Critical Education

Lessons from the "Pen Alongside the Sword"
School Reform through the Lens of Radical Black Press

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Abstract

This study considers the historical and contemporary significance of radical Black press in both challenging mainstream media discourse on school reform and posing an alternative vision rooted in grassroots Black political thought. Our proposition is that this history is educative in the contemporary neoliberal moment in terms of how it argued about education, what it argued for, and to what end. As neoliberalism attempts to divorce ideas of liberty from social justice, radical thinkers of the 1960s-70s offer creative insight on countering the material and discursive practices of the current corporate reform paradigm. Their journalistic practices are put forward in the spirit of Malcolm X's call for a "broader interpretation" of social justice and democratic possibilities. Moreover, the enduring lessons of the radical Black press direct us to look for multiple modes of analysis and strategies of resistance against the frenetic expression of neoliberalism in the media and in schools.

So, where do we go from here? First, we need some friends. We need some new allies. The entire civil-rights struggle needs a new interpretation, a broader interpretation. We need to look at this civil-rights thing from another angle - from the inside as well as from the outside. That old interpretation excluded us. It kept us out. So, we're giving a new interpretation to the civil-rights struggle, an interpretation that will enable us to come into it, take part in it.

—Malcolm X, *The Ballot or the Bullet*

Causal v. Critical

The relationships between media, education and democracy have long been central to conversations about public and political life. In an 1825 letter, Thomas Jefferson warned against the tyranny of a "single and splendid government of an aristocracy, founded on banking institutions, and moneyed incorporations riding and ruling over the plundered ploughman and beggared yeomanry" (2). He argued that a free press and literate society could help stave off such undemocratic conditions: "Where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe" (1825, 1). Furthermore, if citizens are to hold elected officials accountable, and resist capitalism's excesses, there must be a free press, outside of governmental and corporate control, to act as a watchdog for the people. Pursuant Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin, Jefferson argued that democratic governance was dependent upon an informed citizenry with free press as a mechanism by which to transmit information for public good.

Here is one kind of relationship between media and education: media are useful insofar as citizens can engage with them. Pragmatically, this suggests that literacy is prerequisite for democratic participation. Though one might agree with this sentiment as an axiom, Jefferson's Black contemporaries asserted that such a formulation eschews questions about the politics of meaning making that are part of the reading process. In 1829, David Walker (1995) contended that when we "speak of the educated" as simply "one who can write a neat hand, and, who perhaps knows nothing but to scribble and puff pretty fair on a small scrap of paper," we fail to get to "the substance" of either literacy or learning (9).

Following Walker, we make a rejoinder to Jefferson's causal faith in the relationship between reading, the press, and democracy. People need not only know how to read, they must know how to interpret what they are reading. They must know how to evaluate what they are reading in relation to where the information is coming from. And they must be able to understand how what they are reading aligns with conversations about politics and public life. In a Freirian (1994) sense, education must facilitate a critical and love-inspired literacy that helps populations to read *and* write the world in the name of justice. It's not just reading that is important—what is being read and to what end are equally, if not more, important. This kind of literacy, Walker reminds us, "makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation" (Walker, 1995, 12).

From the early 1960s to the mid 1970s, the radical Black press in the United States engaged in a critical and love-inspired literacy project that critiqued mainstream media discourse on school reform. Fighting against reforms that were predicated on racist stereotypes about Black families and Black students, *The Black Panther* and *Muhammad Speaks* reframed educational and democratic debates by calling into question white supremacist assumptions that pervaded conservative and liberal press alike. In newspapers that were generated *by* marginalized communities *for* marginalized communities, the papers embarked on counterpublic literacy

practices that aimed to unsettle the colonial logics at play in notions like the "education gap" or "cultural deficiency" by reclaiming decolonialized notions of Black love and Black power.

Using art and other forms of cultural production, and written in what Malcolm X (1965) described as, "a language that everybody … can easily understand," the radical Black press delivered a narrative that identified the collusion of state power, corporate interests, mainstream media and white supremacy (3). Furthermore, the newspapers situated critical discourses that resisted the stride of mainstream media's master narratives while advocating for community-controlled educational priorities through Black controlled media outlets. It's here, we argue, where we might be able to re-imagine the relationship between media, education, and democracy—a re-imagination we need now as much as we did then.

This study considers the historical and contemporary significance of the radical Black press in both challenging mainstream media discourse on school reform and posing an alternative vision rooted in grassroots Black political thought. Our proposition is that this history is educative in the contemporary neoliberal moment in terms of how it argued about education, what it argued for, and to what end. As neoliberal individualism attempts to divorce ideas of liberty from social justice, radical thinkers of the 1960s-70s offer creative insight on how to counter the material and discursive practices of the current corporate reform paradigm. Their journalistic practices are put forward in the spirit of Malcolm X's call for a "broader interpretation" of social justice and democratic possibilities. Moreover, the enduring lessons of the radical Black press direct us to look for multiple modes of analysis and multiple strategies of resistance against the frenetic expression of neoliberalism in the media and in our schools.

