

Jackson People's School: Student-Centered Pedagogy as a Planning Initiative

Sage Ponder

University of Texas at Austin
csponder@austin.utexas.edu

Willie Jamaal Wright

University of Florida
wrightw@ufl.edu

Fayola Jacobs

University of Minnesota
fayolaj@umn.edu

Noel Didla

Malcolm X Grassroots Movement
noelestherdidla@gmail.com

Theron Wilkerson

Jackson People's School
coffe3boi@yahoo.com

Akil Bakari

Malcolm X Grassroots Movement
abakari@netzero.com

Abstract

In August of 2017 an audit of Jackson Public Schools (JPS) conducted by the Mississippi Department of Education listed the school district as in a state of "extreme emergency." This emergency also coincided with other local infrastructural emergencies. Consistent with its historical disposition towards the majority-Black capital city, the Republican-dominated Mississippi State Legislature proposed an austerity measure that would result in the state's takeover of the city's public school system. This measure would have removed the rights of JPS and parents to determine how their children would be educated, supplanting their agency with that of an often-hostile State administrative body. JPS staved off the takeover, in part, via a partnership with the Kellogg Foundation. Desiring to supplement the city's public-private partnership with a student-centered approach to education, and in coordination with the Lumumba Mayoral administration's method of governing through community consensus, the authors initiated the Jackson People's School in early 2020. Modeled after the Freedom Schools of the Civil Rights Movement, Jackson People's School was a collective reading group designed to provide political education to teenage Jacksonians. Positioning the project as a radical planning initiative, we discuss the origins, pedagogy and successes and challenges of launching the Jackson People's Schools project immediately prior to the onset of a global pandemic in order to illustrate how politically oppressed groups build the skills to engage in radical planning practices in restrictive political environments.

Keywords

Jackson, MS; radical planning; anti-racist pedagogy; scholar-activist

Introduction

In August of 2017 an audit of Jackson Public Schools (JPS) conducted by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) listed the school district as in a state of "extreme emergency" (Skinner, 2017). This came after the Mississippi State Board of Education approved (4-to-1) a corrective action plan for JPS and was appointed to monitor this plan, as well as levy sanctions, "including the withdrawal of accreditation and a state takeover of the district" (MS Department of Education, 2016). The school system's emergency coincided with other local emergencies as well. Namely, the city faces a federal consent decree levied by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) mandating vastly unaffordable modifications to the city's aging water infrastructure. The city's aged water system is so fragile that it breaks down anytime a stress to its system occurs, which often happens given the city's location within the flood-prone Mississippi River system and changing, more extreme weather patterns caused by global climate change. The MDE framing of the school system's state of emergency was in part premised on this preexisting city-wide water-system fragility. As a result, and consistent with its historical disposition towards the majority-Black capital city, the Republican-dominated Mississippi State Legislature (which is itself also located in Jackson) proposed an austerity measure that would result in the state's takeover of the city's public school system.

This measure is not the first of its kind. In 2014 the Mississippi state legislature introduced House Bill 627, the "municipal government responsibility act," known as the "takeover bill" by those opposed to it. It was self-consciously styled after Michigan's financial

emergency management legislation for local governments, and was designed to specifically target the city of Jackson and the mayoral administration of the newly elected Chokwe Lumumba, Sr. When the bill failed to pass, thanks to heavy political organizing by its opponents, the Republican-dominated Mississippi legislature tried again to pass a similar bill in 2016, this time specifically targeting the city's municipal airport. Senate Bill 2162, dubbed the "airport takeover bill," was designed to wrest control of the Jackson-Medger Wylie Evers airport away from the city. After that attempt failed for similar reasons, the focus turned toward initiating a state-takeover of the city's public education system, which we examine here.

The proposed state takeover would have removed JPS's ability to determine how Jackson's children are educated through the public school system, supplanting the agency of Jackson's citizenry and school board with that of an often-hostile State administrative body. Emergency management would have exposed the city's school system to the risks of 'charterization,' the transformation of public schools into publicly funded but privately-owned and operated charter schools. Modeled in cities throughout the US, charter schools have been critiqued for having weak regulatory oversight, educational outcomes, and for contributing to the urban displacement of longtime residents; and in cities that have undergone emergency management, related privatization has proven to be ineffective in improving the efficiency and equity of public services (Seamster, 2018; Cohen, 2021; Santiago Ortíz, 2020).

Believing that a state takeover of locally governed institutions would be detrimental to the city of Jackson, Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba, supported by residents and civic groups, challenged the state's proposal. Then Governor, Phil Bryant, was eventually persuaded against a state takeover, and agreed to a third option that had been tabled by Mayor Lumumba—a collaborative effort between city and state mediated by a major philanthropic organization. The Kellogg Foundation, Governor Bryant, and Mayor Lumumba each appointed five members to a fifteen-person coalition, forming the Better Together Commission (henceforth referred to as the Commission). Though this third option shielded Jacksonians from the imminent hostile state takeover of JPS, which was Mayor Lumumba's objective in proposing the idea, the Commission nevertheless represents the kind of public-private partnership that dominates contemporary neoliberal governance and planning processes that overwhelmingly focus on metric-based regulatory outcomes rather than consensus-driven, community informed project development. That is to say, the purpose of the Commission is to revise the JPS curriculum according to national models, not to adapt it to local legacies, socio-material contexts, or the educational goals of local parents and residents.

In this sense, the Commission was overwhelmingly a compromise solution on all sides. Crucially, Mayor Lumumba avoided an outcome whereby an antagonistic State legislature would be empowered to insert and embed itself into the local governance structure of the city via the school system (as previously mentioned, a long-time legislative goal), while Governor Bryant obtained an outcome in which he could say that a well-respected privately managed philanthropic organization was implementing nationally recognized standards of education into JPS, thus conforming to the ideological mores of his Party and supporters.

Nevertheless, while Mayor Lumumba managed to successfully block direct State Legislative involvement in local governance, he remained sensitive to the specific unmet educational needs of Jackson's youth and was motivated to retain a policy focus on local

educational priorities despite being compelled to work within the parameters the Commission laid out. In this article we examine the framework developed by the Lumumba administration to govern through community consensus –which in turn informs his educational policy priorities– through a case study of the Jackson People’s School project. Positioning the project as a radical planning initiative, we begin to answer Beard’s (2003) call for urban planning literature to attend to discussions of how politically oppressed groups build the skills to engage in radical planning practice in restrictive political environments. First, we discuss the origins and purpose of Jackson People’s School, our political philosophy and pedagogical practice. Next, we focus on our successes and some challenges we faced while implementing this program prior to the onset of a global pandemic. Last, we discuss the project in terms of its implications for developing anti-racist planning practices, particularly including redesigning funding schemes and project management protocol to better fit the realities of working in a landscape impacted by multiple and overlapping socio-material crises.

