The Mother of Teaching, Ms. Earlene Watkins: A Real Mother for Ya

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I am a professor because of my mother. Not only am I a professor, but I am a professor who prides himself on being a good teacher. My mother instilled in me that it is the teachers who change the world. She also taught me that at the core of good teaching is love. Love for those you teach, the community in which you teach, and the subject matter you teach. My mother believed that teachers could make this world a more just place by loving their craft, becoming excellent at that craft, and loving those they have the privilege of learning. What I learned from my mother has guided me throughout my career and it has informed my pedagogy. Her story is my story as I continue to do that which she taught me do as a kid growing up in Eatonville, Florida. Eatonville, Florida, the oldest incorporated all Black town in the United States of America, the home of Zora Neale Hurston. The place where Black history was born.

Ms. Earlene Watkins circa 1970

My mother, Ms. Earlene Watkins, was in the words of Johnny Guitar Watson, "a real mother for ya." She was a mother not only to me and my siblings, but she became the mother of the children of Eatonville. My family moved to Eatonville from Jacksonville, Florida in 1969. We moved from Jacksonville, Florida, from a big city to a small town, Eatonville was one square mile. A close-knit community where everybody knew everybody, and we were the new outsiders trying to make this our new home. Ironically enough, making Eatonville feel like home didn't take long. My mother took to this town, got involved from day one, and me and my siblings were involved as well.

This story takes place over a two-year period. Two of the most important and impressionable years of my life. I was between eight and ten years old, third and fourth grade, and it seems like it was yesterday. Yesterday; all of my memories don't seem so far away. The memories rush as I write. I can sense the energy, excitement, and joy of this time. A time when a town came to love its children and instill in them that they could dream, and their dreams could come true.

All of my senses come to life when I think back to 1969 to 1972. As I remember this story, I remember in frames of joy, fragrances, and sounds. I can smell this time as much as I can see it. It was a time that smelt like summer, the wetness of Florida humidity in the air, sweat on my skin, and hope in the air. Sun shining, grass growing, rain falling. I can see it, I can feel it; as I type joy floods my soul. The joy of a time that gave shape to the life I live today. My life as an indigenous teaching scholar was birthed in Eatonville. A scholar who was of the community, serving the community, and teaching in community. The sounds of joy, the joy of the music of the time – rhythm and blues – coming from the radio my mother controlled that sat on the counter in our kitchen.

It was 1969 and I was dancing in the streets to the sounds of Martha and Vandellas, while singing James Brown's, "Say It Loud, I am Black, I am Proud." This was my theme song, the number one song and album of 1969! *Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud* by Soul Brother #1, Mr. James Brown. This was a revolutionary statement, "I am Black and I am proud," that James Brown was making, but I didn't know that. It rolled off my lips with ease. I was being raised to be proud of who I was and how I looked. My afro was fresh, as fresh as my mother's afro in the picture that opens this piece. This was radical, revolutionary, to wear your hair "natural" as my mother and her peers did. This is the first thing my mother taught me about teaching. There is a power in being yourself, expressing yourself. Bring your whole self to the classroom.

My mother didn't apologize for who she was or how she was proud to be an African American. She taught me there was a uniqueness in being Black, a royalty in being Black. I was taught not to leave my blackness at home. In 1968 we were negroes, but in 1969 we were Black and Proud. The Black Panthers had already signaled the call to blackness. "Say it Loud, I am Black and I am Proud," was in heavy rotation on the radio and my mother bought the 45 record for me, just for me. Well, she bought it for the entire family, but I owned it, I pretended that it was my record. I took pride in being old enough to be trusted to put a record on the record player and play it. I played that song over and over again. It was more than an anthem for me, it was my devotional.

Ms. Earlene Watkins and Mrs. Stephanie Williams at CPEY House circa 1970

When James Brown came on the radio – "Tiger Radio," 1600 WOKB on our radio dial – Mamma would say, "Turn it up!" I was always happy to turn it up, and sing along. The third verse was my verse. I became James Brown, I got the broom (my microphone) and I sung:

Now we demand a chance to do things for ourselves
We're tired of beating our heads against the wall
And working for someone else
Look here, there's one thing more I got to say right here
Now, we're people, we like the birds and the bees
And we'd rather die on our feet than keep living on our knees

