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SPIRITS IN THE DARK:  
BLACK COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND THE LIGHT IT BEARS

by

SYDONI ELLWOOD

A master's capstone project 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

2021

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Spirits in the Dark: Black Community Education and the Light it Bears

by

Sydoni Ellwood

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

Sherry Deckman  
Capstone Project Advisor

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis  
Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

Spirits in the Dark: Black Community Education and the Light it Bears

by

Sydoni Ellwood

Advisor: Dr. Sherry Deckman

“Spirits in the Dark” is a digital space dedicated to the efforts of Black community education. It memorializes the commitment and strategies of spirits, light bearers like Mary McLeod Bethune and Huey Newton – people who devoted their lives to the fortification of their communities via education. This project also presents a variety of answers to one specific question: What lessons can school leaders and educators incorporate from community-controlled education programs to make learning spaces affirming and engaging for Black students? In totality, the digital space contributes to conversations in urban education and sociology, specifically the ones being held around cultural relevance, social justice, and more importantly, Blackness. “Spirits in the Dark” urges educators to move past the halls of anti-racism and diversity trainings, prodding them to transform their classrooms into spaces that fully embrace Blackness – spaces where Black children and youth are affirmed and engaged holistically and radically loved.

*“If service is beneath you, leadership is beyond you.”*

– Dr. Terri Watson

*“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.”*

– Matthew 5:14-15, NIV

## Acknowledgements

First thanks to my Creator for depositing unyielding heaps of purpose and determination into my soul. Second thanks to my mother, father, and uncle for nourishing those deposits, letting me bloom despite the cruelty of this world. Final thanks to my friends and educators – specifically Professors Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké Okome, Immanuel Ness, Molly Makris, and Sherry Deckman – who pushed me, prodded me, and supported me in immeasurable ways – especially in the moments I preferred to deny my purpose and brilliance. A very, very special thank you to my not-so-little sister and my two rambunctious Godsons for reminding me that through education, this Black girl from Brooklyn can change the world around her if continues to lean into her purpose, determination, and brilliance. A huge shoutout to my dear friend and first and only editor, Melissa Clairjuene, for encouraging me to apply to the MALS program and embrace the fact that I’m really a lifelong scholar.

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## Digital Manifest

I. Capstone Whitepaper (PDF)

II. “Spirits in the Dark” digital space: [www.spiritsinthedark.org](http://www.spiritsinthedark.org) (WARC submitted)

## INTRODUCTION: THE STORY BEHIND “SPIRITS IN THE DARK”

As Bettina Love says (2019): “Educational justice is going to take people power, driven by spirit. . .” (9). “Spirits in the Dark” was named after the title track of Aretha Franklin’s 1970 album, *Spirit in the Dark*. In the first verse, she soulfully croons:

*I'm getting the spirit in the dark*

*(um-hum-hum)*

*People moving oh and they grooving*

*Just getting the spirit*

*(Um-hum-hum) in the dark*

*Tell me, sister, how do ya feel?*

*Tell me my brother-brother-brother*

*How do you feel?*

*A do you feel like dancing?*

*Get up and let's start dancing*

*Start getting the spirit<sup>1</sup>*

Each time I hear the song, I close my eyes and envision a dark room with a single light flickering fiercely and as it begins to bounce and weave through the darkness, other lights awaken, moving so much so that together, they light a path to an opening I hadn’t seen before. This is what community does, what kinship means. People coming and working together with passion and for purpose. In the history of Black community-controlled education, like Aretha Franklin’s verse, women, and men like Donna Howell (Black Panthers) or Charles Cobb (SNCC), would begin the work and others would join in, working in a concerted effort to ensure the safety and education of the children and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://genius.com/Aretha-franklin-spirit-in-the-dark-lyrics>

youth in their community. These Spirits shattered the darkness of unequal education – with the light whose essence was a mixture of critical pedagogy and radical love (McLaren 2011; Brooks 2017) – showing their students paths to transformation and liberation.

What made community-controlled education especially revolutionary and special in Black communities was the affirmation of Blackness. Blackness, Black culture, and history was embraced and uplifted (Tai 2016; King 2017). In a space where you are affirmed, celebrated, and protected, remaining engaged is hardly an issue. The radical love and care that community based/influenced education infuses into pedagogy and curricula creates a learning atmosphere that is safe, engaging, and relatable for Black students. Additionally, educational programs that are based on or influenced by community takes a holistic approach to the processes of learning, providing supplemental academic and socio-emotional support for both students and their families (Horsford, Scott and Anderson 2018). This is the lesson “Spirits in the Dark” hopes to teach.

