



GHOSTS IN THE SCHOOLYARD

*Racism and
School Closings
on Chicago's
South Side*

EVE L. EWING

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO AND LONDON

3 *Dueling Realities*

Children see things very well sometimes—and idealists even better.

—Joseph Asagai in *A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry

They called his name, and as the judge listened and the court reporter took notes, Bronzeville resident Trey Barksdale¹ took the microphone and made his statement.

I'm not gonna waste too much time rehashing the same things. But there's one thing I need to state. That it sounds like a broken record, like we keep hitting our head against the wall. These consolidations and closings are racist. Plain and simple, clear and cut. [In] '63 my mother and my grandmother fought against the first Daley to get a better life and a better education. And yet, fifty years later, we're still doing the same thing. So, we give you data. Teachers, professionals, they're giving data over and over again how to improve schooling for our children. Especially children of color. Arts, music programs, physical education, rehabbing of buildings. And yet we've given you this information and you've not done anything about it. So it kind of seems like to me you really don't care. 'Cause you don't.

Despite the official trappings of a legal ordeal, this was not a trial—it was a public hearing to determine the fate of Overton Ele-

mentary School. In 2013, once CPS announced the list of fifty-four schools slated for closure, a series of hearings were held to present the district's justifications for the closure and allow members of the public to offer commentary and feedback. Each hearing was designated to be two hours long and was presided over by a "hearing officer," a retired judge tasked with reviewing the evidence presented and making a recommendation to the CEO on whether the school should be closed. A court reporter recorded the proceedings, and people were assured that questions would be answered a few days later on a district website. Representatives from the district began each meeting by reading prepared statements, then a CPS attorney presented a statement. The attorneys each had a binder of data, which they referred to as "exhibits" like evidence at a trial: "At this time I would like to tender to you the CEO's compiled exhibit one, a binder of documents being submitted for your consideration in support of these proposals. . . . The binder consists of documentary evidence in written statements demonstrating [that] the CEO's proposals comply with the requirements of the Illinois school code and the CEO's guidelines for school actions." Then community members (if they registered in advance) were able to take the microphone and make their comments.

A judge, an opening statement, a court reporter, the words "hearing" (not community meeting, or town hall, or open forum), "exhibit one"—these events sure seemed like a trial, with each school acting as defendant. How could they not? When we enter a social situation, we rely on cues and learned "scripts" to understand what behavior is expected of us. The way we speak and act will be different at a conference, in a classroom, at a town hall meeting, or at a church service. Although the closure hearings were not actual trials, their structure made them appear to be exactly that, leaving children, teachers, and parents to defend themselves, each other, and their school.

How do you judge a school, an institution of organized human relationships? What makes a good school? The answer has varied over time. During the era of mass immigration to the United States from Eastern Europe, a “good” school would teach students American norms, language, and values. During the Cold War, a “good” school prepared students to take an active role in standing against Soviet influence.² What does it mean to be a good school in a black neighborhood in Chicago in the first half of the twenty-first century?

In chapter 2 we explored why people care about “failing” institutions by looking at schools on a communitywide historical scale. We saw the ways racism and the policies of the CHA and CPS created an element of social instability for black families, who over the twentieth century had to cope with overcrowded and substandard housing, then the loss of public housing, as well as with overcrowded schools and the need to expend significant political energy demanding something better from CPS. Fifty years later, as Trey Barksdale pointed out, they found themselves in the same situation. In this chapter we will pivot back to the twenty-first century and move to a much smaller scale to consider the implications of that history and those experiences: a world in which the CPS officials charged with running schools and the black students, teachers, and parents affiliated with those schools occupy largely divergent realities. With those dueling realities come dueling belief systems and ideologies regarding how a school ought to be assessed and its future determined.

This chapter will focus on three schools in Bronzeville that CPS determined were failing. Community members showed up and spoke out to argue that this was not the truth—and that CPS’s history as untrustworthy made district leaders unfit even to understand what a good school looks like. From beyond the Veil,

these schools look irredeemable. But for those within the Veil, there’s more to the story.

We have already seen one example of these dueling realities embodied in Barbara Byrd-Bennett’s statement about the school closures. Byrd-Bennett is a black woman, and when she took her position as the head of CPS she already had a long list of credentials as an educator. In a career spanning three decades, she had been a teacher, a principal, and a district leader in New York, Detroit, and Cleveland and had been the chief education officer at CPS. When she defended the proposed closures at a hearing in April 2013, she brought these identities to the fore, inviting listeners to see her as someone who couldn’t possibly be guilty of the racism alleged against her. “To refuse to challenge the status quo that is failing thousands of African-American students year after year,” she said, “consigning them to a future with less opportunities than others—now, that’s what I call racist. I grew up and went to school in an overwhelming African-American community where the schools were underutilized and under-resourced. So believe me—I *know* what racism is, and what racism is not.”

As we will see, this issue—“what racism is, and what racism is not”—is far more contestable than Byrd-Bennett would lead us to believe. Indeed, as I will argue, the very language she uses in her statement, and the language other CPS officials use, is not a matter of clear-cut definitions and facts. Each statement is a claim about schools and their value.

The three “failing” Bronzeville elementary schools were all similar demographically, historically, and academically (see table 5). William J. and Charles H. Mayo Elementary School, opened in 1951 and named after the founders of the Mayo Clinic, was intended to demonstrate family-community partnership to the rest of the district, including programs for parents to observe

TABLE 5. Selected characteristics of focal schools, 2012–13

School	Opened	Enrollment	Percent black	Percent receiving special education services	Percent receiving free/reduced lunch
Mayo	1951	408	92.9 ^a	8.3	94.6
Overton	1963	431	91.9 ^b	8.1	95.4
Williams	1952	383	98.4	16.4	90.9

Source: Chicago Public Schools, *School data*, 2016.

^a District data reports for Mayo indicate 1 percent of students ($n = 4$) reporting as Latino and 6.1 percent “not available.”

^b District data reports for Overton indicate 1.2 percent of students ($n = 5$) reporting as Latino and 6.7 percent “not available.”

classroom learning and work with an in-house representative from the local YMCA.³ Overton, opened in 1963, was named for Anthony Overton, leader of a successful cosmetics conglomerate and publisher of the *Chicago Bee*, the black newspaper that coined the term Bronzeville. The school’s architecture was unique in the district; three three-story towers connected by corridors were designed to supply wide hallways and classrooms with ample natural light.⁴ Williams, named after Daniel Hale Williams, the black doctor who was the first in the nation to perform open-heart surgery, was opened in 1952 to alleviate overcrowding at nearby Drake, where students were enrolled in double shifts.⁵ The school building sits among the Dearborn Homes, the only high-rise public housing in Bronzeville that was renovated rather than demolished during the Plan for Transformation. All three schools served an almost entirely African American student population.⁶

SPEECH AS ACTION

When Barbara Byrd-Bennett says “I know what racism is, and what racism is not,” she is not only *saying* something—she is also, through language, *doing* something. Speech, it turns out, is a form of action. What does that mean?

Imagine a store employee has mistreated you. You’re upset, and you ask to speak to a manager. The employee takes you to the manager’s office. When you open the door, the manager is sitting behind a desk. Before you can say anything, she says, “Would you like to have a seat?” Or perhaps she says, “Who are you and what are you doing in my office?” Or perhaps “Wow, I absolutely love your shirt. Where did you get it?” In each case, you would understand that she is not simply seeking information; her purpose is not just to learn whether you want to sit down, or who you are, or where you shop. Each of these questions is an attempt to *do* something: to calm you, or challenge you, or put you at ease. Each question is a *speech act*: she is saying something, but she is also making a social move. She is taking an action to move this moment between you in the direction she wants it to go.

Discourse analysis is a method for analyzing actions like these. It is a research method that asks, “When this person says this, what are they doing in the social space?” To better understand CPS school closing hearings, I used a particular variety known as *critical discourse analysis*. The “critical” part means I am paying attention to power, social relationships, inequality, and political institutions and the way they show up in spoken interactions so as to better understand the social conditions that produce those actions.

Before the public comment period of each closing hearing, CPS staff members read prepared statements. They are there not to represent themselves or their personal opinions but to give the official perspective of the district; they even preface their comments by saying “on behalf of the CEO.” They repeatedly refer to specific guidelines that led to the closure proposal. In doing so they portray the decision as based on neutral, objective facts, not on any particular ideology or value bias. The first such statement is made by Brittany Meadows, who introduces herself as a “CPS portfolio planner.” Her statement is a fill-in-the-blanks

document: identical words for each school, with the respective data filled in as applicable:

To understand the enrollment efficiency range of a facility, Chicago Public Schools utilizes its space utilization standards which are located in your binder at Tab 14. The enrollment efficiency range is plus or minus 20% of the facility's ideal enrollment. For elementary school buildings, the ideal enrollment is defined as the number of allotted homerooms multiplied by 30. The number of allotted homerooms is approximately 76 to 77% of the total classrooms available. . . . There are 31 total classrooms within the Mayo facility. Approximately 76 to 77% of 31 is 23, the number of allotted homerooms. Twenty-three multiplied by 30 yields the ideal enrollment of the facility, which is 690. As such, the enrollment efficiency range of the Mayo facility is between 552 and 828 students. As I stated, the enrollment of Mayo as of the 20th day of attendance for the 2012–2013 school year is 408. This number is below the enrollment efficiency range, and thus the school is underutilized.

To most educators or members of the broader public, the language Meadows uses would seem completely alien, detached from the school's day-to-day functioning. What is an "enrollment efficiency range"? Meadows's explanation of the term only provokes more questions. Why plus or minus 20 percent? Why is the ideal number thirty children per classroom? What on earth should we make of the bizarre "76 to 77 percent" idea? Although the binder containing her statement was available for attendees to review during the hearing, there was no opportunity to interact with the district representatives or question them directly. Community members were told that this meeting was for them to share *their* perspectives unidirectionally, not to have any sort

of dialogue. In this sense the hearings were very much *not* like a trial. Or, rather, they were like a trial with no one to represent the defendant, no opportunity for cross-examination, and only one attorney permitted to review the evidence in advance.

Meadows closes with the language of logic: "This number is below the enrollment efficiency range, and *thus* the school is underutilized" (my emphasis). Meadows presents this data using an "if . . . then" statement, explaining the *calculation* of the metrics without explaining the *validity* of the constructs involved. In this manner the school closure proposal appears natural and inevitable. *Well, of course, since this number is below the enrollment efficiency range, this is what happens next.* Meadows is absolved of any personal responsibility for this decision. She is merely the messenger, delivering facts and numbers that can't be denied.