Education and media, two of the pillars of democratic societies, are under the control of a neoliberal regime that is not only economic, but also cultural. The radical Black press provides for us an example of what kind of counter-hegemonic role media might be able to play in the contemporary moment. Through analysis of *The Black Panther* and *Muhammad Speaks*, we identify practices employed by the papers to redress racist, classist school reform, as well as alternative visions for liberatory education. It is our hopes that this project aids in rethinking the building resistance to neoliberal reforms in education by providing examples of how it not only matters who controls the schools and media, but also who has voice and access to determine the cultural content of school and media (e.g., Saltman, 2000). It is our hopes that this case study might get us to rethink the liberatory promise of media and education—especially when they might work in tandem.

Content & Control

Who controls the means of production—media outlets or schools—determines the content being *read* within those institutions. What is getting read and how, then, has implications for democratic life and political agency. If people do not get access to critical information, and if they are not taught to read information with a critical eye, then the prospects for engaged political agency are compromised.

The processes of neoliberalism have done much to affect control and content in schools and media outlets. In terms of an economic and political project, neoliberal policies have sought to deregulate markets, attack labor unions, privatize social services, and "free" markets from state intervention in the name of "free" trade, "democracy," and "development" (Gilpin, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Robinson, 2004). The results of these policies, though rarely articulated in

mainstream media, have materialized in global and domestic realities such as global slum formation (Davis, 2006), new modes of slavery and indentured servitude (Bales, 1999), and the criminalization of the poor (Wacquant, 2009). The neoclassical economic doctrine underpinning neoliberal policies is predicated on a fierce individualism steeped with self-interest and an entrepreneurial zeitgeist.

Moving away from the Keynesian welfare state that "framed people as citizens with certain civil rights and the state as responsible for a minimal level of social well-being," the neoliberal cultural ethos desires an enabling state where individuals have the "freedom" to "choose" social services from the market (Lipman, 2011, 11). Within this kind of ideological structure, individuals see themselves as having equal access to goods and services provided in an unfettered marketplace, which leaves individuals, as opposed to the state, to take responsibility for their own lot. As many scholars have argued, the neoliberal cultural habitus, generously dotted with discourses of liberty, choice, and freedom, generates an alibi for capital's encampment of all aspects of social life (Duggan, 2003; Spade, 2011).

In the media sphere, deregulation has engendered a monopoly where multinational corporations, with subsidiaries ranging from defense contractors to the Atlanta Hawks, *control* most of the *content* the public reads on a daily basis (Hazen & Winoukur, 1997). From magazines to newspapers to television to music, the concentration of control within media, which Ben Bagdikian (1997) termed the *communications cartel*, has created a situation where companies responsible for reporting the news to a public ravaged by recession, racism, classism, and perpetual war are the same companies capitalizing on and creating these issues. Thus, just because the press in the United States is not owned and operated by the State, does not mean it is subsequently free from influence. As media represent sites of both capital accumulation *and* ideological control, freedom from State control does not mean freedom from censorship or propaganda. In a situation where multinational corporations with geopolitical interests control the things that a public reads, corporate interests mediate information, thus controlling what a public comes to know.

Without access to critical information, and with the rise of governance as a means to mitigate public participation in political processes, the public sphere becomes a mere space of consumption and consent, rather than debate, reflection, and consensus building around democratic ideals. People, trusting of the Forth Estate, might passively consume media, having their ideas about public life shaped by actors with vested interests in power and capital. In this way, corporate interests have the ability to manufacture the consent of the people, controlling ideology through various processes of legitimation and hegemony through passive reading acts (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

Moreover, and as Natalie Fenton (2012) has suggested, neoliberal dogma demands that profit is the driving force in a market-based economy and that, in such an economy, "news has no right to exist if it cannot pay its way" (63). Here it's not only that corporate influence taints what the public reads; the neoliberal fetish with efficiency and cost effective practices affect the kinds of reporting that go on. Fenton, thinking through the relationship between media and democracy under neoliberal downsizing, writes that, "when markets fail or come under threat and ethical journalistic practice is swept aside in pursuit of corporate financial stability, the consequences are felt more broadly than the marketplace" (63). As newspapers and television stations cut staff and projects to preserve the bottom line, the things we read are even more distant from the kinds of critical information we need to be political agents. In other words,

making media a commodity, and wanting that commodity to also bring returns to shareholders, those in control edit what a public can engage with based on the algorithms that determine a story's cost-effectiveness. This has serious ramifications for political agency and democracy.

