

# Yale College Education Studies Program

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Senior Capstone Projects

Student Research

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## The Histories, Presents and Futures of Black Education in the City of Philadelphia: A Story and a Dream

### Chapter 1: The Story

Rayshawn A. Johnson Jr.  
Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

#### Abstract:

This capstone is part 1 of a two part project which explores the Philadelphia public education system as it relates to Black Philadelphians. It tracks the city's educational history, beginning with Brown vs. Board and 1954, explores the various integrationist projects of the late 20th century, and concludes with a discussion of the modern texture of schooling in the city. This is all done through the lens of family narrative, with a personal history interspersed throughout to bring color and context to those topics discussed. This chapter flows directly into the next, which is a conversation about a conceptualized Black future for education in the city.

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Cousin,  
I want to tell you a story.

Before I do, I want you to know that I'm proud of you. I hope that means something to you, man. Just know that your graduation means a lot more than anybody might make it seem. You are continuing our long family legacy of educational achievement. You have successfully made your way through one of the worst oppressive structures that this country, in its deep hatred for our people, could have conceived of. You made it through the Philadelphia public education system. Not only that, but you made it through as a Black man. This is a victory, this is a win. But this is tragic. There are places where graduating high school isn't a milestone, but an expectation.<sup>1</sup> There are places where you can graduate high school and expect a decent quality of life afterwards because of it.<sup>2</sup> Philadelphia is neither one of those places. But here you are: a graduate, a Black man, a victor. And I am so proud of you.

I know it wasn't easy. I went to Masterman, but this public school thing is hard. Our city is very poor and very Black, which somehow translates into our schools being very bad. We are forced to navigate inadequate instruction, inaccurate curricula, insufficient leadership.<sup>3</sup> The problem being so pervasive, it would make sense of you to assume that this is how it's supposed to be. Or that this is how it always has been. But bro, this is just how it is.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the American Community Survey from 2013-2017, 87.3% of US high schoolers matriculated through school. In Pennsylvania, that number was raised to 89.9%. However, according to the School District of Philadelphia, only 78% of high schoolers graduated in 2017-2018. The data on Black student graduation in the city is thin, but according to the Philadelphia Tribune, only 72.3% of Black students in the city graduated high school. This number is lower than the national average, state average, and the average for white students in the city. 3 in 10 Black high schoolers in the city do not graduate. (American Community Survey 2017), (School District of Philadelphia 2018), (Philadelphia Tribune 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Newsweek informs that the average high school graduate in North Dakota can expect to earn \$36,102, not too much less than the state median income. Similarly in Wyoming, high school graduates can expect to earn around \$14,000, while the average wage in the state is \$18,000. The average Philadelphian earns \$21,000 a year, \$6,000 less than the state average, according to the US Census. Despite education level, Philadelphia exists as one of the poorest counties in the state, and poorest big city in the country. (Newsweek 2018), (US Census 2010)

<sup>3</sup> There is an overwhelming abundance of literature to support this claim, but this quote from the Commonwealth Foundation describes the situation perfectly- "Likewise, Philly schools performed poorly on Pennsylvania's statewide proficiency test. Seventy-three of Philadelphia's public schools scored among the 144 worst performing in the state. In these Philadelphia schools, students experienced more than 3,876 violent incidents, including 438 thefts and seven rapes in the 2008-09 school year alone." (Commonwealth Foundation 2011)

We gotta consider this, too. That as long as this city has been conspiring against poor Black people through overpolicing or inadequate public services or terrible schools, we have persevered. Our family has persevered, generation after generation, in this city which would much rather see us starve. Or die. And we haven't. Instead, we have found ways to make a way, so that you and I can be having this conversation right now. And that is our beautiful history.

This is the story I want to tell you.

Cousin, I feel like this is a necessary story because we are dying<sup>4</sup>.

The city is on fire. It has been for years and, by the looks of things, will continue to do so. You have lost so many friends, so much family. They were killed or they're locked up or they're lost but, somehow, they are gone. And they were kids. That's why it's so important, such an accomplishment, that you graduated school. You made it through with your diploma, but more importantly, with your life. But like I said, this is just how it is. Not always how it was, not what it has to be, and certainly not what it should be.

They would have us believe that this is our natural state. That our Blackness justifies our poverty, and our poverty justifies the deplorable conditions we find ourselves navigating. It's because we are poor and Black that we are destined to live this way. But, they would have us believe, there is a way out.

If the opposite of Blackness is whiteness, and the opposite of poverty is wealth, then to escape this position, they would have us become them. Or like them, because equality is a myth, and we can never hope to achieve a similar social status as them.<sup>5</sup> But to overcome this unfortunate reality, we are told we should aspire to wealth and aspire to whiteness, because who

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<sup>4</sup> The Philadelphia Police report that, at the time of this writing, there have been 452 homicides in the city of Philadelphia. This represents a 39% increase from the previous year, and the city is well on track to be over 500 by the end of 2020. We are now the second deadliest city in America. (Philadelphia Police Department 2020)

<sup>5</sup> Until 150 years ago, Black people were considered property. The social and economic setback of legal "un-personhood" is for multiple compounding generations is essentially irreconcilable. The more political, philosophical aspects of this thought will be explored more in depth in the coming pages.

we are and what we are will never be deserving of dignified humanity. So to achieve humanity, we must indoctrinate ourselves into hating ourselves and loving the systems and societies that oppress us. You grow up despising your Blackness because you have been groomed to understand it to be the reason why your life is so hard. I can say this with confidence because that was me.

My education was characterized by escaping. I never went to a neighborhood school because my mom wouldn't allow us to. And the first public school I went to was and is the best in the state. Otherwise, for elementary school, I switched charter schools every two years or so. And now, I am approaching graduation from one of the wealthiest, whitest institutions in the world. Through all of this though, I felt like I had a strong foundation and an immovable sense of self. I was undoubtedly, unapologetically Black. But in that Blackness I was special, because I was able to thrive and excel in white spaces. By removing me from my neighborhood, my mom was sending the message that what we had available to us wasn't good enough. What was for us could not be trusted to provide the quality education she felt her son deserved. I cannot blame her because she wasn't wrong. The sad reality is that had I gone to Lingelbach and then Hill Freedman and then King, I likely would not be having this conversation with you right now.<sup>6</sup> But the tradeoff for these educational opportunities was that I internalized that proximity to whiteness not only was the only way to achieve success, but the only way to validate myself as a student. And though that pains me to realize, I cannot blame my mom. She was navigating the given circumstances for our family, like so many Black moms across Philly are. Besides, she herself had internalized that very ideation. So who is really to blame?

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<sup>6</sup> According to the School District of Philadelphia, the average student at Martin Luther King High School (my neighborhood school) has only a 16% chance of graduating and matriculating to college. College is by no means a barometer of success, even though I directly credit my college experience to my ability to engage in this project. However, the lack of matriculation is indicative of the school's failure to adequately educate its students. (School District of Philadelphia 2020)

Also, when I say “we” and “us” in telling this story, I am not trying to claim ownership over an experience that I did not have. Instead, I am identifying with the collective experiences of navigating racism and deep-seeded poverty that defines what it means to be a Black Philadelphian. I’m aware of my detachment from many of the experiences I’m going to discuss with you. That’s a limitation I need to be intentionally cognizant of throughout. But my proximity to this history, to these experiences inspires passion, love and care. So I will carefully talk about this with passion and out of love for you, our family, and this city.

I am going to tell this story through our family.

*In all the information you have, the experience is based on the individuals.*

We understand history to simply be an account of events that took place in the past. It therefore is fixed and stagnant. Dead. But history is very much undying. Very much alive, and its afterlife is based on how we in the present are forced to navigate its effects. History tends to recreate itself as well, and in this way, is immortal.

The history of this city is the same way, because we have as a family lived through and navigated it. We first got here in 1953, with our greatgrandparents Junior and Evelyn. They were sharecroppers from Marion, South Carolina and like so many Black people during and after World War 2, they migrated up north for better prospects. They wanted better jobs and better schooling opportunities for their small child, to abandon the racial terrorism that was the status quo where they were. They wanted their piece of the American Dream, and they wanted to find it in Philly. This was a mass movement that played out all across the country, where Black people in droves fled the South for cities in the North and on the west coast. This was known as the

Second Great Migration, and it is directly responsible for the Black Philadelphia we know today.<sup>7</sup> Our family was part of it.

In total, they had six kids. The first three, John, Linda and Andrew were born in the South while the youngest three, Charles, Eveline and Anne were born in Philly. The history from when they arrived to when they bought the house is a little hazy. My grandfather started elementary school around the same time that the government decided Black kids needed to be around white kids in order to be deserving of a quality education.<sup>8</sup> And by the time 1106 was bought in 1968, he was graduating high school. The third generation, Evelyn and Junior's grandkids, pretty much all lived in that house at one point or another as children. That would be our moms' generation. Around the time they were coming of age, so was crack. So was school desegregation, in earnest. This was directly post-Rizzo and MOVE and just generally one of the more dangerous times in Philadelphia history. But Evelyn and her family remained strong, in that house. The 3rd generation found a way to survive, and had kids of their own. That's us, and all of our cousins. I don't know when Junior died, but our greatgrandma Evelyn died in 2007. I don't know if you remember, because your cousin Raymir barely remembers her in life. But I vividly remember 8 year old me feeling sad, but not quite processing what it meant to lose the family matriarch. I know you, your sister, your mom and uncle all have lived in that house since. And I've only been back once or twice since she's died, but this part really breaks my heart. Still though, it is crucial, so we will talk about it.

Ok, we're about to get into it.

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<sup>7</sup> The Second Great Migration will be explored more in depth through the following pages. But given US Census data, Philadelphia now has the fourth largest Black American population in the country by population, percentages, and concentration. This was a result of the massive movement of five million Black people from the south to urban centers like Philadelphia between 1940 and 1970. (US Census 2010)

<sup>8</sup> *Brown vs. Board of Education Topeka, 1954*. "We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The decision in this case catalyzed nationwide school desegregation, and will be thoroughly explored in the coming pages. (Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954))

This Story is deep. And, as you can imagine, it's long. There are an infinite number of caveats and digressions we can make, should make, to tell the story to its fullest extent. However, for the sake of brevity, I'll tell it primarily through three individuals- my grandfather, my mother (whose voice you may have noticed already, but which I will use to add color and talk about the things I personally cannot), and myself. Some things might be missing, some things may be mentioned but not discussed. But by the end of this conversation, I promise, you will *get* it.