The logic implied in Meadows's statement reflects a certain view of reality: the idea that the most important aspects of the educational enterprise can easily be captured in no-nonsense, non-debatable numeric facts. These numbers are taken to be unbiased and a truer representation of what happens in a school building than more qualitative measures (teacher observations, for instance), which are seen as overly subjective or unreliable. These quantifiable facts are also seen as a necessity—perhaps an imperfect measure, but a needed force for decision making in school systems that serve thousands on thousands of students.⁷ This idea is reflected in a common response to critiques of standardized testing: "They're not great, but we need to have *some* way of seeing how these schools are doing." As sociologist Wendy Espeland writes, "[Quantitative measures] have the patina of objectivity: stripped of rhetoric and emotion, they show what is 'really going on.' Even more, they can reduce vast amounts of information to a figure that is easy to understand, a simplicity that intimates that there is nothing to hide, and indeed that nothing can be hidden."⁸

In many situations such quantitative measures can of course be useful. But in this instance it seems inappropriate to rely on them so heavily, to the exclusion of other forms of knowledge or insight or subtlety, as the basis for a decision that will have a huge impact on hundreds of people's lives. In a sense, though, they reflect the culmination of a broader trend in education: an obsession with numbers to the exclusion of other forms of information and without the nuance or technical training needed to understand the real limitations of those numbers.⁹ Daniel Koretz, a scholar considered an expert on standardized testing, notes that most Americans tend to overestimate how well such tests can provide a complete picture of academic success, especially schoolwide.

When a school performs well or poorly on an achievement test, the reason can be the quality of education, any number of non-educational causes, or—more likely—both. Figuring out which is the case is not always easy. [Observers are] eager to infer school quality from the test scores alone, without doing the hard work of digging up the additional data one would need to identify differences in educational effectiveness. . . . People routinely misinterpret differences in test scores, commonly attributing more to quality of education than they ought.¹⁰

Koretz's cautionary words echo as we consider the statement of another district employee, Justin Brent. Like Meadows, Brent is charged with giving an identical statement at each of the hearings, with the appropriate numbers filled in. His task in this statement is to compare the test scores of the school being closed with the test scores of the "welcoming school" that students would be designated to attend. In this version of the statement, he compares the test scores of the closing school (Mayo) with those of the receiving school (Wells).

Wells's ISAT [Illinois Standards Achievement Test] meets and exceeds composite score was 66.4, while Mayo's meets and exceeds composite score was 62.5. . . . As you can see, Wells's reading value-added score was a positive .4 in 2012 and Mayo's reading value-added score was -.7. This means that on average students at Wells grew at a faster pace in reading when compared to students at Mayo. Wells's mathematics value-added score was -.6 in 2012 [protest from audience]—I'm sorry, Well's mathematics value-added score was .6 in 2012, and Mayo's value-added score was -1.7. This means that on average, students at Wells grew fast—grew at a faster pace in mathematics when compared to students at Mayo. To summarize, Wells performed higher than Mayo in 2011–2012 on a majority of the metrics identified in the CEO's guidelines for school actions, and thus is a higher-performing school.

In a system that once refused to provide any information whatever about vacant schools and had parents arrested for attempting to find out for themselves, Meadows and Brent are presenting statements that are intended to ensure comparative transparency. They are not just pronouncing that one school is better than another but are giving a detailed explanation of *how* they came to their conclusions. But, of course, what is missing is any clear view of *why*. Why are these reasonable metrics to use in making a decision?

As Brent and Meadows present this particular view of reality, the structure of the event and the language they use makes it difficult to challenge them. They are not taking questions or comments, and they use the language of a mathematical algorithm. By the time we get to the "thus" that closes the statement, in order to agree that there is a causal logic—*x*, thus *y*—we also have to agree about other things: that the ISAT is a solid representation

of educational quality; that value-added scores matter and that a difference of 2.3 points between two schools is a meaningful indicator that one is better than the other; that 2011–12 is the only year worth looking at to make this decision; that the CEO’s guidelines for school actions are fair and reasonable. By implicitly presenting these questions as settled—as a given, as something we have all agreed on—district officials suggest that this is neutral evidence. We are to understand that these are the things that make a school good or bad and that this is beyond dispute, debate, or discussion.

However, when it’s community members’ turn to take the microphone, we hear a very different view of reality.

ANOTHER REALITY

The perspectives on three schools offered by teachers, students, community members, and parents could not be more different from district officials’ neutral, matter-of-fact version of a quantitative reality. They present an entirely different picture of events, one informed by years of personal interaction with the school as well as an acknowledgment of broader contexts: the history of CPS, the history of Chicago and particularly of racism in the city, and the social significance of each school. It’s not that community members dispute the facts of the “case”: they don’t go up the microphone and accuse the district officials of lying or dispute the numbers they have presented. Rather, they offer a different logic—a different reality, with a different understanding of what evidence should count in determining the value of a school and a different understanding of what racism is and the huge scale on which it functions.

CPS teachers, like teachers across the country, have been pushed to become amateur data analysts in the service of school

“accountability” and “data-driven instruction.” Teacher Nakia Mosby of Williams uses that experience to question whether the data analysis presented is sound, citing other numbers available from the state’s performance data website and from a newspaper’s annual ranking of schools. She suggests that a difference of a few points on one test is not sufficient evidence for closing a school:

What information determines which school is higher performing or not? . . . I compared the two [school performance] report cards and even based on the *Sun-Times* you have Williams Middle as 67.3 and Drake as 69.9. Does that few points determine that they’re a better school? It’s just not enough information for the community, the parents, the teachers, everyone involved in this decision making. . . . You know we need to look at every single detail and not just one report card that’s half done, missing data, missing information to make a critical decision like this. This is impacting people’s lives, people’s future, people’s children. And I ask you all to look at this data. Do not look at one year’s worth of data. Go back. It’s right there.

Her comments hark back once again to the warning Koretz issued—the danger that district officials are too reliant on test scores to provide a 360-degree view of a school’s educational quality.

One middle school student, Jordan McKendrick, begins her testimony by making a broad statement regarding school closures before moving on to speak directly to the case of Mayo:

Hi, everybody, my name is Jordan McKendrick. Okay, so. This is not just for everybody. I feel like this is so racist of y’all to close down all these CPS schools because most—you see, most black

kids going to CPS schools. It's taking away education from them when you closing their schools down and you movin' them into new schools and you takin' them out they comfort zone and you takin' jobs from teachers. That's not right. That's not fair at all. Okay, back to Mayo.

As discussed in chapter 2, during the 1950s and 1960s superintendent Benjamin Willis used a focus on the individual neighborhood school to deflect attention from racism; black political leaders and education organizers countered that focus by demanding he pay attention to systemwide patterns. Here a child takes that same stand. She is supposed to talk only about her school, but she subverts the structure of the hearing by insisting on making a statement regarding *all* of CPS—that school closures are racist because of their disproportionate impact on black children.

Carla Watts, a former principal, takes the point about racism even further, using a startling metaphor—the slave auction, where families were routinely separated for the expedience and economic gain of white slaveholders.

So now we put [teachers] out to pasture when they have built all these skills for these children and now they're going to be put out there with other teachers trying to grapple for a job. I feel like I'm at a slave auction. I'm very full right now. Because I'm, like, begging you [begins to cry] to keep my family together. Don't take them and separate them.

At another point in her statement, Watts refers to the school and its students as “the fruits of my womb, my labor.” Watts's plaintive request to keep her family together is echoed by many hearing participants. Many students, like Ke'Shaun Knowles, state that they consider their classmates brothers and sisters:

My name is Ke'Shaun. And the reason I came up here today is for Mayo School to not close. 'Cause the school is like my home. And the teacher is like my, um, mother. And . . . the students like my brothers and sisters and my cousins. That's the reason I do not want Mayo School to close. Thank you.

When Ke'Shaun uses these words describing family bonds, it's more than a metaphor, given the importance of fictive kinship in African American social life. In African American social networks fictive kin often share the same rights, status, and intensity of relational bonds as biological kin.¹¹ Indeed, at the Williams hearing, Chicago Teachers Union representative Michael Lucas draws a connection between school closures, the historical challenges faced by African Americans, and his contemporary sense of responsibility for children who are not his own:

This is real fast without taking into consideration real people, real babies, okay? So like I stated I have children. You know I don't have any grandchildren yet, but I'm sure hopefully I will. I want to be an advocate and continue to be an advocate for children or other folks' children just like my own. Because really I'm going to tell you something—I consider us a community, a family. Okay? We've come a long way. And again I'm not casting aspersions but we've come a long way from where we've began as African Americans. Coming over here from Africa and going through what we went through in terms of the slavery and our ancestors and so on and so forth. And then what we went through in the South and the North and then all of a sudden we do get *Brown versus Board of Education*, but the Supreme Court really doesn't really put any teeth in it, and what happened back then historically was that the schools in the South, many of them they shut them—they shut down the school districts.

In this narrative Lucas establishes a through line of concern, pain, and resilience, moving in conversational flow from his own children, his feelings of accountability for the children of others, and history from slavery to desegregation to the closure of black southern schools post-*Brown*—all as reasons Williams should remain open. For him this is relevant information, relevant evidence that should be used to inform this decision yet has not been acknowledged by anyone in power. Speaking from behind the Veil, he challenges a version of events that acts as if history never happened—as if the timeline of everything we need to know somehow begins with 2011 test scores.

In addition to such fictive kinship ties, community members refer to long-standing connections between biological family members and the school. Rayven Patrick, an eighth grader who says she has attended Mayo since preschool, discusses both forms of kinship seamlessly, intertwining them as she describes the rituals of daily school life and graduation. Like Lucas, she is talking about the importance of history, a history in which she and her family play an important role.

Most of my family have went to Mayo. My grandma attended. My mother, my aunt. I came from a big family. The Patricks are known in Mayo. Like, we have been going there for so long. Over the years I have watched lots of students graduate, and they were able to come back to their teachers and tell them how high school has been going. Most of them are in college now, and I see them come to the few teachers that are left at Mayo and tell them of their experience of college and high school. This year I will graduate. And most of the students at Mayo, I think of them as my little sisters. They're family to me. Little sisters and little brothers. I walk through the hallway, and every kid knows who I am. I'm

able to speak to them, and I honestly, I wanna be able to watch them graduate.

The recurrence of discourse around “family,” both biological and fictive, is so prevalent during the hearings that one speaker at the Mayo hearing, DeMarcus Johnson, makes an explicit observation about it:

Now, one of the things that I have looked at from after the first speech to the final speech is that this school is based on family. And I know because as I stated I have four decades of it. To tear down this family will be one of the biggest mistakes that Chicago Public Schools has done in years. And the reason why I say that is because we have the Johnson family, we have the Patrick family, we have the McKendricks, we have the Leonards, we have so many names that have been there for years. And I'm not up here to battle. But it seems like right now we're putting North and South against each other again.

