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### **Insurgent Knowledge: The Poetics and Pedagogy of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich in the Era of Open Admissions**

Danica B. Savonick

*The Graduate Center, CUNY*

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INSURGENT KNOWLEDGE:  
THE POETICS AND PEDAGOGY OF TONI CADE BAMBARA, JUNE JORDAN, AUDRE  
LORDE, AND ADRIENNE RICH IN THE ERA OF OPEN ADMISSIONS

by

DANICA SAVONICK

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2018

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The Poetics and Pedagogy of Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Adrienne Rich  
in the Era of Open Admissions

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Danica Savonick

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of  
the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## ABSTRACT

Insurgent Knowledge: The Poetics and Pedagogy of Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Adrienne Rich in the Era of Open Admissions

by

Danica Savonick

Advisor: Dr. Kandice Chuh

*Insurgent Knowledge* analyzes the reciprocal relations between teaching and literature in the work of Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara, and Adrienne Rich, all of whom taught in the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) educational opportunity program at the City University of New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Drawing on archival research and analysis of their published work, I show how feminist aesthetics have shaped U.S. education (especially student-centered pedagogical practices) and how classroom encounters with students had a lasting impact on our postwar literary landscape and theories of difference. My project demonstrates how, for these teacher-poets, creative work and teaching were interrelated efforts to galvanize students, readers, and audiences in the production of a more just, equitable, and pleasurable world. In doing so, I illuminate the centrality of aesthetic education to processes of social change: how encounters with art and artmaking (poiesis) can help us interrogate common sense, unlearn dominant pedagogies, retrain our viscera, and think beyond the status quo.

The materials analyzed in this project include unpublished archival teaching materials—syllabi, lesson plans, assignments, lecture notes—housed at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe and Spelman College and published literature and essays from the period 1965-2002. Through close examination of these texts, I show how these teacher-poets developed pedagogies of social justice deeply influenced by their experiences teaching in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with

particular attentiveness to the longstanding influence of educational opportunity programs and Open Admissions in their work.

These materials and questions necessitated an interdisciplinary approach that draws on the methods of women of color feminism, urban education studies, critical pedagogy, cultural studies, and literary analysis. Building upon recent research in critical university studies, this project constructs a genealogy of feminist poet-teachers as leaders of pedagogical, institutional, and social change.

Each chapter analyzes the pedagogies that emerge from one author's literary and educational texts. I show how aesthetic education can contribute to ongoing struggles for social justice and material redistribution: by denaturalizing common sense and altering our social consciousness; through place-based local research assignments that help students locate their seemingly idiosyncratic experiences in relation to collective histories and institutional structures; by challenging students to participate in the formal construction of their learning environments including the content, methods, and means by which their learning will be assessed; by teaching collaboration; and by having students write for audiences beyond the classroom (including publishing their work in anthologies). These pedagogies, I argue, demonstrate ways to navigate and contest the privatization of knowledge and power that has come to dominate educational practice.

For my mom and my grandma...  
One thousand dedications  
On one thousand dissertations  
Could not express  
My love.

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I owe much to Holly Smith and Kassandra Ware at the Spelman Archives and the dedicated archivists at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe.

To my cat, Cole Savonick-Beanface, you will always be my Most Improved Teaching Assistant. Any typos are surely the fault of your panther paws prancing across the keyboard.

To my friends — Nicole Barbuto, Selena Drobnick, Allie Howard, Michele McCaffrey, Marie Pace, Martin Ramos, Shaili Shah, Giselle Silvestrini, Annemarie Tiburzi, Arielle Urman, Sarah Verbil — you continually astonish me with the power of friendship, showing me ever new things that it's capable of.

To my Queens College students, who make learning thrilling, and have taught me more than I ever imagined it was possible to know...this project is shot through with your wisdom, your courage, your passion.

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## INTRODUCTION

Comparison-Contrast Topics to Explore in Preparation for Mid-Term Essay:  
Silence... silence as madness, as weapon, as tool, as punishment. See— slave narratives,  
Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Warrior Woman.  
— Toni Cade Bambara, *The Contemporary American Novel: The Text as a Rite of Recovery*,  
Carleton College, 1987

In 1968, four of the twentieth century's most compelling authors were teaching basic writing classes down the hall from one another at the City College of New York. That summer, Paulo Freire was living in exile in Chile and writing his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; in Harlem, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, protests against the Vietnam War, and the Women's Movement, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Adrienne Rich were figuring out how the classroom might be a space of collective social change. That year, Freire famously argued that the dominant banking model of education was suffering from "narration sickness,"<sup>1</sup> an excess of unilateral knowledge transmission from educator to educated at the expense of critical pedagogy, in which students learn to question the world around them. At the same time, these authors were exchanging syllabi, lesson plans, and assignments; sitting in on each other's classes; and drawing on their poetic sensibilities of the collaborations that occur between author and reader to develop a praxis that materialized social change across multiple registers and scales. Like the majority of educators today, these authors were not teaching wealthy or even middle-class students at elite universities with ample resources. Rather, they were teaching working class students of color in the nation's first state-mandated educational opportunity program. While the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) program would later become a model for similar programs nationwide, prompting Ronald Reagan to declare December 11, 1986, "National SEEK and College Discovery Day" (even as he eviscerated the funding structures that would make such initiatives

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<sup>1</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 71.

possible), at the time these poets were teaching in this program, its success was much more uncertain and its pedagogies boldly transformative. Influenced by educators and artists as diverse as Alfred North Whitehead, Mina Shaughnessy, and Amiri Baraka, these poet-teachers<sup>2</sup> used art to contest the individualized terms of liberal education and instead help students toward greater social consciousness. They challenged students to make crucial decisions about the structure of their courses; to do original place-based research on poverty, housing, food, and education; to write and publish literature; and to become teachers in their classrooms and leaders in their communities.

Audre Lorde began writing poetry long before she started teaching. However, it was not until her first formal teaching experience at Tougaloo College that she realized the collective power of poetry: that it could be not only a private pleasure, but also a means of enacting social change. Lorde theorized poems as “learning devices,” and poetry as an “act of teaching,” and yet scholars are only beginning to consider her pedagogical insights and the reciprocal relations between her teaching and poetry.<sup>3</sup> It was in the classroom that both she and her colleague Toni Cade Bambara would come to think of themselves as writers. At City College, Bambara challenged remedial writing students to determine the content, methods, and means by which their learning would be assessed. One afternoon, Bambara took a break from lesson planning to walk June Jordan through the halls of that Gothic campus and to the first classroom she ever taught in, calming the new instructor’s nerves by assuring her that “Anything you have to give,

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<sup>2</sup> I use “poet-teachers” broadly, acknowledging that Bambara was primarily a prose writer, and that all four authors wrote in many different forms.

<sup>3</sup> See Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “Nobody Mean More: Black Feminist Pedagogy and Solidarity” in *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2015) and the forthcoming collection of Lorde’s pedagogical materials published by the CUNY Lost and Found Poetics Documents Initiative.

just give it to them...They'll be grateful for it.”<sup>4</sup> As it turned out, they both had a lot to give: Jordan and Bambara became co-conspirators in the art of radical pedagogy, publishing students' writing in edited anthologies right alongside the work of literary luminaries such as Alice Walker and Langston Hughes. As someone for whom reading and writing literature were acts of freedom, Adrienne Rich, Lorde's long time interlocutor, had to rethink everything she had previously known about language when she met the passionately political but educationally disenfranchised students in SEEK: “young men and women who have had language and literature used against them, to keep them in their place, to mystify, to bully, to make them feel powerless.”<sup>5</sup> And it was in preparation to teach remedial English that several of these influential authors learned the formal rules of grammar for the very first time.

In this dissertation, I ask, what can education do to materialize social justice? And more specifically, what can teaching language and literature do to address the longstanding structural, systemic, and institutional conditions of state violence? To address these questions, I analyze the pedagogies that emerge from the archival teaching materials and published creative works of these four authors. Through close examination of their syllabi, lesson plans, and assignments alongside analysis of their published fiction, poetry, and critical essays, I show that these teacher-poets developed pedagogies of collective dissent deeply influenced by their experiences teaching in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with particular attentiveness to the longstanding influence of educational opportunity programs and Open Admissions in their work. Their pedagogies, I contend, demonstrate ways to navigate and contest the privatization of knowledge and power that has come to dominate educational practice and thought. Considered together, these figures demonstrate how feminist aesthetics have shaped U.S. education, and, reciprocally,

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<sup>4</sup> June Jordan, “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person,” in *Civil Wars* (Boston: Beacon, 1981), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Teaching Language in Open Admissions,” in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), 63.

how initiatives such as Open Admissions, equal opportunity programs, and affirmative action left an indelible mark on our postwar literary landscape and theories of difference. The aims of this dissertation are fivefold: 1) To show the intimate connections between feminist aesthetics and pedagogy 2) To illuminate new perspectives on the literature of these teacher-poets related to their expansive thinking about the power of art and education 3) To show how literature and teaching emerge in reciprocal relation to social movements 4) To position these poet-teachers as leaders of pedagogical, institutional, and social change and 5) To trace pedagogies of social justice that can inspire educators today.

### **Teaching, literature, and social change**

At the same time that Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich were teaching in the politically charged classrooms produced by SEEK and Open Admissions, they were also writing poems, essays, short stories, and novels that empowered marginalized readers by giving them a sense of shared experience and visions of a better future. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jordan's edited anthologies *soulscript* (1968) and *The Voice of the Children* (1970) and Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) and *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* (1971) burst through the oppressive strictures of the bourgeois, white, male, publishing establishment, paving the way for anthologies like *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), *All the Women Are White, all the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982), and *Home Girls* (1983) which remain foundational texts for intersectional feminism. Lorde was teaching at John Jay College (part of the CUNY system) when she delivered her famous speech, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," which drew on notions of difference as a source of creativity developed in courses she taught on "American Women in Black and White" and "Race and the Urban

Situation.” Open Admissions classrooms shaped Rich’s optic of complicity, for which she is still celebrated today.<sup>6</sup> In the SEEK program, Jordan began developing the assignments which would later form the foundation of Poetry for the People, one of the most radically democratic literary and pedagogical experiments of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Jordan’s experiences teaching in environments as diverse as City College, Sarah Lawrence College, in an Upward Bound Program, and as part of the Teachers and Writers Collaborative fundamentally shaped her vision of social change: most notably her “conception of the community I wanted my lifework to encompass.”<sup>8</sup> Would we know anywhere near as much today about the intersecting axes of oppression and resistance if it weren’t for these classrooms?

Research shows that educational opportunity programs and Open Admissions policies drastically improve the lives of working-class students, but rarely do we consider how significant a role these programs played in the production of American literature and theories of difference. While extant scholarship endorses a narrative whereby classroom teaching merely pays the bills for the more serious work of literary production, my dissertation shows the intimate and reciprocal relations between the two: how these teacher-poets understood the formal differences between writing a poem and producing a classroom, though neither was more important or valued over the other. In line with recent scholarship that insists that we analyze literature in relation to its institutional conditions of possibility, my research shows how Open Admissions and educational opportunity classrooms (in addition to expensive and exclusive MFA programs)

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<sup>6</sup> Claudia Rankine, “Adrienne Rich’s Poetic Transformations,” *The New Yorker*, May 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/adrienne-richs-poetic-transformations>

<sup>7</sup> Poetry for the People was a poetic and pedagogical network that Jordan started in 1991 at the University of California, Berkeley. Students were taught to write, publish, and perform their poetry, and how to guide other students (including those in community centers and K-12 schools) through this process.

<sup>8</sup> June Jordan, “Notes Toward a Black Balancing of Love and Hatred” in *Civil Wars* (Boston: Beacon, 1981), 84.

were central to the production of our postwar literary landscape.<sup>9</sup> In these classrooms, where educators worked tirelessly to help students succeed against financial obstacles and without the endowments of private colleges, resources were often scarce but creativity flourished.

This project is inspired by Robin D.G. Kelley's insistence that art, imagination, and dreams of a different world are pivotal to black radical politics.<sup>10</sup> For Kelley, "collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge," forged in pursuit of a more just, equitable, and pleasurable elsewhere that is manifested through art.<sup>11</sup> Participation in these movements, in turn, "actually reshape(s) the desires and dreams of the participants."<sup>12</sup> Following Kelley, this dissertation argues that teaching, writing, and even administrative work were not ancillary, but central and interrelated aspects of larger collective movements for social justice. This research contributes to exciting recent scholarship by Donna Murch, Robyn C. Spencer, Mary Phillips, and Ashley D. Farmer that reconsiders the role of women in the Black Power movement. Considered together, their research challenges the oversimplified notion of the movement's masculinism, a narrative that reproduces the gender inequity it claims as its concern by overlooking the contributions women have made to advance racial justice.<sup>13</sup> Amidst a neoliberal culture that tries to convince people that they are powerless in relation to larger structures of injustice and inequality, the poet-teachers in this project demonstrate that teaching and writing are important modes of political action. In the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, the

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<sup>9</sup> Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Artworks, in Kelley's formation, "take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling" (11).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Robyn C Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*, 2016; Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Mary Phillips, "The Power of the First-Person Narrative: Ericka Huggins and the Black Panther Party," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3–4 (2015): 33–51; Ashley D Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).



increasing privatization of education, and renewed attention to the racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia of mainstream culture, these figures help illuminate the critical role that countercultural education has played in social movements.

This project draws energy from Lorde's insistence that "None of us is all-powerful. But every one of us has *some* power" and it is our responsibility to use that power in the service of social change.<sup>14</sup> My research shows how educators can contribute to ongoing struggles for material redistribution: by teaching literature; through place-based local research assignments that help students locate their seemingly idiosyncratic lived experiences in relation to collective histories and institutional structures; by challenging students to participate in the formal construction of their learning environments including the content, methods, and means by which their learning will be assessed; by teaching collaboration; and by having students write for real audiences (including publishing their work in anthologies). I elaborate these pedagogies so that those of us interested in transformative education don't feel as if we must reinvent the wheel to escape the neoliberal imagination. In doing so, I hope this work will help contemporary educators understand the challenges of our classrooms as part of longer, ongoing, and unfinished efforts to produce spectacular social change.

## Archive

Bambara's reflections on her student-designed course, "Colonialism, Neocolonialism, and Liberation" are located not in her own collections, but in those of Rich, testifying to the networks of pedagogical exchange among these figures—how they are all part of a larger story.

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<sup>14</sup> Audre Lorde and Joan Wylie Hall, *Conversations with Audre Lorde* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2004), 165.

The materials analyzed in this project include unpublished archival syllabi, lesson plans, assignments, lecture notes housed at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe and Spelman College and published literature and essays.<sup>15</sup> Pedagogy, in this project, refers both to philosophical and theoretical orientations towards learning and everyday classroom practices, as demonstrated by the archival materials. While some insights about teaching and learning emerge in the places we might expect, such as writings about education, other ideas are stealthily embedded in the subversive spaces, silences, and estrangements—the literariness, or poetics—of their poetry, fiction, and prose. Because the status quo is reproduced through the regulation of common sense, certain aspects of social justice pedagogy emerge through that which is deemed an irrational and expendable “luxury.”<sup>16</sup> In this dissertation, I show how texts theorize relations of power, knowledge, and learning through their treatments of other subjects: a backyard, a playground, a bombing, a healing.

These teaching materials are animated by hope, aspiration, and the possibility that things could be otherwise. Their lesson plans, for instance, are inherently optimistic documents that manifest an insistence that people can change. What circulate are the polished final products that emerged from these assignments: published anthologies like *The Black Woman* and *Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint*. The archives, however, reveal the back of the envelope, on which is scribbled a list of possible books to teach interspersed with Bambara’s grocery list. Indeed, their archives are filled with bureaucratic documents—budgets, grant proposals, CVs, cover letters, library request forms—which reveal the centrality of administrative labor to

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<sup>15</sup> I understand literature broadly, as encompassing texts such as Bambara’s documentary film, *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* and Jordan’s edited collection of poems, syllabi, and essays from *Poetry for the People*. Literature is any texts that foregrounds its constructedness and/or estranges us from our common sense ways of narrating, navigating, and making sense of the world.

<sup>16</sup> Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1984).

pedagogies of social justice. They remind us that the scene of teaching and learning is always a collaborative production, foregrounding the “labor” at the heart of collaborate.

## Method

This project constructs a genealogy of feminist poet-teachers as leaders of pedagogical, institutional, and social change. This method follows Michel Foucault’s insistence on the transgressive potential of genealogy: illuminating entanglements, conditions of emergence, and contingencies, rather than explaining a phenomenon by attempting to find its origin.<sup>17</sup> This methodology also draws from and contributes to the rigorous attention to class, racial, and gender politics that has long been the hallmark of urban education scholarship. More specifically, this work responds to Lois Weis and Michelle Fine’s call for “critical bifocality” in education research: the analysis of structures, institutions, and policies in relation to people’s everyday lives, decisions, opportunities, and imaginaries.<sup>18</sup> Feminist literature, with its attention to quotidian politics, the embodied nature of experience, resistance at multiple scales, modes of relationality, and the mutability of the present, constitutes an ideal and underexplored archive for critical bifocal analysis. In this dissertation, I track processes of social change across multiple registers and scales: how our viscera are trained, how we relate to others, and how we locate ourselves in relation to institutions and within economic and political systems, including the interplay among these.

This project posits that Lorde, Rich, Jordan, and Bambara were educational theorists who have much to teach us about pedagogy as a response to neoliberalism. This idea is underscored

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Nietzsche*, ed. John Richardson and Brian Leiter (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 139–164.

<sup>18</sup> Lois Weis and Michelle Fine, “Critical Bifocality and Circuits of Privilege: Expanding Critical Ethnographic Theory and Design,” *Harvard Educational Review* 82, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 173–201.

by Barbara Christian's insistence that "people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western abstract logic... in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, [and] in the play with language."<sup>19</sup> I add to this list: through syllabi, lesson plans, and assignments. Christian herself taught in the SEEK program and in conjunction with Bambara laid much of the groundwork and developed the paradigms that successive educators would implement and remix.<sup>20</sup>

Theorists like Paulo Freire remain so influential today because they offered us powerful metaphors like "the banking" and "problem-posing" models of education that connect the classroom to larger social conditions. From Bambara's invented verbs like "teach/learn" to the conditional "if-then" tense of Jordan's teaching philosophy, their work expands the vocabulary, metaphors, grammar, and narratives at our disposal for making sense of education. This is important, given that the ways we talk about education remain structured by inaccurate narratives and hierarchical, individualized distributions of agency. For example, our understanding of the student-teacher relationship is constrained by the ubiquity of notions such as the teacher having as much to learn from their students as their students have to learn from them. What's missing are the politics of such a sentiment; how it might be true in some instances, but less or differently so in others, and how its potential is bound to the location, or situatedness, of participants within intersecting axes of power. How can we tell other stories?

I have gone back and forth many times between "feminist," "black feminist," and "women of color feminist" framings of this project as a shorthand for a constellation of intersectional sensibilities that include the inadequacy of the present; the notion that resources are unevenly distributed along embodied axes; and attentiveness to power hierarchies and the

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<sup>19</sup> Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique*, no. 6 (April 1, 1987): 51–63.

<sup>20</sup> Sean Molloy, "A Convenient Myopia: SEEK, Shaughnessy, and the Rise of High-Stakes Testing at CUNY," (Diss) *All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects*, September 30, 2016.

mutual imbrications of gender, race, class, and sexuality. I selected “women of color feminism” over “black feminist,” because it directs our attention less to the teacher-poets themselves and more towards their efforts to help students of many different backgrounds understand the distinct histories of U.S. racial formation in relation to African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, what we would now call Latinx people, and white people. Having provisionally settled on “women of color feminism,” I now wonder if “queer of color critique” better captures the ways these teacher-poets often, but not always, in the words of Roderick Ferguson and Grace Kyungwon Hong “situate sexuality as constitutive of race and gender.”<sup>21</sup> Ferguson and Hong’s analysis of women of color feminism and queer of color critique gets closest to the theoretical contours of this project:

[to] profoundly question nationalist and identitarian modes of political organization and craft alternative understandings of subjectivity, collectivity, and power... [to] critique... the racialized, gendered, and sexualized devaluation of human life, [giving] us a blueprint for coalition around everyday struggles... [to organize] around *difference*, the difference between and within racialized, gendered, and sexualized collectivities... to undermine the logic of the ideal type entirely...[and to account for] the deadly differences between the valued and the devalued.<sup>22</sup>

Adrienne Rich was not a woman of color, but she is included in this project for several reasons. First, for historical accuracy: Rich was doing important feminist and antiracist educational work during this period, especially thinking through the possibilities afforded to her as a white educator and poet. Second, to not let white people off of the hook when it comes to social change. Institutional racism and sexism are problems we are all complicit in reproducing, and therefore need to address, rather than passing the burden off, once again, to those most affected, exploited, and overburdened by conditions of structural inequality. When I think about the ways my inclusion of Rich might be read as an abstraction, dilution, or appropriation of

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<sup>21</sup> Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick Ferguson, eds., *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011), 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-11.

women of color feminism, I also hear Lorde's direct address to white women: "Your power is not my power. You are able to do, and to reach, and to speak to people who can never hear me. But you are here now. You can hear me. You must speak to people whom I cannot reach."<sup>23</sup>

It also feels important to acknowledge that the three Black women in this study had vexed relationships to a white bourgeois women's movement that actively excluded them. Intersectional feminism was emerging during the period I write about, thanks in large part to the women in this dissertation and their comrades in the Combahee River Collective, the Black Women's Liberation Committee of SNCC, the Third World Women's Alliance, Black Women Enraged, Black Women Organizing for Action, and Black Women for Wages for Housework. In 1989, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to signal the interlocking nature of racial and gender violence that women of color have long been analyzing.<sup>24</sup> In particular, the Black lesbian feminists associated with the Combahee River Collective were some of the first to name their "commitment to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression."<sup>25</sup> They developed an "integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking"<sup>26</sup> and worked tirelessly to change conditions in which "multiple oppressions reinforce each other to create new categories of suffering."<sup>27</sup> While a feminism worth fighting for is not predicated on a universal subject, it strives to put the needs,

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<sup>23</sup> Audre Lorde qtd. in *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years (1984-1992)*, directed by Dagmar Schultz (2012).

<sup>24</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139-167. See also Crenshaw, "Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-99.

<sup>25</sup> Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement" in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, ed. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 15.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Introduction," *How We Get Free*, 4.

desires, histories, worldviews, and experiences of queer, trans, indigenous, disabled, and working class people of color at the heart of our work.

### **Historical background: CUNY, Open Admissions, SEEK**

A recent *New York Times* article with the misleading title, “How CUNY Became Poetry U,” describes how New York City attracts many “fancy” poets, many of whom end up teaching at the city’s university, though a consideration of these poet-teachers is conspicuously absent.<sup>28</sup> This omission is all the stranger, given the important work being done at CUNY by organizations like Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Documents Initiative to honor the legacy of these teacher-poets.<sup>29</sup>

Since its inception in 1847, the City College of New York (then, the Free Academy of the City of New York) has been understood as a barometer for educational democracy in the U.S. City College was founded on land that was originally inhabited by the Lenape Native Americans. Its first president, Horace Webster, proclaimed the college an “experiment...[in] whether the children of the people, the children of the whole people, can be educated; and whether an institution of the highest grade can be successfully controlled by the popular will, not by the privileged few.”<sup>30</sup> In 1907, the school moved into its Neo-Gothic campus, designed by the architect of the New York Stock Exchange, George Browne Post. While City College had a historical mandate to educate “the children of the whole people,” and had long boasted of being the “Harvard of the Proletariat,” it was not until 1965 that initiatives were implemented to

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<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth A. Harris, “How CUNY Became Poetry U,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2017. Harris describes how contemporary poets are drawn to living and working in NYC without attending to the longstanding history of CUNY as a school that has attracted politically engaged authors.

<sup>29</sup> For instance, events like “Living Room: A Gathering on June Jordan’s Life and Work” and the publication of *Adrienne Rich: Teaching at CUNY, 1968-1974*.

<sup>30</sup> “Our History,” City College of New York, Dec. 4, 2017, <https://www.ccny.cuny.edu/about/history>

address the fact that the college's student body did not reflect the diversity of the surrounding Black and Puerto Rican Harlem community.<sup>31</sup> That year the SEEK program was established to recruit and prepare “economically and educationally disadvantaged” students to matriculate at City College through remedial coursework. SEEK provided students not only with free tuition and free books, but also a stipend that addressed the material conditions of students’ complicated lives beyond the classroom.

This was an era in which higher education was rapidly expanding: between the 1960s and mid 1970s, undergraduate enrollment in U.S. colleges more than doubled.<sup>32</sup> While the *Servicemen's Readjustment Bill*, known as the G.I. Bill, helped millions of veterans attend college, the bill was written under the auspices of Jim Crow and it ensured that white veterans disproportionately reaped these benefits.<sup>33</sup> SEEK was a necessary corrective to these exclusionary measures. Like all social programs that benefit people of color and the working class, it was the product of hard-fought battles at both the local and national levels: a “Midnight March” organized by Shirley Chisholm, coalitional activism of black and Puerto Rican caucuses, and increased funding for education made available by Lyndon Johnson’s *Higher Education Act* of 1965.<sup>34</sup> The college’s brief period of Open Admissions (1970-1976), a further effort to

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<sup>31</sup> Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000). At this time, the demographics of New York City were rapidly changing. The 1920s to 1950s saw a major increase in the Black population of New York City and between the 1940s and 1950s the Puerto Rican population of New York City tripled, due in part to a massive wave of Southern Blacks and Puerto Ricans migrating to the city in 1945. Nationwide, cities had experienced white flight (1940-1960) and the population of Black people in urban areas doubled again between 1950 and 1970.

<sup>32</sup> David E. Lavin and David Hyllegard, *Changing the Odds: Open Admissions and the Life Chances of the Disadvantaged* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> See Molloy for a lengthier account of the SEEK and Open Admissions histories.



democratize higher education, followed swiftly on its heels, due in no small part to the activist education of SEEK.<sup>35</sup>

The SEEK program and subsequent implementation of Open Admissions emerged in the wake of *Brown vs. Board of Education* and in relation to what Martha Biondi calls “the black revolution on campus.”<sup>36</sup> As scholars have noted, these initiatives drew energy, talent, and inspiration from the movements for Civil Rights, Black Power, and the community control of schools, as well as the Black Arts Movement and Umbra poetry workshop.<sup>37</sup> In New York City, amidst calls for school integration, Kenneth Clark, Preston Wilcox, Livingston Wingate, and many others demanded, instead, the improvement of schools that served Black and Puerto Rican students.<sup>38</sup> These movements evinced a critical skepticism towards the “lure of integration,” insisting instead upon self-determination, self-governance, and community control.<sup>39</sup>

In 1969, Black and Puerto Rican students, many of whom had entered the school through SEEK, along with their allies, occupied the South Campus of City College for two weeks, transforming it into “Harlem University,” thus enacting the better education they desired. They issued a series of demands for more just, relevant, and equitable education including resources for “Third World (Black, Puerto Rican, and Asian) Studies,” a voice for SEEK students in governance decisions about their program, and curricular changes so that all education majors

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<sup>35</sup> Molloy shows SEEK to be the prototype for Open Admissions. Molloy, “A Convenient Myopia,” 116, 256.

<sup>36</sup> Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2012); Carmen Kynard, *Vernacular Insurrections Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013); Conor Tomás-Reed, “‘Treasures That Prevail’: Adrienne Rich, The SEEK Program, and Social Movements at the City College of New York, 1968-1972,” *Lost and Found CUNY Poetics Document Initiative* 4.3.1 (2013): 37-75. The Black Arts Movement was shaped, in part, on university campuses like Fisk, San Francisco State, Oberlin, Hunter College, Columbia, and in its Southern formations, at Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the Neighborhood Arts Center (where Bambara served as the first artist in residence in 1975).