After I tell you about the past, and dig into the present, we're going to dream about the future. We're going to imagine, given the context of what we know, what truly free<sup>9</sup>, public education in the city of Philadelphia could and should look like. We'll talk about how Black people have and are conceptualizing freedom broadly, and discuss how these conversations have manifested themselves in the city.

We are having this conversation because I want you to understand that the deficit is not with us. Poverty, Blackness, being from Philly does not automatically mean we should have less than. This conversation needs to convince you of your blamelessness in this Story, and make plain for you how the entities you have been taught to revere and trust have failed you. But, I want you to also understand that a newer, better world is possible. And if we are intentional about building it, just like our antagonists were intentional in constructing the one we live in, we can achieve it.

So you ready? Let's go.

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<sup>9</sup> Freedom is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint." In this context, "free" is used to represent the experience of freedom, rather than lack of cost.

Philly is the most important city in the country. Specifically for our people, this city has always represented survival, opportunity, and longevity.

The big, poor, Black Philly we know today is not how it always has been. But Black people have always been here. We first arrived here in 1639 with the first whites, as their enslaved laborers.<sup>10</sup> By the time the Revolutionary War came, enslaved Black people represented almost 10% of the city population.<sup>11</sup> We became famous nationwide for being an abolitionist hub and a national center of Black social, economic and cultural development. Despite whites in the city trying their hardest to prevent it<sup>12</sup>, we established tight knit, sometimes affluent communities with each other. From the late 1700s through the 1800s, Black people established a clear role and undeniable place in the rapidly growing and changing ecosystem of the city. So all that so say, we've always been here.

The first substantial, sudden wave of Black immigration to the city came during World War 1, when European immigrants could no longer supply the manpower to feed the appetites of the large industrial zones of the North.<sup>13</sup> The promise of opportunity to work up North enticed the large, poor, Black, underclass of the South. As “the working poor”, Black migrants found opportunities for employment with major companies in the area like shipyards, railroads and steel mills<sup>14</sup>. As per usual, the white population interpreted Black thriving and surviving as a direct assault on their livelihoods. We have to consider also that these white antagonists were themselves recently arrived in this country. As we migrated from the South, they immigrated from Europe, and we all did so for similar reasons. So our two groups were in a state of constant

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<sup>10</sup> Wolfinger, “African American Migration”. 1

<sup>11</sup> Wolfinger, “African American Migration”. 1

<sup>12</sup> The city experienced five major race riots in the 21 year period between 1828 and 1849. (Wolfinger, “African American Migration”. 1)

<sup>13</sup> Wolfinger, “African American Migration”. 1

<sup>14</sup> Wolfinger, “African American Migration”. 1

conflict, primarily for stable blue collar jobs and respectable, affordable housing.<sup>15</sup> We tended to cluster down North and out West, a legacy still very much evident and alive today. On the cusp of the Great Depression, there were 220,000 Black people living in the city of Philadelphia.<sup>16</sup> Our numbers grew just as the city's economy was beginning to collapse. The Great Depression slowed economic progress and development across the entire nation, and Philly, being overwhelmingly blue collar was hit especially hard. Still, we kept coming. We supported FDR and his New Deal overwhelmingly, transforming the city from a Republican dominated political space to the reliably Democratic supercenter we know today.<sup>17</sup> As we will discuss, this backfired on us tremendously. By 1940, there were a quarter of a million of us here, and by 1950, there were 375,000.<sup>18</sup> The city was getting poorer and Blacker, and those two facts are inextricably linked to one another. This was the reality of the city 70 years ago: the Philly that our greatgrandparents, were arriving in.

I don't know why they chose Philly. Some of their family preferred Trenton or Baltimore or New York. But they chose a city named for love, nestled between two rivers, to be their promised land. With their 3 small children in tow, the oldest of whom was my grandfather, the Phillips' endeavored to make that long journey north in 1953. By God's grace, they got up here safely. Their first home was 1637 N. Bailey Street down North Philly, and the neighborhood was a Black one, many of their neighbors having made similar journeys up 95. My grandfather recalls the house being particularly decrepit, having to use coal and wood heaters, and break part of their fence in the yard for warmth. Still, it proved too expensive for the family to afford and

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<sup>15</sup> Philadelphia and a few of its surrounding suburbs experienced race riots in 1918 that killed 5 people. (Wolfinger, "African American Migration". 1)

<sup>16</sup> Wolfinger, "African American Migration". 1

<sup>17</sup> Wolfinger, "African American Migration". 1

<sup>18</sup> Wolfinger, "African American Migration". 1

they ended up losing ownership over the home when my grandfather was 12. The landlord permitted them to stay, given they now had six small children living in the home, under the condition they would pay rent. To help out, the kids would work at general stores in the area, themselves owned by Germans or Jewish merchants. From talking to my grandfather, I understood that life was hard. They were migrants after all, hoping to forge a new destiny in a new place. Our family wasn't resourced or educated or connected, but they were brave. That bravery is directly why we are here.

A year later, Brown happened. *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka* is probably the most important Supreme Court Case and decision of the 20th century. It is the reason why segregation in schools is against the law, and is seen as a pillar of progress in the grand scheme of the 20th century American Civil Rights Movement. But in my opinion, it is the sole reason why Black children should never expect to be adequately and responsibly educated by the American public school apparatus.

But first, some context.

Up until this decision was made, the guiding principle of social segregation came from the *Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896)* decision, wherein the Supreme Court supported the idea of "separate, but equal".<sup>19</sup> The court saw no issue with separate accommodations for different races, so long as those accommodations were up to a determined standard, and were essentially equal. The dubiousness lay in the fact that the standards were not in fact "standardized" and were determined by individual entities themselves. Racism and prejudice being the law of the land, accommodations for Black people were never equal to those of whites and were rarely up to dignified, human standards. Fast forward 60 years to Topeka, Kansas: 8 year old Linda Brown is preparing for school. She has to travel 21 blocks to the elementary school designated for Black

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<sup>19</sup> Supreme Court Of The United States. U.S. Reports: *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537. 1895. Periodical.

students rather than 5 blocks to the white school in her neighborhood. This scenario is legal, mandated, and most strikingly, normal. Her parents filed a lawsuit to get their daughter into the white school, which if decided in their favor, would force the Topeka School District to integrate. The central question of the case was “Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other 'tangible' factors may be equal, deprive the children of equal educational opportunities?” Future Supreme Court justice and Civil Rights legal extraordinaire Thurgood Marshall was the main attorney for Brown. His team’s main arguments rested on the idea that Black children operated at an intellectual and social detriment by being forced to navigate legal segregation from white children.<sup>20</sup> Attornies for Topeka in turn argued that sepearate schools for non-white children were equal, and in compliance with Plessy standards, from physical buildings to curricula offered to teacher quality.<sup>21</sup> The argument concluded that because the accommodations were equal, segregation did not and could not harm Black children.<sup>22</sup> The court completely sided with Brown and on May 17th, 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that “to separate [some children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.”<sup>23</sup>

I know objectively this feels like a win, and we have been told for years now that Brown was one of the best things that could have happened to us at the time. But I have a few issues with it, and I think we all should.

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<sup>20</sup> U.S. Supreme Court, BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Supreme Court, BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Supreme Court, BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Supreme Court, BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

Concretely, the immediate push for desegregation spelled doom for Black teachers and administrators. The decision obviously meant that segregated schools, really those that primarily served Black people and communities, would come under scrutiny.<sup>24</sup> As Black students and their schools were redistributed or altogether dispersed in the name of integration, the teachers and administrators who staffed these schools lost their jobs.<sup>25</sup> Schools simply would not hire Black teachers or administrators to have authority over white children anyway, and much less in favor of white people competing for the same positions.<sup>26</sup> An entire class of Black school people, fixtures in their communities, simply disappeared.

I have some pedagogical complaints as well. The arguments made by Thurgood Marshall and his team suggested one key thought- Black kids could not hope to receive a worthwhile education if they were not in the proximity of white children. The lawyers famously used sociological survey and data to evidence the immense social trauma suffered by Black children by attending segregated schools.<sup>27</sup> The spirit behind these assertions then as that Black children, Black people, on their own are unable to produce intellectuality and quality educational experiences. Black children, in their Blackness, need white children, white teachers, white schools, in their whiteness, to have any real shot of making it. I have trouble saying that this is what Thurgood Marshall and his team truly internalized and believed about the children and people they represented. He would say that proximity to whites themselves wasn't the goal per

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<sup>24</sup> Onwuachi-Willig, "RECONCEPTUALIZING THE HARMS OF DISCRIMINATION", 352., Will, "65 Years After 'Brown v. Board,' Where Are All the Black Educators?"; 1.

<sup>25</sup> Onwuachi-Willig, "RECONCEPTUALIZING THE HARMS OF DISCRIMINATION", 348., Will, "65 Years After 'Brown v. Board,' Where Are All the Black Educators?"; 1.

<sup>26</sup> Onwuachi-Willig, "RECONCEPTUALIZING THE HARMS OF DISCRIMINATION", 346., Will, "65 Years After 'Brown v. Board,' Where Are All the Black Educators?"; 1.

<sup>27</sup> To emphasize the negative effects of segregation on Black children, attorneys for the Brown family used the results of the famous "doll tests" of the 1940s. Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark conducted their experiment on children around the country, ages three to seven. The children were shown four identical dolls, except for color. They were then told to assign a given set of positive and negative traits to each of the dolls. Most children, regardless of race, chose the lighter doll, and assigned positive attributes to it while the opposite was true for the darker one. According to the Drs. Brown, the experiment was not done for the purpose of making a social statement, but rather "to communicate to our colleagues in psychology the influence of race and color and status on the self-esteem of children." (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, "The Significance Of 'The Doll Test', 1)

se, but rather access to the resources and opportunities whites had was. However, the problem was framed as a people to people issue rather than a people to resources one. So that means the legal team effectively made the point that white kids themselves and whiteness were the resource lacking in all-Black educational situations. And without this resource, this whiteness, Black children were failing.

