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# Morris High School: A Biography

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MORRIS HIGH SCHOOL: A BIOGRAPHY

by

NAOMI SHARLIN

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

Morris High School: A Biography

by

Naomi Sharlin

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Morris High School was conceived and built in the Bronx with a lofty mission: to provide a comprehensive, world-class secondary education to the children of immigrant and working-class families, and in so doing to elevate the American public education system and America itself. Such a weighty mission for an institution would result, one could expect, in painstaking record keeping, the lionization of great leaders, consistent investment in the building, and attention given to problems encountered or created over the years. And yet, the life of Morris High School remains elusive. Key figures in its story are lost to obscurity like so many ghosts. Well-worn quantitative measures of success and failure miss the mark in trying to understand the events, mundane and momentous, occurring inside the building. They are only a partial and ambiguous picture of the life of the school. While this study cannot possibly fill the many gaps, I grapple with partial sources, and attempt to give voice to the ghosts of Morris High School. I study the building, demographics, disinvestment and school reform. Exploring these facets makes clear that the narrative shape is not a teleological rise and fall, but rather a straight line, showing Morris's unchanged mission.

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Figure 1. Morris High School

## INTRODUCTION

A biography of a high school is a haunted story. Many characters appear throughout, yet, too often, little more is known about them than their names. Some heroes of this biography are visionary principals like Jacob Bernstein and Frances Vazquez. Yet no one has written books about them, let alone a Wikipedia page. I don't know where they were born, what drew them into education, or why they chose to lead Morris. Jacob Bernstein championed racial integration in schools a decade before the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown vs. Board* (1954) decision. What led him to believe integration was the key to a supportive and successful school environment?

What did he think of Morris's trajectory after he left the school? I can only guess. Under Frances Vazquez's leadership, Morris cut its dropout rate by more than half. How exactly did she accomplish this? How did she feel about being praised by President Reagan on national television? I can only guess.

Morris High School sits at the top of a hill on Boston Road in the Morrisania section of the Bronx. Today, the school building is covered in scaffolding, black-and-orange striped netting flaps in the breeze from seven stories up, its function indistinct. Gray stone, tall windows and a nearly 50-foot tower are barely visible. Yet the building's presence is not diminished. It dominates the block. The scaffolding gives the building a careworn, rugged appearance that matches the neighborhood. This building is of its surroundings, not plopped down from another era or a different bracket of public investment: Morris High School on the outside.

On the inside, up the steps and past the metal detectors, Morris High School doesn't exist anymore. Morris High School graduated its last class in 2002, replaced with four, much smaller themed schools. Each occupies about a floor and a half of the building. The hallways are wide and brightly painted, the classrooms, however, are dark; scaffolding and netting block the tall, mullioned windows. Paint peels and mold grows on the walls. The old wooden floors have been replaced in most rooms with linoleum tile, whose missing corners and torn up sections are reflected in the water-stained ceiling tiles.

This is Morris High School as it was nearly ten years ago (when I worked there), and roughly how it remains. But it had a long life before this. Like people, buildings exist in a context. And just as it is impossible to write the biography of a person without exploring the time, place, and culture in which she lives, so too the story of a building is nested in the story of the neighborhood, the stories of the place. In the case of a school building, laws and education

policy shaped the building, as well as the people and events of the school. So, a biography of Morris is a palimpsest of sorts, with stories of the Bronx, of immigration, integration and segregation, of urban renewal and drugs, of political activism and school reform, written in overlapping and often contradictory layers on top of the school, like so much graffiti.

Morris is historically notable. Not only was it the first public high school in the Bronx, it was the first co-educational high school in New York City. The building and several surrounding blocks are on the National Register of Historic Places. It is also located in the poorest congressional district in the country (New York's 15<sup>th</sup> District). This might seem unexpected. How did such a poor neighborhood become home to such an important school? Why does a grand public institution in a poor neighborhood feel like a juxtaposition? And, as I peel back the layers of the palimpsest, why was such a notable building allowed physically to deteriorate?

For this project, I conducted archival research at the Bronx Historical Society, where I sifted through a manila folder filled with roughly two inches of documents on Morris at the same dark wooden table as the one other researcher there, politely negotiating the use of the single outlet to charge our laptops. I reference or draw on virtually every one of the scant sources available, mostly articles from local newspapers<sup>1</sup>. The dearth of documentation on Morris begs more questions. Is it because Morris is in a poor neighborhood? Is it because it's a public high school? Is it because it has served primarily communities of color for many decades? Is it because of something else entirely that hasn't occurred to me? Likely, it is all of these and none of these.

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<sup>1</sup> I cite sources as completely as possible throughout. Many articles in the manila folder at the archive did not include authors or page numbers.

Most scholarship in the History of Education is focused on school systems, rather than on individual schools. David Tyack's *One Best System* (1974), a definitive history of New York City public schools, is more concerned with political machinations and social movements than the granular histories of schools themselves. Case studies in Urban Education are not uncommon, and Morris would seem to be a good candidate, since it was among the first waves of buildings to be divided into small schools as part of the Gates Foundation's national initiative. Yet it remains understudied.

It is tempting to structure the biography of Morris High School as a classic rise and fall, perhaps with a question about renewal in the form of gentrification tacked on at the end. I suspect, however, that, in addition to being predictable, this narrative shape would rely on stale assumptions about how changing racial and socio-economic demographics affect an area and a school. Instead, I use several frameworks or mindsets to shape this narrative. First, Joan Scott's concept of experience, as "that about which knowledge is produced," as opposed to truth-filled evidence for something I seek to explain (Scott, 1992). That is, the changes experienced by Morris are not evidence of, for example, the economic decline of the South Bronx, but phenomena in their own right through which I hope to develop an understanding of all those layers written on top of Morris High School. The experiences of students and staff, reduced to partial and coded measures like attendance and graduation rates, or one-off stories in newspapers, are interpreted by policy-makers as evidence of the state of the school, but these numbers fail to illuminate the events, momentous and mundane, occurring inside the building, let alone the motivations or feelings of its inhabitants.

I also use *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008) by Avery F. Gordon to show how the history of people, places and things is not stuck in the past, but

written in the present. Gordon uses haunting to illuminate the otherwise marginal people and events that don't fit neatly into formal sociological and historical frameworks. She starts with the seemingly banal and tired truism that *life is complicated*, but takes the statement seriously, showing through disparate examples that, “the intricate web of connections that characterizes any event or problem *is the story*” (Gordon, 20). Instead of presenting the complex, interconnected and sometimes contradictory forces exerting their influence on Morris as distractions, or separate from the school itself, I treat them not only as part of the story, but fundamentally part of the school, haunting its hallways, classrooms and inhabitants.

Gordon also uses haunting to theorize the gap between academic understandings of systems and sociological structures and the ways in which individuals experience them. “Haunting occurs on the terrain situated between our ability to conclusively describe the logic of Capitalism or State Terror, for example, and the various experiences of this logic, experiences that are more often than not partial, coded, symptomatic, contradictory, ambiguous” (Gordon, 24). In other words, haunting is a metaphor for the human aspect of history, sociology or any other discipline, which rarely matches exactly the academic formulations they inhabit. Extending this framework, I want to avoid twisting the biography of Morris to align neatly with entrenched logics or narratives about, for example, poverty, urban education or structural racism, and instead embrace the “partial, coded, symptomatic, contradictory [and] ambiguous” layers of this story.

In a palimpsest, covered up writing shows through. Previous use of a piece of paper is visible in the present despite a writer's intention to make it invisible. The layers of a palimpsest are evidence that the past lives on in the present. Ghosts, too, defy temporal logic. They should be dead and gone, invisible, no longer able to exert influence, and yet they continue to make themselves known. Their presence is felt. They are beings of the past and present all at once. The

connection between palimpsests and ghosts does not end with their analogous relation to time. They are also both incomplete, at least partly unknown and unknowable. Ghosts, neither alive nor dead, represent part of a life lived. Why do they haunt where they do? Who were they when they were alive? They can offer only partial answers, if any at all. Similarly, a palimpsest reveals a partial text from the past. Who knows what other layers might also lurk underneath; invisible, but present nonetheless. The characters and events, the forces exerted on Morris High School are ghostly and best explored through their partial layers.

The first is of the building. I trace the history of Morris's design and the vision with which it was founded. Why was such a beautiful building, deliberately designed with such a grand purpose allowed to fall into such a dire state of disrepair? How might the state of the building serve as a partial explanation for how students and staff feel about the school? In the next chapter, I add the layer of demographic changes in the Bronx and New York City as whole. Former principal Jacob Bernstein takes center stage and lobbies to racially integrate Morris. Did the racial shifts in the Bronx contribute to the disinvestment in Morris as a building and an institution? Was Bernstein right about the power of racial integration in schools? Then, I further explore periods of investment and disinvestment in Morris. What connections might exist between these financial highs and lows and the other layers of the palimpsest? With the physical state of the building? With the demographics of the school and surrounding neighborhood? Finally, I turn to New York City's school reform of the past two decades, where Morris was once again the site of experimentation and educational innovation. Concomitant with the most recent wave of school reform is a focus on quantitative measures of school success such as graduation rates. What do such measures leave out? What does it mean for a school to be successful?

I cannot fully answer all these questions. This is the partial nature of the story. But it is also due to the nature of the sources available. Former principals Jacob Bernstein and Frances Vazquez are ghosts, but they have a defined shape. I know even less about nearly all the students and alumni who have written letters to the editor or agreed to interviews in local newspapers, or those anonymous young people whose activism so disturbed adult community members. What happened to the nameless young graduate who was accepted to Princeton University while living in a one room apartment with his extended family? Did those alumni who so valued their education at Morris really get a boost up the socio-economic ladder? The students of Morris and the people who worked there are ordinary. Their documented stories are partial, but important. They are Morris's reason for being and yet another source of complexity and ambiguity in its story. The dearth and incompleteness of sources available on Morris tell a story of their own; that, despite its socially critical mission, the work and life of a high school and the people within it are largely unrecognized and invisible.

Respecting such omissions means eschewing a linear narrative. This biography of Morris is told in overlapping layers, allowing the ghosts to speak without hemming them into a story that might not be quite right or might not be quite theirs. Structuring the narrative as a palimpsest is a way of using the relative lack of sources about Morris as an asset and a means to an argument in and of itself. Morris High School was conceived and still stands with enormous responsibility, both to its students and to the country as a whole, and yet the life in the high school is elusive and invisible.

