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Education by Any Means Necessary: Peoples of African Descent and Community-Based Pedagogical Spaces

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This study examines how and why peoples of African descent access and utilize community-based pedagogical spaces that exist outside schools. Employing a theoretical framework that fuses historical methodology and border-crossing theory, the researchers review existing scholarship and primary documents to present an historical examination of how peoples of African descent have fought for and redefined education in nonschool educative venues. These findings inform the authors’ analysis of results from an oral history project they conducted into how Black Bermudian men utilized learning spaces outside schools, such as the family, Black church, and athletics clubs, to augment their personal and scholastic development. Based on their historical and empirical research findings, the authors argue that educational actors (including teachers, administrators, policy makers, and researchers) focused on school-based issues like the academic achievement gap would do well to recognize the impact learning spaces outside of schools may have on student scholastic success, particularly for minority men.

Across the Black Diaspora, the history of education reflects the legacy of struggle, sacrifice, and oppression that has also come to characterize significant elements of the Black experience (Anderson 1988; Branch 1988; Du Bois 1973; Morris 2009; Ogbu 2007; Woodson 1911). In fact, schooling and education for
Black people have historically been two separate experiences that intersect, at
times, but always continue to function independently of each other (Shujaa 1994).
Systemic oppression—in forms such as slavery; racially discriminatory laws;
and segregated, inequitably funded schooling—has separated Black people from
school-based educational opportunities available to many members of the domi-
nant race. This reality has caused peoples of African descent to exercise creative
means of gaining access to education through the utilization of community-based
pedagogical spaces. Traditionally and today, the Black Diaspora has achieved ed-
ucation by any means necessary through accessing a variety of learning spaces
outside schools, including families, churches, and music.

This article pursues an answer to our framing research question: *How and why
have peoples of African descent utilized community-based pedagogical spaces
outside schools?* Employing a theoretical framework that fuses historical method-
ology and border-crossing theory, the authors review existing scholarship, as well
as primary documents, to present an historical examination of how peoples of
African descent have fought for and even redefined education in learning spaces
outside schools. We focus in particular on two spaces—the Black church and
Black barbershops—that have served educative purposes. These findings inform
the authors’ analysis of results from an oral history project they conducted into how
Black Bermudian men utilized nonschool institutions, such as the Black church, the
family, and athletics clubs, to augment their personal and scholastic development.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define and clarify a few key terms used
in this article. For stylistic variety, we use several phrases interchangeably to de-
scribe nonschool-based locales, institutions, forces, or methods that serve educa-
tional purposes, including *community-based pedagogical spaces*, *learning spaces
outside schools*, and *nonschool educative venues*. The phrases *peoples of African
descent* and *Black people(s)* will also be used interchangeably, to recognize the
diversity and plurality of Black identity as a global construct. At times, we make
specific references to the *Black Diaspora* and its subcultures (for example, African
American, Black Bermudian, or Black Caribbean people) but these references and
descriptors are to be considered within the context and understanding of the com-
plexities, similarities, and differences of Black identity development and not as
attempts to reify the tendency to oversimplify people and the labels (mis)used
to describe them (Douglas 2012a, 2013). This acknowledgement is necessary to
account for our propensity to engage in regionalized, nationalistic discussions
of identity that truncate discourses around the global dynamics of culture, in
general, and Black identity, in particular. It is significant to note that understand-
ings of Black identity and the education of Black people(s) must account for the
interconnectedness of Blackness in a global context. Certainly the disproportio-
nalities that plague Black people in various jurisdictions necessitate the utilization
of theoretical approaches that account for Africanness/Blackness as identities
that have been contested and required to cross borders, in the schoolhouse and
beyond (Douglas 2012a, 2012b, 2013).
Our work compels readers to consider the history of education for Black people as one that has consistently occurred outside of schools. Based on our historical and empirical research findings, we argue that educational actors (including teachers, administrators, policy makers, and researchers) focused on seemingly school-based issues like the academic achievement gap would do well to recognize the impact that learning spaces outside of schools may have on student scholastic success, particularly for minority men. Possible solutions to vexing social issues such as poverty may, in fact, lie in the propensity that peoples of African descent have historically shown to cross institutional borders and access, as well as create nonschool-based educative venues as a means to help their culture educate and liberate, and their people survive and thrive. Equally noteworthy is the reality that every lesson learned in community-based pedagogical spaces is not positive. The animating pedagogy in these venues may, in fact, provide debilitating instruction that is devoid of necessary counternarratives to destructive, mainstream discourses on people of African descent. Rather than thriving, some individuals may experience lives of deprivation, in part because of the life lessons they received in spaces that, for others, have been sources of resistance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our theoretical framework incorporates historical methodology and border crossing theory as related to education and peoples of African descent. Toward historical methodology, this article follows in a tradition of scholarship that has examined how populations in general, and peoples of African descent specifically, have pursued education outside schools. Freire (1993), for example, proposed a “pedagogy of the oppressed” to occur outside of state-controlled schools (1). Of importance also is Cremin (1970, 1980, 1988), a major three-volume history that defined education as “the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, attitudes, skills, or sensibilities” (1970, xiii). The history of education for Black people is, in fact, one that has consistently occurred outside of traditional schooling and within alternative educative venues such as families (Billingsley 1992), churches (Billingsley 1999; Billingsley and Caldwell 1991; Douglas 2012b; Hale 2001; Martin and McAdoo 2007), barbershops (Franklin 1985; Harris-Lacewell and Mills 2004; Mills 2005, 2006), social protest groups (Carson 1995; Peck 2001; Perlstein 2002) and music (Alim 2011; Lipsitz 1994; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2002).

The reality that learning occurs outside of schools is not lost on many individuals within Black communities. For example, the term educated fool is commonly used in Black communities to describe people who have been schooled within mainstream structures but lack the cultural relevancy or street smarts to be effective
agents for and within their communities (Shujaa 1994). This language is rooted in the understanding within Black communities that traditional schooling experiences alone are not sufficient for preparing and, in effect, educating Black people for life, resiliency, and service.

