

Reflections on Whiteness

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Integrating Upward Bound in the 1960s

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When I was 13 in 1966, I was one of three White girls recruited from the North to help integrate a newly launched enrichment program, Upward Bound (UB), at Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana. I am now in my seventies, and while clearing my office of decades of accumulated paper, I came across a cache of my old letters from that formative time in my youth. My letters provide a perspective on how one privileged young teen on her own responded to a tense and uncertain moment in US history. This close-up view also provides the opportunity to consider some of the ways White advantage is locked in, as legal scholar Daria Roithmayr describes it. Whiteness is “self-reinforcing and cumulative,” but also specific to my own life course, in time and place (Roithmayr 2014, 6). My youthful experiences have influenced my adult choices, shaping my identity and the ways in which I try to practice anti-racism. To better link my adult reflections to my experiences as a teen in 1966, let’s back up to 1960.

Yankees in the South

From 1960 to 1963, my White family—my parents, my two older sisters, and I—lived in Chapel Hill, North Carolina; I was in third to fifth grades. We were Yankee interlopers. My family had moved from Ohio for my father’s work as a postdoctoral researcher in sociology at the University of North Carolina. While there, we marched in protest of segregated restaurants, movie theaters, and drugstores; helped with voter registration drives; staged sit-ins; and were threatened by gun-wielding White men.

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As a child, racism and segregation were black and white issues to me. Literally, there were Black and White people; racism and segregation were wrong; and my White family, in protesting segregation, was right. As a girl also busy with horseback-riding and painting lessons, my own Whiteness was mostly unmarked to me. I attended third grade at Estes Hills Elementary School in 1960, which that year was the site of what historian Marcelus Barksdale labeled “partial integration” (Barksdale 1986, 32). I only remember walking to school and playing kickball on the rut-filled, sandy lot there. That I have no recollection of my school’s integration efforts is likely due to my Whiteness: I was not bused to school or harassed for attending.

My unsubtle childhood distinctions have a certain purity, but they did not center those most affected by racism, nor did they recognize that local people were (and are) powerful organizers. I now know that my family’s activities were modest and only possible due to the courage and sacrifice of so many people over decades. My father, Don Irish (1919–2017), documented our family involvements. His photographs of protest marches in Chapel Hill (fig. 1) provide a backdrop for my later role in New Orleans in the UB program, another opportunity facilitated by my father.

Just prior to our departure from North Carolina for Minnesota in 1963, my family joined others in Chapel Hill to support a public accommodations

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Fig. 1. March in support of the public accommodations law at the intersection of Henderson and Franklin in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, with the Battle building complex on the campus of the University of North Carolina in the background, 1963. Photo by Don Irish.

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law (PAL) that was being considered by the city council. The newly formed Chapel Hill Committee for Open Business (COB)—a grassroots effort to desegregate businesses and pressure city officials—decided to hold a march on May 25, 1963, in support of the PAL. This law would have banned racial discrimination in public places—hotels, restaurants, gas stations, theaters, and stores. This initial COB-organized march was the start of a summer of marches, held three times a week. Long rows of people under the hot sun, with heat radiating from the asphalt and humidity surrounding us, occupied the main street of Chapel Hill in support of the PAL, walking on blacktop marked with parallel white lines.

The five of us marched with others through downtown Chapel Hill that summer. The photo shows us walking past Battle-Vance-Pettigrew Hall, on the University of North Carolina campus. I realize now that my father's photo juxtaposes civil rights marchers and a campus building commemorating racist leaders, a circumstance both jarring and all too common then and now. Right there in the frame is a building named for Kemp Plummer Battle, president of the university during the White supremacist Redemption period, Zebulon Vance, governor of North Carolina during the Civil War and Redemption period, and James Johnston Pettigrew, brigadier general in the Confederate army. The Battle Hall complex was a building from the same era (1912) as many other monuments to the Confederacy erected during a surge of virulent racism.