## CHAPTER 1: THE MORRIS HIGH SCHOOL BUILDING

If Morris High School were a person, its father would be Charles B.J. Snyder, the architect of the building; its godmother would be the School Reform Law of 1896. The first two layers in this palimpsest biography are about the physical structure of the Morris High School building and the educational law and ideals that led to its founding. The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century saw the establishment of a formal, centralized public-school system in New York City, which, up until then had been disparate, locally controlled, and primarily comprised of competing sectarian institutions (Tyack, 1974). By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the massive influx of immigrants to New York City from Eastern and Southern Europe contributed to a renewed sense of purpose for public schools; not only to provide a rudimentary education to immigrants, the poor and others who could never expect to leave the working class, not just to Americanize immigrant children, but to provide an opportunity for higher education and for a lucky few, a boost up the socio-economic ladder. George Stuart, a proponent of school reform at the time argued that public high school was a social responsibility, “the public school system stands in precisely the same relation to the body politic as other great institutions established for the well-being and safety of society” (Stuart, 1888). Compared unfavorably to the secondary schools in France and Germany, school reformers in the United States focused their attention on high schools. And the public schools of New York City embraced an increasingly progressive vision. A centerpiece of this vision was the School Reform Law of 1896.

The ideal that high school could be the college of the people, a key to America as a meritocracy, underpinned the law. City officials hoped to raise standards in high schools, providing students with a more rigorous academic experience. Raising standards also meant standardizing them, necessitating a stronger central administration of schools, taking power away

from local communities. Teachers mobilized against the reform. They were told their jobs could be in jeopardy, even that they might be required to wear uniforms (Editorial, 1896). Wrapped up in the reform, in the call for higher standards, teachers heard an accusation that they were not doing their jobs well. They felt it would mean a loss of professional autonomy and that supervisory authority control what they taught and how (Hammack, 1982). Furthermore, there seemed to be a class angle to the reform; if the reform passed, perhaps the city would prioritize hiring graduates of private schools and colleges over graduates of the public system.

Despite protests from teachers, the law passed in April 1896. In addition to teaching standards, the law also addressed the need for new school buildings, and allocated funding for three new high schools; a girls' school, a boys' school and a co-educational school. If high school were to be the college of the people, the city would have to increase its capacity for educating students beyond primary school. Planning new buildings was also an opportunity to solidify new boundaries for the city. The Borough of The Bronx, incorporated into New York City in 1898, two years after the School Reform Law passed, was viewed as the northern frontier of the city, an area for expansion and experimentation. The co-educational high school, at the time an innovative and modern concept, was to be located in this frontier, a practice consistent with other cities like Boston and Baltimore, where co-educational schools were placed in the newer, residential areas of the city.

As an only just incorporated section of the city, the Bronx was more a collection of villages than an urban center. Like other parts of the city, however, it was ethnically segregated. The village of Mott Haven, just south of where Morris would be built, was dominated by Irish immigrants and their families, while Morrisania, Morris High School's future neighborhood, was predominantly German. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black families would begin moving into

Morrisania, and the Irish in Mott Haven would be largely replaced by Jews. Concomitant with this change in ethnic and racial composition was overall rapid development and population growth, evidenced by a proliferation of subway and elevated train lines. The placement of a large, new high school in a marginal section of the city was fortuitous. The college of the people had an increasing population to serve.

When the new school was planned, however, this growth was still just ahead. The direct progenitor of Morris High School was the Mixed High School, the first co-educational high school in New York City and, at the time, the only public high school in the Bronx. Funded through the School Reform Law of 1896, it opened in September 1898 in a small brick building on 157<sup>th</sup> Street and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, about six blocks south of where the new building would be built. Over the next few years, annexes were opened in the surrounding blocks to accommodate a growing student population and diverse course options. A call for proposals for the new building, which had been recognized as necessary from the start, was issued in February 1900 and the site on 163<sup>rd</sup> Street and Boston Road acquired by the city. The cornerstone was laid on July 23, 1901.

A debate arose over what to name the landmark school. Originally, the Board of Education had planned to name the school after Peter Cooper (1791-1883), the publicly beloved inventor of the steam locomotive; entrepreneur, and philanthropist. People in the Bronx, however, did not want their high school to be named for a non-Bronxite. Instead, a prominent citizen of the Bronx, Gouverneur Morris (1752-1816), was chosen as the school's namesake. A member of the Constitutional Convention and United States Senator from 1799-1803, Gouverneur Morris is credited with first suggesting the construction of a waterway to connect New York Harbor with the Great Lakes and was the chairman of the first Erie Canal Commission. He was involved with the development of the grid system of New York City. On top of his public

service, he was said to resemble George Washington. No wonder his name pops up all over the Bronx, from the names of neighborhoods to parks and avenues. With the name of the school settled, all that remained was to build it.

It was no surprise that C.B.J. Snyder was awarded the contract to design the building. He was a favorite architect of the public-school bureaucracy, particularly recognized for his state-of-the-art designs - with specialized classrooms, large windows and modern amenities - well suited to the progressive and innovative public-school system New York City aspired to have. He was also a resident of the Bronx, a figure of local pride. His goal was for Morris to be a “model of its kind in the United States” (Hermalyn, 1985). He wanted the building not only to be an architectural exemplar for the new borough, not only to bring it fame, but to use a grand and imposing design to “impress the students with the importance of education” (Ultan, 2008). Snyder designed Morris in the English-collegiate Gothic style, then prevalent on elite college campuses across the East Coast. This move was, of course, deliberate. A building that housed the college of the people, where students were to feel they were receiving a modern, transformative education should look the part.

The lot acquired for Morris High School was small, and the building would fill nearly all of it, leaving virtually no outdoor space for the school. Snyder designed Morris as an H-plan, whose shape maximized light and fresh air, with similar principles that would later be applied to apartment buildings. Inside, seventy-one rooms included specially designed laboratory and lecture classrooms, separate gymnasiums for boys and girls, a large library, a modern ventilation system, full electric wiring, an ornate auditorium, complete with a pipe organ and a bicycle storage room; it was built to accommodate 2,630 people. Outside, the building was dominated by the tower nearly fifty-foot square and 180 feet tall, which Snyder said was, “[a] symbol of the

strong school spirit that characterized Morris High School students” (Hermalyn, 1985). It cost nearly half a million dollars, in the currency of the day, to build. The building was dedicated on June 10, 1904. The auditorium was packed with nearly 2,000 students, parents and teachers. Hundreds of others gathered outside, unable to get into the building (The Morris Annual, 1905).

Nicholas Murray Butler, then president of Columbia University was among the dignitaries present, accentuating the ideological link between his elite university and the new vision for public high schools. In his address this lofty vision was articulated as both a privilege and responsibility for the new Morris community and for the city as a whole. A crucial element of America to be able to fulfill its promise as a meritocratic democracy. “There are colleges and universities from Japan to Chile of varying excellence, but the free public secondary school is the contribution of the American people to modern educational theory and modern educational practice.” The president of the most elite university in New York City anointed a school for the children of immigrants not only as innovative but also as uniquely and proudly American. And he didn’t stop there; “the essence of democratic education is an education of opportunity, an education of continuously opening doors, so that the pupil, as he goes on, widens the possibility for service and distinction...If our city is to be made great and memorable, it will be because we succeed in placing it by the side of Jerusalem, Athens and Rome as an intellectual and spiritual capital” (“Half-Million Dollar,” 1904). Through such a placement, President Butler showed respect and lofty expectations for what others might have characterized as a humble, working-class, immigrant community. He also gave the community members present, the students and teachers of Morris, a sense of purpose, not only to succeed individually and as a school, but as being part of a national project.

Among those present at the dedication was a student of the Mixed High School, now Morris, Edith Duncan. She would recall the excitement and pride at leaving the cramped, temporary buildings of the Mixed High School and entering Morris as a student for the first time (The Morris Piper, 1955). C.B.J. Snyder's innovative design and architecture seemed to have its desired affect; students like Duncan were proud to attend such a school, and this pride bred loyalty in addition to academic success. These feelings about the school seem to have persisted among graduates for several decades. In 2004, on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of the school building, Gary Israel, then a teacher at Morris and one of the principle organizers of the celebrations noted, "The structure made the students who came to Morris feel they were special. You get the feeling the alumni feel honored and blessed to have gone there" (*New York Daily News*, 2004). The graduates he refers to would have been among the classes through the 1930s, the era through which building held onto its stately grandeur. A few of these graduates speak in articles and other documentation, but aside from lists of names in convocation programs, most are silent.

Edith Duncan speaks loudly. After graduating from Morris and attending college, she returned to become a math teacher, a beloved dean of students and finally an acting principal. Her married name was Morris, a symbolic coincidence as her professional trajectory suggests a deep commitment to the school. Students called her "Mother Morris." In 1955, the school's auditorium, complete with pipe organ, vaulted ceiling and Corinthian columns, an original feature of the building, was dedicated in her name (The Morris Piper, 1955).



Figure 2. Morris High School Auditorium, later Duncan Auditorium

This dedication was part of a larger effort to rehabilitate the Morris High School building. Unmet needs for maintenance had begun to catch up with the structure as it entered its fifth decade. Dr. Jacob L. Bernstein, principal of Morris from 1947 to 1953, was, among other things, aligned with architect C.B.J. Snyder. He trusted that value placed on the Morris High School building would translate to academic success for its students. Before he became principal, enrollment at the school had taken a nosedive to 1,400 students from an over-capacity peak of 5,000. For one reason or another, students and families were choosing other high schools instead of Morris. Dr. Bernstein took several steps to make the school a more appealing option for Bronx students. In an interview, he noted that, “school officials realized the school curriculum and its physical plant would have to be improved before the community could begin to take pride in its school.” He secured funds from the Board of Education for renovations including “a new lunchroom, gymnasium and additional classrooms” (“Rebirth of School,” 1952). This leadership

echoed President Butler's vision for Morris as a symbol of intellectual and spiritual excellence for the city as a whole, its tower a beacon of hope for the surrounding community; the idea that the community's pride in its school was critical to Morris's continued success.

