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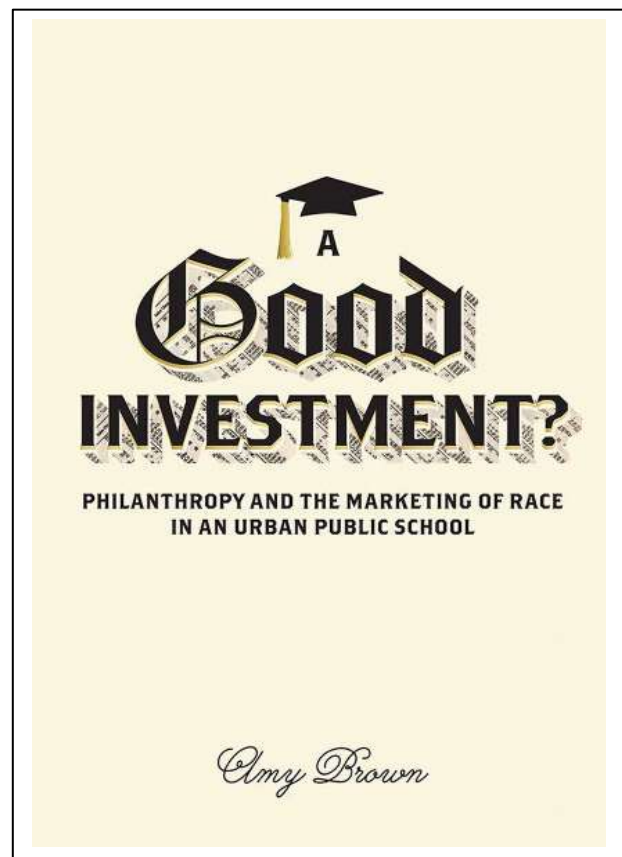
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On the U.S. corporate philanthropy's historic hold on Black education, the late William Watkins (2001) concluded:

Elected by no one, these agencies wielded government-like power. Accountable only to themselves, they were private entities making sweeping educational and public policy. Because they could totally finance and administer projects, their actions had the effect of law. No twentieth-century para-statal or nongovernment organization has enjoyed such influence. (p. 20)

Likewise, Amy Brown's (2015) *A Good Investment? Philanthropy and the Marketing of Race in an Urban Public School* argues that this racial (capitalist) project endures on renewed footing, anchoring itself explicitly in the 21st century neoliberal "social justice" discourse of social mobility *exclusively* through individual educational uplift, and with an accompanying



narrative of college readiness and access that is strategically marked by social and structural amnesia. Thus, in cleaving social justice from racial political economy, corporate philanthropy obfuscates its role in the reproduction of racial and class inequalities, positioning itself as the benefactor to Black and Brown children (and communities) who are conceived as perpetually in need of a hand up.”

While Brown starts out with an overview of neoliberalism, philanthropy, and the contemporary shift toward market liberalisms to “reform” public education, namely how market ideologies effectuated privatization campaigns pushing for “schools of choice” broadly speaking and charter schools specifically under a Mayor Bloomberg-run New York City Schools system, Brown's project is intentionally intimate in its size and scale of investigation. An educational anthropologist, Brown conducted a critical ethnography of “College Prep Academy,” a public small school of choice (SSC) which must continually present itself as an attractive investment to funders. This ritual requires school actors (teachers, students, administrators, and staff) to make repeated overtures to the prevailing ontology of ruling elites. Informed by Edelman's (1988) work on “political spectacle,” Brown critiques these retrofitted performances as not only disingenuous but deeply dehumanizing to those who must perform race, poverty, and gender as prescribed for funding, and thusly posits in her central thesis that “models of corporate or philanthropic charity in education ironically reify the race and class hierarchies they purport to alleviate” (Brown, 2015, p. 179).

Complementing macro analyses of philanthropic networks and their influence on public education policy (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Pedroni & Pedroni, 2011; Reckhow, 2013; Scott, 2009; Scott, Jabbar, LaLonde, DeBray, & Lubienski, 2015), Brown's intimate political portrait of “College Prep” offers the insights that only a place-situated perspective can

provide relative to the contested politics of racial, class, and gendered representations within a context of neoliberal austerity that forces schools (and students) to compete with one another for scarce funds. In one particularly striking anecdote, the director of the school's in-house nonprofit organization recalls recruiting students for an NBC segment with the Duchess of York Sarah Ferguson, in which Ferguson planned to bestow a scholarship on a student with a “big sob story” (Brown, 2015, p. 5). A male student raised by his grandmother was eventually pulled aside and told “TV producers are always looking for the human-interest story, even if ironically it takes the humanity out of the person who they are interviewing” and further reassured that though the decision was completely his to make, “sometimes we buy ourselves opportunity by telling people what they want to hear” (Brown, 2015, p. 5).