The Jackson People’s School Project

Radical urban planning can be defined as the process of transforming oppressive structures to build more equitable futures (eg Friedman, 1987; Beard, 2003; Albrechts 2015). While radical planning is an oft neglected subfield of planning theory, there are a few theorists who have done the work of laying a foundation for understanding the possibilities that radical planning promises. Friedmann (1987) articulates radical planning as social transformation and mobilization (in contrast with more traditional forms of planning which he typifies as ‘social guidance’) that upend the status quo. Building on Friedmann’s work, Beard (2003) defines radical planning as efforts that “occur on a variety of scales to transform the social, political, and economic structures that create and maintain the status quo” (16). Albrechts (2015) describes three central concepts of radical planning as conflict (moving beyond centralized, rational planning knowledge to one of pluralities that encourages agonistic conflict), coproduction (citizens engaging in counter-hegemonic struggles), and legitimacy (where planning bodies are representative, creative, accountable, and innovative).

We envision the Jackson People’s School Project as a radical planning project in that it is an outcome of a community-determined, policy-oriented process. While radical planning traditionally occurs outside of the government’s purview, it is possible for a political party or state, such as Lumumba’s administration, to take part in transformative planning practices (Friedmann, 1987; Beard, 2003). Drawing inspiration from the Mississippi Freedom Schools developed during the Civil Rights Movement, the Jackson People’s School project brings together the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM)¹, the Lumumba administration, city residents, and a university-based research team. Together we co-created critical learning spaces that honor the educational aims of Jacksonians to highlight the socio-spatial and political history of Jackson (and Mississippi more broadly) as a locus of the Civil Rights movement –and more broadly, the long-time home of Black radical movement organizing– and to do so in ways that center the dignity and intellect of Black children through after school and summer initiatives. Our intent was for the Jackson People’s School curriculum to serve as

¹ MXGM is a broad-based organization whose mission is to defend the human rights of Afrikan people in the United States.

a supplement to the Jackson Public Schools official curriculum and the changes made by the Better Together Commission.

To put it in terms of planning theory, the Commission was not designed to support specific learning outcomes desired by the local community, but rather those of established institutions, namely the state legislature and private philanthropic foundation, both of which tend to view public education in universalizing terms that identify standardization of educational attainment as a primary ambition. In line with Albrechts (2015) notion of coproduction as a political strategy that shifts the purpose of planning processes away from statutory regulation and toward collectively determined outcomes that mediate between established structures of power and community-determined priorities, we envisioned the Jackson People's School curriculum addressing topics often omitted in traditional curriculums, but which are nevertheless highly prioritized by Jackson residents themselves.

These topics were identified as community priorities through the Lumumba administration's reliance on Peoples' Assemblies, a collective form of consensus-building typically oriented to social- or policy action (eg Themba, 2021).² For instance, at the behest of the community, we sought to introduce students to issues of voter suppression through a people's history of Black Mississippians' historical and contemporary contributions to electoral and human rights politics through special guest lectures and reading circles. In sum, we understood the purpose of the Jackson People's School project to be threefold: 1) uplift public education in Jackson through literary and storytelling strategies that demonstrate the relationship between the art of communication and community transformation; 2) enhance and sustain a culture of intergenerational community engagement that leads to participatory governance and leadership succession in the city; and 3) initiate a grassroots model of education that promotes collective responsibility and builds community power.

Funding for the Jackson People's School was secured through an Antipode Foundation Scholar-Activist Project Award and was written collaboratively by representatives of the Lumumba administration, the Jackson coordinator for the MXGM, and an inter-collegiate research team. The idea for the project, however –and why we consider the project itself to be a radical planning initiative– is a product of the organizing and advocacy work of Jacksonians. City residents have ceaselessly demonstrated their political acumen through lawsuits, protests, and community meetings. During the early stages of the late Chokwe Lumumba mayorship (2013-2014), and that of the current Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba (2017-present), MXGM³ invited residents to take part in consensus-building People's Assemblies, wherein they brainstormed answers to issues impacting the city. During the assemblies, parents and city citizens expressed desires not only for Jackson youth to be educated in safe, well-functioning buildings⁴ (eg Backer & Rodriguez, 2025), but also for the content of their education to reflect the legacies and people's histories of the place in which they reside. Assembly participants believe that providing youth with an expanded awareness of the legacy of both struggles and resistances of Jackson residents will better prepare them

² For more on the history of Jackson People's Assemblies: <https://jxnpeoplesassembly.org/about/> last accessed Feb 28, 2025

³ At the time of their election, both Mayors Lumumba were members of MXGM.

⁴ Recently, for example, four schools within JPS went to virtual instruction due to having little to no water pressure (Hernandez, 2022).

to be civically engaged citizens of the city. It will also equip them with a sense that transformative politics are possible within Jackson and in Mississippi more broadly. Last, a people's history of Mississippi demonstrates for the city's youth that the Civil Rights Movement was coordinated and sustained by young people such as themselves, emphasizing their potential to personally impact change in the city today.

In keeping with the People's Assemblies focus on governing via direct democracy and its principles of collective self-determination, the Jackson People's School project uses student-centered pedagogy. During the planning phase of the project the facilitators agreed that a 'banking model of education, by which instructors provide information for students to memorize, would not suffice (see Freire, 2000). Rather, in keeping with the premise of freedom schools, every participant would be viewed and treated as a student-teacher. Moreover, we viewed the original Freedom Schools, and our adoptive model, as a form of Black study. Robin D.G. Kelley, in his essay, "Black Study, Black Struggle," argues that Black Studies is more than a disciplinary approach to knowledge creation housed within colleges and universities. The field of Black Studies is rather a product of Black study which he defines as a project of love and ruthless critique beyond the university:

For my generation, the formal classroom was never the space for deep critique precisely because it was not a place of love. The classroom was—and still is—a performative space, where faculty and students compete with each other. Through study groups, we created our own intellectual communities held together by principle and love, though the specters of sectarianism, ego, and just-plain childishness blurred our vision and threatened our camaraderie. Still, the political study group was our lifeblood—both on and off campus (Kelley, 2018).

Martha Biondi (2012), in *The Black Revolution on Campus*, further suggests that the discipline of Black Studies, though influenced by waves of student protests, was born of Black study between students and community residents who believed Black college students deserved an education that reflected their experiences and their lineage as descendants of Africa. Thus, although Black study may contribute to the expansion of equity within a given educational institution, as an educational model it is an independent form of collective knowledge production that pre-and supersedes it.