C.B.J. Snyder, President Butler and Dr. Bernstein were right. The physical structure of Morris High School proved to have a critical impact on its success in providing an innovative, modern education to poor children from marginalized communities. Future leaders of Morris were unable to advocate successfully for the building the way Bernstein had, and the Board of Education seemed more than happy to save money on this type of investment, starting soon after Bernstein's tenure at Morris ended in 1953. The roots of this disinvestment are tangled and many. School officials in a 1990 article asserted that, "the decline of the physical plant of Morris High has been going on since the early 1960s" ("Razing the Roof," 1990). Why? No explanation is attempted. There is no simple, single explanation. History and demography, however, can offer partial narratives.

Historically, the fiscal crisis of the 1970s is a logical starting point for city-wide disinvestment in public services, including schools. A demographic lens might point to shifts in the South Bronx caused by the Great Migration – of Southern Black folks to Northern cities – which strained the limits of historically Black neighborhoods like Harlem, and sent Blacks seeking better housing conditions into the Bronx and Brooklyn from the 1940s onward. *De facto* and systemic racism led both to segregated schools and the prioritization of maintaining majority White schools. These narratives, while not untrue, are partial because they miss the haunting of Morris, the disconnect, as Gordon puts it, between the logic of, for example systemic racism and its impacts, and the lived experiences of such racism, which may contradict or digress from that logic. The disinvestment is concrete; its impacts are not.

In January 1985, then Bronx Borough president Stanley Simon announced a \$13.5 million modernization project. The *Bronx News* article notes that Frances Vazquez, the recently departed Morris High principal had “led the school through an academic renaissance [primarily measured by a significantly reduced dropout rate]<sup>2</sup> that won praise from President Reagan in a 1983 TV address.”<sup>3</sup> Borough president Simon pledged that the façade of the building would be restored, “down to almost the last detail” (“High School Modernization,” 1985). Why such a focus on the outward appearance of the school? Was the inside of the school not also in need of repair? More likely, this priority was indicative of a concern for the school as a neighborhood landmark over its role as a functional educational space. Perhaps this was superficial or impractical on the part of the Borough administration, but the theories of C.B.J Snyder, when applied to a school community as a whole, support this choice. If a grand, state-of-the-art building could inspire pride and academic excellence in students, then a grand, beautiful building, even only on the outside, could similarly inspire pride in the neighborhood surrounding the school. At this time, Morrisania still bore the scars of abandoned, stripped and burned buildings resulting from the NYC fiscal crisis. Instilling pride in the physical place of such a neighborhood was no small thing. And if Morris High School was experiencing a relatively successful moment in terms of its reduced dropout rate, such a budgetary calculus was prudent. Unfortunately, the remarkable gains under Principal Vazquez did not last. By November 1985, just a few months into the new school year, *The New York Times* listed Morris among the 72 problem schools in NYC. Attendant with this academic decline was a physical decline inside the building.

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<sup>2</sup> From 37 percent in 1980 to 16.7 percent in 1984 (“High School Modernization,” 1985)

<sup>3</sup> I can offer no single explanations for how this was achieved, but will return to Frances Vazquez and her leadership of Morris.

By March 1988, *Bronx Beat* ran an article articulating the assumption that a decrepit building is not a suitable home for a successful school; “Morris in high spirits despite low conditions.” NYC schools chancellor Richard Green visited the school and remarked, “I don’t like the shape of your building.” The \$13.5 million promised three years earlier to renovate the building’s façade sat unspent. The contractor in charge of the project, had walked off the job four months previously in a dispute with the Board of Education (“Morris in High Spirits,” 1988). The Morris High building had become the victim of bureaucracy; the school couldn’t hire its own contractor, raise its own development funds, or do its own repairs. It relied on the central Board of Education to manage the building. The Morris staff, students and community had little power to affect the state of the building, yet they were most directly impacted by the crumbling façade, leaky roof and inconsistent plumbing. Not only were they disempowered in decision-making about their livelihoods and educations, the *Bronx News* article renders them ghostlike: silent and invisible. How did janitors feel about cleaning a building that was falling apart? Would teachers have preferred money to be invested on the façade or on the interior? Was C.B.J. Snyder right? Did students have a negative view of their education because their school building lacked investment? The people most impacted didn’t have a voice.

The Board of Education’s failure to maintain and care for the school building properly was particularly egregious when the physical context of students’ lives is considered. If the material conditions of a school building affect the quality of education delivered to students, then a student’s living conditions must also have an impact on their ability to succeed. In the same *Bronx Beat* article, Morris assistant principal Michael Simmons noted that, “surroundings were especially important for Morris students, some of whom emerge each day from, ‘burned-out buildings you think no one lives in to come to school.’” He had compassion for his students. But

why does the *Bronx Beat* assume these students can't speak for themselves? What if Simmons was mistaken in his assumptions about how his students felt or what they needed? Quotations like this make the narrative of the fall of Morris High School so easy. And so misguided. We see burned-out buildings. We see teenagers emerging and walking to school. Their school building is also crumbling. We are alarmed out of a respect for their fundamental right to decent housing, an education. But we don't know what their lives are like. We don't know what they're dreaming about. We don't know how their families are managing. Why are we afraid to ask them?

Less than two years later, the Morris High School building had reached a state of emergency. In February 1990, the *New York Daily News* reported:

“When it rains, it really pours at Morris High School. The School Construction Authority [of the Board of Education] this week declared the fortress-like building ‘an emergency’ so it can halt flooding at the Bronx landmark school that sends a river of water through hallways and causes walls to collapse... according to inspectors, the flooding has carved huge, gaping holes in ceilings and weakened walls to the point of collapse... The decline of the physical plant of Morris High has been going on since the early 1960s, school officials said.”

Unfortunately, a state of emergency declared by the School Construction Authority was not a catalyst to meaningful action (“Razing the Roof,” 1990). Another two years later, in May 1992, *The Bronx Bear* ran a headline “Crumbling high school gets facelift.” This article describes in more detail the extent of water damage due to flooding, “gaping holes in classroom walls, rotting beams, disintegrating bricks and dangling chunks of plaster.” The Board of Education had reported that Morris was the “most dilapidated high school in New York City” (“Crumbling High School,” 1992). This was four years after the schools chancellor had commented on the poor condition of the building. Seven years after \$13.5 million had been promised to rehabilitate the building. That the Morris High School building had needed maintenance for some time was not a new or surprising state. And elsewhere in the city, on the Upper West Side, in Soho,

building was booming (Oser, 1992). Morris, designed as a site of innovation, had become an embarrassment. Newspaper reporting at the time suggests that the Board of Education had made a nominal effort to meet the building's needs, but obstacles – a contractor walking off a job, reduced funding – prevented sufficient amelioration. Why was this school, a landmark, once a symbol of the promise of public education in America, allowed to crumble?



Figure 3. Morris High School

In June 2011, I visited Morris High School for the first time. The Bx21 bus wheezed through the shopping district on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, engine straining as it turned onto residential Boston Road. Morris's gray tower was visible from blocks away, covered as it was with scaffolding, much as in *Figure 3*. Sunlight streamed through large windows in crowded classrooms, illuminating chipped linoleum floors and missing ceiling tiles. Walking through the metal detectors, nervous with excitement, I immediately felt there was something special about the

place. What was really going on inside? The building seemed unimpressive, but I sensed something unseen. It was haunted. Was I feeling the emotional echoes of Morris's first students from the Mixed High School like Edith Duncan, entering the building for the first time? The weighty responsibility of teaching at a school that the President of Columbia University once thought spoke to the greatness of America? Framed portraits of solemn-faced graduates stretching into the past century watched me as I walked down the hallway to the elevator.

## CHAPTER 2: DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

Morris High School's physical structure only tells one story about the school. The story of investment and disinvestment is about more than leaky roofs and ornate auditoriums. Layered above this story are students who loved their school, students who tried to make their voices heard on policies that impacted them, visionary principals who believed in Morris's power to change not only individual lives, but the culture of the country as a whole, and many other ghosts whose motivations remain indistinct. When Morris first opened, the building was a symbol of the strength and potential of the neighborhood; the name echoing the local pride at being chosen as the home of this new and innovative school, and the crowds of people at its opening a sign of excitement. Morris High School meant upward mobility and achievement. If this story were structured as a rise and fall, changing demographics, from white to Black, would mark the beginning of the fall. A shift in population would also signal a change in the meaning of Morris, towards failure and unrealized dreams. This teleological narrative, however, lacks nuance. Since its founding, Morris's consistent mission has been to serve students from immigrant and lower-class families. Demographic changes in the South Bronx did not alter it.

By 1985, demographic shift complete, Morris's student body was primarily Black and Latinx. After reading in the *New York Times* that the school was listed among the 72 problem schools in New York City Yves, Henry Lacaze, Morris class of '34, wrote a letter to the current students. "Whether you succeed or fail in life is entirely up to you, and no one else. Morris High is the guiding light that can show you the way," he wrote. "Once you have left the protection of its classrooms and the understanding so unselfishly offered by your teachers, you will often wish you could go back...The day will come when you realize that each and every moment you spent at Morris High was well worth the time and effort." What motivated Lacaze to write this letter?

Such an act, over fifty years after his graduation, suggests pride and continued connection to the school. Perhaps his time at Morris was pivotal, influential in his life. But these are guesses. Perception is difficult to generalize, and the available information about how graduates felt about Morris is partial. Did Lacaze stay in the Bronx? Was he successful in his career? With his family? He seemed to feel a bond with current Morris students, a responsibility to advise.

He signed off in a way that recalled the letter of recommendation the principal had written for him when he graduated, emphasizing his sense of citizenship and courtesy to his fellow students, “many warm and best wishes to all of you from an old school mate” (Lacaze, 1985). Lacaze is not as ghostly as he might be. He has a name. He has a voice. The letter of recommendation reveals that he was Puerto Rican. How much can one person’s feeling about their high school really matter? Lacaze’s experience of Morris is fundamentally part of its story (Scott, 1992), as are the experiences of all its students. More ghosts emerge from gray stone to speak.

In a letter to the *New York Times* in 1978, Irwin Stark, a graduate from the 1920s, reminisced about the exciting and varied extracurricular opportunities available when he attended Morris that enriched his education. He blamed the teachers’ unions, which “[had] materially changed the educational experiences and excitement of Morris students” (*New York Times*, 1978). While there are other, more logical explanations for a decrease in extracurricular activities, namely reductions in funding and material resources, it is notable that Stark, like Lacaze, still felt connected enough to Morris, 50 years after his graduation, to be concerned with the educational experiences of current students. Their claims about why Morris had changed are partial. They are troubled ghosts, feeling an emotional pull, re-visiting their old haunts, seeing change and speculating.