The digital space consists of six sections that briefly summarizes and archives the history of Black community-controlled education:

- **Home page:** Introduces guests to a selected few past and present *light bearers* – Black men and women, like Mae Mallory for example, who have dedicated their life’s work to the educational betterment of Black children and youth in their communities.
- **The Darkness:** Discusses the problem of unequal education for Black children and youth; highlights the issue of pedagogy and curricula that pathologize Blackness.
- **The Spirits:** Defines *community teachers* and identifies the methods they utilize to affirm Black students and keep them engaged in the process of learning.
- **Keep the Lights On:** Asks guests to consider how they continue the tradition of Black community-controlled educational efforts and provides examples via video clips.

- **Resources:** A toolkit of practical approaches guests can incorporate into their teaching/caretaking style.
- **About the Creator of “Spirits in the Dark”:** A brief biography of Sydoni Ellwood.

The website’s colors were selected carefully; red, black, and green are the colors of the official Pan-African flag, designed by Marcus Garvey in the 1920s (Donella 2017). While there is little to no red on the digital space, the sharpness of blacks and greens, with the contrast of the softest of blues reflect Garvey’s vision: nobility, graciousness, and abundance – all the things that Blackness are.

The process of building this digital space relied heavily on historical research; primary documents such as Charles Cobb’s initial prospectus for SNCC’s Liberation School and the Black Panthers’ newspaper archives are two examples of the kind of sources used to gather information for “Spirits in the Dark.” Connecting with professors and historians Robert Robinson and Mary Phillips was beneficial – both scholars pointed me in the direction of newspaper archives and interviews that recorded the becoming of Oakland Community School. A Google search for *SNCC Freedom School* led me to the SNCC Digital Gateway and there I found Cobbs’ original typed notes. Robert Robinson’s research on OCS led me to his video discussion on the program, which was then added to the website. Similarly, Karen Pittman’s interview with *Edutopia* and Peter Murrell’s definition of *community teachers* were used because of their expertise in youth and teacher education. After gathering the sources, I found most appropriate for “Spirits in the Dark,” I analyzed them, looking to specifically identify teaching philosophy and pedagogy, reading in between the lines for themes of affection and care – which are integral to the purpose of this project.

“Spirits in the Dark” encourages guests to ponder slowly and carefully all the ways in which they can contribute to the holistic education of Black children and youth. It introduces habits and methods educators, and caretakers can practice ensuring that Black children and youth are safe in

learning spaces. Safety is vital to a child’s educational experience; knowing how to protect students from physical, emotional, and mental danger or risk is just as important as knowing how to create a lesson plan. Historically, Black children and youth in the U.S. have been excluded, then ostracized in learning spaces (especially public-schools) – except those created and maintained by their communities (Horsford 2011). The legacy of slavery and systemic racial oppression has long prevented Black students from learning in safe and affirming spaces. Black children were originally deemed unworthy of education and decades after *Brown v. Board of Ed*, public education is still separate and unequal for Black students (Horsford 2011). They are disciplined at higher rates, more likely to be diagnosed with behavioral disorders, and are increasingly isolated from their peers than any other racial demographic (Horsford 2011; Morris 2018). Just four years ago statistics revealed that 45% of Black students attended high-poverty schools (Cai 2020). If educators truly wish to transform their classrooms into sites of love and liberation, they must first begin with safety and affirmation.

The heart of this project is its conceptual framework, which explores how, through a radical acceptance and love for Blackness and the utilization of critical pedagogy, these programs provided Black children and youth with a truly proper education as Du Bois once defined in his 1935 essay, “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?” He argued the exclusion of African Americans in the nation’s education system harmed all of America as it meant the U.S. lacked a public education system that would “create the intelligent basis of a real democracy” (Du Bois, 328). According to Du Bois, proper education is provided when there is/are:

1. Sympathetic touch between teacher and student
2. The teacher has knowledge on each student and their surroundings, background, and the history of their [socio-economic] class and [racial/ethnic] group

3. Contact between students and students, and students and teacher(s) on the basis of *perfect social equality*, which increases *sympathy* and knowledge
4. Facilities for education in equipment and housing
5. Promotion of extra-curricular activities as it tends to induct the child into life

Du Bois' criteria do not mention what children learn (math, reading, science, arts, etc.) or how to assess how much they learn, and with good reason. Du Bois, like many other scholars, understood that any properly trained teacher would have the ability to disseminate information to their students. His concern rather, was the environment in which students learn: Is it nurturing, rooted in equity? In the classroom, equity begins with a simple yet difficult to perform task. When both teachers and students take the time to confront, confess, and abandon any implicit biases and explicit prejudices they might have – daily – the grounds for equity have been plowed.

