

Early College Folio

The House of Education Needs Overhaul

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In Praise of “Powerful, Head-Strong Young People”

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EDITORS’ NOTE: *This is one of several responses to Elizabeth Blodgett Hall’s [“The House of Education Needs Overhaul.”](#) Hall was the founder and president emeritus of Bard College at Simon’s Rock, the only full-time, four-year, residential college of the liberal arts and sciences designed for students ready for college after the 10th or 11th grade. Hall’s article is published alongside these responses by early college leaders in this first issue of Early College Folio.*

The cornerstone for the William Lemmel Middle School building in west Baltimore dates to 1957. Just past the front doors is a large lobby area, which used to be flanked on one side by trophy cases. We moved in nearly sixty years later, in August 2016, the middle school itself now closed but the facility still viable. Our Dean of Studies started referring to the lobby as “Town Center,” and the name stuck. In the mornings, the Dean of Studies posts in Town Center to greet students as they arrive for the day. During class changes, students stream through Town Center en route to Seminar or to the library. Conveniently adjacent to the auditorium, it is the place where families bearing balloon bouquets go after the matriculation ceremony or an awards assembly to take pictures. It is the school’s front parlor and family room.

Town Center is also the school’s point of embarkation for any and every off-campus experience, from museum trips to multi-day college tours. These departures have their own soundtrack: I’ve come to recognize the excited murmur of student chatter as they discuss who they’ll be sitting next to on the bus and the drag of a teenager’s duffle bag sliding across the floor. I’d know them anywhere. On March 6, 2018, the usual sounds of a Bard High School Early College (BHSEC) Baltimore field trip were different. On that day, somewhere between forty and fifty students had assembled in Town Center to participate in a citywide walkout to protest gun violence. It was barely three weeks after the mass shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Students across Baltimore City were answering a call to march from their schools to City Hall; from the old Lemmel building, this is a walk of about four and a half miles. The students had organized themselves. They were gathered and ready to go. They glanced around their group nervously, expecting the adults to stop them, to threaten to suspend them; they were ready for conflict.

And finally, when the time came, they pushed open the heavy glass and steel doors to Town Center into the late winter sunlight. They started to walk.¹

I've often thought about that cornerstone and all the history this one school building must have witnessed, opening just three years after *Brown v. Board of Education* mandated the integration of schools around the country. A lot of people in west Baltimore know Lemmel. Once, an Uber driver who brought me to school asked to come inside, just to see whether his old school had changed from how it figured in his memory. Ta-Nehisi Coates went to Lemmel; so did Freddie Gray.² From its perch on North Dukeland Street, which rises steeply upward from Gwynns Falls Parkway to Liberty Heights Avenue, the old Lemmel building came to be just as Baltimore was gaining a national reputation for peaceful compliance with *Brown*, even if the city was south of the Mason-Dixon. And then it would have seen the city, and its schools, deteriorate into hypersegregation. Between 1955 and 1980, Baltimore City Public Schools' enrollment would shift from 60% white to about 80% black.³ To be sure, there is nothing inherently wrong with having a majority African American school district. The problem is what hypersegregation signifies. Beneath the statistics are the phenomena wrought by post-World War II deindustrialization and white flight, and even farther back in history, redlining: unemployment and underemployment, poverty, under-resourced public schools, the racial wealth gap, all reaching a terrifying crescendo of addiction and mass incarceration after the 1980s. Historians call this "the urban crisis," and at bottom, it has to do with the physical assignment of black and white residents to one part of the city or another.⁴ Redlining and its consequences have similar contours, whether you're looking at Baltimore, Atlanta, Cleveland, Detroit, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, or Miami.⁵ In Baltimore, the shape has a name: "the white L," referring to the sliver of affluent neighborhoods running from north-central Baltimore east along the waterfront, and "the black butterfly" of east and west Baltimore.⁶

The Lemmel building lies in the black butterfly. This is the vantage point, both historical and contemporary, from which I revisit Elizabeth Blodgett Hall's essay, "The House of Education Needs Overhaul" (1967). It, too, is written with both past and present on its mind. Succeeding "the farm economy of our forebears," Hall sees a future for young people that involves "becom[ing] a 'cog' in a huge industrial machine[.]" For those young people who do not wish this future for themselves looms the specter of the "'hippy,'" that person "sufficiently affluent, bright and alienated" for whom no real "action remains other than protest[.]"⁷ The 21st century reader can see Hall contending with the forces unleashed by the post-World War II period and the relative, uneven, and conditional prosperity that came with it. She writes in the throes of the processes of which we are on the other side: the military-industrial economy replaced by technical and service economies, the anti-Vietnam War movement and the tortured resolution of that conflict, the halfway democratization of a college education to include the middle class.