Historically, the intentional disruption of the African American family has been a primary tool of white supremacy,¹² one with deep roots extending from the time of chattel slavery (also evoked through Johnson's comment about “putting North and South against each other again,” as in the Civil War) through the present era of mass incarceration. Further, such family disruption has often been cited as a reason African American students have historically faced academic failure. Perhaps most famously, in “The Negro Family: The Case For National Action,” sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote that “at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family” and that “a prime index of the disadvantage of

Negro youth in the United States is their consistently poor performance on the mental tests that are a standard means of measuring ability and performance in the present generation.”¹³ What is not mentioned in this narrative, though, is the role that structural actors—policymakers, school officials, and others who make decisions on scales large and small—play in this disruption of family connections. Whether children were taken from their parents during slavery or parents were taken from their children by mass incarceration, black families in the United States have been forced to weather injustice after injustice, and as we saw in chapter 2, school systems can sometimes play a malignant role. Now, with an understanding of that history, the community members who speak during the hearings are asking those in power to take a different route—for once, to acknowledge a different truth about their schools, their communities, and their families. At Williams, one parent links the school closing to genocide. “My mother, my cousins, my grandmother went to Daniel Hale Williams,” she says. “We have a long tradition at this school, and to rename it and to do all those others things is, it’s a big . . . it’s like you’re killing our generation off.”

Retired teacher and community member Simone Clark makes this connection between family disruption and the dismantling of African American community and social life even more explicit, while also mentioning its implications for Bronzeville and its historical significance as a center of black culture.

You are destroying a family for many children who don’t always have the easiest family situations in their homes. . . . A school is a community and a family and that is what is being destroyed here. Not only is it a family at the moment, but as you have heard people talk, and I was a history teacher for many years—this is a historical family. This is a family from one of the original and

important African American communities in the city of Chicago, and Mayo School represents the historical continuity of the Bronzeville community in an extraordinarily important way.

The concept Clark introduces here, the “historical family,” is a way of binding together kinship ties and the historical significance of a place and its people to make a very different assessment of their worth than efficiency or value-added metrics.¹⁴

In the case of Williams, much of the challenge to the official district narrative relates to colocation with Urban Prep, an all-boys charter high school equally lauded for sending large numbers of its virtually all-black student body to college each year and criticized for pushing out students whose academic problems are deemed too challenging.¹⁵ Teacher Nakia Mosby, who earlier questioned the district’s reliance on a single year of test scores, pointed out that in calculating available “underutilized” building space, Williams was being penalized for resources and spaces that its students were not actually able to use.

Just as a point of clarification, where it says that Drake will be relocating to the Williams Elementary and Middle building which will offer—the third bullet point—“a building that has received 6.8 million in recent facility investment.” Williams Middle did not benefit from that investment. That investment was strictly for Urban Prep. Everything that was done as far as ADA accessibility and other upgrades, that was for the high school. We have no access to that entry, we have no access to the third floor and the portion of the building that was—that those upgrades you know has been received. We do not have elevators. The high school has that. They utilize that. Those upgrades was strictly for Urban Prep and not for us. So that’s misleading right there, that information.

This comment introduces an element of tension that was an undercurrent to many conversations about school closures in 2013: that while CPS claimed to have too many empty buildings and not enough students, the district had quite recently added new charter schools to its “portfolio.” In 2004, CPS launched an initiative it called Renaissance 2010, a pledge to shut down failing schools and open one hundred new schools.¹⁶ Renaissance 2010 was announced at the Commercial Club of Chicago, which comprises leaders from top corporations in the region, and business leaders lauded the move—especially because two-thirds of the schools would be charter or contract schools. Critics questioned whether there were enough high-quality teachers and principals in the city to support so many new schools. Now, less than a decade later, many neighborhood schools were stung by the suggestion that CPS somehow had too many schools so shortly after a flurry of opening new ones. As Mosby’s comments showed, being held accountable for “investment” that had benefited only the neighboring charter school added insult to injury.

Parent Evelyn Scott, unable to attend the Williams meeting, sent a friend to read a letter in her stead. She challenged the narrative that Drake was a better school than Williams and questioned the decision-making process, which she considered to be a farce. She addressed her letter “to Barbara Byrd-Bennett, or whoever is seeking to undermine my intelligence”:

It burns me up inside to hear that you have decided to close down my children’s school due to underenrollment or lack of performance only to replace their school with a school which is pretty much identical. It’s an outrage and not a good choice. Though I am not a rocket scientist, I am wise enough to see that no serious thought was put into place by your staff when the decision

was made for the improvement of my children’s education. . . . If you were aware of the fact that we were not utilizing the space to its full potential, why didn’t anyone from downtown come into Williams to offer their services to assist us?

“Why didn’t anyone from downtown come into Williams to offer their services to assist us?” Here Scott points out something that seems excruciatingly obvious yet has gone undiscussed in the official district narrative: Where is the accountability from district leaders themselves? Her question reminds us of Byrd-Bennett’s damning comment that the schools slated for closure are “underresourced.” Is it fair for those charged with allocating resources to levy that accusation against those who are supposed to receive them? And why are the officials presenting the data portraying the closing and receiving schools as drastically different when they are not?

Chicago Teachers Union representative Wallace Newkirk also directly countered Byrd-Bennett’s narrative that the closings were neutral and not racist. On the contrary, he argued, the decision to close the schools was based on a desire to systematically disempower black and Latino communities, and the performance criteria were intended only to justify the decision *ex post facto*.

For too long CPS—and I want this on the record—for too long CPS and the Board of Education have claimed that they could improve our schools by closing them. School closings, turn-arounds, and privatizations have targeted African American and Latino neighborhoods for years. I mean, where are—and I’m not casting aspersions—but where are the white community schools in this room or at any of these hearings? They’re all African American. And you gotta think about that. . . . [CPS and the

board] have targeted African American and Latino neighborhoods for years. Latino schools as well. The voices of our communities have been ignored as we have demanded an end to school actions that destabilize our neighborhoods, take resources from our students, and increase racial inequities in Chicago.¹⁷

The quick aside with which Newkirk begins his statement—"I want this on the record"—is technically superfluous, since district officials opened the hearing by stating that a court reporter was present and that all comments would be recorded and conveyed to the CEO. By emphasizing that he wants his comment on the record, Newkirk reinforces the significance of what he is about to say while implying that the officials may not be taking notes as they said they would. Loretta Jeffries, a grandparent at the Overton hearing, makes a similar comment: "You know, y'all already planned to close Overton. I just want to know, because it's worrying me—is y'all's tapes and stuff on? Is y'all really documenting this?" Both Newkirk and Jeffries are concerned that CPS is playing what Jitu Brown referred to in chapter 1 as the "shell game"—that they will say one thing and do another, as they have done so many times.

Additionally, by stating, "they're all African American" and "you gotta think about that," Newkirk suggests that school closing proceedings should be judged not only by disparity in *intentions*, but by disparity in *outcome*; if the schools on the proposed list are all African American, that merits closer examination regardless of how they got on the list.

At the Overton meeting, parent Josita Curtis quoted Byrd-Bennett directly and, like Scott, questioned why those in charge of the system that created the present circumstances can't bear the consequences, which instead are directed toward students, teachers, and families.

As I was reading this paper, and it stated something about "the reality is that too many of our children are being cheated out of a quality education they deserve because they are trapped in under-resourced and underutilized schools." . . . Y'all talkin' about some repairs or "trapped." The only way they're trapped is because of the system, because they don't have a voice, and because everyone is looking upon a certain area, oh, because they [the schools] not full. I'm trying to keep my tears back 'cause we got kids back there looking at people that they not gon' see no more. . . . Y'all gonna tell them where they can and can't go? Y'all are a gang too!

In the context of a meeting where there is much discussion about gangs and violence (as I will discuss further below), Curtis's accusation rings sharply. Other participants suggested that the board and district officials are complicit in something profoundly immoral, saying things like, "I don't know how y'all can sleep at night" and calling the plan for closure "evil and devilish." But by calling them a *gang*, Curtis evoked something much harsher: a coordinated, collective attack inflicting terror on the community, and a cavalier act of violence with no regard for who is caught in the cross fire.

Whereas Brent and Meadows use causal language (e.g., "and thus") to argue that the schools slated for closure are not good schools based on the constructs of "performance" and efficiency, community members suggest other criteria for judging the schools: their history and their legacy as community anchors within Bronzeville. While these attributes could fairly be considered important to stakeholders of any school, they hold a particular symbolic weight given the historical significance of Bronzeville in the twentieth century. These divergent testimonies are more than just differences of opinion—they reflect different realities located on opposite sides of a racially and socioeconomically

segregated world, shaped not only by different experiences but, in the case of the community members, by generations of knowledge and firsthand perspective.

In their testimonies before the hearing officer, multiple Mayo children referred to the school's upcoming fiftieth anniversary, suggesting that they understood the importance of some of the school's history that they had not themselves lived through. One third grader described how painful it was to find out about the proposed closure and how much "shame" it caused:

My whole class started breaking out crying, so did my teacher. We walked through the halls in shame because we didn't want Mayo to close. When I'm in fourth grade, I was really thinking about going to the fiftieth year anniversary, but how can I when Mayo is closing?

Other students refer to the Mayo school song, which they view as an important tradition. A seventh grader speaks:

Every day I go to school, we sing the Mayo song, and we are proud to hear the song. We are proud to sing the song every . . . every day. All I want to know is, why close Mayo? This is one of the best schools we ever had.

And another student:

Just like everybody else was saying when they came up, what's the point of closing Mayo when it been on 37th Street for fifty whole years. And I have, like, I have a granny and she's like sixty-two right now . . . and she had went to Mayo. . . . And she like always tell me stories about, um, that the song that they'd be singing [begins to cry] that we sing still, that we still sing today.

For these students, singing the school song—a recognition of history and legacy—is itself a marker of goodness ("we are proud to hear the song . . . this is one of the best schools we ever had") as well as a representation of close family ties, something that spans generations. And at the end of the hearing, attendees begin to sing the Mayo school song.

At Williams, the proposed plan for closure dictated that Drake would move into the building occupied by Williams and the school's name would change to Drake—honoring John B. Drake, a white hotel magnate of the nineteenth century. Some community members were particularly offended by this proposition. The school had been named for Daniel Hale Williams, an African American doctor who performed the first open-heart surgery in the nation and founded Bronzeville's Provident Hospital, which served black patients at a time when many hospitals would not.¹⁸ Thus changing the school's name was perceived as an affront not only to the school's legacy, but to the history of Bronzeville and of African American heroes in general. One speaker at the Williams hearing stated that it was "just a disrespect": "we went to *Daniel Hale Williams*, the first black open-heart surgeon, and that meant a lot. And it still means a lot."

In light of this concern, Brent's standard script regarding school performance was amended at the April 26 hearing for Williams, where he stated, "Finally, if the CEO's proposal is approved and the community later wishes to consider changing the school's name, the requirements of the board's school renaming policy will be followed to ensure both school and community engagement in evaluating potential new names." There is no justification for why the school cannot remain Williams. Today the school building occupies an odd middle ground: the metal sign outside proclaims in bold letters that the school is officially called Drake, while the original engraved stone above the door

announces the name as Williams, and a metal plaque nearby honors Daniel Hale Williams as the school's namesake.