Most crucially, “Spirits in the Dark” reveals to us the many ways classrooms can be sites of love and liberation when teachers act as warriors on their students and communities’ behalf (Rivera-McCutchen 2019). “Spirits in the Dark” emphasizes the role of *radical* love – a love that grasped Blackness at the root and swore to protect and nurture it – in Black community-controlled educational learning spaces (Garcha 2019). The space is a firm reminder that teaching is an act of love and more pointedly, teaching critically, with the intent to propel students toward liberation, is the ultimate way to transform the classroom into a site of love (Watson 2020).

#### THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND RADICAL LOVE

The website’s conceptual framework is a combination of critical pedagogy and radical love. Therefore, much of the literature reviewed here focuses on the two theories on which the digital space is founded instead of the existing literature on the history of Black community-controlled education. Critical pedagogy is grounded in the belief that educators should use their time in the

classroom to challenge learners to examine power structures, dynamics, and patterns of inequality (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 2000). Through critical pedagogy, students acquire tools they need to critique systems of oppression and the ways in which inequality persists in their families, communities, and the world at large (McMahon 2003). Simply put, critical pedagogy transforms the classroom into a space that manifests radical thought, empathy, and a true desire for change (Kahne 2013).

Because Black community builders and members are aware of the legal legacy of unequal education, utilizing critical pedagogy creates opportunities for students to understand how everything changes, but remains the same (the cycles of systemic oppression) (McLaren 2011, 383). This educational approach empowers Black communities to teach content that investigates and challenges the structural injustice their children are regularly exposed to; it produces safe spaces where the historical truths of racism and oppression can be unmasked and interrogated. Rather than having students accept the myth of the deficit model, which states students lack certain skills, community educators approach their students as knowledge producers and synthesizers. In other words, Black students do not need to be taught skills as they already possess them – their skills need to be affirmed and cultivated to challenge the systemic oppression they will encounter outside learning spaces. Additionally, affirming the value and abilities of Black students have proven to boost their academic success (Minkel 2006). If schools that serve predominantly Black students were to apply the critical and radical love that Black community-controlled education programs provided their students to their own pedagogy, they can create safe, affirming, and truly inclusive learning spaces where their students can succeed.

Whereas critical pedagogy equips educators to teach students lessons of truth and evoke profound thought, the critical theory of love empowers them to care beyond surface niceness or “performative wokeness” (Watson 2020, 242). Radical love interprets love as an action – not a mere

feeling – that is necessary for liberation and revolution. This framework sees love as an intangible object which does tangible justice. Daniel Liston (2007) writes: “In attentive love, we may find the conceptual and practical resources to attend more faithfully to our students and to bring to our situation a clear-sightedness that is frequently missing” (391). Love – the kind that is both critical and attentive – when found in learning spaces, is transformative – challenging educators to rise to the task of preparing their students for the world, not only to live in but to change for the better.

Black community builders and educators love Black children something fierce. They protect them. They nurture them. They believe in them. They love they possess for Black children is an active love, an armed love, one that is consistent, persistent, and critical (Rivera-McCutchen 2019), that seeks to repair and restore. This radical love is crucial to the wellbeing and academic success of Black children, given the marginalization and pathology which surrounds them. Approaching Black children with a love that offers belonging and cares for them holistically, and not just about what or how they can produce – which is the love dominant society often shows Black children – is one of the greatest lessons community-controlled education teaches us. “Spirits in the Dark” bridges the conversations of critical pedagogy, care, and love, emphasizing their necessity to transformation and liberation. It provides a succinct yet beautiful answer to the question “How can educators make learning spaces affirming and engaging for Black students?” which is, to love them radically and teach them to view their world and their position in it critically.

## THE PROOF’S IN THE PROGRAMS

Though there are several people and programs displayed on “Spirits in the Dark,” there are two that when analyzed proves the project’s main argument – that critical pedagogy and radical love made Black community-controlled learning spaces unique and safe for Black children and youth – true. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s Freedom Summer school and the Black Panther

for Self-Defense Party's Oakland Community School provide the very lessons of critical pedagogy, radical love, and Black student engagement that "Spirits in the Dark" intend to share with educators, caretakers, and community builders.