<sup>38</sup> See Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*.

<sup>39</sup> Biondi, *Black Revolution*, 145.

would study Spanish and Third World histories.<sup>40</sup> The most controversial of these was their demand “that City College’s admission policy be changed to reflect the ethnic and racial composition of the city’s highschools.”<sup>41</sup> My research is in many ways inspired by this occupation and by those of my own moment: Occupy Wall Street, the Free University of NYC, the occupation of Cooper Union, Black Lives Matter, and student movements across college campuses worldwide that have provided us with irrefutable evidence that things can be otherwise. I posit these student movements as both a catalyst for and exemplary outcome of student-centered pedagogy, which guides students in taking greater control over their shared conditions of learning.

One result of this campus activism was moving the start date of Open Admissions from 1975 to 1970, when the size of the freshman class increased somewhere between 45% and 75% almost overnight. SEEK was less contentious than Open Admissions, which expanded the program’s commitment to equity and access throughout the CUNY system, guaranteeing every graduate of New York City public schools a spot in one of the CUNY schools, free of tuition, as CUNY had been since 1847 and would remain until 1976. Open Admissions represents one of the most important efforts to democratize higher education and by the 1980s would become standard practice nationwide, when the majority of U.S. colleges more closely resembled CUNY than Harvard.<sup>42</sup> At CUNY, the problems of the policy were predictable given the dramatic increase in students without a sufficient increase in resources: overcrowding; increased class sizes; trailers, ice skating rinks, hotels, and Jewish community centers haphazardly transformed into makeshift classrooms.

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<sup>40</sup> Ferguson, *Reorder*, 76–77.

<sup>41</sup> Sylvan Fox, “CCNY Presses Round-the Clock Negotiations,” *New York Times*, May 23, 1969.

<sup>42</sup> Paul A. Attewell and David E. Lavin, *Passing the Torch: Does Higher Education for the Disadvantaged Pay off across the Generations?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), 17.

Less predictable were the sensationalist accounts of Open Admissions published in major news outlets, including confessional editorials and exposés often authored by the professors themselves. Two salient examples are Leonard Kriegel’s “Surviving the Apocalypse: Teaching at City College” (1972) and Theodore L. Gross’s “How to Kill a College: The Private Papers of a Campus Dean” (1975).<sup>43</sup> Despite feeble attempts to justify the movements for black studies and Open Admissions on liberal terms, these exposés, authored by progressive white men, evince a romantic nostalgia for a City College that was predicated on the exclusion of working class people of color. Both narratives describe a crisis of faith in their understandings of what it meant to teach at City College, what they were capable of as educators, what should be taught, and how. Kriegel describes SEEK and Open Admissions by positioning race against class, refusing to acknowledge the realities of racial capitalism or to interrogate the white supremacy that underscores his nostalgia for the “working-class excellence” of what was actually a white, Jewish, male college.<sup>44</sup> Kriegel describes these classrooms as a “circus ring,” full of “untrained monkeys,” “lions caged in a zoo,” and the college as “a human beehive.” He depicts City College as “a microcosm of New York, perhaps of most big cities” and professes that “the future of higher education in the United States was bound up with the fate of the City College of New York.”<sup>45</sup> These metonymic tropes that tie the fate of City College to New York City and the U.S. abound in writing on Open Admissions, attracting unwarranted media attention and public concern to what Addison Gayle deemed a “quiet revolution,” stealthily shifting the power

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<sup>43</sup> Leonard Kriegel, “Surviving the Apocalypse: Teaching at City College,” *Change* 4, no. 6 (1972): 54–62 and Theodore L. Gross, “How to Kill a College: The Private Papers of a Campus Dean,” *The Saturday Review*, New York 1975.

<sup>44</sup> My use of “racial capitalism” to acknowledge that racism is endemic to the social institutions, sensibilities, and imaginaries that have emerged from capitalist societies is informed by the work of Cedric J. Robinson. Cedric J Robinson and Robin D. G Kelley, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Kriegel, “Surviving,” 55, 54.

hierarchies that otherwise structure social life.<sup>46</sup> Gross, who chaired the City College English Department from 1971-1972, similarly organizes his narrative around fantasies of a formerly meritocratic college that obscure the structural inequalities of New York City and U.S. society, what Lani Guinier calls “the tyranny of meritocracy.”<sup>47</sup> Gross laments how “minorities, now including patient women, used affirmative action to leap into positions of power,” portraying them as incompetent, students of color as mediocre, and activists as irrational bullies exacting “cultural intimidation” against the white faculty.<sup>48</sup> Open Admissions, according to Gross, is how you “kill a college.”

These examples are, on the one hand, striking reminders of Roderick Ferguson’s argument that abstract notions of “excellence” were forged during this era through the vilification of courageous educators, activists, and students of color who put their lives on the line for institutional and social change.<sup>49</sup> They remind us that the majority of English professors bemoaned the fact that SEEK and Open Admissions resulted in an influx of students for remedial and introductory writing classes, but few adequately prepared for their advanced courses on English literature.<sup>50</sup> While math teachers had no problem teaching SEEK students, one professor, Bernard Sohmer, recalls the disdainful reactions of English professors who were asked to teach remedial writing: “‘That’s not our job. We have Ph.D.’s in literature, not in writing.”<sup>51</sup> Sean Molloy identifies Geoffrey Wagner as the English Department’s most vehement opponent to Open Admissions, whose “rambling, openly racist, sexist, and homophobic” *End of Education*

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<sup>46</sup> Gayle qtd. in Molloy, “A Convenient Myopia,” 204.

<sup>47</sup> Lani Guinier, *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America* (Beacon Press, 2016).

<sup>48</sup> Gross, “How to Kill,” 15, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Roderick Ferguson, “The Racial Genealogies of Excellence” in *Reorder*.

<sup>50</sup> LaVona L. Reeves, “Mina Shaughnessy and Open Admissions at New York’s City College,” *Thought and Action* 17, no. 2: 120.

<sup>51</sup> James Traub, *City On A Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1994), 112.

excoriated City College writing courses for teaching “more about injustices of society...than the use of punctuation.”<sup>52</sup> These professors were mainly white, and mainly men, “tweedy, Anglophile, and steeped in the traditional ideals of connoisseurship...concern[ed] with parsing and preserving the classics of English and American writing.”<sup>53</sup> And yet some of the sharpest authors and intellectuals of the twentieth century were lining up at the door to teach remedial writing courses in SEEK.<sup>54</sup>

A 1968 recruitment ad for SEEK solicited educators interested in “a unique opportunity for challenging, experimental work in a program for bright students from educationally poor backgrounds.”<sup>55</sup> Those who responded to this call tell different stories about SEEK and Open Admissions. They do not dehumanize students into “untrained monkeys” or “lions caged in a zoo”; rather, they describe thrilling classroom environments, the problems of which are the products of institutional racism, sexism, and social inequality writ large. Just blocks away from the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School, the City College SEEK classrooms were their own stages for revolutionary performance, where art was central to social transformation and black liberation.<sup>56</sup> The poet-teachers in this study were part of a pedagogical movement in which words had impact, and the literature classroom embodied the possibilities of personal transformation and the difficulties of institutional and social change. According to one historian, there were few learning environments more vibrant:

While history professors were tearing one another to shreds, and English professors were seeing the end of the world around every corner, the young writers and scholars who

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<sup>52</sup> Molloy, “A Convenient Myopia,” 259.

<sup>53</sup> Traub, *City on a Hill*, 112.

<sup>54</sup> See Molloy (86) for a lengthier account of how City College professors insulted, shamed, and thwarted the success of SEEK students, for instance, by deliberately lowering their grades.

<sup>55</sup> Jay Hershenson, “Second Chances: The CUNY and SEEK College Discovery Story,” CUNY TV, 2011: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=21&v=TtGbYi4KtIE>

<sup>56</sup> The connections are not merely figurative: Larry Neal and David Henderson taught at the City College of New York during this era.

worked for Shaughnessy were reading Noam Chomsky and the psychologists, charting the grammatical structures of Spanish, Chinese, and Creole, learning about the patterns of black English. The department had its own publication, the *Journal of Basic Writing*—the first issue was on ‘error’—and published an annual anthology of students’ work. Visitors from other programs would come to City as the fountainhead of writing instructions; members of the department were invited to discuss their findings as professional conferences. This one corner of City College was alive with a sense of possibility.<sup>57</sup>

Poet, essayist, and SEEK graduate Louis Reyes Rivera recounts that the students understood their learning as “an obligation to open doors so that more could come in.”<sup>58</sup> In the words of David Lavin, these programs “put a minority consciousness into the university.”<sup>59</sup> Nowhere is this collective consciousness more prominent than in the words of Allen Ballard, former SEEK Director at City College. Reflecting on the impact of the program, he states: “It transformed higher education. It made it from something that was exclusionary, kind of property of whites primarily to something that was to be shared.” In reflections on SEEK, it is also a common trope to describe the mutual, two-way learning that occurred in these classrooms: how educators had just as much to learn from students as students had to learn from them. As Edmond L. Volpe, Former Chair of the City College English Department, recalls,

We had to learn, and begin to recognize that we were teachers, not simply professors of literature, or scholars of literature...we had responsibilities in the classroom to the students who were sitting there before us. And we had to reach them. And reaching them was a new educational experience for the people in our college and throughout the university.<sup>60</sup>

Reflecting on her instructors at Queens College, Paula Lalande, a graduate (and later director) of the SEEK program recalls how “they created the pedagogy we needed.”<sup>61</sup>

This dissertation addresses two misconceptions of the Open Admissions moment.

Scholars in composition and rhetoric often return to Open Admissions at CUNY, where many

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<sup>57</sup> Traub, *City on a Hill*, 112.

<sup>58</sup> Jay Hershenson, “Second Chances.”

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

student-centered pedagogies we rely on today, such as peer revision and peer tutoring, became popular practice.<sup>62</sup> However, this moment is often understood as a white savior narrative, in which white protagonist teachers allegedly rescued students of color from their plights. This myth denies, on the one hand, the actions, creativity, power, and worldviews of students of color, such as those in the Onyx and Du Bois societies, and, on the other, the pedagogical interventions made by professors of color. While Open Admissions is remembered through the figure of Mina Shaughnessy, recent research by Molloy shows that Barbara Christian, Toni Cade Bambara, and Addison Gayle laid the foundations for the student-centered pedagogical paradigms enacted in these classrooms.<sup>63</sup> The emergence of these learning practices is often understood as a slipshod, haphazard response to overcrowded classrooms, the origins of which “lie neither in radical politics nor in research.”<sup>64</sup> However, the work of these teacher-poets demonstrates how deliberately and extensively they researched, tested, read, experimented, discussed, and shared their insights on these methodologies.

Thanks to multiple studies by David E. Lavin and his various co-authors, we have ample research demonstrating the tremendous impact of Open Admissions at CUNY.<sup>65</sup> Open Admissions nearly doubled the number of Hispanics with M.A.’s and more than doubled the number who received advanced degrees; it tripled the number of Black M.A. recipients and doubled the number with advanced degrees; it drastically increased students’ earnings and

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<sup>62</sup> Kenneth A. Bruffee, “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” *College English* 46, no. 7 (1984): 635–52. At the same time, I am mindful of Carmen Kynard’s argument that Historically Black Colleges and Universities have been leaders of educational innovation for decades, especially in terms of developing pedagogies that engage students of color.

<sup>63</sup> Molloy’s meticulous research shows Shaughnessy to have been a caring and supportive teacher who led by example, but whose progressive teaching was undermined by her regressive administrative “innovations” that emphasized grammatical correctness, delivered in a lecture format, at the expense of creative, empowering, and student-centered writing pedagogy.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 637.

<sup>65</sup> David E. Lavin, Richard D. Alba, and Richard A. Silberstein, *Right Versus Privilege: The Open-Admissions Experiment at the City University of New York* (New York; London: Free Press ; Collier Macmillan, 1981); Hyllegard and Lavin; Attewell and Lavin.

success in finding challenging and interesting jobs; and it contributed to the growth of a college-educated class in New York City's minority communities. The most notable research among these is a massive study by Attewell and Lavin that tracked the educational achievement of two thousand women who entered CUNY between 1970-1972 over a period of thirty years and across three generations. They found that when women from underprivileged backgrounds go to college their children are more likely to succeed in school and obtain a college degree; they become more involved parents in their children's schools; they have higher expectations for their children; their children have higher test scores; and their families yield higher incomes. The impact of this research cannot be overstated, as it demonstrates the potential for higher education to facilitate social mobility. And yet the paradox of Open Admissions is that it actually preserved the racial achievement gap since white students disproportionately reaped the benefits.<sup>66</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the demise of Open Admissions at CUNY is tied to U.S. imperialism. The U.S. decision to support Israel against Egypt and Syria in the 1973 Yom Kippur War resulted in the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, which quadrupled the price of oil and wreaked havoc on the U.S. economy. In response to the manufactured fiscal crisis of 1975, the New York State government used a tactic they continue to rely on today: pitting SUNY against CUNY. New York Governor Hugh Carey threatened to withhold CUNY funding until they, like schools in the SUNY system, agreed to charge tuition.<sup>67</sup> The implementation of tuition was one component of the upwardly redistributive structural adjustment that New York City experienced in the late twentieth century. As business elites increasingly gained political control, they dismantled the "social democratic polity," rolling back many of the social provisions of the 1940s and 1960s including well-funded public hospitals, housing, and education (CUNY in particular) and 1960s

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<sup>66</sup> Lavin, Alba, and Silverstein, *Right Versus Privilege*, 283.

<sup>67</sup> Kim Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate: Regime Change in New York City, 1974 to the Present* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 39-40.



expansions to Medicare, Medicaid, and welfare.<sup>68</sup> These provisions were seen as a threat to the city's position within a global economy. The social democratic polity was replaced with a "crisis regime": "a series of state-sponsored organizations and offices imposed on the financial governance of New York City," through which the government reasserted class power and shifted "priorities toward both the traditional goals of business and the newer ideas that would be known as neoliberalism."<sup>69</sup> These processes of spatial reorganization displaced impoverished racialized communities and required increased police surveillance, placing CUNY classrooms at the center of these neoliberal transformations.

These coordinated, top-down, punitive responses to the fiscal crisis in New York City served as a rehearsal for larger neoliberal reforms that would take place under the Reagan and Thatcher administrations and would be exported worldwide, via the IMF and World Bank, to countries like Sudan and Nigeria.<sup>70</sup> This era was characterized by increased fiscal austerity, privatization, market liberalization, governmental securitization of private property relations, and greater investment in "control policies" of surveillance and repression such as stop-and-frisk police tactics, mass incarceration, and the school-to-prison pipeline.<sup>71</sup> The neoliberalization of higher education entailed decreased state funding for public higher education including the removal of free tuition; attacks on opportunity programs (affirmative action, second chance remedial education, Open Admissions) as an unfair waste of resources; a shift from a needs to merit based model of financial aid; and a shift from grants to loans that had a disproportionately

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>70</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011) and Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 44-48.

negative effect on minority students.<sup>72</sup> While CUNY has succumbed to many of these neoliberal austerity measures, the university system nevertheless continues to serve as an engine of socioeconomic mobility, propelling six times as many students into the middle class as all of the Ivy Leagues schools combined.<sup>73</sup>

### **Educational democracy and the postwar university**

The poet-teachers in this dissertation illuminate literary interventions in critical university studies (or institutional critique), aesthetic education, and critical pedagogy, in part by showing the necessity of considering all three in relation to one another.

Debates about higher education and social inequality in the United States can be traced back at least to the Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890. During this era, scholars such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Anna Julia Cooper were critiquing educational institutions for not facilitating the flourishing of Black Americans and putting forth more viable alternatives. The question of which populations would be served by educational institutions took on new urgency in the mid-late twentieth century in light of the G.I. Bill, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, and the *National Higher Education Act*. Recently, the gravity of our nation's student debt crisis, having surpassed the one trillion dollar mark in 2013, has galvanized renewed attention to this question. Scholars such as Sara Ahmed, Roderick Ferguson, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, Craig Steven Wilder, Sunaina Maira and Piya Chatterjee, Stephen Brier and Michael Fabricant, Christopher Newfield, Cathy N. Davidson, and Kandice Chuh critique the ways education often reproduces the very conditions of inequality it claims to challenge,

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<sup>72</sup> Attewell and Lavin, Hyllegard and Lavin, Brier and Fabricant.

<sup>73</sup> David Leonhardt, "America's Great Working-Class Colleges," January 18, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/opinion/sunday/americas-great-working-class-colleges.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/opinion/sunday/americas-great-working-class-colleges.html?_r=1).

especially through long standing violence against people of color.<sup>74</sup> These critiques are all the more powerful, given that many universities profess some kind of commitment to social progress. They constitute a growing academic discourse known as critical university studies, which responds to the neoliberalization of higher education described in the previous section.

The women in this study were deeply involved with the movement for black studies, which is a useful heuristic for understanding the history of U.S. education. Black studies challenges the desirability of liberal U.S. democracy by foregrounding the labor, the exploitation, the violence, the dispossession, the material conditions of possibility upon which the nation's ideals of freedom were erected and which reveal its hypocrisy. From this vantage point, U.S. schools can be understood as institutions that effectively reproduce social hierarchies by tracking students into the paths carved by liberal racial capitalism. As Craig Steven Wilder argues, universities were founded on the wealth of the Atlantic slave trade and indigenous dispossession and were used to produce "knowledge" of racial inferiority that would legitimize this exploitation. Recognizing that their wealth depended on slavery, early American colonists worried that they would be dispossessed by black education and debated whether or not educated, literate slaves could still be considered private property. Formal emancipation only exacerbated this fear. Du Bois put it best, when he explained how the erection of public, common schools that would welcome Black students was met with violence, as many were

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<sup>74</sup> Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Ferguson 2013; Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013); Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013); Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, eds., *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier, *Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Cathy N. Davidson, *The New Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2017); Christopher Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2016); Kandice Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes* (Durham: Duke UP, 2019).

burned to the ground. The South, he argued, understood “an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro.”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, black education has historically challenged what George Lipsitz calls the U.S.’ “possessive investment in whiteness”: the material, economic advantages that accrue and are passed down through institutionalized white privilege, including “the unequal educational opportunities available to children of different races.”<sup>76</sup> As urban education scholars like Jean Anyon, Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Stephen Brier, and Michael Fabricant have demonstrated, U.S. education remains a tracking system that orients affluent, primarily white, students towards greater capital, and poor students, often of color, towards less pleasurable and less lucrative careers.<sup>77</sup>

While the U.S. claims a national mythology grounded in the disobedience of the American Revolution, black studies entails the threat of an un-American revolution. According to Du Bois, “education among all kinds of men has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent”<sup>78</sup> that threatens the status quo. In a moment of extensive critiques of higher education from the left, right, and everywhere in between, these teacher-poets follow in Du Bois’ tradition of understanding education as a weapon of the dispossessed. They belong alongside figures such as Anna Julia Cooper, Fanny Jackson Coppin, Septima Clark, Elaine Brown, and Ericka Huggins, who demonstrate how women have creatively reimagined how we organize, fund, and enact education for years.

Many contemporary critics argue that present conditions of educational austerity reduce all of higher education to mere training for a job, eclipsing the collective social and political aims

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<sup>75</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1961), 29.

<sup>76</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998), vii.

<sup>77</sup> Lois Weis and Michelle Fine, *Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race and Gender in American Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Jean Anyon, *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>78</sup> Du Bois, “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” *Souls*.

of learning. This tension is the product of a long history of debates over the purpose of higher education. In the nineteenth century, Germany saw a dramatic modernist shift in notions of education, away from *wissenschaft* (learning to do things) to *bildung* (learning how to think), which assumes that the learner already has a certain amount of wealth, leisure, and material security. Cathy N. Davidson shows how Charles Eliot brought these German models of higher education to the U.S. and the ways that Frederick Winslow Taylor and other proponents of industrialization and standardization produced some version of the tiered system we have today. As Davidson writes, many of our contemporary educational practices including “majors, minors, divisions (humanities, social sciences, natural and biological sciences), credit hours, degree requirements, grades, the bell curve, deviation from the mean, class rankings, certification, general education, upper-division electives,” were invented between 1869 and 1909.<sup>79</sup> The teacher-poets in this study understood that many of these constructions did not facilitate their consciousness-raising efforts and collective pursuit of a better society, and thus experimented with alternatives. They believed aesthetic education could and should prepare students for the world beyond the classroom: both to address conditions of injustice and inequality and, in the words of June Jordan, to gain a “reasonable degree of self-respecting self-sufficiency.”<sup>80</sup> Through lectures; journaling, poetry, writing, and interview assignments; and collaborative projects, they taught students to critically reflect on their own needs and desires in relation to the needs and desires of others and understood these as important worldmaking strategies. They remind us that wanting to provide for oneself and have a rewarding job doesn’t make you neoliberal.

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<sup>79</sup> Davidson, *The New Education*, 31-36.

<sup>80</sup> Statement by June Jordan, Assistant Professor of English, Black poet and Writer, May 5, 1976, box 76, folder 14, June Jordan Papers, 1936-2002, MC 513, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

My research builds on critical university studies by elaborating pedagogies through which authors, educators, and students have resisted the consolidation of power and resources in the hands of a wealthy, white minority. I show how even in institutional spaces created to assimilate, integrate, and Americanize, teachers and students refused these conservative politics and pursued social justice through their learning. This attention to the transgressive possibilities of normative institutional spaces is grounded in queer of color critique, especially the work of José Muñoz and Samuel R. Delany (strange bedfellows for critical university studies). Through his analysis of the “uncommon commons” and the insurrectionary social choreography of the punk band The Germs, Muñoz taught me to see classrooms as “circuits of being-with, in difference and discord, that are laden with potentiality and that manifest the desire to want something else.”<sup>81</sup> Equally important has been Delany’s analysis of the lifeworlds of gay porn theaters that lined Forty Second street prior to the Disneyfication of Times Square. According to Delany, these theaters facilitated “interclass contact” and “the mutual exchange of pleasure in a non-competitive mode,” the kinds of encounters that other social spaces foreclose, but that are necessary for a robust, democratic society.<sup>82</sup> Something about educational institutions that aim for access, rather than exclusion and selectivity, suggests that they too can be spaces of transformative encounters and alternative modes of “being-with.” Thinking alongside Sara Ahmed, I am interested in what happens when people for whom institutions were never intended — the working class, people of color, white women — claim these institutions: how their work interrupts the reproduction of the changing same.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, “‘Gimme Gimme This . . . Gimme Gimme That’: Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons,” *SOCIAL TEXT* 116 (2013): 95–110, 96. Muñoz’s notion of “being with” evokes the aleatory encounters and social formations that may briefly crystallize and then dissolve again, though no one leaves untouched.

<sup>82</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York UP, 2001).

<sup>83</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007).

## Why aesthetic education?

In an era when Ronald Reagan was demonizing activist students to garner support for his neoliberal reforms, writing off their calls for relevant education as a frivolous “luxury,” these teacher-poets fought for aesthetic education as essential to the survival of women and people of color. In essays like Bambara’s “Dreaming of a Black University,” Rich’s “Teaching Language in Open Admissions,” Lorde’s “Poetry is not a Luxury,” and “Poet as Teacher—Human as Poet—Teacher as Human,” and Jordan’s “Finding the Haystack in the Needle” these teacher-poets engage the question of how aesthetic education can contribute to the production of a more just and equitable future. They were vociferous critics of universities, and they demonstrated, through their praxis, the better educational alternatives that resist hierarchical structures of power.

These figures lit a fire that burns for our time: a moment in which an ostensible “crisis” in the humanities has subtended the neoliberalization of higher education. At a time when the prohibitive costs of attending college are raising critical questions about the value of higher education, scholars are revisiting the longstanding question of what we want education to do for our society. In this era of educational austerity, pundits and politicians call for solutions such as “skills training” and “unbundling.” Rather than resisting this dismantling of education by rushing to defend a white, patriarchal, and Eurocentric liberal arts tradition, I join scholars such as Jodi Melamed, Roderick Ferguson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Kandice Chuh in asking how humanistic education can be improved to address the material inequalities of racial capitalism.<sup>84</sup> Considered together, these scholars demonstrate that how we define, interact with, and teach art,

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<sup>84</sup> Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*.

even in privileged academic institutions, has dramatic effects on conditions of social inequality far beyond the university classroom.

I believe that the role of humanistic education is to throw contemporary regimes of common sense into crisis so that we can better apprehend conditions of injustice and inequality and help students navigate these uneven structures, even as they imagine and build better alternatives. However, the humanities continue to reflect investments in a narrowly-defined tradition that overlooks the powerful roles that art, language, and literature play in the lives of working class people and people of color. Defending his precious City College against what Foucault would call “the insurrection of subjugated knowledges,”<sup>85</sup> Gross’ “Private Papers of a College Dean” twice invokes Matthew Arnold’s famous assertion that students should be taught “the best that is known and thought in the world,”<sup>86</sup> an ideal that continues to structure education. But Arnold’s deep-seated racism and sexism should make us question whether this is still the work we want humanistic education to do.

In the 1880s, Arnold’s work as a school inspector brought him to the U.S., where he shared his belief that those of African descent were not anatomically built to receive the “sweetness and light” of a cultural education. As Mary Church Terrell, one of the first African American women to receive a college degree, recalls:

One day Matthew Arnold, the English writer, visited our class and Professor Frost asked me both to read the Greek and then to translate. After leaving the class Mr. Arnold referred to the young lady who read the passage of Greek so well. Thinking it would interest the Englishman, Professor Frost told him I was of African descent. Thereupon Mr. Arnold expressed the greatest surprise imaginable, because he said, he thought the tongue of the African was so thick he could not be taught to pronounce the Greek

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<sup>85</sup> Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon), 81.

<sup>86</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869.



correctly.<sup>87</sup>

Terrell's reflections remind us that the humanities emerged from the racist pursuit of philology, and that people of color, women, and the working class were never imagined as the recipients of, much less contributors to, a humanistic education.<sup>88</sup>

The humanities ostensibly promote a "common" culture while effectively naturalizing the conditions of social reproduction analyzed by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron.<sup>89</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s, women's studies, ethnic studies, and black studies emerged to contest these abstractions and engage with material conditions, including the de facto segregation that continues to track students towards differential life paths and possibilities. This late twentieth century moment is often remembered through calls to make curriculum more "relevant," and later, the controversial "canon wars." Recent research by Roderick Ferguson has drawn renewed attention to this moment by showing how U.S. universities responded to the social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s with representational solutions to material problems by creating "the interdisciplines": departments of race, gender, and ethnicity that incorporated the movements' insurrectionary aspirations while ignoring their demands for collective material redistribution. However, Ferguson also suggests possibilities for literary study to advance social justice aligned with the "activation of minor details" in the interdisciplines' institutional praxis: "A syllabus, a job ad, a recruitment strategy, a memo, a book, an artwork, a report, an organizational plan, a protest . . . in order to imagine critical forms of community . . .

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<sup>87</sup> Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Washington D.C.: Ransdell Publishers, 1940), 41.

<sup>88</sup> Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987); Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); Chuh 2019.

<sup>89</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (London: Sage, 1990), 10-11. Systems of education are organized around the replication of tradition, the transmission of culture from one generation to the next, and the reproduction of structural relationships among different social classes.

in which minoritized subjects become the agents rather than the silent objects of knowledge formations and institutional practices.”<sup>90</sup> Amid this retrospective theorizing of the 1960s and 1970s, it is useful to revisit these teacher-poets’ teaching materials, which are rife with attention to “minor details” and the material conditions they index.