So even if that wasn't what good brother Thurgood and his people were trying to say, it's what that Supreme Court understood. Giving the majority opinion, Chief Justice Warren wrote:

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law; for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated schools...We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. segregation [in public education] is a denial of the equal protection of the laws.<sup>28</sup>

*Inherently unequal.* As if separation has to imply unequal treatment. As if the unequal treatment of Black people and whites in this country is a natural phenomenon. It is inherent, it is endemic. But it is manmade, and so it isn't natural. It's how it's always been, how it is, and how it was intended to be by our Founding Fathers. But it isn't *natural*. From that point forward, the mainstream discourse around Black advancement and civil rights was that to be by ourselves was wrong and that inclusion into white spaces and white society, was our only way out. This is why I was told to aspire to the Ivy League, and not necessarily an HBCU. This is why we're told to fix our "broken English" and not celebrate our creole. This is why we want to abandon where we are from and not rebuild it. Our dreams of liberation since that fateful decision revolve around and conclude with attaining whiteness and being included into white society.

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<sup>28</sup> U.S. Supreme Court, BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

Tragic.

Brown was 1954, and my grandpop was seven years old. He didn't attend school in South Carolina, so his first year of formal instruction was in 1953, at a local elementary school down North. Interestingly, Philadelphia public schools had been desegregated since 1881.<sup>29</sup> But the neighborhood school system, coupled with the particularly stark and hostile type of housing segregation in the city meant that schools remained intensely segregated decades following. Yet as the city was changing, so was the school system. 30% of students in the school district were Black in 1950.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, an astounding 92% of Black children attended public school, while only 48% of white children did.<sup>31</sup> So in this discussion, we need to be mindful. What I want you to understand is how a whole host of issues and dynamics compounded on one another to create a situation that was extremely difficult to navigate. But still, as Black people tend to do, we endeavored to navigate it.

The Emlen Federation of Civic Organizations in Germantown was the first group in the city to take action for school desegregation. They focused their advocacy on the Emlen School, taking issue with how boundary lines were drawn<sup>32</sup> and how teachers were assigned to schools<sup>33</sup>, as well as the district's student transfer policy. The group organized a meeting on June 5, 1956 with twenty-two other civic, community, and religious organizations in the northwestern section of the city, and. In said meeting, District Six School Superintendent Edward T. Myers defended

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<sup>29</sup> Wolfinger, "African American Migration". 1

<sup>30</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 52.

<sup>31</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 56.

<sup>32</sup> The district drew boundary lines to determine the catchment areas of local public schools. Parents took issue with the fact that boundary lines in Germantown separated the white and Black parts of the neighborhood, such that Black students went to Emlen and white students went to Day. These boundary lines did not change to accommodate the changing dynamics of the neighborhood. (Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 64.)

<sup>33</sup> The issue was that both the worst teachers were assigned to teach Black students, and Black teachers were rarely assigned to white schools. (Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 65.)

the practices of the school district, wholeheartedly. He argued that other neighborhood schools would become segregated if student transfer policies changed, that the school population reflected the neighborhood itself, and that changing school boundaries would be forcing integration.<sup>34</sup> He most noticeably claimed that he did not favor placing African-American teachers in schools simply to advance integration.<sup>35</sup> This was clear administrative opposition to the community's desires and generally, the project of integration. The Emlen School would eventually face an overcrowding issue, and the School District responded by placing temporary mobile classroom units, "portables", on the school's property. Rather than burden the nearby and white elementary school called Day with Emlen's overcrowding issue, the school district chose to create more space.

What does it say that this school district, rather than attempting to fix the problem by creating a false sense of racial harmony, first tried to address the material need of more space at the school? It says they were dedicated above all else to asserting and maintaining the racial status quo. That racial status quo reserved piss poor educational opportunities and realities for the city's poorest and Blackest residents. The district did not intervene until it was absolutely necessary. That intervention was costly and cumbersome, but it was worth it to them, because it maintained the racial status quo. We mention Emlen here just to underscore the idea that intergrationism, though seemingly our best way forward, was opposed on the fiercest of terms.

So given that context, let's fast forward to 1964.

We would be remiss not to mention the racial uprisings of that summer. The Philadelphia Police Department was notorious for its dismal relationship with the city's Black community,

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<sup>34</sup>Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 72.

<sup>35</sup>Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 73.

despite the force itself being around 20% Black.<sup>36</sup> Amid rumors of white officers beating and killing a pregnant Black woman, pandemonium ensued in the city on the night of August 28th.<sup>37</sup> Most of the chaos, which lasted three days, was concentrated in North Philly and directed towards the white businesses that operated along the Columbia Avenue business corridor.<sup>38</sup> The end result was nearly 800 arrests, almost 350 injuries, and a total of over \$4 million in damages.<sup>39</sup> These riots effectively destroyed the North Philly business corridor, as most businesses never recovered from the damage, or decided to leave permanently.<sup>40</sup> This uprising mirrored those happening in other northern cities in the country, as the Civil Rights Movement reached its zenith in that summer of '64.<sup>41</sup> This was the context that Philly schools were being intentionally desegregated under, as they opened that fall. See, in January of that year, the school board approved a court progress report that recommended busing students to different schools no more than 30 minutes away, and for the primary purpose of relieving the burden of overcrowding for relevant schools.<sup>42</sup>

Two anti-busing, but largely anti-integrationist groups, the Parents' and Taxpayers' Association of Philadelphia (PAT) and the Neighborhood Schools Association (NSA) formed shortly thereafter.<sup>43</sup>

*They didn't want kids being bused to their school. The neighborhoods were working class white neighborhoods...they weren't affluent. Families would go to this school for generations and they had long standing relationships. That was the environment.*

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<sup>36</sup> Maurantonio, "Standing By", 110.

<sup>37</sup> Maurantonio, "Standing By", 110.

<sup>38</sup> Maurantonio, "Standing By", 112.

<sup>39</sup> Maurantonio, "Standing By", 113.

<sup>40</sup> Maurantonio, "Standing By", 116.

<sup>41</sup> Maurantonio, "Standing By", 120.

<sup>42</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 68.

<sup>43</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 66..

These organizations galvanized support from the whiter, working middle class sections of the city like South, Northeast and Roxborough: people who otherwise had negative opinions about Black people and communities, and their further proliferation into the cityscape.<sup>44</sup> Allied with these organizations were senior city politicians, including Mayor James Tate and City Council President Paul D'Ortona, the latter of which urged white citizens to storm City Hall in order to bring an end to the busing project in the city.<sup>45</sup> Still, official opposition to the busing program ceased in July 1964, following the Mayor's Citizen Advisory Committee on Civil Rights' endorsement of the plan.<sup>46</sup> The school year began that fall rather smoothly, despite the recent events of that summer, with white students and parents generally not engaging violently with newly transferred Black students.<sup>47</sup> However at the beginning of the next school year, in light of 5,000 of the 7,000 total bused students being Black, South Philadelphians disrupted a school board meeting by marching into the room with a coffin. This was to symbolize the death of the neighborhood school.<sup>48</sup> The NSA made and then cancelled a plan for an anti-busing demonstration on the school board building in September of 1965, but 500 of its members did still end up protesting the meeting.<sup>49</sup> The president of the NSA claimed the organization could at any point mobilize 1000 pickets across 10 sections of the city.<sup>50</sup> It's important to note that despite their existence as antagonizers and their intimate role in this struggle and history, neither of the

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<sup>44</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 66., Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 76.

<sup>45</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 67., Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 76.

<sup>46</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 68., Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 77.

<sup>47</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 65., Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 78..

<sup>48</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 68., Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 79.

<sup>49</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 70., Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 78.

<sup>50</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 71., Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 80.

presidents of the NSA nor the PAT had children in school.<sup>51</sup> Their sole reasoning for involvement was to increase their own political clout and notoriety amongst those constituents in still deeply racist parts of the city.<sup>52</sup> So they really only cared because we were Black.

Damn.

Another staunch opponent to school desegregation broadly was the infamous Frank Rizzo. Easily one of the most important Philadelphians of all time, Rizzo spent his entire civic and political career embodying white Philadelphia, in all manners of that term.<sup>53</sup> Rizzo was the quintessential South Philly Italian, born to two immigrants from Sicily. Following in his father's footsteps, he became a police officer in 1943.<sup>54</sup> 24 years later, in 1967, he became police commissioner, and almost immediately set in motion his legacy.

On November 17th, 1967, 3000 School District students walked out of class and marched to the School Board building on the Parkway.<sup>55</sup> They came with a list of 25 action items, all of which compelled the School District to be more respectful of and accommodating towards the Black people it served, students or otherwise. The items ranged from the inclusion of Black history in the mandated curriculum to an increase in Black teachers and administrators to the elimination of compulsory vocational education district-wide.<sup>56</sup> Student organizers were even invited inside to meet with the Superintendent and the School Board President.<sup>57</sup> The demonstration, by all accounts, was peaceful and productive. Things quickly turned sour when

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<sup>51</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 71.

<sup>52</sup> Phillips, "A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA", 70.

<sup>53</sup> Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 3.

<sup>54</sup> Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 7.

<sup>55</sup> Graham, "These Philly schoolkids marched against injustice 50 years ago, and police responded with nightsticks.", 1.

<sup>56</sup> Graham, "These Philly schoolkids marched against injustice 50 years ago, and police responded with nightsticks.", 1.

<sup>57</sup> Graham, "These Philly schoolkids marched against injustice 50 years ago, and police responded with nightsticks.", 1.

Rizzo instructed nearly 400 armed police officers to disperse the crowd of mostly students and their adult supporters, yelling “Get their Black asses!”<sup>58</sup> This resulted in a police riot, where 57 demonstrators were arrested.<sup>59</sup> The immediate fallout from this action was the implementation of several reforms, including offering draft-counseling services to students and the creation of a students’ bill of rights.<sup>60</sup> These reforms were widely unpopular, and superintendent Mark Shedd was eventually forced out of office, partially due to this but mainly for his progressive, accommodationist leanings.<sup>61</sup> Still, almost 40 years later, those students’ dream of a mandated African American History requirement in the curriculum for graduation was fully realized. We both took Black History in 10th grade.

