# *Making* Difference *in the Aftermath of the September 11th 2001 Terrorist Attacks*

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*Abstract* ■ When terror struck the Twin Towers on the morning of September 11th 2001, administrators at neighborhood schools had to act quickly. This ethnographic study compares the experiences of two schools – one, New York City's premier specialized public high school, the other, Manhattan's only community college – located adjacent to one another, just four blocks north of the former World Trade Center complex. Each school's immediate and longer-term decisions for minimizing harm reflect distinctions in the student populations and their institutional standings. While the schools were closed after September 11th's horrific events, various distinct forms of risk assessment were implemented regarding structural damage, air quality, psychological trauma and other potential vulnerabilities resulting from the event. By comparing the experiences of each institution – what decisions were made, by whom, and what their results were; how the event was experienced by the student bodies and administrators; and how local and national government and media represented each school's experience – I analyze how class and race are constituted and operationalized (lived) in New York City today.
*Keywords* ■ categorical constructions ■ class difference ■ disaster ■ racialization

## Introduction: a tale of two schools

There are two schools on the west side of lower Manhattan's financial district[1] that sit adjacent to one another just four blocks (0.5 km) north of the former World Trade Center (WTC) complex. One is the elite Stuyvesant High School, a nationally known *specialized* or *magnet* public school, where entrance is test-restricted to approximately 800 students throughout New York City each year. The other is the only community college[2] in Manhattan, the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), with open enrollment to all students with a high school diploma or its tested equivalent, the General Educational Development (GED).

The two equally enormous school buildings are separated physically by a mere 25 m wide highway (the West Side Highway), bridged by an overpass

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walkway. Stuyvesant's students must pass by the front of the college to access local subway and bus stops. Despite their geographical proximity, the two schools are institutionally and otherwise completely isolated from one another. One is considered by many the quintessential symbol of today's democratic opportunity in North America: one of the premier high schools in the country, its intake based entirely on merit, and free of charge. Stuyvesant evinces the reality, and contradiction, of today's neo-liberal opportunity myth, by which achievement results from individual effort free of societal prejudice of any sort. The city's $150 million investment in a new building (out of an annual budget totaling $7 billion for all 991 schools), completed in 1992, and moving another ailing school into Stuyvesant's old building, represents a new model in what it means to 'provide' for the public. The other is also a place of opportunity, though of a different sort. Like most two-year, community colleges, BMCC provides a final opportunity for higher education to those who either could not afford the tuition costs at four-year universities (recently arrived immigrants and other members of the local working class), were not interested in a bachelor's degree, or were not accepted directly into four-year universities for a variety of reasons. The year 1995 marks a significant shift in the origins of a significant segment of the student population. Eliminating remedial education in New York's four-year public universities that year, students failing the English language requirements were re-directed to the community colleges. In effect, many recently arrived immigrants, and others with inadequate English skills, ended up at BMCC, despite above-standard scores on math and science exams. Shortly after the start of the September 11th 2001 school day, such distinctions were 'leveled', so to speak, as both groups had the unfortunate distinction of being within sight of the terrorist attack on the WTC complex.

As is the nature of unprecedented events, traditional coping strategies had to be adapted quickly to new circumstances. In their haste, perhaps, things did not run as smoothly as all might have hoped. The words of a Stuyvesant High School parent, told to me in an interview in April 2002, echo throughout journalistic accounts. 'They just turned the kids out onto the street', he said, 'with no working public transportation.' Both schools shut their doors early on the afternoon of September 11th for an indefinite period, and both re-opened them at nearly the same time: BMCC within three weeks, and Stuyvesant one week later.

Considering the time required to check the structural safety of the school buildings and air quality so close to the site, not to mention potential psychological trauma, this is an unusually quick recovery time; it is a local example of the pervasive sense of urgency expressed in the dominant discourse of the United States government after the attacks. Returning quickly to our normal routines was 'our' way of showing 'them' that we were not defeated. In the weeks and months following the attacks, the terrorists' motivations were formulated in various ways: this was an attack

on 'democracy', on 'freedom', on 'diversity', on 'capitalism', on 'Christianity'. Given the variety of their motivations, the respondents' (our) motivations might have been as equally diverse, but such diversity was not permitted. Returning quickly to normalcy outweighed even the potential health risks involved. Indeed, air quality tests were conducted to evaluate the risks, but even inconclusive results did not forestall the quick return. It is not without relevance that timing has become the central theme on which anti-(Iraqi) war protesters, including the governments of France, Germany and China, have challenged the United States. Weapons inspectors need more time, the opposition states emphatically, to complete the work they were commissioned to perform by the United Nations. The opposition to the sense of urgency is an element of the greater challenge to what is vaguely understood as the contemporary 'American way'.