Given the extensive critiques of how liberal humanism has been used to legitimize violence against racial and ethnic minorities and women, I join Spivak and Chuh in revitalizing the term “aesthetic education” as a way to engage the subjugated praxis, what Chuh calls “illiberal humanisms,” disavowed by humanist traditions.<sup>91</sup> “Aesthetic education” is often associated with German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schiller, who argued that art is the vehicle of education.<sup>92</sup> In 1979, Bourdieu argued that our relationships to art cannot be disarticulated from the social, economic, and political fabric in which they are embedded, an argument that implicates aesthetics in the production of justice and equity.<sup>93</sup> Aesthetics, according to Jacques Ranciere, involve “the distribution of the sensible,” constituting what counts as legitimate knowledge, and how we understand our relationships within the world, within nature, and in relation to other people.<sup>94</sup> Similar to aesthetics, pedagogy also distributes “the sensible”: what can be known, what counts, and how we distinguish subjects, verbs, and objects.

As beings in the world, we are constantly having aesthetic encounters, whether we like it or not. “Aesthetic education,” implies deliberate reflection on the ways cultural texts train our viscera, distribute agency, shape our worldviews, and raise questions of our positioning within

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<sup>90</sup> Ferguson, *Reorder*, 232.

<sup>91</sup> See Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*.

<sup>92</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On The Aesthetic Education of Man* (Hoboken: BiblioBytes, 1990 [1794]).

<sup>93</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979).

<sup>94</sup> Jacques Ranciere, “Ten Theses on Politics” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 36.

the social, political, and economic fabric. This occurs both in formal, institutionalized settings and in less formal conversations and configurations, what Moten and Harney call “study.” In this project, I attend to both, though my primary interest is in pedagogies that respond to and deliberately contest the neoliberal ideologies that often dominate the formal academic institutions in which they are enacted. One reason “aesthetic education” is so useful is because it is not an authorized or legitimized academic discipline, department, discourse, or subject. Every time we use the term, it reminds us of the artificiality of these constructions, their inadequacy for making sense of the world, and opens up a space for us to create alternative genealogies, or usable histories, within which to locate our work. Aesthetic education allows us to apprehend ways of being, knowing, and relating that don’t fit neatly into common sense.

The question of what aesthetic education can do to materialize social justice has long been of interest to educators. Take, for instance, Du Bois’ insistence that the talented tenth ought to read the great works of Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Balzac, and Dumas, and that African Americans should be taught “not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes.”<sup>95</sup> More recently, Jodi Melamed has challenged the assumption that teaching multicultural literatures is a step toward racial justice. In her analysis, U.S. literary studies has tended to “dematerialize” antiracism by disseminating dominant, state-sanctioned fictions of equality in cultural difference that obscure material conditions of inequality. U.S. literary studies effectively teaches privileged white students to “know difference—to learn the supposed inside stories of people of color, to situate themselves with respect to racial difference, and to know the truth about the difference that racial difference makes (or does not make).”<sup>96</sup> Thinking alongside Melamed, dominant modes of U.S. literary studies fail to induce a sense of complicity in

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<sup>95</sup> DuBois, *Souls*, 63.

<sup>96</sup> Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, xvi.

structural violence or an ethical imperative to address white supremacy and work for social change.

While it is urgent to hold the humanities accountable for reinforcing dominant exclusionary discourses, the pedagogies of Bambara, Jordan, Lorde, and Rich demonstrate how art can raise questions of how we know what we know and reconfigure the coordinates through which we understand our place in the world.

### **From critical to creative pedagogy**

While these four authors are typically studied for their contributions to U.S. literature, they were no less bold in their pedagogical innovation. I locate my research within the fields of student-centered pedagogy; critical pedagogy; and black, women of color, and intersectional feminist pedagogy.

Student-centered pedagogy goes back at least as far as the late nineteenth and early twentieth century movements for education reform, in which educators (many of whom were European immigrants) such as Johann Pestalozzi, Johann Friedrich Herbart, G. Stanley Hall, William James, Jacob Riis, Charles Eliot, and other proponents of “the new education” sought to make schools more aware of the social consequences of curricula.<sup>97</sup> In the Progressive Era, philosopher John Dewey famously argued that students should be taught to share, cooperate, and care for one another. Dewey imagined the classroom as a “miniature republic,” that would prepare students to remake America in the image of their democratic classroom. Cold War-era propaganda films like “Practicing Democracy in the Classroom,” (1953) funded in part by the Daughters of the American Revolution, demonstrate how student-centered, democratic, and

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<sup>97</sup> See Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*.

participatory pedagogies were championed to promote American exceptionalism and to protect the nation from the incursions of communism.<sup>98</sup> However, just as proponents of liberal democracy fail to account for its conditions of possibility—Atlantic slavery, indigenous dispossession, and exploitation—Progressive advocates of liberal, democratic, student-centered pedagogy often neglect the structural inequalities of who has access to education and other material resources. Indeed, during this era, Blacks and Puerto Ricans in New York City faced discrimination, underemployment, and poverty, and their schools were often overcrowded, underfunded, and left out of many of the era’s Progressive reform efforts.<sup>99</sup> One problem we have inherited from the legacy of Progressive education is an over-reliance on schools to solve social problems of inequality that would be better addressed through policy changes in housing, healthcare, and labor.<sup>100</sup>

The pedagogies I elaborate in this project put questions of inequality and access to material resources at the heart of the classroom, largely because they are grounded in black, women of color, and intersectional feminist praxis that teaches students the skills to survive, navigate, critique, and change this structurally unequal world.<sup>101</sup> This genealogy extends from Anna Julia Cooper’s commitment to educating “neglected people” to M. Jacqui Alexander’s call for oppositional “pedagogies of crossing” that destabilize dominant ways of being and knowing to contest the very grounds of empire.<sup>102</sup> It is punctuated by such figures as Angela Davis, Gloria

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<sup>98</sup> “Practicing Democracy in the Classroom,” Educational Film Service, 1953, <http://archive.org/details/Practici1953>.

<sup>99</sup> See Ravitch.

<sup>100</sup> See Anyon and Ravitch.

<sup>101</sup> Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

<sup>102</sup> Anna J. Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1992] 1988) & M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

Joseph, Barbara Omolade, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and bell hooks.<sup>103</sup> My dissertation builds on Carmen Kynard's argument that U.S. composition classrooms have been the site of "vernacular insurrections," shaped by black freedom struggles and Alexis Pauline Gumbs' notion of black feminist "counter-poetics": "using spaces designed in service of the colonial project to protest that same project, with varying levels of success."<sup>104</sup>

This project highlights the feminist, antiracist, and decolonial origins of many contemporary student-centered pedagogical practices such as design thinking, makerspaces, universal design for learning, multimodal composition, public writing, service learning, collaborative pedagogy, and project-based learning. While research has shown that student-centered pedagogies increase students' understanding of difficult content, some professors decry their customer service ethos as part and parcel of the neoliberalization of education.<sup>105</sup> Student-centered pedagogy captured these authors' imaginations not merely because, as M. L. J. Abercrombie has shown, it produced more effective medical professionals, but because they saw its potential to empower students through engagement with the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, Black Power, and the Women's Movement.<sup>106</sup> In particular, considering the anthologies, radio programs, broadsides, galleries, and performances—the cultural texts—they asked students to produce alongside organizations like the Combahee River Collective allows us

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<sup>103</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (London: Women's Press, [1981] 2001); Gloria Joseph, "Black Feminist Pedagogy and Schooling in Capitalist White America," (1988) in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1996); Barbara Omolade, "A Black Feminist Pedagogy," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 3/4 (1987): 32–39; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s.," *Cultural Critique*, no. 14 (1989): 179–208; bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>104</sup> Kynard, *Vernacular Insurrections* and Gumbs, "Nobody Mean More," 242.

<sup>105</sup> See Scott Freeman et al., "Active Learning Increases Student Performance in Science, Engineering, and Mathematics," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 23 (June 10, 2014): 8410–15 and Molly Worthen, "Opinion | Lecture Me. Really.," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/opinion/sunday/lecture-me-really.html>.

<sup>106</sup> M. L. J. Abercrombie, *Anatomy of Judgment* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1964).

to consider collaborative project-based pedagogy in relation to building the coalitions necessary to produce social justice. Reminding ourselves of this genealogy should help us engage these methods more fully: not to dismiss student-centered pedagogies outright as the products of neoliberal education, but to see these as tools at our disposal, even as we question the ways they can become complicit in exploitative institutional practices.

At least two of the poet-teachers in this study, June Jordan and Adrienne Rich, were deeply influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, who is generally understood as the founder of critical pedagogy. Jordan was especially well versed in this scholarship and designed a graduate seminar titled “Education: What’s the Point? What’s the Potential?” that included works by Freire, Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, and bell hooks. Critical pedagogy reached its heyday in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Freire, Shor, and Giroux, along with Ivan Illich and Peter McLaren, argued for active and critical consciousness raising education. This same period was tremendously important to women educators, educators of color, and lesbian educators, though their perspectives are often absent in discussions of critical pedagogy, which, with the exception of bell hooks, tend to cite the same few men over and over again. This is in part because identity markers are used to justify neglecting, rather than engaging with, women of color feminist pedagogy: writing it off for being too niche or specific. While women of color feminist pedagogy certainly addresses the positionality of women of color in the academy as both students and teachers, it also offers frameworks for producing feminist and antiracist education — something our society desperately needs. These poet-teachers expand critical pedagogy into the realm of the creative through an emphasis on poesis and acts of worldmaking as responses to neoliberal destruction.

My dissertation would not exist if these teacher-poets had not deemed it worthwhile to take time out of their daily lives to sit down, reflect on their experimental teaching, and share what they learned from their experiences with students. There is nothing romantic about their narratives: they foreground, rather than hide, their efforts to address the many challenges they encountered. They explain how they reached out for help, asked questions, performed research, and experimented with solutions, even if these sometimes failed, or produced new problems. Just as they were unacknowledged participants in a larger movement that emphasized process over product in writing pedagogy, they “show their work” when writing about teaching, narrating the experience of revising and refining ideas, taking risks, messing up, and trying again—failure, no discredit.<sup>107</sup>

Their writings make teaching come alive, just as they made learning exciting for their students. And in a moment when both teachers and students (especially those interested in social change) are so demonized by mainstream media and culture, we need their pedagogies that make teaching and learning desirable. At the same time, it is risky to make teaching art, language, and literature into an object of desire when Michael Berube, Fred Moten, and Stefano Harney have observed the ways that graduate students’ love for this work can keep us in a cruelly optimistic relationship to academe, tethered to a system structured for our exploitation.<sup>108</sup> As Moten and Harney argue, many contemporary minoritarian knowledge practitioners or “subversive intellectuals” who find themselves in universities arrived on “false pretenses,” brought into the fold through the intoxicating experience of learning, only to find our labor exploited, our

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<sup>107</sup> Lad Tobin and Thomas Newkirk, eds., *Taking Stock: The Writing Process Movement in the '90s* (Portsmouth: Baynton/Cook/Heinemann, 1994).

<sup>108</sup> Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons* and Michael Berube, “How We Got Here,” MLA Convention Address Boston, 2013 <https://www.mla.org/Convention/Convention-History/MLA-Presidential-Addresses/2011-15-Presidential-Addresses/2013-Presidential-Address>



students indebted, and, perhaps worst, a shrinking horizon of what we can imagine as possible.<sup>109</sup> We should not overlook the fact that these teacher-poets quit jobs that no longer felt worthwhile, when they were demonized by other faculty, when their courses and writing were not taken seriously, or when the emotional labor of teaching detracted from their writing. We should not overlook the fact that June Jordan was so exhausted by the intensity of the individual conference system at Sarah Lawrence that she resigned, noting that “teaching is a full time occupation, for someone like me.”<sup>110</sup> We should not overlook Gumbs’ reminder that these institutions worked Black women like Lorde and Jordan literally to death, capitalizing on their brilliance — their publications, their abilities to inspire students — yet repeatedly denying them the medical leaves they required as they battled cancer.<sup>111</sup> Their work demonstrates how a consideration of labor and one’s own needs and desires have to be a part of creative pedagogy.

## Chapter organization

The internal organization of each discrete chapter is loosely chronological. However, I have elected a thematic ordering of the chapters that allows a version of engaged aesthetic education to gradually unfold. I urge the reader not to consider these chapters as a chronological progression, and I reiterate that Barbara Christian, Addison Gayle, and Toni Cade Bambara laid much of the groundwork for SEEK pedagogy, even though Bambara’s chapter comes third.

The first chapter, “‘aesthetics of the outsider’: Audre Lorde and the Praxis of Collaborative Worldmaking” positions Lorde as a theorist of collaborative pedagogy across multiple registers: the lyric subject, modes of relationality, and our understandings of history and

<sup>109</sup> Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 26.

<sup>110</sup> June Jordan, Letter of resignation, archival folder 76.18

<sup>111</sup> Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “The Shape of My Impact,” *The Feminist Wire*, Oct. 29, 2012, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2012/10/the-shape-of-my-impact/>

authorship. I read her journaling and group project assignments, writings on the apocalyptic conditions of neoliberalism, and educational poems to elaborate a praxis organized around what one of her students called the “aesthetics of the outsider.” This praxis puts the art of the marginalized at the center of their coursework and engages students and audiences in collective worldmaking practices.

The second chapter, “Changing the Subject: Adrienne Rich and the Poetics of Feminist Pedagogy” analyzes Rich’s poem “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” teaching materials, and writings on education to show how poetry and pedagogy were interrelated means through which feminist authors sought to redistribute institutional power and resources. For Rich, teaching in the SEEK program catalyzed a shift from teaching traditional literary history toward the poetics of everyday life and a related embrace of democratic pedagogy. The literary pedagogy that emerges from these classrooms explores how lives are shaped by metaphors, comparisons, erasures, elisions, and gaps, and how the elliptical, unsaid, implied, and occluded might be deployed, instead, to build a better present.

In the third chapter, “‘To write stories that save lives’: Toni Cade Bambara and the Art of Polyvocal Placemaking,” I analyze Bambara’s reflections on her student-designed course, “Colonialism, Neocolonialism, and Liberation,” (1968) edited anthologies, novel *The Salt Eaters*, and documentary film *The Bombing of Osage Avenue*. I show how Bambara’s experimental, polyvocal storytelling encompassed not only the literary fiction for which she is famous, but was also a methodology that she explored in the classroom, where she insisted that all students have a voice in producing their shared space of learning. Bambara’s multimodal aesthetics illustrate how the arts of polyvocal placemaking can challenge hierarchical power

relations, beginning with what she identified as the “coloniality” of the student-teacher relationship.

In the final chapter, “‘This class has something to teach America’: June Jordan and the Democratization of Poetry and Pedagogy,” I analyze Jordan’s teaching archive, poetry, and essays to argue that Jordan developed a democratic pedagogy that teaches students to navigate, intervene in, and construct alternatives to structures of injustice. While we tend to think of student empowerment in individualized terms, Jordan’s work models collective empowerment: helping students move from an awareness of their vulnerability and complicity to collective actions across multiple scales. Jordan’s work, I contend, is deeply grounded in a structural understanding of inequality, and, as such, it allows us to apprehend an alternative future for aesthetic education, imagined in grassroots terms and enacted from the bottom up, starting with the needs and desires of those located in the classroom.

“aesthetics of the outsider”: Audre Lorde and the Praxis of Collaborative Worldmaking

“A writer by definition is a teacher.”

—Audre Lorde, “Poet as Teacher—Human as Poet—Teacher as Human”

“In your daily living give 3 examples of actual ways in which you yourself can function to positively counteract racism. Be specific.”

— Audre Lorde, “Afro-American Literature,” June 1972

“Audre asks what do you want to talk about?

Nobody knows.

She leaves for 10 mins.

We start talking.

We say we didn’t like it.”

— Student notes, Spelman College Archive

Today, Audre Lorde is celebrated for her courage to speak up against the intersecting axes of racial, sexual, and gendered oppression, and her encouragement of others to do the same. As demonstrated by the tremendous volume of commemorative conferences, films, reflections in her recent “Bio/anthology,” and community health centers and endowed chairs established in Lorde’s honor, women of color, and queer women of color, in particular, continue to draw strength and inspiration from her words, especially her reminder that “it is better to speak, remembering, we were never meant to survive.”<sup>112</sup> Patrisse Khan-Cullors, a founder of Black Lives Matter, refers to Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* as nothing less than her bible, making it a foundational text for the contemporary fight against anti-Black violence.<sup>113</sup> One of Lorde’s most important intellectual contributions to struggles for justice was her insistence that differences need to be considered, not erased, in order to facilitate meaningful collaboration in the service of social change: efforts that do not reproduce the very problems they seek to challenge. Often, scholars and activists consider how this insight emerged through trenchant critiques of the

<sup>112</sup> Lorde, “A Litany for Survival” *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: Norton, 1997).

<sup>113</sup> Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele, *When They Call You a Terrorist: a Black Lives Matter Memoir* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2017), 72.

erasure of racial and class difference in a white, bourgeois women's movement, the masculinism of the Black Power movement, and the blatant homophobia of both. However, we rarely consider the centrality of teaching to the development of Lorde's aesthetics and pedagogy. And yet, according to her biographer and partner, Gloria I. Joseph, it was her classroom interactions with students at Tougaloo College that "provided the groundwork for [Lorde] to acknowledge that the differences that exist among people—racial, sexual, economic, and political—could be used as a positive force in forging unity for progress."<sup>114</sup>

This chapter analyzes the reciprocal relations between Lorde's theories of aesthetics and difference, expressed through her poetry and essays, and her experiences teaching students (often but not always in classrooms) to posit the centrality of pedagogical encounters to understanding Lorde's oeuvre and to position Lorde as a theorist of collaborative pedagogy. While contemporary scholars and educators tend to divide critical and creative work, teaching and scholarship, and activism and education, for Lorde, all of these were intertwined. In her lyric poetry, Lorde mapped the everyday catastrophes of neoliberal life from the bottom up, drawing our attention to possibilities for social interruption and identifying pleasure where it had previously been ignored. In response to these conditions, Lorde undertook teaching as a survival strategy for building more just, equitable, and pleasurable worlds. Central to this praxis is acknowledging the ways material resources are unevenly distributed along embodied axes and working creatively to change these conditions. What emerges from this chapter is a theory of collaboration that considers difference across multiple registers and scales: the lyric "I" as a collaborative subject; creativity and change as that which emerge from the spark of the

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<sup>114</sup> Gloria I. Joseph, *The Wind Is Spirit: the Life, Love, and Legacy of Audre Lorde*, (Villarosa Media, 2016), 23.

encounter; learning to see the collaborative worldmaking labor that history erases; and working together in ways that acknowledge difference.

In advancing these claims, this chapter gives texture to what Alexis Pauline Gumbs identifies as Lorde's "queer pedagogy of interruption."<sup>115</sup> I also draw on Grace Kyungwon Hong's argument that Lorde's theory of difference explores how neoliberalism unevenly distributes precarity, vulnerability, and expendability along axes of race, sexuality, and gender.<sup>116</sup> In this chapter, I elaborate on Hong's notion of the "impossible politics of difference" by demonstrating how Lorde's praxis shaped and was shaped by pedagogy: how the classroom functioned as a site of challenging the seeming inevitability of upwardly redistributive politics.

### **Teaching at the end of the world**

Lorde's sister notes that as a child, "Audre was always learning and looking for new ways of learning."<sup>117</sup> The Lorde sisters grew up in a New York City household structured by West Indian beliefs in the importance of education; they watched their parents endure significant financial hardships and sacrifices in order to send their three daughters to Catholic schools, even when that meant that they were the only Black students. As a precocious Black youth at a lily-white school, Lorde fought tirelessly with the nuns. She was later excluded from elite private schools because her family could not afford tuition. Often, cultural organizations like the Harlem Writer's Guild proved far more generative for Lorde's own education than the formal institutions that actively excluded and abused her.

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<sup>115</sup> Gumbs "Nobody Mean More," 242.

<sup>116</sup> Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>117</sup> Joseph, *Wind is Spirit*, 19.

In the spring of 1968, Lorde was recruited to spend six weeks at Tougaloo College, a Historically Black College near Jackson, Mississippi, teaching a group of students (Black aspiring poets wearing Afros and one white woman) to write poetry. They then published their collected works in a chapbook titled *Pound*, which could be read widely by those beyond the classroom. This was 1968, and the dearth of published black poetry, especially by women authors, is evident in Lorde's own syllabi, which are dominated by the literature of Black men. During these years, it would have been much more difficult to teach "Black Women's Poetry," given how much labor would be required to track down the poetry certainly being written, though not published, by Black women authors. Indeed, it wasn't until 1984 that Lorde would be able to teach such a course. I read this chapbook as an effort to empower students both within and beyond her formal classrooms, in part by working to address the silences in published literature.

Following her experience at Tougaloo, Lorde returned home to New York City, where she would teach at many CUNY campuses including Lehman College in the Bronx, John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan, and her alma mater, Hunter College. Lorde taught classes on "Race and the Urban Situation," remedial writing courses that emphasized creative writing, "The Other Woman: Lesbian Voices in 20th Century American Literature," poetry workshops, and many courses on "Black" and "Afro-American" literature. In 1984, Lorde traveled to the Free University of Berlin to teach "Contemporary Black Women's Poetry" and a course that explicitly thematized the knowledge forged at the margins, "The Poet as Outsider." She read her poetry and lectured widely, understanding these speaking invitations as opportunities to teach large audiences. She visited high school classes, for instance, in St. Croix, where she used historical folk tales and in-class writing exercises to help young people see

themselves as part of a global community whose silence tacitly consented to “racist, sexist, and classist apartheid policies” in South Africa, inspiring them to protest and action.<sup>118</sup> Reflecting on these classroom visits, Chenzira Davis Kahina describes how Lorde “enourage[d] each and every one she talked with, taught, read to and interacted with to positively transform and honor the differences amongst humanity—no matter what.”<sup>119</sup>

From 1968-1969, Lorde spent a year as a librarian and lecturer teaching remedial writing in the SEEK program at City College followed by a year teaching courses like “Race and Education” at Lehman College in the Bronx (1969-1970). In her 1979 interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde describes how thrilling it was to learn the formal rules of grammar in order to teach them to her students and how she became a prose writer in the process:

That’s when I learned how important grammar is, that part of the understanding process is grammatical. That’s how I taught myself to write prose. I kept learning and learning. I’d come to my class and say, ‘Guess what I found out last night. Tenses are a way of ordering the chaos around time.’ I learned that grammar was not arbitrary, that it served a purpose, that it helped to form the ways we thought, that it could be freeing as well as restrictive.<sup>120</sup>

Lorde’s decision to leave Lehman College was catalyzed by the excessive emotional burden of teaching a class of entirely white students “to examine white perceptions of Black Americans through discussions of commonly held stereotypes. They were not prepared for this self-scrutiny and responded with guilt, anger, and silence.”<sup>121</sup> This, along with the 1969 occupation of City College organized by Black and Puerto Rican students, shaped Lorde’s decision to teach elsewhere: “I want to teach Black students again,” she told Rich.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Chenzira Davis Kahina in *Wind is Spirit*, 199-201.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>120</sup> Audre Lorde, “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich,” in *Sister Outsider*, 95.

<sup>121</sup> Alexis DeVaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: Norton, 2004), 112.

<sup>122</sup> Lorde, “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich,” 97.



In 1970, Lorde began teaching at the newly-established John Jay College of Criminal Justice, a CUNY school for New York City police that had opened just six years before her arrival, in 1964, out of growing concern over police and community relations. Its erection, ten years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and before both the *Voting Rights Act* (1965) and the *Fair Housing Act* (1968), testified to the promise of righting racial wrongs through liberal school reform measures: it was built on the aspiration that improved police-community relations might alleviate tensions between police officers and communities of color.<sup>123</sup> While the school initially focused on educating white policemen, Open Admissions catalyzed a demographic overhaul that brought in many African American, Puerto Rican, and civilian students.<sup>124</sup> While a school of criminal justice might seem like the last environment that a lesbian, feminist, antiracist poet and activist would want to teach in, it was these demographic shifts, and the promise of getting to work with Black students, that brought Lorde to John Jay, where she became the first Black faculty member in the English Department. Although she received tenure, she was repeatedly underpaid despite the fact that many students were drawn to the department to work with her, especially as her reputation as a poet increased.<sup>125</sup>

Whereas higher education has typically been the province of the upper echelon, through initiatives like SEEK and Open Admissions students who would not have previously had access to college found themselves at schools throughout the CUNY system. In her interview with Rich, Lorde illustrates how, in these unlikely classrooms, education might do something other than reproduce the status quo's hierarchies of privilege and power:

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<sup>123</sup> "Fifty Years of Educating for Justice." Lloyd Sealy Library Digital Collection.

<http://dc.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/index.php/About/50th>

<sup>124</sup> The size of the faculty doubled in the first year of Open Admissions, and again in 1971, when Lorde began teaching at John Jay. The student demographics went from being 84.7% white in 1967 to 55.6% white in 1974. By 1974, about one third of the students were African American and Puerto Rican, and more than half were civilians.

<sup>125</sup> DeVaux, 163, 269.

Since Open Admissions made college accessible to all high school graduates, we had cops and kids off the block in the same class. In 1970, the Black Panthers were being murdered in Chicago. Here we had Black and white cops, and Black and white kids off the block.<sup>126</sup>

Here, Lorde posits the integrated classroom as an alternative to contemporary conditions of racialized police brutality, framing John Jay, Open Admissions, and pedagogy as opportunities to unlearn, or at least contend with, the long histories of racial capitalism.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, while Lorde was teaching throughout the CUNY system, she was also writing lyric poems such as “Equinox,” “New York City 1970,” and “blackstudies” that evince a profound concern with the lived conditions of neoliberal racial capitalism. Through the lyric “I,” these poems map the dominant pedagogies of neoliberal New York City from the bottom up, tracing the paths, possibilities, and ways of being and knowing incentivized by cultures of upward redistribution and a present in which crisis is not extraordinary, but ordinary, woven into the fabric of everyday life.<sup>127</sup> Considered together, these poems reveal how the city’s shifting landscape was experienced as “death by accretion,” illuminating the material conditions her teaching sought to address.

“Equinox”<sup>128</sup> explores both the futility and urgency of trying to build “some saner future” amidst the devastating inequalities of late 1960s New York City. The poem begins and ends with the birthday of the speaker’s daughter, a cyclical commemoration that forces her to recall babies baking in their mother’s wombs, “lit by mobiloil and easternstandard.” Petrodollars consume the poem, as life-giving amniotic fluid is replaced with “an ocean of oil,” growing thicker each year and keeping the world ablaze. This vision of a foreclosed future challenges the desirability of the

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<sup>126</sup> Lorde, “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich,” 97.

<sup>127</sup> Lauren Berlant defines crisis ordinariness as : “a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine” (10). Similar to Berlant, I find the term useful in indexing how everyday life is disorganized by capitalism. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011).

<sup>128</sup> Audre Lorde, “Equinox” in *From a Land Where Other People Live* (Detroit: Broadside, 1973), 11.

present and the project of social reproduction. Instead of moving forward towards a brighter future, the speaker keeps getting pulled back in time—first to 1963 and the death of DuBois, the March on Washington, the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, and John F. Kennedy’s assassination, then to the assassination of Malcolm X and the nightmare landscapes of “Hanoi Angola Guinea-Bissau Mozambique Phnom Penh/ merging into Bedford-Stuyvesent and Hazelhurst Mississippi...while Detroit and Watts and San Francisco were burning.” The poem moves quickly from one assassination to another, from one imperial, racist genocide to the next, compressing spatiotemporal divides in order to suggest the connectedness of these destructions. Through these decolonial geographies, the poem connects the global distribution of expendability to the blackness of crude oil.