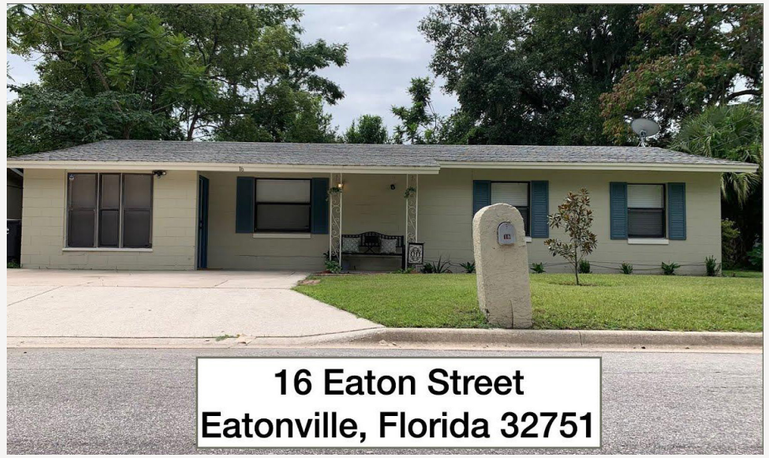
Say it loud (I'm Black and I'm proud)
Say it loud (I'm Black and I'm proud)
Say it loud (I'm Black and I'm proud)
Lordy, Lordy, Lordy, say it loud (I'm Black and I'm proud)

Lordy, Lordy, this was sacred music. Sacred music that critiqued all those folk who spent more time praying and waiting on God to act instead being in the streets fighting and doing the grassroots work. We were fighting the power just like Public Enemy would later proclaim, the enemy of procrastination and waiting on God.

That third verse of this song! We were no longer waiting on our knees. It was time to get up off our knees and get to work. This song was a call to action, it was a call to allow God to use you to make a real difference in the lives of real people by doing some real grassroots organizing. My mother wasn't one for praying in churches, she was one who prayed in the streets, stayed in the streets, connected with the people, and was about doing something that would make a difference. Ms. Earlene wasn't going to die on her knees. She always said, "My prayers got legs." Her prayers walked, talked, and acted in real time. This is the second

thing my mother taught me about teaching. Don't pray for it to happen in the classroom, make it happen.

She taught me that people have a tendency to use prayer as an excuse to do nothing. You have to do something, make something happen, take chances, and be willing to be criticized. Be willing to

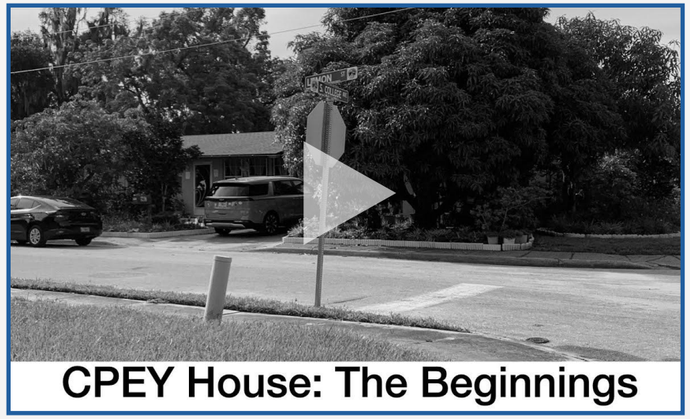


be on the outside, on the margins. My mother was on the margins of the church; the church was a stagnant organization in the eyes of my mother. She was about being on the move. Teachers who make a difference realize that an institution of higher learning, and especially of theological education, is about tradition, teaching it, preserving it, and protecting it. My mother taught me to get up off my knees and make change happen.

One of the keys to my mother's praxis was being committed to the community where you teach. If you are not rooted and connected to that community, the distance gets in the way of the relationship needed to make the change that she believed teaching could produce. When we moved to Eatonville, my mother had to find somewhere for us to live. We had to be rooted in the community.

My mother and father divorced a year before we moved to Eatonville. She was left singing that Freda Payne song, "Band of Gold." She rented our former home in Jacksonville and had the vision to come to this new town and purchase a home for her and children. She was putting down roots in the community. As she was surveying the town, she saw a home for her and her three children. Now mind you, this is 1969-70, and single African American women weren't purchasing brand new homes. My mother had vision; she was able to imagine things in her mind and then figure out how to make it happen. Good teachers have to have imagination. What are you walking around the halls of your institute dreaming of? My mother was driving and dreaming. Her dreams were able to silence the doubts, fears, and what others would've told her couldn't be done. How are you going to purchase a home as a single, thirty-two-year-old divorcee with three young children?