Marie Syrkin is not a ghost. She graduated from Morris in 1916, eight years after she had immigrated with her family to the United States. They lived on Charlotte Street, in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx, just south of Morris. After graduating from Morris, she attended Cornell University, returned to New York City to teach English at a public high school (not Morris), published seven books, and ended her career teaching English literature at Brandeis University. She has a Wikipedia page. It is easy to perceive her story as banal because we believe the upward trajectory of immigrants like her was inevitable, but her story and voice are distinct. She, too, felt connected to Morris long after she graduated. In 1983, she wrote a piece for *The New Republic* titled “French and sonnets in a long-ago Bronx high school.” She describes the formative classes of her high school experience (Syrkin, 1983). She is not nostalgic about the pedagogy, which seems to have been relatively dry and rote, focused on recitation and memorization, but she acknowledges that what may sound boring by the educational standards of the 1980s worked for her.

As Scott explains (1992), experience generates knowledge. Syrkin’s ambivalence raises questions without answers. Would a return to recitation and memorization be beneficial for Morris students? Does it foster discipline or stifle creativity? Did she adopt a similar teaching style in her university courses? Her story is part of the haunting of Morris High School. To embrace it means to resist flattening her story into an entrenched narrative of turn of the century American immigration. In her piece for *The New Republic*, she too, pushed back against a commonly accepted narrative.

At the time of her writing, Morris had halved its dropout rate under Principal Vazquez’s leadership (“High School Modernization,” 1985), but the building was falling into more and more dire disrepair. The reputation of the school was similarly crumbling. Syrkin sought to

explain why Morris had changed, to understand the present of her beloved school and the discrepancy between her own upward mobility and the seemingly intractable poverty of its current students.

“I am not so smug or simpleminded as to suggest that salvation lies in a return to the...unwavering requirements of the Morris High of my day. New factors, both positive and negative, have altered the expectations of teachers and pupils alike. The social and demographic revolution of the 60s engulfed the schools as well as the streets of American cities; no one can look at a newspaper photograph of a shocked President Carter or President Reagan surveying the devastation of contemporary Charlotte Street [where she grew up] and pretend that the young people reared in these crumbling tenements are not victims of far-reaching deprivations from which the poor, immigrant families I knew were largely exempt.”

Given the abandoned infrastructure its students lived in and the experiences of their lives outside of school, marked by race, war and poverty, Morris, she seemed to suggest, had to do more for students, had an even weightier and more critical role to play in their lives, than in her day. And the school was tasked with filling this role in a poorly maintained building and with fewer resources than in her day. In other words, Morris had to do more with less.

Nearly seventy years separate Marie Syrkin’s graduation from Morris’s state of deprivation, which seemed to alarm and require explanation from so many alumni. In those intervening years, another layer of the palimpsest, that of social and demographic changes, wrote itself on the school. And one of the ghostly heroes of Morris’s story returns to the foreground. In 1953, Principal Jacob Bernstein published a letter in the Morris High School newspaper, bidding farewell to the, “most wonderful school in the world, - a school characterized by the ideals of friendship, service and achievement to capacity – a school that has become a model of brotherhood” (*The Morris Piper*, 1953). As principal, Bernstein had made it his mission to amplify this positive perception of the school. Colin Powell, class of 1954, certainly seemed to have internalized Bernstein’s vision. In 2004, he echoed Bernstein’s farewell sentiments on the

occasion of the school's centennial. He wrote in the *Bronx Times*, "the Morris way of life has everything to do with brotherhood and service...Morris High [gave] me such precious gifts – a sharpened intellect, a passion for communicating ideas, a social conscience and the ability to work with diverse people from all walks of life" (*Bronx Times*, 2004).

Powell is famous. His name carries historical and political meaning. His voice has boomed out from the radio, his face has glowed on the T.V. screen. The news has headlined his name. And yet, his impression of Morris, the impact he feels the school had on him is just as partial, and emotional, as the ghosts. I long to draw a line between Bernstein and Powell. To put them in the hallway together, Bernstein's hand on young Powell's shoulder, offering solemn advice. Mentoring him. Becoming a reason for his later success. Bernstein is so large in Morris's unknown story, I want him to be larger in Powell's known one. But Powell's story is obscured by other layers in the palimpsest.

History cannot explain Bernstein's vision and leadership; there is no simple causation here. But Bernstein's tenure as principal coincided with two great migrations that dramatically changed the demographics of the Bronx. The first was the Great Migration of Puerto Ricans to New York City, facilitated by the proliferation of air travel. The second was the Great Migration of Southern Blacks to cities of the North and West, seeking freedom from Jim Crow laws and better educational and employment opportunities (Wilkerson, 2010). These twin migrations extended far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but even by 1955, *The New York Times* showed that these populations had increased by 100,000 each in the South Bronx. This amounted to roughly a 26% increase in Black and Puerto Rican residents out of the total South Bronx population in a 25-year period. *The Times* further reported that these new arrivals, "took over housing that had already begun to deteriorate and little or nothing has been done to halt the deterioration since" ("Our

Changing City,” 1955). Although these new residents became critical taxpayers and members of the labor force, New York City was already beginning to send a coded message through disinvestment: you are not valued by this city.

Public housing and public education attempted to send a different message. In response to the increase in population, the New York City Housing Authority built nine low- and middle-income housing projects in the South Bronx. These new towers were designed to encourage “integrated housing, where people of all and any color or religion can live together” (“Interracial Plans,” 1951). White flight doomed this vision. The neighborhoods surrounding Morris became overwhelmingly Black, but Principal Bernstein didn’t let Morris become a segregated high school.

Years before *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) made school integration the law of the land, at least on paper, Bernstein advocated for Morris to be rezoned to draw students from what were now segregated Black, white and Puerto Rican neighborhoods and maintain racial diversity in the student body. In 1951, *The New York Times* framed this effort in grand terms, “Interracial Plans for Bronx Devised: Special Zoning Proposed: Goal is to Mix Cultural Groups: Parents Urged to Educate Young Against Prejudice.” In this era, schools took on a culture-changing mission: not only to educate individual young people, but to inoculate groups of students against racism and bigotry.

Morris received “more teachers, including some particularly trained to guide the interracial program, [and] more than \$1,000,000 to modernize school buildings” (“Interracial Plans,” 1951) to support this new responsibility. There seemed to be an understanding that to implement a program of integration successfully would require more than just having Black, white and Puerto Rican students in the same classes. Clubs and other extra-curricular activities

were also to be racially integrated and it was recommended that “the school buildings (sic) should become educational centers for the entire community on almost a “twenty-four hours a day” basis” (“Interracial Plans,” 1951). The nature of the proposed offerings for the educational center housed within Morris is not clear, but it is fair to assume that the adult and community offerings would have also advanced the mission of racial integration. Morris was not only engaging in the critical cultural work of reducing American bigotry in the younger generation; it also offered something valuable to the larger community.

Principal Bernstein knew that Morris’s reputation mattered. In 1948, a student club had produced a thirty-minute movie (in color!) depicting “student and classroom activities during a typical school day” (“Morris High School Produces Color Movie,” 1948). Premiering at a Morris parent association meeting, Bernstein framed the movie in clear integrationist terms, “they [the students] wanted to prove that people of all racial and religious backgrounds can work and live together without even the slightest semblance of tension.” The student demographics at the time were “45 percent Negroes, 18 percent Puerto Ricans, 5 percent Jews and a representative mixture of many others” (“Morris High School Produces Color Movie,” 1948). The purpose of such a movie, beyond its role as an enriching experience for the students who made it, was to convince families, particularly white families, that a racially integrated school provided the same opportunities as a majority white school. And, to go further, that there were intrinsic benefits to such an educational atmosphere. Summarizing the movie in utopic terms, Principal Bernstein contended that, “our students are not even aware of color or religious lines – and the film shows it” (“Morris High School Produces Color Movie,” 1948). While such color-blindness is undesirable in the current socio-political moment, Bernstein achieved and maintained integration, at least for a time.

When white flight was rampant and the South Bronx was beginning to leak both public and private investment, Morris was still getting positive press in *The New York Times*. Was Bernstein right about the value of integration? Did white families hold so much power over Morris's functioning? A 1952 headline proclaimed, "Rebirth of school hailed in Bronx: Brotherhood in action cited as having aided Morris, which was dying in '46." Bernstein was again quoted, proudly, "Morris is probably the only high school in the United States which is located in an area predominantly Negro to which white parents are glad to send their children." But it was not only white families that needed to be convinced that Morris could provide an adequate education. The reason for Morris's predicament of '46 – "dying" – was that Black families, as Bernstein noted, "were shunning the school; they wanted one reflecting the make-up of the city as a whole." Enrollment had dropped to 1,400, well below the capacity that C.B.J. Snyder had designed for the school. So integration was not only an American ideal, but a necessity for Morris to survive.

Four years after Bernstein left Morris for an appointment closer to his suburban home, Morris continued to be a model for racial integration as New York City, and the country as a whole, struggled to implement the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. Board* ruling that racial integration in schools was necessary, that schools segregated by race could not be equal. In 1957, however, *The Washington Post and Times Herald* reported that segregation continued to be "troublesome" for New York City. And that while Morris had maintained a "terrific program of education and inspiration" as a school for all races and cultures, "informal segregation [in NYC] has deprived some minority students of an education equal to white children's" ("Segregation Troublesome," 1957).

On the tenth anniversary of Morris's rezoning, Morris still received accolades. *The New York Times* reported that the school maintained, "an integrated balance of whites, Negroes and Puerto Ricans" ("School is Lauded," 1959). But it was starting to become clear that Morris could not be a beacon of integration alone in a segregated system. In an interview for the article, Edward Lewis, then the executive director of the Urban League of Greater New York, expressed doubts that Morris would be able to maintain its "integrated balance" when "most of the 'feeder' schools for Morris High do not have balanced ethnic school populations. Unless steps are taken to achieve this objective, ultimately Morris High will slip back into the pattern of de facto [segregation], which has plagued changing neighborhoods" ("School is Lauded," 1959). It seemed the rezoning which had brought racially diverse students to Morris no longer worked as each of the neighborhoods Morris drew from became more racially homogenous. A good reputation could no longer keep white families at the school and help Black and Puerto Rican families feel good about sending their children there.