Among the resources for this study is the anthropological research on disasters. This sub-specialty of cultural anthropology defines disasters as 'totalizing events or processes' that affect 'most aspects of community life' (Oliver-Smith, 1996: 304).[3] The disaster is a punctuated event that, metaphorically speaking, wipes the slate clean. In stark contrast, rebuilding is a longitudinal process, which thereby reveals various socio-political mechanisms at work to rebuild or re-constitute society. In observing such periods it is particularly useful to consider how *differences* are processually formed. Both E.P. Thompson's (1966) notion of classes as 'social and cultural *formations*', as well as Howard Winant's (1994) notion of race as an 'evolving historical construct', serve as models in this regard.[4] In the wake of the terrorist attacks, many North American residents came under suspicion for their religious, political, economic or other affiliations. Detainments despite absence of any criminal activity have prompted protests from many about the perceived loss of civil liberties. What makes someone 'suspicious' is a key question for social scientists today. Government policies and activities implemented since September 11th have redefined the qualities of 'suspicious' types. In essence, we are witnessing a new kind of *difference*, defining a new 'suitable enemy' (Christie, 1986) being formed, as particular characteristics are targeted.

## The first goal of this ethnography: discovering contemporary mechanisms of difference-making

This ethnographic study aims to explore the constitution of particular contemporary categories of difference in our society by comparing the experiences of the two student groups in relation to the disaster. By comparing (1) each student body's responses and how they and their families were represented in the media, and (2) each school's leadership's responses, it will describe how distinctions are produced, and whether the

common categories of difference employed by social scientists have any explanatory value.

## The second goal: defining social difference

The study also aims to contribute to a growing body of work (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999; Dominguez, 1994; Gilroy, 2000; Gregory, 1998; Hartigan, 1999) that finds the use of a set of standard, commonplace sociological categories to explain behavior inadequate, if not outright misleading. Because group 'characteristics' are usually arbitrarily and misleadingly conceived, they serve only to index possible areas of research. The two populations can be dichotomized easily according to current academic and commonly accepted distinctions: BMCC's student population is 73 percent 'minority'[5] and mostly 'working-class';[6] Stuyvesant's student population is 93 percent 'majority'[7] and mostly 'middle class'.[8] This study employs such terms only as indices of social contexts, not as characteristics of the groups themselves. After all, these are analytic labels that, at best, direct our inquiries; they are not explanations.

In this comparison of the two large groups of young people attending schools in the same close proximity to the disaster site, much theoretical baggage is required to make them *different*. This study draws on popular newspaper and magazine reports, interviews with parents, students and school officials, and the author's personal observations. Interviews at the high school were restricted to parents, who were the responsible and most vocal members of that group. At the college, interviews were with the students themselves, including their elected leaders, and with their professors and other school officials.

## Setting the scene

In the attacks BMCC lost a 15-storey building which had been donated by Miles and Shirley Fiterman and which had opened only two years earlier. It had housed 40 classrooms and a new 'virtual' library; thus, new classrooms had to be rebuilt in the surviving structure. Stuyvesant High School was spared any structural damage. The safety concerns about each facility that accounted for the slightly different re-opening dates revolved primarily around the issue of potentially toxic air-contamination. The different level of contamination in each building revealed in early air-quality tests was due, in most part, to pre-existing architectural distinctions in their respective ventilation systems.

The Stuyvesant building has a diversified ventilation system that draws air from 14 main sites, as well as from the 300 units in each classroom. In contrast, BMCC's system drew air from just one central location, making it

easier to clean, but at the same time, much more vulnerable to disruption. On the other hand, at BMCC, officials succeeded in restricting WTC rescue workers to the two bottom floors, while the Stuyvesant building was taken over by local authorities, who used 10 of its floors, thus putting it at greater risk of re-contamination by 'tracking'. Importantly, BMCC's building engineers shut down the entire HVAC (Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning) system immediately on the morning of September 11th, thereby preventing contaminated air from being drawn into, settling in, or circulating through the building. About this intervention, BMCC President Antonio Perez stated, 'Not even the smart folks across the street thought to do that' (Richardson, 2002). His choice of adjectives to describe the Stuyvesant group reveals one of the more commonly held ideas about them, namely, that they are smarter-than-average – certainly, smarter than students at a community college.