When my mother talks about this herculean feat you see how she saw challenges, the power of vision, and her simple tenacity in getting things done. In this short clip she tells the story of how she would purchase our home in Eatonville: 16 Eaton Street, Eatonville, Florida 32751 (**click on the video below to hear her tell her story)!**



From Purchasing a Home to Making a Home for the Children of Eatonville: Birthing CPEY

My mother was all in. She was committed to this town, its people, called by its history, and committed to making a future here. The purchase of the home is one of many examples that speaks to what I learned from my mother. Because someone hasn't done it says nothing about what you can or can't do. She taught me not to look at what hadn't been done or what others weren't doing and to do ME! Be true to yourself.

Too many teachers teach as they were taught or how their peers are teaching and it results in stifling their teaching, killing their desire to innovate and take chances. My mother took chances; she didn't care what hadn't been done or what people told her she shouldn't be doing. She did HER! As a teacher you must be the unique teacher you are called to be. Her example, of basking in your uniqueness in the midst of critique, is the third thing she taught me about teaching.

My mother came to Eatonville committed to being rooted in the community and making a difference in that community. She came searching for that thing she, and only she, could bring to that community, and that thing was an organization, Concerned Parents of Eatonville Youth (CPEY). It was here at CPEY that I saw myself becoming a professor. It was here that I saw the teacher that I wanted to be. It was here that I learned my history, the love of teachers who loved their community, their students, and the subject matter they were teaching.

My mother and her colleague, Mrs. Stephanie Williams, would birth CPEY and CPEY birthed and developed me and so many to get up off our knees and do things for ourselves. It was through the deeds of CPEY that the words of a Nina Simone song of the time came to life. My mother and Mrs. Stephanie Williams saw us as "young, gifted and Black!" They saw us; they saw us wanting and needing a space and place to develop, and they, along with the parents and kids of Eatonville, built CPEY and CPEY created in me a vision for the life I live today.

Seeing the Need: What's Going On?

What do you see? What do you feel? What should you do? Knowing . . . there are many ways of knowing. Ms. Earlene and Mrs. Stephanie Williams saw something. Their eyes were a window as to what needed to be done. They trusted their eyes, their hearts, and their hunch. Trust your eyes; what do you see, and how does what you see in turn direct what you should do? Seeing is a way of knowing. It is an epistemology. This is an important pedagogical foundation. What do or don't you see that your students might need? My mother saw something and she did something. In this short clip she tells the story of what she saw and what she decided to do that resulted in the birthing of CPEY **(click on the video below to hear her tell her story):**

Ms. Earlene Watkins and Mrs. Williams didn't deny what they saw or dismiss the call to do something about what they saw. Failing to see is a failure to respond. What do you see in your students? What are their faces, body posture, and other visual cues telling you? Ms. Earlene saw that the kids needed something – they needed something to stimulate them, focus them, challenge them, and empower them. What she saw made her uncomfortable and this discomfort wouldn't allow her to rest.

There is power in seeing because it is in seeing that we get vision or a vision. Her seeing produced a vision and that vision would materialize in CPEY. The ironic thing is, when you talk to her she never questioned if she could do it. She was so compelled by what she saw, and in her vision, that she found a way to make it happen. What do you see for your students? What do they need? What are they missing? In what ways do the standard ways of teaching leave your students wanting?

It was my mother's love for the children that helped her see, moved her to respond, and empowered her to make a way out of no way. Her love for her children and the children of Eatonville demanded that she act. She loved me and my siblings, she loved the children of our town, and love propelled her to act. Love is a force in teaching; love moves the teacher to respond in ways that meet their needs and the needs of the ones they love. I am convinced that when you love those you serve, serving them, teaching them, and responding to their needs produces joy. Our best work comes out of our love and joy.

The power of love. The power of love moved my mother to ask, in the words of Marvin Gaye, "What's going on?"