In regard to the oral history aspect of our project, this article builds on the strong oral tradition of Bermudian culture (Zuill 1978), as well as the social, political, cultural, and economic ties that Bermuda holds with the United States, England, Canada, and the Caribbean (Douglas 2012a; Douglas and Gause 2009; Hodgson 2008). These ties are reflected in the dismal statistics of academic displacement for Black Bermudian men that mirror the challenges faced by Black men in the aforementioned countries. The role of nonschool-based pedagogical spaces for Black people in Bermuda has garnered more interest since the publication of a study (Mincy, Jethwani-Keyser, and Haldane 2009) that confirmed that over 50% of Black men in Bermuda fail to graduate from the public school system. Furthermore, we agree with Hodgson (2008), who contends that “the Black Bermudian experience has frequently shadowed the Black American experience” (4). Ironically, national data on the education of Black children in the United States reveal equally disturbing statistics of disproportionality: African American children are 50% more likely not to finish high school than White children; African American children are also the population most likely to be funneled to special education programs, and the least likely to be identified for gifted and talented programs (Children’s Defense Fund 2007; Douglas and Gause 2009; Wilson, Douglas, and Nganga, in press). These findings seem to be consistent with the experiences of Black men in other jurisdictions (Douglas and Gause 2009). For example, studies on Black Caribbean men in the United Kingdom also report significant educational and vocational disadvantages and disproportionalities for Black men (Fitzgerald, Finch, and Nove 2000; Gilborn and Mirza 2000; Graham and Robinson 2004; Sewell 1997; Wrench and Hassan 1996).

Besides attention to the history of education among peoples of African descent, our theoretical framework also expressly incorporates border theory. A single definition cannot fully capture the fluidity, breadth, and transience of border theory. In fact, there are many means, mediums, and modes that border theory/theorists can use to engage in their critical work of rupturing dominant positionalities and deconstructing vestiges of the colonial/postcolonial and center/periphery binaries (Douglas 2012a, 2013). Manifestations of border theory include, as Hicks (1991) explains, “border writing,” “border text,” “border subject,” and “border culture,” which embrace the transformational power of border positionalities and “polarities” to challenge hierarchies and complex power dynamics (xvi). Similarly, Giroux (2005) utilizes the concept of border pedagogy to describe the power relations in educative settings that must be dismantled by students and teachers—acting essentially as border crossers—who are willing to challenge the “physical . . . [and] cultural borders historically constructed and socially organized.
within rules and regulations that limit and enable particular identities, individual capacities, and social forms” (22). What some border theorists have in common is the belief that voices and identities live and are silenced within, across, and on geopolitical, socio-cultural and institutional boundaries and borders (Anzaldúa 2007; Giroux 2005; Hicks 1991). The significance of border theory for challenging colonial/postcolonial binarisms in this study is enhanced by the fact that Bermuda is still a colony of England and border crossing (both literally and figuratively) to other jurisdictions is particularly valuable for residents of a 21-square-mile island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The data collected as part of this study supports this claim.

METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

Analysis of Historical Primary and Secondary Sources

Following a methodological approach similar to that of historians such as Anderson (1988) and Tyack and Cuban (1995), we utilize existing historical scholarship (secondary sources) as well as what historians call primary source documents (for instance, newspaper articles, organizational documents, or autobiographies) to establish an interpretive, analytical overview regarding how and why African peoples have utilized community-based pedagogical spaces. We focus in particular on two spaces—the Black church and the Black barbershop—that have played a sustained educational role. We supplement our discussion of themes identified in existing scholarship by referencing primary sources, especially first-person narratives of various types. In doing so, we hope to give voice to times past by including quotes from those who lived it.

Oral History

The participants in the oral history aspect of the study are Black Bermudian men. We used network sampling (Wolff 1999) to recruit the four participants, who ranged in age from 30 to 70 years old. During the initial interview, we asked them an open-ended, grand narrative question: “Tell me the story of your life” (see Casey 1993). Like Thompson (1978), we believe that “oral history gives history back to the people in their own words. And in giving a past, it also helps them towards a future of their own making” (226). In addition, we determined that the grand narrative question would allow the subjects an opportunity to freely prioritize the educative spaces—schools or otherwise—that were most significant and meaningful in their lives. We conducted a follow-up interview with each participant to give them the opportunity to elaborate on particular topics and clarify any ideas raised during their initial interview; this follow-up interview was also used for the purposes of member checking. All individual names of
participants, associates, and neighborhoods used in this article are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of our respondents.

We analyzed the oral histories of the participants using thematic analysis as outlined by Glesne (2006). The steps of the thematic analysis process were (a) collecting data, (b) coding and categorizing the data, (c) searching and synthesizing for patterns, and (d) interpreting the data. Using this method revealed themes that emerged from our participants’ responses to the questions, as well as connections to the historical literature we reviewed. We established interrater reliability in the coding process by codetermining the codes to be used in analyzing the data. From the initial round of interviews, we analyzed the first transcript together and then analyzed the final three transcriptions separately. We then compared our individual coding of the three transcriptions, discussed similarities and differences, and came to consensus on the interpretation of the data. We analyzed the data from the follow-up interviews individually, highlighting specific statements and topics of particular relevance to community-based pedagogical spaces.

FINNINGS AND ANALYSIS

Learning Spaces Outside Schools: An Historical Overview

Throughout their history, members of the Black Diaspora have produced a strong heritage of accessing education through community-based pedagogical spaces. For instance, previous scholars have demonstrated how slaves in the American South established educational networks within plantations and used clever subterfuge to learn to read. They did so often at significant personal and collective risk, especially by the mid-1800s, as high profile slave revolts led by literate slaves cemented, in slave owners’ minds, a clear correlation: a slave’s quest for knowledge was a quest for liberty. Some Southern states, in fact, established laws that made the education of slaves a heavily punishable offense and enforced illiteracy through intimidation and violence (Cornelius 1983; Webber 1978; Williams 2005). A freed Georgia slave reported, “If they caught you trying to write, they would cut your finger off and if they caught you again they would cut your head off” (Cornelius 1983, 174). The Puritan background of some White slave masters in 1600s and 1700s Bermuda compelled them to encourage Bible-reading abilities in slaves. However, Black Bermudian slaves used creative means to assert their literacy in ways that extended beyond Bible study, including occasions in which they “turned the tables on their White masters by adopting the very method Englishmen had traditionally approved: the written petition” to formally request freedom (Bernhard 1999, 276).

