

Eve L. Ewing, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago's South Side*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780226526027 (cloth); ISBN: 9780226526331 (ebook)

Ghosts in the Schoolyard is a beautifully written monograph with memoir-like qualities. In fact, Ewing explains her project as “offer[ing] a story that is revelatory based on the experience of my own life and the lives of community members living in the shadow of history” (p.7).

Accordingly, she draws on her perspective as a Chicagoan as well an intellectually rich array of scholars in order to make sense of a spike in school closures in a predominantly low-income, Black community of Chicago known as Bronzeville. In doing so, her work has considerable implications for geographers and other critical scholars, especially given her meditations on concepts like displacement, Black placemaking, spatial politics, spatial imaginations, and the symbolism of the school site.

In developing her analysis of school closures in Bronzeville, Ewing employs and extends the analyses of urban sociologists, critical geographers, and Black studies scholars. As such, her book confidently enters ongoing conversations in the field regarding the well-established study of Chicago, as well as the emerging subfield of Black geographies. For example, she elaborates on the findings of Wilson (2012), Pattillo (2008), and Sampson (2012) regarding concentrated disadvantage in Chicago that is both racialized and spatialized. In another intervention, Ewing engages *Black Metropolis* by Drake and Cayton (1970) to discuss how Black life in Bronzeville is both timeless and temporary: “Given the seventy-year difference in our observations, it’s striking how closely Drake and Cayton’s description mirrors my own – businesses owned, and staffed by black people, the familiar faces, the *Defender*. But in other ways our descriptions differ ... How did the hum of black social life ... dwindle from the ‘continuous eddy’ that Drake and Cayton describe?” (p.59-60). Ewing takes on that question later in the book by examining the innumerable structural changes that occurred since the first edition of *Black Metropolis* in 1945. Ewing also builds on Hunter’s (2013) work on Black placemaking and Lipsitz’s (2011) concept of the black spatial imagination to demonstrate how residents of Bronzeville transformed

it into a hub of Black culture, an intervention reminiscent of Woods' (2017) masterful work on the Mississippi Delta.

Ghosts in the Schoolyard is organized into four methodologically distinct, but thematically complementary chapters. Following the introduction, in her first chapter Ewing sets out to answer the question "If the schools are *small, the worst, lacking*, and so on, why is anyone fighting for them?" (p.16) by focusing on the 2015 campaign to save Dyett High School, which was slated to close. In uncovering the origins of Dyett, she indexes the intimate relationship it had to the Black community: "Dyett ... took place within what renowned sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois called 'the Veil' – the border of an all-black world" (p.21). While grounding her analysis in her observations of a 34-day hunger strike to save the school, she reveals what is at stake, namely resisting the belief that Dyett was a "disposable school serving disposable people, to be moved around in whatever ways were convenient at the moment" (p.44). She further adds that the Dyett campaign was "a referendum on the history, legacy, and future of Bronzeville and on the right to black educational self-determination" (ibid.). This finding should inspire more critical engagement with the significance of school sites in cities plagued by rampant racial segregation and gentrification.

In her second chapter, Ewing employs document analysis to excavate the ways in which Bronzeville came about as a result of racialized containment via violence, restrictive covenants, and education policies. With regard to the racial covenants, Ewing notes that they "reinforce[ed] a sort of invisible fence around Bronzeville" that "ironically ... set the stage for a degree of economic, political, and creative vitality for black Chicagoans" (p.65). Here, Ewing cites Lipsitz (2011) to discuss how Black placemaking and cultural production can *rehumanize* the experience of segregation. Also noteworthy are her insights on the symbolism of the kitchenette amidst urban crowding and the ways in which Bronzeville's child population was manipulated by mutually reinforcing housing and education policies. Using Wright's (2008) discussion of the kitchenette as it related to plantations, plunder, and prison, Ewing compared Bronzeville to "one big kitchenette" (p.67). In response to the ever-booming population, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) created densely-populated highrises that "transformed the black metropolis into a city of children" (p.71). Given that Bronzeville's population of children per square mile was

four times the overall population density of Chicago, myriad underfunded and overcrowded schools were built to meet the demand. When it was later determined in the 1990s that the CHA had to demolish over 22,000 units of housing across the city, Bronzeville saw a rapid decline in the number of children, which later became a justification for the closure of schools like Dyett.