#### SNCC'S FREEDOM SUMMER SCHOOL

December of 1963, Charles Cobb, a SNCC field secretary, presented a prospectus for what he called the Summer Freedom School Program (Etienne 2013). Cobb's primary motivation was to provide an oasis for the Black children and youth of Mississippi amid an intellectual wasteland. He found that in comparison to the rest of the American education system, Mississippi's educational spaces were "grossly inadequate" (Cobb 1963). The organization had spent time in Mississippi – the Freedom Rides of 1961 in response to the state's refusal to comply with the court's decision to outlaw segregation in interstate travel (Cobb 2012). While there, the leaders and organizers of SNCC recognized and leaned into the passion of the youth; they wanted to be part of the change, standing on the frontlines even and SNCC embraced them. Cobb in particular, felt deeply that SNCC has a responsibility for the Black students of Mississippi. He cared for them so much so that he drafted an outline of what would become one of the greatest Black community-controlled educational efforts. In his prospectus, he explained that SNCC ought to develop a statewide coordinated student movement – a junior version of SNCC – and more importantly, that SNCC was tasked with filling an "intellectual and creative vacuum" in the lives of Mississippi's Black children and youth (Cobb 1963). His main priority was to get the future students at Freedom Summer School to "articulate their own desires, demands, and questions" (Cobb 1963). Simply put, Cobb intended to use the Freedom Summer School to equip Black high schoolers with the knowledge, critical perspective, and pride to transform their state-run learning spaces once the official school year begun.

Cobb's prospectus proposed that during July and August, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders would be supplemented with lessons and practices they failed to be taught via the state's education. The plan was to provide a "broad intellectual and academic experience during the summer to bring back to school" and propel them to organize and participate in school boycotts based on their newly increased awareness (Cobb 1963). The students of SNCC's Freedom Summer School learned how to protest, studied for citizenship exams, and grasped the importance of the fight for civil rights in those two months (Hale 2016). That first summer – 1964 – over 2,000 students were enrolled in 41 Freedom Schools. The teachers – all volunteers – were mostly African American college students who saw the connection between education and political struggle (Etienne 455).

They taught a humanities-centered based curriculum that focused on citizenship and adopted a critical pedagogy – one that embraced dialogue, critical thinking, and hands-on activities that transformed local protests into learning spaces (Hale 109). The students would advance their learning outside the traditional classroom, as their teachers took them to observe and even participate in protests and demonstrations (111). At the Freedom Summer School, learning was more than theory, it was practice and concrete exercise. SNCC teachers were trained to abandon the traditional modes of instruction like memorization or lecturing and embrace a radically different student-centered pedagogy instead (110). Classes were held in churches, and community member homes; students sat wherever they chose and most mornings the lesson would begin with open and honest dialogue between them and their teachers (113).

To say critical pedagogy was the foundation of the Freedom Summer Schools is an understatement; lessons on Negro history and the philosophy of the civil rights movement was the core curriculum: For example, students studied John Brown and the Reconstruction Era critically (Hale 113). While the academic curriculum also consisted of the more traditional courses such as algebra, chemistry, biology, and literature – art, French, typing, dance, and drama were also taught

(113). For SNCC, providing space for creative and expressive outlet was just as important as political action. They cared so deeply for these students that they approached them holistically, seeking to do more than teach them facts and dates – just as Du Bois suggested in 1935. They were determined to prepare them not only to change society, but how to carry themselves in a world that despised them. Everything about Freedom Summer School emphasized the radical care and love SNCC had for Black youth. That love is what equipped them to be committed and create home places for their students: a safe space filled with community, care, empathy, and love (Love 2019).

## THE BLACK PANTHERS' OAKLAND COMMUNITY SCHOOL

In 1973, the doors of Oakland Community School swung open in East Oakland for the first time. It was one-of-a-kind; the tuition-free elementary school (ages 4 through 12) was community-run and founded by the legendary Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. The staff of OCS filled a void the government of California saw no desire to; just two years before OCS opened its doors, the Oakland Unified School District's population was 62,000, had a \$70.37 million budget, and board members who ignored the pleas for better from 60% of its parents (Huggins & LeBlanc-Ernest 2009). Those parents were Black, Latino, and impoverished – the same parents with who OCS would create authentic and communal bonds. Through these bonds, educators, parents, and community members would work together to establish a safe, culturally affirming, and engaging learning space for the children of Oakland.

When directors Ericka Huggins and Donna Howell thought of how they could contribute to the fortification of their community, the answer was clear – they must teach the children. After all, point five of the BPP's ten points declared:

We want decent education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent

American society. We want an education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society. We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If you do not have knowledge of yourself and your position in the society and in the world, then you will have little chance to know anything else. (BPP Platform 1966)

For Huggins and Howell, that education needed to begin sooner than later. The women were radical educators who viewed education as a tool of survival. They were committed not only to teaching the children of their community, but also to using critical pedagogy as a building stone and guiding light. The school's focus on quality education for Black and poor children made it the BPP's flagship community program and the locale for community members who were passionate about education and committed to youth (Huggins 2016).