In surveying the teenagers of her era, Hall writes that an early college education can “cultivate . . . an awareness of the effect of his individual actions upon himself and others.” This is to be accomplished by “granting to young adults the adult’s freedom of choice[.]” “Too few adults,” she goes on to say, “have the courage to handle powerful, head-strong young people in this way,” preferring instead to “lock the young adult in restriction.” Hall identifies two factors militating against this endeavor: the young person’s “affluence and far-ranging automobile.”⁸ At the BHSEC in west Baltimore, few of the students are affluent, and fewer of them have automobiles of their own. That said, Hall’s assertion that young people ought to be given the chance to be “powerful” and “head-strong” resonates. It resonates because in the black butterfly, not least among the resources historically denied these communities is the right to be heard when one speaks.

In a given school year, the demographics of Baltimore’s BHSEC students are anywhere from 75% to 80% African American, approximately speaking. In the late 1960s, Elizabeth Blodgett Hall was certain that the adolescents of that generation would “not stay locked up.” African American students in Baltimore, whether they attend a Bard Early College or not, face a society that for centuries has sought to “lock them up,” both physically and metaphorically. The latter point concerns us here. All too many of our students are keenly aware of the price to be paid for being a “powerful, head-strong young” black person. This is because of the ample evidence of the consequences, sometimes deadly, levied upon other black people for the offenses of walking through a white neighborhood (Trayvon Martin), jogging (Ahmaud Arbery), or sleeping in one’s own bed (Breonna Taylor).⁹ They know this to be a gendered phenomenon that cuts men and women in different ways. One must not be an angry black woman, or she will forfeit advancement on the job.¹⁰ One must not appear a threatening young black man, or the police will be called. When an irritated Joe Biden instructed Donald Trump to “shut up, man” in the first presidential debate of 2020, commentators observed that women and people of color could never have done the same.¹¹ And when a mostly-white mob attempted to overthrow the results of that election by overrunning the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, Black Lives Matter activists across the country were quick to describe a racial double standard in police response. “There was no shooting, no rubber bullets, no tear gas,” said Lesley McSpadden, whose son Michael Brown was killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. “It was nothing like what we have seen.”¹²

To understand why this is so, I find it helpful to apply a concept developed by Ann Laura Stoler in the context, not of the United States, but the period of Dutch colonialism in the East Indies. Here, she argues,

Dutch colonial authorities were troubled by the distribution of sentiment, by both its excessive expression and the absence of it; of European fathers too attached to their mixed-blood offspring, of Indies-born European children devoid of attachment to their (Dutch) cultural origins, of European-educated children who, upon return to the Indies, held sympathies and sensibilities out of order and out of place.¹³

As much as any other economic or political policy, the project of maintaining the dominance of the ruling class required emotional regulation as well. Translated to the American project of white supremacy, we find, for instance, laws that deprived mixed-race children of any claim on the estates of their white fathers. We find African Americans in the Jim Crow era beaten or murdered for being too outspoken against injustice. And, too, we find a strain of racial uplift strategy from the antebellum period through the Civil Rights Movement stressing restraint and respectability as means of countering anti-black stereotypes and giving the lie to justifications for segregation as a necessary and positive social good.¹⁴