So it’s important to include this event in this conversation about the impetus of busing in Philadelphia for two reasons. First, it provides necessary insight on how Black students themselves were feeling and reacting to these decisions being made on their behalf. Instead of integration, Black students simply wanted to exist and be dignified by and within our own schools. Instead of diversity and inclusion, Black students simply wanted to be edified by our schools in the same way white students were edified by theirs. This incident also makes clear how deep-seeded and severe white opposition to Black advancement and Black self determination was. Rizzo’s actions were supported by many city officials, including the mayor.<sup>62</sup> In fact, Rizzo only resigned his post as police commissioner after 4 years to run for mayor.<sup>63</sup> From this event, we learn that the way we envisioned our own progress and advancement was

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<sup>58</sup> Graham, “These Philly schoolkids marched against injustice 50 years ago, and police responded with nightsticks.”, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Graham, “These Philly schoolkids marched against injustice 50 years ago, and police responded with nightsticks.”, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Graham, “These Philly schoolkids marched against injustice 50 years ago, and police responded with nightsticks.”, 1.

<sup>61</sup> Graham, “These Philly schoolkids marched against injustice 50 years ago, and police responded with nightsticks.”, 1.

<sup>62</sup> Lombardo, “MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM”, 89., Phillips, “A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA”, 72.

<sup>63</sup> Lombardo, “MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM”, 92., Phillips, “A HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA”, 73.

directly at odds with how white Philadelphia did. While liberals wanted us bused and conservatives hoped we would stay where we were. But we simply wanted to be our best selves, empowered by our city to do so.

In 1967, my grandfather was able to move the family out of that shack and into a real, dignified housing situation. He was 21, and had saved up enough money to buy the house outright, but still required his mother's cosignature because of his age. The house was at 1106 N. Tioga Street, and that was the family home for generations. At some point, everybody lived or spent significant time there. Grandma made a rule that if you were going to live there, you were either in school or working. She kept her kids, and their kids in line with that vision of bravery and achievement. You and I are young, but I remember us playing up and down that street, zipping in and out of that house. We didn't even recognize the symbolism of us owning that house, and if we're being honest, I don't think any of the adults did either. But we were occupying a living history that stood as a testament to hope and faith, as well as a validation of Evelyn and Junior's bravery. That house quite literally represented our family's survival.

I mention 1106, this house we were able to buy, because I believe we owe a lot of the social and economic issues we face in the city today to the very real, intense project of housing segregation that took place in the city for most of the 20th century.

Remember FDR, who I said without the support of newly migrated Black folks would not have won his election? Perhaps along with shepherding the country through the first few years of World War 2, he is best known for his conceptualization and implementation of the New Deal. As the Great Depression crippled the country, the government sought to assert itself in the

American economic system like never before. Of the numerous government agencies developed in response to the New Deal, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) are most relevant to our conversation.<sup>64</sup> The former was responsible for refinancing existing mortgages in order to keep foreclosures at bay while the latter was responsible for insuring mortgage loans for the purpose of kickstarting housing construction.<sup>65</sup> Racism, and the maintenance of a segregationist, white supremacist social order, were key to their operation.

The FHA refused to insure in Black neighborhoods, while also working to maintain the segregated landscape of our fast-growing suburbs.<sup>66</sup> The hypersegregation seen in most of the country's major metropolises, but especially Philly, is a direct result of these actions taken by the administration.<sup>67</sup> The HOLC created Residential Security Maps, which assessed the investment risk and creditworthiness of certain neighborhoods. Areas determined to have the least risk of mortgage default were shaded green on the map and given the grade "A", while those deemed undesirable were shaded red and given the grade "D".<sup>68</sup> Yeah, this is where "redlining" comes from.

Though the pretext for many of these negative valuations was that older neighborhoods were difficult to restore and thus trending downwards, racism was the real driving sentiment. The government hired local real estate agents in droves to create these maps, many of whom had developed racialized residential coded maps already in the private sector.<sup>69</sup> Parts of the city with

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<sup>64</sup> Blumgart, "How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia", 1.

<sup>65</sup> Blumgart, "How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia", 1.

<sup>66</sup> Blumgart, "How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia", 1., Boustan, "Was Postwar Suburbanization 'White Flight?'" , 422.

<sup>67</sup> "A 1939 FHA underwriting manual informed that to ensure the consistency in social and racial occupancy that property values relied on, appraisers should insure white neighborhoods are physically separated by waterways or railroad tracks from Black and mixed-race neighborhoods." Blumgart, "How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia", 1.)

<sup>68</sup> Blumgart, "How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia", 1. Boustan, "Was Postwar Suburbanization 'White Flight?'" , 426.

<sup>69</sup> Blumgart, "How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia", 1., Boustan, "Was Postwar Suburbanization 'White Flight?'" , 429

high concentrations of Black people, Jews, and recently arrived immigrants categorically received “D” grades.<sup>70</sup> The redlined neighborhoods in North and West to this day still desperately need investment. Interestingly, however, some redlined neighborhoods in the city have been the site of renewal and revitalization. Neighborhoods in the Northwest and all of South Philadelphia experienced redlining, less for their Black populations (they were small, if at all existent), and more-so for the geography of the neighborhood and their mixed industrial-residential textures.<sup>71</sup> Today, they exist as some of the trendiest and expensive places to live in the city. This makes clear that the redline itself wasn’t necessarily the reason for our neighborhoods’ neglect and disinvestment. Rather, again, it was the fact that our occupying this space spelled its inevitable devolution. So while the post World War 2 urban renewal movement revitalized South Philly and Manayunk and Fishtown, almost 50% of North Philadelphia residents live at or below the poverty line.<sup>72</sup> Toxic brownfields still crowd and litter sections of the city mostly or completely occupied by Black people.<sup>73</sup> Those government agencies may not bear the full brunt of the blame. However, they worked in coalition with academics, politicians, real estate agents and white community stakeholders alike to ensure dissatisfactory outcomes for us.

In this conversation, we must also mention the phenomenon of public housing: the projects.

*One thing about Philly: there’s a ghetto everywhere. I don’t care where you are.*

Public housing began in the 30s as a service provided to Black and white workers alike to curb homelessness.<sup>74</sup> However by the 1950s, it became chiefly associated with Black people, as newly

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<sup>70</sup> Blumgart, “How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia”, 1., Boustan, “Was Postwar Suburbanization ‘White Flight?’”, 430.

<sup>71</sup> Blumgart, “How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia”, 1., Boustan, “Was Postwar Suburbanization ‘White Flight?’”, 433.

<sup>72</sup> Blumgart, “How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia”, 1., Boustan, “Was Postwar Suburbanization ‘White Flight?’”, 434.

<sup>73</sup> Blumgart, “How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia”, 1., Boustan, “Was Postwar Suburbanization ‘White Flight?’”, 435.

<sup>74</sup> Blumgart, “How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia”, 1., Bauman, “Row Housing as Public Housing”, 434.

developed projects exclusively came about in “D” graded neighborhoods.<sup>75</sup> In fact, of the 60 projects built by the city between the issuance of the HOLC maps and 1967, only 6 popped up outside of “D” graded neighborhoods.<sup>76</sup> The single projects in the Northeast, which itself developed as a residential area post World War 2 and remained very white until the 90s, is found in the only “D” rated neighborhood in that part of the city.<sup>77</sup>

Redlining was destructive, but whitelining was disgusting. Following World War 2, the FHA played a major role in suburbanization, by providing developers massive loans to create housing developments and planned towns outside of cities. The caveat? That the homes not be available to Black mortgage seekers.<sup>78</sup> This should be held in tandem with the fact that the Department of Veteran Affairs began offering mortgage loans to soldiers returning home from World War 2.<sup>79</sup> They simply adopted many of the FHA’s racist policies, barring Black soldiers from qualifying for these loans.<sup>80</sup> It therefore became common for a white family to be paying much less to live in a segregated, white suburban utopia than a Black family was paying to live in a crowded housing project.<sup>81</sup> So essentially, the government conspired with private land developers to provide white families with an avenue out of the increasingly Black inner-cities. As this was happening, the government systematically devalued and discouraged investment from the neighborhoods they left, leaving the now Black occupants without much economic stimulation. And furthermore, while formerly redlined white neighborhoods have seen an economic turnaround due to urban reinvestment, Black people who experienced those same

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<sup>75</sup> Blumgart, “How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia”, 1., Bauman, “Row Housing as Public Housing”, 435.

<sup>76</sup> Blumgart, “How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia”, 1., Bauman, “Row Housing as Public Housing”, 436.

<sup>77</sup> Blumgart, “How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia”, 1., Bauman, “Row Housing as Public Housing”, 436.

<sup>78</sup> Blumgart, “How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia”, 1., Boustan, “Was Postwar Suburbanization ‘White Flight?’”, 440.

<sup>79</sup> Blumgart, “How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia”, 1., Boustan, “Was Postwar Suburbanization ‘White Flight?’”, 441.

<sup>80</sup> Blumgart, “How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia”, 1., Boustan, “Was Postwar Suburbanization ‘White Flight?’”, 442.

<sup>81</sup> Blumgart, “How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia”, 1., Boustan, “Was Postwar Suburbanization ‘White Flight?’”, 444.

outcomes are still reeling from the intentional government project to keep them isolated in poverty.

Damn.

And still, In the middle of all of that, we were able to buy that house.

My mom spent alot of time in 1106 with her cousins, aunts and uncles. She was born in 1971, in a city still recovering from the tumultousness of the previous decade. Frank Rizzo's tenure as mayor was beginning and her parents were still married at this point. They had a two year old son: my uncle John Jr and lived together in a little house down North.

My mother's mother, my grandma, was born herself to migrants from Florida, two years after my grandpop was. She was 1 of 3 children, the only girl, and was an extremely bright student. She graduated high school at 16. So between her mother and her father, my mom was born to excellence. My grandma raised my mom and uncle in a house at 16th and York down North Philly, as her and my grandpop divorced when my mom was young. I don't need to tell you about the things my mother experienced as a child. They were a young Black family in 1970s Philadelphia. But the community was tight and her family was around, so things weren't as bad as they could have been.

Like the vast majority of Black parents in this city, my grandma simply wanted the best for her kids. She recognized my mom and uncle were bright students, full of potential, which their neighborhood school was not equipped to facilitate, tap into, or grow. So she actively began searching for alternative schooling options.

*I was angry for a lot of reasons. I was angry at school because at home, there was dysfunction. School was supposed to be my outlet but they got on my nerves. So I was just angry.*

After attending her neighborhood school for most of elementary, she would move to a new school in the 3rd grade.

*It was only called desegregation when it was going one way...they didn't call it desegregation when the white kids were coming into the neighborhood, going to our schools. That was called "integration".*

My granma had been made aware that my mom qualified for the city's voluntary busing program, which would send her and her brother to school in the Northeast.