While BMCC, then, faced constraints imposed by classroom losses, Stuyvesant faced that of impaired air quality. The very ambiguity in quality testing makes it a highly contestable issue. It is in such areas of potential contest, where negotiation is possible, that we see the greatest distinctions between the two groups' reactions. About this, Oliver-Smith's words resonate instructively:

> Ownership of a disaster, that is, the right to claim that it occurred, who its victims were, and the 'true account' of events, origin, consequences, and responsibilities, often erupts as a very contested form of discourse in all stages of a disaster. (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 2002: 11)

The Stuyvesant parents created an effective political space to voice their position publicly.

## Initial responses

The starkest contrast between the reactions of each school community is evinced in their respective responses to official statements. Nonetheless, at both schools, the authoritative bodies encouraged students to return to the facilities and get back to business-as-usual as soon as possible. The only obstacle was lingering concern about student safety: structural damage to the surviving BMCC buildings, and air quality, at Stuyvesant. Experts claimed that the collapse of the WTC's two main towers released nine potentially carcinogenic substances into the air, in a radius of up to 2 miles, claims that remain unresolved to this day.

However, about 300 BMCC students did not return to school.[9] Concerning this group, school officials have suggested that it was to be expected. 'After all', said a nurse- practitioner there, 'many of these kids were barely holding on as it was.' She was referring to the financial burden of attending school while working and/or maintaining a family, with little,

if any, financial assistance from the school or elsewhere. Indeed, students would not have to repay financial aid if they left the school in response to the attacks. Alternatively, we could interpret their 'dropping out' as a proactive decision based on a sound evaluation of the benefits and costs of attending a community college in New York City today. Furthermore, the treatment of immigrants of uncertain status since September 11th in the United States must be considered as a factor in their decision. Shortly after the September 11th attacks, New York Senator Frank Padavan (of District 11 in Queens, bordering Nassau county), and CUNY General Counsel Frederick P. Schaffer, proposed to change a 14-year City University policy that allowed undocumented or out-of-status students residing in NYC to pay resident tuition rates. Instead, the proposal recommends, these students should be charged as if they were non-residents or international students, more than doubling the expense of attending New York's four-year public universities and increasing community college costs by 40 percent. In no ambiguous terms, Padavan declared that allowing 'illegal immigrants' in our schools was a threat to 'national security' and 'an insult to every citizen', a local example of how misdirected fear has been employed to justify an assault on particular members of our community (of which the Patriot Acts are the institutionalized examples) (Arenson, 2001). Of course, raising the costs of tuition in order to exclude such people does not ensure that they will not remain on North American soil. In effect, the proposed legislation would merely exclude a greater proportion of the working class from our institutions of higher learning. (As of 4 February 2003 the proposed changes have not been enforced.)

Whereas Stuyvesant parents exploited the issue of contaminated air, refuting Board of Education and Environmental Protection Agency statements with their own expert testimony, drawn from independent tests, at BMCC there was only minimal substantive debate. It is this difference of activity that constitutes one observable distinction between these two groups. These disparate activities index differences in expectation, access to paid experts, or 'acceptable' responses, but reveal nothing about individual characteristics. Individuals within each group responded in various ways, some of which were publicized, some of which were not. The access to expertise indexes the social capital of the Stuyvesant group, largely absent at BMCC.

## The authoritative responses to early air-quality tests

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reported little or no sign of danger according to the air tests conducted in late September, in and outside of both schools' buildings. The BMCC administration's, including President Perez's, only public statement in response to these findings, posted on its web site, reads, 'Prior to reopening BMCC on October 1, our

emphasis was placed upon asbestos and lead levels, and consultants were retained to measure these dangerous substances within the college.' Testing for other potentially toxic substances, such as benzene, carbon monoxide, mercury, particulates and volatile organic compounds, did not take place until after the student body had returned to the school building.