And so, at the Baltimore campus of Bard Early College in the 21st century, Elizabeth Blodgett Hall's challenge that we "have the courage to handle powerful, head-strong young people" assumes a special significance. At the same time that we fight against the systemic racism that would deny our students access to a college education, we must also swim upstream against the social forces that pressure them into silence. This requires more from us adults than simply not getting in their way when students are set on doing a walkout. We must actively invite them to use their voices—particularly and especially when they are going to be critical of us. Some of the most difficult days I've had as principal have also been the most important; they are the days when we hold a Town Hall to discuss some issue of concern in the school community. Facing an auditorium of four hundred teenagers at varying degrees of disgruntlement is hard. Allowing them to express anger, frustration, or—much worse—disappointment in their school or its leadership is harder still. But if we mean to give our students an education that equips them to think and ask critical questions, we must be prepared for them to wield that critical thinking in analysis of our own actions. And so I do more than simply endure these difficult conversations. I schedule them. "[T]he consequences invited by a free choice of action are often the ones we would prefer to avoid," Hall writes. I would offer that the consequences of being yet another institution that relegates young people of color to silence, to grudging acquiescence to the status quo for fear of doing anything to challenge it, is far worse.

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NOTES

1 Although not as extensively as we would have for a school-sponsored field trip, we did take such safety precautions as we could that day. We recorded the names of the students who left so we could make sure their caregivers knew they had left the building. And our associate dean followed behind the group in his car until the students made it safely to City Hall.

2 Catherine Rentz, “Freddie Gray Remembered as a Jokester Who Struggled to Leave Drug Trade,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 22, 2015, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/crime/bal-freddie-gray-remembered-as-jokester-who-struggled-to-leave-drug-trade-20151120-story.html> (accessed January 18, 2021); Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Dastardly Vandals Who Do Not Shoot the Fair One,” *The Atlantic*, June 23, 2010, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/06/dastardly-vandals-who-do-not-shoot-the-fair-one/58569/> (accessed January 18, 2021).

3 Edward Berkowitz, “Baltimore’s Public Schools in a Time of Transition,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 92, no. 4 (1997): 413-416. Also see Howell S. Baum, Brown in *Baltimore: School Desegregation and the Limits of Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

4 See Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); David Simon and Edward Burns, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997); and *13th*, directed by Ava DuVernay (Netflix, 2016). For an argument about the corporeal significance of segregation, see Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

5 “The Racial Wealth Gap,” *Explained* (Netflix, 2018).

6 Lawrence Brown, “Two Baltimores: The White L vs. the Black Butterfly,” *Baltimore City Paper*, June 28, 2016, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/citypaper/bcpnews-two-baltimores-the-white-l-vs-the-black-butterfly-20160628-htmlstory.html> (accessed January 18, 2021).

7 Elizabeth Blodgett Hall, “The House of Education Needs Overhaul: The Theory Behind Simon’s Rock,” (Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Elizabeth Blodgett Hall Manuscripts Collection, Simon’s Rock Archives, Bard College at Simon’s Rock, reprint 1973). Quotations are on pages 1-3 of the reprint edition.

8 Hall, “Overhaul,” pages 4-5.

9 Wesley Lowery, “From Sanford, Fla., to Charleston, S.C.: ‘Why Does Blackness Equal a Threat?’” *Washington Post*, June 23, 2015; Richard Fausset,

“What We Know about the Shooting Death of Ahmaud Arbery,” *New York Times*, December 17, 2020; Ava Wallace and Roman Stubbs, “Louisville Protestors Decry Police Shooting that Killed Breonna Taylor in her Apartment,” *Washington Post*, May 29, 2020.

10 Samantha Schmidt, “Why Serena Williams’s Frustration Was Far Too Familiar for Many Black Women,” *Washington Post*, September 11, 2018.

11 Jill Filipovic, “Only a Man Could Get Away with Telling Trump to Shut Up,” *Washington Post*, September 30, 2020.

12 Robert Klemko, Kimberly Kindy, Kim Bellware, and Derek Hawkins, “Kid Glove Treatment of Pro-Trump Mob Contrasts with Strong-Arm Police Tactics Against Black Lives Matter, Activists Say,” *Washington Post*, January 6, 2021. See also Christian Davenport, Sarah A. Soule, and David A. Armstrong II, “Protesting While Black? The Differential Policing of American Activism, 1960 to 1990,” *American Sociological Review* 78, no. 1 (2011): 152-178.

13 Ann Laura Stoler, “Affective States,” in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics*, eds. David Nugent and Joan Vincent (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 5.

14 See Germaine Etienne, “Excellence is the Highest Form of Resistance: African-American Reformers in the Pre-Civil War North,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2004); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, “‘Dress modestly, neatly . . . as if you were going to church’: Respectability, Class, and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, eds. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 69-10