*You had to have certain test scores, be identified that it was good for you to be bused. If I had all of that, why couldn't I just stay where I was?*

She detested the experience.

*The purpose was, you get a better education, you do so well...but I had deteriorated. When I came to the school in 3rd grade, I was an excellent student...an excellent student. By the time I got to 8th grade, I was horrible. I was tired of white people...I almost hated white people. And I was just over the racism, the constant fight. It was a constant fight with the teachers, constant fight with the kids, constant fight with everything. A fight. So by the time I graduated 8th grade, if I was smart, nobody knew it because I was just a bad ass.*

*The premise was supposed to be inclusivity. But where was the training? So no one thought about the whole socio-economic structure. I was from North Philly, I'm coming from a whole different environment. And even though I was 8 or 9, you putting me in this environment and I still have to go home to deal with what I had to deal with. I don't even have a connection with the people in my neighborhood like that cause I don't go to school with them. I was angry. I didn't want to be there. And I felt like there was hate coming from them towards me. It was never an inclusive environment.*

*On top of all of that, there's already colorism and classism within your own race. So I was a dark skin girl. They called me blackie, tarbaby, jigaboo. By other Black people. Ms. Sudler, the one Black teacher I had, tried to keep all the Black kids together. And your grandmother gave her permission, but if you would act up, she would hit you with a ruler. Yeah! They would take you into the coatroom and beat you! Like "you're acting up, why are you acting this way?" Never a sense of 'I understand', it was always "you know you not supposed to act like this". But do you understand what I was going through? She wasn't the disciplinarian, but she would discipline the Black kids. It was a love and hate thing with her. It's like, I hear you, but you don't know what I'm going through, type of thing.*

*Did I learn a lot? I guess I did, I learned enough to get through. By the time I was graduating in '84, all the teachers and administrators came out of the office and started clapping like "oh my*

*God, look at her. She's FINALLY graduating." I ended up going to Lincoln High School. What you had was a Great Migration of all these Black kids to these high schools in the Northeast. And then the white kids decided, they were done with the K-8 thing. They were gonna go to catholic schools. And now you just got a neighborhood high school. The purpose was to get a better education. But this was a neighborhood school. Everything that we had, everyone else had, too.*

*So you hate to think...what the hell did I go through all of this for?*

We could be all political and analytical with her words. She said a lot about a lot. But it still paints a simple picture. The end goal was to be in spaces where we might receive what we deserved: the best. These spaces, instead of the best, held hostility and hatred for us. Still, we persevered to thrive in them, until that perseverance was perceived as proliferation. And such as has been the case, across this long, unfortunate story, they systematically devalued and discredited those things that we strove for, causing them to lose that label of best. So again, all of this, for what?

What the hell did my mother go through all that for?

I said that my mother and her little family were a young Black family in 1970s Philadelphia. But the 70s were rather bleak. We were experiencing Frank Rizzo's maniacal reign as mayor<sup>82</sup>, while the economic situation for many Black people worsened tremendously.<sup>83</sup> The city itself, continuing the trend from the past few decades, was experiencing rapid depopulation, losing 13% of its citizens across the entire decade.<sup>84</sup> The industrial jobs that so many of us came to the city for were now being exported out, especially to the suburbs, where those white former city-dwellers were taking refuge from our "encroachment".<sup>85</sup> These conditions in the city at large of course reflected on the school district, which only increased its failure of Black people as the decade progressed. It was dark.

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<sup>82</sup> Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 250.

<sup>83</sup> Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 261.

<sup>84</sup> Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 270., Boustan, "Was Postwar Suburbanization 'White Flight?'", 440.

<sup>85</sup> Lombardo, "MAKING BLUE-COLLAR CONSERVATISM", 250.

But out of this did come some light. The School District decided in 1983 that 8 years of Michael Marcase at the helm was enough. Though he is credited with expanding the district's magnet school program and developing a phone line which students could call for homework help, his tenure was full of controversy.<sup>86</sup> Because of that, and his failure to usher significant growth and development in the district, he was forced to resign in 1982.<sup>87</sup> His replacement was a gem.

Her name is Constance Clayton. She was both the first Black person and first woman to serve Superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia.<sup>88</sup> Herself a Philadelphian, she was born and raised in the city, attending Temple, and then Penn State and eventually UPenn.<sup>89</sup> Clayton began her career in 1955, teaching 4th grade at Harrison down North.<sup>90</sup> Then, in 1964 she was catapulted into administration, when she was asked to develop a district-wide elementary school social studies curriculum.<sup>91</sup> 5 years later, she was called upon to serve as the head of the district's new African and Afro-American Studies program, which would impact students at all grade levels.<sup>92</sup> Then, after a brief stint working for the Department of Labor in D.C, she returned home and served as the director and eventual associate superintendent of the Early Childhood program for the district. That program was lauded as a national model, garnering nation-wide attention.<sup>93</sup> After receiving two more degrees in the late 70s, she bested a

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<sup>86</sup> "News reports criticized Dr. Marcase for having received his doctorate from the University of Sarasota in Florida, a then-unaccredited school that was once housed in the Sarasota Motor Hotel...Three teachers' strikes plagued his tenure, including a 50-day walkout in 1981 over a promised 10 percent pay raise that never materialized because of disagreements between Mayor William J. Green and City Council." (Finley, "Michael P. Marcase, Phila. School Superintendent", 1.)

<sup>87</sup> Finley, "Michael P. Marcase, Phila. School Superintendent", 1.

<sup>88</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 94.

<sup>89</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 95.

<sup>90</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 95.

<sup>91</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 94.

<sup>92</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 94.

<sup>93</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 94

field of over 80 candidates to imprint on the history of our city as the head of its public schools.<sup>94</sup> She was more than qualified.

Three days after assuming the post, Clayton famously drafted a 10 page, 58 point statement outlining her administration's plan for the district.<sup>95</sup> At this point, the seeds of negativity that had been planted over the previous two decades within the district and the city at large were bearing full fruit. An extreme, perpetual budget deficit was coupled with a sizeable population of deeply impoverished students, all within the 6th largest in the country.<sup>96</sup> Superintendent Clayton sought to balance the budget without cutting student services, standardize curricula, and lobby support from the private sector.<sup>97</sup> She was known for being a staunch advocate for children above all else, and called on the federal, state and city government to do its very best to support them.<sup>98</sup> Her high standards and expectation of those around her to care about the cause just as much as she did was notable, and this placed her at odds with those in city government who didn't.<sup>99</sup> Still, by the end of her tenure, most of these goals were accomplished. Over 170 businesses in the city "adopted" local schools, and a Homeless Student Initiative was developed to support unhoused district children.<sup>100</sup> She implemented a more robust sexual education curriculum, while also advocating for the acceptance of pregnant students wishing to graduate.<sup>101</sup> More substantial than any of these initiatives or programs was her very existence as a Philadelphian, as a Black woman, and as an experienced educator in one of the highest offices in the city.<sup>102</sup> She retired a legend, whose undeniable impact inspired, but for a

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<sup>94</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ,", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 94.

<sup>95</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ,", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 94.

<sup>96</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ,", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 95.

<sup>97</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ,", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 95.

<sup>98</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ,", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 95.

<sup>99</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ,", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 95.

<sup>100</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ,", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 95.

<sup>101</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ,", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 95.

<sup>102</sup> "Clayton, Constance 1937 (?) – ,", 1., Smith, "Notable Black American women.", 96.

brief moment, a hope that change was a possibility, and more importantly, a worthwhile goal for the School District of Philadelphia.

Though Clayton was a bright light in the deep, dark cavern that is this history, she left the school district in a similar position that she found it in. There is only but so much one person, or even one administration can accomplish in the face of covert and overt antagonism from the powers that be. Our state system relies mainly on property taxes to fund schools, such that the amount of homeowners a locality has, as well as the value of that owned land itself, directly translates to the quality of the school district.<sup>103</sup> You can imagine then how a large, poor city like Philadelphia was done completely dirty by that funding system. By the end of the 90s, the School District was spending a little less than \$7k a year on each student.<sup>104</sup> To compare, Jenkintown, Radnor and Upper Merion school districts were all spending around \$13k a year per student.<sup>105</sup> To this issue, two lawsuits were filed during that decade. The first in 1997, filed by the school district as well as the city and community leaders, contended the state did not provide “a thorough and efficient” education to Philadelphian students.<sup>106</sup> The state court responded by dismissing the case outright. The second lawsuit, filed in 1998, contended that Pennsylvania’s funding practices discriminated against districts with large non-white populations.<sup>107</sup> The case was put on hold when Mayor John Street made a concession with the state to receive more funding. This concession was made possible by a threat levied against the state by district Superintendent David Hornbeck: he threatened to close city schools if the state did not provide

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<sup>103</sup> "Overview and Introduction to the Education Reform in the 21st Century", 1.

<sup>104</sup> "Overview and Introduction to the Education Reform in the 21st Century", 1.

<sup>105</sup> Travers, "Philadelphia School Reform", 1.

<sup>106</sup> Travers, "Philadelphia School Reform", 1.

<sup>107</sup> Travers, "Philadelphia School Reform", 1.

the funds to balance his budget.<sup>108</sup> The threat was made in February of 1998, and by April, the state legislature signed Act 46 in response.<sup>109</sup> While providing the school district with direly needed funds, the act also set in motion one of the most drastic solutions to all of the district's issues.<sup>110</sup> It paved a clear path for state takeover of public education in the city of Philadelphia.

And this is the part where we talk about us.

In 2018, following the dissolution of the hated School Reform Commission, longtime city Councilwoman Helen Gym remarked "I am glad to see the experiment known as the School Reform Commission finally come to an end. This is a win for every parent and community member who fought for fair funding despite a system that told us our children deserve less."<sup>111</sup>

The experiment known as the SRC came to be in December of 2001.<sup>112</sup> Following a tumultuous decade, the city was eager to receive more funding resources from the state.<sup>113</sup> In exchange, the state wanted more oversight, and the ability to transform public schools into charters.<sup>114</sup> This new theorized committee would consist of 5 members, 2 appointed by the mayor and 3 by the governor.<sup>115</sup> In 1998, District Superintendent David Hornbeck threatened the state that he would be forced to close schools if it did not bail the district out, to which the governor responded by threatening to create the SRC.<sup>116</sup> Two years later, a threatened teacher's strike intensified ideations of a state-run district oversight apparatus.<sup>117</sup> Then, in 2001, those ideas

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<sup>108</sup> "Overview and Introduction to the Education Reform in the 21st Century", 1., Travers, "Philadelphia School Reform", 1.