Many of the women in BPP found their purpose at OCS; they served as administration and educators, following the footsteps of the Black women before them who served in SNCC's Liberation Schools (Huggins & LeBlanc-Ernest 2009). Oakland Community School was revolutionary. Lessons were not planned for students to memorize dates, names, and other facts – they were planned with the intent to spark critical thought (Robinson 2020). The students of OCS were encouraged to really think and to ask questions no matter how critical they might be. Each student was acknowledged as a producer of knowledge, as a co-teacher. One former Panther educator explained, “We don't treat the children as little babies, and pet them. We relate to them as comrades. . .” (Garcha 2019, 327). Classrooms were inviting and teachers were affirming. OCS challenged the mainstream education scene's perception of what it meant to Black and poor. By the mid-1960s the Panthers' newspaper regularly depicted the work of OCS as enabling children to navigate “the real threat of state-sponsored violence against African Americans on the one hand, and the potential for community building and racial survival on the other (331). Every day, they

reminded the children of Oakland they were not “unfortunate” victims of their environment but rather, they were survivors (Dyson 2014). They survived despite the oppression and racism designed to eradicate them. Each morning, the community members who taught them would begin the day with Huey Newton’s founding principle: Serve the people (Hughey 2007). OCS’ commitment to Black children was rooted in community, critical thought, and love. For this reason, the school serves as the utmost appropriate case study for this project.

OCS’ service was ever-present; they provided their students with breakfast and dinner and even though the school served 150 students by 1981, each student’s education was tailored to suit his or her needs (Huggins 2016). The extended community provided extracurricular and supplemental academic support when necessary. Each student’s core instruction consisted of math, science, language arts (Spanish and English), history, current events, art, physical education, theater, dance, choir, gardening, and environmental studies (Huggins 2016). OCS was committed to the whole student, not just their academic achievement, which explains why there were classes on the history of grassroots organizing and why the school had a “Each One Teach One” philosophy, encouraging students to teach their peers who had difficulty grasping concepts (Huggins & LeBlanc-Ernest 2009). Students at OCS were tended to in a myriad of ways that would boost their self-esteem, have them take pride in their Blackness and community, acquire leadership skills, and develop a critical world view.

In an interview, Ericka Huggins remarked that she believes in transformative teaching, where in the learning space, the facilitator of learning learns as much as the students (Rofel & Tai 2016, 237). Huggins’ remark is evidence that OCS staff did not approach their students as though they had nothing to contribute to the lesson. Instead, they created a dynamic where the production and exchange of knowledge was evenly divided between the adult and the children. One OCS teacher’s lesson planning notes revealed the philosophy which guided them: “In order to educate

our youth we must study them and ourselves in a critical manner” (Robinson 2020, 187). Critical thought, care and radical love was at the center of Oakland Community School’s pedagogy and curriculum. The Berkeley and San Francisco sites organized special theme days like Revolutionary Culture, Movie Day, and Revolutionary History (184).

The community builders and educators who worked with OCS took the time to know the Black children they served. They cared so deeply for their students, going above the basic requirements of a learning space – providing dinner meals and rides home for students who lived far from the location (Ealey 2017). They took the time to introduce them to concepts and history that illuminated the brilliance, perseverance, and rich culture of Blackness and their local neighborhoods. The idea behind OCS’ pedagogy and curriculum were always to “transmit revolutionary content in terms children could understand” (184). The Black Panthers strongly believed education was essential to their community’s survival and not just any education, but an education immersed in critical thought and revolutionary practices.

#### BEYOND MOMENTS IN HISTORY: MY REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS OF P.S. 92 IN THE 90S

Critical pedagogy and a radical love for Blackness, Black children and youth, and the community at large is what made the Freedom Summer Schools and OCS as special and revolutionary as they were. It is important for those who visit “Spirits in the Dark” to understand that the sacrifice, commitment, courage, critical reflection, and care (Watson 2020) that these community teachers and leaders put into their program is not a mere moment or happening in history. It can be done again; educators *can* and should work to create what Dr. Terri Watson (2020) calls a beloved community<sup>2</sup>: one where power, love, and justice is the foundation – where classrooms are loving and caring spaces. A more recent and personal example of how a school can

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Watson’s presentation at CUNY’s Graduate Center Fall 2020 Urban Education Colloquium.

be transformed into a caring and loving space for Black children when the community is in control is my elementary school experience.