“YOU'RE PUTTING OUR CHILDREN'S LIVES ON THE LINE”

Many community members expressed concern for their children's security, citing tensions between closing schools and receiving schools and the difficulties of traveling a strange route to school. Parents' and teachers' concerns about students' safety are far from hypothetical. While gun violence in Chicago in general has received a great deal of local and national media attention in recent years, there is a particular linkage between the fear of school closure and the fear that children face death: the heartbreaking story of Derrion Albert, who was beaten to death in 2009 during a fight that many attributed to student conflict after a school closure and consolidation.¹⁹ During the scripted portion of the hearing, district representatives promised that safety and security measures would be taken and that the Safe Passage program—where representatives from community organizations usher children to and from school—would be expanded. However, many parents and teachers had doubts, suggesting that Brent's assurances about the program were naive, ill-informed, or misguided. At the Williams meeting, teacher Jessica Wellington invoked the students themselves as experts on safety—experts no one had consulted:

Now let's just be realistic here. You know there are boundaries, and some of my students had to tell me about them. If you ask them, they'll let you know which boundaries they cannot cross because they're going into this gang's territory and that gang's territory. What are we doing to make sure that they can actually walk to and from school? A situation happened at another school over by our area where that child got beat to death. How

is CPS addressing that and [able to] confirm that that would never happen again? . . . What can we do for those students, how is that going to be addressed in writing to our parents and our community for their safe travels?

In noting that some of her students had to inform her about gang boundaries, Roberts admits that she does not share their expertise—meaning that representatives from the Office of Safety and Security are also likely to lack the information needed to keep their promises about students' safety. By noting that she wants to see the issue “addressed in writing,” she implies that promises from the board cannot be accepted or believed unless they are recorded like a formal contract.

Phylicia Columbus, speaking at the Mayo meeting, frames her concerns about violence in a manner intended to invoke both empathy and a sense of justice.

When you shut down the schools, now you're gonna send my special ed kid walking through a bad neighborhood by himself. Is that fair to him? When you close these schools, you're putting our children's lives on the line. Have some sympathy for us parents that have to work. I work at 147th and Halsted. My child goes to school at Mayo. If something happens with them walking to another school, is that fair for me to have to try to get from 147th and Halsted to see what's going on while he walking to school? Mayo did a lot for these children, and CPS is making very bad decisions right now, and somebody needs to stop it before we have more kids killed on the street.

Columbus's account, which focuses on her family's individual narrative (her son, her job, and their specific circumstances), stands in contrast to the district officials' language, which avoided

naming any particular individuals or even referring to children more generally. By illustrating the specifics of her situation, Columbus reframes the dialogue from a large-scale view (the building, the classrooms, the test scores) to a focus on a single individual, her son: his circumstances, and what the district fairly owes him. She also brings to the fore the day-to-day reality of what it will mean for her, as a parent, to cope with the aftermath of his school's closing. In the eyes of the district, being relocated to a nearby "welcoming school" should mean an opportunity for a better education. For the Columbus family it means disruption of the services her child needs and the relationships he has formed as a student with a disability. It means potential threats to his safety. Working almost twenty miles from where her child currently goes to school, she experiences increased anxiety and uncertainty as he is moved to a new setting where neither he nor she has relationships with the adults around him.

More generally, community members cited past instances where trust had been violated as evidence that CPS's promises regarding safety or anything else could not be believed. Loretta Jeffries, the speaker at the Overton hearing who asked whether the event was actually being recorded, reminded attendees of the city's failed bid for the 2016 Olympics (with its proposal for an athletes' village in the Bronzeville area, along the lakefront) as evidence that the closure proposal had an ulterior motive.²⁰

Y'all want our building though. Yup. 'Cause the university want that land. Y'all don't know. . . . I'm the community person. I see what goes on in that neighborhood. Why we can't keep our school? There was a time when the Olympics was coming. Y'all remember they was gonna have the Olympics? They was gonna tear up all of King Drive. Well, since they lost the deal, they said, oh, we'll skip over to Overton. No! Leave our babies alone!

Much like the hunger strikers in chapter 1, Jeffries understands that what happens to Overton is not simply about Overton. The school is a bellwether for the community's future, and this latest threat against the school is only the most recent in a long line of assaults on its integrity and attempts to use it as a pawn in a broader plan for displacing residents of the South Side.

WHOSE REALITY COUNTS?

The students, parents, teachers, and community members who took time to appear at the hearings described in this chapter were doing more than arguing that their schools were "good schools" in the face of accusations of failure. They were arguing that their vision of the world, their experience, their very reality was valid. They had to make an argument for history: an argument that the events outlined in chapter 2 actually took place, an argument for considering the long-term impact of racism, and an argument that the legacy of each school actually counted for something. And they had to make an argument for the value of care and relationships: that the bonds shared within each school mattered, that they were tangible and irreplaceable. This version of reality—in which the value of a school is directly related to its nurture and support of lasting human relationships, and in which history matters—stood opposed to another reality. In this other reality, numbers don't lie, the question of "good school" versus "failing school" is simple and beyond debate, and the only history that matters is last year's test scores. And it is the second reality that comes with the power of enforcement. Hence, today Overton, Williams, and Mayo are all closed.

The district's version of reality, in which numbers allow for a final and indisputable call about a school's future, is not unique to Chicago or to this situation. It reflects the national policy trend

I discussed earlier in this chapter of attempting to quantify every aspect of the educational process. This in turn reflects the broader move toward neoliberalism in education. While neoliberalism is a broad idea that takes many forms in different contexts, in the context of public education it constitutes a set of ideals that assume that efficiency is an important goal in managing schools and public education systems; that the best way to achieve such efficiency is to allow schools to function within a free market system based on competition, where the best schools will succeed and the worst ones will be driven to improve or shut down; that private entities like for-profit companies and corporations should be allowed to participate freely in this marketplace and are better at delivering services than public entities such as the government; and that the success of individuals should also be allowed to play out within the free market, with the assumption that the most deserving will succeed by working hard and navigating the system.²¹ Through a neoliberal lens, “rather than ‘citizens,’ with rights, we are consumers of services. People are ‘empowered’ by taking advantage of opportunities in the market.”²²

This set of assumptions fails to account for some basic realities in a public school system. First, any enterprise dealing with the care and nurturing of children is likely to be inefficient at times, and striving for efficiency often requires sacrificing things like care, patience, and flexibility. Second, although a marketplace is premised on “winners” and “losers” competing against each other, the “consumers” in this case (parents and children) are not operating on a level playing field. The children who enter a school system may face poverty, homelessness, hunger, and health issues, and they vary in identity—in race, gender, disability, language practices, and all the other things that make them who they are. Public schools have to account for all of these differences, which shape the outcomes they are measured on (grad-

uation rates, standardized test scores, and so on). This leads us to the third problem: neoliberalism pushes schools to focus on the “winners,” those exceptional students who will be successful by these limited metrics, and to abandon students who might lead to inefficiencies.

And so, through the logic of neoliberalism, we find ourselves observing the dual realities reflected in this chapter. We see schools that in many ways are nearly identical forced to compete against each other instead of uniting in their shared educational goals. We see them judged by how “efficient” they are and how effectively they meet quantifiable metrics, with district officials presenting a case that one school is better than another based on differences that statisticians would be hard-pressed to call significant. We see the reality of the students these schools serve—students facing challenges brought on by racism, multigenerational injustice, housing insecurity, and poverty—being ignored in a calculation of their future. We see a willful ignorance of a history of explicit racism and a failure to critically examine the extension of that history into the present. We see a system that fails to take responsibility for creating the conditions of that social instability, preferring to act as though it’s all a matter of individuals’ pulling themselves up by their bootstraps and teachers’ needing to work harder.

It is impossible to get around the fact that the school closure process outlined in this chapter was racist. To many, this claim will seem too bold or impossible to prove—How can we know what was in the hearts and minds of those involved, since many if not all certainly care about children and desire racial equity? Remember, though, that the question of racism is not about intentions, it’s about outcomes. In other words, student Jordan McKendrick had it right. “I feel like this is so racist of y’all to close down all these CPS schools,” she said, “because most—you see,

most black kids going to CPS schools.” As community members understand, the school closings are racist because they have disparate impact and because they are rooted in a racist history in which institutional actors have demonstrated ill intent (as one Overton meeting participant put it, “turning Bronzeville into Rahmsville,” implying that the mayor had authoritarian intentions for the community), unreliability, or at best ignorance about how to ensure the safety and sustainability of the community. And so, when people stand up and argue for their schools, they are not only arguing to keep one building open. As with the fight for Dyett, these school battles are about much more than individual sites. Community members are fighting for an acknowledgment of past harms, an honest reckoning of present injustice, and an acceptance of their reality—a reality in which a school’s value is about much more than numbers.

These two realities are at odds, and they don’t exist in a vacuum. One group—CPS officials—has more power to ensure that decisions are based on their operating reality. So the discrepancy is not settled through logic, or debate, or internal validity, or the will of the majority. The “enrollment efficiency range,” for instance, is not clearly motivated by any facet of child development research, professional expertise, or any other transparent factors. It includes figures that seem peculiarly arbitrary to carry so much weight (e.g., the notion that “76 to 77 percent” of a building’s classrooms should be occupied). But because of the balance of power, the claims emerging from the school district win the day. Therefore Overton, Williams, and Mayo all are closed now, and it seems that no amount of tears or pleading, logic or history, could have saved them.

4 Mourning

For long years we of the world gone wild have looked into the face of death and smiled.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater*

On the one hand, there is the loss of place and the loss of time, a loss that cannot be recovered or recuperated but that leaves its enigmatic trace. And then there is something else that one cannot “get over,” one cannot “work through,” which is the deliberate act of violence against a collectivity, humans who have been rendered anonymous for violence and whose death recapitulates an anonymity for memory.

—Judith Butler, “After Loss, What Then?”

I’m eighteen. I play pick-up basketball games with ghosts.

—Nate Marshall and Demetrius Amparan, “Lost Count: A Love Story”

DEATH BY ANOTHER NAME: LOVE, LOSS, AND INSTITUTIONAL MOURNING

I believe in ghosts.

I haven’t always. I remember the day: I was cleaning my classroom after school, when Ms. Samuels walked in. She was a paraprofessional who also ran a popular girls’ mentoring program and

was known for her sense of humor, her candor, and the personal attention with which she cared for the children at our school—alternating between warmth and sometimes strict words.

“You know,” she told me offhandedly, “I went to this school. Right here in this building. It used to be Douglas.” I knew that one of stones on the building’s exterior was carved with “Douglas,” but I’d never thought to ask why. She told me how as a teenager she had frequently cut class and been caught up with trouble. Now, as she found herself employed in the very building where she’d gotten into fights and ignored her teachers, she considered it a sign. God was giving her a second chance—the opportunity to nurture young people needing guidance as she had once needed it. And what about Douglas, I asked? Closed, she explained. Closed when they tore down the projects.

That’s when I first started seeing ghosts.¹ Not exciting ghosts—no literal apparitions, no translucent beings floating down the hallway. It was just a nagging presence, a thought as fleeting as it was sudden. *There were so many other children here.* I would see them in the auditorium—running where they weren’t supposed to run, cracking jokes, resisting teachers trying to get them to hush, pulling each other aside to share a bag of chips or a whispered secret. I’d never known them, but that didn’t change their having been there.