> ***Mother, mother***
> ***There's too many of you crying***
> ***Brother, brother, brothzer***
> ***There's far too many of you dying***
> ***You know we've got to find a way***
> ***To bring some lovin' here today, yeah***

Bringing the love is what Ms. Earlene did. She brought the love, and if you don't love your students it is hard to feel them. Her love for the children gave her a connection with their felt needs. Academics are taught to live in their heads, but the power of teaching comes from the heart. Students respond to love. Teachers that love their students and the subject matter they teach are the ones who are transformative. Transformation is an inside job with external manifestations.

What changed Eatonville, Ms. Earlene, and all the children she touched was love. Her love for the children drove her to design something with the children in mind. She wasn't concerned about the adults who had left the kids in the balance, she wasn't afraid of the city fathers who looked at her as a radical Black woman who, in their opinion, should go find a husband and be a submissive wife. She ignored what people thought of her, said about her, and opposed. She was going to do what was right and was in the best interest of her students.

There is power in ignoring what others are doing so that you can do what you want to do. Academics are taught to build on previous knowledge, teach what has been taught the way it has been taught, and as result they are held hostage to the past. Liberation comes when you can respect the past but create the future. A future that is not held hostage to what was, because if you are held to what was you can't become what can be. Ms. Earlene embraced the future by being propelled by the past. She knew the ancestors and what the ancestors said to her: Don't repeat them but build on them.

Imagination: What Do You See in the Future

Not only did Ms. Earlene birth CPEY, there was something in her that wouldn't be denied. At her core she was an audacious visionary. The power of seeing and acting was in who she was, and this would birth the most powerful teaching experience of my life. We know that "Design projects must ultimately pass through three spaces ('Inspiration, ideation, implementation')." Ms. Earlene was doing design thinking in action before they had a name for it. Ms. Earlene was inspired: she dreamt of the type of experience the children could have in a nurturing learning environment, and then she made it happen!

CPEY became much more than an after-school program that provided remedial help for children; it became the center of our lives. Doctors, lawyers, professional athletes, actors, politicians, preachers, civil servants, and college professors came out of that program. The program was the center of the community, built with the community, to empower the community. CPEY saw what we needed and provided what we needed. They built with design in mind. Designed around the needs of the children of the town.

We are children. We are the children this program was designed for, who met at the CPEY House every day after school. The picture above is a bit deceiving. This picture was taken by a newspaper photographer for an article about the success of CPEY. I am the youngest kid in this picture (third from left), looking at my Mamma. What makes this picture deceiving is that we never sat like this. We never sat and listened to adults talk to us or lecture us and point at stuff. CPEY was about community, conversation, dialogue, engagement, pushing us to think, act, dream, and speak up. I hear academics talking about trying to find their voice post PhD; I found my voice at CPEY. CPEY was a place of empowerment. I learned from CPEY that the best of teaching empowers students to think for themselves, speak for themselves, and think in new ways. Does your teaching do what CPEY did? Does your teaching empower students with voice, vision, and courage? I was taught not to be afraid at CPEY. My first book was entitled, I Ain't Afraid to Speak My Mind. It was the first book I published after getting my PhD and was a tribute to my mother and those at CPEY who empowered me to have a voice as a third grader.

At CPEY we were encouraged to talk back, to question, to think, to speak up; they were intentionally preparing us to speak truth to power. The kids in this picture would become a career telephone company employee, pastor, professor, and the first African American woman chief in the Orlando correction system, and all four would graduate from college.

Thank You Falettinme Be Mice Elf Again: Get Up

CPEY was touted as an after-school tutorial program. CPEY helped kids with homework. CPEY also had classes that spoke to kids' interests, from homemaking to Black history. Black history was my favorite class. There was something there for all kids. You could find your place at CPEY and this was important. Helping students find their place, find out who they are, and who they want to be. CPEY helped us navigate those uncomfortable years being a kid, trying to find your table in the lunch room. Does your teaching help your students find themselves, their voice, their sense of identity and vocation?

Sly and the Family Stone broke out with "Thank You Falettinme Be Mice Elf Again" during this time and that is what Ms. Earlene and CPEY were doing for us. My mother and her team not only designed something for us, they designed something for us that would help us know who we were. They designed an experience for us that would let us be ourselves. They didn't try to confine us to classrooms, they let us play, they let us go outside, play ball, and then talk about what we learned on the football field and basketball court. It was a holistic experience. Everything was done in the community – it was a communal experience. It was an experience that we were thankful for because it let us be kids. It let us be ourselves so that we could find ourselves. Do we let our students be themselves? Do we respect the communities they come from? Do we even ask or consider the theology they bring with them? and do we respect it, destroy it, or demean it?

