

# In the Spirit of the Midnight School

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In the introduction to Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith's authoritative anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, the editors tell the story of an enslaved woman named Lily Ann Granderson. Granderson founded a clandestine school for blacks in Natchez, Mississippi. A "midnight school," the people called it. She started her classes at twelve at night and ended them at 2:00 a.m. The archive says, "Her number of scholars was twelve at a time, and when she had taught these to read and write, she dismissed them, and again took her apostolic number and brought them up to the extent of her ability, until she had graduated hundreds. A number of them wrote their own passes and started for Canada."<sup>1</sup>

In a moment in which conservative forces rally to suppress knowledge and the diverse groups of people who receive, rearticulate, and disseminate it, Mrs. Granderson's midnight schools provide us with the crucial principles needed for this historic challenge. In these dead-of-night lessons, we find an early instance of the classroom outside the classroom and the inspired activation of everyday people as the agents of collective liberation. This is the radical legacy that we must harness and reactivate.

The history of social movements provides spectacular examples of similar interventions. In this country, we need only look to the Mississippi Freedom Schools that challenged the racist domination of the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party and contested white supremacy through a curriculum taught by young Black and white student volunteers from colleges and universities around the country—volunteers who would run their Freedom Schools in basements, in churches, on porches, and under trees. We need only study the

Black radical reading groups in the Bay Area that the historian Donna Murch discusses in her book *Living for the City: Migration, Education and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California*. Talking about one group, the African American Association (AAA), she writes, "Through a wide and varied reading list that brought together cultural anthropology, critical black sociology, and classic works in African American history, the AAA politicized a whole generation of black students who passed through Bay Area colleges and universities in the late fifties and early sixties."<sup>2</sup> In addition, we simply have to take inspiration from Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.), that organization founded by the Stonewall veterans Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, who used their S.T.A.R. house on 213 East Second Street in New York to practice mutual aid and to raise such questions as, "Why do we suffer?" and "Why do we got to take the brunt of this shit?"<sup>3</sup> These are just a few of the many examples.

Behind these interventions was a steadfast commitment to the power of nonelites. Indeed, the great organizer and leader Ella Baker said in a 1969 speech at the Institute of the Black World, "We have to begin to think in terms of where do we really want to go and how do we get there. . . . [One] of the guiding principles has to be that we cannot lead a struggle that involves masses of people without identifying with the people and without getting the people to understand what their potentials are, what their strengths are."<sup>4</sup> In his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," Dr. Martin Luther King sounded a note like Baker's. He said, "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored."<sup>5</sup> For Baker and King, ordinary people would largely be the channels for new kinds of social, political, and intellectual potentials and creativities—potentials and creativities that society needed for a life-and-death confrontation.

Our present conjuncture requires us to extend these legacies of direct action and community activation. Doing so involves identifying and establishing the institutions and collectivities through which we can foster creative tensions, forms of knowledge, and genres of strength—in schools, neighborhoods, churches, mosques, cell blocks. It means learning from and multiplying organizations made up of progressive teachers and parents like the Anti-racist Teach-



ing and Learning Collective. It entails coordinating curricular efforts across K–16. It presumes supporting the 153 black bookstores listed on the African American Literature Book Club’s website. It concerns holding up public and independent libraries like the Eastside Freedom Library in St. Paul, Minnesota.

If the right is terrified of a politically astute population, winning means seriously proliferating the opportunities for critical political education. Whether through reading groups, community organizations, bookstores, or libraries, we can turn these into relays for progressive know-how and analysis. And if there are places with none of these institutions, we can create them.

In her book *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, the organizer and author Jane McAlevey draws on histories of direct action to identify “the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved, who don’t consider themselves activists at all—that’s the point of organizing.”<sup>6</sup> She also writes, “When people understand the strategy because they helped to make it, they will be invested for the long haul, sustained and propelled to achieve more meaningful wins.”<sup>7</sup> By contrast, those organizations that privilege elites are most often characterized by short-term victories. As she states, “Many small advances can be and are won without engaging ordinary people, where the key actors are instead paid lawyers, lobbyists, and public relations professionals, helped by some good smoke and mirrors. That is an advocacy model, and small advances are all it can produce.”<sup>8</sup> Building a movement with ordinary people—at its heart—entails creating new social relations, and there can be no shortcuts when it comes to that.

As dismaying as our present catastrophe is, this could be the moment of a political shift that returns us to the fundamentals of direct action and the broad activation of critical pedagogies. Such a return is necessary because we have become overtrained in seeking celebrity and wealth as the presumed means for effecting change. As a result, we have forgotten that the most crucial strategy involves looking for the sister, brother, or sibling in the neighborhood who—on those hot-ass summer days—controls the fire hydrant.

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