Nowhere is the apocalyptic present more palpable than in “New York City 1970”<sup>129</sup> a damning condemnation of the city as “empire’s altar.” It is a city whose governing individualist religion of “the self” serves the architects of racial capitalism who simultaneously “bomb my children into mortar in churches,” and “shit money-pebbles shaped like their parents brains” becoming “grosser and more swollen,” as their “private hoard” of wealth accumulates. The speaker feels ambivalent about living in this city: guilty about condemning her children to its trials, cognizant of the irrationality of remaining there, and cautiously optimistic that if her children survive, they will have learned the strength to build a new city that belongs to them. The city has taught her to see and feel in the inadequacies of the present the need to tear down the entire social order and build something new. In the poem’s opening lines, its insistence that you can’t spell change with “the emptied can of yesterdays’ meanings / with yesterdays’ names” we can sense how this city on fire was part of Lorde’s own education — how its contradictions and

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<sup>129</sup> Audre Lorde, “New York City 1970” in *New York Head Shop and Museum*, (Detroit: Broadside, 1974), 1.

violences helped shape her often-cited theory that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” When “New York City 1970” was republished nearly twenty years later in *Undersong*, the last collection Lorde had editorial control over before her death, the year “1970” conspicuously disappears from the poem’s title, a subtle acknowledgment that the city it depicts remains structured by these contradictions and that the work of dismantling and rebuilding remains unfinished and ongoing.

These poems illustrate the cartographies of desire shaped by the material, sensual, and embodied experience of what it feels like to have to share a world—New York City, America—with dangerous, desirable, and unknowable other people. However, Lorde espoused a critical and creative relationship to these conditions of destruction. Some things—the master’s house, nation, philosophies, ideologies, systems of governance, institutions, and ways of being and knowing—need not to be saved, but destroyed. Offset against this backdrop, the unlikely act of teaching, of assuming the labor for social and cultural reproduction and taking control of the means of production, emerged as a survival strategy:

I have always had the sense of Armageddon and it was much stronger in those days, the sense of living on the edge of chaos. Not just personally, but on the world level. That we were dying, that we were killing our world—that sense had always been with me. That whatever I was doing, whatever we were doing that was creative and right, functioned to hold us from going over the edge. That this was the most we could do while we constructed some saner future.<sup>130</sup>

For Lorde, both writing and teaching were ways not of absconding from the world and holing up in an ivy-covered enclave, but of participating in the creation of new possibilities.

During this era, processes of spatial reorganization displaced impoverished racialized communities and required increased police surveillance, placing Lorde’s classrooms at John Jay at the center of these structural transformations. Much of the mainstream media coverage of

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<sup>130</sup> Lorde, “Interview with Adrienne Rich,” 93.

Open Admissions was suffused with apocalyptic imagery, as educators like Leonard Kriegel portended the onslaught of educational doom in articles like “Surviving the Apocalypse: Teaching at City College.” However, Lorde’s poetry and prose depict late twentieth century New York City as a place in which being a black, lesbian, feminist, mother was an everyday struggle. Her work reframes Open Admissions within the larger devastating conditions of neoliberal New York City, helping us understand that if CUNY classrooms felt so apocalyptic it was because they were actually functioning as the City University of New York. Her work illuminates how journalistic accounts like Kriegel’s blame Open Admissions for the conditions it replicated, but did not itself produce.

Amidst conditions of apocalypse, Lorde taught students to survive and thrive. In her writing and literature classes, Lorde taught poetry and fiction alongside sociology, history, and journalism. In classes like “American Women in Black and White,” co-taught with Blanche Wiesen Cook at John Jay College in 1972, the syllabus does not abide by neat literary historical categories; instead, they drew from whatever bodies of knowledge were urgent for them to learn in that moment. While her courses were rendered institutionally legible through designations like “Literature and History 210,” they were often interdisciplinary by nature. “American Women in Black and White” included units such as “Archetypes in Anthropology and Psychology,” “The Cult of True Womanhood and the Social and Economic Status of Women in the 19th Century,” “The Emergence of Black Radicalism and Suffragism” and “Literary Image of Women in the 20th Century,” in which students interrogated the means by which the literary canon shapes our perceptions of women. During the month of April they focused on “Issues of Liberation”: “Racism and Sexism,” “Women’s Liberation vs. The Liberation of Women,” “Prostitution,”

“Homosexuality,” and “Towards Androgyny.” The final month of May was devoted entirely to student reports and class discussion.

In courses on Afro-American literature, students were taken on a journey through American history that focused on the “De-Americanization of Black people”: how Black people have historically been dispossessed, disenfranchised, and rendered outside of the ideal national citizen. Lorde’s lecture notes demonstrate hours of careful preparation and research before classes, as she compiled the historical, statistical, sociological, and theoretical information to support each lesson: “1st Amer W. to graduate law - Charlotte Ray - Howard 1872,” “Sojourner Truth - NY, 1795, ran 1827, 5 sons sold / Harriet Tubman - Maryland 1820, 20 trips, 300 slaves, nursed in Civil War, led scouts.” Her handouts break complex topics like “Race and the Urban Situation” into sub-units:

- Introduction - What is race?
- I. Defining racism
- II. Racism in America
  - A. Western values for ‘Black’
  - B. What is a racist society? Institutionalized racism.
- III. Mechanics of Oppression
- IV. Effects of Racism on White Americans
- V. Effects of racism in Black Americans<sup>131</sup>

Written in the shorthand characteristic of lecture notes, she records that “Today, majority of BW [Black women] confined to most menial and lowest paid occupations - domestic & laundry, counter girls, service.” This is followed by the unemployment statistics for 1967 by race and gender, and a note that states “1970- 20% BW [Black women] private household - median income - \$1200.”<sup>132</sup> While Lorde entered the classroom thoroughly dissatisfied with the status quo, she didn’t assume that students walked into the classroom already sharing this discontent.

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<sup>131</sup> Lorde, “Race and the Urban Situation” the notes are actually much more detailed but have been truncated for brevity.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

Instead, she helped them sense the present devastation and better understand the long histories that had produced the present. In this class, Lorde taught students to theorize power through the history of marginalized people: “Power steps back only in the face of more power. Do you find this an accurate statement in terms of the history of black people in America? Discuss four historical occurrences from *Before the Mayflower* as examples illustrating your answer.”<sup>133</sup> This assignment does not tell students what to think but shows them how to marshal historical evidence in support of their claims. In all of these instances, Lorde treats her students as intelligent individuals who require sufficient evidence in order to be convinced of a lesson or idea.

Even in basic writing classes, often considered an instrumental tool of social control, Lorde taught students to counter the destructive forces around them by making art. Basic writing courses provided Lorde with an opportunity to teach these students to cultivate a different relationship to their everyday lives. She taught basic writing as creative writing, organizing the course around the arts of “observation, description, detailed reaction, and the writing of poetry.”<sup>134</sup> In these classrooms, Lorde taught students to think through their differences, tracing the particularities of their experiences as they emerged in relation to others and exploring the historicity of their immediate, embodied, and lived interactions in the world. In their journals, students analyze difference, not treating it as a “cause for separation and suspicion” nor celebrating superficial, dematerialized, and abstract notions of “diversity” and “multiculturalism.” Instead, they explore the meaningfulness of racial, sexual, and gender difference—the ways these come to matter in everyday life. In one example, an English 101

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<sup>133</sup> Audre Lorde collection, Spelman College Archives Box 82.

<sup>134</sup> Audre Lorde collection, Spelman College Archives Box 82.

paper titled “On Being Blue,”<sup>135</sup> a student who was also a Black police officer thinks through the differential life and death possibilities attached to these social positions. He writes, “on being blue: this is only possible for a Black officer when he is working (on duty) and in full uniform...Out of uniform he is only another black or hispanic face. A threat to the very existence of the powers that be—he must be pushed and shoved like the rest...” In the classroom, Lorde and her students traced the contours of their selves, learning what experiences they shared, what experiences could not be translated, and how these lines were drawn along axes of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

Participants’ lives and work together in these spaces were as much the subjects of the courses as the texts they were assigned to read. As an educator, Lorde assigned book reports, group projects, portfolios of student work, attendance at poetry readings throughout the city, and many different types of journals: weekly response journals, private journals of “FEELINGS, DREAM MATERIAL, IMAGINGS, FOUND LINES, etc. and any other material that might later be used in their poetry,” and poetry logs submitted to the instructor.<sup>136</sup> By collecting, rearranging, acting on, and creating with the texts of their lives, Lorde encouraged students to become artists of the self and build worlds around their desires. As one student notes, through their analysis of lesbian literature they were “making our lives,” rather than following inherited paths and possibilities. Students in her poetry workshops would sit in a circle, hand out photocopies of their poems, and take turns reading out loud to hear how their poems “sounded in another person’s voice. Each person would then share a brief response to the poem by speaking about how the poem had made him or her feel.”<sup>137</sup> Many students were unaccustomed to this style of teaching, which required them to pay close attention to how language made them feel at

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<sup>135</sup> Student, “On Being Blue.” Audre Lorde collection, Spelman College Archives Box 82.

<sup>136</sup> Student Notes, Audre Lorde collection, Spelman College Archives Box 82.

<sup>137</sup> Reflections from Lorde’s student Melinda Goodman, *Wind Is Spirit*, 293.



different moments throughout a poem and to put these feelings into words that would be shared with their classmates.

In 1973, Lorde wrote and published the poem “blackstudies,” which depicts a scene of teaching and learning on the chilling, windy seventeenth floor of an unnamed building. The title alludes to the particularly terrifying experience of fighting to establish a department of black studies at John Jay, events that placed Lorde on trial before her colleagues and students.<sup>138</sup>

Although it may be tempting to look back nostalgically on Open Admissions, and a university system that opened its doors to the city as the golden age of urban public education, Lorde’s accounts of John Jay make it impossible to romanticize the experience of teaching underprepared students with insufficient institutional funding and an inadequate salary, all while being the school’s first Black, female English professor. Through its governing metaphor of a court trial, “blackstudies” depicts a classroom that is never simply a classroom, but a space of entanglement, thickened by overlapping, intersecting, and colliding histories and where social justice is at stake. The speaker, a teacher, describes teaching using images that conjure the racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes used to dehumanize Black women:

my body is dreaming  
it sits  
bottom pinned to a table  
eating perpetual watermelon inside my own head<sup>139</sup>

In contrast to liberal notions of the student mind as a tabula rasa, Lorde depicts a classroom that is haunted by the images that students and teachers encounter throughout their lives—in particular, stereotypes of Black women’s aberrant sexuality and childish enthusiasm for an

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<sup>138</sup> According to Lorde, her teaching experiences at Tougaloo College “laid the foundation” for “blackstudies,” though she wrote it years later while teaching at John Jay. At John Jay, Lorde was demonized by both conservative and progressive faculty members for her insistence that there ought to be separate departments of black and Puerto Rican studies. See DeVaux.

<sup>139</sup> Audre Lorde, “blackstudies,” *New York Head Shop and Museum* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1974), 52.

inexpensive, sloppy fruit (the origins of which lie in white people's fears of black economic independence). These stereotypes replay perpetually in the speaker's mind, pinning her down, and stifling her creativity and ability to work. The class she teaches is a "trial on the 17th floor," in which students wait outside the accused speaker's door, "searching condemning listening" with "questions that feel like judgments." This telling reversal of traditional classroom relationships, in which the teacher is responsible for judging the students, speaks to the experience of teaching current and future policemen, students who were part of the disciplining apparatus of the state and charged with enacting its political projects.

While the majority of "blackstudies" depicts the scene of teaching and learning as dangerous, lonely, violent, and cold, it concludes with a sense of the transformative possibilities of teaching. Its concluding lines, two questions, ask:

what shall they carve for weapons?  
what shall they grow for food?

Here the classroom is imagined as a site structured by racialized, gendered, and sexual violence, but from which something else might emerge. It is a space in which we can address political questions of resource distribution, competing desires, and how best to organize collective life. Rather than an "either/or" dynamic, we are encouraged to see the classroom as *both* dangerous *and* nourishing. In contrast to pedagogies oriented towards the production of liberal national democracy, "blackstudies" calls for a pedagogical praxis grounded in dissatisfaction with the status quo and a desire for social interruption, rather than reproduction.

The poem depicts a classroom that is thickened by the 1973 trial of white police officer, Thomas Shea, who was acquitted, the same year the poem was authored, by an almost entirely white jury after killing an unarmed black, ten year-old child, Clifford Glover, in Jamaica, Queens. Glover's murder became the subject of several of Lorde's poems including "Power,"

“blackstudies,” “The Same Death Over and Over or Lullabies are for Children,” and “A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children” (marked with the dedication “for Clifford”). In her analysis of Lorde’s poem “Power,” Gumbs demonstrates how Shea’s trial deeply informed Lorde’s understanding of the shared disciplinary imperatives of racialized police violence and teaching at a school of criminal justice. Indeed, Glover’s murder and Shea’s exoneration profoundly affected Lorde’s understanding of what should be taught and how. In a description of her teaching practices, Lorde draws our attention to how much they varied from day to day, emphasizing that one’s lesson plan might need to be radically revised when an act of racist police violence occurs:

the exercise I choose for a rainy day with the same group is different from that which I’d have chosen had the day been bright, or the day after a police slaughter of a Black child, for make no mistake, these emotional climates are absorbed and metabolized by our children with frightening thoroughness.<sup>140</sup>

Through her invocation of the rainy day, Lorde’s pedagogical reflection underscores the quotidian nature of antiblack racism—how, in a racist society, violence organizes everyday life, when in fact each “slaughter of a Black child” should stop the world in its tracks, demanding we address whatever produced this present. In this example, and throughout Lorde’s work, the contents and methods of education emerge in relation to students who are similarly mutable, impressionable, and porous, transformed by events taking place in their surrounding environments. While many of the structures, practices, and theories of education continue to look much like they did centuries ago, Lorde suggests that this does not need to remain the case in the classroom. Through her poetic and pedagogical praxis, Lorde worked to challenge the conditions that had resulted in Shea’s trial and its verdict of innocence; she sought to induce ways of being, knowing, and relating that could try to do justice for Clifford.

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<sup>140</sup> Lorde, “Poet as Teacher,” 182.

Lorde taught students to listen to and learn from their reactions to the world, as evidence that can tune us into the inadequacies of the present and catalyze actions. She insisted that students make their learning “useful” to others; they were expected to do things with the knowledge they were acquiring. We see this in the epigraph, in which Lorde challenges students to take their classroom lessons and come up with a concrete, specific plan, “3 ways” that they are going to work to address racism. As a student from her class in Germany recalls, Lorde insisted that they not only confront “the entire consequences of racism in real life,” but also, use “this new knowledge, to develop a plan for acting against racism.”<sup>141</sup> In her 1989 graduation speech at Oberlin College, Lorde describes the way attentiveness to feelings is not purely an individual experience but a catalyst for social action:

Learn to use what you feel to move you towards action. It is our day to day decisions, the way in which we testify with our lives to those things in which we say we believe, that empower us...Change did not begin with you, and it will not end with you, but what you do with your life is an absolutely vital piece of that chain. The testimony of your daily living is the missing remnant in the fabric of our future.<sup>142</sup>

Here, Lorde’s repeated use of “testimony” and “testimonial” demonstrate how working with language is not solely for one’s own pleasure, but a means of participating in longer ongoing struggles for justice. Lorde’s pedagogy involved making sense of, literally making felt, the undesirability of the present; carving weapons to resist the distribution of power along embodied axes of race, gender, and sexuality; and tracing the contours of as yet unimagined alternatives, exploring what might be built in the wake of old worlds.

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<sup>141</sup> Katharina Oguntoye, “My Coming-out as a Black Lesbian in Germany,” in *Wind Is Spirit*, 160.

<sup>142</sup> Audre Lorde, “Commencement Address: Oberlin College, May 29, 1989,” in *I am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde* Ed. Rudolph P. Byrd, (New York: Oxford, 2009), 213.

## Unfaithful to the known

Lorde's vision of the present Armageddon challenges the teleological narratives of progress that often constrict how we understand both education and the possibilities for social justice. Whereas so many educational practices rely either implicitly or explicitly on the reproduction of the past and teaching "the best which has been thought and said," Lorde's pedagogical praxis demands infidelity to the past and to the known. Lorde's educational poems "Teacher" (1971) and "Dear Toni Instead of Congratulation Upon Your Book And Your Daughter Whom You Say You Are Raising To Be A Correct Little Sister," (1971) direct our attention to the labor and material resources, namely food, that the reproduction of life requires. Both were published in Lorde's 1973 poetry collection, *From a Land Where Other People Live*, the title of which announces the political questions that get taken up in her work: how do we inhabit, move through, and make worlds in a land where other people live? The SEEK and Open Admissions classrooms staged many of these conflicts, bringing together strangers in scenes of collision. Through poetry and pedagogy, Lorde offers ways of thinking about how to best organize social and collective life, not theorized through an abstract or an imagined state of nature, but through the food that is necessary to produce everyday life, and the social distribution of this labor vis-a-vis notions of the mother-child and student-teacher relationship.

"Teacher"<sup>143</sup> takes place in a cafeteria on a wintry afternoon, but instead of food the children are fed promises "like lunchtime stories." Through its preoccupation with nourishment, the poem interrogates the idea that meritocratic schools should function as a societal test that determines one's access to resources. It reminds us that there are few lessons more powerful than hunger.

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<sup>143</sup> Audre Lorde, "Teacher" in *From a Land Where Other People Live* (Detroit: Broadside, 1973), 20.

The speaker, a teacher, has been placed in charge of social reproduction, though her own living conditions and poverty remain forms of imprisonment:

I am trapped in  
the intensities of my own (our) situation  
where what we need and do not have  
deadens us

The poem's parenthetical "(our)" registers the ambivalence over whether the teacher's living conditions can in fact be extended to the students, an ambivalence that is constitutive of the scene of teaching and learning. Pedagogy emerges, consciously or not, from whether and how we imagine students' living conditions: where they are, what they need, what they want, and what happens when they are not at school.

The speaker describes her work not in the sense of cultivating certain aesthetic "tastes" or sensibilities, but "taste" as in nourishment and sustenance:

I provide food with a frightening efficiency  
the talk is free/dom meaning state  
condition of being

Here, freedom is spliced, raising several questions at once: what is at stake in conflating knowledge, skills, learning, and food? Is "talk" in fact "free," when it depends on a teacher showing up not too hungry to teach, and a student arriving not too hungry to learn? What are the grounds from which freedom should be theorized: the state, or our everyday states, our conditions of being? Is the promise of freedom even desirable if it is experienced as hunger? By focusing on food, "Teacher" directs our attention to the ways that education enacts state politics, using ideas of liberal, democratic freedom to obscure conditions of material inequality.

The speaker spins these promises of freedom despite her own imprisonment in poverty and worries what will become of her words. On the one hand, they inspire children to build "new cities" out of snow, offering a fleeting glimpse of the real worlds that might emerge from their

desires, “with more love than our dreams,” though the poem immediately pivots into fear for their future. This vision of students as the future architects of new cities dissolves into fear that instead they will hear “freedom’s bell deaden/in the clang of the gates of the prisons,” as these visions “melt into darkness.” In contrast to narratives of education as *bildung*, subject formation, and progress towards independence, the poem figures the precarity and the tenuousness of learning in a drastically unequal society. Whereas education is often imagined as the means by which individuals advance their socioeconomic status, through these repeated images of imprisonment, the poem questions how liberatory education can be in a carceral state. We are trapped by our situations, it suggests, inviting us to ask, what would education look like if it acknowledged the likelihood that the conditions of our birth will determine our outcomes? What would education look like if it was disorganized by this knowledge, untethered from fantasies of meritocracy and individual progress towards becoming an enlightened citizen-subject?

“Teacher” advocates pursuing equality by addressing people’s hunger, rather than through meritocratic schools. This poem locates Lorde’s work alongside organizations like the Black Panther Party, members of which were theorizing, through their work, how best to organize society not through appeals to abstract ideals, but first through people’s needs for food, shelter, healthcare, and safety, and the alleviation of poverty as the necessary precondition for any kind of freedom. Rather than assuming that the students who showed up had a stable food source, the Breakfast for Children [BFC] program countered the lessons of poverty by feeding black, urban youth. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover understood the danger of this pedagogy and named the BFC’s commitment to “fighting hunger in order to cultivate learning” as the Black Panther Party’s “greatest threat.”<sup>144</sup> “Teacher” testifies to the radical, redistributive, and insurrectionary possibilities of alleviating hunger, which empowered the Black Panther Party and

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<sup>144</sup> J. Edgar Hoover qtd. in Murch *Living for the City*, 184.

terrified the FBI. Similar to “blackstudies,” “Teacher” depicts the classroom as a site of growing food and carving weapons, of guiding students towards a life of food security while simultaneously teaching them to critique the histories, politics, and ideologies that had produced these conditions.

“Teacher” raises the question, how do you teach when you’re afraid of the future—both cautiously optimistic about how students might change it and all too aware of how little has changed throughout history? This question also gets taken up in “Dear Toni,”<sup>145</sup> which reimagines education and the family, twinned sites of social reproduction, in insurrectionary ways, through the pleasures of not reproducing the ways of being, knowing, and relating that have constructed the present. The title of the poem identifies Toni Cade Bambara as its addressee, announcing its intent to celebrate the twinned birth of Bambara’s daughter and her book, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*.<sup>146</sup> The poem maps Lorde’s relationship to Bambara, to the city, to teaching, and to motherhood, all of which crystallize in lines halfway through, in which Lorde imagines encountering Bambara

...in an office down the hall from mine  
calmly studying term papers like maps  
marking off stations  
on our trip through the heights of Convent Avenue  
teaching english our children citycollege

The last line quoted here plays with the multiple notions of the subject that get attached to the transitive verb “teaching.” Here, the subjects being taught—induced and produced—are threefold, including the academic subject of “english,” (the study of reading, writing, and

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<sup>145</sup> Audre Lorde, “Dear Toni...” in *From a Land Where Other People Live* (Detroit: Broadside, 1973), 40.

<sup>146</sup> Bambara actually had another book published around the time that “Dear Toni” was written. While the poem could just as easily refer to *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* (1971) my reading focuses on the poem’s relationship to *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970).



language) “our children” (the students constituted through the scene of teaching and learning) and “citycollege,” the school they are producing through their labor.

The “maps” to this new “citycollege” lie in the “term papers”: the material archives of pedagogy, what students and teachers work together, and unevenly, to create. Rather than a punitive understanding of term papers as evidence of individualized student success or failure, the term papers Lorde imagines Bambara reading trace the contours of this new “citycollege,” a university with a different relationship to the city in which it is embedded. Similar to Rich’s reimagining of the city as college, Barbara Christian’s “Universities Without Walls,” and June Jordan’s “Poetry for the People,” here Lorde closes the gap between “city” and “college,” just as the SEEK program sought to close the gap between Harlem and City College. These projects involved reconfiguring relations between learning and cities, redistributing institutional resources, and creating spaces to think together in ways that exceed the academy. They challenged the inadequacy of traditional academic hierarchies—between teaching and research, literature and theory, literature and composition—binaries articulated along racialized and gendered lines. We see this in the book the poem celebrates, *The Black Woman, An Anthology*, which includes student writing alongside other pieces of black feminist literature, all texts written by “women who have been able to think better than they’ve been trained,” a necessity for surviving an apocalyptic present.<sup>147</sup> We can read these term papers as maps to different configurations of power and knowledge, as blueprints for a different kind of education crafted around students’ needs and desires. Lorde recognized in the image of Bambara reading students’ term papers that they were mapping the ineffable, charting, through pedagogy, different

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<sup>147</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman, An Anthology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), 4.

geographies of power and knowledge. In these explorations of the scary, unknowable, and unthinkable, they were, in Lorde's terms, producing poetry.<sup>148</sup>

By not capitalizing English and City College, Lorde invokes how she and Bambara took up teaching positions in an effort not to reproduce the status quo, but to change things; not to be proper and correct, but heretical. Teaching in this environment meant learning not to trust what they had learned, but to recognize the need for better pedagogies crafted from their lived experiences: "our teaching means keeping trust/with less and less correctness/only with ourselves—." In taking up positions in university English departments, Lorde and Bambara queered these normative spaces, shifting the contours of the possible by revising institutions that were not designed for and did not want them.<sup>149</sup> Rather than assimilating to the demands of the institutions, they brought with them previously-excluded knowledge, refusing to check their experiences—of motherhood, poverty, racism, sexism, undervalued and exploited labor—at the door. Instead, they used these experiences to challenge the limits of the sayable and knowable, and they taught students to do the same.

In "Dear Toni" City College students are imagined as the speaker's "children," a metaphor of teaching as mothering that registers contradictory attitudes towards the social totality. In one register, this metaphor privatizes the labor of social reproduction by displacing it onto the realm of the family. From this perspective, imagining the work of teaching as mothering renders already-exploited educators vulnerable to further exploitation through an ethics of care. At the same time, the metaphor of teaching as mothering invokes how teaching has historically been a feminized profession, through which women were charged with social reproduction,

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<sup>148</sup> See Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury" in *Sister Outsider*.

<sup>149</sup> According to Sara Ahmed, when bodies take up institutional spaces that they were not intended to inhabit "something other than the reproduction of the facts of the matter happens." *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 62.

while this work did not get to count as intellectual labor. Because teaching has historically been organized around the idea of reproducing, rather than interrupting, the status quo, it has not typically been understood as a site of research, experimentation, and theorization. In a patriarchal society, notions of mothering and teaching as *mere reproduction* has helped contribute to the exploitation of women.

In “Dear Toni,” Lorde appeals to their shared insurrectionary relationship to City College in order to make the case for a similarly heretical relationship to the institution of motherhood.<sup>150</sup> As the title suggests, the poem urges Bambara not to raise her daughter the way they were raised, to be “a correct little sister,” through respectability politics and accommodation to a sexist, white supremacist status quo that continues to devalue the lives of Black girls. Lorde implores Bambara to recognize their daughters’ agency, unknowability, and propensity for becoming, and to let go, allowing them to trace their own paths through life.

For Lorde, mothering and the literary are connected through the question of how we relate to things people bring into the world. “Dear Toni,” like several other poems, theorizes the relationship between authors and literary texts through metaphors of childbearing, informed by the labor of worldmaking that is traditionally erased. Here, Bambara’s book and her newborn daughter become figures for one another: both are things that one gives birth to, but then take on a life of their own - a nonreproductive pedagogy we see throughout Lorde’s teaching materials. As a student in Lorde’s class notes, “A piece of literature is a thing / The one who creates is a person / It draws life from but is not the same as the person.”<sup>151</sup> It is a notion of simultaneous

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<sup>150</sup> China Martens et al., *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines* (PM Press, 2016). The authors of *Revolutionary Mothering* argue that caring for those lives deemed expendable by the state is a revolutionary act.

<sup>151</sup> Student Notes, Audre Lorde collection, Spelman College Archives Box 82.

material dependency and autonomy that emerges from mother - child relationships, but that also offers a way of thinking about relationships among authors, texts, and readers.

Whereas “Teacher” thematizes the failure of education to produce freedom when the students who arrive to class may not have access to a stable food source, “Dear Toni,” imagines a queer future through revised understandings of two normative institutions: education and the family. While education is typically narrated as the individual student’s journey towards autonomy, by reconfiguring learning through its material conditions of possibility, directing our attention to food and mothers, Lorde’s poetry depicts education as coming-to-consciousness of our dependency. In other words, neoliberalism disavows our collective conditions of dependence by isolating them through the figure of the child who, through education, is supposed to unlearn this dependence. While neoliberalism sustains the fantasy that we can unlearn our dependence on others, Lorde’s educational praxis interrogates the material conditions of our interdependency.