At Stuyvesant, the parents immediately contested the government's findings with their own, gleaned from reports by three independent environmental consulting firms and two independent ventilation engineers. Literally hundreds of tests per week returned mixed results. Their leading environmental consultant, H.A. Bader and Associates, informed them that in addition to those contaminants tested for by the EPA (asbestos and lead), there were at least nine other carcinogenic substances to consider: respirable particulates (PM2.5), PCBs, benzene, Dioxin, chromium, heavy metals, total volatile organic compounds (TVOCs), silica and fiberglass. Most importantly, Bader representatives declared that the same tests conducted at the same time in the same place by different agencies routinely report different results. For this study, the empirical tests were not noted for their potential reliability, but rather for how they were made variably available to each group. Expertise, today, is available at a cost. Though this may seem obvious, here, *difference* might have life-threatening consequences.

## Managing dissent

One BMCC student interviewed in front of the building in late April 2002 remembered, 'at first I was wearing a mask, and they kept telling everyone it was alright'. Another added:

> . . . you know what's crazy about it: most of the workers on the World Trade [including construction workers, police, and firemen that used BMCC facilities] had masks, but for the students who were actually attending [school], you had to purchase your own mask.[10]

When asked what, if anything, their teachers had said to them, one smirked ironically, 'Prof. X said we came back too soon, and he was a chemistry teacher.' The students' concern did not find its way into any mainstream public record. Without a ready venue for their expression, the official line remained uncontested in the mainstream media, though several articles published in the two school newspapers expressed concerns about air quality and the general neglect of BMCC. In the *SGA News*, the BMCC student government newspaper, the author repeated President Perez's words (above), drawing its information from an internal memo (see Joseph, 2001). In the other student paper, poignantly titled *The Voice of the Voiceless*, numerous articles appeared between December 2001 and

November 2002, addressing both safety concerns and continued budget cuts during this time.

Because silences are 'ambiguous' (Shields, 1996), we must examine why some narratives are heard while others are not. They are 'not necessarily intended' or 'consonant with class struggle, patriarchy or white domination', writes Shields (1996: 231); but, nonetheless they are 'processes' (Apple, 1996). Apple sees silence as evidence of dominant groups 'work[ing] to maintain the power of their hegemonic meanings' by constructing barriers to the realm of 'official knowledge'; they are not an attribute of a subordinated group (Apple, 1996: 125). The students in this case were not silent, but their 'knowledge' was. Despite their ongoing public protests over school facility conditions, cuts to the university budget and the elimination of the government tuition assistance program (TAP), mainstream news sources failed to report their activities. This is not for lack of a well-articulated argument, as the following personal letter from BMCC student Raheem Hamilton to New York Senator Hillary R. Clinton demonstrates. (This letter, and others like it, were given to me by an English professor at BMCC.) On 4 April 2002, Mr Hamilton wrote:

> I feel that is wrong to cut TAP . . . some [students] come from low-income homes or are homeless and can't afford the cost of the tuition, and student loans will hurt more than help. . . . Should the state cut the CUNY budget and put an end to TAP? . . . Back in the 60s and 70s the CUNY admission policy gave the opportunity to . . . come to their two-year college for free if you were a New York resident and went to any high school in the five boroughs of New York. Do you favor bringing back open admission to CUNY's two-year school? . . . I hope you will be at the rally on 4/5/02 to urge the city council members to restore cuts to CUNY.

With limited channels to express their voice, BMCC students have been effectively prevented from challenging 'official' stories. The point to take from this is that despite appearances from the outside, there was neither agreement nor complacency amongst this group.

Stuyvesant parents also challenged publicly the integrity of the city administration, claiming that contrary to official statements, their independent investigators had found that 'school ventilation ducts were never cleaned . . . neither were the 300 individual classroom ventilation units' (memo from PTA member). One parent accused the Board of Education of deception about the air-test results. 'They do not test for heavy metals, solvents, or very fine particulate matter on a regular basis', he writes, 'so it's no wonder their tests reveal nothing' (memo from another PTA member). There is no similar discussion of the intricacies of air contamination in reports from BMCC.

Stuyvesant parents' efforts coalesced around contesting three issues: the validity of the air-quality testing, the need to upgrade Stuyvesant's ventilation system with new filters, and moving the debris-dumping barge away from its docked position in front of the school. Follow-up statements from

the EPA and Bader regarding air quality at both Stuyvesant High School and BMCC, claiming inconclusive tests at both sites, has led periodically to a refueling of these debates.[11]

Test results will remain inconclusive, due both to the potential for *re*-contamination by 'tracking' and the variable nature of the tests themselves. In addition, debris removal from the nearby disaster site made dust particles air-borne once again.

