structural, existential and embodied precarity.

At the multicultural leadership project, as we discussed teachers who made a difference, Monique piped up, "There was a teacher who said 'You are gonna be a great reader, I am going to help you'—and she handed me a book that I couldn't read and she said, 'We are going to do this together.'" Vicente said "I just love teachers who put red marks all over my paper but then show me how to write better." Students who were engaged in workshops on multicultural leadership, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) projects and youth activism seminars at Berkeley and UCLA spoke with a vibrancy about learning "our history—with all due respect, we are tired of learning Caucasian history"; producing critical knowledge, pursuing research, writing poetry, leading campaigns. The distinction between their in-school experiences and their experiences in these critical youth organizing/leadership contexts was striking. But in our last focus group, in a community setting where there was more despair than oxygen, after Michelle explained the purpose of the focus groups and that lawsuit framed more instructional time as a civil right long denied, one young man said, "Lady you seen really nice. Please don't make us go to school for longer days. It already feels like a jail."

Listening closely we learned three things: One, beware seductive appeal of technical solutions to wicked problems in policy or in court. Disparities are oppressive, but more time in toxic settings is not a civil rights agenda. Second: it is a cruel policy irony that the young people with the most personal, material and existential precarity attend schools that are most structurally unstable. And third: even in circumstances of massive disinvestment and civic betrayal, young people in highly precarious circumstances nevertheless yearn for opportunities to be respected, recognized and educated, to dive into critical histories, create opportunities for and with their communities and to mobilize for educational justice. Despairing about their schools, these young people nevertheless had a thirst to be educated.

By listening to the voices of young people speaking across very different educational settings, we learned just how much context matters. Demographically identical youth were so passionately engaged in settings that invited inquiry, critical history, creativity and deep participation, and so fundamentally alienated in settings corroded by neoliberal reforms. More instructional time is of course a human right, particularly for young people routinely denied equal time in school. And yet more time in systematically disinvested and dehumanizing buildings is no one's idea of justice.

Ultimately we chose not to testify. We met with the lawyers and explained that we could not testify for the civil right to more instructional time in schools that violate the dignity of the young. We continue to work with lawyers, youth and community activists, advocating for more time in worthy educational settings. These narratives obligated us to trace back the literatures on precarity, and to unearth how corporate educational reforms deepen the disruptions that haunt young lives.

The Cumulative Weight of Growing Up in Precarity

"Whether explicitly stated or not, every political effort to manage populations involves a tactical distribution of precarity… regarding whose life is grievable and worth protecting, and whose life is ungrievable or marginally or episodically grievable." (Puar 2012, p. 170) Saskia Sassen joins Puar when she argues that precarity breeds the "savage sorting of winners and losers." Lauren Berlant writes that precarity is the fuse to slow death (2007).

Young people growing up in poverty and in the swamp of harsh racial stratifications, today endure a doubled precarity: structural and economic shifts that realign the economy, housing, criminal justice, immigration supports and social opportunities, which are joined with federal, state and local educational policies that privilege testing and policing, school closings and teacher evaluation, ruptured relationships (between community and school; teachers and parents; curriculum and ethnic histories) over community, democracy, sustainability and relationship.

Those growing up in poverty are drenched in dispossession and disruptions; the loss of public goods, the closing of schools, threats to housing and the criminalization of poverty. These material fingernail scratches on the souls of youth, produced by policy reforms, cut deep into the lives of urban youth surviving (and their educators teaching) in communities of color, concentrated poverty, sprawling aggressive policing and looming gentrification. For some, precarious subjectivities metastisize into despair and anger. But—and here is where we will end this essay—we also recognize precarity as the rich soil of radically new solidarities, between Dreamers and Queer youth, Muslims concerned with over-policing and young women and men of color filming aggressive and homicidal policing practices; students protesting rising debt and (un)documented immigrants and unions demanding a $15 living wage.

Within the field of educational studies, a focus on precarity obligates us to consider how market logic and values have entangled themselves within State apparatus in ways that threaten democracy, equity and stability for young people and disproportionately those most marginalized by class and racial hierarchies. All evidence would suggest that students in precarious settings would suffer enormously. And they do. At the same time, one can no longer deny the knowledge and desire, critiques and solidarities that grow at the precarious edge, narrated by some of the most marginalized youth and educators in the nation.