Reflecting on his quest for literacy and liberty, the former slave turned abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass, in his 1845 autobiography, remembered the power and purpose of slave owners’ attempts to enforce a regime of “mental darkness” (Douglass 1995, 22). Douglass recalled his master once stating, “Now, if
you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master” (20). Such a statement only emboldened Douglass to find alternative means of learning. He explained, “though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read” (20). He recalled that he learned to write by learning a few basic letters, and then challenging White boys in the street to top his abilities. As these other boys frantically scribbled letters to best their competitor, Douglass was exposed to and learned more. “During this time, my copy book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk” (26). Douglass also reveals how, much like the Bermudian slaves, he was able to write for himself and others a false pass to freedom by using the reading and writing skills he had developed under the tutelage of his slave-master’s wife (Douglass 1995). Frederick Douglass embodied a slave culture that encouraged seeking education by any means necessary.

Historians have demonstrated how, though slavery had ended in the post-Civil War segregated American South, educational opportunities for African Americans were severely limited (Anderson 1988, Fultz 1995). Author Richard Wright, who grew up within those conditions, described in his autobiography how he gleaned much of his education outside of schools. He remembered,

At the age of twelve, before I had one full year of formal schooling, I had a conception of life that no experience would ever erase, a predilection for what was real that no argument could ever gainsay, a sense of the world that was mine and mine alone, a notion as to what life meant that no education could ever alter, a conviction that the meaning of living came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering. (Wright, 1945, 87–88)

His early-life classroom, in fact, included nonschool educative venues such as family and church, as well as neighborhoods suffused with relentless, White-dominated race relations. Importantly, these venues were not always conducive to positive lessons. Wright, for instance, told his grandmother at one point, “that old church of yours is messing up my life!” (126). Wright recognized life experience as an ambivalent teacher, explaining, “At the age of twelve I had an attitude toward life that was to endure . . . that was to make me skeptical of everything while seeking everything, tolerant of all and yet critical” and a “spirit” that “made me strangely tender and cruel, violent and peaceful” (88). Such were the imperfect, yet sustaining, educational tensions of a life learned outside of schools.

As the struggle for Black freedom emerged to challenge overt racist oppression, protest groups engaged in social justice efforts that relied upon essential instructional elements. From 1961 to 1966 in the American South, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) used participatory workshops to
introduce community members to nonviolent tactics. As historian Clayborne Carson (1995) demonstrated, the organization put these lessons into practice through sit-ins and taught *freedom songs* that served as a binding emotional force. SNCC freedom schools provided free instruction to students poorly served in segregated schools (Perlstein 1990), and media coverage of the SNCC freedom schools instructed the broader nation that powerful change was underway in the American South. A 1964 profile in the widely distributed *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, for instance, described a Mississippi freedom school political education session in which adult African American women discussed the potential benefits of gaining the right to vote, with one woman stating, “We could elect some Negroes in office.” Another woman explained further, “Some could be sheriff. Some could . . . could maybe be president” (Watters 1964, 43). In the later Civil Rights Movement era, the Black Panther Party used an array of institutions and initiatives, including their newspaper, schools, and use of mass media coverage, to deliver political education to a vast and varied audience (Peck 2001; Perlstein 2002). Black Panther founder Huey Newton noted, “The main purpose of a vanguard group [like the Black Panthers] should be to raise the consciousness of the masses through educational programs and certain activities the party will participate in” (Newton, 1968, 42–43). Black Panther co-founder Bobby Seale explained, “We go through a long process of trying to educate the people. All of them. The hippies, Whites, Blacks, everybody. We try to organize them” (Seale 1991, 251). Suggesting how the pursuit of education outside schools crossed borders, the Black Panther Party cited Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (1963) as a seminal source regarding the proper approach to revolution (see, for instance, Newton 1968). Fanon stressed the essential importance of political education, broadly construed, to Black freedom efforts in Algeria. He stated, “Political education means opening up the mind, awakening the mind, and introducing it to the world. It is as C`esaire said: ‘To invent the souls of men’” (Fanon 1963, 138). The Black Power Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was also vibrant and impactful in Bermuda due to the influence of activists like the Black Beret Cadre and Pauulu Kamarakafego. According to Bermudian historian Swan (2009), the meaningful relationships that were sustained between Bermudian activists and “revolutionary organizations across the African Diaspora such as the Black Panthers,” are emblematic of the strong and steady “voice of Black [Bermudian] dissent” that could often be heard amongst the bellows of Black activists from “the wider Black world” (xi). For example, John Hilton Bassett Jr., “the long standing chief of staff” of the Black Beret Cadre, “raised money by writing and producing plays” and much like “activities organized by the Black Panthers, he used the funds to feed the needy in the Black community” (Swan 2009, 98–99). In these respects, Black Bermudians have not only tapped into the tradition of accessing community-based pedagogical spaces for peoples of African descent, but they have also crossed borders by remaining connected to the larger struggles for political, social, and economic uplift for peoples across the Black Diaspora.
Over the last several centuries, music forms such as spirituals, work songs, and jazz spread across the Diaspora and instructed generations of Black peoples (Charters 2009). In the mid-20th century, jazz icon Billie Holiday sang “Strange Fruit,” a song whose haunting melody and stark lyrics (“Black body swinging in the Southern breeze/Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees”) offered a soul-scouring protest against lynchings in the American South (Margolick 2000). Today, hip-hop music crosses borders as a powerful influence on Black and other minority youth and cultures throughout the world (Alim 2011; Gause 2008). Some scholars have advocated bringing hip-hop into the classroom as a means to more effectively engage students who have struggled in traditional academic structures (Hill 2009; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2002; Runell and Diaz 2007; Stovall 2006). Hip-hop artists have consciously accepted and presented their role as cultural instructors. Boogie Down Productions, for instance, released an album *Edutainment* with a title that accurately reflected the collaborative’s twin goals of entertaining the Black community while also educating it about prevailing social issues (Boogie Down Productions 1990). Similarly, the history and educative power of other musical genres, like Negro spirituals (Lovell 1939) and Afro-Caribbean reggae music (Manuel, Bilby, and Largey 2006), affirm that education through music has been utilized across the Black Diaspora.