From the image of a baby burning in its mother’s oil-filled womb to the anxiety surrounding how Bambara will raise her daughter (related to the fate of “citycollege” students), these poems evince a fear of the future that is similar to the present. Lorde’s intimate knowledge of the present apocalypse resulted in a vision of learning that was always about individual and social change, about producing, in the classroom, something better.

### **Aesthetics of the outsider**

Dominant models of the liberal arts reproduce the biases of liberal democratic politics and colonial modernity.<sup>152</sup> According to Kandice Chuh, one way this occurs is through the “liberal representational field coverage model,” which offers a representational solution to

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<sup>152</sup> As Kandice Chuh argues, the contemporary rush to “defend” and protect the humanities erases their complicity in producing the present. See, “Towards a Defensible Humanities” and *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*.

material problems of racial, sexual, and gender inequality and preserves the telos of modernity while structural inequality remains intact.<sup>153</sup> A student in one of Lorde's classes recorded the term "the aesthetics of changelessness" for these privileged, white, patriarchal, American and Western European models. "academia separates art from life," this student notes, reproducing the status quo through Western European concepts of beauty: "status quo approach separates it [art] from life/ "art for art's sake" / ivory tower / artist withdraws." We can think about these aesthetics of changelessness through the myriad ways in which the disorganization, protest, and refusal of rationality evident in art — art's excess — gets managed and fixed through the institutions, disciplines, and pedagogies of modern bourgeois liberalism. But this student also records another term for their alternative, oppositional praxis: the "aesthetics of the outsider," which directs our attention to the subversive and experimental work that occurs at the periphery. In contrast to the aesthetics of changelessness, the aesthetics of the outsider aim to transform. As one student recorded in their class notes, "the function of art is to make us more what we want to be (change)...real change happens at the periphery."<sup>154</sup>

For Lorde, both poetry and pedagogy were means to materialize "the aesthetics of the outsider": the project of transforming established understandings of art, learning, and politics through the needs and desires of those historically and unequally marginalized by the social order. Lorde's poem "The Bees"<sup>155</sup> (1974) dramatizes the outsider relationality that is (almost paradoxically) central to this praxis. In the poem, a playground drama ensues, in which a group of young boys throw rocks at a beehive, proceed to get stung, and are avenged by the school's security guards, who destroy the beautiful beehive and its inhabitants. While the first stanza focuses on the destruction of the bees by the boys and the guards, the second stanza takes a step

<sup>153</sup> Chuh, "modifying literature" in *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*.

<sup>154</sup> Student Notes, Audre Lorde collection, Spelman College Archives Box 82.

<sup>155</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Bees" in *New York Head Shop and Museum*, (Detroit: Broadside, 1974), 45.

back, positioning the reader alongside a group of four girls standing “apart,” on the outside, and bearing witness to this massacre. On the surface, the poem allegorizes the destruction enacted by U.S. cultures of victim blaming. However, through its depiction of the aesthetics of the outsider, the poem simultaneously opens up the possibility that things might be otherwise—more life-giving, nourishing, even sweet.

The poem’s playground setting is itself a site of peripheral knowledge where students learn just as much about the world as they do inside the classroom. The poem draws our attention to the lessons that the students learn from this experience: “what children learn/ possesses them.” Possession invokes how learning undoes notions of the self through our porousness to the world. And in fact, many students in Lorde’s classes recorded the intensity of the experience—how classes made them feel “unusually agitated” for hours afterwards, requiring several hours in order to process and come down from the experience. Thinking about learning as an act of possession foregrounds our mutability, how something like a class or a conversation can change everything, disorganizing and rearranging who we previously were as we exceed the fictional constraints of the organizing “I.” Possession also reminds us that education is always about ownership, accumulation, and access to material resources.

Rather than presuming that learning is universally accessed and experienced, “The Bees” emphasizes the role of gender in education, how what the boys and girls learn in this playground-classroom is different. The guards’ reactions to the rock-throwing boys teaches them that power will respond to their cries of pain and punish those who have hurt them. The honey dripping from the battered broom handles invites us to feel the slow and accumulative thickness of these lessons. We witness the young boys, bolstered by the state-sanctioned authorities, “becoming expert/in destruction.” In this example, Lorde invokes a biblical lesson from the Gospel

According to John, in which people are gathered around a woman accused of adultery, convened to fulfill Moses' commandment that she be stoned. "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her," Jesus cautions. Through this invocation, Lorde highlights how the boys have been taught that they are holy and innocent; their lack of critical reflexivity; and their willingness to throw the first stone, thus destroying the life, labor, and love of the bees.

The girls, on the other hand, observe this behavior from the periphery, "learning a secret lesson/ trying to understand their own destruction." From the outside, the girls observe that the bees sting the boys to defend themselves against their attackers. By bearing witness to this sequence of events that began with the boys throwing the first stone, the young girls, and by extension the reader, are encouraged to ask what previous actions are obscured when we focus too intently on the immediacy of pain. While the need to mitigate pain is real, the poem invites us to pause in ascribing blame and ask whose pain gets to count and whose is deliberately ignored. One possible response, it suggests, is not to enact more pain, but to think instead in terms of the worldmaking power of pleasure.

Whereas liberalism erases the racialized and gendered labor of worldmaking, the poem enjoins us to ask, who suffers? By describing "the almost finished rooms of wax" and the "new tunnels" destroyed by these acts of violence, we experience this damage through the labor of worldmaking enacted by the bees. The poem's present is thickened by the past, and the histories of systematically destroying those who have labored to produce sweetness. In the poem's final line, one of the girls speaks up, not condemning the act for its injustice, but for its destruction of that which could have provided collective learning and pleasure: "we could have studied honey-making." This simple expression of sadness at the loss of what could have been invites us to imagine how every act of destruction entails the loss of possibilities for learning. It is a

commemorative poem that holds a space for the pleasures that could have proliferated through study, while asking us to pause in the presence of pain and look for what it obscures.

The four little girls witness the bees' entire world crushed into "buzzing ruins." Just as we are encouraged to see the girls and bees as figures for one another, so too are we invited to imagine the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing layered into the playground present. The poem invites us to imagine all the pleasure that could have been brought into the world and experienced by Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair, had their lives not been so swiftly destroyed on that September Sunday in 1963. It imagines a different future for them, as witnesses, artists, and knowledge producers. As outsiders, the girls are more vulnerable to destruction, but they also learn to see what the insider can not: the gaps, holes, histories, contradictions, inconsistencies, and inadequacies that a pleasant present otherwise obscures.

Similar to Samuel Delany's theory of "contact" and Jose Muñoz's "punk rock commons," "the aesthetics of the outsider" emerge from and theorize the transformative possibilities of encounters typically dismissed by dominant regimes of power. Lorde was deeply interested in outsider epistemologies: how experiences of neglect, marginalization, and oppression can become part of a critical optic for surviving and contesting these conditions. She was a self-proclaimed "Black, lesbian, mother, warrior poet," at a moment when being even just one of those likely meant a limited access to material resources. She taught in what could be considered marginalized spaces: at a Historically Black College, in a huge, sprawling, urban, public university system, in remedial education programs, at a school of criminal justice, in programs that aimed for access and equity over exclusivity, and in women's studies programs. Her courses attracted students who felt marginalized, many of whom were interested in



feminism, lesbian literature, and Black studies—knowledge projects that involve thinking through and theorizing the experience of marginalization. In these peripheral spaces, aesthetic education functioned as a means by which those at the margins could condemn the inadequacy of the status quo and explore alternatives.

### **The lyrics of learning**

Lorde theorized poetic and pedagogical praxis through the discourse of aesthetic education—literally, an education of the senses—learning to touch, listen, and look in new ways. Poems, she argued, are “learning devices,” acts of “teaching—touching—really touching another human being,” making an impression, however small, that alters the conditions of another person’s life.<sup>156</sup> Both poetry and pedagogy are forms of reaching out and in touching, realizing that we are not and cannot ever know another human being. As Jodi Melamed argues, dominant modes of liberal, multicultural pedagogy teach students to “know” others—including the differences of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability. By contrast, Lorde’s praxis recognizes the incommensurability of lives and experiences, rejecting the possibility of both intersubjectivity and the knowability of the other. If we live and work under the assumption that there are always gaps in our knowledge of ourselves, others, and the world, that we are always missing a part of the picture, then collaborative, dialogic acts such as writing, teaching, and organizing emerge as necessary modes of praxis through which something else—something other than the status quo—might emerge.

Dominant educational paradigms are organized through narratives that often reflect modernity’s teleology of progress and the idea of human perfectibility: from narratives of education as subject-formation (*bildung*) and its corresponding genre, the *bildungsroman*, to

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<sup>156</sup> Audre Lorde, “Poet as Teacher—Human as Poet—Teacher as Human” in *I am Your Sister*, 182.

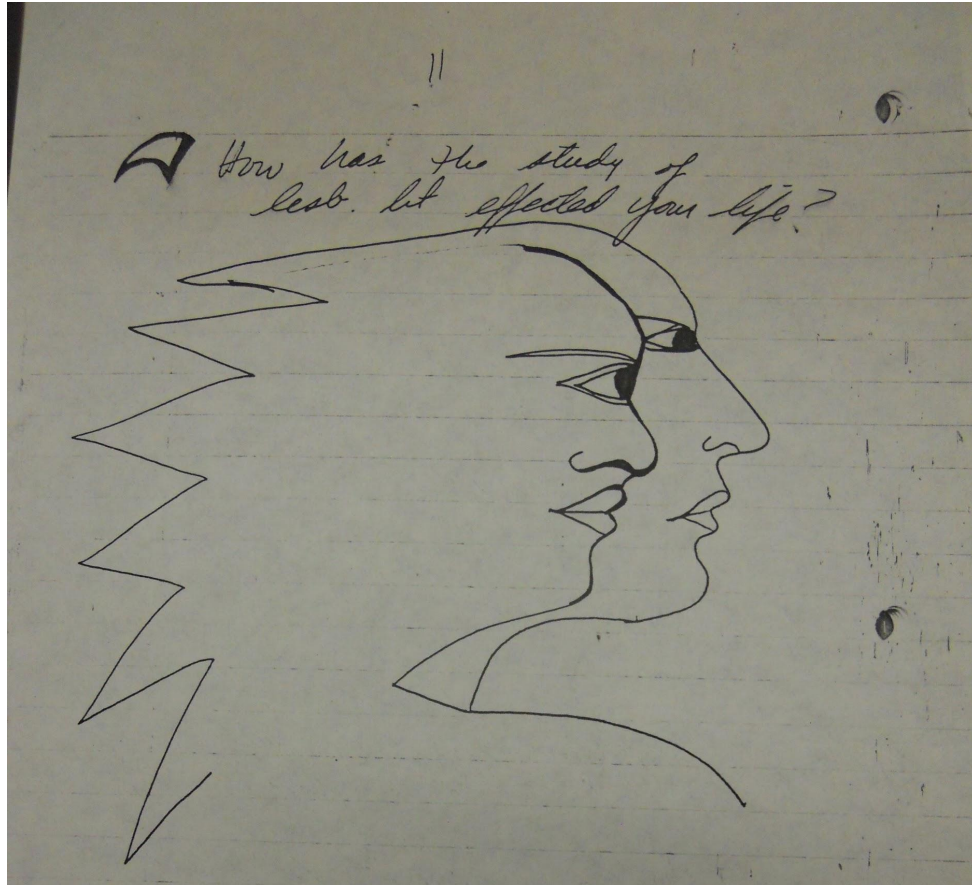
Freire's critique of the "banking" model of education, predicated on the teacher as narrator who "leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content."<sup>157</sup> And in fact, Lorde's pedagogical poems were penned at the same moment in which Freire argued that education was suffering from "narration sickness." Unlike educators who are comfortable assuming the established position of an authority figure who simply dictates what students should do, Lorde understood that students come to the classroom with their own complex needs, wills, and experiences that might not neatly align with her own. She was afraid of not being able to communicate across the experiential, ideological, gendered, and racial divides among them. "How am I going to speak to them?" she wondered, describing the fear teaching elicited, "How am I going to tell them what I want from them — literally — that kind of terror."<sup>158</sup> These are the words of someone who is thinking about the spaces of incommunicability and untranslatability at the heart of learning—someone who is thinking poetically about pedagogy.

Thinking lyrically about learning allows us to apprehend the subjects of education and poetry as a self that is constantly in the process of becoming, that is always an outsider or other.

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<sup>157</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 71 -72.

<sup>158</sup> Lorde, "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich," 94.



*Photograph of a student's notes from "Lesbian Literature" (Hunter College, 1985) illustrating an "I" that is also always an other. Courtesy of Spelman College archives.*

Throughout Lorde's poems, the lyric "I" is made and unmade, constituted and held together through a string of images only to disintegrate at the end of each short poem and re-emerge anew. Lorde's poems depict the self as radically vulnerable, impressionable, and dependent on other people. In our capacity to change and ability to learn lies the potential of a future that is better than the present.

Lorde's style of teaching was to offer herself up as an example: to show how she felt, thought, and worked, and make these modes available to others. Joseph described her not "as a role model, but rather a touchstone," too unique to be emulated, but someone from whom we all

have a great deal to learn.<sup>159</sup> When Joseph asked Lorde what she wanted her biography to do, Lorde responded in strikingly pedagogical terms:

I'm talking about enabling people to be the best that they can be, to use themselves the best that they can, and to show them—here's the way I did it. It's not a question of following; it's like a poem...a poem doesn't tell you how to act and how to feel. It inspires something in you.<sup>160</sup>

Here Lorde describes learning as a kind of collaboratively-authored poem. As a teacher, Lorde pushed and prodded, and tried to inspire courage in others, literally, “encourage” them to confront their silences and their fears. In fact, Lorde imagined the role of the poetry teacher as similar to an editor:

I do not teach anyone how to create poetry. I can help children recognize and respect their own poetry; I can show a student how to improve what is already written—and by improve I mean specifically how to bring the poem closer to the feeling the poet wishes to evoke.<sup>161</sup>

While she guided students in the art of recognizing and improving their poetry, her non-reproductive or queer pedagogy did not demand that students reproduce her habits of being, knowing, and writing.

For Lorde, the goal of her intense style of “confrontation teaching,” was to incite riotous subjects: “The learning process is something you can incite, literally incite, like a riot. And then, just possibly, hopefully, it goes home, or on.”<sup>162</sup> Here, learning is described not as something measurable, quantifiable, and bound, but as dangerous, unwieldy, and inherently collective. This description of learning as a riot revises the official state narrative, through which the danger of riots was bound to the project of black studies. In 1967, the National Advisory Committee on Urban Disorders, known as the Kerner Commission, described the “typical rioter” as someone

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<sup>159</sup> Joseph, *Wind is Spirit*, 168.

<sup>160</sup> Lorde qtd. in Joseph, *Wind is Spirit*, 2.

<sup>161</sup> Lorde, “Poet as Teacher,” 183.

<sup>162</sup> Lorde, “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich,” 98.

who was “better educated than his non-rioting Negro neighbor...proud of his race, extremely hostile to both whites and middle-class Negroes and, although informed about politics, highly distrustful of the political system.”<sup>163</sup> The Kerner Commission understood that black studies could result in radical dissatisfaction and collective acts of resistance. Congress responded to the wave of urban riots that occurred throughout the 1960s with the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which, while prohibiting certain modes of discrimination in housing practices, also criminalized the act of organizing, promoting, participating in, and carrying on a riot: “an action by three or more people involving threats of violence.”<sup>164</sup> While the national committee depicted riots as a dangerous threat, Lorde’s pedagogy sought to induce riotous subjects—to “hail” not ideal citizen-subjects, but co-conspirators and collaborators, people who shared her sense of the apocalyptic present and wanted to produce something better in the wake of old worlds.<sup>165</sup> More than just a casual metaphor, inciting a riotous education was in fact a deliberate pedagogical project organized around collective acts of resistance and refusal. Thinking alongside Michel Foucault, we might understand Lorde to have been teaching the arts of dissent: “the art of not being governed like that and at that cost...the art of not being governed quite so much...the will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price.”<sup>166</sup>

While we tend to think of poetry in individualized terms, for Lorde, the art of teaching poetry was an act of social protest. Poetry and pedagogy are means of exploring the evitability of the present and disorganizing the status quo—inducing a sense that things could be otherwise.

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<sup>163</sup> Kerner Commission, qtd in Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-2001*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 460.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 461.

<sup>165</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 163.

<sup>166</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?” in *The Politics of Truth* ed. Sylvere Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1997).

Through this riotous poetic and pedagogical praxis, subjects map the contours of the worlds that might emerge from the feelings, dreams, and desires of those dispossessed by the status quo:

I see protest as a genuine means of encouraging someone to feel the inconsistencies, the horror of the lives we are living. Social protest is saying that we do not have to live this way. If we feel deeply, and we encourage ourselves and other to feel deeply, we will find the germ of our answers to bring about change.<sup>167</sup>

In a moment when conservative politicians like Ronald Reagan were calling art education an “intellectual luxury,” Lorde claimed poetry as the means by which those dispossessed by the status quo could exercise the imagination, cultivate the will to think and feel differently, and develop different relationships to their senses, sensibilities, and desires. Reflecting on the moment of teaching in *Open Admissions*, Lorde states that “Our visions begin with our desires,” moving us to and through questions: from what do you feel? To “what do you want to feel?” questions that direct our attention to the inadequacies of our present and the conditions in which we are embedded. These questions exemplify the aesthetics of the outsider: the exploration of “unnamed, untamed longings for something different and beyond what is now called possible.”<sup>168</sup>

### **Towards a theory of radical collaboration**

Lorde’s vision of collaborative worldmaking is clearest in the essay she is most famous for, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.”<sup>169</sup> First delivered at a panel titled “The Personal is Political” at the Second Sex Conference in 1979, “The Master’s Tools” condemns the racism of second wave feminism, arguing that feminists need a different relationship to difference: one which understands racial, sexual, and gender differences as

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<sup>167</sup> Lorde, “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich,” 108.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>169</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” in *Sister Outsider*, 97.

sources of vital creativity. Recent scholarship by Grace Kyungwon Hong and Kandice Chuh has placed the essay in relation to neoliberal knowledge politics.<sup>170</sup> Building on these interventions, I explore the significance of the essay's conditions of emergence, the ways it thematizes learning, and how it might be read as a theory of collaborative pedagogy.

Thinking alongside Hong, "The Master's Tools" takes up the differences that neoliberalism works to disavow. Lorde writes:

Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic...As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion, rather than change...[Survival] is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.*<sup>171</sup>

In this theory of collaboration, work, or what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call "study," difference is wrenched from the realm of tolerance, a rhetorical framework that elides the actual, material, economic, and embodied realities produced by race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability.<sup>172</sup> Instead, Lorde posits these differences as the sites from which one must think and theorize in order to map the world. Only by working together in ways that acknowledge these differences can "creativity" emerge: the kind of creativity necessary to imagine and bring about a world without racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia.

"The Master's Tools" was penned during Lorde's time teaching at John Jay and in this sense, teaching provided the actual labor and material conditions for its emergence. During this time, faculty members at John Jay used Lorde's status as an out lesbian as an attempt to alienate

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<sup>170</sup> Grace Hong argues that Lorde's theories of "difference" and "the erotic" refuse neoliberalism by engaging what it actively disavows. Kandice Chuh reads the essay as "a mandate for attending to the material ground and effects of knowledge practices that continue to resound some three decades since its first enunciation" (87).

<sup>171</sup> Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 111-12.

<sup>172</sup> Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*.

her from the Black students she had been so eager to teach, adding a pedagogical dimension to her essay.<sup>173</sup> The speech also revolves around the possibility of learning, suturing the space of the classroom to the broader project of feminist pedagogy. In addition to providing a starting point for what Hong calls "a queer theory emerging out of a materialist critique of racial capitalism,"<sup>174</sup> Lorde's call to stand alone marks several crucial interventions, not only in feminism, as is often acknowledged, but also in pedagogy. Almost paradoxically, the very passage that calls for collaboration as the engine for creative social change also insists that we must first learn how to embrace our aloneness and become willing to be "unpopular," and "reviled" before we can "build common cause." Through this insistence on aloneness, the essay extends an invitation not to feel bad about feeling bad given the inadequacy of the structures, knowledges, and frameworks we have inherited for moving through and making sense of the world, making it legible and intelligible. It acknowledges that wanting to push the status quo is undoubtedly going to upset people and produce a whole array of ugly feelings, especially in diverse classrooms that bring together very different people, some of whom may be adamantly tethered to the very status quo you are trying to challenge.

In another register, this affirmation of aloneness insists that we take our edges seriously, refusing the idea that the other, despite any amount of disclosure, is ever a knowable subject. We should hear in this theory an echo of Lorde's insistence that "I don't have to be you to work with you," that it can be dangerous to assume any kind of likeness of experience.<sup>175</sup> In fact, our abilities to work together may depend on the knowledge shared from our distinct experiences as "I's" and "you's." Thinking back to Lorde's notion of poetry and pedagogy as "touching," her

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<sup>173</sup> DeVaux, *Warrior Poet*, 140-41.

<sup>174</sup> Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal*, 74.

<sup>175</sup> Lorde qtd. in Ada Gay Griffin et al., *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (2006; New York: Third World News Reel).



theory of difference highlights the contiguity of these encounters: how the very act of touching also preserves the borders of unknowability.<sup>176</sup> Instead, collaborative praxis ought to emerge from acknowledging the differences among us—how I am not you.<sup>177</sup> We should also hear in this insistence on aloneness an early articulation of one of queer theory's central tenets, what Eve Sedgwick would famously articulate as its very first axiom: “people are different from each other.”<sup>178</sup>

Students' journal entries illustrate how they considered the radical unknowability of another person's beliefs, thoughts, and desires. For example, a German, white female student writes of her realization, in Lorde's class, that “I cannot simply transfere [sic] Black womens [sic] situations and feelings to mine and that it is almost impossible to identify myself with the statements of Black women's poems.” Another student recorded how the class taught her that “people are strangers.” Several recall the transformative experience of having Lorde ask the white women in the class to leave the room, and insisting that the Black women make contact with one another before they leave. “We didn't understand what was happening to us,” one woman recalls, describing a moment that stayed with her for forever.<sup>179</sup>

In addition to underscoring the untranslatability of lives and experiences, “The Master's Tools” suggests that the scene of teaching and learning can be organized around the production of a “common cause,” the collective project “to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish.” This is an invitation to think about teaching as acting on desire for a better, as yet unimaginable future that we can sometimes sense despite or against all evidence to the contrary.

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<sup>176</sup> Here, I am thinking alongside Jean-Luc Nancy about the incommensurability of touch, how closeness emphasizes distance, how “the law of touching is separation.” *On Being Singular Plural*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 5-6.

<sup>177</sup> Lorde qtd. in Griffin and Parkerson, *A Litany for Survival*.

<sup>178</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>179</sup> Lorde qtd. in Griffin and Parkerson, *A Litany for Survival*.

Many advocates of progressive education insist that teachers must “love” their students, which risks individualizing the social, political, material, and structural relationship of teaching and learning, so prominent in poems like “Teacher.” In a regime of neoliberal austerity, educators may show up to the scene of teaching and learning as a last resort, or, like the speaker of “Teacher,” might be so underpaid and worn down from the labor of social reproduction that loving the mind of the student is simply not available. The question of love for students becomes irrelevant if we imagine, instead, how each might play a part in bringing this world to fruition. While not everyone walks into the classroom with a desire to build a better world, we can, perhaps, create the conditions for the transmission of this desire. The idea that pedagogy can emerge around the project of defining and seeking “a world in which we can all flourish,” may create space to move, breathe, and build in a still stifling and apocalyptic present.

While the seeds of this pedagogical project are evident in Lorde’s early teaching materials from her time at John Jay, the materials from latter courses taught at Hunter College and the Free University of Berlin illustrate a sustained investment in exploring, with her students, how better ways of being together might emerge from nuanced attention to the differences among us.<sup>180</sup> Lorde’s teaching materials and notes authored by her students depict a classroom in which students and the instructor engaged the politics of difference through group projects, which were sometimes as broadly-defined as, “Do a group project: an evening given over to something we’ve worked on.”<sup>181</sup> This vague assignment suggests that the final product, the project itself, was of less importance than the act of students working together, deliberately staging scenes of encounter in which students would have to navigate each other’s potentially conflicting schedules, needs, desires, onto-epistemologies, and access to material resources.

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<sup>180</sup> This insight may be the product of gaps in the archival record.

<sup>181</sup> Assignment, Audre Lorde collection, Spelman College Archives Box 82.

What emerge are structures of pedagogical accountability not grounded in hierarchical relationships between teachers and students, but determined by the urgency of the work and all they could potentially learn from one another. As a student in Lorde's class in Germany wrote, attendance was crucial for their seminar, not to satisfy an institutional objective, but because they needed to be present in order for the dialectic of difference to spark, so that they could each "get and give something from this seminar."<sup>182</sup> Another student regretted her lack of participation in the course not because it negatively affected her grade but because she felt that she failed to be "usefull" [sic] to the other women in the course.

The open-ended nature of these assignments allowed Lorde's students to design projects that would be meaningful and relevant to their lives. For example, a Black female student who wanted to better understand her difficulties relating to other Black women did an interview as a final project. She interviewed two other students about their responses to Lorde's essay, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," which traces the social, cultural, and political conditions that have incentivized antagonism among Black women. In doing so, they engaged in acts of self-scrutiny: measuring each other's experiences and reactions against their own. They were, as Lorde writes in that essay, interrogating "the hideous gaps of our learned despisals." Together, they took up Lorde's invitation to "hear...across our differences"<sup>183</sup> and explored how so many moments that felt bad were in fact the products of a racist society that systematically devalues the lives of Black women, a society whose values are threatened by what they could achieve in collaboration with one another. By "reaching out" towards each other they engaged in transgressive acts of worldmaking praxis.

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<sup>182</sup> Student Journal, Audre Lorde collection, Spelman College Archives Box 82.

<sup>183</sup> Audre Lorde, "Eye to Eye: Black women, Hatred, and Anger," in *Sister Outsider*, 164.

While students described Lorde's pedagogy in emotionally charged terms, her praxis hinged on a distinction between feeling and talking about feelings, suggesting, in fact, the inadequacy of emotions for capturing the complexities of learning.<sup>184</sup> The only Black student in one of her courses in Germany describes how "frightening" it was to learn to speak in public about her perspective "as a Black lesbian." Several white female students describe the pain of this consciousness-raising education, recording how it made them feel "terrible" "sick" "competitive" "insecure" "ignorant" and "tyrannized by Audre." However, the conversations that occurred in and around the classroom were ways of cultivating different relationships to these feelings. In contrast to pedagogies of individualism that encourage us to treat each other's feelings as we would "a Kleenex,"<sup>185</sup> (or to care only insofar as they serve our own ends), Lorde insists that feelings be taken seriously, as evidence that can tune us into and open up questions about our material embeddedness in history. Feelings, when discussed, contextualized, and historicized, can register the contradictions and inadequacies of the present. We should read students' reactions to her pedagogy, then, not as evidence of what Lorde did or did not do well, but as indices of how oftentimes learning feels bad, especially if it involves the scary process of detaching from a previously-held and seemingly-secure worldview. In the classroom, Lorde and her students explored the historicity of their feelings—how they were the products of larger cultural, political, economic, and social forces. In learning to listen to, rather than dismiss, each other's feelings, they rehearsed a different world in which people's experiences, feelings, and reactions are valued and valid, but also understood in relation to longer histories that layer and thicken the present.

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<sup>184</sup> "It's one thing to talk about feeling. It's another to feel." Lorde, "Interview with Adrienne Rich," 107.

<sup>185</sup> Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic" in *Sister Outsider*, 58.

