

Another Philadelphia Story: Mobilizing resistance and widening the educational imagination in the midst of corporate assault on the public sphere

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I was recently invited to participate in the MIT Media Lab PLATFORM, a Summit of Innovators. Brilliant engineers, computer scientists, coders, activists, designers, and technology wizards -- this was a gathering of people of color who have been remarkably successful, provocative, and creative against the odds. The seminar opened with a stunning young man who began his remarks by quoting Mark Zuckerberg's innovators' motto: "Move fast and break things."

On the second day of the Summit, I presented on the work of the Public Science Project at the Graduate Center, CUNY, where researchers, activists, and everyday youth undertake critical participatory action research for and with those who have experienced the sharp racialized edge of policy-based dispossession. In my short talk, I explained that for 30 years I have been researching with youth in Philadelphia, New York, Newark, and in California, whose things -- dreams, lives, institutions, and communities -- had indeed been broken by drive-by "innovators" who may have thought they had a good idea, or simply sought to profit, but carried no sense of respect for the people who had to live through their experiments. When they failed, these innovators packed their bags and moved onto the next "virgin" territory, eager to expand their "market share." These (mostly) men bet on risk, anticipated failure, and seemingly felt accountable to no one in the community where their innovations have been handsomely subsidized. With no rear-view mirror, they embody remote executioners of state or corporate takeover. but the victims look much the same -- poor, immigrant, African American, Latino, sometimes White, from families who have long histories of structural violence, survival, and resistance.

I returned to my hotel room, and I cried for Philadelphia and Detroit, petri dishes for "reform" de jour.

And then I received an email from Robert LeBlanc, with these stunning essays of courage, caution, despair, analysis, and urgency penned by educators, organizers, and scholars; elders and those coming up; from writers in depression and writers in action.

And I cried again to read Torch Lytle, brilliant educator, political strategist, a man with a professional resume of dedication, conclude, "the prospects here [in Philadelphia] are not encouraging."

I have been asked to write an epilogue to these essays -- reflecting back to think forward.

We could conclude the volume with a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for those who have plundered through Philadelphia over the decades, with corporate policy, state takeovers, and test/surveillance-driven reform, ignoring educators, students, and parents -- a trifecta of democratic abuse, closing schools, and silencing communities, and repeating the neo-liberal mantra, "This is for your own good, in the name of civil rights." We could call for reparations.

Alternatively, drawing upon Philadelphia's long recognized history of struggle for educational justice, we could close the volume by celebrating the stunning activism of Philadelphia's Student Union and Youth United for Change, recognized nationally as outstanding enactments of student voice, action, compassion, and organizing. We could display t-shirts inscribed with "More classmates, less inmates," with links to videos of youth walking out of school demanding dignity and educational justice.

We could take a sweet nostalgic bath in the words and wisdom of Philadelphia educators in this volume who, like so many Philadelphia educators who came before, narrate delicious, daring, and impossible challenges of the everyday as they cradle the soul of students and the city of Brotherly and Sisterly Neglect. We could sketch a thank you note to David Sokoloff, who has taught in more than 14 rooms in 4 years, and Anissa Weinraub, whose passion for activism is breathtaking in the midst of her pink slip.

With an economic epilogue, we could expose Philadelphia's promiscuous affair with charters and privatization, and its consistent betrayal of its people of poverty, people of color, and people of relentless dedication. Or we could scratch our collective heads over

the 2001 protest against the Edison Schools in Philadelphia, and the fact that Christopher Cerf, former CEO of this voracious and systematically failing privatizer, is now the Commissioner of Education in New Jersey.

Channeling Philadelphia's spiritual traditions, we could worship – and pray for – the prec(ar)ious solidarities of parents, communities, educators, and youth who have delicately stitched a coalition within PCAPS. Or, we could have a moment of silence for the 23 schools that have been shuttered; for the communities disenfranchised; for babies who have been betrayed, yet again,

Finally, we might end with a comic strip of Zach Lax's opening day of school – no desks, assigned to teach in the wrong subject, as too many students are running into his classroom. Zach, this is my annual late August anxiety dream – I am supposed to teach feminist theory and a room full of immigrant men expect me to teach them Chemical Engineering. But I get to wake up and laugh. You teach. Bless you.

But instead, let me use my pages to trace why Philadelphia must, in extremely desperate times, fight in solidarity with other cities, for that which is common, accessible, democratic, anti-racist – “public” education to be sustained over time, over space, despite corporate carpet baggers.