Prolonging both schools' air problems is continued access to the dumping barge by trucks passing between the two schools, often resulting in billowing dust clouds. Stuyvesant parents' repeated demands to relocate the barge have not been satisfied, but their plea has at least received public attention: then-Chancellor of the Board of Education, Harold Levy, responded to the parents that while he shared their concern, it was out of his jurisdiction. He claimed to have made several appeals to the mayor and governor to move the barge. The barge remained in its original location throughout the clean-up effort, though the contents were soaked in order to minimize dust clouds.

Challenging authoritative statements, hiring independent 'experts', staging demonstrations and organizing local coalitions are practices that distinguish the two groups. It is these practices – both the skills and the personal contacts that they imply – that mark the groups as *distinct* social bodies. For example, when the parents at Stuyvesant High School felt that their efforts were stalled due to insufficient press attention, they devised a corrective plan. On the advice of one particularly active parent with past experience in public relations, the parents staged a demonstration. They gathered in front of the school on a March morning at 7:30 a.m., chanting 'Take charge, move the barge.' Finally, to maximize his group's effectiveness, one of the Stuyvesant parents contacted reporters well in advance.

## How the press constructs difference

Between September 11th 2001, and 24 April 2002, there appeared 121 articles about Stuyvesant High School, including national press coverage; of these, 97 make direct reference to the September 11th attacks. For the same period, the numbers for BMCC are 21 and 17 respectively, and these are all from local papers. Part of this discrepancy can perhaps be attributed to the age differential between the two student populations: younger students are bound to receive more press attention than older ones in times of crisis. But this explanation, in turn, is belied by the fact that none of the other eight schools in the area (two high schools, two junior high schools and four elementary schools), some of which were even closer to the WTC, received press attention on anything like the scale of that received by Stuyvesant. The disproportionate press coverage has not gone unnoticed by the public. At least one *Washington Post* reader submitted a written

complaint. 'I was disappointed', she writes, 'to find that "Recovery 101" also focused on a Stuyvesant student' (Allison Tores, 6 January 2002). This is the first and most obvious example of difference *making* between the two schools.

Stuyvesant's story was further publicized when its school newspaper, the *Spectator*, was distributed inside the 20 November issue of the *New York Times*,[12] as well as through a PBS television mini-series, *9–11: Looking Back, Moving Forward*, aired on 18 November.[13] Videocassette copies of the show were distributed to school counselors throughout the country through a grant from the MetLife Foundation and other local groups.

From beginning to end, Stuyvesant's case, unlike BMCC's, has attracted mainstream press attention. For example, most of the articles about Stuyvesant make mention of the high school's 15 semi-finalists in this year's Intel Competition – the country's most prestigious high school science contest – out of a total 300 semi-finalists nationwide. The success of these 15 students is then used as a reflection of how well all of their colleagues (3000 students) endure adversity. In a 17 January 2002 *Newsday* article, 'Scientific Achievement: "Resilient" Stuyvesant Students Excel in National Competition', McKenna writes: 'Students at Stuy again showed why they are often seen as the cream of New York's public school system. . . . It was Stuy, which placed the second-highest total in the nation, which hurdled the greatest obstacles. They are totally resilient.' The author of a 9 February 2002 *New York Times* article writes: 'Students carried on their daily lives with a dose of stoicism and a dab of bravado.' Finally, the title alone of the last example is sufficient: 'At Stuyvesant, Kudos for Scientific Creativity in the Shadow of Ruin' (Zhao, 2002).

The Stuyvesant parents have also shown their political acumen and capabilities by joining their struggle with those of other local groups, such as the WTC Environmental Coalition, other local schools, Community Board 1, Independence Plaza Tenants' Association, and others (see Appendix A). At a City Council meeting they were encouraged in their struggle by a Stuyvesant alumnus, and offered free legal representation from prominent Washington attorney Richard Ben-Veniste,[14] who also happens to be a Stuyvesant alumnus. Nevertheless, thus far, they have been significantly more successful in demonstrating their connections to authority than in affecting actual change. As stated above, the dumping barge was never moved, and the full cleaning of the air ducts they demanded has never been completed to their satisfaction.

