Commentary

Surveillance, Violence, and the Marginalization of Students of Color

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With numbers of school shootings on the rise across the United States and the preponderance of mass shootings off of school grounds, some school districts and politicians are responding with proposals for beefed up security and surveillance measures. While these proposals may sound appealing in the immediate wake of disaster, policy-makers and public school personnel must be aware of the disproportionately negative impact surveillance measures in schools have on students of color. School surveillance, heavily advocated in a post-Columbine world by a largely White and middle-class population, serves to simultaneously protect and marginalize (Lewis, 2006). Indeed, scholars such as Lewis (2006), Davis (2003), and Brown (2003) have argued that surveillance privileges and discriminates along racial and class lines. This commentary explores that tenuous dynamic, specifically focusing on the differential impact of school surveillance policies on minority students at Jamaica High School in Jamaica, Queens, New York, where I taught 9th grade English during the 2012-2013 school year. I argue that the school's multiple layers of surveillance physically marginalized student bodies upon entrance into school every day, and I question how students perceived surveillance, especially as teacher bodies were not subjected to similar surveillance measures. I end with an uncomfortable observation that rather than protect students from danger, the presumed intent of surveillance features, one impact of surveillance at Jamaica was to make minority student bodies potentially more vulnerable to the threat of violence, an unacceptable but all too common consequence for people of color in a reactive and fear-driven political environment.

Positioned on a vast green lawn in Jamaica, Queens, Jamaica High School is both imposing and grand. Built in the Georgian Revival architectural style typical of the urban school reformers of the early 20th century, the school's architectural features were originally meant to impose an order and symmetry on the 'irregular' immigrants who first attended the school. Almost 100 years later, the building that houses the former Jamaica High School still stands, yet the school in name does not. In 2007, Jamaica High School landed on the "persistently dangerous schools" list compiled once each year in the State of New York, offering parents the option to send their children to school elsewhere (Chan, 2007). Metal detectors were installed at the building's entrance, school security guards increased, and cameras were

mounted. Since then Jamaica High School has slowly lost enrollment, prompting the Department of Education to figuratively close Jamaica's doors, opening the school up to a number of small "boutique" schools and thereby pushing Jamaica High School to the margins of its own building. I taught at one of these boutique schools in the 2012-2013 school year, a school housed in the social studies wing of the former Jamaica High School that primarily served the children of immigrant families of Caribbean, South Asian, and African descent. Despite closing the only school in the building on the persistently dangerous list, the metal detectors and cameras still stand at Jamaica High School and dozens of other schools serving poor, Black and Latino students across the city (*School Safety*, n.d.).

Each day during the 2012-2013 school year I bypassed security—an elaborate metal detector system comparable to airport security—while my students removed their belts, backpacks, and shoes, were searched for banned cell phones or music devices, or, forgetting to drop their cell phone off at the deli down the street for one dollar per day, hustled back up the hill to make it to school in time. My students were often late for class because scanning moved too slowly or a metal detector failed to work correctly. Despite the annoyances they caused, the metal detectors felt safe for me, especially after the mass murders at Sandy Hook Elementary in nearby Connecticut. Yet my correlation of surveillance with safety might be very much in line with my suburban, White middle-class upbringing. Indeed, Ericson and Haggerty (2000) argue, "Subjects of surveillance now desire their own subjugation. Since Columbine and 9/11, a predominantly White, middle-class populous has cried out for more stringent forms of surveillance" (as cited in Lewis, 2006, p. 270). From my uncritical perspective, I viewed surveillance as a safety measure meant to keep us *all* safe, even though I never once was subjected to it. However, surveillance does not operate separate from race, class, and gender implications, and the multiple layers of surveillance present at Jamaica High School (cameras, guards, and metal detectors), suggests that the building's historical legacy of cultural indoctrination continues in the present, as surveillance embodies "a sign value, reminding people of what constitutes acceptable behaviour, whilst threatening consequences for deviancy" (Hope, 2009, pp. 893-4). Lewis (2006), an advocate for critical surveillance literacy, explains that in all likelihood my students and others in high security schools did experience security differently than I did, as "differential effects of surveillance do in fact occur" (Lewis, 2006, p. 270). In particular, he explains how surveillance operates differently in suburban and urban contexts. This is important—having grown up in a suburban area, I have internalized surveillance differently than my urban students because, on the whole, surveillance operates more severely and with increased visibility in urban contexts. For example, Lewis (2006) argues that suburban surveillance regulates while urban surveillance polices. Likewise, suburban surveillance prepares middle-management workers while urban surveillance prepares future prisoners (Lewis, 2006). Indeed, Willene Magny, a parent of a Jamaica High School student attempting to transfer her son away from the school due to the "daunting" nature of the metal detectors, claimed, "'[My son] was nervous about the scanning. He's never done it before. It's like going to prison and now he has to deal with [it] every day'" (Medina, 2007).