For me, of course, these ghosts weren’t real memories. But for many black Chicagoans the ghosts are present in everyday life. “I always think of double Dutch,” said a woman sitting outside Dyett one day while it was still closed. “The whole line of girls playing double Dutch, all along this way. And I used to enter through that door.”² These ghosts are stewards of lives marked by mourning: mourning those lost to the many forms of violence this country has invented to kill us. We mourn those killed by police; we mourn those killed directly or indirectly by the violence of hunger and desperation or the violence of poverty and poor health; we mourn those taken from us and imprisoned. And, as I will

argue, we mourn those institutions, like our schools, that have helped shape our sense of who we are.

Institutional mourning is 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—especially when those individuals or communities occupy a socially marginalized status that amplifies their reliance on the institution or its significance in their lives. Although institutional mourning can occur in many contexts, here I explore its traits within the context of school closure and examine what this “death” means for the African American community of Bronzeville. Of course, we have already seen the metaphor of death used to talk about Chicago’s school closures. “It’s like you’re killing our generation off [by closing the school],” said one Williams Elementary parent. “This is not rhetoric. They killed this school,” says Jitu Brown when discussing Dyett. As we have seen in the previous chapters, a school closing is much more than the loss of an interchangeable building. It can be a harbinger of things to come, the culmination of multiple generations of racism and injustice and a blatant disregard of the fundamental reality within which a community understands itself. A school closure can thus be a devastating event that leaves an indelible emotional aftermath. In this chapter, we will look at institutional mourning to better understand why people fight so fiercely for their schools even when others have labeled them a failure. They fight because losing them can mean losing their very world.

BLACK INSTITUTIONS AND BLACK MOURNING

For human beings, an attachment to “home” or a sense of place is perhaps universal, but it manifests itself differently across time, geography, and subculture. (Consider, for instance, how the meaning

of “home” may differ for a twentieth-century nomadic herder in Morocco and a nineteenth-century traveler crossing the Rocky Mountains. For African American city dwellers, who continue to live the legacy of Jim Crow, “home” often includes an attachment to certain institutions.³

Segregation in American cities, although it has declined since 1970, remains high. At the current rate of decline, it would take 150 years for black-white segregation to reach low levels.⁴ Such segregation has contributed to what sociologist William Julius Wilson calls social isolation,⁵ creating closed social networks that have limited overlap with the institutions of dominant white society. While Wilson’s theory refers specifically to poor black city dwellers, middle-class or affluent black Americans may retain attachments to many of the same institutions as poor African Americans, whether through utility (going to a hair salon that serves black clientele), through emotional bonds (attending the same church as one’s parents or other relatives), or because most middle-class and even relatively affluent African Americans in the United States still live in neighborhoods that are majority black.⁶

Perhaps as a by-product of segregation and its legacy, African Americans as a group have a political sensibility that is less individualistic than the American mainstream. Within black communities, there is a focus on uplifting the collective and “giving back to the community” as opposed to viewing success only in terms of private property and individual triumphs. As political scientist Michael Dawson describes it, this ideology dates back to Reconstruction. For many black people “the advancement of the self, the liberation of the self, is a meaningless concept outside the context of one’s community.”⁷

The continued wealth gap between black and white Americans may also play a role. In 2013 the net worth of white households was thirteen times that of black households—an increase since

1983, when white households had eight times as much wealth.⁸ This gap may encourage African Americans to rely on shared institutions and resources to compensate for diminished individual resources. For instance, black people donate 25 percent more of their discretionary income to charitable causes than their white peers do and are far more likely to give to churches—with the understanding that as their contributions support those in need, they may one day be supported.⁹

Some scholars have described this bond between black families and their churches as paralleled by their bond with their schools. These bonds are defined by a sense of shared participation and ownership—a sense that *this place is ours*.¹⁰ In many places, as black people arrived during the Great Migration, these bonds created cities within cities: the black Seventh Ward in Philadelphia, Bronzeville in Chicago, Harlem in New York City, and so on.¹¹ On this smaller scale, the institutions one encounters in everyday life take on grander significance. Structures like the Supreme Life Building at 35th and King Drive (home of the North’s first black-owned insurance company) or the Pilgrim Baptist Church at 33rd and Indiana (the birthplace of modern gospel music) take on the importance of the World Trade Center or the National Cathedral—cultural icons looming large not only in the imagination but in daily life.

Even African American mourning practices reflect communal bonds. In a survey of about fifteen hundred grieving individuals, psychologists have found that compared with white people, African Americans maintain a stronger sense of continuing bonds with the deceased after death. This trend diverges from the dominant way we think of grief in a society that promotes the importance of “moving on” by severing these bonds.¹² African Americans are more likely to grieve the loss of extended family members beyond the nuclear unit.¹³ Black mourners also are more likely to

experience *complicated grief*, a prolonged form characterized by symptoms such as unbidden memories or intrusive fantasies of the lost relationship, strong spells or pangs of emotion related to the lost relationship, and a loss of interest in social activities.¹⁴

These same “symptoms,” or aspects of mourning—a sense that bonds continue after death and grief persisting long after loss (in this case, two years)—were present in the stories of Bronzeville residents I spoke to. Parents, teachers, students, and community members—each affiliated with a closed school—described these institutional attachments in their own words. “In essence, you know how your school, your church, that’s the place, that’s what makes it your home. I still see those folks coming back to the Robert Taylor Homes and sitting out there in that grassy area with their lawn chairs,” said Sharon Munro,¹⁵ a teacher who had experienced two consecutive school closures. Munro is referring to the practice, described by sociologist Mary Pattillo,¹⁶ of former Bronzeville public housing residents’ demonstrating loyalty and commitment to the projects they once lived in, even after they have been demolished, by holding regular picnics where they stood.

Odetta McNealy, a Bronzeville resident who sent several children, grandchildren, and foster children to the same school before it closed, describes some residents’ reliance on schools for social support as a matter of personal strength and resources—those who don’t have them draw on the institution for support. “Everyone is not strong like some of us are,” she says. “And everyone has their separate issues. The schools were like second homes for some people, and there were resources out there for children who didn’t have that safe haven at home.”

“WE’RE ALL IN IT TOGETHER”: STORIES OF LOVE

When we remember what we’ve lost, we remember first with love. In institutional mourning this doesn’t just mean love for a school

or for the people in it. It can also mean love for *ourselves* within the school. In losing a school one loses a version of oneself—a self understood to be a member of a community, living and learning in relation to other community members. Without the school to act as a hub, that membership is gone.¹⁷ “At [my closed school], I never felt vulnerable,” says teacher Katherine Warner. “I felt safe and strong. And then they closed it.” We can think of this form of love as a logical extension of the southern African philosophy of *ubuntu*, frequently translated as “I am because you are” or, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu has explained the concept, “my humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.” If I am because you are, it follows that my understanding of myself is bound up in my relation to you and my place within our network of relationships. When the school dies, a version of the self dies with it.

Teacher Lynn Ross describes how her school was characterized by love between teachers and students, defining it as a relationship of protection. “We had that mind-set of *those are our babies*,” she says emphatically. “Those were *our babies*. We gon’ talk about ’em, but you better not! We will fuss at them. We fussed at ’em all the time. But don’t treat our babies unfairly. You will not. No.”¹⁸ Martin, a former student at two schools that are now closed, says of his grammar school, “I loved being there. . . . We had computer lab and we had after-school programs and stuff like that. It was, it was just—I liked being there.” Recalling his high school experience, he, like Ross, invokes the language of a family, where interpersonal conflicts or challenges are superseded by bonds. “We had teachers there that was like family. . . . At the end of the day we were family. We made sure that we was together. Because we argued, but we were still family and we were still together.”

Warner, the teacher who explained how she “felt safe” at her school, described her love in terms of both such family bonds and her own sense of personal and professional development, particularly as a white teacher in a school with mostly black faculty

and virtually all black students. “I was the Emerson cheerleader. I loved Emerson. . . . I was one of the people who brought in the restorative justice program. And people came from all over. Not just Chicago—we had a whole group from Wisconsin to observe our program. It was fun, and interesting. . . . [My colleagues and the students] were always teaching me things. [I enjoyed] being able to talk about stuff. Being able to talk about racism and prejudice and creating that environment where they’re really fascinated by having that conversation was wonderful. I loved it.” Warner described staying after hours to work on projects with colleagues and enthusiastically attending extracurricular and sporting events. She contrasted that level of involvement with her current teaching position at an elite school on the North Side, with far more material resources at her disposal. “[At Emerson] it was very much a home-community situation. Which was great. It was really great. [Now] I’m doing the best teaching I’ve ever done, because it’s all I’m doing. But I’m not enjoying it the way I enjoyed being an integral part of a community, which I think is what neighborhood schools have to be in order to survive and function. This idea that everybody there is just an integral part of this mission. You’re in it together. And even if it’s bad, it’s okay because we’re all in it together and we’ve got our arms linked.” Although Warner’s new school offers conditions that should make for a rewarding teaching experience, she said she misses the sense of self she cultivated at the old school, which she can’t recover. In a sense, some of this sense of self was developed in the context of the precarious situation; when she was teaching where nothing was certain (CPS policy, safety, the future of the neighborhood), Warner nevertheless was comforted by the idea that she and everyone else in her school could face the future together.

McNealy, the parent, grandparent, and foster parent, described a similar sense of shared mission at her family’s closed school, which had housed a child-parent center where teachers collab-

orated in teams with a community representative to provide comprehensive resources for parents. “It was a circle of love,” she said, describing the activities her children did at school, which she felt enhanced their self-love as African Americans, such as memorizing poems like “Hey, Black Child” by Bronzeville poet Useni Eugene Perkins and “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou. “They were happy,” she said of her children and the others she worked with at the center. “They knew they were loved. They wanted to be there. We [parents] wanted to be there.”

Teacher Amanda Moss, who experienced three school closings in a row (two in Bronzeville), described a similar nurturing of personal and professional development. Her first job was at a school she knew would be closing, and she was hired only to complete the year, which allowed her to maintain a degree of emotional detachment. However, at her second school she settled in comfortably for seven years before its closing was announced. She was animated in recounting the experience of developing curricula and activities in her field of English literature and described the satisfaction of seeing students thrive:

And I mean, that’s where I got really invested. You know? I mean, I really learned to teach there. . . . And I got to be the AP [advanced placement] English teacher! And I was so excited and I just—Because you could totally make your own curriculum. And I got to do that. And I, you know, I *loved* that class. . . . I had some students who participated with me in that CPS Shakespeare [program with the Chicago Shakespeare Theater]. It was a beautiful experience . . . and I mean they just, they so shined. I mean they were so involved, so dedicated, you know to this experience. It was awesome. So I loved Burleigh High School.