My mother and her colleagues kept us in mind from start to finish. They were helping us be ourselves. They focused on our needs. My mother and her colleagues identified a need and allowed us to articulate our needs and dreams as a part of the plan. They empowered us to do what only James Brown says so succinctly: "Get Up" and get to it.

When designing something it is important to keep in mind, and in conversation with, those for whom you are planning it. Ms. Earlene kept us in the conversation. We would sit around the table with her and she would ask what the kids wanted. What do you all think you need? She worked with us to design an experience for us. It wasn't a class or a set of classes but rather it was an experience she was designing.
My mother made it her business to know the children in the community. She knew them by name. She put up a basketball goal in our backyard, kids would come, play, and be fed some of my Mamma's good cooking. In exchange for the food and games she earned the right to ask questions.

My mother would talk to the children, ask them what they wanted to do, how they wanted to spend their time, and what type of program they should create. She asked what was missing in their lives, what subjects were they struggling with, what they liked to do after school, and her key question was: "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I felt sorry for my friends when she asked her "key question." My mother would use your answer to motivate you. The conversation would go something like this, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" "I want to be a lawyer like Thurgood Marshall." She would pause, look in your eyes; her eyes would lock eyes with your eyes. Mesmerizing trance-producing eyes. It was as if she was looking deep into your soul. Her response was never a lecture but always a call to have a conversation. The probing questions would start. "Do you know what college he attended? Do you know how hard he studied? Do you know how hard he worked?"

When she found out you had a dream, she used it to push you to act on your dream. She showed you how your today would produce your tomorrow. The consequences of your actions, daily habits, the power of study and school as the ticket to success, was what she was pushing. She wasn't offering a way out of the 'hood but she was calling you to be a part of the 'hood, to grow up here, make your dreams a reality here, serve your community and stay in your community like she did. All you needed to make your dreams a reality was right here in Eatonville.

Her dream was for your dreams to come fruition. When she talked, you felt her love. The conversations were inspiring and those conversations fueled what CPEY did for us and in us. They inspired us

Ms. Earlene at CPEY House with Victor Watkins, Clarence Pittman, Ralph Basui Watkins, and Cornita Scott-Riley circa 1971

to come, stay, grow, and be CPEY! I benefited, not simply by being a part of CPEY – I had her all the time and she pushed me to dream, to study, and to become what I am in the process of becoming. She taught us never to settle but to always push. Push to make your dreams and those in your community's dreams a communal reality that would help all people.

At CPEY we weren't taught to do by yourself and for yourself. We were taught to be ourselves in the context of community and to help others. We did homework together, we studied together, we read together, we talked together, we dreamt together, we fought together, we stuck together, we were there for each other. We are in community.

How do you make your classroom a learning community? How do students see themselves, not in competition, but in companionship, partnership, relationship? CPEY taught us what it was like to be in a relationship. We celebrated together. We celebrated with each other, loved each other, and cared for each other. How do you teach your students to care for each other? How is caring experienced in your classroom?

The CPEY Model: Push and Pull

CPEY was great but it didn't start that way. The leadership made adjustments along the way and weren't afraid to change course. What they were building was new. This was a novel program back in 1969-70. After-school programs are everywhere in 2022 but this was not the case in the early 1970s.

CPEY was trial and error. In the words of Rufus Thomas, "everybody is doing the push and pull." Rufus Thomas' song, "Push and Pull," could've been the theme song of CPEY in those first few months. It was a push and pull.

CPEY met us at our deepest need.

They put the CPEY house in the line of traffic, with rooms for teaching, a yard for outdoor events, and basketball courts across the street, but they were vacant. In the first few months CPEY struggled. My mother and her team had to deal with failure and they used failure to learn. The kids weren't coming. They had built it, designed it, and put it in the right place. What had they missed?

My mother saw what was missing; she needed children to lead children. She had to let a child lead her! She was humble enough to partner with the kid who led the community: Larry Hopkins, a fifteen year old, Malcolm X wannabe. Larry was part athlete, part preacher, part radical, but all leader. My mother saw this, recruited him, made a fifteen-year-old her trusted partner in building CPEY, and it worked.

