

Shakira Hall Louimarre

Power Autobiography

My junior high school was a towering four-story pre-war building, the length of an entire city Block. It was originally built for the children of Italian, Russian and European Jews, to have space to play for recess, but white flight was a thing, so we were here now. To account for the change in population, a chain link fence was built around the once grand courtyard. There were two main times students could be in the yard- before we lined up for first period and at lunch. During the lunch hour occasionally, kids would try to climb it- and the more athletic boys would succeed in escaping the confines of the school to just go and hang out in the park for the remainder of the day. But there was always a chance that the NYPD officers would be nearby in their vans, diligently at work, rounding up the truant children of the city. When truancy officers got you, you weren't quite arrested, but you we 'rent *NOT* arrested either. Most kids never tried to climb—too much work, not enough payoff. Most contented themselves with double Dutch, hopscotch, scully, basketball courts, and middle school flirtations; normal adolescent lunch time fare. —until the bell would ring, indicating the beginning of the next period and uniformed safety officers would appear with their detector wands, and their booming voices giving direction. “MOVE MOVE MOVE! Line up! Y'all Talking too Much!” “This ISS slip got your name on it!”. Their adult voices boomed, and their adult bodies moved those students not quick enough to respond to the former. The officers were the muscle, the enforcers, but we would have to look elsewhere to find real power at the school.

Once inside, you could find all the expected school things. An auditorium, with a large American flag at the front. Classrooms- not enough books or computer. Teachers- some who were dedicated and others who were just biding time until more lucrative career opportunities would appear, and students- 99% Black, mostly the children of Caribbean immigrants, living either paycheck to paycheck or at the poverty line. The nomenclature for classes was as follows: first you would say the grade-8 for example, and then the number. So, there was class 8-1 (housing the highest aptitude students) through class 8-9 (housing the lowest aptitude students), there was also the ESL and special education students who were in their own class, and then there was class 8A1- the gifted and talented class. Class 8A1- was my class. Class 8 A1 was an oasis. Books? - there were enough. Student to teacher ratio was just fine. Being in the gifted and talented program at my school didn't quiet afford us the best education in the city, but it was surely the best that the building had to offer. And with our A-1 status, and A-1 test scores, and A-1 parents who were often involved at the school, also came A-1 privilege; which set the stage for one of my first experiences with power in education: The power of labelling.

It was right of passage of sorts for 7th graders to sneak out of the courtyard at lunch and go to the corner store. If you made it there and back, great. If you got caught, you were almost guaranteed to be suspended. So, on one of the last days of the 7th grade my friends, suggested



we try our hand at it. I didn't particularly want to risk getting suspended, but it was a hot day out and an Icey seemed like a good idea. So, we made a plan to climb. My first friend Tashana who was in 7-6 climbed first, she landed two feet outside the yard. Then my friend Laterece who was in 7-4 climbed, Troy who was in 7-9 climbed... then it was my turn. I've never been athletic, and I was scared, but I started my ascent. Up, up, up, until I reached the apex. But as soon as my two feet touch the other side, we see Mr. Ray one of the officers turn the corner. He must have been patrolling the perimeter of the school.... We ran. He was faster. We got caught.

We were all escorted to the principal's office. And each separately waited for our time With Ms. Brown. Tashana, Latrece, and Troy were suspended, and I was not. When it was time for my individual session, Ms. Brown sat me down and said I was a 'good kid', and that I don't need to be hanging out with kids like them. She said *she knew* that I knew better than to sneak out of school; and that as an Astral student, I should be a role model. She said I couldn't afford to have a suspension on my record. She called my mother and sent me back to class.

In Education, the way we label children. "gifted", "honors", or "IEP", follows them. It empowers some students and families, chances, opportunities, and choice. These labels totally disempower others and enables inequity. In this situation, where a student is "let off the hook" despite clearly violating the rules, privilege would have been easier to name in a Black or PoC/ White racial dynamic. But in this situation, in my racially homogenous school, it was complexified by intra-racial understandings of race, ethnicity, language (accent), and class. My mother is an Americanized Jamaican immigrant who has no problem advocating for my educational needs. This created a situation where she wouldn't be bulldozed by administration the way some of my school mates' parents were. Although racism wasn't a factor in the situation, I believe that colorism, classism, and even anti- black male gender bias played a role in the unfair punishment of my friends and the grace given to me. Because of my label of an "Astral" student, my potential was recognized and valued, and I believe that is fundamentally wrong. All of us who climbed the fence that day were entitled to grace and less punitive measures. There was a potential lesson to be learned, suspension didn't have to be the answer for any of us. This has impacted my decision to work in Education and advocacy because it highlighted for me the complex and unexpected ways that opportunities are divvied and doled as if they are scarce; and the way it concentrates educational power away from students and families of color, and around those who already have capital (educational, social) at the expense of those who have less. I hope that in my work in education and advocacy I can help to productively complicate the conversation. Black and Brown students and parents are not a monolith. Programs created to increase access for some- when implemented in ways that may inadvertently promote inequity for others, only create an illusion of doing "good"—and in the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, nobody's free until everybody's free.