Case in point can be taken from two current television shows. First, in an episode from the *Daily Show* (2013), correspondent John Oliver interviews Kaj Larsen, a former CNN investigative reporter who was let go because his coverage of global issues was cost prohibitive. Upon hearing this, Oliver, dumbfounded, remarks, "CNN, the worldwide leader in news, has eliminated its entire investigative news department." The irony, of course, being that the self-proclaimed world's leader dramatically cut staff that actually investigates news. In trying to make sense of this logic, Oliver visits with "professional analyst Brad Adgate," who says, straight-faced, "investigative reporting is the first to go because it's not a profit center." Oliver tries to push Adgate to see the journalistic responsibility in covering stories that cost money to report on, to which Adgate, responds tautologically by saying, "there are a lot of stories we won't know." Oliver, stating the obvious, suggests that we won't be able to know about these things because analysts have deemed them cost prohibitive and unnecessary. Adgate goes on to suggest that we could just Skype with others around the world to find out information and save money, to which Oliver, deadpan, responds, "I don't know how many child soldiers in Sierra Leone use Skype." The skit ends surrealistically on the set of HBO's *Newsroom*. The fictional TV show has hired Larsen to give them ideas for investigative reporting beats. Only fictional shows, it seems, are doing any real news. The spectacle and simulacrum here is telling. It's only in fictional television where the possibilities for media to play a democratic role are possible.

Second, *The Wire* presents a social realist account of the relationship between neoliberalism, post-industrial urban America, politics, race, and media. The drive and narrative of the show provides a nuanced and complicated critique of neoliberal economic and political ideology and its effects on a variety of characters and communities. Furthermore, *The Wire* presents the complexities and contingencies between seemingly disparate events. All five seasons of the show critique the way in which neoliberal media outlets cover social issues— shallow, unrelated, and sensationalized. In season five, attention is paid to a fictionalized version of *The Baltimore Sun*, where we see neoliberal downsizing taking place—jobs being cut and decisions about what stories to cover being decided based on how many papers will be sold rather than on what will be in service to the public. In an early episode in season five, an editor at the paper applauds a fabricated story about an urban kid who wants to attend an Orioles game. The editor calls the story, "a portrait of 'the disparity of the two worlds of this city in a highly readable narrative'" (cited in Vint 2013, 98). Vint, in her study of the show as a media and political artifact, writes of this scene, that the reporter "has fabricated this boy is only part of the satiric point: more important, the *kind* of story, a small and affective anecdote that allows its audience to visualize the aspirations of inner-city youth without confronting a systemic need for change, is what is valued by the press" (98, emphasis original).

News articles that present these affective portraits of a good and deserving inner-city youth play on racialized stereotypes about all the other undeserving inner-city youth who are read as deterministically violent and subhuman. Without the resources or time to find out more about this young boy and the contingent conditions that determine his inability to attend the game, the affective pathos generates neoliberal charity, rather than a deep structural analysis. David Simon, writer and producer of *The Wire*, told *Slate Magazine* that season five asks us to consider how closely news stories "relate to truth; how distant are they from the truth?...What

stories get told and what don't and why it is that things stay the same" (O'Rourke, 2006). Simon here is directly confronting the relationship between media, reading, and democracy. Without reporters to report the news, and without in-depth investigative reporting illuminating relation and contingency, what we are left with are affective stories about poor kids wanting to go to baseball games, without exposing the 'how and why' kids are poor and how that poverty is contingent on those developers and politicians who got rich and elected through the building of that baseball stadium. Without this information, as Simon suggests, things will remain the same as they ever were. Control of the media by parties intent on capitalizing on media has big implications for content. And content has big implications for democracy.

Reading & Education

Deregulation has hit the educationsphere as well, though in a slightly different way. Whereas media deregulation meant removing the protections in place to stave off monopolies, deregulation in the educational context has meant deregulating the protections in place to assure that local communities (the public) control their local schools. In other words, where deregulation in media meant "large corporations swallow[ing] smaller corporations [to create a] hazardous concentration of power into select hands so the public is denied choice" (Hazen & Winokur, 1997, 7), deregulation in terms of education has meant unhinging the public's monopoly on public education to create competition, choice, and, so we're told, innovation (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990). Though the direction of deregulation differs, the effects on reading and democracy, we will argue, come to have similar ends.

In terms of control and content of education in neoliberal times, we want to focus on two related events: high stakes standardized testing and the charter school movement. From at least 1983 to the present, the public has been under constant bombardment about the culture of failure in public education. This culture of fear was first brought into the public imaginary through *A Nation At Risk*, which "labeled the entire system of education as mediocre and substandard, and simultaneously that other countries have passed the U.S. in 'educational attainments'" (Au, 2009, 52). In ways that elucidate the manufacturing of consent above, the media was used as a broker to manufacture a myth of failure in America's schools—if we didn't do something about our schools, Cold War enemies were going to take over the world order and jeopardize democratic integrity (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Ironic that the corporate and business influence in the assessments and recommendations in *A Nation At Risk* used the threat of democracy to push neoliberal ideology, which in turn, has actually done much to dismantle democratic practice and ideals.

The culture of fear and failure was generative, opening a space for new discourses about choice, standards, and accountability to reframe educational policy debate. Interestingly, though not surprisingly, the business class had a vested interest in pushing a kind of ideology about school reform as the educational marketplace represented a site of both capital accumulation and knowledge control (e.g., Scott, 2011). National Governors Association Education Summits became sites where corporate leaders emerged as innovators in educational policy-think. By 1996, the meetings where almost entirely dominated by corporate CEOs who "set the priorities for education reform efforts for the century" (ibid., 274). And it's here, under then-President Clinton, that the makings for the corporate control of education gained its legislative footing. Five years later, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) was signed into legislation, which mandated standards, testing, accountability, and choice for all schools in the United States.