Another image shows us marching past the Colonial Stores (fig. 2). As a child, this property to me was just one in a series of segregated facilities. As an adult with graduate degrees in architectural history, I contemplate the ways in which the Colonial Stores, both in name and in building style, recall the eighteenth century, when brickwork and broken pediments were typical of antebellum architectural designs, both of southern plantation mansions and northern merchant houses. Scholar George Lipsitz has deepened my understanding of spatial politics. To secure freedom, he writes, "African American battles for resources, rights, and recognition not only have 'taken place,' but also have required blacks literally to 'take places.'" The marches down the streets of Chapel Hill in the summer of 1963—past campus, churches, stores, restaurants, and gas stations—were one of many instances of the "power of the Black spatial imaginary and its socially shared understanding of the importance of public space" (Lipsitz 2014, 52).

If PAL had passed, it would have been the first public accommodations ordinance in the state, and in the South. By late May, the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Merchants Association "urged its members and other public businesses to end without further delay all discriminatory practices" (Barksdale

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Fig. 2. Double line of people march in support of the public accommodations law in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1963. This photo looks west down Franklin Street, probably between Roberson and Graham Streets. Photo by Don Irish.

1986, 35). That was the word; deeds were much harder to accomplish. Although 165 retail businesses were at least nominally desegregated by that summer, there were still a number that were not. On June 25, 1963, the board of aldermen tabled the ordinance, 4–2. In January 1964, the board of aldermen rejected a local PAL altogether, sparking more protests (Barksdale 1986, 40). By then, my family had moved to Minnesota.

Freedom Schools and White Citizens Council Schools

While my family was marching in North Carolina, Black Mississippians were organizing voter registration drives and Freedom Schools. These Freedom Schools, formally proposed by Charlie Cobb, a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the Mississippi delta, became a regional, grassroots, and independent school system, parallel to state-supported schools. Recognizing the inadequacy of public education for Mississippi's Black children, activists recruited about 280 volunteer teachers in 1964 to develop a curriculum that stressed citizenship, civil rights history, and African American literature, politics, and culture.

Freedom School learners met in community homes, storefronts, and churches to explore “a humanities-based curriculum that taught political efficacy, social

critique, and the organizing strategies employed in the civil rights movement.” More than 2,000 students attended 41 Freedom Schools, despite bombings and other threats from White terrorists (Hale 2016, 5, 12, 77). Freedom Schools recognized young people as key participants in the civil rights struggle. In Meridian, Mississippi, in early August 1964, 90 student delegates from Freedom Schools gathered to develop a youth platform for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

In marked contrast to the values and structures of Freedom Schools in Mississippi in the 1960s, White Citizens Councils (WCC) established all-White schools. “Council schools” were among White people’s responses to the May 1954 US Supreme Court *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision that mandated school desegregation. White families started these council schools and pulled their children out of public schools to avoid integration. In 1964, the WCC opened its first private academy in Jackson, Mississippi, providing a model for private school education throughout the South. According to journalist Vanessa Williams in the *Washington Post*, “more than 750,000 white children are estimated to have attended more than 3,000 segregated academies during the first half of the 1970s” (Williams 2019).

Here is the thing: these council schools siphoned public funds intended for public schools into the council schools. For example, “in 1964, at the Council’s urging, the Mississippi legislature passed legislation appropriating \$185 per child in vouchers for private school tuition and allowing the free use of state textbooks in private institutions. . . . Although these vouchers were eventually ruled unconstitutional, the availability of public funding encouraged schools to open and provided a crucial financial base in their tenuous early years” (Fuquay 2002, 164).

Similarly, Louisiana provided “state tuition grants that allowed parents to exercise ‘freedom of choice’ in educating their children. By October 1962, such grants paid partial or total tuition costs for more than 5000 children in Louisiana” (Rogers 1993, 75).

Although education for Blacks in the United States has been egregiously unequal for a very long time, scholar Jon Hale also notes that Black public schools had integrity, “despite legal segregation and woeful underfunding,” using “hidden transcripts of resistance” (Hale 2016, 91). White students were also deprived of critical knowledge. In fact, in terms of the histories of systematically marginalized people, we are all miseducated. Historian Carol Anderson writes: “African Americans weren’t the only ones who took a hit [in the effort to halt Black advancement]. The states of the Deep South, which fought *Brown* tooth and nail, today all fall in the bottom quartile of state rankings for educational attainment, per capita income, and quality of health” (Anderson 2016, 96).