**Learning Spaces Outside Schools: Focus on the Black Church**

Spirituality has been an ever-present and consistently influential force in Black communities (Dantley 2005; Martin and McAdoo 2007; McAdoo 2007). As the preeminent institution for the expression of spirituality among peoples of African descent, the Black church has been historically active as a socializing space and support system (Evans 2008; Frey and Wood, 1998; Hale 2001; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Turner and Bagley 2000). The centrality of spirituality and religion for peoples of African descent is a nexus for the diverse cultures reflected in African, Caribbean, South American, and African American people, whose ancestors “relied upon an African-based understanding of life, death, and creation to help them adjust to an unpredictable social environment” (McAdoo 2007, 98). Drawing on African patterns of “multigenerational” interconnectivity and the “fictive kin (nonrelatives who are as close and involved in the family as blood relatives)” (McAdoo 2007, 98), the Black Church has served as a buffer and bridge for the sustenance and uplift of Black people. More than that, as Hale (2001) asserts, “the African American church is the most important institution in the African American community and is supported and controlled entirely by African American people. African American churches were burned and bombed during and after the modern civil rights movement because they represented black power, independence, and self-determination” (155). Serving as a space where spirituality and education converge, the Black church has been and continues to
be a reservoir and resource for educational advancement for Black people. C. Eric Lincoln noted, “Beyond its purely religious function, as critical as that function has been, the Black church in its historical role as lyceum, conservatory, forum, social service center, political academy and financial institution has been and is for Black America the mother of our culture, the champion of our freedom, the hallmark of our civilization” (Lincoln 1989; quoted in Billingsley 1992, 354, and Putnam 2000, 68–69).

Scholars (e.g., Billingsley and Caldwell 1991; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990) have acknowledged that educational outreach programs have been a top priority for many Black churches, including tutoring initiatives, preschool/day care, GED programs, and private elementary schools. Notably, the educational focus of Black churches is not new. From its inception, the mission of the Black Sabbath/Sunday School was to promote literacy amongst slaves, newly freed African people, and (later) young people who had not been prepared for college admission (Hale 2001). The interactive relationship between spirituality and education for African Americans is evident in the fact that when many historically Black colleges were founded, Sunday schools were also established and faculty members were obligated to serve as Sunday school teachers as well (Hale 2001). Similarly, the Black church has been an educational, oratorical, and artistic training ground for everyday citizens and contemporary artists alike. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) assert that “Black churches have served as concert halls, art galleries, and public forums, and the first public performance seen or given by many Black children often occurred in church” (312). The scholars note further that “special Sunday services were set aside for the participation of children and children’s choirs on ‘Children’s Day,’ or ‘junior church’ occasions” (312).

Narratives from history demonstrate the centrality of education in the churches of the Black Diaspora, though the institution’s role in serving its people may have changed over time. In the United States in 1898, for instance, African American evangelist Samuel Robert Cassius sought to fuse teaching and religion through the establishment of an Oklahoma industrial school modeled after Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute. He explained, “The negro’s mind can be changed in but one way; that is, to educate both mind and hands,” with an end goal of producing “the great industrial army of tomorrow” (Cassius 1898, 39). As a result, Cassius asserted, “you produce a happy, independent people, who will be a credit to the nation and a safe guard to the republic” (Cassius 1898, 39). More than seventy years later, seminarian Major J. Jones (1971) offered a starkly different message in proposing the recognition of a “theology of hope” closely intertwined with the ongoing struggle for Black consciousness and equality (87). He explained, “The Black man has a right to appropriate his God in his own color, and to express this in art forms, language symbols, and literature. . . . Indeed, when the oppressed no longer is satisfied to accept or adopt the God of the oppressor, especially his explicit or implicit color as it is expressed in art and literature, then the process of
liberation has begun” (114). Recalling her childhood church experiences in early to mid-twentieth-century Bermuda, historian Ruth Thomas captures elements of a Black Bermudian church experience as a conservative worship setting where “stark white walls,” “a strict moral code,” “no instrumental music,” and children who “understood the meaning of silence” were counterbalanced by “richly blended, melodic, muted voices” joined together “in eight-part harmony” (Jones 1993, 243). Clearly, different times and locales produced different churches with different lessons for members of the Diaspora.

Learning Spaces Outside Schools: Focus on the Black Barbershop

The Black barbershop is a powerful institution in the Black community (Harris-Lacewell and Mills 2004; Hart and Bowen 2004; Mills 2005, 2006). As a profession, business entity, and center of socialization, the Black barbershop has been a central fixture in the Black community from as early as the nineteenth century (Harris-Lacewell and Mills 2004). More than seeing their profession as a fiscal stepping stone, Black barbers used their influence and opportunities for the betterment of their community. In fact, Harris-Lacewell and Mills (2004) assert: “From slavery to freedom, barbers and hairstylists have constituted the overwhelming majority of entrepreneurs in the African American community. Both as slaves and as free men, Black barbers used both monopoly and a White consumer base to their advantage. Their profession provided them with power, prestige, and status in the Black community. These men did not use this status and wealth solely for individual gain. African American barbers often used their earnings to actively engage in uplift activities” (164).