<sup>109</sup> "Overview and Introduction to the Education Reform in the 21st Century", 1., Travers, "Philadelphia School Reform", 1.

<sup>110</sup> "Overview and Introduction to the Education Reform in the 21st Century", 1., Travers, "Philadelphia School Reform", 1.

<sup>111</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1.

<sup>112</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1., Useem, "Big City Superintendent as Powerful CEO", 301., Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 437., DeJarnatt, "Follow the Money", 37.

<sup>113</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1., Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 439.

<sup>114</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1., Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 438.

<sup>115</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1.

<sup>116</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1., Useem, "Big City Superintendent as Powerful CEO", 302.

<sup>117</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1., Useem, "Big City Superintendent as Powerful CEO", 305.

became a reality as the district expected to suffer a \$1.5 billion deficit in the coming years.<sup>118</sup> The new apparatus would function as a school-board with one key abnormality. Every other school district in Pennsylvania was locally run and operated. However, the School District of Philadelphia, under the School Reform Commission, was run and operated by the state government in Harrisburg.<sup>119</sup> Its 16 year tenure was characterized by school closings, massive layoffs, stagnated student achievement, and a persistent budget deficit and crisis.<sup>120</sup>

2002 was a pivotal year nationwide in regards to children's education. President George Bush passed the No Child Left Behind Act, which sought through different accountability measures to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students.<sup>121</sup> Schools that did not meet the standards set by the state were penalized, and Philadelphia suffered heavily under this new legislation.<sup>122</sup> At the time, the District's superintendent was Paul Vallas, who was brought in from Chicago because of his reputation for "being an energetic leader who could move quickly to carry out a far-reaching reform program."<sup>123</sup> In such a time of transition for Philly public schools, a proven leader like Paul Vallas was necessary.

The SRC experimented heavily with market-based solutions to school problems. 75 of the District's 250 or so schools were slated for reform, and 45 of those were to be managed by

<sup>118</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1.

<sup>119</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1.

<sup>120</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1., Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 439.

<sup>121</sup> "Under the 2002 law, states are required to test students in reading and math in grades 3–8 and once in high school. All students are expected to meet or exceed state standards in reading and math by 2014. The major focus of No Child Left Behind is to close student achievement gaps by providing all children with a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. The U.S. Department of Education emphasizes four pillars within the bill. Accountability: to ensure those students who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency. Flexibility: Allows school districts flexibility in how they use federal education funds to improve student achievement. Research-based education: Emphasizes educational programs and practices that have been proven effective through scientific research. Parent options: Increases the choices available to the parents of students attending Title I schools. NCLB requires each state to establish state academic standards and a state testing system that meet federal requirements. This accountability requirement is called Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)." Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

<sup>122</sup> "School climate among schools flagged for cheating and budget decreases experienced by all Philadelphia schools significantly contributed to the declines. Nevertheless, the major finding faults the elimination of cheating, enforced by the use of increased testing security in 2012, for the lower test scores. The analysis supports existing theory that high stakes testing encourages administrative cheating and hinders the educational achievement of students."- Excerpt from the abstract of "No School Left Uncorrupted: How Cheating, High-Stakes Testing, and Declining Budgets Affected Student Achievement in Philadelphia". Thesis identifies reactions to the pressure applied by NCLB by administrators as the reason why student achievement suffered in the city. (Sadler, "No School Left Uncorrupted", 1.)

<sup>123</sup> Useem, "Big City Superintendent as Powerful CEO", 301., Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 438

for-profit educational management organizations (EMOs).<sup>124</sup> This intervention represented the largest experiment in privatized public education in the country.<sup>125</sup> All of this, coupled with the immediate cavaliering reform efforts of Superintendent Vallas, meant that Philly's educational system was unlike any other in the country to begin the 2003 school year.<sup>126</sup>

The effectiveness of these interventions, particularly that of EMO-operated schools, was dubious at best. A study was conducted to assess student performance trends on standardized tests. Standardized tests cannot accurately assess how much students are improving and learning, but do provide some metric to measure schools against each other. The study informs that from 1997-2002, pre SRC-takeover, schools were uniformly making achievement gains, doing so more rapidly directly after takeover.<sup>127</sup> Yet, when comparing district-run and EMO schools, the situation becomes more complicated. 4 years post-intervention, the growth rate of EMO schools noticeably lagged behind their district-run counterparts.<sup>128</sup> Other studies have confirmed the same finding- the outsourcing of public education to private entities did little to nothing with respect to improving student outcomes.<sup>129</sup>

In discussing this research, there are a few factors to consider. Firstly, the schools taken over by outside entities were the lowest performing schools in the system, and were navigating their own disparate issues that existed before operations were handed over to outsiders.<sup>130</sup> Thus, the expectation that they could be easily or effectively fixed in a relatively short amount of time was lofty. Similarly, there is the argument that the competitive marketplace created by these

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<sup>124</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1., Useem, "Big City Superintendent as Powerful CEO", 301., Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 437.,

<sup>125</sup> Useem, "Big City Superintendent as Powerful CEO", 301., Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 438

<sup>126</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1., Useem, "Big City Superintendent as Powerful CEO", 301.,

<sup>127</sup> Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 440

<sup>128</sup> Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 440

<sup>129</sup> Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 441,

<sup>130</sup> Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 441.

outside interventions spurred district run school's rapid development.<sup>131</sup> Both of these considerations are easily rebuffed with just a little bit of context and research. To the latter, there is little to no evidence of a competitive environment between EMO schools and district ones.<sup>132</sup> EMO schools generally adopted many of the district mandated reform efforts, and both quantitative and qualitative research suggest more of a cooperative environment between schools utilizing different models.<sup>133</sup> To the former, EMO's were utilized under the pretext that their particular managerial style and pedagogy would be the remedy to these schools issues.<sup>134</sup> To then identify the schools' issues as the reason why their issues could not be remedied is lazy and reductive. Ultimately, the experiment of privatized public education in the city of Philadelphia failed because it did not succeed as drastically changing outcomes for our students'.

I am frustrated by this history, because it again evidences the phenomena of our people being deemed incapable of writing our own destiny. Unlike other attempts at privatized public education across the country, Philadelphia's experiment did not feature a voucher system, which meant that parents at these schools slated for reform could not opt their children out.<sup>135</sup> Similarly, in implementation, these parents and communities had no say in which outside entities would take over their schools.<sup>136</sup> EMOs therefore drew from local school populations, incurred high costs for the district, and provided children and families with an education of equal, but oftentimes lesser value, than what it was pre-takeover.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 442.

<sup>132</sup> Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 445

<sup>133</sup> Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 446

<sup>134</sup> Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 441, Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1., Useem, "Big City Superintendent as Powerful CEO", 301.,

<sup>135</sup> Useem, "Big City Superintendent as Powerful CEO", 301., Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 438 DeJarnatt, "Follow the Money", 65.

<sup>136</sup> Useem, "Big City Superintendent as Powerful CEO", 301., Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 438 DeJarnatt, "Follow the Money", 65.

<sup>137</sup> Byrnes, "Getting a Feel for the Market", 445.

All of this happened before either of us were attending school, but the events that took place the first couple of years after state takeover directly informed the School District of Philadelphia we know and hate.

My parents always had me in daycare or pre-K, but I formally started school in 2005 as a Kindergartener.

*Yall went to the schools yall did because we realized we had control over your education.*

I went to St. Barnabas until first grade, when I went to Khepera Charter School. After two years at Khepera, I went to Greenwoods Charter School, in the middle of a wildlife reserve in Roxborough. After two years there, I attended Masterman, where I would spend the rest of my pre-collegiate academic career. Notice that I never spent more than two years at one place. My parents say they kept moving me around because after I would get comfortable socially, and the school became too easy academically, I started to get restless. I never really had behavioral problems that weren't typical of kids my age, but I guess I would stagnate. Notice also that none of my schools before Masterman were public schools, and two of the three were charter schools. The charter school phenomenon in the city is extremely controversial, but important to discuss as we continue this conversation. If it were not for charter schools offering a positive schooling alternative, I would not be here with this knowledge talking to you.

During the 2020-2021 school year, 82 charter schools served 70,000 of Philadelphia's students, representing just over one third of the total student population.<sup>138</sup> Charter schools are essentially non-profit organizations given charge over a school by the district with varying levels of oversight from and accountability to the district.<sup>139</sup> Unlike fully private schools, charter

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<sup>138</sup> The School District of Philadelphia 2020

<sup>139</sup> DeJarnatt, "Follow the Money", 66.

schools are funded by taxpayers and, in the case of Philadelphia, generally available to the same student populations that are served by public schools.<sup>140</sup> The main controversy surrounding charter schools in the city is that very fact of non-public schools receiving public funding.<sup>141</sup> In Pennsylvania, charter schools are required to be non-profit entities, and therefore experience many of the internal political challenges facing those kinds of organizations.<sup>142</sup> This, coupled with their tax exempt status, make charter schools ripe sites for mismanagement and corruption.<sup>143</sup> According to the Urban Lawyer, by way of the Philadelphia Inquirer, 19 charter schools or networks were under investigation by the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year.<sup>144</sup> In all of these cases, greed and mismanagement were primed over the wellbeing of children, families and communities. Here again, the most disadvantaged of us were at the mercy of the whims of random power brokers and outside entities.

Charter schools also present problems pedagogically. “No excuses”/“zero tolerance” model charter schools and networks are especially prevalent in the city. Mastery and KIPP are two examples of these types of schools, which prime discipline, order and academic achievement over anything else.<sup>145</sup> Stakes are high for students in these schools, as infractions to their established codes could lead directly to severe consequences.<sup>146</sup> Unlike traditional public schools, charters are not legally obligated to provide students with a schooling opportunity, as they are not a function of the state.<sup>147</sup> Students are thus expected to conform to the code by following strict, oftentimes arbitrary rules, with consequences ranging from “demerits” to expulsion to be

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<sup>140</sup> DeJarnatt, “Follow the Money”, 66.

<sup>141</sup> DeJarnatt, “Follow the Money”, 67.

<sup>142</sup> “Charter schools share many of the features identified as challenging for non-profits generally-volunteer board members who may lack training and expertise, and group dynamics that can discourage individual board members from taking individual stands. The charter school sector is similarly challenged by the limited resources available for enforcement of existing regulations and requirements.” (DeJarnatt, “Follow the Money”, 68.)