Ellen Ann Fentress’s personal account of her experience in a “seg academy” amplified others’ “sadness and bitterness about how the experience distorted their sense of racial reality” (Fentress 2019; Williams 2019). I did not attend a “seg academy,” but the Whiteness of my public school’s curricula and suburban environment in 1960s Minnesota reinforced dominant cultural narratives that remained largely invisible to us White students. It was a white-on-white world with few contrasts. Ironically, my own White advantages allowed my family and me to step outside of our familiar contexts to gain some understanding of non-White experiences.

Upward Bound

A federally funded program called Upward Bound provided another response to segregated education, which led to my return to the South for a brief time. As the daughter of a college teacher and as an occasional college teacher myself, it is no surprise that I value education. The framework and implementation of learning situations, though, diverge enormously, from council schools to Freedom Schools, from indoctrination to open inquiry, from rigid ideologies to broad intellectual and emotional exploration. Teachers, students, setting, structure, funding, and philosophy all affect formal and informal education, of course. My childhood was defined by informal experiential education as my activist parents plunged us into struggles for social justice. Life experiences continue to provide me with rich and challenging lessons, many of which have occurred outside of school.

In 1966, I arrived in New Orleans with two other White girls from the North to integrate the UB program at Xavier University. UB was created in 1965 as part of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. It aimed to “help underachieving low-income high school students prepare for higher education” through immersive summer programs and tutoring and counseling during the school year (Office of Economic Opportunity 1970, 1). According to a 1972 dissertation, “The National UB program in 1966 had two major purposes: first, it would prepare talented poverty youth for college, and second, it would demonstrate that the traditional academic failure patterns of such youth were reversible, and it would thus attempt to initiate changes in the educational system. The two-year curriculum of the Project stressed reading, writing, and mathematics, coupled with understanding of self and others” (Seelie-Fields 1972, 46).

As a federal program, UB was required to be racially integrated. I recall that some of the southern White families who signed up to participate in the Xavier enrichment program had been threatened with violence and

they withdrew their children, but I have not been able to confirm that threats occurred that summer at UB Xavier. In any case, the Xavier organizers found themselves short of White youths to join their inaugural UB program, and three sociologists in Minnesota and Wisconsin asked their daughters, including me, to go south. My dad taught sociology at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, which had a faculty and student exchange with Xavier during this time. The fathers of the other two girls were academics at the University of Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Because in 1966 there was no digital communication and long-distance calls were still a big deal, I reported back to my parents in frequent letters, which my father saved. My family also wrote to me, but I do not have those letters; I called home twice during my six weeks in New Orleans.

Retrieval of my educational experiences with UB at Xavier in 1966 is like peering through patchy fog: a few sharply visible recollections, whereas others remain obscure. I must rely on sensory memories and those letters that I wrote home. What I remember clearly are the flaky, warm biscuits in the dining hall, the incense during Mass, and my palpable fear. Although I am frustrated by my partial recall, that summer shaped my 13-year-old self and the future me. So, I have linked my sometimes indistinct personal history in 1966 with a broader view.

The three of us teens—I was 13 and the other two girls, Sue J and Kris B, may have been 14 or 15—met in Milwaukee, where Kris lived. Sue J and I had taken the train from St. Paul to Milwaukee and spent the night with Kris's family. The next day, June 11, the three of us flew from Chicago to New Orleans, arriving a couple of days ahead of the other UB students. It was my first solo plane trip. My younger self reported: "I'd much prefer the plane to the train any day!! Oh! It was wonderful! Everything's so little. We got to see clouds and the La. bayous! We had a luscious 'snack' on the plane—swiss cheese sand[wich] with turkey, pickles, milk, chocolate pudding with whipped cream, etc. (If that's their snack, what are their dinners like) Anyway, I'm stuffed. We got here at 5:30 N.O. time. We got a terribly warm welcome! (88 degrees pun! pun!) the only way you can get cool here is to pray! (The chapel's air conditioned.) Gosh! Is it HOT!!!" Of course, flying in 1966 is practically unrecognizable compared with the cramped misery of coach plane travel now, with pretzels if you are lucky!

Not only was flying new to me, but so also was Catholicism. Our guardian for the summer was Sister Paul Mary and her order, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, which had founded Xavier in 1915. Just the phrase, "Blessed Sacrament," was exotic to me. I was fascinated by the schedule of prayer and work that the nuns observed. Sister Paul Mary was on the biology faculty

at Xavier. A thin, White woman, she had an easy laugh, a warm demeanor, and considerable energy. She embodied much of what my family valued: commitment to interracial work, determination to promote social justice, frugality, and a sense of humor. For a brief time that summer, I imagined converting to Catholicism and becoming a nun. This short-lived idea was due to my admiration and trust of Sister Paul Mary rather than any flash of faith.