It is essential that we interrogate how corporate educational reform subsidizes the precaritization of low income schools and youth of color, while selecting and

extracting a "talented tenth" away from critical consciousness (Fabricant and Fine, 2013).

As inequality gaps widen, poverty deepens and pools in place. In 2000, one in eight public schools was classified by the U.S Department of Education as "high poverty"; by 2011 that figure leaped to one out of five public schools, means that at least 75 % of a school's students qualify for free or reduced lunch. In a bit over a decade, we have witnessed a 60 % increase in the number of very poor schools serving very poor children, with highly transient teacher populations and aggressive threats of school closings haunting these same buildings. In ways deeply racialized and classed, public institutions, communities, educators and youth attached to "high poverty" schools are highly vulnerable to fluctuations in the economy, real estate incarceration, policing practices and immigration policies, school closings and other forms of what Rosa Luxembourg, and later David Harvey (2003) would call accumulation by dispossession.

Structural precarization not only renders particular groups of youth vulnerable but it tends to pool and segregate demographic and residential communities drowning in precarity. We can see these same trend lines persist across measures of homelessness, hunger, foster care, parents lost to deportation and incarceration. The National Center for Children in Poverty reports that 44 % of children live in low-income families (poor and near poor), a figure that increased from 39 % in 2007 to 44 % in 2013. The Southern Education Foundation reports that a full 51 % of students in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade in 2012–2013 school year were eligible for the federal program that provides free and reduced lunch programs. The National Center on Family Homelessness reports that one in every 30 children in the U.S. is homeless. "The new homeless statistics, for the 2011–2012 school year, are 10 % higher than the year before and 72 % higher than before the recession." Over the last three years, they report dramatic increases in the numbers of children with disabilities and children who are limited in their English proficiency who are experiencing homelessness. The numbers of unaccompanied youth have also been steadily climbing in recent years (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (2015).

Family insecurity has been dramatically magnified in recent history as a consequence of US policies and practices around immigration, criminalization and housing. Deportations and citizenship insecurity haunt thousands of families in the U.S. For the year 2011–2012, Human Rights Watch analyzed Customs and Border Protection data in which they report that the near 400,000 persons deported each year, left behind more than 202,000 American children. While more than 2.7 million children in the U.S. have an incarcerated parent, and approximately 10 million have experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives, these include one in 9 African American children (11.4 %), 1 in 26 Latin@ children (3.5 %) and 1 in 57 White children (1.8 %) (Gangi et al. 2004). Precaritization is skewed grossly by race, class and immigration status, and enableld by State policy.

Economic, family and housing insecurity are not simple or single silo concerns. Indeed, as Fine and Ruglis (2008) have argued, in low-income communities the adverse consequences of dispossession in one area of life spill across sectors and generations. When a young person in poverty encounters trouble in one sphere—

school, juvenile justice or health—or when his/her parent does, adverse consequences travel through *circuits* in ways that negatively affect other family members' well being, and other areas of everyday living. If a student is denied a diploma because of a high stakes graduation requirement, or was suspended for 6 months or arrested in a school with more police than guidance counselors, there are well-documented effects in terms of education, employment, physical health, pregnancy, reproductive outcomes and juvenile justice involvement (Fine et al. 2007).

Adolescents of color, in poverty and/or living in immigrant households, not only have more of the stressors and fewer buffers, but there is growing evidence that these stressors can move under the skin with serious physical and psychological consequence. Interested in the neurological imprint of sustained stressors, neuroscientist Bruce McEwen coined the term *allostatic load* to represent the cumulative wear and tear on the body's systems due to repeated adaptation to stressors, tracing the impact of stress on two categories of biomarkers: the substances released by the body in times of stress, and the measurable effects of these substances, including blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and hemoglobin levels. British epidemiologist Michael Marmot finds that "the higher you are in the social hierarchy the better your health, because, "the stress that kills… is characterized by a lack of a sense of control over one's fate" (Velasquez-Manoff, 2013).

Isabell Lorey argues that "Governmental precarization thus means not only destabilization through employment, but also destabilization of the conduct of life and thus of bodies and modes of subjectivation." (Lorey 2015, p. 13) While rallying cries of precarity can be traced as a transnational response to the structural disenfranchisement of economically marginalized, it is important to interrogate how the most reproductive arms of the State, e.g. educational and school policies, collude in the acceleration of precarity through a variety of mechanisms including most notably school closures, unevenly distributed teacher turn over, zero tolerance, high stakes testing and varied disruptive interventions, including policing, in low income schools. And how these policies sculpt subjectivities in the bodies and souls of youth and educators.