Larry was like a magnet, he brought kids with him. Not only did Larry come, but Clarice came, and Peanut, and Shirley and Howard, and Vernon and Michael. . . the CPEY house was full every day. At night we could come back for evening talks with the teachers from the high school, and my favorite was the history teacher. We were being taught Black History by a teacher with an afro and he was a Black Panther. It couldn't get any better. I excelled in his class. I read, raised my hand, pushed back, and was affirmed as someone who was "smart." He would call on me, encourage me, and ask questions. He was the first person to tell me that I could be a professor and I believed him.

There was something about this time that doesn't have to be unique to this time. We were community, wed together in a cultural fabric that made us operationally one. It wasn't unusual for Sly and the Family Stone's work to be the foundation for next week's lesson, or Glady's Knight and the Pips's, or Funkadelic's; "I Got a Thing, You Got a Thing, Everybody's Got a Thing."
Everybody had a place at CPEY. CPEY supported the local little league football team, The Eatonville Rockets, basketball teams, scholarship banquets, and pageants. CPEY was a one stop shop. The one stop shop was born out my mother's keen eye. She saw what had to be done and took the steps necessary to create a holistic learning experience. Holistic learning is communal, needs-meeting, love-oriented, innovative, creative, and course changing. That is what CPEY was for us and is for me as I do CPEY-type teaching today.

CPEY provided a nurturing educational environment centered around our hopes and dreams. These weren't empty hopes and dreams, they were dreams we could see through the community at CPEY. We were taught about those who had come before us. We were taught that our history said something about our future. It said something about our people and our resilience. When KRS-One would declare, years later, "that most of my heroes don't appear on no stamp," we had been taught about our heroes and sheroes: we knew them and they were stamped in our hearts and minds.

CPEY met us at our deepest need. It met us, loved us, encouraged us, and it sustains me yet. This model of holistic teaching is a transformative way of teaching that promises to do what my Mamma said it could do: make the world a more just place. There is power in love. Love is liberating, transformative, and to truly love the other is to want what is best and right for them. When we teach from a place of love it leads to a world of love, and love can change the world.

Playlist

"Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud" by James Brown

"Dancing in the Street" by Martha and the Vandellas

"Fight the Power" by Public Enemy

"A Real Mother for Ya" by Johnny Guitar Watson

"Most of My Heroes Don't Appear on No Stamp" by KRS-One

"What's Going On" by Marvin Gaye

"Band of Gold" by Freda Payne

"Get Up Offa That Thing" by James Brown

"Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)" by Sly and the Family Stone

"(Do the) Push and Pull" by Rufus Thomas

"I Got a Thing, You Got a Thing, Everybody's Got a Thing" by Funkadelic

"You Need Love Like I Do (Don't You)" by Glady's Knight and the Pips

"The Thrill is Gone" by B.B. King

Notes & Bibliography

[1]James Brown, "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud (Part 2)," (Vox Studios, 1968, 45 rpm single).

[2]Marvin Gaye, "What's Going On," (Hitsville USA, 1971, 45 rpm single).

[3]Brown, Tim, Clayton M. Christensen, Indra Nooyi, and Vijay Govindarajan, HBR's 10 Must Reads on Design Thinking (Boston MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2020), 16.

About the Author

Ralph Basui Watkins is known as "the scholar with a camera!" He is a professor, photographer, documentarian, faith leader and scholar. He is the author of six books, and over thirty chapters and articles. He is a sought after speaker, workshop leader and panelist. His television show Talk it Out with Dr. Ralph Basui Watkins was one of the top rated show on the Atlanta Interfaith Broadcasting network for over four years (2012-2016). He is also the producer / director, cameraman and editor of three full length made for television feature documentaries: She Is The Pastor (2012) and Our Journey to Palestine: A Story of the 43rd Delegation of Interfaith Peace Builders (2013) and Africana Theology and the Roots of Our Faith: A Journey Through Egypt (2018). Dr. Watkins has had two solo photography shows and his photographs have been published in numerous publications. In recent years, Watkins has been the artist in residence at the Velvet Note and St. James Live, both nationally recognized jazz clubs. He also been awarded a Louisville Institute Sabbatical Grant, Collegeville Institute Sabbatical Residency Grant, Governor's Teaching Fellowship, Lilly Teaching Fellowship, Fulbright Hayes Fellowship for study in Ghana, a Wabash Teaching Fellowship, and various awards and grants to study in Kenya, Tanzania, Egypt, Ethiopia, Senegal, and Ghana.