In the same article, Joseph Montserrat, the director of the New York office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and later president of the Board of Education, presciently warned of social and political uprisings as "colored peoples of the world... would choose to side with American democracy only if all the nation's schools followed the example of Morris High." At this moment, Morris retained its founding purpose not only as an example of the promise of American public education, but also as a symbol of American democracy and equality. Morris would not be able to maintain this optimism. In the next decade and a half, racial integration failed and students, empowered by social movements, demanded that the school and the city recognize their value and autonomy.

But at first, Morris continued towards racial equity. In 1969, Bertha C. Gordon was appointed principal of Morris as the “first regularly licensed Negro high school principal” (“Black Principal,” 1969) in the New York City system. Principal Gordon would oversee a tumultuous era at Morris. The article announcing her appointment alludes to two significant changes at the school. First, the enrollment of the school, anemic in the 1940s, but having become more robust as the school became a model of racial integration ballooned to over 4,000 students, nearly double the building’s capacity. However, the school was no longer a model for racial integration. In 1969, *The New York Times* now described Morris as “academic...with a predominantly Puerto Rican and Black student population.”<sup>4</sup> Gone was any mention of racial harmony or the responsibility of public schools to achieve racial equity in America.

From these two shifts in Morris’s representation in a widely-read newspaper like *The New York Times*, emerges a partial story about the ways in which life at Morris had changed. While a low student enrollment in the years preceding Principal Bernstein’s tenure may have been a sign of a lack of community confidence in the quality of the school, over-enrollment, such as that described in 1969, would not necessarily have been a positive sign either. Over-enrollment means strained resources, large class sizes, not enough books to go around, limited laboratory materials, crowded hallways. It means custodial staff might struggle to clean up after so many people and keep the building looking and feeling tidy. Gregory Avery, a sophomore at Morris in 1970, described the school’s main problems as a product of these strained resources; “the education’s lousy, it’s overcrowded, the facilities are poor – half the time there isn’t any water or toilet paper in the johns” (“Pupil Power,” 1970). In other words, over-enrollment at the magnitude identified in 1969 felt to students like the school could not or would not provide for

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<sup>4</sup> Note the use of “Negro” and “Black” (capitalized) in the same article – a sign of a socio-political turning point

them. Perhaps lack of toilet paper felt like lack of care. Did Gregory Avery suspect that the racial identity of his fellow students played a role?

The fact that the student population had shifted to “predominantly Puerto Rican and Black” would have compounded this feeling. These populations of students had already been sent the message of disinvestment and devaluation by their ghettoization, by discrimination they faced in every facet of their lives, both explicit and covert. Morris was no longer a school that would inspire the “colored peoples of the world” to support American democracy, but yet another example of an institution, Black principal or not, that contributed to their feeling of subordination.

The high school students in 1970 had grown up with the Civil Rights Movement and protests against the Vietnam War. Revolution was part of their culture; it was in the air and in the hallways of Morris High School: another layer of the palimpsest. In the fall of 1970, students attempted to empower themselves. The Wantu-Gente Club, taking its name from the word for *people* in Swahili and Spanish, had received training and support from both the Black Panthers and the Young Lords. The club planned an assembly for the entire student body on “draft counseling and the Puerto Rican question.” When teacher would not be available to supervise, and the assembly had to be rescheduled for later in the day, at a time when not all students would be able to attend, the situation escalated. Wantu-Gente Club planned a walk out in protest. Many students participated and gathered on the street outside the school, where they were greeted by police officers. Students inside the building threw bricks and bottles at the officers. The officers, armed with nightsticks, arrested three students and another was sent to a youth detention center. Articles covering the event noted that no one was hurt, except that an officer was “struck in the

arm with a brick.” (“Pupil Power,” 1970). Morris was closed for the day and students went home early.

Racial tensions, poverty and violence frame this narrative: “Blue-helmeted policemen line the sidewalk in front of huge Morris High school in the impoverished Morrisania section of the Bronx. The officers, mostly white, twirl their 24-inch-long nightsticks and warily eye groups of black and Puerto Rican students milling about the street” (Pupil Power, 1970). Armed, fully grown policemen were wary of teenage students, who, in another context, might be lauded for their leadership and political engagement. High school students who wanted to be more involved leaders at their high school were arrested. The Wantu-Gente Club and its demands for more student input in the running of the school were a student attempt to empower themselves in an overcrowded, under-resourced school, and to the city at large. To be met with police force and serious penalties such as arrest would have reinforced the implicit message that their voices, their concerns, and their ideas didn’t matter. Or to go further, that their voices were dangerous and needed to be silenced for the good of the city.

The founding of the Wantu-Gente Club at Morris High School was not an inevitable result of public financial disinvestment from the Bronx. Individual students read, met other community members and actively formed a club with a strong social and political stance. While the larger historical context is well documented and often told, these actions are described in just a few newspapers and now largely forgotten. But the story of these students, ghosts in history, none of them identified by name, asks questions the larger narrative cannot answer. What empowered these young people to take action when so many forces seemed to seek to disempower them? Did they look back on their years at Morris as fondly and with such loyalty as

Henry Lacaze and Irwin Stark? How many years did it take for the students that came after them to forget the story of the walkout that shutdown the whole school?

After the walkout, I can only guess what happened to the Wantu-Gente Club and its mission to empower students. But the material disinvestment at Morris and the feeling of disempowerment continued. In fact, it intensified with the crisis that crippled New York City, beginning in the Spring of 1975. The financial collapse in New York City was at least partially caused by the loss of a stable tax base as manufacturing industries began to move elsewhere and white flight and suburbanization reached their peak. In the aftermath, however, neighborhoods and communities most severely impacted by the crisis were blamed and brutalized. Denied a bailout by the federal government,<sup>5</sup> the city avoided bankruptcy by taking drastic measures; slashing some public services, ceding control of others to New York State, such as the public transportation system and the CUNY senior colleges, raiding the pensions of public employees, and forming new relations with private companies that would evolve into the public-private partnerships that now fund and manage most public parks and business districts. New York City, long a home and hopeful haven to those with few personal resources, no longer provided the services to support this population or their dreams.

In Morrisania, residents were hit especially hard. Recent immigrants, Blacks and the Latinx, less likely to have personal resources and more likely to depend on the public subsidies that carried the most stigma – such as public housing – found themselves not only less supported but also more heavily stigmatized as subsidies for the middle class and those that white people were more likely to depend on, such as ones related to mortgages, also eroded. Public and private

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<sup>5</sup> FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD, *The NY Daily News*, October 30, 1975

investment in the neighborhood nose-dived. And, as landlords found that their insurance was worth more than their property, the South Bronx, infamously, began to burn.

In 1983, Marie Syrkin had a nuanced and sympathetic view of the ways in which living and going to school among such conditions impacted Morrisania residents, and young people in particular. But her reading was not the norm. Perversely, as the physically destabilized and deprived area gained a reputation for being dangerous and crime-ridden, residents, who were victims of both the physical destruction of the built neighborhood environment and crime, were punished for their predicament through the acts of predatory policing that increasingly influenced life at Morris. Following the financial collapse of 1975, Morris High School was one of many sites where young people faced increased policing and scrutiny, under the guise of protection. By the 1980s, efforts to control its students overshadowed its reputation as an institution to lift-up and educate young people.

## CHAPTER 3: INVESTMENT AND DISINVESTMENT

Bertha C. Gordon, the first regularly appointed Black principal in New York City, left Morris in the late 1970s. The new principal, Frances Vazquez, who had risen from assistant principal at Morris seemed committed to the community. She tried to draw students to the school, and make the ones enrolled there positively perceive their education by bringing vocational programs to the school, including a medical lab where students received training in, “EKGs, urinalysis, blood tests, as well as management techniques, like inventory-keeping and billing” (“Morris High School is Seeking,” 1981). Still, the local newspaper that reported on this new program framed the article around Morris’s bad reputation; the headline ran “Morris HS is Seeking a Better Image,” with Morris described as an “inner-city school” with “declining enrollments, low attendance and a high dropout rate, security problems and low student achievement results.” Principal Vazquez sought to improve the “low prestige” of the school that the article so clearly reinforced, by “mak[ing] kids realize that their neighborhood school is not the last resort and that we have programs for all a student’s needs and interests” (“Morris High School is Seeking,” 1981). Yet, Morris’s lack of course options was not its only drawback. In addition to the new vocational program, Morris also had, “an extra school guard.”

Some argue that metal detectors, school guards and police presence outside of schools are necessary to ensuring the safety of students and staff. But they also make up what sociologist Carla Shedd calls the *universal carceral apparatus* (Shedd, 2015). A large menu of surveillance and policing practices on neighborhood streets and in institutions, such as schools, ultimately result in young people, particularly Black and Latinx (with some exceptions), coming into disproportionate contact with the criminal justice system and resulting in arrests and incarceration. “An extra school guard” at Morris might seem innocuous, or even positive, but for

students already under siege in the streets going about their daily lives and on the stoops in front of their homes, extra surveillance at school could have added to the feeling that they were under suspicion, seen as potential criminals and doubted or undervalued as students.

Still, Principal Vazquez led the school effectively. In 1983, President Reagan mentioned her in a televised address, praising her work in slashing the dropout rate at Morris from 37 percent in 1980 to 16.7 percent at the end of the 1983-1984 school year (“Bronx School Gets 400G,” 1984). This praise reflected a political obsession with high school dropout rates as a symbol of the failure of American public schools. Politicians, non-profits and corporations alike all focused their efforts on reducing the dropout rate, although not as much energy on the vocational or educational options available to young people after graduating from high school.