Chapel at 7:30 a.m. was required for us students, and I was initially eager to go. I reported in a letter that evening about what then happened in Mass that first morning: “I started to shake from cold and sweat about the same time and then my stomach turned over and as we were kneeling I just got up and sat down. I guess I fainted which sort of scares me because I have never fainted before. Then I got up and walked out and 3 nuns came out to see what was wrong which made me feel pretty dumb. Anyway, I walked back to my room and I guess I’m O.K. now, tho[ugh] my stomach’s sort of wheezy.”

The smell of incense had been nauseating. My Minnesota Quaker self was not yet acclimated to the heat, the religion, or the distance from home. My parents had been raised Methodist, met in college at Wesley Foundation functions, and married in 1942. When my father became a conscientious objector during World War II, he and my mother joined the Society of Friends (Quakers). What was familiar to me were silent meetings for worship in modest buildings among small groups. In my religious world, there were no candles, no cloying incense smells, no liturgy, no prayer books, and certainly no priests or nuns. Right out of the gate, then, I was disoriented and homesick in New Orleans, with this probable panic attack as evidence.

On the campus of Catholic, historically Black Xavier University, with 60 or so Black kids and a sprinkling of White kids from around Louisiana, we three joined in the summer classes and each lived with our Black roommates for six weeks. One of my letters provided exact numbers: “Right now there are 6 white girls (3-N.O.) to 19 Negro girls and there must be 40 boys about 4 of them La. white kids. We’re the only ones from out-of-state.” My roommate, Linda D, was from Eunice, Louisiana, with a family of three brothers and five sisters. Eunice, which I visited later in the summer, was about 160 miles west and north of New Orleans. Unfortunately, I have lost track of Linda, and my self-absorption prevented me from learning much about her that summer. Shortly after my fainting spell, I wrote another letter home. I reported: “After the kids came we went over to a steak dinner (which I didn’t feel like eating) and then went to an assembly. We had several speakers and then were presented gold berets while we learned a

reworded song of the 'Green Berets.' I guess we're going to have the works—math, music appreciation, choral music, reading, English, phy.ed., grades, tests, etc. I'm not sure whether I'm looking forward to this or not!!!"

Four days into my stay at Xavier, I was struggling with my range of emotions and with the challenge of a hot, humid summer on the Gulf. Many of my letters ended: "P.S. Please excuse the mess, it's so hot I can't see straight! Miss you lots!!!" On June 15, I reflected:

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I don't know whether you noticed or not but my last letter had a pretty negative attitude of Xavier in it! Well, I've given it a little more time and thought and I decided I like it here very much. This sounds pretty dumb but my whole problem down here is a bad case of homesickness, pride and making friends. Let me explain more before you get mad! (I don't think you will tho')

Coming down here I've discovered a lot about myself I didn't know! For one I discovered I am terribly proud and I am really prejudiced against Negroes. I [am] ashamed to admit it, but I feel terribly hurt being associated with people who come from lower class areas and who have a poorer education than I. I've never felt this way before. Then there's always making friends. Kris and Sue are great kids, but I don't like to segregate things.

Everybody is terribly polite and friendly, but the gap isn't covered. Everybody's from Eunice or Sunset, La. and most of the kids know each other. My roommate is very sweet but . . . well, it's hard to explain . . . everybody seems to be in cliques. Everybody's as friendly as they can be and I think I'm being friendly (considering my roommate woke me up at 4:45 a.m. this morning by turning on her radio w/o earphone to read!) But I don't know if you understand . . . but there's a pit in my stomach like something's missing. Then there's the language barrier—they may as well be speaking Spanish as far as I'm concerned! I hope you [are] not as disappointed in me! (As you can tell I'm sort of mixed up!)

I now want to say to my younger middle-class self that at least I was able to name some of my prejudices and recognize that I felt threatened by differences. Adult me wants to hug younger me in acknowledgment of how hard I was trying. Linda, my roommate, was from a family of nine children, compared with the three girls in my family. That is just one instance of the contrasts in our lives in addition to class, racialization, geographic location, and religion.