This ethos of service and community accountability continues today through the dialogue, networking, and mentoring that takes place in many Black barbershops. As a community-based pedagogical space, the Black barbershop has become a sanctuary where Black men can find community, camaraderie, culturally relevant discourse (Douglas, 2012a; Nunley, 2011), and “meaningful everyday Black talk” (Harris-Lacewell and Mills 2004, 167). Reminiscent of the spaces that allowed slaves to communicate beyond the listening ear of slave masters, the contemporary barbershop is a socio-political space where dialogue can occur beyond the confines of the workplace and the home. For many Black men, communication with employers and family members is a complex experience. Similarly, for many Black men, the Black barbershop is the only space where they will be in the company of other Black men exclusively (Harris-Lacewell and Mills 2004).

Based on a study of sex-role socialization in a Black urban barbershop, Franklin (1985) noted that topics “ranging from international crises to neighborhood ruckuses” exemplify the breadth of barbershop discourse (971). Franklin further contended that the barbershop is a powerful educational space that can both damage and empower, depending on the clientele on a particular day. Specifically,
Franklin notes: (a) “Masculinity is negotiated actively by adult males and passively by male youth” in urban barbershops (976); (b) “barbershop[s] literally capture the ‘minds’ of Black youth for one to two hours approximately two times per month,” during which time “vulnerable Black male youth are exposed to a predominantly male environment which reveals ‘expectations’ held for them by a cross-section of males with whom these Black male youth identify” (976); and (c) barbershop discourse provides messages of “physical aggression” and defeatism, such as stories about Black male failure due to external constraints (i.e., the White man, society) without reference to the successes of Black men (977–978). These findings suggest that those who seek to utilize the pedagogical potential of the barbershop and other community-based spaces must also acknowledge and address some of the detrimental practices and unspoken rules that exist in these spaces. Others have identified the barbershop as a powerful nonschool-educative venue (Douglas 2012a; Nunley 2011), although published studies focusing on the barbershop as a site for educational intervention research targeting African American men are scarce (Hart and Bowen 2004).

Narrative voices from history demonstrate the importance of barbershops to the culture of the Black Diaspora. One of Bermuda’s premiere vocalists and orchestra leaders of the 1920s, Harry Foster, learned to play the violin, bass violin, and cello in the barbershop, while also developing barbering skills that eventually led to him opening his own barbershop (Butler 2006). In a feature printed in African-American newspapers, historian Carter G. Woodson (1932) explained, “The cause of the Race can get a hearing in the Negro barber shop more easily than in a Negro school. In the barber shop the Negro has freedom; in the school the Negro must do what somebody else wants done” (2A). In a 1961 interview, novelist Ralph Ellison stated, “There is no place like a Negro barbershop for hearing what Negroes really think. There is more unselfconscious affirmation to be found here on a Saturday than you can find in a Negro college in a month, or so it seems to me” (Stern 1961, 9). In contemporary times, the popularity of the Barbershop films, including the related film Beauty Shop, help showcase the continuing importance of the institution to Black life in the United States.

Learning Spaces Outside Schools: Oral Histories of Black Bermudians

To gain a greater understanding of how individuals of African descent have personally experienced education in learning spaces outside schools, we conducted an oral history study of four Black Bermudian men between the ages of 30 and 70. The results of the study reveal that nonschool-educative venues are impactful centers of learning, socialization, and support, and suggest that some of these community-based spaces may in fact have had a more substantial impact on the subjects’ lives than schools. To provide further illustration of how our
participants discussed nonschool-educative spaces, we provide brief portrayals of 
the educational experiences—in school and out—described by our participants.

Asked the open-ended question, “Tell me the story of your life,” three of the 
four participants talked without interviewer prompting about the significance of 
Black churches in their personal development. In fact, it was not uncommon for 
these participants to frame their identities and personal decisions in relation to 
their commitment to or disengagement from the church. David, who is in his early 
70s, provided an example of how the church or spirituality can serve as the beats on 
which the lyrics of other lived experiences (i.e., family relationships) synchronize 
or fall out of rhythm. He began his narrative this way:

I was pretty much brought up in a Christian environment. At an early age I left the 
church and went out in the world. And I got caught up in the things that go on in the 
world—which are alcohol and drugs—not too much of the drug business but alcohol 
and I thought I was in control of it. I got married when I was 19. I was a pretty good 
father for many years. I went back in the church while I was married. Then I left the 
church again and my marriage dropped apart and I dropped apart.

In his narrative, David described his battles with alcoholism and mental illness as 
manifestations of his failure to commit to God. Nonetheless, though David left the 
church he later returned, seeing this space as an important route to revitalization. 
Reflecting on his life’s journey and the healthy relationships he now enjoys with 
his children and church family, he states: “I never thought I would make it this far. 
When I stood up at [church name] Church and was getting ready to be baptized, I 
cried. It was because I never thought I would make it back there. It is dangerous 
when you leave like that because there is no guarantee that you will make it back. 
You can get snuffed out through death or whatever or just your lifestyle can do it. 
Praise the Lord. He saved me. My health is pretty good.”

Steve, who was in his late 40s at the time of the interview, repeatedly referenced 
his experience being raised in a foster home, and the affinity he has for these 
individuals that became family to him. He stated: “I had a rough life. I was brought 
up by a . . . foster mother on Springfield Avenue. [Ms. Smith] brought me up. She 
[Ms. Smith] calls me her nephew and I called her auntie. She was like a mama 
to me. Anyhow, she had a couple of sisters . . . [and] a brother. . . . They were 
special people.” Including Steve, three of the four participants discussed—without 
interviewer prompting—the importance of family to their personal development, 
while all four mentioned relationships as a pivotal factor in their lived and learned 
experiences. Steve also expressly talked about spirituality within the context of his 
frequent hospital trips to visit family members and relationships with members of 
his sports club: “My cousin [at] the hospital . . . gets upset when she doesn’t see 
me. The one who had the stroke. I am going to see her tomorrow. She is coming 
around now [be]cause the Lord is bringing her around. Everybody needs prayer
every day. Just like the boys from [the Chargers Sports Club]. [Do you know] the boy who got killed (referencing a young man who had recently been killed in a motor cycle accident)? I used to help that little boy. That was my mate. I told his brother, ‘Let’s keep the faith.’"