<sup>143</sup> DeJarnatt, “Follow the Money”, 53.

<sup>144</sup> DeJarnatt, “Follow the Money”, 65

<sup>145</sup> Prothero, “‘No-Excuses’ Charter Schools May Be Falling Out of Favor, Report Suggests”, 1. , DeJarnatt, “Follow the Money”, 80.

<sup>146</sup> Prothero, “‘No-Excuses’ Charter Schools May Be Falling Out of Favor, Report Suggests”, 1., DeJarnatt, “Follow the Money”, 80.

<sup>147</sup> DeJarnatt, “Follow the Money”, 74.

expected in the case of noncompliance.<sup>148</sup> These types of schools, in the name of academic achievement, traumatize kids.<sup>149</sup> They operate under the pretext that poor Black kids need correcting as opposed to care, norms as opposed to nurturing. Some parents send their kids to these school situations because they feel the alternative is that much worse. Some parents truly believe in the no excuses, zero tolerance model for their children. All of these parents are comfortable sacrificing their children's social and emotional comfortability for the sake of providing them with better academic prospects. Does this sound familiar?

While corruption and conformity are normal charter school experiences in the city, they were not mine.

I have nothing but good things to say about both Khepera. As mentioned, much of who I am today, I owe to my time at Khepera. At the time of course, it was just school to me. Of course my teachers were Black and of course Cultural Infusion was a normal class to take. Of course we abide by the principles of Ma'at to govern our behavior, and of course we call the adults in the building "mama" and "baba". I fell in love with history there, I fell in love with being Black there. I was in the first and second grade man, so before I could reliably walk down the street by myself, I was reciting Langston Hughes and Phyllis Wheatley, discussing Garveyism and ancient African empires. I met one of my best friends, to this day, at that school in the first grade. Sadly, Khepera is no longer operable. Like other Afro-centric schools in the city, they suffered from low-student achievement and teacher retention.<sup>150</sup> In the years after I left, they moved and moved again, got much larger and then slowly faded out of existence. But I was there. My classmates, teachers, administrators and entire school community was there to witness a moment, an experience, an experiment in Black people educating ourselves about ourselves. And even

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<sup>148</sup> DeJarnatt, "Follow the Money", 80.

<sup>149</sup> Prothero, "'No-Excuses' Charter Schools May Be Falling Out of Favor, Report Suggests", 1.,

<sup>150</sup> Graham, "Philly's Black-Led Charter Schools Are Treated Unfairly, New Group Says.", 1., Hanna, "Black Leaders Ask", 1.

though this experiment was deemed invalid given its failure to meet standards set by the state, I will never forget its necessity.

*Khepera, you were empowered and strong and Black. But ok, we gotta navigate this real world. And I needed you to live on both sides.*

Greenwoods was a completely different experience, but still positive. I transitioned from a Black school in the next neighborhood over to a white school in one of the few remaining areas in Philly that was/is relentlessly white: Roxborough. I was older and took the bus to school, which itself was in the middle of a forest. My parents noticed my deep fascination with nature and animals, and found a school situation that would edify that curiosity. I'm so appreciative of my parents, primarily my mother, for catering my school experience to my needs and passions. Not everyone is afforded that luxury, and I'm grateful that it worked. Still, Greenwoods was a major culture shock. For the first time, I was one of-, if not, the only-. We wore uniforms but I looked different. We were all Philly kids but I spoke different. However, I was in love with this school, which was unlike anything I had experienced before. We took weekly hikes, and learned bird classifications for grades. We tested the pH levels of our streams, learned wilderness orienteering, and identified different animals based on the excrements. And eventually of course I made friends, established a real community with my white classmates. Greenwoods is still in existence today, and has since moved and expanded. I hope the curriculum is as robust as it was when I was there. I'm hoping that some little Black boy gets to lean into his geeky obsession with nature and animals like I was. I hope that school is doing right by him.

I want to put my experiences in charter school in conversation with this discourse that we've surveyed in order to complicate it. Charter schools in Philly, for the reasons we discussed before, are polarizing. Still, many Black families in the city support them and support robust

school choice legislation.<sup>151</sup> I feel like we recognize that our public schools are in a state of crisis. And I feel like just as there is an impulse to improve the situation, there is an equally valid impulse to want to provide our children with suitable alternatives. We recognize that there are certain stakes for Black students and their achievement that make the handling of their education a sensitive and intentional endeavor. After all, we did not make this mess, so why should we be the ones to labor and fix it? While it is noble to essentially play a long game with neighborhood public schools and the district itself, I think many parents felt and feel that they can not afford to waste their children's potential. In this way, charter schools are a necessary intervention for our community, even in all of their bad. I hesitate to call them "a necessary evil" because the situation that necessitates them, this failing school district, was and is wholly unnecessary. Still, we must consider all of the Black children who have been cultivated, properly educated by these schooling alternatives who would have otherwise fell through the cracks in their neighborhood schools. I am not at all trying to convince you that charter schools are better or preferred to traditional public schools. And there is a lot to be said about which children have the "potential", or more accurately, the privilege to escape that neighborhood school and which children do not. I'm just saying how positive they were for me, and for so many other students like me. I'm saying this because, I feel like the conversation around them, especially within our community, should be handled with more nuance and consideration.

*School choice is great. More people should take advantage of school choice. I never imagined yall going to a charter school but here we are.*

I had always been considered advanced as a child and student, so when the time came, I was encouraged to apply to Masterman.

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<sup>151</sup>Ei-Mekki, "Black Families Have a Long History of Using School Choice as Resistance to Racist and Inadequate School Systems", 1.

*Anything that was hard to get into, that's where I wanted yall to be. Cause if anybody could get there, it wasn't enough, I'm sorry.*

It was and still is the highest performing middle and high school, public or private, in Pennsylvania. It's a public school, but a special admissions magnet school, meaning the school gets to pick and choose who it lets in. I needed Khepera to be able to survive my 8 years here, because I needed to already know who I was. I needed Greenwoods to be able to survive too, because I had to be comfortable being uncomfortable. But cousin, nothing, nothing, nothing could have prepared me for the experience that was that school. Before we get into it, some more context.

Masterman was my first introduction to the School District of Philadelphia, when I entered the 5th grade at the start of the 2009-2010 school year. At this point, the infamous Arlene Ackerman had just begun her short tenure as superintendent. She is most notable for her inability to do much to change the trajectory our schools were on.<sup>152</sup> Under her leadership, the district experienced widespread violence in schools, policy decision making with no consultation with teachers, unethical bidding for huge contracts, the largest budget deficit in Philadelphia school history, and allegations of test score manipulation.<sup>153</sup> She was not popular, and was disposed at the request of Mayor Michael Nutter and the SRC in 2011.<sup>154</sup> In this same year, Republican Philly-hater governor Tom Corbett proposed massive cuts to state education, 25% of those being directed towards Philly, even though the District only enrolled about 10% of the state's students.<sup>155</sup> In response, councilman Bill Green recommended the SRC be disbanded, questioning the worth of this state entity if another state entity had the power to reduce the District's funding.<sup>156</sup> Though criticism of the Commission was commonplace for city politicians,

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<sup>152</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

<sup>153</sup> Woodall, "No-bid schools contract is costing millions", 1.

<sup>154</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

<sup>155</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

<sup>156</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

dissolution was still an unpopular opinion, as their main concern with changing the SRC was losing some state funding.<sup>157</sup> However, even in his criticism, Bill Green eventually accepted Governor Corbett's nomination to the SRC in 2014.<sup>158</sup> Nobody really cares about us but us, cousin.

The following year, the SRC began taking those actions that directly led to its demise. In 2012, they changed the school code to cap charter school enrollments and, most egregiously, expedite the process to close schools.<sup>159</sup> The SRC no longer needed to hold a hearing three months before deciding to close a school.<sup>160</sup> In 2014, the SRC voted to cut health benefits from teacher contracts, giving that \$44 million dollars back to schools.<sup>161</sup> Teachers, who at this point were working without a contract and had given up their ability to strike following state takeover in 2002, immediately protested.<sup>162</sup> This move also led to a court challenge and a non-binding referendum about the status of the SRC, where 75% of respondents voted to disband it, and return control of the District to the local government.<sup>163</sup> The writing was on the wall for the School Reform Commission experiment in Philadelphia.

So, about Masterman.

Julia Reynolds Masterman Laboratory and Demonstration School is the crown jewel of the School District of Philadelphia. The school is where some of the best students, teachers, and administrators contribute to a highly competitive learning environment that produces tremendous results and impressive alumni.

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<sup>157</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

<sup>158</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

<sup>159</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

<sup>160</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

<sup>161</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

<sup>162</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

<sup>163</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

I went to the same school for the most formative years of my young life. The location of it gives context to the academic and social culture that was established inside. We were less than a mile from metropolitan, ritzy Center City, our downtown area, where many of my classmates were from. We were also 3 blocks away from Benjamin Franklin High School, one of the most dangerous schools in the country. The community surrounding my school was full of white and upper middle class professionals who moved back into the cities from the suburbs. They raised their picturesque families in enormous, historic brownstones. Their Puerto Rican and Dominican neighbors a few blocks away lived in similar buildings, but shared them with 3 or 4 other families. My school existed at a social and cultural crossroads. It created a dichotomy wherein an institution of learning gave students private school educations with public school resources. We had APs and honors classes and what not, but the building was decrepit and infested. The books were raggedy, desks and chairs were commonly broken.

*When I walked into Masterman, I called my cousin and said this school looks just like my old elementary school. I was like this is it?*

Students from around the city, despite socio-economic background, attended and excelled. This mix of different experiences, means, and perspectives coupled with the reality of a rigorous curriculum in a poor public school system made for an interesting experience.