I assume I don't have to rehearse the familiar statistics.

Our nation is haunted by swelling inequality gaps. Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich reminds us that the wealthiest 1% own at least 25% of privately held wealth, while law professor and scholar Michelle Alexander, in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), tells us that there are more Black men in prison today than were enslaved in 1850. The Chronicle of Higher Education continues to report that financial assistance to higher education is in jeopardy for low-income youth and shamefully unavailable to students who are considered undocumented. British epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2009) explain that these gaps – even more than the percentage of a community living in poverty – adversely affect our collective well-being in terms of health, infant mortality, crime, fear, violence, civic participation, voting, and sense of shared fates.

Across the country, with the tutelage of organizations like ALEC, the resources of Koch Brothers, Eli Broad, Walton, Gates, and other philanthropies, public officials – Republicans and Democrats alike – have chosen to transfer the economic pain and structural precarity onto the already burdened poor and working class, proverbial wolves in sheep's clothing hiding under the banner of 'austerity' or, more cynically, as 'accountability'. Market logic promises to save poor people from the inefficiency of the public by providing exit ramps for a few, while dismantling public systems, closing schools, testing children and evaluating teachers, and now holding schools of education accountable for the test scores of the children of our students. Collective bargaining is under attack; books are banned in Tucson; undocumented children and their families exiled from schools in Atlanta; schools shuttered in New York, Chicago and Cleveland, sold to for-profit and charter networks in Philadelphia and New Orleans. High stakes testing has become the naturalized ink of “scientific stratification,” staining the souls of children, evaluating teachers, undermining unions, closing schools, and ripping the public soul out of low-income communities. We witness today the systematic disinvestment in mental health services and educational access, and at the same time, a muscular investment in criminalization, high-stakes testing, surveillance of youth and educators, and the pharmaceuticalization of our cultural fears. The consequences are severe and uneven, racialized and classed. And somebody's making money.

At the dawn of the 1900s, W.E.B. Du Bois published *The Crisis*, a magazine committed to chronicling the ongoing exploitation of the African American community. A brilliant man, he understood that our country would not likely attend or respond to the cumulative structural neglect and miseducation of Black children until a profit could be made or until the people would revolt (see Du Bois, 1903). A century later, Naomi Klein, in her book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), catalogues how the U.S. exploits crisis – natural or human-made war – in Katrina, Iraq, Afghanistan, Detroit as an opportunity for invasion, empire, and profit. If Du Bois and Klein had a baby, it would be our current historic moment, when the perverse braiding of poor people's pain with corporate profit has become an American pastime, inscribed in federal, state, and local policy. In 2012, Eli Broad, of the Broad Foundation, published an essay, “Let no crisis go to waste.” A man of his word.

Declarations of crisis have become ideological and strategic, lubricating profits for a few, as Broad would prefer. As significant, the corporate reform agenda has strategically pitted parents against teachers against students; charter parents against traditional school parents; high achieving youth against those who struggle. In Detroit, a few years ago, Shonandra Jones, a parent organizer, demanded in a public forum that educators should be sentenced to prison in the event that they do not increase students' test scores: a tragic algorithm of how far we have come, where communities have been convinced that prison is the only way to hold people accountable, that test scores are a measure of student capacity and achievement, that teachers are the enemy.

And yet, even as the public sphere has been hijacked, and a war unleashed on the poor, immigrant people of color and women – across the globe we hear the rumbles of revolution, in the streets of Madison and Cairo, Greece and Spain. In the last years we have witnessed a virtual human chain of educational struggles unleashed across and beyond the United States, at the University of Puerto Rico, in Chile, Madison, Wisconsin, Newark, Portland, Seattle, Detroit, Michigan, Chicago, Oakland, and in Philadelphia. When

politicians banned ethnic studies in Tucson, Arizona, throughout the city – in parks, on football fields and in community based education liberation zones – parents, educators, youth read aloud the brilliant writings of Bill Bigelow, Paolo Freire, Gloria Anzaldua, and other dangerous authors of banned books. All over the country parents, educators, students, and professional organizations are denouncing the over-reliance on high-stakes testing. In New York State, 1,400 principals and 1,200 NY professors signed petitions against the perverse use of high-stakes testing for disparate impact on youth, evaluation of teachers and how the scientific legitimization for school closings in what is little more than a land grab. And in Philadelphia, hundreds of young people walked out of their high schools during the late Spring of 2013, marching down to City Hall, demanding no less than dignity, finance equity, and educational justice.