The Advancement Project, in their Research Brief, *Test, punish and push out: Zero tolerance and high stakes testing* (March 2010) lays out the empirical and legal arguments that demonstrate the perverse effects, and disparate racial consequences, of punitive State mandated policies that combine to push out and criminalize disproportionate numbers of Black and Latin@ students. The youth.gov website reports that during a single year, an estimated 2.1 million youth under age 18 are arrested. African American youth comprise 16 % of youth population, 30 % of juvenile court referrals, 36 % of youth in residential placement and 58 % of youth admitted to state adult prison. The Center for Civil Rights Remedies at UCLA Civil Rights Project reports in a: "The fact that 14 % of districts suspended more than one of every 10 Black elementary students, and 21 % of districts suspended one of every four Black secondary students." (Losen et al. 2015). Research by Chmielewski, Belmonte, Stoudt and Fine documents that gender non-conforming lesbians of color have the highest rates of school suspensions in New York City public schools (2016). While much scholarly and organizing attention has been paid to zero tolerance and suspensions as individual level disruptions, we turn our attention to

policy driven, collective disruptions: school closings and teacher turn over in communities of concentrated, racialized poverty.

The National Center on Educational Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education, reports that in 2000–2001 school year, 717 traditional public schools were closed across the country. In 2010–2011, 1069 schools were closed. In total, from 2000 to 2012 a total of 20,709 schools were closed. In Death by a Thousand Cuts: Racism, School Closures and Public School Sabotage, the writers from Journey for Justice offer a detailed analysis of the consequences of school closing as a corporate educational reform strategy, documenting cuts that disproportionately affected students and teachers in Black and Latin@ urban communities. For example:

> In New Orleans, beginning in the fall of 2014, there will only be five public schools left in the entire city.

- Detroit, New York, and Chicago have all had more than 100 public schools closed in recent years.
- Columbus (OH), Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Houston, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Kansas City, Milwaukee, and Baltimore have all had more than 25 public schools closed in recent years.

School closings are a major policy intervention initiated by urban districts throughout the nation, particularly in low-income communities of color, presumably as a strategy to respond to low-achieving schools, although the evidence suggests that new schools designed to replace old schools often serve a different population, and that the displaced students rarely benefit from the closure (Fabricant and Fine, 2013). Indeed, in a cross city analysis of "the color of school closures" in Chicago, New York and Philadelphia (see Galletta, 2012 and The National Opportunity to Learn Campaign 2015), schools slated for closing were 88 % Black and 94 % low-income in Chicago, 81 % Black and 93 % low-income in Philadelphia and 59 % Black and 82 % low-income in New York City.

Studies have tracked students displaced by school closings in Cleveland, Chicago and Denver, and find that displaced students lose relationships, trust and continuity – and academic achievement. In Cleveland, Galletta (2012) finds that displaced students have already attended 5–6, and sometimes as many as seven elementary schools. These are young people who already have long histories, in their short lives, of disrupted education. In Chicago, De la Torre and Gwynne (2009) find that school closings had a "negative impact on reading and math achievement"; that 42 % of students were sent to weak receiving schools and experienced more than one month loss in reading and half month in math; students sent to strong receiving schools (6 %) gained a month in reading and 2 months in math. Overall, 94 % of the displaced students evidenced no gains beyond their expected development. To the extent that some students do improve academically after a school closure, "the level of support and intervention necessary for mitigating displaced students' loss of social networks and their adjustment to the receiving school" has serious financial

obligations and academic implications, unlikely to be fulfilled in cities in austerity. Children and youth living in poverty and attending schools of concentrated poverty are both more likely to need, and less likely to have, access to schools of stability, relational trust, and high quality consistent instruction. These young people are also more likely to experience high rates of school transitions, disruptions and school closures. As Eccles and Roeser (2011) argue: "[these transitions] are particularly troublesome in our highly mobile society to which teachers represent one of the last stable sources of nonparental role models for adolescents." (229) Even if initially generated as a rational solution to the problems of under-achievement and/or lack of population, school closing as a reform strategy is a huge disruption; more aptly, a colonizing move in communities of color, a land grab in disproportionately Black and Latin@neighborhoods, with no evidence of academic effectiveness. The aggressive school closure movement in largely Black and Latin@, and immigrant communities, further destabilizes low income communities in urban America, accelerating the velocity and penetration of gentrification and precarity, and undermining relationships between schools and communities; families and educators, and youth and local public institutions. As you will hear, below, a simple pattern of accelerated and racialized disruption appears to be related to impending gentrification, criminalization and high rates of teacher turnover.