Student-centered Pedagogy as a Planning Initiative

The initial time frame provided for the development and completion of the project, set by the funding parameters, was one year. We intended to use this first year as a pilot program to illustrate the value of the endeavor to Jackson Public School system administrators and parents while also seeking additional funds from other sources to keep the project going in subsequent years.

The Jackson People's School curriculum was grounded in four pre-selected texts (listed in reading group order): *The Hate You Give* (Thomas, 2017), *Heavy* (Laymon, 2018), *Salvage the Bones* (Ward, 2011), and *Black Boy* (Wright, 1945). We chose these books for a number of reasons. First, they were written by Black Mississippians. An objective of the Jackson People's School is to expose Black youth to Black writers as central literary figures - not as addendums to their studies. Second, each of these texts address, across different time

periods, racialized, gendered, and spatialized experiences of Black youth and young adults coming of age in Mississippi and those who were a product of the Great Migration north. Therefore, students are introduced to the struggles waged by Black Mississippians, whether in cities like Jackson, or regions such as the Delta, the Gulf Coast, or the northern industrial cities their families sometimes moved to. We anticipated that discussions of a book like Richard Wright's *Black Boy* would provide an intimate look into the Great Migration and the role that Black Mississippians played in shaping the economies of the urban north and the country more broadly, and the racism they experienced in such places they hoped would be lands of promise and plenty. Last, we hoped that discussing these texts, which for many, are not read until college and adulthood, would impress upon our students that Black Mississippians have profoundly shaped the American literary canon.⁵

To ensure that each of the enrolled forty students could participate in the project, renowned author Kiese Laymon generously supplies copies of each of our required texts. Our initial desire was to host the project within an area high school. However, the relatively fast paced timeline of our project was at odds with the long-time horizon needed to develop the necessary relationships to JPS administrators and stakeholders, and we were unable to secure approval from the superintendent within the allotted time frame stipulated by the life of the grant. Therefore, we contacted a coordinator at the Boys & Girls Club of West Jackson (BGCWJ), with whom a member of our research team had a pre-existing relationship. Ultimately, the BGCWJ agreed to be our host organization and use its relationship with area youth to recruit participants for the Jackson People's School.

In anticipation of our initial meeting with the students, the research project team met thrice to discuss the purpose of the program. After our final meeting, during which time we discussed the initial launch of the Jackson People's School, our facilitator, Theron Wilkerson, who was also a local high school educator at the time, developed guiding questions along with a handful of team building activities. Our inaugural Jackson People's School session was held at the BGCWJ on Saturday, February 1, 2020. In attendance were the project team members, 12 student participants, one parent, and two veterans of the Civil Rights Movement - Hollis Watkins Muhammad and Frankye Adams-Johnson. We chose to ground the launch of the project in the sharing of stories about both of their life experiences as young organizers within the Civil Rights Movement throughout Mississippi to highlight commonalities between that era of struggle and the contemporary Movement for Black Lives.

⁵ Black literature has also shaped the subfield of Black geographies. This discipline, forwarded most notably through the research of Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, has roots in the work of Sylvia Wynter and Richard Wright. Woods (2017), in his study of the Mississippi Delta blues, borrows the terms "blues epistemology" from reflections of black sharecroppers made by Richard Wright in *12 Million Black Voices*.

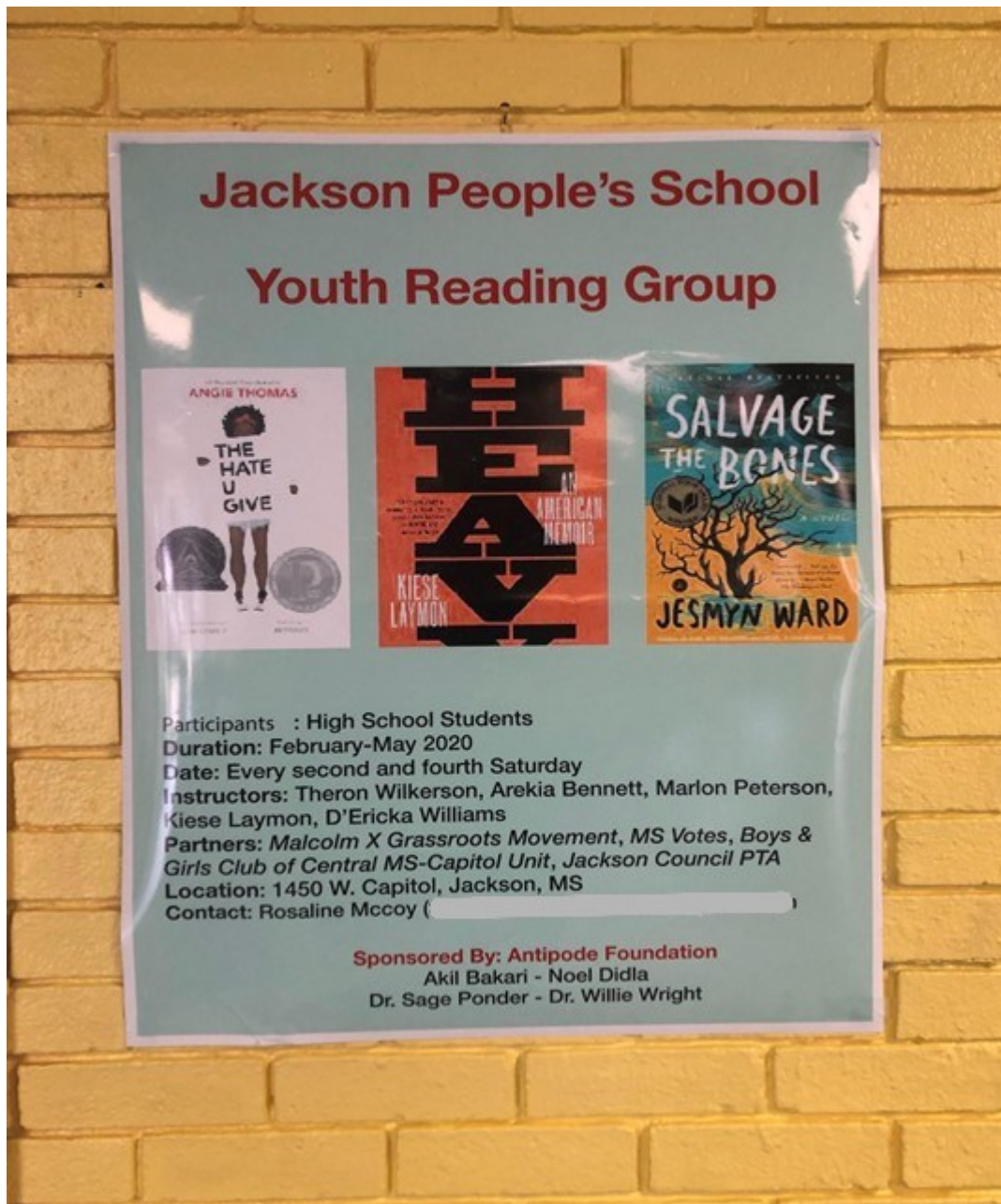


Figure 1. Poster advertising the Jackson People's School initiative at the Boys & Girls Club of West Jackson, Fall 2019 (Photo Credit: Noel Didla)