Given the increasing presence of the philanthropic “community” in the governance and funding of “startup” urban learning academies, Brown's (2015) contribution is unique in its investigation of how philanthropy's conscription of race, class, and gender mediate the identity formation (and politics) of actors who must *endure* its “benevolence.” Indeed, recognizing what an extractive process performing under philanthropy's gaze has been for students, teachers, and staff alike, Brown takes painstaking care in her reporting to not further diminish the voices of these agents as they share their stories. As such, on a technical note, those engaging in ethnographic research may find Brown's transparency, openness to “developmental feedback,” and disciplined use of meaning co-construction with agents to be instructive.

Brown's (2015) ethnography primarily focuses on “the complex ways students, teachers, parents, and administrators at College Prep navigated the complicated current of private-sector involvement in public education” and how through participating in political spectacle, “their performance ‘in front

of the curtain' enables them in terms of material resources and (maybe) life chances, but at the same time, 'behind the curtain,'...subjugates them through furthering problematic and oppressive narratives about their identities and communities" (p. 4).

Brown further concludes that the project of philanthrocapitalism, rather than challenging racial injustice and poverty, maintains white advantage and economic inequity, and in turn argues for a counterproject to what she identifies as an increasingly problematic turn.

And in cultivating "critical awareness of and resistance" (Brown, 2015, p. 16) to this project, chapters in Brown's book identify the dramaturgical discourses integral to maintaining the political spectacle that rationalizes privatization of schools serving Black and Brown children, and how various actors in College Prep either embodied or complicated these discourses. Chapter Two critiques the all-consuming image management needed to maintain the College Prep "brand" of successful urban academy with high graduation rates and college attendance. Indeed, a telling quote from a student suggests that perhaps all is not as it seems, that "College Prep is a very slick mixed-up school. A lot of lies are put into promoting this school" (Brown, 2015, p. 44). Chapter Three deconstructs the College Prep "professionalism" discourse used to surveil students, who are overwhelmingly Black. And while not all students openly articulated the racial roots of "professionalism," one shared that it was about "Being dressed and well behaved and manored [sic] for the real world here in 'White America'" (Brown, 2015, p.77).

Brown's organization of Chapters Four and Five work in tandem to surface, as depicted in the philanthropic imagination *and* in popular culture, the two-sided racialized female, that is, the "with-privilege" White female teacher ready to confer cultural capital and the "at-risk" Black female student in need of such remediation. In Chapter Four, Brown

deftly tackles and critiques philanthropy and reformers' predilection for a certain savior archetype, what she identifies in the popular imagination as the neo/liberal white female teacher who "saves" poor Black and Brown children from themselves and their communities. Brown's layered critique here of Erin Gruwell's (1999) *Freedom Writers* project and its overt neoliberal posturing, along with the presentation of teacher case studies from her ethnographic research serve to complicate that trope, and is quite the critical read. In Chapter Five, Brown proceeds to challenge College Prep's deficit narrative that recasts its students, majority Black and majority female, as "problems" to be fixed and full of "Black girl drama" to be contained; a good companion read to this particular treatment would be Wun's (2016) case study on full spectrum surveillance and the disciplining of Black girls in school.

While Chapter Six describes a summer intervention modeled after Freire's cultural circles project undertaken by Brown and several students "to creatively contest the school's deficit-based marketing of its students" (Brown, 2015, p. 162), it is the final chapter, Chapter Seven's "Behind the Mask: Professionalism and Life After College Prep," that specifically places, in stark relief, the cost of collaborating with privatization's "political spectacle" and what it has done to College Prep students, particularly as voiced by the few Black teachers and staff there. As one of the only Black male teachers (who has since left) shared, "It's a game. I feel like...it's a game [played] especially with Black and Brown children that we are going to experiment with your child" (Brown, 2015, p. 195). Brown (2015) reports that another Black teacher, who also left, concurred, "[Donors] are funding an experiment" (p. 195). Though Brown discusses the "problem industrial complex" in the context of urban school reforms in the introductory chapter as well as the "problem" lens used to re-view black female students in Chapter Five, it is here, made expressly clear in the comments of Black teachers, where the

neoliberal “problem and intervention” framework is most specifically named as a project of racial elites tinkering with Black/Darker bodies. For interested readers, Dumas’s (2016) critique of neoliberal governmentality and the limits of technocratic interventions as remedies for racial inequities in education speaks directly to the tensions identified.

Readers will find Brown’s (2015) *A Good Investment?* to be an unflinching reveal of how a “nongovernment organization” (Watkins, 2001, p. 20), effectively the philanthropic arm of a corporation, can so completely govern and map the vision, mission, methods, and *professional* identities of teachers, students, and administrators. And as Brown’s critique has charged, the danger of such an arrangement is the wholesale re-imagining and embedding of social justice and

racial uplift into a framework of market liberalism that distracts with discourses on corporate professionalism, individual competition for scarce resources, and neoliberal saviourism instead of upending the spectacle of philanthropic benevolence for projects on radical racial and economic justice. A provocative read, Brown’s text is appropriate for all audiences concerned with the marketization and privatization of public education during a time of marked state retrenchment. This volume serves especially well those who have become increasingly wary of philanthropic intrusion into *urban* public education, and who wish to learn more about the ways in which dehumanizing racial and gendered tropes, in particular, have been enlisted (and reproduced) to justify seemingly *untroubled* partnerships with urban public schools.

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