Here we begin to see control and content come into focus. With state-mandated and corporate-backed testing regimes set in place, control of classroom content and pedagogy came under consolidated jurisdiction. Just as media monopolies limit the amount of content produced and can control representation, mandated standardized testing and holding teachers accountable for their students' test scores is a means by which powerful forces can control curriculum and pedagogy (Au, 2009, 83). In her work on teachers' alienated labor under NCLB, Kesson (2004) writes that, "Testing, particularly, is the mechanism of accountability; it is the means by which we ensure that teachers are performing their teaching functions properly, that administrators are performing their supervisory functions properly, and that students are complying with the curricular expectations of the state" (98). If teachers are held accountable by their students' test scores, and if corporate interests have created the tests, then we can see how corporate power can steer classrooms from a distance (Au, 2009, 81). Much like how the democratic possibility of the public sphere wanes as corporate influence mediates information, the democratic possibilities of education wane as corporate influences mediate and control the classroom. Through testing and accountability structures, what gets read (is it on the test?) and how it gets read (comprehension?) limits the multiplicity of voices and engagements with the text that engender robust classroom life and deep reflection. We might think of this in relation to media as a kind of consolidation of epistemic and pedagogical life—a narrowing of what gets covered and how the things that do get covered are engaged.

While testing and accountability represent a certain kind of control within a neoliberal educational paradigm, a control of content that prepares future workers for the demands of a low-skill economy, it has also facilitated a transfer of control from the public realm to the private realm. The discourse of failure that has only intensified as the NCLB climate gave credence to turning public control of schools over to the private sector. The most popular iteration of this transfer of control is charter schools, which are privately run schools that operate on public dollars. Once spaces of intentional and careful enrichment for students who weren't having their needs met in their traditional classrooms, charter schools have been co-opted by the corporate sector so as to be leading the push for the privatization of educational institutions (e.g., Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Though framed in the language of democracy—that charter schools create choices for parents who were once "forced" to send their children to failing public schools— many charter schools, especially the larger chain-charters, operate on anti-democratic principles. Governed by boards of trustees and operated by CEOs, many charters have a corporate hierarchy structure. Choosing to send your child to that school is seen as a democratic ideal, rather than the kind of democracy that entails real parent/teacher/student/community involvement in school governance (e.g., Lipman, 2011). This distinction, between choice and active participation, is an important difference that we will come back to in our analysis of the radical Black press and their campaigns for radically democratic education.

With testing and charters, neoliberal dogma views education as another commodity that, if scaled and made more efficient (read systematized), should be able to pay for itself and have the prospect to generate surplus capital for shareholders. Many charter schools are operated by for-profit education management organizations (EMOs) (e.g., Saltman, 2005, 2012). Through cost cutting strategies such as, but not limited to, hiring uncertified, non-unionized teachers, counseling out students with disabilities, and cutting extracurricular activities, charters have the possibility to produce profit. Rather then investing in dynamic curriculum that serves entire communities, cost-saving logics instead minimize "investigative" education that would serve students in learning to read and write the world. Seeing education as a commodity profanes the

promise of education—a promise unrealized, yet in need of fighting for. To fight for control of the institutions and content of our schools is a means by which we fight to call into being a more just and democratic world.

As Fenton and John Oliver and David Simon all speak to above, when ethical and investigative reporting is swept aside for the pursuit of profit or financial stability, the effects are felt broadly. Without media pursuing stories that matter in regard to public welfare in meaningful ways, and without schools preparing young folks for active civic lives in the name of good will and democratic ideals, the prospects for social transformation are suffocated. Part of the reason for examining the radical Black press is to explore the historical iterations of communities who attempted to stave off suffocation and re-imagine radical democratic life.

As the introductory quote by Malcolm X suggests, the time calls for new voices and a new interpretation of what is possible and to what end. Mainstream media, with their reliance on think tanks whose corporate coffers have helped to buy educational research and publicity, has been mostly a conduit for uncritical facilitation of the corporate education platform (Henig, 2009, Ravitch, 2010, Saltman, 2010). Even when stories emerge that seek to problematize the charter movement's close relationship to Wall St. or the illegality of the soft exclusions of students with disabilities, media rarely call into question bigger ideas about control and content (Conniff, 2014; Rich, 2014; Winerip, 2011). Though these articles do very important work at connecting the dots between Wall St., testing, privatization, and institutions like Teach for America, they fail to engage in a deeper conversation about the democratic significance of keeping schools publicly run or about content. To reimagine the relationship between media, education, and democracy, we turn to the radical Black press to provide an example of what this conversation might look like in a context and language that is intended for mass consumption.