Teacher Turnover: With estimates that the revolving door of teacher turnover costs the nation $2.2 billion a year, Simon and Moore Johnson (2015) confirm that staffing instability in public schools is rising, particularly in low income schools serving Black and Latin@ youth: many schools serving the neediest students lose more than half of their teaching staff every 5 years; the instability rate is massively higher in high poverty schools than in wealthier communities. Schools in urban districts spend, on average, $70,000 on costs associated with turnover; in suburban districts that figure drops to $33,000. The Chicago Schools Consortium reports that 20 % of schools in the Chicago public system lose more than 30 % of their faculty annually. This hemorrhaging of educators, experience, relationships and shredding of school culture is not, of course, random. Demographically these ruptures are most likely to occur in low income Black and Latin@ schools, but, as Simon and Moore Johnson persuasively demonstrate, the strongest predictor of teacher loss is not student demography but school culture, including (in)competent and (un)supportive administration, (lack of) access to mentors and professional development for new teachers, a sense of (low) trust within faculty relations and (minimal) participation in school governance.

In a systematic look at "How teacher turnover harms student achievement," Ronfeldt et al. (2013) analyzed data from New York City to put to empirical test the prevailing belief, advocated by researchers such as Hanushek, that "students benefit when their school hires teachers who are more effective than the ones who left," with effectiveness being "something that individual teachers bring with them (or not)." (3) In contrast, Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) have found that when educators leave low-income schools, those schools are often challenged to attract new teachers and end up hiring relatively inexperienced or less prepared teachers. There are multiple negative consequences: novice teachers are not as effective as experienced educators; novice teachers know less, and therefore can not engage, the

historic rhythms of institutional practices; the loss of educators affects not only the students in the disrupted classrooms, but typically induces a bumping of educators into new and different levels, undermining norms and trust essential to strong school communities.

Ronfeldt and colleagues designed a study to test these competing propositions– the "disruption" versus "continuity" explanation– and found that school culture, in terms of staff cohesion and sense of community, is highly related to student engagement and achievement. "Patterned norms" of interaction, trust, and school level traditions and rituals require long-standing relationships and shared mission, and are disrupted by high rates of turnover or frequent changes. "New hires in underserved schools often are less experienced and so require more supports to improve." (5) Across the board, "turnover has a harmful effect on student achievement." (17) "On average, students are harmed by the changing composition in teacher effectiveness that results from teacher turnover, primarily in lower-performing schools" (19), in both ELA and math. Further, "teacher turnover is particularly harmful to the achievement of students in schools with large populations of low-performing and Black students." (21).

These scholars generate evidence to support policies that would diminish teacher mobility and yet, in urban communities across the country, the headlines read:

> *7000 New Orleans teachers, laid off after Katrina, win court ruling* (Jan 2012)
> *Chicago may lay off 1500 educators and staff*—expected to have to fill 1450 teaching vacancies before the opening of school (August 11, 2015)
> *Newark: 700 teachers may be laid off, many replaced by TFA* (2/14)

These patterns are not idiosyncratic: high "churn" is a strategy advocated by educational reformers who subscribe to the business model of Disruptive Innovation.

At this moment in history, public educational policy is deeply influenced by corporate informed strategies—testing, charter school expansion and organizational strategies that sit beneath the framework Disruptive Innovation. The key elements of Disruptive Innovation were developed by Christiansen (2015), from Harvard's Graduate School of Business, as a model for entrepreneurs, recognizing risk and spikes of disruption and transformation. There are courses on Disruptive Innovation at business schools across the country, and for a short formulaic description, you may want to download Deloitte Consulting's monograph "How Disruptive Innovation can help government achieve more for less."

Andy Smarick, a policy fellow with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, has been a major spokesperson for Disruptive Innovation, an early advocate for the dismantling of public education districts and aggressive voice calling for school closings and teacher removal where "educational failure" is declared: "The churn caused by closures isn't something to be feared; on the contrary it's a familiar prerequisite for industry health. … Creative Destruction catalogued the ubiquity of turnover in thriving industries, including the even loss of once dominant players. Churn generates new ideas, ensures responsiveness, facilitates needed change and empowers the best to do more." (2010).