Read through a pedagogical lens and alongside the additional insights of Lorde's students, "The Master's Tools," brings into relief a version of aesthetic education in which the texts we read and our reactions, interactions, and conversations tell us less about ourselves as discrete individuals, and more about the social, political, and economic fabric in which we are embedded. How we read, relate to, and discuss fiction, poetry, prose, films, etc. and what lessons we draw from these encounters provide an occasion to cultivate different ways of being in the world and relating to other people. What if literary studies didn't, as so many defenders of the liberal arts argue, teach "empathy" but instead taught us how to listen, unlearn, and not know? Might this create a space for other things to happen?

Lorde called these oppositional modes of being, knowing, and relating "the intimacy of scrutiny...the most strongly prohibited, or discouraged, human exercise of our time."<sup>186</sup> Intimacy has been central to discussions of feminist pedagogy in part because when women take up academic positions, especially as educators, they come to inhabit institutions designed by and for men, that are structured around the exploitation of women's labor through demands on their intimacy. However, in Lorde's pedagogy, intimacy functions in another register, indexing the radical possibility that emerges through collaborative acts of reading, making, and discussing art, and foregrounding the unevenness of this labor. The intimacy of scrutiny emerges through dialogue, whether it occurs in the margins of student essays, in a class conversation, or through a group project. It is about the worlds we perform through the words we use, the difference between "you're a great writer" and "this word carries negative connotations." Whereas the first remark individualizes learning, the second performs a world in which language is central, and the person using the language—the poet, the student—is borrowing and working with it.

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<sup>186</sup> Lorde, "Poet as Teacher," 183.

These intimate acts of scrutiny are dangerous because, like the erotic, they are often accompanied by a sense of pleasure that threatens to make us bad liberal capitalist subjects, desirous of the wrong things, namely, working with others in non-exploitative, extractive, or capital-producing modes. While scrutiny may sound antithetical to pleasure, Lorde describes it as related to but distinct from “sexual contact,” involving desires for others that do not fit neatly into available paradigms. Scrutiny, in this sense, is characterized by an openness to the possibilities for becoming-otherwise that are constitutive of pedagogical relationships. The intimacy of scrutiny, then, indexes a desire for the common, for justice, for a future that is unlike the past, for learning and becoming in ways that are irreducible to the emotional registers that we often resort to when describing relationships of teaching and learning, the desire to be undone by the other, to have a conversation, to change one’s mind. Collaboration with others similarly invested in social change threatens the status quo.

Lorde understood teaching and learning as inherently collaborative acts grounded in nothing less than the art of survival: something she was continually learning how to do with and alongside her students. She writes:

I think that we teach best those things we need to learn for our own survival. So, as we learn them, we then reach back and teach, and it becomes a joint process. I think that this is what keeps us new, that we do not learn from what goes on in a book. We learn from that interaction that takes place in the spaces between what is in the book and ourselves.<sup>187</sup>

In this example, Lorde envisions students and teacher on a shared journey. When progress is made, no one dashes ahead, leaving everyone else in the dust; instead, they reach back and share what they’ve learned, understanding that any progress is the product of the collective labor that got you there in the first place. This collaboration takes place across multiple registers: between

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<sup>187</sup> Lorde qtd. in Marion Kraft, “On Difference and Sameness: How Audre Lorde Inspired My Work,” *Wind Is Spirit*, 233.

the book and the reader, the reader and her fellow readers, and the reader's understanding of the historical conditions that produced our present. Lorde taught students how to pay closer attention to their lived experiences, to work with others, and to testify, thus putting language into action — the same things she was doing to survive the apocalypse.

### **Collaboration in the archives**

To talk about Audre Lorde's pedagogy is not only to talk about Audre Lorde, but to conjure a whole constellation of teachers, learners, thinkers, activists, artists, authors, and students who touched and were touched by this praxis, all of whom were working to “envision what has not yet been and...to make the reality and pursuit of that vision irresistible.”<sup>188</sup> While many of the quotes I've included to theorize this pedagogical praxis sound so much like Lorde's confident, concise, and empowering prose, many of these notes including the term “the aesthetics of the outsider,” were recorded by students, who may have messed up, misheard (deliberately or not), filtered her words through their own experiences, recorded what another student said, etc. What we are left with are poetic, pedagogical fragments that, regardless of who authored them, still describe the urgent need to transform the oppressive educational practices we have inherited. The pedagogy that emerges from these artifacts illustrates the inherently social nature of learning—how knowledge and sense-making actually occur in the collision between minds, making it difficult to neatly attribute learning to what we commonly think of as individuals.

Lorde's work models a collaborative pedagogy in which learning emerges from the dialectical spark of the encounter. This involves looking beneath, beyond, and beside the present to the labor, exploitation, and suffering—the actual worldmaking that has built our present, but that the status quo actively works to obscure. “Become aware of who pays what for you to live

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<sup>188</sup> Lorde qtd. in Griffin, *A Litany for Survival*.

the way you do. Cheap labor is never cheap for the person who performs it,” Lorde wrote in her commencement address to Oberlin College students in 1989.<sup>189</sup> Her attention to labor and material conditions of possibility in poems like “Teacher” and “Dear Toni,” urges us to consider how worldmaking is always collaborative, but uneven, and erased through liberal notions of individualism. Part of dismantling the master’s house is acknowledging the backs upon which his architecture was erected.

I want to end with a sense of Lorde’s embeddedness in a pedagogical milieu—to understand her work as part of larger efforts to advance social justice. Patches of this constellation are brought into relief by the physical materials in Lorde’s teaching archive, which includes syllabi for courses other people taught on topics as widely distinct as “The Psychology of Death and Dying,” “Milton,” “African Revolution” and “American Literature to 1865.” Nestled among her syllabi, lesson plans, and assignments are similar works from many other educators that Lorde collected, adapted, and remixed: from works authored by students and colleagues to exchanges with administrators, which often go unacknowledged if we think about pedagogical praxis on individual terms. As contemporary educators know all too well, these materials exemplify the kinds of exchanges that go into producing the scene of teaching and learning. This is especially true among minoritarian knowledge practitioners who work in majoritarian institutions, whose disciplines, pedagogies, and practices we inherit, though they are often antithetical to the justice, equity, and pleasure we seek to cultivate. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter, the internet has opened an array of collaborative possibilities for minoritarian knowledge production and pedagogy across institutions.

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<sup>189</sup> Audre Lorde, “Oberlin College Commencement Address, May 29, 1989” in *Sing, Whisper, Shout, Pray! Feminist Visions for a Just World* (Fort Brag: EdgeWork Books, 2003), 533. There is a discrepancy in published versions of this speech.



It would be impossible to try and do justice to the huge networks of pedagogical exchange partially revealed by Lorde's physical archive. Instead, by highlighting two pedagogical documents contained therein, neither of which were authored by Lorde, I hope to illustrate the entangled ways in which educators were theorizing pedagogy as social interruption, and produce a sense of just how much we are missing—how much labor is obscured.

The first document is titled "Consciousness Raising," and it sits alongside a syllabus for a spring 1982 course on women's writing at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. The author of both documents is Rosemary Curb, whose *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* (1985) explored how convents offered women a site of radical refusal, collecting the stories of women who turned to religious life as "a refuge from heterosexuality, Catholic marriage, and exhausting motherhood."<sup>190</sup> It is a project that offers an unexpected metaphor for the peripheral work of the classroom, which similarly involves inhabiting marginal spaces in unconventional, resistant ways. However, "Consciousness Raising" suggests that simply bringing marginalized people together *is not enough*; it cannot guarantee that dominant ways of being, knowing, and relating won't be reproduced. Instead, it illustrates how we have to deliberately work to unlearn these and practice better ways of being alone together.

"Consciousness Raising," is a single sheet of paper, divided into three sections: "Goals," "Procedures," and "Consciousness Raising on Ethnicity." It is organized around the promise of prefigurative politics: of performing better worlds through our conversations and interactions. More specifically, it suggests that by learning to listen, not rank degrees of oppression, reimagine what is unique to ourselves or generalizable to others, and think differently about power we can experience trust, solidarity, and pleasure. One goal of the consciousness-raising exercise is "to realize that since we are all in the same boat you gain power when you help other people to grow

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<sup>190</sup> Rosemary Curb, *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* (Midway: Spinsters Ink, 1985).

in their power.”<sup>191</sup> Like all of the goals, it is articulated in the infinitive because what is to be learned has no fixed beginning or end, but must be practiced and enacted. It is a habit, a verb, not a stable noun. Pedagogy, in this vision, entails producing a sense of shared-boatedness through which our pleasure and power are not pitted against one another, but experienced through an exponential, multiplier effect. In contrast to the commonplace idea that those who cannot do, teach, and competitive, individualist, zero-sum notions of power, here we have a vision of learning as the amplification of pleasure, where the empowerment of one is bound to the empowerment of many. Teaching offers the kind of intoxicating and all too rare experience whereby we succeed, as educators, through the success of others.

The “Procedures” to achieve these “Goals” are designed to ensure that dominant power relations don’t get reproduced in spaces being intentionally shaped to have conversations about difference. Rather than a “safe space,” that protects the imperial white supremacist, capitalist heteropatriarchy from the incursions of other knowledges, these are cartographic procedures for producing a space in which something else can happen. Some of these procedures include identifying a facilitator and timer to ensure the equitable distribution of speaking time, getting in the habit of sharing pleasures (especially actions that group members have done that make them feel good about themselves), and then moving around the circle, offering each participant a chance to respond to the questions posed to the group. It includes instructions for listening to one another, speaking out of personal experience and not challenging the validity of people’s feelings and experiences, respecting what other people say and not offering advice, maintaining confidentiality, and avoiding the formation of cliques and factions within the group. In contrast

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<sup>191</sup> Rosemary Curb, “Consciousness Raising,” Audre Lorde collection, Spelman College Archives Box 82, Folder 34.

to the demands placed on marginalized subjects by dominant culture, participants always have the option not to speak and to preserve their silence.

The second document is a syllabus for Paula King and Melanie Kaye's "Women as Creative Artists,"<sup>192</sup> course taught at Portland State University in 1978. The course is organized around many of the feminist calls for action of the 1970s, including listening to silence, reclaiming culture, forming feminist communities, and generating "a common language." Each week, students were asked to come to class not just having done readings and watched videos, but having done a creative research or writing activity. Readings were assigned for the methodologies they offered, which students then experimented with. For example, the week they read essays on the lies of patriarchal culture, they were asked to write about the lies they've been told in their own lives. Students were taught to think about language as a form of power through deconstructive assignments that ask them to speak the unspeakable, to "present in some form something you can't talk about, a secret, a taboo subject." Students learned to listen to the silences in the literary, historical, cultural, and artistic record; to recognize these as effects of the patriarchal status quo; and to speak back to them, drawing on the lessons of their lived experiences.

Because so much of academia reflects the views of a patriarchal and white supremacist society, one response was to counter these knowledge practices by performing feminist research. Projects early on in the semester were more structured and helped students develop methodologies for this work. One week, students attended an art museum, university art program, performance, or festival and counted the number of female artists represented or in the audience. That same week, they were asked to present a picture of culture in the home they grew

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<sup>192</sup> Melanie Kaye and Paula King, "Women as Creative Artists," Audre Lorde collection, Spelman College Archives, Box 82, Folder 34.

up in. By weighing the institutions of a patriarchal culture against their experiences, they practiced asking whether or not the institutions they inhabited reflected their needs, desires, and experiences. In later assignments, students were given the grammar and methodology for feminist research, but allowed to determine the content, and in doing so to gain agency over their learning. One assignment asks students to keep notes in a journal for three weeks, focusing on “Women & something, you fill in the blank.” These assignments illustrate how feminist educators transformed the undergraduate classroom from a site of knowledge transmission to production.

Another response to these gaps was not to rush to fill them but to use the techniques of fiction to explore the depths of these silences. For instance, the same week that the class read and discussed “A Room of One’s Own,” students were asked to “imagine” a woman-historical and answer the question, “what do you need to know from her, what are you deprived of by her silence?” Through this act of creative production, students are invited to feel the inadequacies of the present; not merely to study “Women as Creative Artists,” but to become creative artists. They are asked to produce feminist knowledge through radical speculation: imagining the impossible and tracing what has never been.

The materials in Lorde’s physical archive allow us to see her pedagogy within a larger context of educators interested in social justice. Other connections are less physically apparent, though no less significant. Poems like “Teacher,” and its insistence that we think about food and the conditions for learning, link Lorde’s praxis, however implicitly, to the Black Panther Party’s Breakfast for Children program. While the Black Panther Party’s “Ten Point Program” took on a militant, austere rhetoric, calling for an education “that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society,” Lorde’s poetry and pedagogy claimed indulgence, sensuality, and pleasure as

crucial to any truly revolutionary and redistributive praxis. In this regard, her pedagogy has less in common with the masculinist authors of the party's political platform and more with Ericka Huggins and Elaine Brown, who ran the Black Panther's Oakland Community School according to the nonauthoritarian, hands-on, and curiosity-based pedagogical approaches typically reserved for affluent, white students.<sup>193</sup> In 1973, the same year Lorde wrote and published "blackstudies," students and educators on the opposite coast at the Oakland Community School were similarly imagining beyond the disciplinary, authoritarian, and individualizing pedagogies of liberal racial capitalism.

These connections illustrate how social justice pedagogies transcend individual, institutional, and geographic divides, and are crafted in response to the inadequacies of the status quo. Because learning occurs in the unattributable and uncontainable spark of the encounter, to tell the story of pedagogy is a project organized around, or disorganized by, the impossible. By tracing the contours of some of these encounters, I hope we can think about how practices of teaching and learning can continue to challenge carceral, individualizing, privatizing, disciplining, and punitive "solutions" to longstanding problems of social injustice and inequality.

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<sup>193</sup> Murch, *Living for the City*, 182.

## Changing the Subject: Adrienne Rich and the Poetics of Feminist Pedagogy

Classroom as cell—unit—enclosed & enclosing space in which teacher & students are alone together

Can be prison cell      commune  
                  trap              junction—place of coming-together  
                  torture chamber

—Adrienne Rich, “Notes, Statements & Memos On SEEK, Basic Writing & the Interdisciplinary Program (1969–1972)”

When those who have the power to name and socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. Yet you know you exist and others like you, that this is a game with mirrors. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this nonbeing, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.

—Adrienne Rich, “Invisibility in Academe” (1984)

What can studying language and literature do to address conditions of state violence?

This contemporary question was taken up by poet, educator, and activist Adrienne Rich following her decision in 1968 to leave Columbia University to teach remedial writing and English courses in the SEEK program at the City College of New York. At the height of the Vietnam War and shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Rich was widely recognized as one of the nation’s most promising young poets. At the same time, she made a professional move that may have been surprising for a writer who had earned such accolades as the Yale Younger Poets Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award. This move, and Rich’s increasing involvement in social justice movements, exemplified her own grappling with the central question of how literature itself can be used as part of the pedagogical resistance to state power and violence.

Rich understood the classroom, and compensatory education in particular, as part of a “movement for social change,” the goal of which was to “break down false barriers of class & color to make all education truly open to all people who want it.”<sup>194</sup> She echoes this language in her very definition of politics as “process, the breaking down of barriers of oppression, tradition, culture, ignorance, fear, [and] self-protectiveness.”<sup>195</sup> At the heart of this definition were Rich’s experiences as an educator in the late 1960s. Rich, celebrated for her political poetry, attributed her very definition of politics to the experience:

of teaching and activism in an institution where the question of white Western supremacy was already being talked about, where students were occupying buildings and teachers either fled the campus or were in constant meetings and teaching ‘liberation’ classes; in a city where parents were demanding community control of the schools; through a certain kind of openness and searching for transformed relationships in the New Left, which soon led to thousands of women asking “the Woman Question” in women’s voices; and from reading Malcolm X, Chekhov’s *Sakhalin Journals*, Barbara Deming’s *Prison Notes*, Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, and the writings of my students.<sup>196</sup>

How often do we think about the role that student writing played in fundamentally shaping the worldview of one of the twentieth century’s most important writers? How might this shift our understanding of education? How might this lead us to read our own students’ writing differently?

Thanks to recent journalism and scholarship, many of us know (some version of) Rich’s biography: that she experienced, in the late 1960s and 70s, a “feminist awakening,” as she joined protests against the Vietnam War, became actively involved in the women’s movement, and

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<sup>194</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Notes, Statements & Memos on SEEK, Basic Writing & The Interdisciplinary Program (1969-1972),” in *What We Are Part Of: Teaching at CUNY: 1968–1974*, 2 vols., edited by Iemanja Brown et al. (New York: Adrienne Rich Literary Estate), 2013, 15.

<sup>195</sup> Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 24-5.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

came out as a lesbian.<sup>197</sup> During this era, Rich eschewed the patriarchal pursuit of alleged “objectivity” in writing and embraced the political possibilities of poetry as a social art that could exist in relation to contemporary social movements.

This chapter examines Rich’s teaching materials and writings on education in order to argue that poetry and pedagogy were interrelated means through which Rich sought to redistribute institutional power and resources. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that emphasizes the extent to which Rich’s oeuvre and worldview were shaped by her experiences as an educator.<sup>198</sup> At City College, Rich put into practice her conviction that work with language could change lives. Although she had been educated at Radcliffe and had taught courses at Columbia and Swarthmore, it was from her teaching at City College that she moved away from a pedagogy grounded in hierarchical models of knowledge transmission and towards a more collective pedagogy inspired by movements for anti-imperialism, racial justice, and women’s liberation. At City College, Rich explored how the English classroom could become a space for different articulations of power, thus reimagining education in the service of a more just, equitable, and pleasurable world. Rich’s writing, was, in turn, shaped by the student movements of this era, as an ethos of institutional critique became more prominent in her poetry and essays. As suggested by this chapter’s second epigraph, Rich and her students were learning,

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<sup>197</sup> Claire Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986); Alice Templeton, *The Dream and the Dialogue: Adrienne Rich’s Feminist Poetics* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1994); Jeannette E Riley, *Understanding Adrienne Rich* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2016); Michelle Dean, “Adrienne Rich’s Feminist Awakening,” *New Republic*, April 3, 2016; Claudia Rankine, “Adrienne Rich’s Poetic Transformations,” *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2016.

<sup>198</sup> The most salient examples of this include the critical companion pieces published alongside an excerpt of Rich’s teaching materials by erica kaufman, Talia Shalev, and Conor Tomas Reed. See Brown, Iemanja et al., *Adrienne Rich, Teaching at CUNY, 1968-1974 (Part I and II)*, CUNY Lost and Found Poetics Document Initiative, 2013.



from and alongside each other, how “to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard” amidst a culture that otherwise erases you.

Formal higher education and poetry have historically been the purview of a wealthy, white, male elite, despite copious amounts of learning undertaken and literature produced by people of different races, classes, and genders, as well as the efforts of W.E.B. DuBois, Anna J. Cooper, Zora Neale Hurston, Alain Locke, and many others to address these conditions. Amidst the G.I. Bill and the social movements of the 1960s, women, people of color, Native Americans, and other marginalized people began to publicly stake their claim in both en masse, gradually shifting the subjects of and audiences for both literature and education. Rich’s essays on education such as “Teaching Language in Open Admissions” (1972), “Towards a Woman-Centered University” (1973-4), “Claiming an Education” (1977), “Taking Women Students Seriously” (1978), “Disobedience and Women’s Studies” (1981), “The Soul of a Woman’s College” (1984), and “Invisibility in Academe” (1984) connect the conditions of education to those of literature, suggesting that it is strong, high quality public education that provides the conditions for literature to flourish. Whereas traditional approaches to aesthetic education tend to erase the material conditions that enable the production of art — including racial, gender, and class privilege, and access to education and material resources — Rich’s pedagogy uses literary texts as points of entry into these structural questions. In the SEEK classrooms, Rich taught students to use one’s seemingly idiosyncratic experiences to challenge the structures of power that, in many ways, shape our life paths and possibilities. They were, to borrow a term from “Towards a Woman-Centered University,” transforming the “subject” of American literature and American learning.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Rich argues that educators are uniquely poised to transform the “subject, lines of inquiry, and method” of education (141).

## The poetics of institutional change

At a moment when Rich was calling for “a radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse,”<sup>200</sup> she was simultaneously realizing that teaching language and literature in a segregated, racist, sexist, and highly stratified society demanded something other than the literary pedagogies and methodologies she had experienced at Harvard, Radcliffe, Swarthmore, and Columbia. In her own literary education, Rich read Homer, Shakespeare, and Melville in gothic libraries and wrote poetry that W. H. Auden would describe as deferential, “neatly and modestly dressed,” and which earned her recognition in the Yale Younger Poets series.<sup>201</sup> But everything changed in 1968, when Rich was teaching at Columbia and student protests against racism and the Vietnam War shook the foundations of campuses nationwide. In 1968 the collective demands for justice were loud, palpable, and urgent, not “veil[ed] in ivy or fantasy,”<sup>202</sup> and they captured Rich’s feminist imagination. As Robin D.G. Kelley has shown, social movements are “incubators of new knowledge” and formations of creative and intellectual activity that have given rise to materialist paradigms of thought.<sup>203</sup> Rich’s pedagogical praxis emerged in response to their critiques of universities and of racial injustice, imperialism, and gendered violence writ large. It also reflected her ongoing interest, as a feminist intellectual, in connecting women’s erasure from literary history to a broader politics of knowledge.

Years before Rich would become a famous theorist of institutions including heteropatriarchy and motherhood, she was developing a framework for institutional critique by engaging with student movements, which connected seemingly freestanding classrooms and

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<sup>200</sup> Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision (1971)” in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York: Norton), 35.

<sup>201</sup> W. H. Auden, Forward to *A Change of World* by Adrienne Rich (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1951), 7-9.

<sup>202</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Teaching Language in Open Admissions (1972)” In *Lies*, 58.

<sup>203</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.

courses to the larger university structures in which they are embedded. In contrast to many of her professorial colleagues and fellow poets, Rich radically listened to these critiques, which sharpened her understanding of the interconnectedness of feminism and antiracism, what we would now call, following Kimberlé Crenshaw, “intersectionality.” In a 1968 letter to poet Jean Stafford, Rich wrote:

It was not until the occupation of the buildings that I became concerned with what Columbia was, how it functioned, who had power and how it was used. It did, in fact, take that occupation to make me aware that I was associated with a university which was actively threatening, as part of its policy, the minimal social values which I had painfully, over long years, come to realize were essential for me as a woman, a writer, a human animal.<sup>204</sup>

These movements sharpened Rich’s awareness of her own complicity in unjust institutions: how universities can foreclose the kinds of justice, equity, pleasure, and possibilities many of us imagine might emerge from teaching literature. These student activists raised questions about power and knowledge that Rich was increasingly exploring in her own work, asking “what a school of the arts might be, where the arts actually stand, in a society whose unparalleled affluence . . . is founded on a war economy.”<sup>205</sup> As her letter suggests, Rich also used her position of power as a respected poet to bring the student critiques to the authors, educators, scholars, professors, and administrators who might otherwise overlook their political interventions.

In 1968, Rich acted on this knowledge of her complicity in unjust institutions. She left Columbia University and traveled twenty blocks north, where Mina Shaughnessy hired her to teach in the much less affluent and less white SEEK program at City College. There she joined a group of educators dedicated to the power of writing. Rich’s motivations were, in her own words, “complex.” On one level, she was acting out of “white liberal guilt . . . a political decision

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<sup>204</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Letter to Jean Stafford.”

<sup>205</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Letter to Davidson Taylor,” September 26, 1968, Rich Papers, folder 382.

to use my energies in work with ‘disadvantaged’ (Black and Puerto Rican) students . . . [and] a need to involve myself with the real life of the city.”<sup>206</sup> But on another level, it was an act of survival: “In order to live in the city, I needed to ally myself, in some concrete, practical, if limited way, with the possibilities. So I went up to Convent Avenue . . . and was . . . hired as a poet teacher.”<sup>207</sup> At City College, Rich joined a vibrant pedagogical milieu in which authors, educators, scholars, and critics were reimagining education from the ground up, beginning with the SEEK students they encountered in the classroom. In many ways, the pedagogy Rich developed at City College synthesized and remixed paradigms developed by Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Christian, Addison Gayle, and Mina Shaughnessy, and drew on her own sensibilities as a feminist poet.<sup>208</sup>

In an unpublished essay in Rich’s archive, “Humanistic Studies and the New Students,” Shaughnessy challenges the innocence of the liberal arts in the production of social inequality and argues for a curricular overhaul of the humanities based on the perspectives of students who entered the university through SEEK and Open Admissions.<sup>209</sup> Rather than pathologizing students for their disinterest in the canonical Western tradition or trying to make this material “more palatable,” Shaughnessy advocated for transformative questions “about the kind of society, the kind of reality, that is transmitted through the literature and techniques of that cultural tradition and about the chances of its serving the needs of the new students.” Rich and Shaughnessy, both white women, were deeply influenced by the movement for black studies and the vehement debates over curriculum and admissions policies throughout the CUNY campuses and especially at City College, where Black students and professors were making incise

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<sup>206</sup> Rich, “Teaching Language,” 53.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>208</sup> See Molloy, “A Convenient Myopia” for more on Christian, Bambara, and the origins of SEEK.

<sup>209</sup> Mina Shaughnessy, “Humanistic Studies and the New Students,” 84-M141—99-M136, folder 387. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

demands for more relevant education. While Rich approached these questions from her emerging sense of exclusion as a lesbian feminist, Shaughnessy was connected to these movements through her experiences teaching writing to English language learners, immigrants, and working class students, all of whom were ignored by traditional pedagogies that assume a homogenous, wealthy, white, male student body.

Rich's classrooms contributed to this reimagining of humanistic education. Rich's pedagogy drew on the new critical approaches in which she had been trained at Radcliffe and Harvard, including what were then considered radical courses (in part because they focused on American literature) taught by F. O. Matthiessen, who discussed Herman Melville, Theodore Dreiser, and Walt Whitman in relation to contemporary politics and world events.<sup>210</sup> Matthiessen, however, taught Harvard students, not open-admissions students from Harlem—a fact that Rich acknowledged in her classroom. In the SEEK classroom, Rich encountered students whose relationships to literature were the product of a whitewashed curriculum and their experiences at overcrowded, underfunded public schools in a segregated society, “young men and women who have had language and literature used against them, to keep them in their place, to mystify, to bully, to make them feel powerless.”<sup>211</sup> These classrooms disclosed the privileges the poet had previously taken for granted: those that allowed her to identify with, even as she challenged, the literary canon. In the City College English Department, Rich confronted much of the elitist conservatism that continues to structure literary studies: the idea that the great works taught in elite universities represent the best that has been thought and said; that instruction in writing is preparation for the more serious work of literary analysis; that there are meaningful

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<sup>210</sup> Amy Sickels, *Adrienne Rich* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2005), 23.

<sup>211</sup> Rich, “Teaching Language,” 63.

distinctions between critical and creative writing (in terms of what gets to count as knowledge production); and even how literature is defined.