Learning through life stories

Hollis Watkins Muhammad was born in Chisholm Mission, Mississippi in 1941. One of a number of unsung members of the civil rights movement, Watkins Muhammad became a full-time member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) at the tender age of nineteen. Not much older than the student participants of the Jackson People's School, he joined SNCC after having been invited by Medgar Evers to attend a local civil rights meeting. One of his major projects was canvassing the town of McComb as he attempted to register Black residents to vote (Watkins & McInnis, 2015). Watkins Muhammad's dedication to ensuring civil rights illustrated that though many outside the South were swayed by the media's portrayal of singular, charismatic leaders -- in Mississippi and elsewhere (see Cole,

1997; Sams, Jr., 2015) it was "... the actions of young people [that] changed the thinking of adult[s]." ⁶ After meeting SNCC leader Bob Moses, Watkins Muhammad attempted to integrate the Woolworth's in McComb. This sit-in resulted in his arrest and thirty-one days in jail. A lifelong contributor to the struggle for human and civil rights, Watkins Muhammad would eventually form Southern Echo, an organization dedicated to training budding civil rights organizers (Interview with Hollis Watkins Muhammad, 2014). ⁷ He expounds on Southern Echo's educational mission in an interview for the University of North Carolina-Greensboro's *Unsung Heroes of the Civil Rights Movement* project:

Southern Echo is a leadership development, education, and training organization that provides training and technical assistance to individuals and organizations throughout Mississippi and the South. We do the training and technical assistance in a number of different areas. All areas, first of all, pertaining to politics. That means everything from how to conduct a voter registration. How do you conduct a successful political campaign. Duties and responsibilities of all elected officials. How bills become law. Redistricting. The whole gambit. (Interview with Hollis Watkins Muhammad, 2014)

Civic education, administered by organizers, was central to the development of civil rights organizers and the Civil Rights Movement. Without education on their civil rights, and training on civil disobedience, these bands of young black dissidents would have had a more challenging time shifting the moral and legal terrains of the South.

Frankye Adams-Johnson, also a civil rights veteran, grew up in Pochahontas, Mississippi. In 1963, while a seventeen-year-old senior at Brinkley High School, she became one of the brave students from several local high schools who participated in a walk out in support of the "Tougaloo Nine." The Tougaloo Nine were university students who staged a sit-in at Woolworth's in Jackson (University of Mississippi, 2001; Sykes, 2015). This collective act of civil disobedience led to her first arrest, after which, she and her compatriots were detained at the Jackson Fairgrounds. That same year, she was arrested for protesting the assassination of Medgar Evers. After this arrest, she was held at the Hinds County Jail, where she and other young women were terrorized by Jackson Police Department (JPD) officers. Over the course of the Civil Rights Movement, Adams-Johnson would mature throughout the movement as a Youth Regional Secretary for the NAACP, and subsequently, SNCC. Her transition to the SNCC came as a result of her belief that the organization was more assertive. ⁸

⁶ Digital SNCC Gateway, 2022, <https://snccdigital.org/people/hollis-watkins/>, accessed Feb 28, 2025

⁷ http://libresearch.uncg.edu/unsung_heroes/participants/hWatkins.html

⁸ Her decision was also determined by the difficulty she had in accepting the practice of nonviolence.



Figure 2: Frankye Adams-Johnson and Hollis Watkins Muhammad (center) share their life stories with Jackson People's School. Community educator Theron Wilkerson, left. (Photo Credit: Jamaal Wright)

Each veteran, a living testimony of the Mississippi's Civil Rights Movement, stunned the students and their parents. Their surprise was visceral in terms of facial expressions, body language, and susurrations throughout the room in learning that across the South, the Civil Rights Movement was led by young adults, and in many instances, high school students. SNCC leader and co-founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Bob Moses being described by Mr. Hollis as the 'old man' of the group, at the age of 25 was met with disbelief and shocked murmuring. Their surprise at the fact that the Civil Rights Movement was a strongly youth-led movement underscores the charismatic leader-centered educational approach of the Civil Rights Movement that dominates the civil rights educational content favored by public school systems (and the Better Together Commission), and the national zeitgeist regarding this movement. It also highlights the comparative significance of the Jackson People's School as an alternative pedagogical and political space through its emphasis on movement building as the primary vehicle of social transformation, rather than charismatic leaders. In a video filmed for the Freedom Riders 40th Anniversary Oral History Project, Adams-Johnson alluded to the need for a more precise study and teaching of the Civil Rights Movement to Black youth:

What I really would like to see, and where my passion is, is to really begin to try to reach out to those young people more so that they will know that they weren't

just born into a world of luxury - that people died. And I'm a living testimony of a struggle, and just so happen to be alive, but there are so many people that I know in my lifetime, you know, who died for this struggle. And it's very very [inaudible] to see that young people are very clueless. And it's very painful to know that people who are teaching in these schools, are teaching young people, don't have the information [and] don't make it their business to educate themselves to this information. (Interview with Frankye Adams-Johnson 2001)

Meetings of the Jackson People's School were scheduled to take place every other Saturday through May of 2020. During the initial meeting, we concentrated on getting to know participating youth and listening to the experiences of Mr. Watkins Muhammad and Ms. Adams-Johnson. Our Community Educator, Theron Wilkerson, also worked with the youth to develop expectations for participating in the sessions. Together, the group discussed what it would look like for them to embrace the idea that in order to fully explore the content and context of the selected materials, the books need to be made relatable to young people, and to our participating young people in particular. Theron explained that we (the organizers) developed the project using a mutual learning model whose guiding ethos was best captured by the phrase "each one teach one." With that in mind we practiced what would become standard pedagogy for the remaining sessions—students split into small groups and were asked to discuss and then share their answers to what they would like to see in terms of how the context can be made relatable to their own life experiences growing up in Jackson, and what might it mean for education to center Blackness? The young people were hesitant to speak up in groups at first, but gradually developed a sense of trust that we thought what they had to say on the matter was a valuable contribution, and of confidence in each other and in the process that continued through subsequent sessions.