In the public narrative about closed schools, these are stories we rarely hear. Using words like love in a conversation about

educational policy decisions feels almost taboo, or somehow in poor taste. Perhaps it's rude to talk about love in polite company. Instead, closing schools are presented as uniformly valueless, without worth, and characterized mostly by criteria that are as far as you can get from something as base and as messy as human emotion. How many students can the building hold? How much will it cost to repair it? What test scores did it have last year? But for those closest to these schools, these questions swim beneath the surface of something much more important: love.

DEFENDING THE DEAD

Each of these Bronzeville school closures took place within the cloud of a narrative of the school's failure as an institution—from Barbara Byrd-Bennett's description of children "cheated" out of an education because they were "trapped," to the quantitative comparisons between schools at closure hearings, to the language of Dyett as "chronically underperforming." Community members were keenly aware of this narrative and its implications—that in naming the school as a failure, public discourse also implicated *them* as failures as students, parents, and teachers. Much like a relative tasked with eulogizing someone who was imperfect, perhaps even deeply flawed, but nevertheless loved, they flinched under the weight of these public characterizations and spoke both candidly and protectively about the lost institution. Like a person, the school does not have to be perfect to be mourned; it can be acknowledged as flawed, but its death is no less unjust.

"I felt bad," said one student, Chanelle, "because I felt like Emerson is actually a good school! Emerson is not what people make it seem. People make it seem like it's just a horrible place." Martin used similar language to describe his closed high school. "The

thing about [it] is when you're in that school—when you're *in* the school, though, it's like, it's not what they try to make it look."

Amanda Moss, the AP English teacher, responded specifically to the rhetoric of "failure" that surrounds school closure: "I never considered us a failing school or failing teachers or failing students. I felt like pretty much everyone in that building was working really hard for those kids, whether it was at Emerson or at Burleigh. Trying to push them forward as far as they could go. You know, you meet the students where they are, not where you would ideally want them to be. . . . And you keep pushing. . . . And it's possible." Here Moss insisted on the school as a site not of failure, but of perseverance and growth, despite external language of failure and the real complications of student and teacher limitations.

Psychologist Paul C. Rosenblatt and chaplain Beverly Wallace, in *African-American Grief*, found that bereaved interviewees spoke of the ongoing pain of not being able to access the bonds once shared with the lost person. One participant described grieving as "a mourning and a sorrowfulness [about] . . . having [lost] physical access to engage in dialogue and to recall memories and to use as a resource for guidance, and so that is no longer there, as being able to call them up on the phone, to stop in to their house, because it's not available to us in this realm that we live in, so that's the sorrowful part."¹⁹ Their findings are echoed in a story Martin told me about frequently walking past Gridley Elementary on his way to work. The building doesn't house a new school but simply sits dark. He vividly described the emotions and memories that rise as he passes.

Because sometimes when I walk [by] I do feel disappointed and sad because when I go to [work] I cut through my old school all the time. . . . And as a kid that's the same walk I made going to

school every day. And it's just like, you just remember everything, like, you remember—I don't know if you feel that way?

[Ewing: Yeah.]

You remember a tree! We played near that tree and my brother would take us to school. . . . Like you'll walk to school with your brother and I see the tree and I see the school . . . and then I walk into my school. So it's like I would take a left and you would walk down and you just start remembering everything. Because like, it's this house, it's a house that you always remembered. . . . I remember I walked past it and I remember they were building it. Then I walked past this tree and there was a beehive there. And you know we were kids so—

[Ewing (laughs): You're throwin' . . .]

You're messing with the bees [laughs]. I know it's not good now, but you're messing with the bees and we're running from the bees and every time I walk past that tree I just think about the bees. When I walk past that house, I think about when they was building that house. And then you make it to the corner . . . and then like it's different memories everywhere you go. You make it to this corner and you look down this way and you look down that way. And down this way is where you walked into the alley when you was in seventh grade. . . . And I just remember how a bus used to sit in front of the school. . . . And then you just remember how when school had end-of-the-school-year bashes . . . how people who graduated would come back, and then you're like "Who was that?" . . . but he's cool because he's older. And you go through all that. And you just get a little bit angry because they use the school for different stuff now. And it's like you just see that. You just. . . . We got a field right there—I think I even remember when they was building that field. Wow. . . . And this is behind the school and then we used to play football there every morning. . . . And when I walk in there I

just remember, this is on my journey to [work], I just remember, like, we played football there. And I get a little bit angry 'cause now you'll just see cars parked. . . . You just get a little bit angry because [of] all the memories and stuff.

In this extended narrative, Martin described, with great specificity, the quotidian details of his life at the now-closed school: a specific tree where he played, the childhood misdeed of disturbing a beehive, seeing older graduates of his school and looking up to them, playing football, walking with his brother. He spoke fluently, the memories coming one after another, punctuated by descriptions of how he felt (disappointed, sad, angry). He periodically invited me into his memories—invited me to see his ghosts. At the beginning of the narrative he seemed concerned that what he was about to say might make me uncomfortable, and he checked for my affirmation ("I don't know if you feel that way?") before continuing. He told me he hesitates to share these feelings with others but at first has a hard time articulating precisely why.

I don't know how to say it though. But it's not something—it's kind of embarrassing sometimes. And it's not embarrassing as "oh, you're embarrassing, this is stupid." It's embarrassing as I don't know how to . . . it's like you have to talk about it and people are like—I don't know. I don't know how to say it, but I don't find myself talking about it a lot.

[Ewing: Do you feel like people will look at you a certain way?]

A certain—I don't even know how to say it but it's like not something you want to talk about a lot. It's not easy to talk about . . . it's not something that you just bring up. Because like I said it's not normal. It's not something that everybody has gone through. Sometimes when stuff is different it's like—oh, put it like [this]: You came to school with a mark on your face, right?

And maybe it was a mark because you was doing something stupid and then people are intensely asking you questions.

Shame is a pervasive but rarely discussed aspect of the grieving experience. Grief can induce feelings of shame through many routes: shame at the stigma of death, shame at one's rage or anger, shame at one's own fear of death, shame at feeling weak or like a failure.²⁰ In this case Martin described not wanting to share his experience because others might find it aberrant or strange—"not normal." He compared it to coming to school with a mark on your face; since teachers are mandated reporters, CPS requires them to immediately call the Department of Children and Family Services. Thus the "mark" is like a scarlet letter: not only is it ugly and disfiguring, it prompts uncomfortable personal questions about one's home life and therefore one's own value as a person and the value of one's family. Given the rhetoric of school failure discussed above, Martin had reasonable fears that a frank conversation about school closure might bring similarly invasive and judgmental questions and personal assessments. What kind of person goes to a failing school?

COPING IN THE FACE OF VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA

Teachers also recalled the intense emotions they felt on learning that their schools would close. Munro called it "an amazing shock to the system."²¹ Teacher Carlina Baker explained:

Everybody was scared. You know, scared shitless basically . . . everybody was really scared. Everybody went to all the meetings, and we wrote speeches and got our best and brightest up there and said, "speak for Harding." And when I realized how the meetings were going it was like, Why waste your time? You

know? It was like a slap in the face. And I still get like a little emotional about it just because [long pause] just because of like—of how *voiceless* we all felt. Yeah. So it was really hard. And at the end everybody kind of said, "Okay, we know this school is going to close, and we'll probably be moved somewhere else." That was the consensus that we were kind of—the reality, I guess, of it. Now my son's school closed as well.

In this account Baker described a cycle of feelings that preceded the actual loss of the school: fear surrounding the process, followed by collective efforts to fight the closing, then the startling realization that their efforts wouldn't succeed ("like a slap in the face"), followed by feelings of futility or voicelessness and then resignation, coupled with the unsettling news that her son's school, also in Bronzeville, would be closing as well. Baker, who in addition to being a classroom teacher is trained as an art therapist, used this perspective to draw direct connections between losing a school and grieving a death: "You go through a mourning period. Definitely. It's like a loss. And you're constantly reminded by this empty, this empty building that you still have to pass every day. Like a tombstone. You know it's just still sitting there, so yeah it's sad [small laugh]. It really is sad." Like Martin, Baker found her emotions triggered by passing the shuttered school as she went about her business in the neighborhood. Also like Martin, she responded to the perceived social taboo of talking about the death of the school, laughing with a slight awkwardness or embarrassment in the middle of her account as though to lessen any discomfort I might feel at her honest discussion of her own sadness.

Warner called the experience of closure "so demoralizing." She drew a parallel between the closure and student deaths that occurred at roughly the same time. "It was just—it was really

bad. And that last year, in the last eight weeks of school, we lost three kids to violence. And then they closed my school.” Warner went from the closed school to another school, where she felt deeply unhappy, before moving to her present position at the North Side school. In her new position she experienced such severe anxiety that she was hospitalized. In the two years between the school closure and the time of our interview, she theoretically should have had time to forge new bonds and move on professionally and personally. However, she said, “I don’t know if I’ll ever recover from losing that school.” Like Martin, the teachers I interviewed also feared being considered “failures”: they felt that being attached to a closing school was a scarlet letter and that they would be marked as bad teachers and would have a hard time finding new employment.

Other teachers described how their own emotional responses were compounded and amplified by an overall climate of stress, anxiety, and sadness as students and teachers struggled to cope with loss. Moss said she felt “devastated” and that everyone was “feed[ing] off of the same energy” to create a pervasive sense of stress and despair. “We were all depressed,” she said. “I remember I started having panic attacks. So many people were just under so much stress. And the kids were very anxious. They didn’t know what was going to happen to them.”

McNealy described similar feelings of despair and hopelessness, and she was angry with the board of education for subjecting the community to these experiences. Like Baker, she described a moment of resigned certainty when she understood that attempts to save the school would be futile, and she called the hurtful decisions “intentional, premeditated to destroy.”

I sat right there on the corner . . . and I cried my eyes out. Do you know how it feels for me as a mama? I have raised my kids and

my grandkids. And for them to do them like that—you can hurt me. I really don’t care. But you don’t have to hurt the babies. You don’t. This is a hate crime. I said, “I don’t care what you say. Y’all talkin’ about kids.” Look. . . . That hurt. Ain’t no mama gonna let you hurt their kids. . . . So I knew then that it was a formula of destruction.

McNealy described this hurt as continuing long after students were supposed to be comfortably settled in receiving schools. She told of finding an eighth grader she knew breaking down in tears on her walk to her new school. “She said she hated school. [She] ain’t never hated school! She grew up there. . . . They have broken, they have knocked the life out of many of these children. They have made them so unhappy. But besides that, they have hurt them. They have hurt them to no end.”