As an educator, Rich sought to enact an “undoing” and “detoxification” by instead finding texts that students could relate to, designing assignments that fostered new modes of perception, providing opportunities for students to use the literary techniques they were learning about, and asking students to make crucial decisions about their learning.<sup>212</sup> Rather than teaching solely the canonical literature she had been taught in the ways she had been taught it, Rich honored Matthiessen’s literary insurgencies by listening to the critiques emerging from student protest movements and treating these as major interventions in how we understand the humanities. Her classes combined brief periods of lecture—on topics ranging from the history of plantations, slavery, and sharecropping to the definitions of metaphor, dialect, vernacular, and jargon—with ample time for debate over literary texts and rigorous discussion of student writing. Peer editing and revising were central to these courses, as were individual student conferences. In her syllabi, students’ lives are the subject of the course, to be analyzed through the production of literary texts: “We will work out of the experiences and feelings of the people in the class, with readings in fiction, anthropology, and poetry, and with papers written by students.”<sup>213</sup> This involved, for example, assigning Plato’s *Republic* alongside Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* to show how both theorized social relations, and teaching students that they, too, have important things to say about how society ought to be organized. By asking students to make fundamental decisions about their learning, such as whether they preferred to receive grades or “critical comments”<sup>214</sup> on their essays (they chose the latter) and having students research and write about their own communities, Rich’s classroom both drew from and actualized the problem-posing,

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<sup>212</sup> Rich, “Final Comments on the Interdisciplinary Program” in *Teaching at CUNY*, 1:35.

<sup>213</sup> Rich, English 1-T Syllabus (Fall 1970), in *Teaching at CUNY*, 1:21.

<sup>214</sup> Rich, City College SEEK English course 1.8 (April 1969) in *Teaching at CUNY*, 2:15.

consciousness-raising pedagogy Paulo Freire would call for in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As she wrote to students enrolled in her 1971 English I-H class, “This class will start from the idea that language—the way we put words together—is a way of acting on reality and eventually gaining more control of one’s life.”<sup>215</sup> The syllabi for her courses, while seemingly straightforward—two pages long, including a course description and reading list—actually contain some of the poet’s most profound statements about the value of art, literature, and language. They affirm that their classroom work with language mattered in the world, not just for a degree (though this certainly was important), but as part of larger, collective movements to redistribute power.

Rather than stressing explication or literary history, they explored what other, more creative and empowering relationships could exist between literature and writing. The aim of Rich’s SEEK English 1.8 course was “to stimulate students to write in a number of forms encountered through the reading: essay, biography, poetry, fiction, argument.”<sup>216</sup> One week, she assigned Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground” and asked students to describe an incident in their own life, which, like the protagonist, Fred Daniels, involved being radically alone. Her assignment invites students to experiment with Wright’s metaphor of living underground—to practice thinking metaphorically and to explore the felt and imaginative experiences that literary devices make possible. Drawing on her own poetic ability to create haunting images—her aunt’s fingers, trapped by a wedding band even in the grave; a submerged diver exploring the depths of a shipwreck in cold isolation; the hot flames of a book burning in

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<sup>215</sup> Rich, Syllabus for English 1-H (Fall 1971) in *Teaching at CUNY*, 2:22.

<sup>216</sup> Rich, City College SEEK English course 1.8 (April 1969) in *Teaching at CUNY* 2:13.

the backyard—she directs students to use “physical sensory detail to evoke the scene . . . to communicate to the reader the specific images, sensations, etc. that you encountered.”<sup>217</sup>

Rich’s assignments ask students to draw on their reactions to the readings and their experiences and use language to communicate, literally to transfer, an idea or a feeling to their reader. She borrowed Bambara’s writing assignment that asked students to read LeRoi Jones’ “Cuba Libre,” in order to think about the lies often circulated by the media that produce partial, inaccurate, and stereotypical ideas about groups of people. Instead of writing an essay analyzing the text, they used it as a heuristic to find examples of this relationship in their own lives. Rich guided students in writing literature that spoke back to the suicidal brides, Uncle Toms, mammys, strumpets, harlots, happy slaves, tragic mulattos, exotic primitives, muses, street rats, mad women in the attic, drug addicts, gang members, unruly and uneducable children. At the same time, in her lectures and writing, Rich was challenging the stereotypes of Open Admissions students that prevailed in public discourse. She writes of them not as “culturally deprived,” “cognitively deficient,” “unruly,” or “disruptive,” but as responsible adults accustomed to providing for “themselves and their families for years,” who arrived to learn, brimming with “force and wit” and a penchant for writing “satire [and] black humor.”<sup>218</sup>

When Rich assigned Ann Petry’s “Darkness and Confusion,” which carries the reader into the midst of a Harlem uprising, Rich asked students to describe their participation in a mass human scene (“an Army induction center, . . . a political protest, a confrontation of demonstrators with police, or even registration at City College”) using the same strategy as Petry: “try to make

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<sup>217</sup> Rich Papers, folder 388.

<sup>218</sup> Rich, “Teaching Language,” 61.



the reader feel your own emotional reaction to the situation.”<sup>219</sup> Her classrooms, like her writing, valued everyday lives and championed the expression of those lives as a form of literary craft. By providing students with the methods for cultivating a literary relationship to the present, Rich helped them discover, in erica kaufman’s words, “their own right to become authors.”<sup>220</sup> Together, they explored the poetics of everyday life: how the world is constructed through metaphors, comparisons, erasures, elisions, and gaps, and how the elliptical, unsaid, implied, and occluded might be deployed to build a better present.

In 1969, just one year after she began teaching at City College, the school experienced its own wave of student demonstrations.<sup>221</sup> Black and Puerto Rican students occupied the South campus of City College issuing a series of demands including resources for “Third World (Black, Puerto Rican, and Asian) Studies,” a voice for SEEK students in governance decisions about their program, and curricular changes so that all education majors would study Spanish and Third World histories.<sup>222</sup> Rich saw the occupation not as an interruption but an extension of the kinds of work they were doing in the classroom and an additional opportunity for students to learn. Like the women’s movement, Rich understood the student protests as crucial forms of “political and human education” and encouraged students to participate:

Whether or not your classes are meeting as usual, don’t stay away from the campus! There is plenty of political and human education going on there. This is part of what it means to be a college student in our time and is probably one of the most valuable parts of your education even though you don’t get academic credits for it.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Rich Papers, folder 388.

<sup>220</sup> erica kaufman, Introduction to Rich 2013, 1:1–8, 3.

<sup>221</sup> See Conor Tomas Reed, “‘Treasures That Prevail’: Adrienne Rich, The SEEK Program, and Social Movements at the City College of New York, 1968-1972,” *Lost and Found CUNY Poetics Document Initiative* 4.3.1 (2013): 37-75.

<sup>222</sup> Ferguson, *Reorder*, 76–77.

<sup>223</sup> Adrienne Rich, “To: ALL Students in English 1.8 B2 and 1.8 C4” in *Teaching at CUNY*, 1, 10.

Drawing on the examples of colleagues like Toni Cade Bambara, Rich altered syllabi, assignments, and activities to bolster political activism on campus and nurture students' political desires for decision-making.

As demonstrated by her teaching materials, Rich raised questions of power, institutional authority, and knowledge production in her language and literature classrooms. For example, the syllabus for Rich's course English 1-H is not organized by literary historical categories such as Romanticism or American Renaissance, nor is it organized by genre, time period, or national literary tradition. Instead, critique and social change are the principles behind the selection of literary texts: "The reading will consist of writings in which the authors or their characters have tried to understand and criticize their situations, and to change or move beyond them."<sup>224</sup> When Rich assigned George Orwell's satirical essay "Such, Such Were the Joys" (1945), a scathing indictment of the author's boyhood boarding school, she asked them not to analyze Orwell's essay but to write a literary text of their own, using his miserable boarding school to reflect on the declining conditions at City College.<sup>225</sup> By using literature to help students see their experiences in relation to institutional and structural conditions, Rich brought the campus climate of collective dissent into the English classroom. In and beyond the classroom, Rich and her students questioned the relationships among classrooms, institutions, and the societies in which they are embedded. Is the classroom a metaphor, metonymy, symbol, or synecdoche for the U.S. — prison cell, or place of coming together? And what about City College? Ivory Tower, Harvard on the Hudson, the American Dream, a White Citadel, Harlem University, a Black University, a Woman-Centered University, or some combination of these?

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<sup>224</sup> Adrienne Rich, "English 1-H Syllabus" in *Teaching at CUNY*, 2:23.

<sup>225</sup> Rich 2013, 2:10. The idea to assign Orwell's essay likely came from Shaughnessy, who assigned it in her 1968 summer workshop, but the assignment appears to be of Rich's own design.

In one writing assignment, Rich asks students to analyze their neighborhood—to connect their sensory, particular observations of moving through space in a highly segregated city to “the larger context,” the social fabric, in which this experience is embedded:

Write an analysis of your neighborhood. You may use description as part of your technique but you will need to go beyond it. Some questions you may want to answer: 1) Into what parts, or subdivisions, does the area divide itself? 2) What do you observe that is unique?... What is there that shouldn't be there? What isn't there that should be there? ... 4) When do you, walking along, begin to feel that you are in 'your' neighborhood? What makes you feel this?<sup>226</sup>

Rich's questions invite students to listen to the noises and silences of their neighborhoods — to tune into their senses, desires, and lived material experiences, and to use these observations as grounds from which to think, theorize, and challenge the status quo. This assignment is part of a praxis that Rich developed alongside and in collaboration with June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and Mina Shaughnessy, all of whom were asking students to write about their neighborhoods as a way of locating their lived experiences in relation to collective histories and institutional structures. This assignment guides students in cultivating the poetic impulse: a felt sense of contingency and possibility, and the will to enact change.

Like Rich's poetry, her pedagogy invites students to critique the world that is out of sync with our desires and to imagine better institutions, disciplines, pedagogies, and methodologies:

Write a description of a course you would like to take some day— on any subject, or covering any kind of material. Talk about how you feel this material could best be taught, and what you would hope to be doing in the course. . . . Talk about how you'd like this course to be run, under what conditions you would most enjoy and profit from it . . . why this particular course would seem valuable to you, and what you hope to gain from it for your life.<sup>227</sup>

Rather than imposing her worldview on students, Rich's assignment honors them as passionate learners and thinkers with their own desires and sense of what they want from life. This

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<sup>226</sup> Adrienne Rich, writing assignment, in *Teaching at CUNY*, 2:9.

<sup>227</sup> Adrienne Rich, writing assignment, in *Teaching at CUNY*, 2:8.

fundamental respect for students is a central component of feminist and antiracist education, especially for students who have historically been excluded, or abused, by educational institutions: taught that they are not powerful thinkers with the capacity to influence others, organize, demand, and enact change. It is the assignment of a lyric poet, someone who recognizes the limits of her own knowledge and subjectivity, who pauses and creates a space to ask what students want instead of assuming she already knows. It asks students to act as instructors and make critical, creative, and imaginative choices about what they want to learn, assuming knowledge to be an object of desire. Just as they were reading literature to debate various styles of living and the choices characters made within their fictional worlds, this assignment asks students how they are going to navigate and/or transform the real, material conditions of the world they inhabit to live the lives they want. It is one of the most striking examples of how changing the subjects (recipients/participants) of higher education (through SEEK, Open Admissions, the National Higher Education Act, etc.) was entangled with an overhaul of our educational imaginary in terms of academic subjects and methods.

In 1970, when CUNY implemented Open Admissions, many professors in the English Department at City College bemoaned the influx of students who were, by conventional standards, unprepared for a liberal arts education.<sup>228</sup> The dominant reaction to students' demands for more equitable admissions criteria, curricula that acknowledged the histories and cultures of racial and ethnic minorities, and more student power in decision-making was a desire to return to "business as usual." Rich describes the primary response she witnessed among literature professors: "We are going to forget all this irrelevant disruption and concentrate on the following

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<sup>228</sup> LaVona L. Reeves, "Mina Shaughnessy and Open Admissions at New York's City College," *Thought and Action* 17, no. 2 (2001): 117–28, 120.

models of literary craft,”<sup>229</sup> those they had been trained in themselves. But Rich, one of the most important poets of the generation, understood that if these students entered the English classroom skeptical, angry, or bored, it was because of a pedagogy that did not address their lives: “the lesson of the schools for a vast number of children—hence, of readers—is *This is not for you*.”<sup>230</sup>

Rather than embracing the deficit model implicit in remedial education, Rich asked instead how the experiences, perspectives, attitudes, and desires that these students brought to the classroom might catalyze transformations in the study of language and literature. As Rich notes in a memo to her colleagues, the students that entered City College through SEEK and Open Admissions brought

intelligence, toughmindedness, and motivation . . . a concern for justice, truth and freedom, which many of our better prepared students unfortunately do not [have] . . . brains, talent and courage which we have hitherto excluded from the college. . . . Let’s not sell our ghetto students short by imagining that they have everything to gain from the College, and little to give.<sup>231</sup>

Rather than teaching them to assimilate into institutions organized around “the dehumanizing forces of competition, money lust, the lure of personal fame and individual aggrandizement,”<sup>232</sup> Rich used literature—the poetry of Victor Hernandez Cruz, the plays of Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy, Addison Gayle’s anthology of black criticism, texts by Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, Virginia Woolf, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Malcolm X, Richard Wright, Albert Camus, Eldridge Cleaver, Simone de Beauvoir, Henrik Ibsen, D. H. Lawrence, Toni Cade Bambara, Mary Daly, and Judy Chicago—to draw on and out students’ concerns about justice, truth, and freedom.

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<sup>229</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Letter to Jean Stafford” in Rich Papers.

<sup>230</sup> Rich, *What is Found There*, 32.

<sup>231</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Statement to CCNY Faculty Meeting, Wednesday April 23,” in *Teaching at CUNY*, 1:23.

<sup>232</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Towards a Woman Centered University (1973–1974),” in *Lies*, 133.

In the SEEK classroom, Rich taught students not to strive for “an objectivity, a detachment, that would make us sound more like Jane Austen or Shakespeare” but to take seriously that they knew “more than Jane Austen or Shakespeare knew.”<sup>233</sup> Many of her assignments invite students to read, write, and think through their knowledge that exceeds the academy: “their knowledge of the naked facts of society, which academia has always, even in its public urban form, managed to veil in ivy or fantasy” including more knowledge than either their instructors or “elite contemporaries” about “the actual workings of the city and of American racial oppression.”<sup>234</sup>

From listening to the student movements, finding readings, and developing assignments that would engage students in discussions of institutionality, material resources, and social justice, a series of questions emerged. Rich asked students:

When you come out of here, who will you be? . . . Who decides what you are allowed to learn? . . . What determines the courses you take each semester? . . . Where is the power that controls your life here? . . . What does quality education mean? What is a university? . . . Can a quality education take place under these conditions? . . . What are your expectations here and what do you have a right to expect? . . . And who makes the decisions that are even now shaping your future life?<sup>235</sup>

These questions, strung through a document titled “Student Passes— Education Fails,” extend, rather than manage, the modes of dissent that literature sets in motion. They invite students to see their education as a question of power, resources, and pleasure, and to ask whether it is training them for the lives they want. They encourage students to take an active role not just in performing education as it is laid out by institutions and instructors, but by shaping its content, methods, and systems of value. If Rich’s English classroom looked more like what we might now call “critical university studies,” this can be understood through a note on her syllabus: “In a

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<sup>233</sup> Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision (1971),” In *Lies*, 49.

<sup>234</sup> Rich, “Teaching Language,” 58.

<sup>235</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Student Passes--Education Fails” in *Teaching at CUNY*, 1:25–28.

patriarchal society—all institutions, economic, social, religious, educational, are dominated by men. . . . I see no excuse for studying literature in a way which does not come to grips with this fact.”<sup>236</sup> In this climate of collective institutional critique, in which historically marginalized people were demanding what they desired, literary studies had to be imagined anew if it was to contribute to these struggles.

Rich’s classrooms challenged contemporary distinctions between writing and literature courses. Academic hierarchies denigrate basic writing, and many literature professors are still quick to dismiss the remedial writing classroom as a site of mere skills training, or as a way to bring students up to speed to do “real” academic work in English literature classes. By contrast, Rich and her co-conspirators understood writing and reading as instruments of power that had historically been denied from these students—and that the denial of a creative and inspiring education to the majority of citizens was a way to reproduce white, male privilege. In Rich’s SEEK classroom, literary studies was reimagined not as that which basic writing prepares you for, but as a means to teach students about language, power, and writing.

Rich’s essay “Towards a Woman-Centered University,” illustrates the profound effects of student movements on her educational imaginary. It also represents an effort to apply their modes of institutional critique to a subject Rich cared deeply about: the education of women. Written for a collection on academia and the women’s movement, the essay offers a scathing critique of hierarchical, “androcentric” universities and a blueprint for “ways in which one particular institution—the university—might become a focus . . . for a ‘female counterforce.’”<sup>237</sup> Rich’s essay echoes Bambara’s earlier “Realizing the Dream of a Black University,” (1969) which describes how universities disguise their white supremacy by misrepresenting themselves

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<sup>236</sup> Adrienne Rich, “[Notes on Eng. 13.3 W] Assumptions behind course” in *Teaching at CUNY*, 2:30

<sup>237</sup> Rich, “Woman Centered University,” 131.

as the privileged purveyors of universal knowledge and outlines institutional changes that could produce a university for a flourishing black community.<sup>238</sup>

“Towards a Woman-Centered University” imagines a feminist praxis that dismantles universality by refusing the terms of the system it protects. Rich notes that whereas universities depict themselves as

the dwelling place of permanent values . . . of beauty, of righteousness, of freedom, . . . the “radical student critique”—black and white—of the sixties readily put its finger on the facts underlying this fiction: the racism of the academy and its curriculum, its responsiveness to pressures of vested interest, political, economic, and military; the use of the academy as a base for research into weapons and social control and as a machinery for perpetuating the power of white, middle-class men.<sup>239</sup>

Whereas early feminists fought for access to traditional universities with their promise of an “enduring, universal” education, “civilizing to the mind and sensitizing to the spirit,”<sup>240</sup> Rich, following Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*, called for the more radical transformation of universities: “Today the question is no longer whether women (or non-whites) are intellectually and ‘by nature’ equipped for higher education, but whether this male-created, male-dominated structure is really capable of serving the humanism and freedom it professes.” Her work suggests that education could be drastically improved by implementing the demands of activist students and acknowledging the voices of the marginalized, the dispossessed, and the exploited.

In the essay, Rich tells the stories that institutions actively work to silence, offering a better image of universities not as ivory towers, but as pyramids: glittering, sacred temples erected to honor and celebrate those with power, built through the exploitation of enslaved labor. Universities continue to reflect the hierarchical structure of society at large, in which a handful of wealthy, white, and powerful men make decisions that trickle down to affect the lives of

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<sup>238</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, “Realizing the Dream of a Black University,” *Observation Post* (New York), February 14, 1969.

<sup>239</sup> Rich, “Woman Centered University,” 132–33.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.



everyone else. This is evident in salaries, adjunct labor, professional rank, acceptance rates, assessment metrics, types of institutions, funding, and the organization of disciplines like English or fields like American literature. By contrast, Rich advocates a series of reforms, insisting that changes be made in all the connected aspects of the university: in its contents, pedagogies, disciplines, and curriculum and to the disparities among faculty, staff, and administrators. As in her classroom pedagogy, which was grounded in everyday material conditions, Rich astutely connects canon and salary, hierarchies of all sorts. According to Rich, the goal of institutional change should not be to alter who is at the top of the pyramid but “to do away with the pyramid itself, insofar as it is based on sex, age, color, class, and other irrelevant distinctions.”<sup>241</sup> Through the image of the pyramid, Rich reimagines our complicity as an opportunity to demand accountability and produce change at every level. At the end of the essay, Rich, like Bambara, engages in a poetic act of radical speculation, imagining a university crafted around the needs and desires of women and children, those most abused by patriarchal institutions.

Rich produced a woman-centered university from within her classrooms. In courses like “Images of Women in Poetry By Men,” Rich asked students to speak back to the stereotypes inherited from canonical poets, though this type of course gradually disappeared from Rich’s repertoire, replaced by classes that focused on the writings of women: “Writing out of Female Experience: Poetry and Non-Fiction,” at Douglass College and later, “Woman Novelist as Historian” and “The Activist Roots of Feminist Theory” at San Jose State University. Rich’s feminist pedagogy taught women to write from and through their experiences of estrangement from the institutions and knowledges designed by and for wealthy white men, drawing on “the education— unofficial, unpaid for, unvalued by society—of their female experience.”<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 133.

By foregrounding, rather than trying to hide, the “assumptions” behind her courses and through repeated use of the personal pronoun “I” in her teaching materials, Rich disidentifies with the university’s false pretenses of objective authority and claims the classroom as an insurgent feminist space that values the particularities of experience. Not only does Rich use the personal pronoun “I” in her syllabi, lesson plans, and assignments, she encourages students to do the same in their writing. Her reading lists note that the assigned texts are not the objective, universal great works that exemplify a literary tradition; rather, the list “contains books I’ve related to, books other students have related to, books you might relate to.”<sup>243</sup> Her lecture notes for “Images of Women in Poetry by Men” foreground the “assumptions” behind the course, going so far as to admit the “bias I come with”: that being a radical feminist in the classroom means “I identify with women, but I am interested in teaching men who want to explore through poetry what the patriarchal system in which they collaborate is doing to them. I can communicate with men who want to think, struggle and change, but my primary loyalty is to women.”<sup>244</sup>

While the student movements at Columbia, CUNY, and nationwide were undoubtedly student-led, in some cases the relationships between students and professors were reciprocal. In addition to drawing support from the poet-teachers in this study, activist students drew on research by CUNY economics professor and Rich’s then husband, Alfred Conrad, “to ascertain the racial composition of area high schools, and as a result, they called for a student body that was 43 percent black.”<sup>245</sup> I mention this not only to highlight the intimate nature of Rich’s involvement (how these discussions certainly permeated the dinner table as well as the classroom), but to highlight some of the roles professors have historically played in supporting the demands of activist students. Insisting that “the thrust and demand” (to use Bambara’s

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<sup>243</sup> Rich, “[Notes on Eng. 13.3 W] Assumptions behind course,” 2:32.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution*, 124.

words) come from students does not mean that professors simply step aside; rather, it means finding ways to use one's training in research and position of relative power to support students committed to institutional and social change. This can mean researching the racial composition of area high schools so that students have a specific admissions figure to demand, assigning texts and engaging students in questions related to histories of institutional injustice, and giving students opportunities to write about these in ways that help them see their lives and struggles as connected to longer histories and movements.

### Mapping our failures

During this period, Rich was undergoing her own radical education through poetry and feminism, learning to trust her “nervous system” and know in unauthorized ways.<sup>246</sup> In *The Will to Change* and *Diving into the Wreck* Rich breaks with the formalism of her earlier poetry as she worked to unlearn the patriarchal rules, traditions, forms, and values that had previously governed her life and work. The same year that Rich began teaching in SEEK, she wrote “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,”<sup>247</sup> which locates the basic writing classroom at the incendiary intersection of the Women's Movement, protests against the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Power movement.

“The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” unfolds in the shadow of Fr. Daniel Berrigan's burning of his draft notice alongside eight others who would come to be known as the Catonsville Nine. The poem's title invokes their collective refusal to participate in the U.S.

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<sup>246</sup> “I would tell all the stories I knew / in which people went wrong / but the nervous system / was right all along.” Adrienne Rich, “Pierrot Le Fou (1969)” in *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970* (New York: Norton, 1971), 26.

<sup>247</sup> Adrienne Rich, “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children (1968),” *Will to Change*, 15–18.

imperial violence in Vietnam, exemplified by the burning of Vietnamese children with napalm.

The poem's epigraph, justified right, belongs to Berrigan:

I was in danger of  
verbalizing my moral  
impulses out of  
existence.  
—Fr. Daniel Berrigan,  
on trial in Baltimore.

With these words, Rich introduces a discrepancy between “verbalizing” and “impulses” thematized throughout the poem. By enjamming “moral impulses,” Rich questions which category morals belong in: are they something we impulsively feel or develop through language?

The poem is divided into five sections, each of which moves back and forth between the immediate reality of the speaker, a teacher-poet, and the speaker's intimate, psychological, and carnal life: from the texts she repeatedly loses herself in to her fantasies of silence, a hand roving over a lover's body, the writing of her students, the ravages of a sexual encounter. The text traverses a domestic scene of a phone call, a library, a bedroom, a body, a classroom, a mysterious sylvan “temple / built eighteen hundred years ago,” and a study, interwoven sites that foreground the tension between embodied experiences of the world and the knowledge gained through the verbalizing of language and literature.

Section one opens with a chunky paragraph, weighted with full sentences and towering atop a poem that is otherwise comprised of lines with fewer than five words each:

1. My neighbor, a scientist and art collector, telephones me in a state of violent emotion. He tells me that my son and his, aged eleven and twelve, have on the last days of school burned a mathematics text-book in the backyard. He has forbidden my son to come to this house for a week, and has forbidden his own son to leave the house during that time. “The burning of a book,” he says, “arouses terrible sensations in me, memories of Hitler; there are few things that upset me so much as the idea of burning a book.”

While this incident is the ostensible occasion for this meditation, the poem's title and opening invocation of Berrigan orient the reader to be skeptical of this neighbor's reaction. Indeed, the poem begins with an eye roll towards this neighbor's false equivalence and excessive disciplining of their sons given the actual burnings inflicted by the U.S. government. The overly formal and conventional use of appositive commas twice in the first two sentences and a semicolon in the stanza's final line deliberately position this paragraph alongside the grammatical lessons often taught in a writing classroom, the subject of fierce debate during the time this poem was authored. Were it not for the predominance of space in the lines that follow, this paragraph could easily be the opening of an expository essay that goes on to make an argument about whether or not the speaker felt their neighbor's actions were justified. This reading is bolstered by the poem's division into five numerical sections, echoing a traditional five paragraph essay.

Instead, the poem transitions to free verse stanzas and transports the reader to a library — part oasis, part fortress—partitioned off by a fence of “green Britannicas,” where the texts precede the appearance of our speaker. The encyclopedias both cordon off the space, policing what can be thought and known, while also protecting its precious contents. The speaker repeatedly returns to this library with quasi-religious devotion:

Looking again  
in Durer's Complete Works  
for MELANCOLIA, the baffled woman

the crocodiles in Herodotus  
the Book of the Dead  
the *Triale of Jeanne d'Arc*, so blue  
I think, It is her color

It isn't until the end of this promiscuous bibliography, ranging from hieroglyphics to German Romantic printmaking, that the “I” appears, suggesting that the speaker has been forged through

these texts, brought into subjectivity by a process akin to what Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar call “bibliogenesis.”<sup>248</sup> This is a heretical immersion in Western culture, demonstrating the speaker’s interest in the occult; in that which doesn’t fit neatly into modern epistemologies; in artistic and rebellious women unconvinced by the patriarchal knowledge of their times; in poems like Muriel Rukeyser’s *Book of the Dead* that expose the atrocities of racial capitalism; and in those minor details that swim, like a crocodile, back and forth across the lines of fact and fiction and grab us in their jaws, refusing to let go.

A mysterious “they” condemns this speaker for excessively dreaming of another woman, especially one as willful as Joan of Arc: “and they take the book away / because I dream of her too often.” These texts have taught the speaker to love other brave women and to fear the architects of patriarchal power. Through Joan’s story, the speaker has gained “knowledge of the oppressor/ I know it hurts to burn.” If before the speaker was mocking her neighbor’s naive conflation of burning a mathematics textbook and Hitler’s infamous book burning, here she clearly cherishes the survival lessons of these texts. Taking away the *Trial of Jeanne d’Arc* confirms patriarchal fears of her transgressive reading.

While the speaker briefly entertains the fantasy of renouncing language in favor of tactile, alchemical, and musical communication, her ultimate concern is with language as a source of power:

knowledge of the oppressor  
this is the oppressor’s language  
  
yet I need it to talk to you

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<sup>248</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

“Knowledge of the oppressor” is what the speaker learned from Joan of Arc, from the books that have been taken away. Here the speaker confronts the reality that her language belongs to “the oppressor,” and that when she uses it, she is complicit in this violence. Though inadequate, it is necessary, especially for communicating with her beloved.