Young people's desires to be known, respected, and educated, in Philadelphia and throughout the land, are barely diminished by generations of structural betrayal. And yet we, the adults, are in distress.

I end on a note of our collective responsibility to fight through the despair, build local coalitions among students, parents and educators, across zip codes, class lines and languages, and mobilize with allies in cities across the country.

Each of the essays in this volume bears witness to an incredibly difficult moment in the history of public education. There are dangerous, well-funded forces eager to dismantle, destroy, undermine and never be held accountable. Nevertheless, Philadelphia has a proud, if contentious and braided history as a city of persistent racialized oppression and vibrant resistance; brotherly love and bloody betrayal; structural violence and caring communities; where quiet moans of Mumia Abu Jamal mingle with the unfulfilled promises of the Liberty Bell. Highlander organizer Myles Horton warned us decades ago about "the long haul" of struggles for social justice. Neither freedom nor equity materialize in a single exchange and yet oppression is never total and never final. Oppressive regimes always meet with and cultivate waves of resistance that will outlast any drive-by reform. Mobilization is long and hard, and requires strategic solidarities in, and across, place. Philadelphia knows this dialectic well.

The concentration of wealth, power, and control by a few is neo-liberal sport, but a longstanding Philadelphia tradition. At the same time, however, the political mobilization by many for racial and educational justice, linked across zip codes, languages, immigration status, race/ethnicities/religions/sexualities/genders, is also a strong Philadelphia tradition. A fierce and proud history of resistance is claimed by Quakers, abolitionists, by African American radicals and Latino activists, for feminism and queer rights in the city of Brotherly and Sisterly Power. Resisting while holding one another through decades of oppression is a skill well developed in Philadelphia's communities of color.

Thirty years ago, when the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative was running into systemic resistance from the district and the union, energized gatherings of parents, community activists, educators, and students held strong to a vision of educational justice. When the resistance from the "top" was most fierce, I personally took to bed, to more wine (and whine) than was typical for me. My humor was depleted, as was my sense of possibility. I was indeed discouraged.

My friend Rochelle Nichols Solomon, brilliant educational activist and scholar of the streets, masseuse for the soul and cardiologist for the heart of Philadelphia, said something I will never forget (and probably never remember accurately): "Racial justice, educational justice, this is a long fight. We don't expect to win every battle. As a white woman, with a Ph.D. who teaches at Penn, you're probably used to winning. Welcome to the struggle."

We know from Rochelle, from nature, and from politics, that shared fates and solidarities are critical to sustainability. Consider the teachings of science writer Janine M. Beynus (1997). Beynus pulls social problems up by their roots and asks, "How would nature solve this?" (Goldsmith and Elizabeth, 2011). She has studied, for instance, how trees survive natural disasters, and she tells us that in every forest, there are sacrifice trees – you know these sacrifice trees too well. But she also tells us that the secret to survival lives in the might oaks. Standing tall, almost unbowed, she tells us, oak trees grow in communities, expansive, bold and comfortably taking up lots of space. While they appear autonomous and free-standing, the truth is that they are held up by a thick, entwined maze of roots, deep and wide. These intimate underground snuggles lean on each other for strength, even and especially in times of natural disaster.

Sylvia Cremer is an evolutionary biologist studying the social life of ants in Austria. Cremer's experiments have demonstrated that if one ant in a colony is contaminated with small pox, the other ants don't exclude the sick one, but actually organize to lick her clean, until she is healthy. And what Cremer has found is that not only does the one ant survive in more than 90% of the cases, but the collective immunity of the colony rises. We are profoundly interdependent; only as strong as our weakest members; and strengthened by washing each other's burdens away.

Philadelphia has always been a national model of deep roots, powerful resistance, washing away one another's burdens, and building tight solidarities. Today there is a need for doubled solidarities – within local communities and across the national landscape. Throughout the U.S. and globally, communities of color, poverty and disenfranchisement are contending with well-financed corporate circuits of dispossession, implemented through technologies of government and public policy. Resisting together, educators, parents, community activists, students, universities, artists, and independent media must link arms within our

cities, across lines of struggle, and also across cities as diverse as Chicago, Detroit, Newark, New York, Atlanta, Cleveland, Oakland, Milwaukee.... As in Philadelphia, we will struggle together against corporate takeover, even as we nurture the popular imagination for what could be, and feed the engaged educational and political yearnings of our young.

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Source URL: <http://urbanedjournal.org/archive/volume-10-issue-1-summer-2013/another-philadelphia-story-mobilizing-resistance-and-widening->