In the Stuyvesant articles, the students are almost invariably identified by one of two characteristics: either their home country, without mention of how their status as 'foreigners' was ascertained or defined, or an anecdote about the student's academic achievement. Examples include 'Bangladesh', 'an Indian-born immigrant', a 'Muslim senior' (Zhao, 2002), or 'he has gotten good grades and earned early admission to Stanford University' (*Newsday*, S. McKenna, 17 January 2002). In the BMCC articles,

the common qualifying marker is where the students currently reside. Examples include 'East Harlem', 'Brooklyn', 'Newark' and 'East New York'. With a sizeable immigrant student body, this discrepancy cannot be explained by a lack of foreign students at BMCC. Racialized and class segregation in New York City have been documented amply in academic studies (Gregory, 1998; Sanjek, 1994; Susser, 1982) and are common knowledge to New Yorkers, the local newspaper readership. Not-so-sophisticated symbolic discourse, like that above, makes residence an easily deciphered coded marker for racialized and class characteristics. This is a good example of the difficulty in analysis of separating race from class. In this case, the economically wealthier foreign group members are identified by their nationalities, while their poorer counterparts are qualified by their area of local residence.

No articles identify particular BMCC students, such as Dennis Sinned, who published a book containing a personal account of walking through the streets of lower Manhattan on September 11th (*The September Apocalypse: An Eyewitness Account of the September 11th Disaster*); only President Perez is cited individually. In one article the speaker is identified as 'a 53-year-old student from East Harlem . . . [who speaks] in halting English' (Arenson, 2002). In referring to Stuyvesant students, articles highlight their immigrant status to emphasize their academic achievement. At BMCC, the interviewee's lack of English fluency – marking his foreignness – is contextualized by reference to his working-class, and racialized, identity. A balanced representation might mention the inordinate success of BMCC's chess team, considered one of the best in the country. In their first year in the tournament, 1993, BMCC won the Pan-American Intercollegiate Chess Championships, beating Harvard. The team would go on to win four of the following five annual competitions. Nor do the newspaper reports emphasize the BMCC students' relentless struggles against citywide budget cuts throughout September's events and up to the present as a sign of their resilience, bravado and determination. In fact, as the then-student-body Vice-President said in an interview, through repeated meetings with College President Perez and the City Council, student coalitions did win back '$13 [million] of the $200 million in cuts proposed for this year, which, though trivial, is at least a start'. This is confirmed by an article in the February 2002 edition of the PSC-CUNY (Professional Staff Congress, City University of New York) newspaper, *Clarion*, reporting that the 'combination of protest and lobbying changed the City budget', reducing 'Guiliani's 15% cut to 4.2%' (p. 3).

What the press has painted are two distinct groups. One is engaged, determined and successful, despite adversity; in this case, individual achievement defines the group. In the other there is resignation, silence, victimization; in this case, the group's apathy overshadows any individual successes. Both images are obvious distortions.

## Discussion

As in the immediate aftershock of other disasters, constructed hierarchies within social categories can be momentarily blurred, as commonalities (e.g. as neighbors, survivors, New Yorkers) obscure the usual, stereotyped kinds of group distinction.

In the recovery process, organizing lines of distinction are redrawn. This should not be read as an admission of defeat. Rather, as various critical social theorists (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1995; Gregory and Sanjek, 1994; Harrison, 1995) have reminded us, socially constructed categories of separation (race, ethnicity, minority/majority, etc.) are 'profound and fundamental to the social order' (Merry, 2001: 121). If returning to that social order after a natural disaster is proof that the society has 'developed in a sustainable way' (Oliver-Smith, 1996: 304) after a terrorist attack, then redrawing these distinctions, however erroneously derived, demonstrates their familiarity, and even utility. At the least, it provides a (fortunately!) rare opportunity to observe multiple, often cross-cutting, operations at work.

Contemporary ethnographic research on inequality is useful for recognizing that race and class cannot be disaggregated. This is an opportunity to see how these work in conjunction. Emphasizing the social *constitutiveness* of categorical distinctions, they maintain their significance only to the extent that they can be reproduced in practice. The differential ability of each school community to have its story heard presents a clear example of this process of distinction.

From my discussions with students at both schools, what emerged is a picture of differential reactions to the feelings of vulnerability caused by the disaster, based on differences in expectations. Disaster itself was something that each group was, in its way, accustomed to. The Stuyvesant parents' response was to demonstrate their power position. By contrast, the BMCC response was to take the event in stride – perhaps too much so – and to forge ahead. This response was perhaps best articulated by two members of its community. One, a school doctor, stated, 'these kids see this kind of stuff everyday. Okay, maybe not this bad, but for them, it's like, okay, that's life, so move over, because nothing is going to stop me from getting my diploma.' Another, the student Vice-President, who plans to continue his studies in a PhD program, offers the students' perspective directly:

> Culturally and historically speaking, the people at this school don't have it in them. . . . If something goes on, they're used to seeing politicians leave their neighborhoods the way they are. They are used to hearing the politicians say, yeah, we're going to fix up your schools, and nothing happens, used to the police beating their people up or treating them the wrong way, treat them with prejudice, so their school getting bombed and then they're cutting their schools' budget, okay, they're used to it, and it's sad.