In her third chapter, Ewing conducts a discourse analysis of audio recordings from school closure hearings. Noting the recurring references to family in public statements and the importance of fictive kinship in Black communities, Ewing connects school closures to family separation, claiming that, “[h]istorically, the intentional disruption of the African American family has been a primary tool of white supremacy, one with deep roots extending from the time of chattel slavery through the present era of mass incarceration” (p.109). Moreover, she finds that the closing of schools led to the displacement and endangerment of countless students who were pushed across gang boundaries. Casting blame on neoliberalism as fellow Chicago scholar Lipman (2011) has, Ewing notes that district and city officials ignored both local knowledge and recent history in favor of an ostensibly data-driven plan, a process which Woods (2017: 256) has elsewhere argued serves “as a cloaking device, as a silencing strategy, and as an attempt to make struggling and conscious humans scientifically invisible and voiceless numbers”.

In her fourth chapter, Ewing analyzes her interviews of community members and notes the recurring theme of death and mourning. Such emergent themes led to her theorizing of “institutional mourning”, which she defines as “the social and emotional experience undergone by individuals and communities facing the loss of a shared institution they are affiliated with – such as a school, church, residence, neighborhood, or business district ... ” (p.127). This intervention raises questions about ontological and epistemological relationships to place, especially in relation to nondominant identities. In regard to Black urban communities, Ewing argues that they continue to deal with the legacy of Jim Crow and as such for them “‘home’ often includes an attachment to certain institutions” (p.128). To flesh out this analysis further, Ewing cites Wilson (2012) to note the social isolation brought on by segregation, resulting in Black communities across class utilizing the same or similar institutions. She also cites Ralph (2015), an anthropologist of Chicago, to claim that not only do Black communities have closer ties to institutions than other groups, but also to the deceased. Henceforth, the death of an institution

like a neighborhood school can be devastating to Black communities: “When the school dies, a version of the self dies with it” (p.131). Finally, the stories of those long displaced, Ewing argues, become the contents of “ghost stories” which counter the city’s dominant narrative: “a ghost story says *something you thought was gone is still happening here*; a ghost story says *those who are dead will not be forgotten*” (p.154).

As a complete work, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard* is an engaging and insightful read for scholars interested in issues of race, space, and inequality. On the one hand, Ewing contributes several concepts worthy of further exploration by scholars in Black studies, geography, and urban sociology. On the other hand, there are areas where her analysis could have been refined or extended. First, given recent scholarly contributions distinguishing anti-Black racism from anti-Blackness (Dumas 2016; Hudson 2014), a focus on school closures as anti-Black events may have yielded a sharper analysis in relation to anti-Black urbicide (McKittrick 2011). Second, Ewing’s conclusions could be further complexified by a relational approach. For example, where do Latinx Chicagoans fit into the picture? Are they simply co-sufferers of racist school closures or might they be somehow implicated in the aforementioned anti-Blackness? Moreover, what parallels might be drawn between Black and Indigenous dispossession? Relatedly, what might be the function of school closures in the context of settler colonialism? Pulido (2018) encourages further grappling of settler colonialism within Chicanx Studies and others have called for greater conversations between Black and Latinx Geographies (Cahuas 2019), but a similar engagement with settler colonialism may be necessary in Black Geographies. As Moreton-Robinson (2015) notes, both Blackness and Whiteness could not have been defined in the U.S. context without Indigenous dispossession. Nevertheless, Ewing’s work is full of fresh insights that should be taken up and built upon across a host of fields. Ewing expertly problematizes taken-for-granted ideas like home, school, and place; in doing so, she reveals how such ideas have their own ideologies, histories, and cultural contingencies worthy of future engagement.

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Julio Angel Alicea
Graduate School of Education & Information Studies
UCLA
jalicea@g.ucla.edu

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