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Ten days later, I wrote: “I realize these kids had a poor education but I was shocked when a boy was asked where France was and he looked in South America! Another person couldn’t think of the countries in North America!” A few days later I wrote: “Sue + Kris aren’t in any of my classes except Biology—they spread the pale faces around.” Beyond being homesick, I was not really aware of my loneliness, compounded by southern draws that were foreign to me. Clearly, I was worried that my parents would be disappointed in me; they expected me to cope, but I had few emotional tools.

In addition to other identities, there was gender. I was an awkward and intimidated girl in the presence of boys. That comes through in my June 15 letter: “I thought I made a friend a couple of days ago when I beat this boy at two games of ping pong (he was pretty rotten, really, but took it very well!) We sat down for lack of anything else to do (his name is Jim, he’s Negro and 15 yrs. old) and he wanted to go outside for some fresh air (he might have but I doubt it) so I gave him the cold shoulder and told him I was dying to play volleyball (which was the last thing I wanted to do).”

And the next day’s letter: “Jim has now started working on Kris! Gosh! The boys down here are polite! Today 2 boys asked if they could carry my raincoat and they always open doors, etc. Whew!!” The gender dynamics certainly distressed me; although I may have given a “cold shoulder” to a boy or two, internally I felt like a hot mess, that summer and for years to come.

Compared with Freedom School curricula focused on African American literature and culture, the UB curriculum seemed aligned with the White mainstream. UB youth were expected to perform adequately in predominantly White institutions, and there apparently was little effort to expand the education of young Black students beyond White frameworks. The program did hold student council elections, which faintly echoed the 1964 development of the youth platform for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. For enrichment, we took field trips, including to a water purification plant, a Pepsi-Cola bottling plant, and the Michoud Assembly Facility for NASA rockets. We also went bowling and swimming and had weekly dances. Sister Paul Mary took us out-of-state girls separately to visit the psychiatric ward at Charity Hospital and on a trip through bayous on the Mark Twain riverboat; we three midwesterners visited Jackson Square on our own. The nuns also took a few of us to the Gulf shore, where we all got miserably sunburned. I was surprised that my very dark-skinned roommate Linda was as uncomfortable as I was with blistering skin.

There seemed to be no set reading list or writing prompts for English. I mentioned on June 29: “I’m halfway thru Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage* + almost done with Rawlings’ *The Yearling*. Our English teacher gave us *To Kill*

a Mockingbird [by Harper Lee] this morning.” I also read Edita Morris’s *Flowers of Hiroshima*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith, and Morris West’s 1959 novel, *The Devil’s Advocate*. The books we read in UB Xavier only included one Black author, as far as I know. In a July 19 letter I reported: “We’ve been having seminars on vocations. . . . We have guest speakers—dentists, anesthesiologists, bankers, etc. Last Friday we had a really EXCELLENT speaker from the American National Bank. His stories were hilarious, but brought out some good points—be prepared, work hard, get an education, and NOTHING can stop you. His life story reminded me of Booker T. Washington’s Up From Slavery.”

I have no memory of any critiques of our readings in 1966. Considering the texts now, I note that Rawlings’s novel used the n-word and “Injuns” and had some dialect. Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* is widely praised for its literary merit, but her text presents African American characters in largely negative ways as superstitious or dirty. Lee’s book was and still is required reading for secondary school students and thus remains influential as a story familiar to several generations. These representations matter in the context of such a dearth of material presenting historically oppressed people in any positive way.

Educators were concerned about the derogatory depictions in these books. They founded the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) in 1965 in response to the need in Freedom Schools for self-affirming, quality literature. Organizers were alarmed by racist and sexist treatments of African Americans in available children’s publications and distressed by the lack of suitable materials. As Banfield noted: “The educators involved had come to recognize that books reflect the values of a society. They also had to recognize that, from its inception, the United States was a racist and sexist society and that myths and stereotypes were invented to justify racist and sexist practices” (Banfield 1998, 17). The CIBC was an effort to counter cumulative and damaging publications that reinforced White racism.