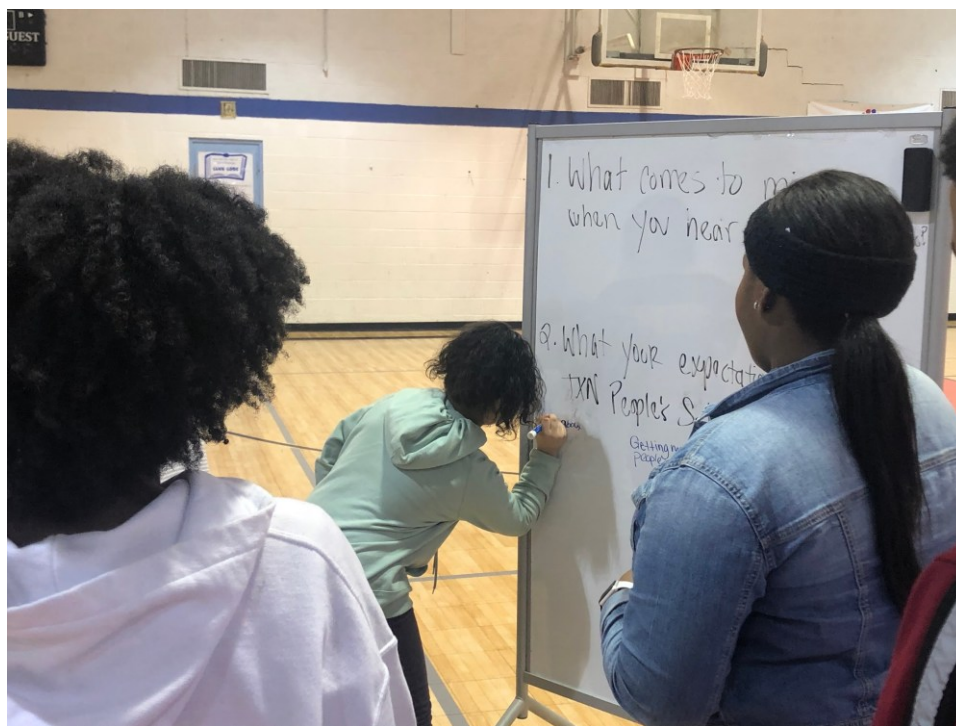


Figure 3. Jackson People's School participants share back with the larger group what they discussed. (Photo Credit: Noel Didla)

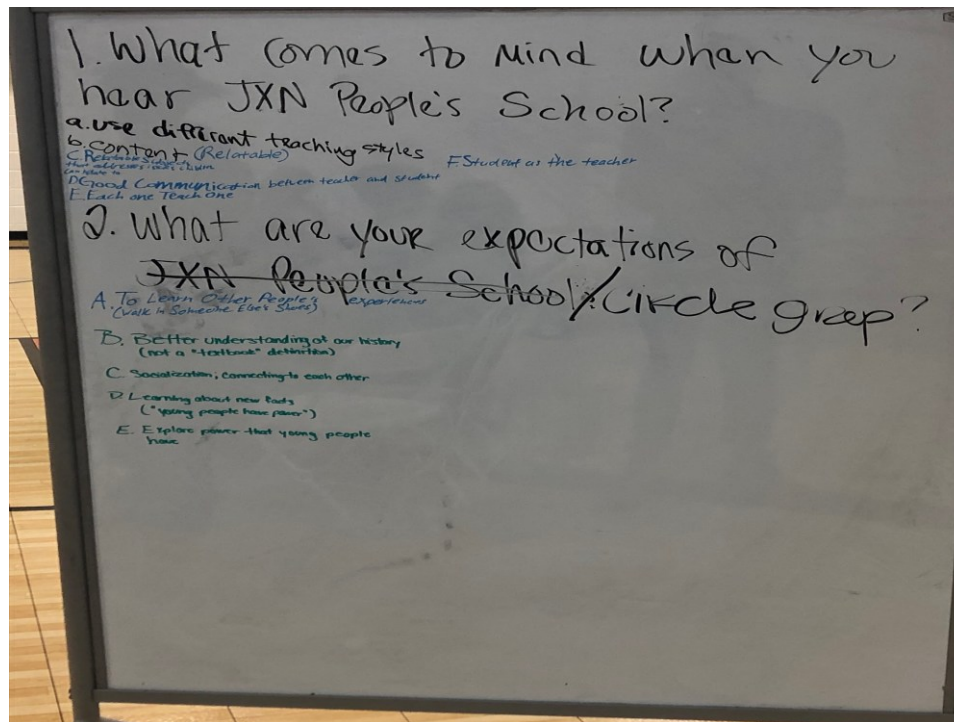


Figure 4. Shared answers to questions about what Jackson People's School means to them and the work they want it to do, including: "student as the teacher"; "...subjects that address issues children can relate to"; "to walk in someone else's shoes"; "better understanding of our history"; and "explore power that young people have". (Photo Credit: Noel Didla)

The next two meetings introduced the students to Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*. The text was chosen, in part, because Thomas is a native of Jackson. Furthermore, the city at the center of the text is based on Jackson. The book was adapted into a screenplay as well and so many of the students were already familiar with its plot. Some had even seen the film. Theron paired the text with the Black Panther Party's (BPP) "Ten Point Program," which is alluded to in the storyline. As an in-class activity, participating students were placed in small groups using social annotation and dialectical journaling methods to discuss their reading of the material. Each group then used their notes to facilitate a discussion with the collective.

These brief examples highlight how the Jackson People's School set about harnessing the notion of co-created learning spaces in order to achieve the internal goals organizers set out to accomplish with the project (eg, to use storytelling as a strategy for community transformation; commit to processes of intergenerational community building and governance; and supplement a neoliberalized educational model with grassroots oriented pedagogy that builds community power and honors the historicity of place and people). It is a radical planning initiative in that it undertook the challenge of contributing to social transformation in a place experiencing multiple intersecting histories of political and structural oppression (Friedman, 1987; Beard, 2003) and did so through a process that sought to mediate between statutory regulatory processes and community priorities (Albrechts, 2015) and was developed with community guidance and input during People's Assemblies hosted by MXGM. Further it is, somewhat uniquely within the literature, a radical planning process that developed outside of the global South (Jacobs, 2019: 27), and under the auspices of an elected political administration (Beard, 2003: 16).

Pandemic hiatus

In March of 2020, following the global transmission of the coronavirus (Covid-19), large sectors of the US economy and public sector shutdown. For the safety of our participants and facilitator, the Jackson People's Schools project was placed on hiatus, indefinitely. A year following the onset of the pandemic, as the state of Mississippi reopened in the spring of 2021, we considered rebooting the program. However, at the time, we believed it was still too unsafe to bring students together in an enclosed space. As an alternative to in-person meetings, we considered convening sessions digitally via Zoom. However, our efforts to restart the program with the BGCWJ were hampered by concerns over the 'digital divide' that exists among students within the Jackson Public School system. We were not confident that all students would have viable and consistent access to the internet or the technology they would need to take part in virtual sessions. A second concern was whether we would be able to reconnect with original participants following a yearlong absence. We attempted to circumvent these technological issues by circulating a newsletter, via our BGCWJ contact, to each of the student participants.