Devon was a 30-year-old participant who consistently referenced the strong influence of the neighborhood on his upbringing. Of the four participants, he most frequently mentioned the absence of strong family support during his developmental years. As a result, his community, his neighborhood peers, and “trial and error” became the most dominant teachers. Devon began his narrative by sharing the following: “I was raised on Thompson Street, Gilchrest Parish. I used to play football. I was a good footballer. . . . I went to Blake Secondary. I wanted to be a lot of things, like [a] lawyer and stuff like that. But then stuff happens. You go around the wrong people and stuff like that. You go the wrong way. Some people go different ways. You learn from your experiences.”

Although participants like Devon consistently referenced significant learning experiences and relationships that were sustained in spaces outside of the schoolhouse, only one of the participants discussed his schooling experience in any detail without being specifically prompted to do so, and three of the four participants described their schooling in terms that suggested that it was a regrettable or negative experience. Further underscoring the centrality of nonschool-based pedagogical spaces in the lives of the Black men in our study, some participants even chose a church parking lot or the neighborhood sports/community club as the site for their interview with the researcher.

Kevin was one such participant who chose to meet in a church parking lot to conduct the interview. The son of participant David, described earlier, Kevin offers a narrative that crosses the generational borders to cast light on the distinct connections and disconnects that emerged in response to his father’s struggles and triumphs. Kevin grounded his narrative in the various neighborhoods and communities that his family lived in. Kevin, now in his late 30s, stated:

I am Bermudian born and raised. I started out my life up in Brenau Parish . . . on Haven Road. I was a bit too young to remember that. What I do remember is when I lived on Jewelry Road. I came up with what started off with what we would term complete family: mother, father, supportive grandparents, aunts and uncles and as time went on for various reasons the family broke. My father was removed from the home. But in doing that my mom was ensuring that we maintained a form of relationship as we could. He used to drink a lot. She would allow us to maintain contact with him in whatever way we could. We moved around a lot. On [this] 21 square mile I think I have lived in every parish at least once; some of them, 4 or 5 times.

Kevin’s early years were made more difficult by the constant moving that his family did once his father was no longer in the home. But houses were not the
only things that changed in Kevin’s life and parish borders were not the only borders Kevin crossed as he journeyed to manhood. Although spirituality was a mainstay for most of his life, at times he struggled with what he describes as “the dichotomy of two religions” as a result of moving back and forth between two religious denominations. He declared:

If you can find dichotomy in two religions then you can find dichotomy in your life. You can find a reason and a means and a justification for doing just about anything. When I was in my early 20s, I guess, we had a situation where financially my family, my mom, my tight family, my nuclear family didn’t have a lot of finances. And we were always struggling. My mom was working 12 double shifts, you know 16-hour shifts to just put food on your table and keep a roof over our head. My family decided that, in a lot of ways, they would shield me from the realities of our situation. I grew up resenting the area that we lived in. I didn’t have all the stuff that my friends had or I didn’t have all the stuff that even other members of my family had access to . . . finances, access to getting certain types of clothes.

These dynamics, he believes, were contributing factors to his decision to involve himself in the sale of narcotics, which eventually led to a stint in prison. In fact, his prison experience was significant in him turning his life around. Reflecting upon the day of his release from jail, he says: “I remember saying to myself that there will never be a time that I will go back there [to prison].” What he did not know, however, is how his conviction and prison term would infringe upon his capacity to travel to the United States. Similarly, many Black Bermudian men have forfeited their rights to cross literal borders into foreign countries due to criminal convictions. In this regard, the 21-square-mile island that tourists have come to describe as paradise has become a 21-square-mile prison for Black men who are now chained to the Rock.¹ Kevin’s experience in this respect is significant because it both underscores the centrality of border crossing to the Bermudian experience and it also reveals the rebirth experience of a man who is able to reconcile his personal and spiritual dichotomies:

One thing that I didn’t know . . . was that something . . . I did in my early 20s [could] still hinder me in my late 30s. In the US [Immigration Department] they have a stop list. They get information on the incarcerated individuals and what they have been incarcerated for and they put you on the stop list. And once you are on the stop list you can’t travel from Bermuda to the US, which is the most economical travelling spot to get to from Bermuda. If you go to London it is more expensive than Bermuda. But when you go to the States everything is cheaper. And so when I found out I was on the stop list my first wife and I were about to go on a well-deserved [yet delayed] honeymoon . . . [but] I [was] stopped at the airport; I couldn’t go. She came back early and I couldn’t leave. And I remember [thinking] that my travelling career [was over] and I am trapped on 21 square miles in Bermuda for one mistake.
But there was a different plan though. I started to focus my life back on God. I got baptized back into the church. I started to pray a little bit more and started to focus on more spiritual things. And a couple of years after that, which was unheard of for the amount of time and the amount of the drugs that were involved in [my] case, when I went to visit the US Immigration/Customs official to sit down ... in an unprecedented [decision] I got a waiver; I got paper work that I would be able to travel and I just go back every year to renew it and so far, even after 9–11, some of the procedures and processes have changed, I have still been able to travel to the US on a pretty consistent basis and I am very thankful for that because there are a lot of guys here that are just stuck. They can’t get off the island.

Kevin’s experience of having his international travel privileges restricted and revoked is not unique. Sadly, there’s a disturbing frequency and irony to the reality that so many Black men are stuck in Bermuda. As policy makers and school stakeholders in Bermuda and across the world make decisions to address the achievement gap between White students and students of color, the data in this study underscores the reality that spaces outside of the schoolhouse are highly impactful locales in the lives of many Black males.