In addition to praising cooler weather, my letter home on June 23 indicated a shift in mood:

Just as I was about to resign from the human race the other night Providence stepped in! I’d felt so left out, everybody around here knows each other, etc. Anyway, Linda (my roommate, she’s a real funny (?) kid) anyway . . . she asked me to go home with her on the 4th of July weekend! Of course I accepted (is that all right, Sr. Paul Mary said to ask!) and I think I’m looking forward to it!

I just luv biology!! It's fascinating I haven't started chemistry yet! I get to skip math + music, but I have to keep study skills, English and social studies. The latter is the only one I don't yawn in!!

My parents granted permission for me to go home with Linda. On June 29, I sent a postcard that said: "I'll just repeat what S[ister] P[aul] M[ary] said to me. She said there is, of course, some danger in going to Eunice with Linda. But she said if we don't walk on main street, never go out at night alone, of course, stay with her family at all times, then I'll come back whole!!! (just kidding)" Thus, I went home with my roommate Linda for the Fourth of July. All the kids in her family slept in one bed so that I could have a bed to myself.

On July 11, I wrote home:

Now about the weekend!! We left on Friday at 2:00 P.M. We had one flat tire on the way but otherwise no mishaps! We got to Linda's house about 7:00 that evening. We went to bed early, got up at 6:00 with the rooster and Linda showed me her neighborhood. She lives across the tracks but has a very nice house compared to the rest of the neighborhood! Then she showed me her back yard. I helped her feed the chickens and I took lots of pictures of her house, chickens, pig named Dick and dog Timothy!

Sunday Linda's mother took us to Father Boucree's fair in Elton, La. He had asked me to stay with him over the Fourth. Thank heavens Linda asked me cuz the fair consisted of 3 booths and a hot dog stand!! That night I struggled through a 3-hour southern Baptist church session! WEIRD!! Monday found us waiting 4 hrs so we could go swimming as it was raining. Finally, we gave up and went home! We left again at 7:00 A.M. Tuesday.

I was really scared the first day but I was reassured after we walked around the neighborhood—nobody said anything just STARED!!!

In Eunice, I took nine photos with my Instamatic camera, including one of Linda and her brother on the wide front porch of their home. A low fence supported the mailbox that separated Linda's family's property from the street. The ridge roof of the broad house held a tall television antenna. Its pediment featured a louvered opening for ventilation (fig. 3). I remember nothing about the interior except having a bed to myself and being embarrassed about that. I mentioned in my letter that the house was "across the tracks." I suppose I saw that as a marker of poverty.

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Fig. 3. Exterior of Linda D's family home in July 1966, less than half a mile south of downtown Eunice, Louisiana. The home is no longer extant. Photo by Sharon Irish.

Behind Linda's house, a path of bricks led through the swept dirt yard, under a small sassafras tree, to steps up to a shed with a corrugated iron roof. Near the shed were chicken coops and a small tarpaper-covered structure. The pig and chickens roamed freely when I was there, pecking the ground underneath the clothesline. There was a fenced-in garden area and several fruit trees. My family in St. Paul did not have chickens, pigs, or dogs, and not much of a garden, because we traveled so much.

My main preoccupation during that weekend was my fear that the Ku Klux Klan would find and hurt me, although I had a vague awareness then that my presence in Eunice was far riskier for Linda's family than for me. Driving west to Elton, 16 miles away, with a White kid in the car seems like it could have stirred White people to violence against the family. I did receive a letter from Linda's family after my visit thanking me for my thank-you note, saying that they were glad to have had me in their home and inviting me back: they were definitely gracious hosts!

In a carbon-copy letter to relatives, my father described my time in New Orleans as “a maturing experience,” and I have no doubt it was. I returned to the Midwest on July 24, 1966, without much clarity about who I was or how I fit into the wider world, but with some awareness of the variety of experience among my peers and a large dose of humility after an intense six weeks. I was not completely heedless of the racialized scenarios in Louisiana, but I was young and served as something of a placeholder in attempts to alter racist behaviors and practices. Unlike the Louisiana youths in UB, I had not been immersed in the White terror of the midsixties. A week after my arrival back in St. Paul, on July 30, 1966, Black activist Clarence Triggs was murdered in Bogalusa, just north of New Orleans. He had attended civil rights meetings sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality. I was not aware of his death at the time, but I had felt the ever-present tension around me.