Reimaging Content, Reclaiming Control

Rooted in grassroots Black political thought, the radical Black press redressed corporate media's school reform discourse through counter narratives rooted in community-based conceptions of political agency. This is embodied in what the papers printed and who controlled their agenda. While mainstream perceptions of the papers cast the radical press as sensationalist mouthpieces of their parent organizations, they were much more than that (Hilliard, 1993; Malcolm X, 1993). Certainly the papers included pointed and colorful rhetoric that highlighted the ideological premise of their sponsors – revolutionary socialism and dialectical materialism for the Panthers, separatist Black Nationalism and racial chauvinism for the Muslims. However, what was, and is, less well known to mainstream white society was the quality of the papers' writing, the grassroots character of their journalism and the broadly justice-minded nature of their coverage. Moreover, despite their ideological particularities, the papers served a common cause: providing relevant and professional content aimed at critically and constructively countering mainstream media.

Much of the distinct tone, style and content of the 1960s radical Black press was an outgrowth of the vision and structure established by Malcolm X. Throughout his years in the Nation of Islam (NOI), Malcolm X held firm belief in the power of an independent Black press as the only medium for "voicing the true plight of our oppressed people to the world" (Malcolm X, 1992, 247). After several proto-journalistic endeavors, Malcolm settled on a formula for a 1960 city paper, titled *Mr. Muhammad Speaks*, which proved to be strikingly effective at

appealing to Black Harlemites. The tabloid-sized city paper's banner read: "A Militant Monthly Dedicated to Justice for the Black Man." The paper included the religious teachings of NOI leader, Elijah Muhammad, and stood out in its professional layout, quality of writing, and coverage of news events pertinent to Black communities. Malcolm X went outside his organization to hire renowned professional Black journalists and writers. He directed them to produce a protest-oriented paper that used stirring language to stage news of the day within a narrative of racial justice (Sales, 1994).

All male members of the NOI were required to sell a quota of papers each week, and did so largely on foot, peddling outside churches, store fronts and community centers. The triple threat of quality journalism, a racially charged approach to current events and an aggressive grassroots sales campaign earned it notoriety throughout New York City. In 1961, the paper moved to Chicago, became a national publication and brought on a slate of professional Black editors. The co-founders of the Black Panthers, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, "studied carefully" the weekly contents of *Muhammad Speaks* (Newton, 1995, 113). In turn, *The Black Panther* mirrored the elements of the tabloid format and tone of *Muhammad Speaks*, and also required their male members to hoc the paper. Both papers took a militant approach to current affairs, oriented themselves around community concerns and staffed their offices with activist editors.

As other Black newspapers steadily declined in the 1960s, *Muhammad Speaks* and *The Black Panther* laid claim to hundreds of thousands of purchases every week. The papers' circulation was driven by professional coverage of issues of interest to Black communities, and a compelling counter narrative to dominant discourse (Clegg, 1996). It "didn't take much to sell [*The Black Panther*]" recalled David Hilliard, because Black Americans wanted a "counterpoint to the establishment media that was so biased and racist as a matter of fact" (2007, 2). A primary reason the papers were able to do this was that, unlike mainstream newspapers, writers and editors of radical press enjoyed tremendous journalistic freedom because they were not beholden to corporate or nationally affiliated advertisers.

The radical press attracted editors who left national papers because they found freedom to push investigative journalism in an environment free of the influence of corporate financial entities. Two examples illustrate this well – Askia Muhammad at *Ebony* and John Woodford at *Newsweek*. When Muhammad (at the time known as Charles Moreland) covered Black interest stories for *Newsweek*, he wanted to go where stories led him. An assignment to find out if Black newborns were being named after civil rights leaders led him instead to the story of Black parents giving their children African styled names. When in 1967 he was assigned to report on emerging civil rights leaders, Muhammad's research led instead to Black Nationalists like Maulana Karenga.

Askia Muhammad was rebuffed by Hal Bruno, *Newsweek*'s chief of correspondents, for not reporting on the stories he was assigned to. Muhammad believed that Bruno's actual concern was that his stories were about "Black masses stuff" and not a narrative of "lets hold hands, and sing we shall overcome." In other words, Muhammad's stories highlighted emerging expressions of Black cultural Nationalism, instead of highlighting what Bruno would have liked to see: stories about Civil Rights gains towards pluralism. Muhammad contended that pluralistic integration was simply not what he was seeing and he had a responsibility to report what he saw. Looking back at the Newsweek experience, Askia Muhammad "wasn't so steeped in Black culture or Black Nationalism" as to favor that philosophy "it was just what I discovered"

(personal communication, March 18, 2009). In his view, the incident reflected a fundamental difference in approach between him and his *Newsweek* minders.

Muhammad wanted to uncover the story as it emerged; however he believed Newsweek had vested interests in stories that supported a master narrative about the Civil Rights Movement as the advance of racial harmony (Hall, 2005). Maintaining that narrative was more important to Newsweek than reporting on a substantive pattern of new information from around the country. During the same year, John Woodford (1993) was confronted with similar pushback at *Ebony Magazine* where he hoped to follow the emergence of two stories:

> H. Rap Brown was in jail in Louisiana on trumped up charges. The Black Panther Party was striding around northern California declaring it the right and duty of our ethnic group ... to defend itself with arms against brutal police. And there sat I, in what I thought would be a good position to cover the freedom movement, as an editor/writer for *Ebony* magazine (83).