In school, we were taught by teachers with a plethora of experiences and views. It's crazy because I'm realizing that some of my teachers likely were my mom's classmates, or the older siblings of her classmates. They were white women from the Northeast or South, who had moved to Jersey or the burbs and were now back in the city to teach. Most teachers would not allow their individual politics to influence their classroom instruction. However, what they really thought shone through in what they required us to read, how they conducted conversations about what was read, what supplemental materials were used, and more. All of these individuals were

responsible for teaching this selective crop of new students. The crop was fairly diverse, being 40% white, 30% Asian, 15% Black, and 10% multiracial, so exposure to a varied mix of people and cultures helped us a lot in navigating a multicultural world. However, culture and politics did clash. In the arenas of extracurricular programming, dress codes, and school disciplinary policies, social conservatism found a place. My school did not have a uniform, but the dress code restricted how short pants could be, how much shoulder could be exposed and more. We had rather robust multicultural student organization programming, but events had to be heavily vetted by the administration for messaging. Students rarely were disciplined for offenses other than cheating, but the Black kids were disproportionately affected.

I remember explicitly at the end of 6th grade, we all were given a math test. Passing would allow us to take Algebra 1 next year, and if we didn't we would take pre-algebra. Most kids didn't pass and took pre-algebra. This is important, because in order to be considered for admission to Masterman High School from the middle school, you had to meet several academic benchmarks, one of which was to have already completed algebra studies before 9th grade. You had to have completed a year of a language as well as achieved at least the 88th percentile in the PSSA's. You're shocked? Understandably so, because the average School District student won't be able to fulfill these requirements until halfway through high school. Such was the acceleration that was normalized and expected at this school. The fact that you needed those scores and the language requirement to be considered for admission almost ensured that all Masterman high schoolers were also former Masterman middle schoolers. That Algebra II requirement made it so most middle schoolers themselves could not even access the high school. I remember taking that test, and it being so hard. I remember failing.

I still took Algebra II because my mom believed that was where I should have been. I don't know how it happened, but I came home from camp that summer to the "exciting news" that I had actually been accepted to take Algebra next year, and my grandma would tutor me. I ended up doing well, and I ended up meeting Masterman High School's admissions requirements. I ended up attending, and thriving, and eventually graduating. My high school experience taught me to draw power from being one of-, if not, the only- in whatever academic space I was occupying. I felt empowered to apply to colleges like the one I'm graduating from, solely because of how I thrived socially and academically at Masterman. While there, I spent a lot of time thinking about the shortcomings of my school as an institution, particularly how it failed its Black students. But it's only now, as I'm reflecting on that experience in this stage of my life, in the context of having this conversation with you, that I am problematizing its very existence, and my role in it.

Masterman does and can exist as a neo-liberal's dream, standing as a testament to the relevancy and effectiveness of public education executed correctly. It can be directly juxtaposed to the Ben Franklins and Kings and Dobbins' of the world, to say public education works if school, community, family and child want it to work. However, Masterman subsists on pulling the city's brightest kids away from their neighborhoods and thrusting them into a highly competitive schooling machine. Those kids are internally tracked and separated, compelled to submit to a social culture imposed and maintained by teachers and administrators. Both through academic and social pressures, kids deemed unworthy or lazy are disinvited from this shining city on the hill. The kids who stay create a high school, the best in the state, which utterly did not represent, demographically or otherwise, the schooling situation in the rest of the city. I felt very much like I earned my spot there. The toxic competitiveness that drove the school culture

compelled me to believe that my work, my personal valor, my ability to grasp onto the academics and survive socially, justified my being there. And I very much internalized that, along with ideas about myself and my people that I might not ever be fully able to work through. So what I want you to get from all of this is: their best attempts at diversity ultimately compel us to conform to them and their way of being. In Masterman, and the handful of city schools like it, they've created a private public space, which in the school's continued success, justifies both its own existence and the existence of horrible public schools for the rest of the city. What is presented as a public service accessible to those who want it and work for it most is actually an ivy tower of privilege and resources, that could not care any less about that public.

Tragic.

I want to make space here to be critical. I want to interrogate why, given the lessons of her childhood, did my mother think removing us from our neighborhood schools would lend to the best outcomes for us. I want to know why, seeing her child deteriorate academically and suffer socially and emotionally, did my grandmother still allow my mom to attend the school that she did. Is there space for confusion? For anger?

I can't bring myself to feel any of those things for any of us, and I hope throughout this exploration you don't either. You can't blame the oppressed for how they choose to navigate their oppression. So in our critique of integrationism and reform, know that we blame wholeheartedly that system that required our conceiving of new technologies to combat it. My mother therefore despite knowing how a "desegregated" education affected her still removed my brother and I from our neighborhood school because she too realized it to be unable to cultivate or edify our potential. She made sure, in controlling our education, that she found the best option available to do just that, just like her mother did 25 years earlier. Only, the options available to

my mother were undeniably more favorable than those available to my grandmother all those years ago. Just because choices are hard doesn't mean they shouldn't be made. Bravery and survival are what we as a family do well. If Junior and Evelyn didn't make that difficult choice to leave all they knew for the slight prospect of a better life, and didn't struggle for years trying to forge that better life while raising a large family, we would not be here. The varied discourses on the merit of these escapist decisions (migration, desegregation, school choice, etc.), their implications and consequences, all of that are largely irrelevant to this conversation. What is factual and undeniable is that our family has, for the entirety of its existence that we've discussed, been forced by this hateful world to make difficult decisions ultimately to ensure our survival and longevity. So you understand why, even if confusion or frustration does, hate can never live here.

By the beginning of my first year of college, the SRC was well on its way to dissolution. In October of 2017, a Philadelphia Inquirer article reported that the body was expected to dissolve itself by the end of the year.<sup>164</sup> Then, on November 18th the SRC voted to disband itself, in favor of a return to a local school board structure.<sup>165</sup> This effectively ended the state of Pennsylvania's 15+ year reign over our schools. Thus, all of the successes and failures associated with this new governing structure would be the responsibilities of no other entity besides the city government. The SRC left us with a \$900 million deficit, which is roughly what it came into existence with as well.<sup>166</sup> Currently, we are the largest school district in Pennsylvania, but still one of its worst. We rank in the bottom 50% for testing, but you know how I feel about testing as

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<sup>164</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

<sup>165</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

<sup>166</sup> Dent, "A not-so-brief history of Philly's rocky relationship with the SRC", 1

a metric. Consider this though: our graduation rate was 63% while the state average was 86%.<sup>167</sup> Of all the numbers we could use to encapsulate the direness of the situation, I feel like this one fully encapsulates the story. A student could do everything they were supposed to, everything right, and still have only a 63% chance of graduating, due to how poorly their district is equipped to educate them.

*So you hate to think...what the hell did I go through all of this for?*

I think it's important in telling this story that we revisit 1106, that shining symbol of our survival. It was sold around the time that you were graduating. Evelyn required that anyone living under that roof was attending school or working. That rule died with her back in 2007, and since then, the house has been juggled back and forth between varied family members. You and yours had lived there, too, if I remember correctly. The house was extremely important, but no one could take care of it like it needed to be. This, coupled with the encroachment of Templetown, meant our days in that home were numbered. Our family narrative, as it relates to that house, is directly informed by those processes like segregation and gentrification that negatively inform our sense of place. In 1967, 1106 was the only place we could afford to live, only place we were permitted to live. In 2017, 1106 was sold to contractors for an undisclosed amount of money by my grandfather and his siblings, as its ideal location near Temple Hospital proved prime real estate.

That neighborhood, where you are from, has always been and will always be North Philly. But I believe in a generation, it'll be unrecognizable. The grandkids of those same people who left the city for the lilly-white utopia of the suburbs are now returning. They like neighborhoods out West for their proximity to University City and ease of access to public

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<sup>167</sup> School District of Philadelphia 2020.

transportation, and like some neighborhoods down North for the same reasons. They're able to save money from their downtown jobs by not living where they work, or the suburbs, but in those neighborhoods already inhabited for generations at this point by us. As they come in, property valuations go up, taxes go up, businesses come in, and the neighborhood goes through a sort of "restoration". As they come in, we go out. Where do we go? When it suddenly becomes too expensive to live where your parents and grandparents before you staked claims to live, liberty and happiness, when all of that is jeopardized right before your eyes, where do you go? You don't, you just die. So I think in deciding to sell that house, in all of its symbolism, our elders were thinking about our survival, as they tend to.

But remember at the start of this conversation, I said that I was proud of you? It's because your educational journey wasn't curated specifically for your academic and personal development like mine was. It didn't allow the option to escape and be exposed to a different reality like my mom's. You were there and present for all of the hatred, neglect and imposition that had been compounding for generations, directly informing the district you endeavored to navigate through. Against all odds, you made it, and for that, you should be immensely proud.

Your schools, from elementary school to high school, were uniformly ill-equipped to educate you. The buildings themselves were huge and imposing, but ugly. Inside and out, they looked more like prisons than educational institutions. They were overcrowded, having almost 40 students in a class taught by a single teacher. Those teachers had little to no administrative support. With there being no auxiliary money in the budget for anything, the financial burden of creating a learning environment faintly reminiscent of a classroom for students fell on those teachers. They were not blameless though. The vast majority of your teachers were white women, with no understanding or exposure to you and your classmates, or where you all came

from. Many, indoctrinated with an unshakeable savior's complex, viewed you all as the deficit, and made it their mission to reform you. When you all rightfully resisted, their saviorism would turn to fatalism, and their new mission became to simply push you through the system with minimal effort from them. They taught you what was required, and what was required was your social and cultural death. I'm not being dramatic here, because those were the stakes. You were taught a history, a science, a math, a language arts so entirely different from how you experienced all of those things in your everyday life that you had to give up part of yourself to learn them. You see? Even when escaping, even when experiencing something different, even when just trying to make it through, we are asked to sacrifice pieces of ourselves in exchange for this education. But we'll talk about that more in the next chapter. So in summary, what little learning that did take place in your schools was only made possible by the dedication of you and your classmates to overcome, as well as the commitment of those few teachers and administrators who actually cared to care. And still, given all of those odds, you were of but the 1% students at your school who actually made it. I hope you know just how important that is, man.

This story, unfortunately, doesn't have a happy ending. And if we are to take away anything from the history we just explored, it probably will never end. I do hope you can gain from it, though. I hope now you see that what we experienced in school was the result of decades and generations of hatred, neglect and imposition. The School District of Philadelphia that fails to meaningfully educate the majority of its students is not something we ourselves created. It's not something that we deserved. Our family, and the millions of Black families like it across the city, simply sought our piece of freedom, a peace of mind. So committed to the project of white supremacy and Black subjugation were those already here, that they developed an intense white

uplift project that did the same work of dooming us. This history, though necessary, is hard to deal with. This story is hard to tell, but now you know how blameless we are. And now you know why I'm so proud of you.

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