The rebuilding effort in these two schools has shown differences in expectations, knowledge and access to resources, and, most disturbing, the isolation of two groups with similar interests, located across the street from each other. In fact, a top BMCC administrator, Scott Anderson, told me in February 2003 that there had been no contact at all with Stuyvesant over the previous 18 months. On the day I spoke with him, Stuyvesant's President, Stanley Teitel, broke that silence. Mr Teitel called to request some assistance. He was looking for a space to house 3000 students temporarily in the event of a future emergency, while deciding whether or not to close the school. This was, clearly, a new concern brought about by the unprecedented events of September 11th 2001. Anderson was primarily concerned that the college's resources might not be appropriately designed for the younger population. He also said he would first speak with local police and fire departments, in order to see if they would need the site again. 'After all', said Anderson after hanging up the phone, when the last disaster happened, 'it was the city rescue workers that restored our lights.' New relationships were, and will be, forged as a result of the collective experience of September 11th 2001. As this instance brings to light, the specific nature of these relationships – between whom, and to what extent – will depend upon the realization of dependency across established, superficial lines of group distinction.

## Appendix A: Parents' Association (PA) actions, as listed by the PA

Numerous meetings and communications between representatives of the PA Executive Board, the PA EHSC and the BOE [Board of Education] from mid-September until mid-November, at which time the BOE refused to meet with us any more (Deputy Chancellor Klasfeld invited us to a meeting on February 11th only after he learned that the PA was considering litigation).

Communication with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and our local chapter, and coordination efforts.

PA representatives made a presentation at the BOE Public Agenda Meeting, attended by Members of the Board of the BOE. Also, private meetings were held with certain BOE Board members.

Continuous involvement of the PA's expert, Howard Bader, along with UFT experts, in cleanup, testing, and remedial actions by BOE and their consultants.

Notification by EPA to PA President of any elevated levels of contaminants at EPA monitoring station at the barge. This is how the PA learned of the asbestos, tetrachloroethane, and isocyanate contamination next to the school's north side.

Consultations with scientists, physicians, and environmentalists, including physicians at Mt. Sinai, NYU, and SUNY hospitals, physicians at the Centers for Disease Control's National Institute of Occupational Safety & Health, scientists at NYU and Columbia University, environmentalists at Natural Resources Defense Council, Healthy Schools Network, and others.

PA President, PA Expert, and PA members have testified at several City Council

and EPA hearings. PA President also testified at State Assembly and U.S. Senate hearings.

Employed several professional ventilation engineering firms, including the original designer of the school's ventilation system. They all agree that the ventilation system needs to be upgraded.

We are seeking to obtain funding for the upgrade of the ventilation systems from sources outside the BOE, and have submitted so far applications to the 9/11 Fund and to a private foundation.

Numerous meetings and communications with government agencies, EPA, DEP, DEC, DOH, DCC, DOT, etc., and City officials, including Deputy Mayor Mark Shaw.

Numerous meetings and communications with elected officials, including City Council members, State Senators, and Congressmen. In recent weeks, we have been working with Senator Clinton's office, and with Congressman Nadler's office. Also, along with other schools in the area, we have been working closely with City Councilman Alan Gerson, especially regarding the current high lead levels in all the area schools.

We have joined forces with the downtown community through the PA Political, Social, and Legal Action Committee, and have joined the WTC Environmental Coalition. The PA participated in a press conference and rally at City Hall in December, and jointly with the other schools and the Stuyvesant Student Union petitioned the Mayor to move the barge. In addition to the other schools, we are working with Borough of Manhattan Community College, Community Board 1, Independence Plaza Tenants' Association, Lower Manhattan Residents' Relief Coalition, NYC Coalition to End Lead Poisoning, Chinatown community organizations, unions, and others.

Consultation with several major law firms. At the February 13 PA General Meeting, a motion was voted upon for the PA to retain legal counsel on a pro-bono basis (at no cost to the PA) to explore legal courses of action. We are currently talking to several law firms interested in taking our case. In the near future, parents will be called upon to vote on commencing litigation. Per the PA By-Laws, parents have to be present to vote.