Unfortunately for Woodford, coverage of the two potential stories was muzzled. Woodford believed that the paper's publisher, John H. Johnson, had little interest in covering Brown's imprisonment or the Panthers because they were financially risky topics that might upset advertisers. Woodford was not the first to criticize Johnson in this regard. For years John Johnson had been accused by writers of being a man more concerned with making money than providing talented Black journalists an outlet for serious journalism (Wolseley, 1990). For instance, Askia Muhammad argued that *Ebony's* censorship was an inherent result of its financial structure, which depended on "large institutional advertising coming from the corporate business system, upon which *Ebony* is financially dependent" (*Muhammad Speaks*, 1972, 15).

The absence of the two stories was particularly grating for Woodford (1991) because it came on the heels of a maneuver that tested his faith in the integrity of *Ebony*'s commitment to free speech. In late 1967, *Ebony* surveyed its readers on their preferred Democratic candidate for president. The results indicated that Robert Kennedy was strongly favored and when John Johnson learned that the poll would likely displease president Johnson, he had the story killed. It unsettled Woodford to know that readers were denied information even about themselves: "These and similar practices of American mainstream 'free' journalism-whether the owners of the presses were Black or White- were goading me to seek an employer with more guts to cover stories that needed to be told" (2).

At *Muhammad Speaks* and *The Black Panther*, editors found greater freedom, emboldened to push limits because they were not beholden to corporate financial entities. Instead their viability rested on their capacity to serve and be relevant to the interests of Black consumers in Black communities. According to Woodford (1991) a reporter from *Muhammad Speaks* could go to any Black community meeting or gathering across the country and be met with tremendous good will. The Chicago-based *Muhammad Speaks* had bureaus in New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta, D.C., and scores of correspondents nationwide. The San Francisco-based *The Black Panther* published news reports from members in every major city on the east and west coast.

The papers worked to maintain relevance among local patrons by dispatching journalists to cover regionally pertinent issues. They built their reputation by serving up stories relevant to the interests of Black communities. *The Black Panther* went as far as publishing hundreds of news reports written by non-professional Black contributors who shared their stories of state and corporate repression. Bobby Seale (1996) asserted that the source of *The Black Panther*'s

legitimacy was "the hard core of the Black community, the grassroots" (181). According to Leon Forrest, *Muhammad Speaks* was operating within the "organic structure" of the Black community. He believed that Black communities hungered for news that "does justice to true life" through journalistic excellence providing a "community with insight into its deeper wounds, and its everlasting or shifting strength" (1973, 8)

An illustrative example of this is *Muhammad Speaks'* coverage of a 1971 teachers' strike in Newark, New Jersey. New York Bureau Chief Joe Walker spent the first half of the year covering the strike. During that time he interviewed parents, students, teachers, the primary leaders of the strike, as well as the primary opponents. Instead of paraphrasing their words, he provided space for extended remarks and re-interviewed informants weeks later to get their reaction to strike updates. Walker secured sufficient space to cover the strike, including full-page spreads with photos and reporting. Throughout the coverage, *Muhammad Speaks* invited community editorials for and against the striking teachers, even when such responses were unflattering towards the paper. A Newark principal wrote the paper accusing Walker of naïvely supporting the teachers, illustrating his "ignorance of the struggle that is taking place in our communities." Another 1971 letter asserted: "Joe Walker, widely noted and respected in many circles obviously has been given false and misleading information concerning the Newark strike" (20). Succeeding editorials shot back at detractors of the strike for their willful ignorance of the teacher's demands. Dozens of points and counter-points were printed in the paper as the strike rolled on. Walker presented a complex narrative to readers, including community voices and intense debates that at times made for a conflicted narrative, but reflected his commitment to follow the story with perspectives from the community most affected by the strike.

Reporters earned their reputation in racially concentrated inner-city communities like Newark by taking time to build relationships with community informants, obtaining multiple local perspectives and following up on a story several weeks or months later. Such reporting earned the paper a reputation as a viable news source among community leaders such as mayors, city councilpersons and grassroots organizers, such as local NAACP and Urban League offices. The presses proudly offered themselves up as a counterpoint to the failures of the mainstream press to get at the complex, lived realities of communities of color. *Muhammad Speaks* editor Leon Forrest argued that newspapers "are not autonomous agents unto themselves, but rather nourished and accredited by the community." Furthermore, Black communities are "hungry for information" on bad housing, "rent strikes, tutorial programs, narcotics woes, and how to employ the vet home from Viet Nam" (1972, 8).

The community orientation of the papers allowed them to ground their retaliation against mainstream educational discourse in the voices of communities of color. Ultimately they produced a body of discourse that reimagined educational content and reclaimed control over the conversation about what reform should look like and who should decide. An elemental part of the conversation was helping readers frame the inextricable relationship between educational reform and structural social reform. Eugene Alsandor exclaimed in *The Black Panther*, if social reform is to be "meaningful and successful, if it is to permeate throughout the nation and affect every household such a change must inevitably be reflected in the educational institutions" (1968, 20). For the radical Black press, this required both deposing the cultural and institutional legitimacy of white supremacy as well as reaffirming the rights of Black Americans to have a voice in determining the conditions and context of learning. These sentiments were articulated

across ideological lines, with Black Nationalists, Marxists, Pan Africanists and civil rights activists advocating for educational reform.

