

**A Book Review: Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space
Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance**

By Kristen L. Buras

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Mr. Ciro Jesus Viamontes
Ph.D. Student of Educational Leadership
University of North Texas
c/o Dr. Miriam Ezzani
1155 Union Circle, #310740
Denton, Texas 76201
CiroViamontes@unt.edu

Biographical Statement: Ciro J. Viamontes is a science high school teacher and Ph.D. student in Educational Leadership at the University of North Texas. His research interests are ethnicity and gender issues in public education settings. His dissertation research project examines the role of ethnicity within constructs that predict student achievement. A conference paper will be presented at UCEA in November 2017.

Dr. Miriam D. Ezzani
Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership
University of North Texas
College of Education
1155 Union Circle, #310740
Denton, Texas 76201
Office: 940-565-2935 Cell: 626-216-5591
miriam.ezzani@unt.edu

Biographical Statement: Miriam Ezzani is Assistant Professor in the Department of Teacher Education and Administration at the University of North Texas. Her areas of research interest are in cultural proficiency, organizational leadership, district and school reform, and ethics and equity. Her most recent publication is: Brooks, M. & **Ezzani, M.** (2017). "Being Wholly Muslim and Wholly American": Exploring One Islamic School's Efforts to Educate Against Extremism. *Teachers College Record*, 119(6), p. 1-32.

Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the market meets grassroots resistance.

In *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the market meets grassroots resistance*, Kristen Buras reveals details of what is the remarkable story of the privatization of public schools in New Orleans post hurricane Katrina. A New Orleans native, Buras brings to this study the influential context of the historical past of New Orleans public schools and educational policy. In tangible ways, this text can be taken as an ethnography of the public policy conflicts between White and non-White communities in the context of extant hegemonic social structures that prohibit educational access. This historical setting takes on deeper significance as we are reminded immediately that New Orleans is the home of Homer Plessy, whose resistance to segregation in that city led to the infamous 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Buras' advocacy and activism experience with the Urban South Grassroots Research Collective for Public Education (USGRC) will no doubt be used to attack the validity of this work. Yet Buras clearly addresses her positionality and acknowledges that, "The critique presented in this book of market-based school reform does not imply the preexisting system in New Orleans was ideal" (p. 3). The included appendix on methodology further addresses and clarifies Buras' positionality.

Buras' argues that, "black education writ large enough cannot be understood adequately without examining the reconstruction of public education in the South" (p. 9). Moving towards that understanding Buras expands her previously published research. Chapters two and six examine the actions of the White power elite, while chapters three and four examine community efforts to secure equity in educational opportunities. Rather than examine this book in a linear chapter by chapter fashion it may be helpful to think in conceptual terms. Using critical race theory, Buras proposes three conceptual facets to the political ecology of market based privatization efforts: whiteness as property, accumulation by dispossession, and urban space economy. Arguing that New Orleans may be the American city that historically demonstrates the harshest forms of White supremacy, Buras leads us to understand how these factors intertwine to limit educational opportunities for communities of color.

Charter school based educational reform in New Orleans is a collaboration which can appropriately be examined as an ecological system (p. 40). The Recovery School District (RSD) effectively represents the interests of the White political establishment and educational entrepreneurs/reformers. The RSD acted with astonishing speed in taking over the public-school system post Katrina. Tacit support of the takeover came from the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), Governor Blanco, Senator Landrieu (Democrat) and the State Legislature, with the assistance of national groups such as the Heritage Foundation, Teach for America (TFA), and the Cowen Institute. These actions, seen as a response to the catastrophe, incited little if any resistance to the actions of the RSD. Meanwhile, accumulation by dispossession is evidenced by the RSD's elimination of a school district by taking control of the buildings. This allowed the *en masse* firing of veteran teachers, predominately people of color who had evacuated, as their jobs no longer existed. Citing a "teacher shortage" BESE then contracted with Teach for America (TFA) allowing the RSD to replace fired teachers with inexperienced, non-certified, non-union, predominately White teachers. TFA recruitment efforts focused on teaching in communities of color as an entrepreneurial opportunity. This entrepreneurial spirit spearheaded by the RSD functions to recruit White people to come to New Orleans. Other examples of accumulation by dispossession through RSD actions can be viewed as malicious. A dramatic example is the diversion of funds, obtained from the state of Louisiana

to pay for the soon to be fired displaced teachers' salaries and benefits, to the operating budgets of charter schools that were given the former school district's buildings.

Buras also shows how the historically racist political ecology served to shape the space economy of the city. The least desirable, lowest elevation, and thus most vulnerable areas became the predominately African-American areas (p. 12). It is for this reason that the African-American community suffered the brunt of the damage caused by Katrina. In these most vulnerable areas of New Orleans, grassroots groups have been struggling to mitigate the impacts of this historically inequitable political ecology. Delays in opening schools in African American communities, such as Bywater and the 9th Ward continues to impact the space economy. After five years of RSD management only three schools were reopened in the Bywater and lower 9th Ward (p. 60). Even then, Frederick Douglass High School was reopened as a selective admittance charter school by the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP). Effectively there is no open enrollment high school available to residents in the Bywater community, where coincidentally Douglass served as a locus of community resistance to the White supremacist political ecology. Schools that were reopened relatively quickly were on the periphery of African-American areas near predominately White areas. The pattern of RSD re-establishment of educational facilities serves as a disincentive to African-Americans wishing to return to New Orleans while undermining grass roots movements.

The concluding chapter of this book is a refutation of the charter school incubator New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) *Guide for Cities*. The NSNO *Guide* offers a template of lessons learned to facilitate other cities enacting New Orleans style market-based school reforms. Crafted in part by the USGRC this chapter refutes four main points of the *Guide* using, in part, testimonies of community based groups that resisted the market-based reforms. Taken from a critical race theory perspective these counterstories are used with other evidence to present the experiential perspective of communities of color on the lessons they have learned from the implementation of this public educational policy. These counterstories thematically share the argument that alleged innovative market-based reforms fail to serve the needs of the students and the communities they live in. These failures are comprised of the marginalization of experienced minority teachers in favor of predominately inexperienced white teachers, the restructuring of public education as a primarily profit generating asset, reducing access to special education services through "cost containment" measures, and a non-democratic process of external actors imposing reforms without regard to community input or participation. The last lesson is dramatically illustrated in a graphic representation of the relationship between and among the NSNO leadership and other outside actors.

Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space represents a meticulously crafted work on the complexity of social justice issues in public education reform. Moving outside of the classroom and curriculum this work details how historically inequitable political, economic, and social factors come together to create a "broken" educational system that limits the opportunities of communities of color. Rather than address the inequities of this artificially broken system Buras illustrates the reality of market-based reforms, which create a mechanism for educational "entrepreneurs" to profit from maintaining limited educational opportunities for communities of color. Further Buras shows that the New Orleans experience is actively being presented as a template for public school privatization. This is an eye-opening book for anyone interested in the debate surrounding charter school based systems of reform.