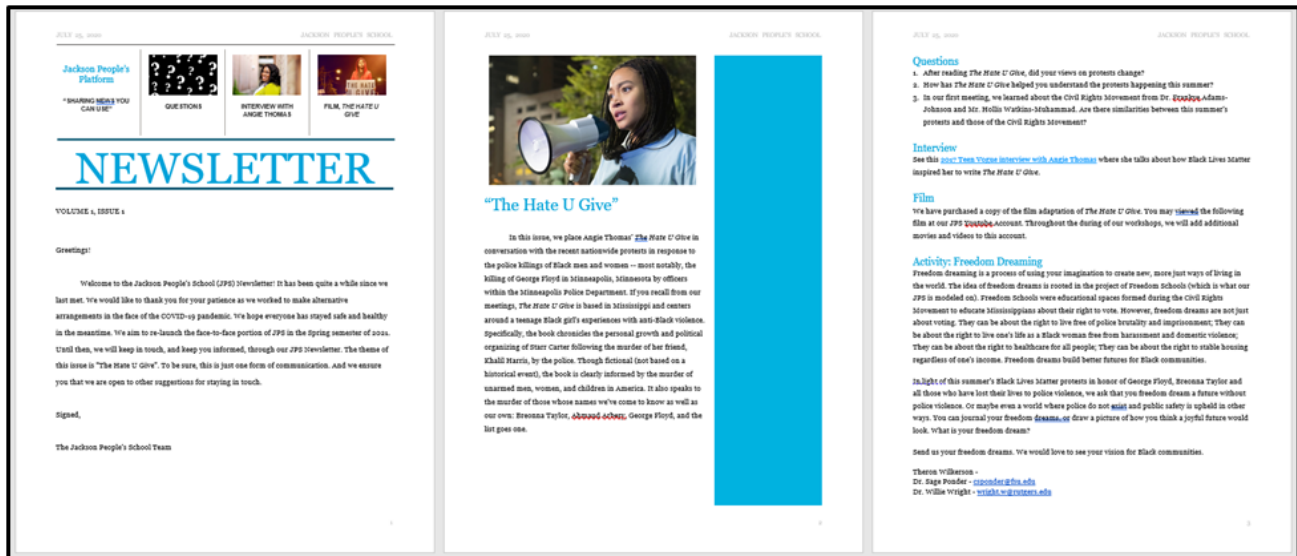


Figure 5. Jackson People's School Newsletter

In addition to the logistical and capacity challenges resulting from pandemic conditions, the city's water system continued to be an issue. In the early months of 2021, it reached a breaking point. After Winter Storm Uri ravaged the Gulf Coast, residential water pipes and water mains burst all throughout Jackson. Given the city's water infrastructure was extremely fragile prior to the storm, and in need of substantive repairs, Jacksonians were greatly affected. For over a month after the storm, many households, particularly those in the lower-income neighborhoods of West Jackson - where the BGCWJ is located - were left without access to potable water (Fentress & Fausset, 2021; Stribling, 2021). Undaunted, we continued rebooting the program in 2021. However, by this time, the BGCWJ coordinator who served as our point of contact was no longer employed by the agency. Her absence hampered our ability to reinvigorate our connection with the original enrollees and drastically slowed down attempts to reorganize.

Disrupting Racist Planning Practices in Institutions and Communities

Historically, planning has been a centralized, top-down process with little public participation or the tokenization of publics (Arnstein, 1969). From highways (DiMento & Ellis, 2013), to transit systems (Enright, 2019), to housing options (Sadler & Lafreniere, 2017), and park systems (Hoover & Lim, 2021; Walker, 2021), the traditional planning apparatus has embedded racism into every aspect of urban environments (Ross & Leigh, 2000). The city of Jackson exemplifies the kind of devastation wrought upon a city by decades of local and state schemes. In a recent interview, following the city's most recent water crisis, former head of Jackson's Department of Planning and Development referenced a legacy of racialized disinvestment that dates back to the Civil Rights Movements. His words indicate how following successful struggles for political enfranchisement, collusion between local and state officials, along with white residents, drained the city of much needed funding (Felton & Pietsch, 2022). Therefore, today's crumbling water infrastructure, which some may view as simply an issue of poor fiscal management, has roots in the post-Civil Rights evacuation of the city.

In order to move from planning as societal guidance, which maintains the status quo, to planning as anti-racist project, radical social transformation is in order. This means that the power to plan must reside with the communities most impacted by oppressive systems and policies (Arnstein, 1969; Friedmann, 1987; Beard, 2003; Jacobs, 2019). For academics to take part in radical planning processes, they must build and maintain relationships with community-based practitioners. Locally embedded collaborators are able to articulate ambitious projects that bring together both urgent needs and long held aspirations of community residents. When trusting relationships have been earned by university-based researchers with local practitioners, these collaborations can work to acquire funding and other resources for such projects that are very meaningful to the communities they are based in. We see the Jackson People's School project as the outcome of such a trust-based relationship and process.

The Jackson People's School project makes four important contributions to urban geography and planning processes. First, it presents a case study of a radical planning process in the United States occurring in collaboration with a city government. While most radical planning literature is focused on the global South and is in direct opposition with the government (Beard, 2003; Miraftab, 2009; Tironi, 2015), the Jackson People's School is an example of radical planning occurring in the United States which broadens our understanding of the scope of radical planning. It also points to the planning possibilities (as well as potential limits) for municipal governments that become mobilized through radical political struggle, as Mayor Lumumba's administration is.

Second, the selection of Jackson for this work furthers a growing interest in Black places, majority-Black cities and their planning pressures and needs (Summers, 2019; Ramírez, 2020; Brand, 2021). Specifically, it stands to contribute to urban austerity scholarship centered on majority-Black US municipalities (Ponder, 2021). Moreover, by partnering with youth, educators, and veteran organizers, the Jackson People's School project highlights how residents of Jackson are developing alternative politics and planning pedagogies for themselves.

Third, inspired by the popular education programs that informed working-class and anti-racist social movements during the civil rights era, the Jackson People's School project was designed to create alternative learning spaces beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom. Our approach is notably influenced by the intergenerational mentoring philosophy of Ella Baker and the capacity-building strategies of the Highlander Center. The project values the knowledge of students and everyday Mississippians alike. As such, the Jackson People's School treated all participants as problem solvers and co-educators. With this supplementary curriculum, we instructed students on the political history of their city through the stories of the local people who helped shape it. A result of this methodological approach to the critical pedagogy is that it impressed upon these youths that ordinary people are essential to creating social change.