The papers took particular care to offer a counterpoint to establishment media's coverage of educational policy issues. Akin to contemporary corporate media today, 1960s mainstream press actively colluded with federal education policy interests, reifying discourse aimed to subject Black children to a deficiency status, and further justifying federal policy. Deficiency discourse flooded 1960s mainstream press. In 1963 *Nation* magazine first reported on the "educational achievement gap" between Black and white children (7). It was an opening salvo in a tradition of deploying Black deficiency discourse to call for greater government intervention in the lives of Black communities. Soon after, the *Coleman Report* used the phrase "gap in achievement" to describe the variance in achievement between white and Black students (Coleman et al., 1966, 220). Almost invariably the term was used in reference to performance differences in state sponsored achievement test scores (Anderson, Medrich, & Fowler, 2007, 548). In ways that elucidate Chomsky's "manufacturing of consent" above, the mainstream media was used as a broker to manufacture a deficiency myth, which helped set in motion state-mandated and corporate-backed testing regimes to address "the gap" (Au, 2009).

This media practice gained momentum following the 1965 publication of Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case of National Action*. Subsequent mainstream media coverage of the report served to reinforce popular perceptions of Black cultural and social deficiency. The report's language and content framed the lived experience of Black children in terms of shortage of resources, lack of cultural capital and cyclical degradation. The report identified deficiencies that Black children walk into the classroom with and justified the placement of Black children in white-controlled surroundings, beyond the harmful radius of "deprived" community conditions (Patterson, 2004).

The radical Black press took on the rhetorical maneuvers of mainstream press, with ripostes that unearthed its underlying assumptions. In 1964 *Muhammad Speaks* appropriated "achievement gap" discourse to address the "gap" between white supremacist schoolbooks and racially inclusive texts. Likewise a 1970 *The Black Panther* covered the "silent gap" between Black students' demand for relevant curriculum and the alienating nature of public school curriculum (5). They also confronted the subtext of Moynihan's report, which implied that Black people failed to produce meaningful lives for their children. Moynihan's reforms were framed as disingenuous and imperialistic. A 1965 editorial in *Muhammad Speaks* remonstrated the report's characterization of Blacks as lazy, unintelligent and preoccupied with "self-pity and self-indulgence" needing "only an 'education' in order to cure all these and many other injustices." Instead the editorial directed readers to understand the report as a "typical" colonial project "to teach whiteness whenever and wherever he can, even if he has to humble himself to the Black man to do so" (15).

The papers were keen to employ the voices of Black students to remonstrate mainstream educational reporting. For instance, when Black students occupied Cornell University's Willard Straight Hall, demanding reforms to the Africana Studies program, *Time* described the incident as a "crisis in a week of chaos that almost destroyed Cornell and deeply alarmed universities throughout the U.S." (Trillin, 1969). By contrast, *Muhammad Speaks* did not talk about the students, but *through* them. The press ran a special report, homing in on student demands, interviewing protestors, publishing their writing in the paper, and concluding with the students, that substantive curricular reforms were needed nation wide (1969).

After Black student demonstrators at the University of Wisconsin, Madison were met by 2,100 National Guard troops equipped with bayonets, gas pellets and machine guns, a perplexed *New Yorker* exclaimed that "[n]obody could understand their action: the university had consciously recruited Negroes; [and] had established a special committee to assist them ... " (1969, 4). That same week, *Muhammad Speaks* heralded the protesters as the "vanguard of revolution" evidencing a "new breed" of Black students. Adam Clayton Powell told the paper that "[y]oung people are all through with their preachers, politicians and parents, who have led them on a downward spiral that is sickening. They are trying to find a way out of this cult of mediocrity" (1968, 26).

Many of the youth voices covered in the papers were altogether invisible in the mainstream press. When Black students in High Point, North Carolina were suspended for formally requesting the school board add Black Studies, *The Black Panther* covered the story whereas local press made no mention of the incident (1970, 17). Further, *The Black Panther* published dozens of stories about the abuse and criminalization of Black students at the hands of teachers and officers in what it described as "maximum security" high schools (1970, 26). The paper put an unprecedented national spotlight on the issue of police violence against children and adolescents. Vivid personal accounts were published to give voice and dimension to the lived oppression of high school students. In a March 1970 edition of *The Black Panther* two fifteen-year-old Black students explicated an encounter outside of school, where police officers struck one student

> "with his billy club; he was standing in front of me so it bashed my check bone. I fell down and the next one snatched me up and hit me with his club, he struck the other side of my face in the same place. I fell again and the third police snatched me by my collar and stood me up. He didn't use a club, he smashed my jaw with his right fist … ."

The other student's injuries required hospitalization because "there is damage to the brain, enough so that he cannot get a solid nights sleep without quite possibly never waking up again." The incident went unreported in the local and national press.