In May 1984, in an example of a public-private partnership at work, Coca-Cola awarded Morris a \$400,000 grant to continue to cut its dropout rate. Principal Vazquez, recognizing the emotional distress if not the traumas that students brought to school with them, chose to spend the money on “counselors to work with incoming freshman classes” (“Bronx School Gets 400G,” 1984). Accepting a check in the landmarked but poorly maintained auditorium, Principal Vazquez was passionate, if not overly optimistic about the students in her care, “Those [the incoming freshmen] are my youngest children. If they can make it through the ninth grade, they have a fighting chance.” Why did she emphasize the importance of ninth grade? Perhaps realism about the magnitude of obstacles the students faced contributed to her relative success. The article for the *Post* also questioned why Coca-Cola chose Morris for the grant when there were so many needy schools and Morris had already made such strides. A Coca-Cola executive was pragmatic; “we don’t want to start where everything is negative.” Principal Vazquez’s response pointed directly at the inequity in public investment, a gap grown wider since the 1975 financial

collapse. Noting that Morris was in the country's poorest congressional district, she said; "we need everything we can get."<sup>6</sup> An effective advocate for her school and its nameless, faceless students, Principal Vazquez was gone eight months later, promoted to superintendent of Bronx high schools.

In the late 80s and early 90s, there was far less local and national reporting on Morris. Articles that did appear focused less on problems facing the school and more on exceptional students who were able to overcome steep odds to win scholarships, awards and prestigious college acceptance letters. These articles contain portraits of ghosts, with a flash of visibility that illuminates some students through the years. But they do little to address the mystery of these students' successes amid the backdrop of a crumbling school building and an overwhelming number of their peers who did not graduate high school or enter the narrative of their neighborhoods or high school in a documented, knowable way. The question is not just what made some students successful and not others, but how to account for the forgotten students as well as those remembered. Their stories are a critical part of Morris, too, despite their invisibility.

The individualistic success narrative left aside the structural and systemic causes of Morris's problems, and instead questioned why all students could not overcome the odds and succeed anyway. A few did. On the occasion of Morris High School's 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in 1986, the *Bronx Press-Review* ran an article that listed scholarships and awards that current students had received. These included programs at Hostos Community College and Fordham University designed to allow successful students to take college courses and earn college credit while still in

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<sup>6</sup> In September 2010, on my first day student teaching at The HS for Violin and Dance, now occupying the top floors of the Morris High School building, I met with the principal, Tanya John. As an exhortation for me to throw myself into the work, she also noted that the school was in the poorest congressional district in the country.

high school. Eight students are mentioned by name in this celebratory list of accomplishments, and three of them appear twice (“Morris High School Celebrates,” 1986). Considering that the enrollment at Morris at this time was well over four thousand, the double duty done by nearly half of the acclaimed students speaks to severe disparities in the distribution of opportunities and successes, exposing the cracks in the façade of an unequivocally positive article.

Two years later in 1988, the chancellor of New York City schools visited the school and berated the principal, Carmen Valera-Russo, for the state of the building. He knew full well that \$14 million promised to the school for renovation had never been delivered. She responded by dismissing Morris’s poor reputation as “rumors.” Two students offered more concrete examples of why it was unjustified. The senior class president said; “We have a special relationship between teachers and students that goes beyond the classroom...teachers invite kids to their homes<sup>7</sup> and lend them computers.” A sophomore added that “she had heard terrible things about Morris before she arrived. “Everyone used to say, ‘You’ll get raped. They sell drugs. They beat you up in the bathroom.’ People need to have a more open mind about Morris. The school’s motto is ‘We are family’” (“Morris in High Spirits,” 1988). Teachers who felt a real connection and responsibility for students would have created a special community the nameless sophomore student described, and for such a large school to have a sense of family between the student body and staff is indeed exceptional. But to those outside that community, such as Department of Education officials and politicians, close relationships that didn’t yield quantifiable “results” were not enough.

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<sup>7</sup> When I taught in the Morris Educational Campus (September 2010- June 2012), this sense of community was still evident. I knew of several teachers who invited students who had nowhere else to go to their homes for Thanksgiving.

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Observe a changing Morris throughout the decades. Does this explain what appears ambiguous or vague from the perspective of an individual story? Or the events of one day or school year? The overarching narrative is that through approximately the first third of the twentieth century, the students of Morris High School were more likely to be the children of white, American-born parents than immigrants (Walsh, 1937). The immigrant population of Morrisania – Irish, Germans and Russian Jews – was not large enough to change significantly the character or reputation of the neighborhood. Morris’s neo-gothic façade was not only a point of pride for the neighborhood; it was aspirational as these white, working class New Yorkers, supported by the robust social safety net the city provided, including free education through college, free hospitals, and heavily subsidized public transportation and housing, could reasonably expect their children to climb higher on the socio-economic ladder than they themselves had. Morris, therefore, had a reputation as a school for ambitious, optimistic students. It represented the American meritocracy, the myth that with hard work, anyone, anywhere could achieve financial, professional and personal success.

By the middle of the twentieth century, immigration from the Caribbean islands and migrants from the American South shifted the demographics of Morrisania. General Colin Powell, Morris’s most distinguished alumnus, and the son of Jamaican immigrants, graduated in 1954 and attended City College, then free for New York City residents. Just two decades later, this subsidy, along with many others for city residents, was gone. The racial demographic shift in Morrisania affected Morris High School’s reputation, but dire economic circumstances across the city, for at least a generation, made the South Bronx and all its neighborhoods and inhabitants synonymous with unspeakable (Dembart, 1977) poverty and crime.

For over a generation, the South Bronx, including Morrisania and Morris High School have been associated with rubble and burned out buildings, unemployment, illegal drugs and extreme poverty, guns and gang violence. Perversely, instead of being seen as victims of a collapsed social safety net, of a shifting economic landscape, and inadequate medical care, the people of the South Bronx were blamed for their deteriorating environment. The narrative became that the South Bronx burned, filled with poverty and crime because Black people, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans moved in. New York City declined due to a demographic shift. The enormity of the fiscal crisis of 1975 was cast as evidence for continuing to pull back support for the people of the South Bronx. Morris High School was one of many institutions deprived of funding, resources and personnel. And, of course, its students paid the price. The twenty-five percent graduation rate experienced by the school in the early 2000s was not further evidence of the poverty and hopelessness in the South Bronx, but a phenomenon that required study and reflection to understand. It was not caused simply by lazy teachers or disengaged students, nor simply by economic and social forces stretching back over forty years.

Reading the palimpsest of Morris High School means seeing that this overarching narrative only tells a partial story. It misses the vision of Jacob Bernstein, the spirit of the students of the Wantu-Gente club, the pride of Henry Yves Lacaze and Irwin Stark. The ambiguity of causation is not unique to Morris High School. Focusing on the voices of individuals, however ghostlike, brings nuance and leaves room for the questions that lead to a more complex story.

## CHAPTER 4: MORRIS AND SCHOOL REFORM

In September 2003, in the Morris High School auditorium, Bill Gates held a press conference with Mayor Bloomberg, Chancellor of Schools Joel Klein and other local dignitaries to announce a \$51 million grant to the New York City Department of Education to divide large high schools into small, themed schools. Perhaps unknowingly, Gates echoed school reformers from just over a century before, who had championed the building he stood in: “New York City is demonstrating how we can bring our schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to make sure that all students, not just a select few, are prepared for college and the workplace. Our country’s civic, social and economic future depends on our ability to do this on a national scale” (Press release, 2003). College of the people, indeed. Morris High School, which had been the site for modern, innovative education reform at its founding at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reprised the role at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup>; the building would no longer house one school, but four small schools.

What precipitated the perceived need for such a radical change? By 2001, the four-year graduation rate at Morris High School was twenty-five percent (McDonald, 2014). Morris wasn’t the only struggling school in New York City. In fact, most large high schools that received federal Title I funds, meaning a certain percentage of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, would, at some time between 2002 and 2008, be designated as “failing” (Meyer, 2015). Statistics such as these carry the weight of quantitative truth and have the power to drive policy changes. Emile Durkheim’s landmark use of statistics in social science research, *On Suicide*, was published in 1897, just as Morris High School was beginning to move from state legislature’s documents to stone. Since then, the use of quantitative statistics has become ubiquitous in education, from district-wide policy to choices teachers make in their classrooms. Statistics have their place, and a twenty-five percent graduation rate is objectively alarming. But they also don’t

tell the whole story. What happened to the other seventy-five percent of students? What factors contributed to their inability to graduate? What kinds of lives did they have after high school? And what about those hard-working twenty-five percenters? Where are they now? The voices of these ghosts, however partial or indistinct, take on renewed importance as the next layer of the palimpsest emerges, focused on education policy, where quantitative statistics play a major role: it is too easy to forget the people impacted by these decisions. When the discussion centers around a school system of more than one million students, it is hard to think about the individual child, difficult to consider the needs of a single teacher.

A twenty-five percent graduation rate demanded action. The proposed solution, which would eventually be applied in nearly every borough and neighborhood of New York City,<sup>8</sup> was funded by The Gates Foundation. In a press release<sup>9</sup> announcing their new initiative, The Gates Foundation made their diagnosis; America's dropout problem was affecting every corner of the country from big cities to small towns, suburbs and rural areas. Small schools, defined as schools serving grades 9-12 with a student population of 550 or less, would increase student attendance and achievement, elevate teacher satisfaction and improve school climate. This was the second wave of small school reform of high schools in US cities. The first had occurred in the early 1990s, centered in cities such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Oakland (Schwartz, et al. 2013).

Using this first wave as models, The Gates Foundation promised that small high schools would solve America's dropout problem. In 2003, the second wave of small school reform began in earnest. Morris was divided into four themed high schools, from top floor to ground: The High

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<sup>8</sup> Staten Island's schools remained virtually untouched by the school reform wave of the 1990s and 2000s.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/Media-Center/Press-Releases/2006/04/STAND-UP-to-Address-Americas-Education-Crisis>

School for Violin and Dance, Morris Academy for Collaborative Studies, School for Excellence and Bronx International High School. The building looked the same on the outside, but inside it was fragmented, each floor housing a school with its own culture, identity and student population. Peeling back the layers of the palimpsest helps to recall how the physical space of the school influences how students feel about their education. But if the problem these small schools were designed to solve was simply a high dropout rate, recent data shows their relative success. According to the New York City Department of Education's most recent attempt to measure a school's success annually, the School Quality Snapshot, the four-year graduation rates in the 2016-2017 school year for each of the small schools at Morris were, from top to bottom: 67 percent, 73 percent, 58 percent and 80 percent. Not exactly the kind of turnaround Frances Vazquez was able to accomplish, but well above the 2001 rate of 25 percent.