Baker, speaking from the perspective of being an art therapist as well as a teacher, used the language of trauma to describe students’ and teachers’ attempts to cope with the closing, suggesting that the decision makers behind school closure needed to be more aware of its effects. “I have to say that Rahm Emanuel has to understand that it’s a violent act against a community when you constantly do these type of things. And so there’s definitely a PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] response. Even for the teachers, they’re like ‘Are you going to leave us too?’ [when they are] talking to the principal.” She mentioned public housing reunions to demonstrate that people in Bronzeville retain institutional bonds long after the institution itself has ceased to exist. “Even with the closing of the projects,” she said, “Stateway Gardens, they have a big reunion every year where people come to Dunbar Park and meet up. It’s like a humongous event. So it’s like . . . yeah, you’re losing your family.” This connection between schools and housing reflects the community’s particular history, discussed in

chapter 2. For Bronzeville residents, these latest losses are not only about a single school or a single moment. They are echoes of something deeper, a sadness that precedes them and may outlive them. In experiencing a school closure, community members have to contend with a new shock to the system, but at the same time they may also be prompted to face unresolved traumas that are still raw and painful.

Understanding a death as occurring within the shadow of a larger act of injustice renders mourning at once personal and historical. While death is of course a natural part of the world we live in, deaths that feel unjust, and thereby unnatural, can leave us with unease that is hard to handle. Death that results from extreme violence, especially state violence, can feel anything but natural. As novelist and critic R. Clifton Spargo wrote, "Mourning a figure of the past [has] everything to do with the injustice of the present."²² Spargo's words are part of an analysis of the works of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who was a prisoner of war during World War II. Spargo writes that Levinas's work centers on "the historical specter of the unjust death." For Levinas, the long shadow of the Holocaust and the injustice of the world that produced it shapes the recollection of an individual person's death. The unjust death leaves us with a specter—an unsettled ghost, a phantom that is hard to shake off. For bereaved people, a critical part of mourning is trying to construct a narrative of someone's death as meaningful, or not. We hear this language all the time when someone's death is described as "honorable" or "senseless." In *African American Grief*, Paul Rosenblatt and Beverly Wallace describe how, for African American mourners, the experience of making meaning can be influenced by whether racism was directly or indirectly responsible for the loss.

When economic discrimination or direct racism seems to a grieving African American to be partly or fully responsible for

a death, it may add elements of anger, rage, and indignation to the grief. . . . There are also matters of meaning making. People make meanings about the death as a part of the grief process. In making meaning, they come to a story about the person who died, what happened that brought about the death, and what feelings are appropriate.²³

As I spoke to people mourning their schools, their stories were rife with adamant criticism of the way their schools were lost. Their belief that the process was fundamentally unjust shaped their grief. That is, seeing the death of the institution as unjust made them sadder or angrier, or it made it recovery harder. Asif Wilson, a teacher who joined the Dyett hunger strike in solidarity after the closure of his own school on the West Side, described being struck simultaneously by intense emotions and by a sense of the injustice of the closing.

I was on my couch when we heard about my school closing on [the local affiliate of] Fox News. They put a picture—they did their nine o'clock news broadcast from the front of [my school]. Like, "We're standing in front of [this school], one of the fifty schools that will be closed," and I'm like . . . [exhales] *Oh*. It goes to show the level of fucking disrespect these people have—I'll define it for you specifically: the board of education, the fucking mayor—for black communities. They didn't even have the compassion or care to tell the community before they told Fox News. They didn't send a memo out, they didn't send an email. You could have sent an official letter out to the families. You could have done a lot. But you only engage through a press release. They're fucking cowards. They're cowards. . . . I started crying. It was a really emotional time for all of us at the school. Because it was like . . . it was such an uninformed process. It was like, a hundred schools today. Fifty schools. And CPS—they'll do this! Sit,

sit, sit. Hit real hard. Sit in our fucking closet, plan, be decisive, be very strategic in private. Which shows their lack of public accountability. They are not a transparent organization.

Wilson's story reflects the mistrust of CPS we have heard throughout this volume—a mistrust that has been earned over such a long period, through so much action and inaction, that it is hard to shake off. Prentice, a former student at a closed school, also blamed Mayor Rahm Emanuel for not being present or transparent about the school closure process, saying that if he were mayor he would personally visit schools before closing them. “If you're a boss, or if you're the mayor or whatever your position is, you shouldn't be scared to go out to the public. . . . A lot of them [who work at central office] are scared. You don't see them making any type of appearances in public. You know they're doing something secret. They're grimy. He's scary.”

James Roberts, a parent and local business owner who was born in Bronzeville and is now raising his three children in the area, was even more straightforward. He called the public closure hearings “all bullshit. Public hearings are just there to let you talk. ‘We already know what we're gonna do, but we're giving you a chance to feel good about talking.’” He echoed Prentice's point about district employees' failure to engage with the community, saying, “Some of them live in the suburbs. Some of them live in [white communities on the North Side such as] Lake View, Lincoln Park. And they don't leave that office. They don't go to any meetings in the community. They don't know and they really don't want to know.”

Other participants shared Wilson's sense that the school closings were being part of a broader pattern of disrespect for people of color in Chicago, particularly black Chicagoans—to use McNealy's, term, a “formula of destruction.” Martin, the student

who spoke so vividly about his memories of playing football at his school, referred to the symbolic importance of the closed schools' names as evidence of this.

When you take over, when you take over a 'hood—because the people that lived [the history] aren't going to live forever. The people that actually experienced, that lived that. And as you're getting older and you're listening to these stories at some point you still gotta move on and you can't—you're not going to remember everything your parents told you. So that's how you get black history to go away. That's how you get black history to go away. Closing schools. The schools I went to . . . [lists Bronzeville schools named for famous African Americans]. They're closing these schools down. That's how you get black history to go away. . . . It's like we've been through a lot and people always try to—I mean the same people who will take everything you have will blame it on you for not having anything.

That's how you get black history to go away. For Martin, losing a school is losing a piece of a history, a piece of self-understanding and personal narrative. As he sees it, the city is counting on those older black Chicagoans who carry this history to eventually disappear, and by shutting down the institutions that bear our collective memory, those in power ensure that it will be gone forever. In chapters 1 and 3 we heard residents stand up for the memories of Walter H. Dyett and Daniel Hale Williams as they fought to keep their schools' names. In many areas of the city where charter schools or other schools have occupied the buildings where older schools once stood, the names of black historical icons have already been wiped out. Mary C. Terrell Elementary—named for a black suffragist who was a charter member of the NAACP—became ACE Technical Charter School in 2001. Two years later,

Sojourner Truth Elementary School became the Chicago International Charter School. Ralph J. Bunche Elementary School, honoring the first African American to win a Nobel Prize, is now Providence Englewood Charter School.²⁴ Baker, the teacher and art therapist, concurred, arguing that to change the names of schools is “almost like they’re erasing history.” Like other teachers I spoke with, she challenged the narrative of the “failing school,” but she tied her critique directly to racism and white supremacy. “The idea of closing a school based on test scores is just, it’s so absurd to me. Especially with the standardized test scores and how they are, how they are centered in eugenics. . . . So you’re closing schools in these areas that have been, like, harmed by institutionalized racism and white supremacy. You’re closing these schools, these institutions that are pillars and blaming them.”

Ross echoed this sense of being not only angry at the outcome of school closure, but upset about the means through which it was done. As a social studies teacher, she believed she was sensitive to and understanding of concepts like supply and demand and the economic constraints of a district budget, but she felt insulted at the hypocrisy with which the district deployed these concepts.

What pissed me off so much was. . . . I mean, I *get* economics. . . . So some schools have to close. I absolutely get that. But you can’t tell me that you don’t have money, and in the same breath open charter schools. . . . I was aware of what was happening in the neighborhood and understood, because I’m a social science teacher, that it was because of gentrification. I don’t even think that there was a real attempt to cover up the fact that . . . I mean, maybe they thought it was, because they just thought we’re so ignorant. But I just thought, this is so *blatant*. And it started with the closing of King High School. It’s almost like, “I poured gasoline on your house, and then it’s your fault that it’s on fire.”

The metaphor Ross used here—pouring gasoline on your house, then blaming you for the fire—harks back to Martin’s comment. “People will take everything you have, then blame you for having nothing.” In both cases their observations seem to speak to the broader history described in earlier chapters: the idea that the actions of CPS are always situated within a wider context of harm that goes undiscussed.

In her account of the injustice of school closure, Ross referred back to the conditions under which many Bronzeville schools were constructed in the first place—the extreme segregation discussed in chapter 2, which drove CPS to open new buildings for black students rather than allow them to attend school elsewhere. For her those conditions meant that the buildings were always constructed on a faulty premise—the need to contain black students rather than the need to educate them. “They were just putting up these factory schools. With no input from the community. Why? Because the community was black. And poor. . . . If you look at it, the schools in the projects are the ones that closed first. ‘Oh, project schools, projects are no longer here, oop! Do away with the school.’ But if they would have thought about making these community schools in the first place, you wouldn’t have as many issues.” For her closing the schools represents an ironic end to a cruel cycle of racism and disregard for black life that began before she was born. In both instances—the historical precedent and the present moment—the people who make the policy decisions are isolated from the fallout that follows them. They do not have to live in the affected communities or, because of the massive bureaucratic structure built around these policy decisions, to accept personal responsibility or even acknowledge their a role in them. For those living within the Veil, the feeling is maddening. The reality you know to be true, because you witnessed it and everyone you know and love is still facing the consequences, goes unacknowledged.

Roberts, the local business leader, argued adamantly that the focus on academic test scores during the hearings was “insulting.” He believed that if CPS had focused purely on a resource-based argument rather than comparing test scores that were not substantially different in any way, residents would have been more amenable to change.

“Well, these kids are failing anyway.” Don’t do that! Don’t do it! Just take it strictly from the business part of it and tell people, if we can close this school and take your kids to a school four blocks away, now those kids are gonna have a full library, nurse, arts program, everything. We can move it there. Keep that narrative. And then people would say, “Oh, I’m leaving my school even though my granddaddy went there, I went there, this is gonna be better because they’re bringing over all the resources.” And *do* something. Put new windows in. Do what you gotta do. Just make it nice. And then you ingratiate people. People aren’t blind, really, that much. But they always have to add the insult. . . . Just leave it alone. It’s always a comparison [between schools’ test scores].

He also felt that when accused of racism, CPS should have offered an honest acknowledgment of history rather than trying to skirt the issue. Since it was an open secret that school closings were the culmination of a much longer sequence of historical events, failing to admit that—pretending instead that it was a matter of test scores or mysteriously empty buildings—came across as disrespectful and duplicitous. This, in turn, only furthered the idea that CPS could not be trusted.

I think they should have just said, “Yes, this is a race issue, because the projects were built because of racial bias. So when the

projects came down, it affects black people more than [white] people in Lincoln Park.” And it is a racial issue. Don’t dodge it. And the schools that are being closed are in black areas for a reason. Look at the history. . . . To me, if you strike people with the truth, swift and hard, then they have a different perspective of you.