While I viewed surveillance as a regulatory feature, others viewed it in a more punishing light that undoubtedly influenced their perception of the school

and the education that occurred within its walls. Some scholars have argued that highly visible and pervasive surveillance works to block the possibility of "critical thinking and transformative praxis" in schools, and instead creates "learning communities built on mutual fear and paranoia" (Lewis, 2006, p. 279). I wonder how my students interpreted the culture of their school, whose official mission it was to foster a close-knit "professional community of learners" (Dubei, 2008). How might they have reconciled surveillance features that served to socialize them into prison culture with the rhetoric of small school reformers hoping for a close-knit community? If surveillance features help to normalize the existence of crime and transgression (Hope, 2009), how might students who are subjected to such surveillance internalize their role in society or imagine new possibilities for a more peaceful future? A sophomore at Jamaica High School interviewed for the *New York Times* offers some insight, claiming, "I don't think nothing can be done. There's already scanning all the time. Nothing's [school violence and crime] going to change" (Medina, 2007). In an environment in which students seem defeated by the inevitability of school violence and subsequent surveillance, one wonders how a school might meet its mission to "construct an environment where community, citizenship, culture, and emotional intelligence lead to life-long learning and success" (Dubei, 2008) when that environment is first mediated by a hierarchical scanning procedure that polices and regulates student bodies, and yet allows teachers to sidestep the very same regulatory feature?

These questions aside, surveillance does more than just disrupt the community and culture of a school. It also places an undue financial burden on students in New York City. Like other school districts, New York City bans cell phones in schools, a rule that goes largely unenforced (Hindman, 2012). In schools with metal detectors, however, cell phones become immediately visible. As a result, schools with metal detectors can enforce the cell phone ban, forcing the majority minority students in those schools to find an alternative location to store their phones during the school day. My students and others within Jamaica High School stored their cell phones at one of three bodegas and delis in the area for the cost of one dollar per day, a trend that the *Huffington Post* points out is city-wide (Hindman, 2012). In fact, an estimated $4.2 million is generated each year from cell phone storage in New York City, with the majority of those dollars coming from low-income students (Hindman, 2012). Violence and theft have cropped up near school sites as a result of the high concentration of expensive gadgets stored in the small delis, prompting more police patrolling—in other words, prompting more surveillance (Kilgannon, 2014). The cell phone ban, then, combined with increased surveillance at mostly minority schools, creates a hyper-visibility of minority student transgressions, leaving students at majority White, middle-class schools that lack surveillance features free to transgress the ban with no penalty, further perpetuating the subjugation of minority groups, potentially increasing or centralizing the threat of violence in the areas surrounding schools with metal detectors, and adding disproportional surveillance via police presence.

Because of the unintended financial burden, the damaging psychological effects of constant self-policing, and the culture of fear and paranoia that security creates, my experience teaching in Jamaica High School taught me that students, particularly our most policed and watched students, may be put at greater risk when surveillance features pervade school sites. Teachers, administrators, and

politicians who argue for increased surveillance to protect the safety of all students must recognize the racial and class-based dimensions of their calls and continually interrogate the impact of surveillance on the lives and psyches of students inside and outside of the schoolhouse walls.

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