Despite the veneer of certainty that quantitative statistics and methodology full of mathematical equations provide, the studies used by The Gates Foundation to justify small school reform were just as partial and ambiguous as the emotional response of a teenager to outdated textbooks and a leaky roof. In the language of Sociology, they were primarily conceptual (using cultural and educational theory to explain why small schools would better support students), and when empirical, relied largely on correlational instead of causal evidence (Schwartz et al. 2013). Given the longitudinal nature of the goals of education – to mold engaged citizens and contributing members of society – the implementation and evaluation of evidence-based reforms requires a level of patience, consistency and political will that is too rare, if not entirely absent. In New York City between 2002 and 2008, educational theory and correlational evidence justified the closure of 31 large high schools deemed failing, based on graduation rates of 40 percent or less, and the creation of more than 200 small high schools

serving well over 40,000 students, a population larger than most entire high school districts in the United States (Bloom and Unterman, 2014). Policy decisions made in New York City schools carry a particularly heavy weight due to the sheer number of individual young people they impact. Perhaps small schools are the best option for supporting as many students as possible in fulfilling their potential, but ideally, policy makers should be relatively certain of this, and not treat tens of thousands of vulnerable young people as guinea pigs. The experiences of these students, their test scores or rates of graduation, are not simply evidence that small schools represent effective policy or not, but actual lives with meaning and value of their own (Scott, 1992).

Following Bill Gates' press conference, Morris High School continued for a few more years, its enrollment capped, its space reduced, its staff scrambling to find jobs elsewhere. Ideally, the new, small, innovative high schools that replaced Morris would hire its best teachers, preserving some continuity in the building. In practice, principals preferred to build their own teams from scratch, generally hiring younger teachers with less experience who were seen as more malleable. Many of these teachers were graduates of elite colleges, trying teaching on for a few years through Teach for America or the New York City Teaching Fellows. One hundred years later, the worst fears of teachers about the School Reform Law of 1896 seemed to have come true. The creation of all these new schools was an opportunity to remake the teaching profession into a temporary stop-off for young professionals on their way to more lucrative and well-respected careers.

The students attending the new schools were demographically the same. Some were actually the same. The Bronx School for Excellence, which is housed on the third floor, took as its inaugural sophomore class the top seventy-five students from Morris High School's last

sophomore class (Herszenhorn, 2005). Morris High School graduated its last class in 2005. Fewer than one hundred of the original eight hundred Morris ninth graders received their diplomas in the grand auditorium. What happened to those final one hundred graduates? What did it mean for their education to attend a fading, contracting school? An article at the time painted them as resilient survivors, overcoming trauma, pregnancy, violence and long odds to graduate (Herszenhorn, 2005).

New schools settled in. Sharing a building meant upending C.B.J. Snyder's carefully designed educational spaces. History classes would have to be taught in a science lab, cafeterias would fill with students eating "lunch" from ten in the morning to three in the afternoon, the bike storage room had long since become office space for unfortunate administrators. In Snyder's design, specialized instruction, the rigorous courses that would turn secondary school into the college of the people, required specialized spaces. The five floors of the building were each an integral component of the whole. The lecture rooms, the science labs, the gymnasiums, the library, all were sites of critical education for Morris students. The innovative curriculum of the college of the people was embodied in the physical space. So, dividing the building into multiple schools a century later meant not only a physical re-shuffling of space, but also a shift in how the curriculum was implemented. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century school reform meant designing a grand building to house the educational vision; late 20<sup>th</sup> century school reform meant adjusting the vision to fit the physical space. The vision itself was still grand – to prepare all disadvantaged youth for a productive post-secondary life – but it would be realized without public fanfare, quietly, in the relationships between teachers and students, in theme-oriented curricula, in the new dance room or the mock trial court classroom, in the cramped spaces of a shared campus. On the inside, Morris High School was no more. It was now the Morris High School Educational Campus.

In January 2012, Mayor Michael Bloomberg held his State of the City address in Morris's landmarked Duncan auditorium. I was in the middle of my second year teaching at the High School for Violin and Dance, housed in Morris's fifth floor. The routine of the school was uninterrupted by the Mayor's visit, but in a flurry of activity weeks before, custodians had worked overtime to remove broken desks and unused chalkboard from the balcony seating, fix the broken auditorium seats and polish the hardwood floor. The invitation to the address gave some history of the school and the building: first public high school in the Bronx, building opened in 1904, designed by C.B.J. Snyder as a collegiate Gothic Revival. Then, the change in use, "today the Morris Educational Campus is home to four successful small high school" (Press release, 2012). What defines school success? Even though he spoke in the school building, the mayor did not visit classrooms or speak to students. The actual work of the school remained invisible to him, shrouded in numbers.

Evaluations of school effectiveness tend to focus on quantifiable factors; graduation rates, credit accumulation, attendance, test scores. By these measures, small schools have been largely successful. A policy brief by the MDRC (Unterman, 2014) showed that students enrolled in small schools were more likely to graduate high school in four years, to graduate with a Regents diploma and to be enrolled in a postsecondary institution than their peers attending large high schools. Similarly, a 2017 policy review by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation gave the small schools initiative a "near top tier" rating, based on graduation rates, Regents examination scores and determinations of college-readiness based on said scores. These are meaningful gains, and for the individuals represented in this data, the difference between attending a large high school and a small one may have been life-changing, but they tell only the partial story of test scores.

More in depth studies have produced more ambivalent findings. Notably, however, two studies funded by The Gates Foundation, (Bloom and Unterman, 2014 and Booker, et al. 2011) argue respectively that small high schools are beneficial to all subgroups of students and that introducing the choice of charter high schools increases graduation rates. Concomitant with the introduction of small high schools to New York City is a complex high school ranking and lottery process based on the system for assigning residencies to medical students. Unlike medical students, who are matched using merit-based measures, eighth graders in New York City (except for those students testing into elite high schools like Stuyvesant High School) are matched to their high schools based on their location and their own ranking of schools by their listing from one to a maximum of twelve schools. Small schools created since 2003 are almost exclusively classified as *limited unscreened*. Through a massive lottery, these schools prioritize admitting students who live in the borough in which the school is located and who have shown interest in the school, either by visiting the school's booth at a high school fair or the school itself. Bloom and Unterman (2014) use data from the high school lottery conducted each year to compare demographically similar students; the experimental group includes students who were assigned to a small school that they ranked as their first choice, the control group consists of students who lost the lottery for their first-choice ranked small school, but may have been assigned to a different small school. They find that there is on average a 9.5 percentage increase in 4-year graduation rates among students attending small schools that they ranked as their first choice.

The fact that this study was funded by The Gates Foundation, which has a vested interest in the success of small schools, makes it difficult to take these results at face value. The study is titled *Improving Educational Prospects for Disadvantaged Students*, yet besides noting that the students are “90 percent black or Hispanic, 84 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 17

percent overage for grade in eighth grade, 68 percent performing below eighth-grade level in reading, and 66 percent performing below eighth-grade level in math,” there is no discussion of whether or how small schools target these particular demographics differently from large schools. Furthermore, it is disturbing to see the descriptors black, Hispanic and low-income lumped in with deficit-based characteristics like reading and math levels. Former Morris principal, Jacob Bernstein, would argue that racial or ethnic identity alone are not deficits, but represent a diversity to be cultivated that enriches both the education students receive and that benefits society as whole. This study, by ignoring how or why students are actually disadvantaged, offers a disingenuous solution. In fact, the study concludes with a major caveat, that small schools differ from other high schools in many ways, so it is still unclear if size is the defining factor that contributes to their success.

Other studies (Schwartz, et al. 2013 and 2016) of small schools suggest school size might not be the most crucial factor in the increased graduation rates observed by Bloom and Unterman. The 2013 study by Schwartz, et al also focuses on New York City, and attempts to isolate the variable of school size by comparing small schools opened between 2002 and 2008 to older small high schools, established in the 1990s. Using New York City Department of Education administrative data on 4-year graduation rates, Regents exams scores in math and English Language Arts, as well as demographic data on students and the distance they live from school, Schwartz, et al find that new small schools do graduate students at a higher rate compared to large high schools, but that old small schools do not. They also find that commuting distance strongly predicts attendance to all types of schools, which is also correlated with an individual student’s success. In other words, no matter what school a student attends, if they need to commute a significant distance to get there, academic performance can be adversely affected.

This raises a possible unintended consequence of new small schools and the high school admissions lottery system; students may win the lottery in terms of being assigned to a school they prefer, but if they are ill-informed or misadvised on the criteria on which they base their decision, namely if they chose a school far from where they live, their academic potential may be undermined.

The fact that new small schools and old small schools did not impact student achievement in the same way suggests that size is not the definitive influencing factor in school success. In both studies, Schwartz, et al point to the context of the new small school movement as also being significant. For example, potential school leaders wishing to open a small school were vetted through a competitive and rigorous application process. Those schools that were chosen to open partnered with community organizations and non-profits to secure additional resources and funding. New small schools were created alongside a push by the New York City Department of Education to hold individual schools accountable for their graduation rates with cash incentives for staff at schools that met benchmarks. In other words, although they were the centerpiece, small schools were not the only education reform initiative in New York City from 2003 onwards.

If it is not size, then what, if anything, is the defining factor that has enabled the higher graduation rates in the data? Schwartz, et al, in an argument that speaks back to the Bloom and Unterman study, posit that students might self-select into new small schools based on what they call unobservable characteristics. They suggest that these unobservable factors, such as intrinsic motivation to succeed or parental involvement might account for student success in new small schools where measurable factors such as school size and distance to school fail to show a convincing correlation. While not completely dismissing the impact of school reforms, this

finding does undermine them. A similar study from Chicago (Barrow, et al. 2015) concluded that students attending new small high schools were more likely to stay in school and graduate than their peers attending large schools, but that their achievement as measured by test scores were not substantially different. Perhaps the students that new small schools serve successfully are more likely to persist where-ever they attend school. Perhaps reducing school size is not the panacea for improving educational outcomes, particularly for young people of color, who are more likely to be failed by their schools than their white peers. And it points to a need for qualitative research into school success. Factors like motivation and parental involvement may be unobservable in quantitative data, but surveying students and families could make these factors visible.