In regard to the use of specific learning spaces outside schools, the participants’ recollections of the barbershop provide compelling insight into the uniqueness of their experiences. For Steve, the barbershop was a bridge to another educative venue, the church: “I went there [to the barbershop] a lot. ... They taught me a lot. [One particular] barber taught me about the church—about Christianity—since it was a Christian barbershop.” Kevin’s enthusiastic overtures about the barbershop reveal the educative impact of the barbershop in his life:

The Black barbershop ... ha, ha, ha! That is the Black hub. ... You would go, and you would sit down, and there was no, every topic is meat for discussion in a barbershop. There is no taboo; there is nothing off limits [and] there is no situation or circumstance that’s out there. You can talk sports. Sports came up. ... It was literally, if you were a Black man, that is where you were taught to debate. And how to maintain, how to give passion, without turning to violence. And that is something that our young people could use a little bit more of. You know, to sit down, you talk about religious stuff if you wanted to. Political stuff if you wanted to. And you could get as passionate and heated as you wanted. But when you left the barbershop, you and whomever you were discussing it with, would be like, ‘Yeah, I check you next week Friday,’ or ‘Check you next week Thursday,’ or whatever the case may be. It was just a perpetual place to just hang out, chill, and sometime you would be in there sitting for hours and you didn’t mind. [The barber] Mr. Clark, he always taught us guys when we were younger that when you go out, you represent more than yourself. So while you may look tore up from the floor up and think you’re only representing yourself, dude, when you go out, you’re representing your family, you are representing your bloodline in certain ways and so for that, you need to shave, and you know, look a little bit tighter on a day to day basis. And then, when it comes
to special occasions, you got to look real tight. And then the other things it taught me, it just taught me the art of agreeing to disagree. It’s all right to have a difference of opinion with a person, a guy or whatever, and it didn’t have to break down into a fight, a curse fest, because he didn’t allow cursing in his barbershop. It taught you how to be a gentleman, as opposed to sitting off on the street you know saying ‘f’ this and ‘f’ you, drinking or whatever you did, all this other stuff. And it taught you to be a really good debater. You couldn’t come into a barbershop and talk about your team without some facts and figures. You had to know what was what. It helped, it really helped.

Kevin also reported, “I get my haircut by my wife now and have been for some years, but I miss the interaction of the Black barbershop.” Such a statement suggests how the venues where individuals access lessons may change over a lifetime.

Ironically, Kevin’s dad, David, views the barbershop quite differently: “If a guy could cut my hair in five minutes he was my barber. My idea of a barbershop was to go get a haircut and get out of there.” Devon uses remarkably similar language in describing how he approaches the barbershop: “It’s a place to go get my haircut. I just want to get in and get out. [For] some people, [the barbershop is] their comfort zone where they talk about their stuff or whatever, that’s not me.” Whereas, for two of the participants, the barbershop is valued as an engaging learning space, the other two participants find their education elsewhere.

One more space deserves mention. Although the prison experience emerged as a motif in one of the interviews and served as a context where a subject’s personal rebirth may have occurred, this occurrence may be an exception, rather than the general rule, for men who enter the penal system. Kevin’s counsel is profound and summative in this regard, even as he underscores why we need to proactively employ community-based educative spaces to promote positive outcomes for Black men prior to them entering the penal system:

A lot of people in Bermuda (who have never been to prison) think that our prison is like a country club. There are a lot of misconceptions. People think that the units are air conditioned . . . [and] they [prisoners] are down there living in the lap of luxury. There’s not a lick of air condition in there. The place is built with a 20-foot wall around it that is 4 feet thick. [There’s] razor wire over the top. It is on the water but no water breeze comes in; unless you are on the upper floors you are not catching any breeze . . . in [a] little 6-by-9 cubicle [with] your toilet, your sink, [and] your personal items. So for people who [think prisoners] keep going to prison because it is a joy ride and because their lives in there are better than the life they have outside . . . [they shouldn’t] think that. People keep going back [to] prison because they don’t know how to do anything else. They are not equipped to handle not being in prison, and they are not able to get within what society wants them to do and so they do other things.
In the end, nonschool-based educative venues and personal lessons learned from lived experiences essentially framed the personal journeys described in the participants’ narratives. The wide range of spaces/experiences discussed by the participants include: the family, neighborhoods, sports clubs, church/spirituality, barbershops, prison, jobs/work, and international travel. Particularly noteworthy are the historical connections and border-crossing roots/routes among the participants’ narratives and historical accounts. For instance, much like the African American twentieth-century novelist Ralph Ellison believed “there is no place like a Negro barbershop for hearing what Negroes really think” (Stern 1961, 9), the contemporary Black Bermudian, Kevin, states, “the Black barbershop ... ha, ha, ha! That is the Black hub. ... If you were a Black man, that is where you were taught to debate.” Growing up with little formal schooling in early twentieth-century American South, Richard Wright (1945) remembered: “At the age of twelve, I had an attitude toward life that was to endure ... that was to make me skeptical of everything while seeking everything, tolerant of all and yet critical” and a “spirit” that “made me strangely tender and cruel, violent and peaceful” (88).

Across time and geographic space, our study participant, Devon, remembers the educational effects of growing up in a 1980s Bermudian neighborhood: “I was raised on Thompson Street, Gilchrest Parish. ... I wanted to be a lot of things, like [a] lawyer and stuff like that. But then stuff happens. You go around the wrong people. ... You go the wrong way. ... You learn from your experiences.”

Spanning time and crossing borders, life has not always been an easy teacher.

Complexities abound in trying to understand the implications of our findings regarding community-based pedagogical spaces. Fundamental questions remain, such as: Can community-based pedagogical spaces be utilized beyond the manner in which they are presently employed? Should community-based pedagogical spaces be utilized more extensively than they are presently employed? How can we utilize community-based pedagogical spaces without compromising the authenticity of the spaces?