## Notes

1 This covers the area from the southern tip of Manhattan island north to Chambers Street, from the East River to the Hudson.

2 Community colleges are authorized to grant associates degrees to graduating students, many of whom continue their studies at four-year universities in order to attain the bachelors degree, which is a prerequisite for admission to graduate schools.

3 Despite some disagreement among its prominent theorists (Anthony Oliver-Smith, Kenneth Hewitt, Henry W. Fischer), in this study I assume that this description applies to both natural and man-made 'disasters'.

4 The understanding of these authors stands in stark contrast to top-down explanations of the persistence of categorical distinctions (race, class, etc.), such as those of classic Marxist explanations of white-on-black oppression (Cox, 1959; Fanon, 1963). When Cox writes, 'If we see that race prejudice is an attitudinal instrument of modern, human, economic exploitation', he is explaining the existence of racism as an aspect of 'political class-conflict', found only in a

capitalist system (1959: 330, 333). He does not bother to explore why the fictitious notion of 'race' ever presented itself for exploitation, or how particular human qualities of difference become designated as 'racial'. Similarly, to explain the demise of New World slavery, and the subsequent 'transformation' of *savages* into *primitives*, Fanon writes, 'After a phase of accumulation of capital . . . [t]he colonies have become a market. . . . [A] blind domination based on slavery is not, economically speaking, worthwhile for the bourgeoisie of the mother country' (1963: 65). The new form of the subjects, then, results naturally (?) from a change in the form of domination. In other words, neither the oppressors nor the oppressed have any role in defining who they are and on what grounds they will relate.

5 According to how the New York City public university system classifies them today, this means Black and Hispanic. For the 2001 school year, BMCC's student population (of 16,025) was described in racial terms as: 12.5 percent White, 42.2 percent Black, 31.1 percent Hispanic and 14.2 percent Asian and 'other' (including Pacific Islanders, Alaskan Natives, Native Americans) (www.cuny.edu/topframe-abtcuny.html?/abtcuny/contact_us/index.html).

6 I borrow this term from Joshua Freeman (2000).

7 According to how the New York City public school system classifies them today, this means Whites and Asians. For the 2001 school year, the Stuyvesant High School student population was described in racial terms as: 43.2 percent White, 3.2 percent Black, 3.6 percent Hispanic and 50 percent Asian and 'other' (including Pacific Islanders, Alaskan Natives, Native American) (www.nycenet.edu/daa/01asr/default.asp).

8 In terms of class status, compared to City-wide schools where 48.4 percent of students are eligible for 'free lunch', only 15.4 percent at Stuyvesant are. This number is significantly low, even when compared to only the other 'specialized' City schools, where 22.2 percent of students qualify for 'free lunch' (www.nycenet.edu/daa/01asr/default.asp).

9 The Vice-President of Administration and Planning, G. Scott Anderson, explained how he arrived at this number. 'We compared the numbers to the historical attrition rate over the last three years, during both the fall and spring semesters.' This is the 'most accurate number, from a social scientific perspective', he said.

10 In a discussion with a BMCC health practitioner a few days later, I was assured that the school did provide masks for students. 'We handed out about 1000 masks from this office, and about 10,000 in total throughout the school.'

11 On 7 February, the Bader form reported 'troubling levels of cancer-causing dioxins' at the BMCC site. 'I'm talking about levels 20 to 90 orders of magnitude above' acceptable levels, said President Howard Bader (*Daily News*, J. Gonzalez, 7 February 2002). On 28 February, 28th National Ombudsman for the EPA, Robert J. Martin, reported that Stuyvesant and PS 89 (another downtown school) 'are being recontaminated with hazardous material' (*Daily News*, A. Gendar, 28 February 2002). These findings were independent from those of the Bader firm. Two months later, on 17 April, the EPA found that 92 indoor air contaminant measurements for adults, and five for children, exceeded federal standards.

12 Paid for by magazine and book printer R.R. Donnelley.

13 About this show, a *Daily News* article states that the 'quietly intense' program is 'graced with articulate teens who speak with heart and candor about what they thought, saw and felt at the time of the attacks and in the weeks since'.

14 Richard Ben-Veniste was a prosecutor on Watergate trials, and defended Bill Clinton in the Whitewater Committee, among many other distinctions.

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