This last comment, about CPS’s failure to “strike people with the truth,” leads to another important theme that emerged from Bronzeville residents’ mourning stories: the idea that honorable people should live by a moral code, and that CPS and the mayor were dishonorable and deceitful because they failed to do so. Reflecting Chicago’s deeply entrenched history of street organizations and organized crime, some participants characterized Mayor Emanuel as a gang leader beholden to his “cronies” instead of to average citizens, deploying district employees as “enforcers.”²⁵

McNealy put it explicitly, framing average Chicagoans as innocents caught in the cross fire and terrorized by city leaders who act like gang kingpins. “They ain’t worried about the consequences. They worried about how much more money I’m a get. This is a big hit. They talk about the gangsters, they talk about Al Capone, they talk about the Vice Lords, they talk about the [Gangster] Disciples. But this government is the worst example of interrogating and railroading the people, and gangsters. We [average people] don’t have nobody.” Describing the mayor, Prentice said, “He’s just trying to collect his money, he’s just trying to get his. And whoever is in on it, they get theirs. And they just go about their day and stay quiet.” Roberts said of district employees, “They don’t care. They get their \$150,000 or \$160,000 a year to enforce things.” These uses of gang imagery are complicated, because for many Chicagoans gangs are an embedded part

of social life, not a distinct criminal class but a set of multigenerational social bonds.²⁶ Thus the mayor's transgression was not his *being* a gang leader, but his failure to *act honorably* within the ethical logic of gang social codes—in contrast to his predecessor, Mayor Richard M. Daley, who was seen as a “real” gangster. “And no matter what people outside Chicago say,” said Roberts, “people in Chicago respect that. Because this is a gangster town.”

Richard Collins, the director of a community nonprofit in Bronzeville, made a similar unfavorable comparison between Rahm Emanuel and “real” gangster Richard M. Daley:

What [Emanuel is] doing isn't drastically different—in some ways it is. I mean, he just doesn't care. Appearance means nothing. He's doing the same stuff: Daley closed schools, Rahm closed schools. Daley tore down public housing, Rahm's tearing down public housing. Daley was cookin' the books, Rahm's cookin' the books. It's the same thing. It's just, what Rahm is doing is so egregious that it's hard to look the other way. It's like, you know, everybody knows that the Mafia kills people. But you just can't kill people in broad daylight and not expect anything to happen. . . . It's like dude, I'm with you, but dag!

Much like Ross's characterization of school closings as “blatant,” Collins here is suggesting that the mayor is not adhering to “the Chicago way,” a political tradition that embraces a certain amount of cronyism, nepotism, and corruption but expects one to be discreet or at least maintain the appearance of propriety. In contrast to Daley's behind-the-scenes dealings, Emanuel's actions are seen as disrespectful, like committing murder in broad daylight. This distinction is partly a matter of scale; although his predecessor closed dozens of schools in the decade before Emanuel was elected, the move to close so many schools at once was unprecedented.²⁷

In an era when national attention has been fixed on “Chicago violence” within a relatively narrow framework—observable gun violence—Bronzeville residents are attuned to a form of violence that is less direct and less immediately visible but no less lethal: structural violence.²⁸ This form of violence creates systems within which death and despair are quiet but inevitable, and the weapons at hand are history, policy, and racism. And regardless of what the outside world may think about the quality or worth of closed schools as “failing institutions,” their role as crucial pillars of their communities means their wanton destruction is a key step in enacting such structural violence.

And to make matters worse, those most harmed by structural violence are those who feel least empowered to stop it. Warner said she felt that the district was implicitly telling her and other teachers, “‘You're just stupid women. Shut up and do what we tell you to do.’ That's the attitude that comes from downtown and comes from the mayor's office.” And Moss said of the school closing hearings, “It was already decided pretty much. I mean, I don't think it mattered what we said. I really don't believe it mattered at all.”²⁹

Despite this feeling of voicelessness, the Bronzeville teachers I spoke with emphatically said they believed they were responsible for helping children make meaning of school closure, even as they themselves were mourning. Baker was concerned about students' repeating the language of failure they heard in the news media, rhetoric that positioned them (and their low test scores) as being to blame for the loss of their school. In her current teaching position, where many of her students had been displaced from their previous schools, she invited them to share their feelings about what happened. “Many of them remember the school closings and how they felt about it. . . . It's interesting what they say. They're like, ‘Yeah, the schools were closed because we're black and we were failing all our tests.’ And it's like, ‘Well, actually you

know, the schools were closed because they were underutilized.' And they're like, 'But we weren't—there were kids everywhere!' So how do you explain that to someone?"

In the days between the announcement of potential closure and the final decision, Moss says, she and other teachers tried to mask their own feelings to better support the young people around them. "You know, I think we tried to put a nice face on it. . . . 'You'll have new teachers, but I'm sure those teachers are going to care about you as well.' Do you know what I mean? I don't think we sat there and, like, tried to paint an even uglier picture. We didn't want to exacerbate their anxiety or their fear or their pain of loss. Because they were feeling loss too."

Three of the five teachers I spoke with expressed hesitation and fear about growing attached to another school and perhaps facing additional trauma. A fourth teacher did not discuss such reluctance openly but has left teaching for another field altogether. Among those who mentioned it explicitly, I was struck that they spoke of this reluctance using a language of intimacy and vulnerability, as if they'd experienced romantic or other interpersonal heartbreak. Katherine Warner, the teacher who said she would not "ever recover" from losing her school, described how difficult it was for her to fit in at the school she went to next. Even though it was near the closed school and served a similar student population, she had a hard time working with the students, faculty, and administration. "I was in tears with my principal at [the new school]. Because he was like, 'I don't know how to make this better with you.' And I said . . . , you know, I was so heartbroken after what they did to [the closed school] that to open myself up, to be that integral part of a school again? I don't know [if] I could do it."

Lynn Ross also compared her commitment and intense social bonding at the closed school with a much different sense of herself at her new school, an academically competitive school on the South Side. "At my old school I felt like, I'ma give you everything,

and I'ma stay till seven o'clock at night. And you can sit in here if you don't wanna go home. . . . [But] after everything that happened with Emerson, I was like, "I have spent five years of my life doing this, and it's gone. So what am I going to . . . I need to figure out what's going to fulfill me, because clearly this can be gone. Any day, any time. . . . I loved doing what I do and it's gone." Ross's boundless warmth toward her students, her willingness to "give you everything," was curtailed when the experience of loss made her realize that the social bonds she thrived on might be temporary and could be taken away.

Amanda Moss, too, had a hard time handling the move to a new school (which would ultimately close as well). "That first year was really, really rough. I was unhappy, I didn't want to be there. This was not my choice, right? I was sort of mourning, I guess, my loss." When news came down that this school also faced closure, Moss felt, based on her previous experience, that trying to resist was pointless. "It was already decided, and they were just going through the motions. The downtown people, not the people on the ground, but the downtown people were just going through the motions, saying 'we're going to have a hearing and decide.' So that's when I started applying to graduate schools." Now Moss is a substitute teacher and uses the flexible schedule to establish a singing career rather than continuing as a classroom teacher after nine years in the district. "At this point I don't envision myself going back to teaching full time. I don't really trust . . . the students that I would want to teach, I just don't trust the system to allow me to teach them."

GHOSTS IN THE CITY

These are mourning stories,³⁰ which in a sense makes them ghost stories. The changes in Bronzeville have been made with the promise of a positive metamorphosis. But as urban planner Janet

Smith and education scholar David Stovall have written, these “discourses of ‘transformation’ and ‘renaissance’ evoke such promise for the new gentry, but a counter-story is omitted, or masked.”³¹ In a way, ghost stories serve as an important counterstory; 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*.³² Something, someone, is still here. We are still here, despite all attempts to eradicate us. This defies the dominant narrative of the city’s powerful, who would prefer to position the destruction of black institutions as a necessary step toward beautification or marketability. Or, as a group of four black teenage poets put it during the 2014 Louder Than a Bomb Teen Poetry Slam Festival,³³

Hammer in one hand, paintbrush in the other
 Rahm Emanuel singlehandedly destroying our city
 Mister Wreck-It Rahm
 Look at what Chicago’s becoming
 Bending the rules to fit a lie of building a new Chicago
 Building new streets when your own plan got some potholes
 Tearing down dreams
 It’s getting real windy in these streets
 Where Xs mark the spot where his wrecking ball is next to drop
 We are not included in the blueprint of the new Chicago
 We’re being pushed out
 Our buildings being transformed into condos
 And we know those ain’t for us.

And of course we aren’t the only city with ghosts. In his account of the closure of his historic New York City alma mater (an essay with the online title “The Life and Death of Jamaica High School”), Jelani Cobb describes visiting the old building and finding it covered in tarps. “It looked,” he writes, “as if it were

draped in a shroud.”³⁴ Sociologist Marcus Anthony Hunter describes the contemporary black Seventh Ward in Philadelphia as a “graveyard,” a site of collective black memory where residents honor the institutions they have lost.³⁵ Journalist Gene Demby describes taking a friend on a walking tour around his native Philadelphia, only to find that the school he once attended is no more.

Memory was the only place that Durham—my Durham—still existed. The school had closed its doors in the late 1990s because of the city’s crushing budget problems, and was later swept up in a wave of charterization that took over Philly after I graduated. The old Durham building now housed something called the Independence Charter School. . . . It was a peculiar sense of loss that I felt the day I visited Durham—one of unmooring.³⁶

Judith Butler argues that when a community faces the loss of a place, that loss can become so insurmountable that it becomes part of the community’s own self-definition, “where community does not overcome the loss, where the community *cannot* overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community.”³⁷ Understanding these tropes of death and mourning as they pertain not to the people we love, but to the places where we loved them, has a particular gravity during a time when the deaths of black people at the hands of the state—through such mechanisms as police violence and mass incarceration—are receiving renewed attention. As the people of Bronzeville understand, the death of a school and the death of a person at the barrel of a gun are not the same thing, but they also *are* the same thing. The people of Bronzeville understand that a school is more than a school. A school is the site of a history and a pillar of black pride in a racist city. A school is a safe place to be. A school is a place

where you find family. A school is a home. So when they come for your schools, they're coming for you. And after you're gone, they'd prefer you be forgotten.

Mourning, then, is how we refute that erasure. It's a way to insist that we matter. It's a way to remember.

Conclusion: An Open Door

I gave him the letter to read and when he finished he said, "You go, my child; you're the one to go, for you have the story to tell."

It seemed like an open door in a stone wall.

—Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*

On a fall afternoon, I stop at my favorite bakery on 47th Street. The last time I was here, the boy working behind the counter was a newly graduated eighth grader pulling summer duty at the family business. Now he's a freshman at a school not far from here. His grandfather watches as he rings up my peach cobbler, standing by the faded calendars, handwritten signs, and newspaper clippings of glowing reviews from over the years. "I swear you grew three inches over the summer!" I exclaim. The boy blushes and nods slightly, handing me my change and assuring me that so far high school is going well. In Bronzeville, a visit to a place like this—a family-owned business, or an artist's workspace, or the park on a sunny day—can make you feel lost in time, as if the community has stood still while the rest of the world rushes forward. And yet though much remains the same, so much has changed. Where high-rise projects stood, vast stretches of grass or concrete sprawl toward the horizon. Where children once ran and tumbled and called to one another, playgrounds sit empty, overlooked by darkened windows. Mayo is gone. Williams is gone.