Integration and Coalition

“In the mid-1960s,” historian Kent Germany notes about New Orleans, “this city of almost 650,000 residents was one of the most impoverished, most unequal, most violent, and least educated places in the United States.” As Germany writes, the explanations for these problems are many, but each of them “was a direct product of a system organized by Jim Crow imperatives” (Germany 2007, 745). The federal government’s War on Poverty, including the UB program, was intended to address some educational challenges, but these efforts were conventional and aimed at social and economic stability. In other words, they reinforced the assumptions and structures of the White dominant culture. Yet, within this cluster of educational supports, job preparedness sessions, and parenting classes, some cracks opened in the old systems. For one, “using the government to integrate and assimilate black citizens instead of to segregate and alienate them represented a dramatic historical departure” (Germany 2007, 746). Although I believe most of the approaches revealed flawed assimilationist and individualist frameworks, the effort in New Orleans to move beyond Jim Crow was apparently decentralized and allowed for experimentation. Germany reported that “the broad War on Poverty helped a coalition of progressive interests move from the fringes of political power in the early 1960s to the center of it by 1970” (Germany 2007, 747). Some of that hard-won power accrued to Black political activists in community-based organizations who energized Black voters and set civic agendas for a time (Germany 2007, 744).

In addition to the faithful commitment of Sister Paul Mary at Xavier, another adult with whom I spent time in 1966, Dr. Norman Francis, also was

instrumental in cracking open old systems. As a teenager, I only knew that Dr. Francis held an important position at the university, then dean of men. In retrospect, he stands among the many courageous social justice activists who pushed over and over again for transformation. My letter home about my time with his family reported: “Last Sunday after getting back from the ‘Mark Twain,’ . . . Kris rushed up and said we were going to Ponchartrain Beach! . . . We went with the dean of men, Mr. [Norman] Francis, his 5 kids and wonderful wife! They paid our way if we looked after the kids and would go on their rides so they wouldn’t have to. I’m afraid they got jipped [*sic*]! I had a RIOT! The roller coaster is the GREATEST and we went on about 5 other rides. Their kids range from 1-1/2 to 10 yrs!”

I did not know it at the time, but Dr. Francis had earned his undergraduate degree from Xavier in 1952 and then was one of two Black students who integrated Loyola University Law School in New Orleans, although he had to live at Xavier because Loyola’s dorms were barred to him. He received his JD with honors in 1955, the law school’s first Black graduate. In 1961, as dean of men, he had secretly arranged housing at Xavier for the Freedom Riders, after they had been violently attacked in Alabama. In 1968, Dr. Francis was appointed the first lay, Black, and male president of Xavier; he retired 47 years later. My 1966 letter about the Francis family enthused: “Then we went out and bought 2 dozen hamburgers and a big jug of root beer and went back to their house and had a party! We got back to the dorm at 11:45 and had to wake up the house-mother to let us in!” When I later met Dr. Francis again, he was as gracious and friendly to me as he had been that night.

I write this article in 2024, when mostly White politicians and various leaders continue to deny our history and, in many locations, prohibit teachers and students the right to examine that history. Willful ignorance and racist miseducation carry huge costs for all of us, a perspective that Heather McGhee shares in *The Sum of Us*. She writes about an “all-out assault on honest education that [is sweeping] local school districts. . . . Conservatives brazenly opened a new front in the Lost Cause, the multi-generation campaign by white southerners to win the narrative over the Civil War, rewriting history through textbooks, public commemorations, and monuments to minimize the role of slavery and glorify antebellum culture” (McGhee 2022, 294–95). The costs of our White racism include perpetuating the appropriation, distortion, and erasure of Black histories and cultural wealth as well as the ongoing harms of lies, insults, and injuries to Black people.

UB Xavier in 1966 was an interracial effort, with some Black leadership. But racial integration in the United States all too often has meant that

White society sets the terms. Federal funding, regulations, and the context of Louisiana in the 1960s both aided and encumbered integration. As leading scholar Bettina Love notes, “The resistance to *Brown* anchored itself in a bureaucratic opposition that drew from across the political spectrum, gutted the aspirations of integration, and galvanized a new form of White rage by 1983: educational reform” (Love 2023, 41). Federal decisions and dollars fostered long-sought change in schools (sometimes as “educational reform”), but the bodies and minds of Black youths were still at risk. Black students were expected to assimilate into White educational systems, which were clearly not safe for them or designed for their success. Barely funded grassroots Freedom School organizers, on the other hand, experimented with radical democracy and aimed at coalition politics that centered Black experiences.