I attended P.S. 92, Adrian Hegeman at 601 Parkside Avenue from 1995-2000. When I recall my time at P.S. 92, people usually ask if I was part of an experimental program or a charter school of some sort. It took me some time to realize why they were stunned by my answer, which was “no,” by the way. I attended a public elementary school in Brooklyn, New York during the end of the Golden Era (the 90s were stellar, no one can tell me different) that was overwhelmingly Afro-centric in culture and sometimes, in curriculum.

Apart from my fourth-grade teacher whom I cannot remember, all of my teachers were Black. Mrs. Lane (1<sup>st</sup> grade) was Bajan; Ms. Mohammed (2<sup>nd</sup> grade) was African American and a proud member of the Nation of Islam; Mrs. Clarke (3<sup>rd</sup> grade) was Jamaican; Ms. Haughton (5<sup>th</sup> grade) was Panamanian, and our Assistant Principal, Ms. Spann, was a 28-year-old African American who would regularly trade WNBA cards with me. Interestingly enough, our Principal was a white woman – I cannot remember her name. Our music teacher was also our art teacher and her classes were always a good time; she was what Nina Simone sang about: young, gifted, and Black. She was from St. Louis and had beautiful, long locs. We lacked traditional instruments, but she would have us make our own from Arts & Crafts materials and we would sing alongside her boombox as she corrected our notes. She was always kind, regularly sharing snacks from her bag with us as we drew or painted. Although we had no organized sports, our P.E. teacher took her job quite seriously; we did a variety of exercises ranging from yoga to calisthenics to free run daily and that was *before* the tag playoffs we arranged ourselves during recess.

We had one special-ed class per grade, which was only distinguishable due to the paraprofessionals who would often walk alongside certain students. When I asked one boy, “What’s she here for?” he explained he had an extra teacher because he sometimes confused letters and that

made reading hard. I remember offering to help him read during our weekly library time. Our library doors had a faded poster of Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" and what I thought was every Walter Dean Meyers paperback novel. Nearly every inch of the hallways boasted our artwork, essays, and book reports and during the science project months, the best ones held down the lobby. We often grew plants in our rooftop garden and brought them home once they bloomed. At P.S. 92, two things were clear: Our teachers loved us and were proud of our work.

Every morning, we sang "Lift Every Voice"<sup>3</sup> and recited the seven principles of Kwanzaa. I did not sing the American national anthem until junior high. We went on trips a lot, my favorite one was to City Hall. I had one Ecuadorian classmate, Eduardo; the rest of my classmates were Black, and we rarely had newcomers as we moved up the ranks. We all pretty much lived within the ten blocks surrounding the building – so did our teachers. My elementary school was certainly the physical and psychological center of my neighborhood (Horsford, Scott and Anderson 13). I did my best to keep quiet in Ms. Haughton's class on account of my mother and I often running into her at the dry cleaners on a Saturday morning, and on more than one occasion, my father and I would see my music teacher doing yoga in Prospect Park as we roller-bladed.

In truth, my loyalty to community-controlled education stems from the deep river of learning I was immersed in at P.S. 92. So does my conviction of approaching education through the lens of critical race theory, particularly racial realism (Horsford 96). I vividly remember one September morning, Mrs. Clarke – who also ensured penmanship was part of the school year's curriculum – was teaching the facts of the Louisiana Purchase and she suddenly stopped, closed our cherry red classroom door, and quietly said: "The U.S. would not have that land if Napoleon wasn't hellbent on squelching the fiercest Black revolution history would ever record. 1804 was the real Birth of a Nation." My Haitian classmates roared, hollering "Tell 'em Mrs. Clarke! Long live Ayiti!" and I

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.naacp.org/naacp-history-lift-evry-voice-and-sing/>

beamed with pride; my Afro-Jamaican father who was a Jack-of-All-Trades but master of none, used to tell me stories of my Maroon ancestors and how Dutty Boukman, a Jamaican slave shipped off to Haiti because of his insolence, was one of the core organizers at the beginning of the revolution. My father would always say: “Syd, fight and freedom are in our blood.” I ran behind Mrs. Clarke later that day in the hallway and before even asking me what was wrong, she whipped around and told me, “Ms. Ellwood, young women do not run and for Heaven’s sake please tie your laces. Aren’t you tired of walking on them? How much did Dorrett [my mom] pay for those sneakers? Be responsible!” I let all of her questions slip through my ears, tied my laces, and asked her why she closed the door before talking about 1804. Her response is the earliest memory I have of understanding knowledge had a different meaning for Black people. Mrs. Clarke smiled and said: “Because Ms. Ellwood, the victors rarely keep accurate record and, so the half has never been told.”