Such graphic first-person narratives were not treated as isolated, which was, and is, conventional in mainstream press, but were mined for deeper meaning. Stories of school-sponsored violence and repression were viewed as part of concurrent racial and socioeconomic disparities in law enforcement and education. The paper identified a linear relationship between the two. This relationship is today identified as the "school to prison pipeline" (Wald & Losen, 2007). With prescience, *The Black Panther* connected the modalities of power and discursive practices that undergird both schools and prisons, thereby facilitating transition from one to the other. In doing so they brought to life a coherent narrative arc about schools and prisons that not only countered master narratives about Black criminality, but offered deep structural analysis in place of shallow mainstream news coverage. In doing so, they demonstrate that investigative journalism, embedded in communities and written in an environment free of corporate oversight can foster deep, multidimensional stories that help readers build necessary context to think critically about school reform. Herein lay important lessons for contemporary resistance to neoliberal educational projects.

So, where do we go from here?

The 1970s witnessed the gradual dissolution of the radical Black press. Following the state-sponsored dismantling of the Black Panther Party, *The Black Panther* faded out of circulation. Leadership changes within the Nation of Islam led *Muhammad Speaks* – renamed *Muslim Journal* – to become more internally oriented, focusing on organizational news. Yet, prior to their nadir, *The Black Panther* and *Muhammad Speaks* demonstrated a vast body of rhetorical tactics that moved against empire in creative and communally meaningful ways. In doing so they call us to not only critique neoliberalism but to work productively towards democratic possibilities. As Harvey (2005) observes, the current neoliberal project is, in part, a reaction to the radical activism of the 1960s and 70s. That conversation cuts both ways – just as neoliberals attempt to divorce "liberty" from social justice, radical thinkers of the 1960s offer creative insight on how to counter the discursive practices of neoliberalism. The history of the radical Black press provides enduring lessons on how to look at multiple modes of analysis and multiple strategies of resistance. As activists, teachers and scholars look for ways in which the relentless storytelling of neoliberalism can be challenged, the radical Black press offers two important lessons for us to consider.

First, we are obliged to nurture counter narratives that are intellectually honest and psychologically satisfying. By focusing efforts on critique alone, we lose the opportunity to compel peoples' imagination with alternatives to a neoliberal world. Co-founder of *The Black Panther*, David Hilliard (2007), reminds us that "to urge change" we must use "the pen alongside the sword" (3). We read Hilliard's metaphor for activism to include both cutting analysis alongside creativity. Granted, new counter narratives open up the likelihood that justice-minded actors devise a master narrative of their own. However, history bears witness to the effectiveness of counter narratives that acknowledge the rhetorical and political force of hope in alternative outcomes. Furthermore, as the radical Black press demonstrates, respective counter narratives can have deeply divisive visions of hope and still move important criticisms forward. *The Black Panther*'s editors assailed the racially essentialist logic of the Nation of Islam and *Muhammad Speaks'* contributors attacked the dogmatism of the Panther's Marxism. Yet, they collectively identified "a world of evil" and informed communities to aid the struggle to creatively think and work a way out (*Muhammad Speaks*, 1973, 18).

Secondly, the radical Black press directs us to work *from* and *for* communities. Despite being national papers, *The Black Panther* and *Muhammad Speaks* operated on community appeal. This was central to their logic and their sense of hope. Most likely it was also the source of their success in presenting compelling rhetoric that helped marginalized communities engage with dominant policy discourse. The papers drew on community power as a resource for alternative revenue streams and to nurture their visions of reform. Freed from corporate influence, the papers could resist anti-democratic practices that limit political agency. In turn educators, grassroots activists and scholars made intellectual inroads – forwarding fresh insight on, school governance models, alternatives to punitive disciplinary practices, anti-racist progressive pedagogy and multicultural curriculum. Ultimately, they did their work in a language designed to actually reach people. Beyond their intellectual commitment to Marxism and Black Nationalism, the editors of *The Black Panther* and *Muhammad Speaks* put the immediate realities of oppressed people ahead of the veracity of their respective ideologies. In so doing, they evoke us to interrogate our ideological alliances and consider *who* we are trying to reach in the critique of corporate mainstream media.

We contend that justice-minded teachers, activists, and scholars are well served to consider the critical and creative attributes of the radical Black tradition when redressing corporate media's coverage of neoliberalism. All too often, corporate media confirms the dogma of neoliberalism's view of education as another commodity that should pay for itself and have the prospect to generate surplus capital for shareholders. Cable news and national newspaper outlets have normalized language like "accountability," "high standards," and "school choice." In turn neoliberal policies – such as, hiring uncertified teachers, cutting extracurricular activities, charterizing school districts and eschewing dynamic curriculum in place of standardized tests – are increasingly accepted by the public as appropriate reforms.

The radical Black press provides a media model of critical and community oriented professional journalism. It was in relentless pursuit of the dominant media narrative, identifying its collusions with state and corporate power and shedding light on the silenced aspirations of millions. Collectively they serve as a beacon that corporate media can be creatively and democratically exorcised out of their rhetorical possession of communities most vulnerable to neoliberal designs.

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Critical Education

ISSN 1920-4175