The New York City Department of Education does collect survey data from students and families each year. Charbonneau and Van Ryzin (2012) contend that traditional measures of school performance, such as graduation rates and test scores are predictors of parental satisfaction with schools, reinforcing the notion that qualitative survey data can be a valid measure of school success. In the Learning Environment Survey administered by the New York City Department of Education each year, students and families are asked to respond (with options *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, *strongly disagree*) to prompts in the categories of rigorous instruction, supportive environment, school leadership and trust such as: the school has high expectations for me/my child; the school communicates with me about my child's performance; teachers support me/my child when I am upset. In the 2008-2009 academic year, the family response rate was 40 percent, representing a significant number of families given the size of the New York City public school system. Although dissatisfied families are less likely to respond to the survey at all, Charbonneau and Van Ryzin concluded that student performance,

test scores and graduation rates, are strongly correlated to parental satisfaction. This suggests that qualitative data supports quantitative results and could play a larger role in how school success is measured. If student motivation and parent involvement are invisible in demographic data and test scores, these factors can become visible through surveys and used to compare student satisfaction at new small schools, old small schools and large high schools.

On average, Charbonneau and Van Ryzin find that schools with a higher percentage of Black and Latinx parents tend to report more satisfaction with their children's schools, but that low-income parents and the parents of children receiving special education services tend to report less satisfaction with their schools. They do not attempt to tease out these factors to determine, for instance, how low-income Black parents of a child receiving special education services might fit into this data trend. The authors do point out that schools in New York City receiving federal Title I funds based on the percentage of enrolled students eligible for free and reduced-price meals tend to have a higher percentage of Black and Latinx students. They offer two possible interpretations: racial diversity in schools is viewed positively by Black and Latinx families, and negatively by White families, or that Black and Latinx families simply have different expectations, options or basis for comparison when it comes to their children's schools than White families.

These few sentences from Charbonneau and Van Ryzin are among the most in depth treatment of the ways in which race might be intertwined with issues of school success and failure in the ten articles reviewed here. This is despite the well-documented fact that racial inequality is reproduced in schools (Kao, et al., 2003) and that racial and economic segregation exacerbates this inequality (Orfield and Lee, 2005). Small schools in New York City, with their promise of choice, contain a capitalist subtext; if families have some element of choice in where

their children attend school, schools will compete (Winters, 2012), thus driving up educational quality and somehow eliminating racial disparities in achievement.

According to Burgess and Briggs (2010), however, using data from the United Kingdom, school choice does not increase the chance of a low-income child attending a good school. As in the United States, school assignment is causally related to location and distance between home and school. Burgess and Briggs do not dispute that location matters when it comes to school assignment, but they contend that parents with more financial resources, and the accompanying time and social capital, are better able to either “work the system” to get their children into more desirable schools, or to move their residence to achieve the same outcome. In other words, no matter how many choices there may be, families with racial privilege or wealth are more likely to be able to make the most strategic choice for their children.

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What must it have been like to attend the first high school in the Bronx, the first co-educational high school in New York City when it first opened? The crowds reported at the opening of the building suggest significant pride (The Morris Annual, 1905). Students and staff alike must have felt excited to enter the building each morning, to feel themselves on the cutting edge, a part of a new educational movement in their city, a model for schools across the country. The shift towards small schools also changed the expectations for what it would feel like to attend a great school. Instead of taking pride in a physical space, instead of building community focused on a building, the proliferation of small schools encouraged students and staff to form their collective identities around their school’s theme: law and government, green careers, violin and dance, emergency management. No matter if a school is split awkwardly between sections of several floors or stashed in the basement; a good school can be anywhere.

As Morris evolved into an Educational Campus, housing four different schools, the focus of reform and pedagogical innovation turned inward, no longer embodied by the school building. Simultaneous with the proliferation of small schools was the decline of the neighborhood school. Students could no longer expect to attend the high school in the neighborhood in which they lived. This meant that Morris's community no longer necessarily surrounded the building, no longer saw its neo-gothic façade on the weekends or in the evening out their windows. Instead of adding prestige to the neighborhood, Morris's primary value was in providing services, and not just education. By the time Morris became an Educational Campus, there was growing public acknowledgement that education alone could not cure the social ills of poverty, disinvestment and racism. Schools would have to become multi-functional. The Morris High School Educational Campus opened a day care center in one of its first-floor classrooms, for student and larger neighborhood use. In 2012, principals wrote a grant to open a medical clinic in the building. Morris's community, the public it served, no longer identified with its physical presence, no longer took pride in its appearance, but instead formed around the programs, the education, and other services that occurred inside the building.

Each year, students, staff and parents in New York City public schools take a survey in categories that encompass multiple facets of the school experience: rigorous instruction, collaborative teachers, supportive environment, effective school leadership, strong family-community ties and trust. These surveys attempt to quantify a good school. And if they are to be trusted, the schools in Morris are roughly on par with other schools across the city; slightly better in establishing a supportive environment and slightly worse at delivering rigorous instruction. This is consistent with the advantages and drawbacks of a small school: staff members can more easily form personal relationships with students, their families and each other, but at the same

time, teachers are also more likely to fill multiple roles at the school, teaching in multiple subject areas or doing double duty in other ways. With their time fragmented among diverse and completing responsibilities, classroom instruction often suffers.

Dividing Morris High School into the schools of the Morris Educational Campus was, in some ways, an attempt to make over the reputation of the building, to press the reset button. New names, new personnel and a new vision for the building were like a fresh coat of paint, covering up the cracks in investment, in energy, the peeling healthcare and fading housing prospects. Unlike a fresh coat of paint, however, education reform at Morris and throughout New York City has been more than superficial. Graduation rates among the four high schools now housed in Morris hovers around seventy percent, just below the city average, but a significant increase from twenty-five percent in 2001 nonetheless.

## CONCLUSION

Morris High School was founded with the bold vision of serving as the college of the people, a means for social and economic advancement and a symbol of an American meritocracy. From local and national celebration to chronic disinvestment; from devoted alumni to dropout rates climbing to two-thirds of the student population, Morris has maintained this vision. The small schools that inherited its space continue to position themselves as democratizing institutions that prepare young people of little means for careers and college. The same imposing, gray façade still towers over Boston Road, lending an air of grandeur, even from beneath its scaffolding. The students who walk its hallways and sit in its classrooms still carry the weight of responsibility to make good on the sacrifices of their families, to climb the socio-economic ladder. Yet, for an institution with such a lofty and critical purpose, so much of what has transpired in its hallways and classrooms remains undocumented and forgotten, key characters; anonymous, important events; partial. The overlapping layers of education policy, personal recollections, public investment and disinvestment, and racial politics piece together to form a more complete biography, although questions remain.

As a building, Morris is historically notable; the first high school built in the Bronx, the first co-educational high school in New York City. Both its physical structure and ideological mission were innovative, progressive and modern. The early champions of the school, including C.B.J. Snyder, the building's architect, recognized that investment in both human and material resources were not only critical to the quality of education the school could offer, but, more subtly, also crucial to how students would feel about the school and their education. And they were right. Letters to the editor, speeches and articles in literary journals show that alumni from the half century of Morris's life shared a particular pride and loyalty to their high school. This

pride and loyalty correspond to an era when the building was well-maintained, the curriculum was cutting-edge, extracurricular activities proliferated, and the school administration was successful in championing racial integration.

Beginning in the 1960s, Morris started to suffer from the disinvestment that became widespread in urban areas. In a catastrophic feedback loop, deepening racial segregation implicitly justified disinvestment in communities like the South Bronx; social problems that accompanied public disinvestment, like crumbling infrastructure and crime were then blamed on the residents of these areas, justifying further disinvestment. Morris High School was one of many institutions to suffer. And as the physical structure of the building declined and crumbled, so too did students' perception of the education they received there. The fiscal crisis in New York City in 1975 re-shaped the South Bronx and branded it as a hopeless case, a Third World country within a world-class city. This financial and political catastrophe became personal for the students and families of Morris High School. When it rained, a waterfall cascaded down a stairway; enrollment ballooned to nearly double the planned capacity of the building, straining human and material resources. Despite successful interventions to increase drastically the graduation rate in the 1980s, students didn't feel that they were receiving a world-class education anymore. Yet the ghosts of alumni who treasured the school, the city officials who believed in the promise of the education it offered, lingered. Even in this most dilapidated, under-resourced era, there was still something special about Morris. Teachers invited students to their homes for Thanksgiving. Students with limited personal resources won prestigious scholarships against the odds. And the alumni returned for the centennial anniversary of the grand Morris High School building.

As past and present community members gathered to celebrate Morris the building and Morris the school, the bureaucratic wheels were already turning to remake the school radically. Just as Morris was, at its founding, at the front of a new vision for public secondary education in America as the college of the people, so it was, almost exactly one hundred years later, one of the first schools in New York City to participate in the small schools experiment. While the efficacy of this ubiquitous, citywide initiative remains unclear, there is no doubt that it was an attempt to leave behind Morris's tumultuous past and patchy record to create a fresh start.

Applying Gordon's theory of haunting, however, reveals the futility of this project. The physical plant of Morris is not an empty shell, rather it holds the residue of experiences from previous generations of students, teachers, principals and other staff. Early classes of devoted students, like Yves Lacaze and Marie Syrkin, who felt attachment to Morris long after they graduated may be the invisible but not absent factor that helps explain why Morris community members continue to feel there is something special about the schools housed within the building. Likewise, the pain of disinvestment cannot be erased by a coat of paint and a new name. The voices of students the city would have preferred to ignore still push today's Morris students to demand more from their school system. On a certain level, dividing Morris into small schools is insignificant. Just as the revolutionary leader governing from same desk, using the same systems and institutions as a deposed despot cannot help but fall into the same patterns as her predecessor (Anderson, 1983), so too the small, themed schools that replaced Morris High School cannot escape its past, for better or worse.

In the gray, just-dawn light, Third Avenue at 149<sup>th</sup> Street, in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx, is subdued, but the steady trickle of commuters up the subway steps hint at the hustle and bustle to come. The Bx21 bus lumbers past the still-shuttered discount clothing stores, the

fried chicken and Chinese joints, the bodegas, pawn shops and the jewelry stores with a tattoo and piercing lounge in the back. In a few hours, these sidewalks will be clogged with shoppers and workers, with mothers pushing strollers and kids late to school. But now, it's not even seven and the sidewalks are empty. The bus bears right onto Boston Road, engine groaning as it strains up the steepening hill. Apartment buildings line the street, a new development opposite an old one, equal in their griminess. Past another fried chicken place and another bodega, at the top of the hill, a gray tower looms. The bus sighs to a stop in front of Morris High School.

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