Mrs. Clarke’s Louisiana Purchase lesson, and our hallway chat is the story I grab for whenever someone asks me to explain racial realism which, according to Horsford is what educators employ when they acknowledge “the history, pervasiveness, and salience of race and racism in U.S. society . . .” (Horsford 2011, 96). Much like the Southern all-Black schools during the Jim Crow era, what made P.S. 92 the corner stone of our little piece of Flatbush – which gentrifiers now call Prospect-Lefferts Garden – is that our teachers were not only skin folk, but they were *kin* folk, as our elders would say. Anyone who taught at P.S. 92 was committed to Flatbush and its children. My teachers not only looked like me, they knew my grandparents and parents. As I mentioned before, my teachers lived in the same neighborhood; spotting them on a Sunday evening stroll was natural. For this reason, I believe their investment in my future was two-fold. My eventual success would prove their professional excellence and it would contribute to the preservation of our middle-class, Black and brown community. 601 Parkside Avenue exemplified the school-family-community linkages and relationships that defined the all-Black schools in the South and current school leaders

seek to achieve (Horsford 47). The radical love and care that flowed from the community into the school building made P.S. unique.

The administrators and educators at P.S. 92, in my opinion, had a radical perspective of education (Sadovnik, et al. 2018). Many of the social studies and current events lessons proved Mrs. Clarke right – the victors had not always told the truth. My teachers taught me the systems that shape our society were not just. Rather, they were oppressive in nature. We wrote letters – which read like pacts of solidarity – to pen pals on reservations in commemoration of the Trail of Tears. Ms. Mohammed regularly included words like *hegemony* and *activism* in our daily aims; she would also encourage us girls to speak boldly and share our ideas, telling the boys to “hush up” when it was our turn to read or present. P.S. 92, alongside my faith, is the foundation of my core values: Blackness, womanism, kindness, and justice. Still, there were times where it was apparent my principal and teachers did not always agree with whoever was in charge at the top.

At the beginning of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, there was a PTA meeting about the ELA exam. That was new. . . the only tests I took before then were daily 5 question quizzes about yesterday’s lesson. My parents were informed these exams would be administered yearly and our scores would determine how much funding P.S. 92 received. Our parents were upset, and we were nervous. My father told Mrs. Clarke, “These people don’t know shit about our kids.” She said he was right but that our school board had to comply with state rules. After that meeting, I cannot remember how often, but my teachers would inform that morning that we were to expect a visitor from the Board of Ed. We were assured that we could continue to be ourselves, ask questions and participate in the day’s lesson. What we were not told though, is that the lesson would look and sound different from what we were used to.

On the days the visitor – who would always be white and in a suit – arrived, my teachers would have us work on practice reading and math exams. It was strange; while we were usually

given story books to take home, vocabulary lists, and math worksheets – practice exams were not part of our classroom work. Our time in Mrs. Clarke’s classroom consisted of reading the *New York Times*, U.S. history lessons that contextualized Africa and the Caribbean, and math practice where we used jolly ranchers and silver coins to work out problems. When I left P.S. 92 for junior high, I was surprised how many of my new classmates did not know who Thomas Sankara was or that the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense designed what we now know as WIC. But, on the days the visitors came, we did not hear stories of Buffalo Soldiers (the inspiration for Bob Marley’s song) or listen to Sonia Sanchez’ poems as we wrote the lesson’s “Hot Takes”, as Mrs. Clarke called them. On those days, we were given a yellow Dixon pencil and told to read carefully and fill out the bubbles below. I was not fond of those days. In fact, on those days all I dreamed of was lunch and recess. It was so boring!

Something changed at the start of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and it would continue right up to graduation. It was as if someone entered our sacred space without invitation and proceeded to make it their own. The intrusion did not hinder Mrs. Clarke or Ms. Haughton from teaching us what they knew and in the way were used to though, and that was comforting. “Knowledge is what you make it” was Ms. Haughton’s classroom motto. She made the classroom democratic; she would always start the lesson of the day by asking us what *we* knew about the topic. She also held creative writing contests and used OutKast songs to teach us literary devices. Ms. Haughton is the reason I used song lyrics in my undergrad research papers. What *did* change worried our parents though.