In 2020 William Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen published *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the 21st Century*. As a well-known political economist, Darity has spoken and written about racial and ethnic inequality for years; in their 2020 book, he and Mullen explain how “Black reparations can place America squarely on the path to racial equality” in a program of “acknowledgment, redress, and closure for a grievous injustice. Where African Americans are concerned, the grievous injustices that make the case for reparations include slavery, legal segregation (Jim Crow), and ongoing discrimination and stigmatization” (Darity and Mullen 2020, 1, 2).

The final chapter of Bettina Love’s most recent book, *Punished for Dreaming*, summarizes reparations efforts over the last two centuries, extensively citing Darity and Mullen. She argues that “the field of education provides Black people a clear path toward collectively reaching an agreement that sufficiently addresses harm, structural policies, and redress for educational injustice. . . . Educational reparations are not about creating a better education system that will benefit only Black children. Instead, all children benefit from an abundantly funded public education system” (Love 2023, 262–63). She analyzes school funding and spending nationwide, prior to focusing on K–12 school building conditions, curricula, and disciplinary punishments.

“The school buildings we are asked to enter, the suboptimal classes we are made to take, and the carceral logics that undergird schools must be repaired if we are ever to improve the conditions of Black folx and this nation as a whole,” she writes (Love 2023, 278). Love urges the formation of Community and School Reparations Collectives composed of community members, parents, and students to “lead the fullness of reparations within their districts and communities” (Love 2023, 286).

After being raised in my mobile activist family, I have spent most of my adult life in predominantly White Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, small mid-western adjoined cities that host the University of Illinois. While a parent of young children, I put most of my volunteer energy into mentoring and organizing in the public schools. Then, when my kids were older, I became an adjunct instructor at the university and joined a reading group for about five years focused on critical Whiteness studies. That group strengthened my intention to work in coalition with Black-led initiatives. One such initiative is a version of Love's "Community and School Reparations Collective," known as the Champaign-Urbana Reparations Coalition (CURC), formed in May 2023. CURC is building robust local support for acknowledgment, education, and legislation that aims to repair some of the harms of slavery and its enduring aftermath.

What coalition work means for me in practice is showing up to listen to what my Black collaborators say they need and then helping to meet those needs, checking my assumptions to keep my own behaviors from getting in their way, doing my best to keep usually White spaces open and accessible so that Black efforts flourish, and finding more resources to support their work. Let me be clear: Black people for a very long time have been doing effective work for justice, without me. Sometimes, however, I help provide more options by writing grants, soliciting donations, talking to other White people, and making connections to resources that are not usually available to grassroots organizations. I go to meetings so that my collaborators can do something else with their time. I take and distribute minutes so others can appear on the radio, lead discussions, or strategize about legislation. I blunder and stumble, care and contribute. I am grateful for the patience of my collaborators.

Sister Paul Mary and Dr. Francis worked in coalition in New Orleans in the 1960s; their leadership, that of others alongside them, and those who went before them demonstrate to me the remarkable bravery and tenacity necessary to push back against entrenched systems of oppression and White resistance to justice. Although harm reduction and repair for Black people are long overdue, I view reparations—acknowledgment of and apology for slavery and its legacies, continuing education about our shared histories, and financial compensation—to be urgent and essential to our present and future survival together.

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Abstract

Upward Bound (UB), created in 1965 to provide educational enrichment for low-income youths, had to be racially integrated. In 1966, I was among three White northern teens sent to integrate UB at Xavier University in New Orleans. My family had lived in North Carolina in the early 1960s, participating in civil rights actions, so I had had some exposure to White responses to integration. I excerpt my letters home that summer of 1966 to assess the essentially White curriculum of UB. Two years prior to my stint in New Orleans, Freedom Schools had emerged in 1964 in Mississippi. Freedom Schools were in stark contrast to White Citizens Council schools that flourished in response to the *Brown* decision. Freedom Schools and, to an extent, UB, offered powerful alternatives to segregated educational settings. As an older White woman shaped by the civil rights movement, I now work in a coalition for educational reparations.