Finally, a potential legacy of this project relates to changing urban and educational policy in Jackson. Influencing Jackson municipal politics and policy is a goal long held by Black political groups like the Republic of New Afrika (since the 1970s) and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (since the 1990s), one with longstanding political and spatial implications. The intergenerational efforts of these groups contributed to the election of Chokwe Lumumba (former citizen of the RNA) and Chokwe Antar Lumumba as mayors of Jackson. Jackson's shift in political representation and Black radical political history makes it a site wherein changing municipal policy can be a tactic of self-determination.

Through this project our team has also identified several key points in the resource allocation and project development process that have outsized impacts on the experience and outcome of such collaborative projects for our community partners and for project participants. Two of the most important of these pivotal moments include the design of the funding parameters in grant or award-based competitions, and University management protocol for research monies. At a fundamental level, the standard approach to developing successful grant applications requires a narrowed narration of the project and its context, as well as a truncated explanation of possible project delivery pathways. This streamlined focus is useful for grant reviewers to assess the rigor and executability of a proposed project, however it is not a good fit for cities experiencing multiple crises simultaneously, such as Jackson.⁹ For example, everyone involved in the preparation of the Jackson People's School was aware of the fragility of the city's water infrastructure, and the possibility that infrastructural issues could impact the execution of the project. However, as previous rounds of applications had by that point shown us, to incorporate this environmental context into the grant application in a sustained way would have taken focus away from the project's main deliverable (the youth-centered reading groups) and weakened our chances of being awarded funding. Our ability to adapt the project to the community's needs during the months-long water outage was curtailed by the limits of the project as outlined in our application.

Second, university-based research monies accounting protocols -through which most academics are required to route any grant monies they are awarded- are not well structured for use in social justice and antiracist projects. The realities of most community-based

⁹ This fixation of granting agencies on highly specified scopes for project execution is very similar to the challenges faced by communities working within parameters established by (equally narrow in scope) public-private partnerships. Our thanks to reviewer Danielle Purifoy for pointing this out.

practitioners working in such environments are of labor being spread thin across many different projects and contexts, and the demands of university accounting protocols for many community-based collaborators given this context are extremely taxing to meet. For example, the original instructions received from the University accounts management unit for Mr. Hollis Watkins Muhammad and Ms. Adams-Johnson—our Civil Rights Movement veterans—to receive their honorariums for participating in our project included digitizing identification cards, signatures, and signing up to be vendors in the university-based online disbursements system, all of which were onerous requests to make of elders without reliable home internet, office equipment, or regular access to transportation.

Crucially, the university research teams are the ones in a pivotal position here. They can either act as a buffer for community collaborators against the racial and economic insensitivity of university research management standards or as a gateway for them. Acting as a buffer requires extra effort and negotiations with university protocol enforcement units as well as with funding providers. As such, these pivotal moments in the planning process have the capacity to either usher in racially violent institutional processes to communities working in league with university-based academics, or mitigate against them (Ehrman-Solberg et al., 2020; Wiggins et al., 2020; Santiago-Ortiz, 2021).¹⁰

Conclusion

A state-driven process attempting to introduce emergency management and charterization to Jackson's public school system was successfully countered by the Lumumba administration. However, despite partnering with the philanthropic Kellogg Foundation to broker compromise with inimical state leaders, the future autonomy of JPS is still not guaranteed. Given the historical antagonism between the Mississippi legislature and the majority-Black city of Jackson, infrastructural and institutional challenges remain for JPS. Continuing to keep the spotlight on the often antagonistic relationship between state governance and Black-majority places such as cities and school districts will be a major element in ongoing efforts to disrupt racist planning practices, especially in coming years as Donald Trump's second term in office increasingly sets the formal tone and context for multiscalar politics in the US. While the Lumumba administration concentrates on this more formal arena, it also remains dedicated to meeting the policy aspirations of local Jacksonians themselves, as articulated in people's assemblies and carried out through radical planning projects like the Jackson People's School. The Lumumba administration relies upon people's assemblies as a means of reconciling formal regulatory powers of governance with community-determined priorities. As such, the Jackson people's assembly is also a mechanism of social and policy transformation for the city, and the means by which everyday Jacksonians are building capacity to engage in radical planning in an otherwise deeply restrictive political environment. The coalitional Jackson People's School project is one of the

¹⁰ While we note the structural insensitivity of grant processes and university accounting protocols, we wish to also acknowledge here that the Antipode Foundation has been extremely flexible and supportive of our project. Likewise, individuals in the accounting units of our universities, while constrained by legal requirements and regulatory protocol, have also been willing to take the context of our project into consideration. After negotiations we were, for example, allowed to write personal checks to our civil rights veterans as honorariums for them to cash. But it was at times, extremely institutionally difficult and laborious to get funds directly to our community partners.

ways we (the authorial team) have tried to bring the people's desires for place-based civic education to life.

Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to Mr. Hollis Watkins Muhammad (Rest in Power, 1941-2023) and Ms. Frankye Adams-Johnson, living civil and human rights legend, community resource and cherished elder.

References

- ABC13. 2010. "HISD Could Change 5 Campuses to Magnet Schools." *ABC News*, <https://abc13.com/archive/7351209/>
- ABC13. 2013. "HISD Board Approves Turning Ryan Middle School in Third Ward into Magnet School." *ABC News*, <https://abc13.com/archive/9061887/>
- Albrechts, Louis. 2015. "Ingredients for a More Radical Strategic Spatial Planning," *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 42(3): 510-525. <https://doi.org/10.1068/b130104p>
- Arnstein, Sherry R. 1969. "A Ladder Of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35(4): 216-224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>
- Backer, David I. and Akira Drake Rodriguez. 2023. "Movements at the Fiscal/Monetary Crossroads: Financing a Green New Deal for Schools in Philadelphia," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 47(1): 87-101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2023.2232062>
- Beard, Victoria A. 2003. "Learning Radical Planning: The Power of Collective Action," *Planning Theory* 2(1): 13-35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095203002001004>
- Biondi, Martha. 2012. *The Black Revolution on Campus*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brand, Anna L. 2021. "Black Mecca Futures: Re-Membering New Orleans's Claiborne Avenue," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 44(6): 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2020.1860675>
- Cohen, Dan. 2021. "'A marketplace of schools': Race, Power, and Education Reform in the Detroit Region," *Urban Geography* 42(8): 1170-1194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2020.1759015>
- Cole, Thomas R. 1997. *No Color is My Kind: The Life of Eldrewey Stearns and the Integration of Houston*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Digital SNCC Gateway. 2022. *Hollis Watkins*, January 30. <https://snccdigital.org/people/hollis-watkins/>
- DiMento, Joseph F. and Cliff Ellis. 2013. *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Ehrman-Solberg, Kevin, Bonnie Keeler, Kate Derickson and Kirsten Delegard. 2020. "Mapping a Path towards Equity: Reflections on a Co-creative Community Praxis," *GeoJournal* 87: 185-194, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-020-10294-1>