The first time I took the ELA exam, I earned a perfect score (a 4) and with that, came letters from the Board of Ed and other schools. My father was furious. I remember him telling my mother I was being scouted like a ball player. Every year I earned a 4 and every year, I was drafted to take special program entry exams on Saturdays. My father begrudgingly let my mother take me to Manhattan where I would meet other Black kids from around the City whose parents’ only desire

was for their child to pass for a prep junior high. My father thought it common sense to send his child to schools closest to home; he believed active parenting and not any special program, made the difference in a child's life. My mother agreed but, she also figured if there was something better that would not cost us, what was the harm? As for me, I wanted to stay at P.S. 92 forever – who would ever want to leave their favorite teachers and their tag gang? I did not quite understand what all the testing was for but I did realize what the results often meant. Kids were sent to schools far away, lost track of the neighborhood happenings and their early childhood friendships. I had no name for what happened the summer of 5<sup>th</sup> grade nor anything to compare it to. . . until the first time I read *Learning in a Burning House* (2011). The déjà vu was surreal. How could the counter-narrative of all-Black school students and teachers from the 1950s match so closely to an Afro-Caribbean kid's elementary school experience in late 1990s New York City? Policies was the answer.

Bill Clinton's presidency lasted throughout my childhood. As the Governor of Arkansas, he played a significant role in the 1989 education summit, shaping the national education goals. In his first presidential term, Clinton legislated Goals 2000: The Educate America Act (1994), which was to show his commitment to federal action on education. The Act did not target "a particular group of students or subject areas" (65) which many states took full advantage of, using the funds they received for broader uses.<sup>4</sup> This might explain how P.S. 92 functioned the way it did. Our administrators, like those of the all-Black schools during segregation, had a degree of autonomy where allocation of funds was concerned – no matter how nominal those funds may have been. Goals 2000 however, was responsible for the yearly testing my classmates and I were subjected to. The Act was heavily influenced by recommendations from the National Council on Education Standards and Testing and by the late 1990s, a barrage of private organizations and think tanks found their way into the center of education reform circles. These organizations used their collective

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.archives.nysed.gov/common/archives/files/ed\\_background\\_overview\\_essay.pdf](http://www.archives.nysed.gov/common/archives/files/ed_background_overview_essay.pdf) (65)

wealth to fund voucher plans and charter schools (71). Some even pushed for curriculum which emphasized “basic skills.”<sup>5</sup> Their involvement in education and education reform – from the farthest distances – had an immediate and significant impact on my last years in P.S. 92 and admittedly, forever.

Despite the changes in policy and their effect on my last years in elementary school, P.S. 92 *was* profoundly different and much like the man the building was named after – Adrian Hegeman<sup>6</sup> – my teachers there were vital and active members of the community and bold education leaders. When I think of education and education reform, I often rely on my memories of P.S. 92 to guide me. Having teachers who saw **me** and taught me beyond “basic skills” arguably made me well-rounded and stirred a hunger for knowledge and righteousness within. Which parent would pass that up for their child? Which teacher would not wish to be remembered for impacting their students’ outlook on life? Which community would not benefit from students who see the value in civic engagement? P.S. 92 taught me what Adrian Hegeman stood for: purposeful education and proper leadership.

THUS, CONCLUDES THE PAPER – NOT THE MISSION

I would hope that every child – especially Black children – has access those two things. Living in a world that despises you and your culture, living under policies designed to destroy your community requires knowledge, love, and support to navigate, to survive. This is the importance of Black community-controlled education. At the core of programs like the Freedom Summer School and Oakland Community School or even a public school like P.S. 92 is a radical love infused with a critical pedagogy – carefully crafted by community builders and members – that arms students with the strength, courage, and wisdom to survive and more importantly, to thrive – to reimagine,

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.archives.nysed.gov/common/archives/files/ed\\_background\\_overview\\_essay.pdf](http://www.archives.nysed.gov/common/archives/files/ed_background_overview_essay.pdf) (71)

<sup>6</sup> <http://ancestorbios.blogspot.com/2012/02/teacher-and-leader-in-early-flatbush.html>

dismantle, and recreate. What our Black children and youth need is not exams to measure their intellect, they need to be cared for, to know their history, and think critically about how they can influence their present and future.

The experiences the students of these programs shaped whole generations and fortified communities; the present and future generations of Black children and youth of the U.S. deserve the same freedoms and wisdom. When teachers and school leaders are willing to work with community groups – with clear passion and radical love – in solidarity to reimagine pedagogy and curricula to ensure Black children and youth are cared for, holistically engaged, and intellectually stimulated, it is then that they become true spirits lighting the dark path of unequal education and anti-Blackness. In a world that despises and dehumanizes Blackness, this is the most revolutionary work educators can dedicate themselves to.

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