There is a centrifugal pull in low-income communities, where unemployment, lack of housing, food insecurity and family instability huddle together. And now we see that the very schools, and relations with teachers—undoubtedly long troubled and in need of intervention—are not being repaired or transformed but disrupted, in the name of educational progress, civil rights and reform. We have decades of evidence, like the narratives and maps that opened this essay, demonstrating that the very students living in poverty, students of color, immigrant students and struggling students benefit from, need more and enjoy less sustained relations with educators and meaningful instructional time, on average, than wealthier students, White and US-born students, and academically flourishing students, respectively.

While empirical evidence consistently demonstrates a positive, buffering role for continuity in youth-adult relationships, contemporary policy reforms have disrupted families, closed schools, cut/transferred or terminated teachers and enabled the "flipping" of low income housing stock. Drawing on evidence from neuropsychology, developmental, and social psychology, as well as educational studies, sociology and public health, the empirical story line challenges this policy strategy and finds that Disruptive Innovation has severe racial and classed consequences.

Educational theorist and researcher Pruitt (2011) thoughtfully conceptualized how under-resourced schools, serving low-income children, with committed but burdened faculties, can nevertheless create *holding environments*, borrowing the term from D.W. Winnicott, for educators and youth:

> Teachers are being asked to take on new tasks with little support and shifting goals, under considerable scrutiny about outcomes… workers in organizations dealing with these kinds of challenges need more than what has traditionally been studied as social support on the job…human beings must be 'held' to develop well. These 'holding environments' are 'temporary bases to which people retreat for respite, support, help…' enabling them to recover their bearings and figure out what to do. (42, originally published in 2000, reprinted in Pruitt 2011).

From this literature review on structural and educational precarity, three preliminary conclusions can be drawn. First, more poor children of color are significantly dispossessed and living precarious lives than was true a decade ago. Second, for schools to be effective, equitable and accountable to children and families, high poverty schools require finance equity stability, support, professional development and practices that build trust among educators, between community and school and among the youth and the staff. Third, schools serving low income Black and Latin@ students—both immigrant and U.S. born—not only inherit bodies that tremble from substantial structural precarity but these schools themselves are targets for fortified policies that induce disruption and punishment.

As we gathered these stories in what we thought was preparation for a lawsuit, we assumed a responsibility to represent and circulate students' wisdom, pain and desires. Despite years, and generations of institutional betrayal, young people growing up in poverty yearn for educational spaces that are filled with respect for their biographies, capacities and for who they are not yet; where they might read for pleasure and research idiosyncratic questions that appeal; where they can gently

enter into rich complex dialogue about matters of social import with educators and peers and many answers are valued; spaces where they belong, are treated with dignity and where they can produce work of meaning. They are asking us for no more than what is their human right: to a dignified education filled with challenge and support, possibility and stretch.

It is clear that on the way to the Land of Oz, low-income students are struggling to persist, to be respected, to find community, and to engage with meaning in their schooling. The students who sit in advanced classes, engage in Ethnic Studies or Leadership Institutes at public universities, have tasted the joys of meaningful time well spent; they have had opportunities to discuss with faculty and other students the racialized political economy behind their precarious yellow brick road and their flying monkeys. But they worry that their friends are falling off the road, that they know how to take tests but not learn, that what they are following is a road to nowhere. These young people deserve public policies that honor continuity, community, democracy, relationships, inquiry and creativity. What elites take for granted in their children's private, or public schools.

Contemporary neoliberal reforms sever schools from communities; seduce motivated students out of their neighborhoods to exit for promises of mobility; close and reopen schools for other people's children. These reforms viscously exacerbate the precarity infesting low income communities of color; a material and psychological virus undermining the core of our collective humanity. In contrast, the movement for community schools, advocated by Journeys for Justice, activist groups in New York City and Newark, Detroit and Chicago, for "grow your own teachers," performance assessment and restorative justice take seriously the precarious conditions in which low income students survive, and the need for schools to belong to communities as pods of democracy, community engagement, anti-racist organizing, intellectually thrilling and culturally engaged curriculum, and the arts; spaces in which health services, social workers, community organizers, educators, lawyers and youth come together to build schools for justice; to resist the extraction industries of Disruptive Innovation and to honor, recognize and engage the tragic and vibrant brilliance borne in precarity.

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