In answering these questions, we need to think carefully about how we ultimately approach educational interventions in community spaces. There are many borders still to be crossed and dots to be connected both ideologically and institutionally. Distrust and fear are particularly challenging obstacles. Some educational and community stakeholders may fear the lack of traditional structures and controls in these spaces. Others may express concern that utilizing community venues more intentionally will lead to the inevitable alteration or sanitization of inherently messy, organic spaces. What is unacceptable is to fail to reflect on, account for, and evaluate the influence of nonschooling venues, especially if discourses around equity, culturally relevant pedagogy, and closing achievement gaps are genuine.
Regardless of one’s apprehensions and inhibitions about the roles of learning spaces outside schools, the historical data remind us that these spaces represent a rich lineage of community-based education for people of African descent. To ignore the impact of these spaces is to ignore key cogs in the history, development, and sustenance of Black identities and Black cultures, and to ignore sites where education—irrespective of one’s perception of its quality—takes place. Concomitantly, educational and community stakeholders act carelessly when they ignore how the organic nature of these community spaces can be both beneficial and detrimental, depending on who enters and leads these nonschool-based learning communities.

Our historical overview and our qualitative study data reveal that far less than thriving, some Black people are merely surviving, and too many others are being deprived of the necessary tools and opportunities (educational and otherwise) to challenge this reality. Sadly, the mantra “education by any means necessary” is often replaced by the bottom line: “survival by any means necessary.” The lived experiences of the men in our oral history study suggest that much work still needs to be done to address the disproportionalities and disconnects that inhibit their capacity to cross literal and figurative borders. Although some of these men would describe themselves as successful, many of them have had to experience the bitter to know the sweet. Prison and other perilous circumstances have served as both tools of education and inhibitors to the fulfillment of big dreams.

What emerges from our study is the reality that community-based pedagogical spaces alone are not the panacea. In fact, the data reveal that there is no one space that meets the needs of every individual. Participation in community spaces is quite organic and fluid, as people go in and out of institutions and organizations. The implications of these realities for schoolhouse and nonschool-based outcomes are significant. Specifically, we are reminded that addressing one organization or entity will not allow us to address the needs of every student. Just like we must individualize instruction, an understanding of individual needs must undergird our approach to evaluating how spaces can be effectively utilized to buttress schoolhouse and other mainstream institutional approaches to education. Additionally, greater consideration must be given to the fact that education by any means necessary encompasses a range of processes and experiences that, at times, embody notions of survival, coping, deprivation, and thriving.

CONCLUSION

Through our study of history and our qualitative investigation, we conclude that it is important for all K–12 educational stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators, community members, policy makers, and researchers) to understand that
education of Blacks has occurred and will continue to occur outside of schools. We believe there is potential for greater utilization of community-based pedagogical spaces to enhance the academic and life experiences of all students, and students of African descent in particular. In a time when policy makers are trying to address the overrepresentation of Black men in the penal system and scholar-practitioners are trying to close the achievement gap in schools between White students and students of color, this study offers an important reminder of the significance of alternative avenues in the educative experience. In this respect, our study challenges the orthodoxy that reforming schools, alone, will lead to greater academic success (Cuban 2010).

Our study is significant as a building block for future educative approaches that respect and incorporate the pedagogical potency of nonschool-based educational venues. For instance, scholars such as Franklin (1985), Seiler (2001), Mills (2005), and Hart and Bowen (2004), have considered the barbershop as a culturally relevant setting in the Black community for the study of topics ranging from Black male socialization practices to the dissemination of prostate cancer research. But little consideration has been given to partnerships that would foster pedagogical and institutional exchange and engagement between the barbershop and the K–12 schoolhouse (Douglas and Gause 2009). The barbershop could in fact be a possible site for early educational interventions intended to help youths navigate schools successfully (Author et al. 2009), even as we acknowledge that some messages and activities in these spaces may not always be positive (Franklin 1985; Harris-Lacewell and Mills 2004; Mills 2005).

In addition, as Gerald Horne notes in back cover praise of Swan’s (2009) book, *Black Power in Bermuda: The Struggle for Decolonization*, there is a case to be made “for the importance of Bermuda as a laboratory for political developments that reverberated significantly on the U.S. mainland.” Drawing on our previously stated belief that education must be more broadly defined to consider the impact of spaces outside of the schoolhouse, we believe that Bermuda can and must be used as “a laboratory” for greater understandings of Western educational constructs and their effects on peoples of African descent—peoples who are consistently required to cross literal and metaphorical borders to participate in the global community and the dominant Anglo-centered paradigms that are privileged in modern society. The privileging of the schoolhouse as the sole educative space for all young people and the inattention offered to learning spaces outside schools for Black people is emblematic of the cultural domination that must be considered if discussions of academic divides and achievement gaps are to evolve into more fruitful approaches and outcomes for all students. The findings of this study are our nascent efforts to participate in this process.

Although nonschool-educative venues like the Black church and the Black barbershop may be seen and described as nontraditional spaces in mainstream discourse and dominant schoolhouse settings, these spaces are actually traditional
educative locale for peoples of African descent that continue to buttress and supplement the experiences that Black people have in the schoolhouse. Sadly, worse than being minimized as mere social or educational appendages, the power of nonschool-educative spaces to impact the educational experiences of Black youth has been virtually ignored or underutilized. This cannot continue. In the end, we believe that to help Black and other minority youth improve academically, school stakeholders must respect and show a willingness to embrace the culturally-grounded, educational traditions of African peoples. Specifically, we must pursue and achieve education by any means necessary.

Notes

1. Bermuda is often affectionately referred to as The Rock by many locals. Also, although Cyril Packwood’s (1975) book, *Chained on the Rock: Slavery in Bermuda*, is not being directly referenced in this metaphor, it is significant to acknowledge his seminal work and the apparent, contemporary manifestations of Black Bermudian male oppression.

2. In Bermuda, discourses around race, achievement gaps, and schooling are often embedded in the overarching labels of public and private schooling, where the majority of public school students are Black (Social and Demographic Division-Department of Statistics, Bermuda, 2006) and where most private schools are read as White, even though some Black students and other students of color attend these institutions (Christopher 2009; Douglas and Gause 2009).

REFERENCES