- Enright, Theresa. 2019. "Transit Justice as Spatial Justice: Learning from Activists," *Mobilities* 14(5):665-680. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2019.1607156>
- Freedom Riders Oral Histories. 2001. *Interview with Frankye Adams-Johnson*. eGrove (repository), University of Mississippi, <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/freeriders/1/>
- Felton, Emmanuel and Bryan Pietsch. 2022. "Jackson's water crisis comes after years of neglect: 'We've been going it alone'." *The Washington Post*, August 30. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/08/30/jackson-mississippi-water-crisis-update/>
- Fentress, Ellen Anne and Richard Fausset. 2021. "'You Can't Bathe. You Can't Wash.' Water Crisis Hobbles Jackson, Miss., for Weeks." *The New York Times*, March 12. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/12/us/jackson-mississippi-water-winter-storm.html>
- Freire, Paulo. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th anniversary ed). New York: Continuum.
- Friedmann, John. 1987. *Planning in the Public Domain: From Knowledge to Action*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Heiman, Daniel and Elizabeth Murakami. 2019. "'It Was Like a Magnet to Bring People In': School Administrators' Responses to the Gentrification of a Two-Way Bilingual Education (TWBE) Program in Central Texas," *Journal of School Leadership* 29(6): 454-472. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684619864702>
- Hernandez, Rachel. 2022. Jackson Schools go Virtual, Relocate Due to Water Pressure Issues. *WJTV*, January 24. <https://www.wjtv.com/news/local-news/jackson-schools-go-virtual-relocate-due-to-water-pressure-issues/>
- Hoover, Fuschia-Ann and Theodore C. Lim. 2021. "Examining Privilege and Power in US Urban Parks and Open Space during the Double Crises of Antiracism and COVID-19," *Socio-Ecological Practice Research* 3(1): 55-70. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42532-020-00070-3>
- Bolton, Chuck and Curtis Austin. 2014. Interview with Hollis Watkins Muhammad. *"Unsung Heroes of the Civil Rights Movement."* http://libresearch.uncg.edu/unsung_heroes/participants/hWatkins.html
- Jacobs, Fayola. 2019. "Black Feminism and Radical Planning: New Directions for Disaster Planning Research," *Planning Theory* 18(1): 24-39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095218763221>
- Kelley, Robin D. G. 2018. "Black Study, Black Struggle," *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 40(2):153-158. <https://doi.org/10.5070/F7402040947>
- Miraftab, Faranak. 2009. "Insurgent Planning: Situating Radical Planning in the Global South," *Planning Theory* 8(1): 32-50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095208099297>
- MS Department of Education. *State Board of Education Approves Corrective Action Plan for JPS*. December 15, 2016, <https://www.mdek12.org/OCGR/jps>
- Ponder, C.S. 2021. "Spatializing the Municipal Bond Market: Urban Resilience under Racial Capitalism," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111(7):2112-2129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2020.1866487>

- Ramírez, Margaret Marietta. 2020. "Take the Houses Back/Take the Land Back: Black and Indigenous Urban Futures in Oakland," *Urban Geography* 41(5): 682-693. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2020.1736440>
- Ross, Catherine L. and Nancey Green Leigh. 2000. "Planning, Urban Revitalization, and the Inner City: An Exploration of Structural Racism," *Journal of Planning Literature* 14(3): 367-380. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08854120022092719>
- Sadler, Richard Casey and Don J. Lafreniere. 2017. "Racist Housing Practices as a Precursor to Uneven Neighborhood Change in a Post-Industrial City," *Housing Studies* 32(2): 186-208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2016.1181724>
- Sams, Kelton D. Jr. 2015. *Growing Up in Galveston, Texas: Walls Came Tumbling Down*. [S.l.]: Eisenbrauns.
- Santiago-Ortiz, Aurora. 2021. "Testimonio as Stitch Work: Undoing Coloniality Through Autoethnography in Puerto Rico," *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* 20(2): 122-148.
- Santiago Ortiz, Aurora. 2020. "Apuntes Sobre la Charterización de las Escuelas Públicas en Puerto Rico". In *Políticas Educativas y Justicia Social: Entre lo Global y lo Local* 67-79. Madrid: Ediciones Morata S.L.
- Seamster, Louise. 2018. "When Democracy Disappears," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 15(02): 295-322. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X18000255>
- Skinner, Kayleigh. 2017. State Ed Board Declares Extreme Emergency in Jackson Public Schools. *Mississippi Today*, September 14. <https://mississippitoday.org/2017/09/14/state-declares-extreme-emergency-jackson-public-schools/>
- Stribling, Will. 2021. Thousands in Jackson, the State's Largest City, Are Still Without Water following Historic Winter Storm. *Mississippi Today*, February 22. <https://mississippitoday.org/2021/02/22/thousands-in-jackson-the-states-largest-city-are-still-without-water-following-historic-winter-storm/>
- Summers, Brandi Thompson. 2019. *Black in Place: The Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Sykes, Albert. 2015. "And They Came: The Lineage of Freedom," *Souls* 17(1-2): 54-61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2015.998574>
- Tironi, Manuel. 2015. "Modes of Technification: Expertise, Urban Controversies and the Radicalness of Radical Planning," *Planning Theory* 14(1): 70-89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095213513579>
- Themba, Makani. 2021. It's All Organizing, It's All Love, in *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health and Social Equity*, 4th edition, edited by Meredith Minkler and Patricia Wakimoto, 78-86.
- Walker, R. H. 2021. "Engineering Gentrification: Urban Redevelopment, Sustainability Policy, and Green Stormwater Infrastructure in Minneapolis," *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 23(5): 646-664. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2021.1945917>

- Watkins, Hollis and Leigh McInnis. 2015. *Brother Hollis: The Sankofa of a Movement Man*. Clinton: Sankofa Southern Publishing.
- Wiggins, Benjamin A., Kate D. Derickson and Glenda Simmons Jenkins. 2020. "Resourcing Community Partnerships Through Academic Libraries," *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 24(3): 115.
- Woods, Clyde A. 2017. *Development Drowned and Reborn: The Blues and Bourbon Restorations in Post-Katrina New Orleans*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Woods, Clyde A. 1998. *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*. New York: Verso.
- Wright, Richard. 1941. *12 Million Black Voices*. New York: Viking Press.