In section three, the poem transitions to a paragraph of quoted dialogue that echoes the paragraph form of the opening stanza:

3. “People suffer highly in poverty and it takes dignity and intelligence to overcome this suffering. Some of the suffering are: a child did not had dinner last night: a child steal because he did not have money to buy it: to hear a mother say she do not have money to buy food for her children and to see a child without cloth it will make tears in your eyes.”

The parenthetical lines that follow invite us to read this section through a teacherly paradigm that hinges on “fracture” and “repair”:

(the fracture of order  
the repair of speech  
to overcome this suffering)

Rich’s archival materials confirm that these words belong to a City College student. By echoing the “properly” punctuated paragraph of the opening stanza, the poem questions the structures of privilege and power through which we distinguish between grammatical errors and the poetic use of punctuation to emphasize the profundity of a pause, and all that goes unspoken. In none of the poetry that intervened between these two paragraphs were there complete sentences bookended by proper punctuation, yet the reader does not rush to correct the poem’s grammar. Nor do we circle the capitalized “It” in the opening stanza as an error to be fixed. Instead, we assume that everything is significant, chosen, deliberate, and important. How often do we extend that kind of critical generosity to our students—especially in a composition course? While Rich was an active participant in remedial writing programs, poetry opened up a space where she could admit a degree of skepticism towards their foundational assumptions. “Burning” traces the intricacies

of complicity, questioning how the poet participates in that which she critiques through the idea that the “repair of speech” in a remedial English class can do anything to help this student “to overcome this suffering,” given the structural conditions they are up against. In this parenthetical aside, the poet wonders whether their faith in education is actually just naivete.

“Burning” thematizes the utility and futility of humanistic study, oscillating between that which literature and language enable and foreclose. It opens with the contrast between Berrigan and the neighbor and moves to the speaker’s books forcefully taken away for providing knowledge of the oppressor; the necessity of language, even if it is the oppressor’s, for communication; the question of how we distinguish literary language from student writing; the way books can “relieve” our loneliness, but also make us “re-live” its ongoing reality, especially for intelligent, brave, and desiring women like Joan of Arc — how lonely she must have been; the inadequacy of language to capture the dehydrating intensity of “sexual jealousy,” how flat those words will feel to anyone who has experienced anything like that which they attempt to describe; Artaud’s injunction to “*burn the texts*” his incendiary desire to watch the Old Masters go up in flames, clearing space for culture as protest.<sup>249</sup>

All of these converge in the poem’s final stanza, which returns again to the form of the paragraph:

5. I am composing on a typewriter late at night, thinking of today. How well we all spoke. A language is a map of our failures. Frederick Douglass wrote an English purer than Milton’s. People suffer highly in poverty. There are methods but we do not use them. Joan, who could not read, spoke some peasant form of French. Some of the suffering are: it is hard to tell the truth; this is America; I cannot touch you now. In America we have only the present tense. I am in danger. You are in danger. The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me. I know it hurts to burn. There are flames of napalm in Catonsville,

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<sup>249</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double* (New York: Grove Press Books, 1997), 10. Artaud defines culture not as idol worship of a humanistic pantheon, but as protest. For Artaud, “The library at Alexandria can be burnt down,” which will unleash energetic forces “beyond papyrus.” This burning will open up “exaltation and force,” in contrast to the death imposed by European art.



Maryland. I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor's language.

The poem concludes with the speaker furiously composing, the words frantically fleeing her fingers barely keeping up with her thoughts and setting the typewriter ablaze. Reflecting on one's teaching, it turns out, also entails theorizing language as an act of power; reimagining literary history and humanistic studies; theorizing America as a nation that erases the past and forecloses the future; and interrogating the desires the state sanctions and those it does not. All of this is punctuated by the speaker's echo of the student's words and syntax. Why, the poem asks again, more forcefully now, is Adrienne Rich celebrated for her poetic use of "had" instead of "have," while the same usage by an anonymous basic writing student is treated as a "fracture," that must be "repaired"?

But Rich was not the first person to cite the words of this student. They also appeared in Shaughnessy's "Humanistic Studies and the New Students," as part of the essay's call for a curricular overhaul of the humanities based on the needs, desires, and experiences of the students who entered the university through SEEK and Open Admissions. In effect, Rich's poem responds both to this student and to Shaughnessy's essay. Shaughnessy quotes this student to support her claim that working class, first generation students, immigrants, and students of color, "testify by their own lives to the distance art interposes between suffering and form. Often, it is through their writing, their words and their syntax, that the intransigent fact of inequity is first felt by the teacher who has spent years studying humanistic education." For Shaughnessy, the grammatical "errors" in this student's writing reveal to teachers the stark material conditions of inequality, how students can go through a K-12 school system so radically different from their own as to arrive at college unable to write in complete sentences. While this was, on some level,

the case for Rich, in “Burning” she goes beyond a kind of white, liberal awakening to crafting a critical reading practice around the question of how one approaches student writing.

The speaker’s ambivalence, her oscillation between the power of language and books and their utter uselessness, crystallize in the poem’s notion that “a language is a map of our failures.” Rich’s comparison of Milton and Douglass highlights the material conditions of slavery and imposed illiteracy as central to the English language, even as it raises a skeptical eyebrow at notions of linguistic purity. Present in the poem are arguments put forth by proponents of Black English and “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language”: that students’ modes of expression are valuable and should not be extinguished in the pursuit of Standard (White) English.<sup>250</sup> At the same time that it critiques dominant notions of literacy, it opens up other ways of reading the world that attend to the impossible suffering of poverty: the subject the student writes about, what we miss if we read their words as a piece of writing to be corrected, the heartbeat of the poem.

“Burning” locates Rich’s experiences as a teacher and a poet squarely within what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls “the double bind” of capitalism: the contradictory and imperative demands placed on subjects, especially the demand to use the oppressor’s language to communicate.<sup>251</sup> There is no way out of these double binds, only ways of failing better, more spectacularly, failing in a way that disrupts the system, or failing in a way that makes it irrelevant. In the concluding stanza the speaker allows the words of this student to guide her to a new reading practice, one that doesn’t rely on Durer, Herodotus, or the *Trial of Jeanne d’Arc*, but doesn’t abandon them either. The reading practice that emerges from the final stanza recognizes

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<sup>250</sup> Conference on College Composition and Communication, “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language,” *CCC* (Fall 1974): XXV. While Rich may have been less directly involved in the movements for Black English and black studies, her colleagues at City College certainly were, and she altered her pedagogical and poetic sensibilities based on their affirmations of students’ languages and experiences.

<sup>251</sup> Spivak, “The Double Bind Starts to Kick In,” *Aesthetic Education*.

the institutional conditions that underscore our attitudes towards Milton and Douglass; attends to the ways the embodied suffering of poverty erases both the past and the future; considers the world through this critical optic of present danger; and treats every piece of writing both as poetry and as student writing. While hardly an encomium, the poem affirms the transgressive potential of reading differently, with attentiveness to embodied violence and an understanding of the English language as a “map” of our colonial, racist, and patriarchal “failures.”

### **Listening to silence**

The deep thinking about words and bodies in poems like “Burning” was implicated in a pedagogical turn in Rich’s thinking: a move toward thinking about the English classroom as a physical space embedded in an ideologically fraught institution but also a space that is produced by desiring bodies. Rich’s attention to the embodied nature of experience—how life in a patriarchal society entails the policing of women’s minds, bodies, desires, and intellects—altered her thinking about the language and literature classroom as a collaborative space of knowledge production and decision making. As demonstrated by “Burning,” poetry teaches us to listen to silences and understand these not as absences but the constitutive components of a given structure, whether that’s a poem, a classroom, or an institution. In the SEEK program, Rich learned to “listen better”<sup>252</sup> and extend her own pauses so that they might instead be filled by students’ thoughts and voices. She learned “to look more carefully” at students who, though silent, may be “gathering courage to voice her/his thoughts in public.” The literary pedagogy she developed in these classrooms emerged through radically listening to those voices that are

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<sup>252</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Final Comments on the Interdisciplinary Program (Spring 1972)” in *Teaching at CUNY*, 38.

traditionally silenced, excluded, and absented from literature and decisions about education, from curriculum to pedagogy.

For Rich, teaching in SEEK was the “remediation of her own education.”<sup>253</sup> She notes that she had to learn a range of new fields that were neither in the canon nor syllabi of her previous life as a student or professor: “linguistics, Black or Latin literature, history, current events, [and] criticism.” During her tenure in SEEK, Rich read dozens if not hundreds of women’s studies syllabi from all over the country. She read Freire and the work of her SEEK colleagues Fred Byron, Barbara Christian, Addison Gayle, David Henderson, and Toni Cade Bambara, who asked students in remedial courses to help design the content, methods, and structure of the course. She asked Shaughnessy about the methods other educators had found successful. She read local newspapers to stay abreast of everything that was going on at, around, and related to City College. She searched for literature by racial and ethnic minority authors, which her students could better relate to, difficult because of the paucity of publishing houses for this work. (In Rich’s reflections on the dearth of Black women writers on her syllabi, she notes, “Integral to the struggle against racism in the literary canon there was another, as yet unarticulated, struggle against the sexism of black and white male editors, anthologists, critics, and publishers.”<sup>254</sup>) She attended lectures by other professors to observe students’ reactions and determine what teaching methods she might try in her own classes. In the classroom, she asked students questions about their backgrounds, aspirations, and experiences and adjusted her teaching accordingly. In addition, she documented this labor, writing passionate memoranda to SEEK administrators calling for a “2-course [teaching] ‘load,’” given all the hours that go into preparing to teach most effectively. Rich, like many today fighting for structural change in

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<sup>253</sup> Rich, “Notes, Statements & Memos on SEEK,” 21.

<sup>254</sup> Rich, “On Teaching Language,” 51.

higher education, was re-evaluating the labor that goes into teaching and putting forth more accurate metrics for figuring out how to fund transformative learning.

This deliberate research Rich undertook affirms that teaching is not something one magically knows how to do based on expertise in a subject, but is, in fact, an artform that we can study and improve. It gives the lie to both the idea that student-centered pedagogies emerged as a slipshod, harried response to overcrowded classrooms and the notion that they are any less difficult to compose than a lecture.<sup>255</sup> Through this research, Rich discovered, for herself, the pernicious effects of classrooms organized around hierarchical models of knowledge transmission and came to believe that “the underlying mode of the feminist teaching style is...by nature antihierarchical.”<sup>256</sup>

In 1968, Paulo Freire famously argued that the dominant banking model of education was suffering from “narration sickness,”<sup>257</sup> an excess of unilateral knowledge transmission from educator to educated at the expense of critical pedagogy, in which students learn to question the world around them. At the same time, in classrooms at City College, Rich was exploring how education functions as a tool of mastery when it is enacted solely through lecture—a mode of learning that can, depending on students’ past educational experiences, preclude “active participation or critical thinking or dissent or even the asking of questions,” instead inducing “boredom” and “detachment,” especially among students who had long been tracked through the educational institutions of a racist society away from lives of inquiry.<sup>258</sup> As a feminist poet Rich was attuned to silences; she recognized the silent, passive students imagined and produced by the

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<sup>255</sup> Kenneth A. Bruffee, “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation on Mankind.’” *College English* 46, no. 7 (1984): 635–52. Bruffee describes the development of practices such as group work, peer tutoring, and peer criticism as a harried, slipshod, and hasty response to students from different backgrounds, the origins of which “lie neither in radical politics nor in research.”

<sup>256</sup> Rich, “Toward a Woman Centered University,” 145.

<sup>257</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 71.

<sup>258</sup> Rich, “Final Comments.”

banking model of education. Drawing on the enforced silence she experienced as a woman, Rich understood these silences not as absences but the effects of power in a white supremacist, patriarchal society.

In a section of her poem “The Blue Ghazals”<sup>259</sup> dated “9/28/68” (early in the fall semester) Rich conveys the nightmarish feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, and abandonment that pervaded the antiquated classroom. “Most of the old lecturers are inaudible or dead,” Rich writes; the “blackboard scribbled over with dead languages / is falling and killing our children.” Amid the silent lessons of a white, patriarchal civilization, it is the voice of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, to whom the poem is dedicated, “shouting instructions to us all.” The title of Jones’s 1964 poetry collection, *The Dead Lecturer*, captured the spirit of pedagogical transformation that Rich and her coconspirators embodied (and it was written while Jones was teaching at the New School). Indeed, the pedagogy she developed with students in these classes involved not merely adding authors like Jones to the syllabus, but asking how their texts might shift our understanding of why and how we should study literature, and interrogating the institutions in which this work occurs.

While Rich’s classes included brief, engaging lectures, her poetic sense of the collaborations that occur between poet and reader shaped a pedagogical praxis organized around acts of discovery rather than the imposition of knowledge. For Rich, poetry questions what passes as truth and affirms our abilities to desire beyond what good liberal subjects are supposed to want: “...poetry unsettles these apparently self-evident propositions [about democracy, free enterprise, market economy, and corporate profits]—not through ideology, but by its very presence and ways of being, its embodiment of states of longing and desire.”<sup>260</sup> In other words,

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<sup>259</sup> Adrienne Rich, “The Blue Ghazals,” in *Will to Change*, 22.

<sup>260</sup> Rich, *What Is Found*, xv.

poetry tunes us into feelings, desires, ways of being and knowing that are obscured by the exploitative individualism incentivized by capitalism. The act of reading or writing a poem, in Rich's formulation, is a mode of learning that is all the more powerful for not being ideological. The poet's lesson, like the teacher's, has to traverse a cavernous distance between one individual's worldview and another's; it must "travel from the nervous system of the poet, preverbal, to the nervous system of the one who listens, who reads, the active participant without whom the poem is never finished."<sup>261</sup> Both reading a poem and learning a lesson involve actively weighing each word against one's lived experiences and observations, discovering what we will accept as true or reject as an oversimplified, inaccurate, or unsubstantiated falsehood.

Just as lecturing can reinforce hierarchies between teacher and student, Rich was equally concerned with the ways education teaches "ranking and comparison" rather than "supporting and giving to each other." This kind of "competition—taught in the schools, abetted at home—that pushes the 'star' at the expense of culture as a whole, that makes people want stardom rather than participation, association, exchange, and improvisation with others," can undermine efforts for collective liberation.<sup>262</sup> Her teaching materials include actual activities, assignments, and writing prompts that guide students in thinking critically about collaboration and competition. For instance, the week of May 18, 1970, amidst the nationwide student strike against Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, Rich asked students to respond to a quote from anti-war icon and countercultural activist Jerry Rubin:

'What you learn in school is that the kid next to you is your enemy; love is impossible because they teach you to always do better than him' In 2 or more pages, relate this statement to your own experience. (Maybe your own experience has been different. Either way, be concrete!).<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>263</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Assignment for week of May 18," in *Teaching at CUNY*, 1:11.

In characteristic fashion, Rich opens up a space for institutional critique without ideologically enforcing this view on students by inviting them to disagree. While Rich clearly thought the quote merited discussion, she explicitly let students know that disagreement is a valid position, and that they would not be penalized for dissenting views as long as evidence is provided. When students have come through a system that rewards them for regurgitating textbook information, inviting students to disagree lets them know that their own experiences are valid and valued.

A major revision that Rich sought to implement was reimagining remedial English as a cocreated, “long-term project,” ideally extending over three semesters, in which students help define, design, and evaluate the work of the course, with a strong emphasis on group work.<sup>264</sup> The goal of this endeavor would be the production of a tangible final project: “a proposal, a study, a set of interviews or a newspaper.”<sup>265</sup> As these projects suggest, Rich embraced the idea that reading Orwell’s “Such, Such Were the Joys,” or Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* might inspire projects that look quite different from literary analysis but nevertheless extend the lessons about language and power theorized through these texts. Although Rich identified as a poet, she did not assume that poetry was also the preferred means by which her students sought to do transformative work in the world. Rather, through poesis — creative acts of making — she proliferated the ways in which education in language and the arts could have an impact on students’ lives and communities. For Rich, poesis was an anticapitalist praxis that cultivated “the opposite of possessive, exploitative power: the power to engender, to create, to bring forth fuller life.”<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Memo to Mina Shaughnessy 9/3/71” in *Teaching at CUNY*, 1:31.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>266</sup> Rich, *What is Found*, 49.



### The intricacies of complicity

Rich's pedagogy used literature to explore the lived, felt, and experiential effects of structural injustice and to "extend" their shared "sense of what is possible, what has been done, [and] what might be done" differently.<sup>267</sup> Rather than presenting the kinds of representational solutions Melamed critiques in the multicultural US literature classroom, Rich uses literature as a tool to know the world differently, not simply to "know difference."<sup>268</sup> As she wrote in her syllabus for English 1-H: "The people in the class and their experiences will be the basic material of the course, about which we will be talking and writing."<sup>269</sup> Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, and many poems and stories by Native American, African, and Chinese authors were assigned to help students "to define the actual experiences we ourselves are having, and to make others more aware of our reality as we perceive it."<sup>270</sup> In the SEEK classroom, where the students were not the privileged white students historically imagined as the subjects of literary education, Rich created spaces for them to write and theorize the lived, material, and felt experience of differences of all kinds.

"Teaching Language in Open Admissions" thematizes much of what Rich learned at City College, including how Rich's own relationship to racial and class difference shifted in these classrooms. It is also a crucial text of American literary pedagogy that illustrates the inextricability of how literature is defined and studied and how pedagogical relationships are enacted. The essay dramatizes Rich's increasing awareness of the ways the students she was teaching were not the kind of student she had been. With its opening invocations of Rich's "white liberal guilt," the policemen who had recently "become a threatening figure to many

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<sup>267</sup> Rich Papers, folder 384.

<sup>268</sup> Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, xvi.

<sup>269</sup> Rich, "English 1-H," 2:22.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:22–23.

whites as he had long been to blacks,” and the ways “the white middle class could live in New York,” “Teaching Language” was written by an educator who was trying to feel out what modes of student empowerment were available to her as an educator given her positionality as an upper-middle-class white woman teaching working-class students, many of whom were students of color.<sup>271</sup> She writes as someone for whom the experience of reading and writing literature produced possibilities, “someone for whom language has implied freedom,”<sup>272</sup> but then traces the structural conditions that foreclosed this relationship for many students. Unlike students at expensive institutions, the students at City College had formed different relationships to teaching and learning, colored by the cumulative effects of their educational pasts, including “the drug pushers at the school gates, the obsolete texts, the punitive conception of the teacher’s role, the ugliness, filth, and decay of the buildings, the demoralization even of good teachers working under such conditions.”<sup>273</sup> All these had to be considered when figuring out how literature might also help these students “free themselves through the written word.”<sup>274</sup>

Rich’s essay addresses the intersecting axes of privilege that create significant degrees of difference and unknowability between her and her students: “I cannot know for them what it is they need to free, or what words they need to write; I can only try with them to get an approximation of the story they want to tell.”<sup>275</sup> In her insistence that she “cannot know” what her students need and that the classroom is a space not just of being together in solidarity or community but of being alone together in difference and discord, Rich acknowledges the rifts of racial capitalism that asymmetrically structure the positions of student and teacher in this context. This confession raises the question of how English can be taught if the instructor does

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<sup>271</sup> Rich, “Teaching Language,” 53-4.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

not have the right literature, words, stories, or poems that can do for students what literature did for them.

Rich's process of learning to locate herself differently in the world, not just as a woman but as a white woman, was interlaced with the work she was doing in the classroom. Nearly twenty years later, in 1993, she recalls that, "Walking up to Convent Avenue from Broadway, and in the classroom, I saw much that became part of my own education, having to do with the daily struggle of poor African-American and Puerto Ricans to live and, if possible, to love and, where possible, to put love into action."<sup>276</sup> The SEEK classroom confronted Rich with the lived, material effects of racism and poverty in the United States and the needs, desires, and perspectives of the working class. "I went in white terror," Rich told Audre Lorde reflecting on how it felt to enter the classroom, "now you're on the line, all your racism is going to show."<sup>277</sup> During her tenure in SEEK and Open Admissions, Rich's pedagogy underwent a "profound change"<sup>278</sup> involving a turn toward the poetics of everyday life and the production of a classroom

in which students find themselves having to learn for themselves, and to teach each other, more than they have ever been asked to do. The value of this is not merely to 'increase participation' but to break, once and for all, the modes and patterns which 12 years of public or parochial education have left as their legacy.<sup>279</sup>

In "Teaching Language," Rich critiques her own earlier vision of the pleasures teaching might bring: that she might find, hidden among the students, an unlikely Shakespeare, a nascent poetic genius, whose gifts she could help cultivate. Toward the end of the essay, Rich reveals how teaching in SEEK and Open Admissions corrected that vision. She writes that the transformative possibilities of teaching lie not in the discovery of a singular genius but in the

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<sup>276</sup> Rich, *What is Found There*, 64.

<sup>277</sup> Audre Lorde, "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich," 94.

<sup>278</sup> Rich, "Teaching Language," 53.

<sup>279</sup> Rich, "Final Comments," 34.

“veins of possibility running through students,”<sup>280</sup> all students. A vociferous critic of tokenism, Rich learned to identify the tokenism at work in her own thinking about literary genius. As the individualized myth of the exceptional student gives way to a vision of education as collective liberation, so, too, is literary studies redefined, not as the production of secondary texts about singularly great works but as the production of literature: critical and creative texts that emerge from “the imagery of lives, the anger and flare of urban youth.”<sup>281</sup> In the SEEK classroom Rich and her students were not only reading but redefining and even rewriting American literature through their essays, poems, protests, and news articles. What emerges is a democratic and distributed notion of knowledge production, creativity, authorship, and power, and the idea that aesthetic education must change to nurture the success of students from a wide array of backgrounds and with vastly different life experiences. By teaching students to make, rather than just read, literature, this pedagogy challenges the racial and patriarchal structures of colonial modernity through which affluent white men have been the privileged producers of literature and public school students the consumers. It was in these classrooms that Rich began her lifelong project of bringing together what power forcibly keeps apart: “the making of literature and public education.”<sup>282</sup>

The myth of exceptional genius would shape Rich’s thinking, writing, and activism for years to come. For example, in 1974, Rich joined with Alice Walker and Audre Lorde in refusing the competitive logic of literary prizes like the National Book Award — a kind of tokenism that they saw as creating unnecessary hierarchies among authors in ways that bolster racist and patriarchal institutions. In refusing the individualism of the award, they co-authored a statement that would be jointly read as their shared acceptance speech, regardless of who

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>282</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible* (New York: Norton, 1990), 6.

received the prize: “We believe that we can enrich ourselves more in supporting and giving to each other than by competing against each other; and that poetry...exists in a realm beyond ranking and comparison.”<sup>283</sup> Instead, they dedicated the award to

the self-determination of all women, of every color, identification, or derived class: the poet, the housewife, the lesbian, the mathematician, the mother, the dishwasher, the pregnant teenager, the teacher... the silent whose voices have been denied us, the articulate women who have given us strength to do our work.<sup>284</sup>

Unlike many of her colleagues of color who identified with the larger Harlem community that City College students formed a part of, Rich’s increasing awareness of the effects of her racial and class privilege catalyzed a turn towards a decentralized classroom full of “active participant(s),” what we might now call student-centered pedagogies. Student-centered pedagogy captured Rich’s imagination not merely because, as M. L. J. Abercrombie’s work has shown, it produced more effective medical professionals, but in part because it allowed her to envision alternative relationships of power.<sup>285</sup> Teaching in Harlem in the late 1960s and early 1970s meant facing a classroom full of students who had been taught to distrust education. And thus, transforming a course into a group project and allowing students to have a say in how it is governed was not merely training for the workplace; it offered the possibility that by working together, “mutual trust and familiarity—even some degree of community—might gradually develop . . . among the students and with the instructor.”<sup>286</sup> Teaching students to work together, trust, and learn from one another was central to addressing the histories of white privilege that placed her as the authorizing figure at the front of the classroom. In a moment of heightened attention to teaching and learning methods, Rich’s writing demonstrates how student-centered

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<sup>283</sup> Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, “National Book Award for Poetry Acceptance Speech (1974),” [http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech\\_arich\\_74.html#.WoCkrJPwaqA](http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_arich_74.html#.WoCkrJPwaqA)

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> M.L.J Abercrombie, *Anatomy of Judgment*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).

<sup>286</sup> Rich “Memo to Mina Shaughnessy,” 31.

pedagogical practices emerged through radical feminist and antiracist movements as part of the complex modes of resistance to “ghettoes [sic], Viet Nam, drug addiction, unemployment, spiraling prices, brutalization of men in mass society, [and] the spoilage of the earth and ocean.”<sup>287</sup> By redistributing the power that is hierarchically structured into the classroom, Rich enacted the kind of transformation she wanted to see in the world.

Rich’s writings continue to hold such traction today in part because of her tireless confrontations with her own complicity in the structures of power she critiques. I want to consider this alongside the fact that the professoriate remains overwhelmingly and appallingly white, male, and upper-class — conditions Rich vehemently detested and worked to change. Given this reality, and the increasing diversity of the students we teach (even as state budget cuts to higher education try to halt the speed of this diversification or reverse this trend entirely and for-profit colleges prey on students of color, burdening them with insurmountable debt) many white instructors find themselves in structural positions of power, even as we seek to dismantle the white supremacy that contributed to these conditions. For those of us who seek to act from an awareness of the intersecting axes of oppression, including our own positioning within these axes, Rich models ways that white women can use our positions of relative power and the knowledge and skills we possess to most effectively teach our students. As an educator, Rich was doing the kinds of work she was asking students to do, in terms of locating her lived experiences in relation to structures of power and interrogating the role of the past in structuring the possibilities available to us in the present. Indeed, Rich’s pedagogical legacy has much to offer contemporary educators who are listening to the lessons of Ferguson, Missouri, Charlottesville, and so many other places and figuring out how we can use our power towards the production of a more just and equitable future.

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<sup>287</sup> Rich, “Student Passes, Education Fails,” 25.

### The difference desire makes

At the same time that Rich was engaged, as a professor, in efforts to enact pedagogical, curricular, and institutional change at the City College of New York, she was also involved, as a parent, in the Elizabeth Cleaners Street School (ECSS): an experimental free school in the Upper West Side, designed and run by predominantly white, middle-class parents and children who felt “disenchanted” and “disaffected” towards their education in both public and private schools.<sup>288</sup>

As a parent, Rich witnessed her sons’ feelings that their schools were oppressing them and in 1970 she allowed them to withdraw from their public schools and enroll instead in ECSS, which formed a part of the larger “free,” “alternative,” and “new” schools movements.

The students, parents, and educators involved in these efforts to reinvent school from scratch formed a crucial part of Rich’s pedagogical milieu. Their stories are collected in *Starting Your Own High School* (New York: Random House, 1972), which turns the lessons from the school outwards, into a kind of how-to guide for others interested in creating alternative educational institutions. Rich’s contributions to the collection include two chapters:

“Beginnings,” written in a rigid third-person, journalistic style (the “I” feels noticeably absent, in contrast to much of her writing) and “Education of a parent,” in which she imagines an interview with herself about her involvement with the school (a technique she would use in later essays as well). As evidenced by the very title, “Education of a parent,” highlights the reciprocal nature of these lessons in creating a structure that would nurture, rather than stifle, students’ desires to learn.

Some students at ECSS were unsuccessful in traditional schools, and labeled as troublemakers, while others succeeded but were miserable. In contrast to schools that blame

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<sup>288</sup> Elizabeth Cleaners Street School, *Starting Your Own High School* (New York: Random House, 1972), 4.

students for their misbehaviors, Rich saw her children's disaffection as the product of inadequate institutions:

I happen to feel that it's a rather honorable and hopeful thing to be a 'misfit' in this kind of educational system. And that people labelled as 'problems' by this society are often people who are responding with healthy revulsion to a process which seems to have no meaning for them to be trying to package them for sale in a marketplace.<sup>289</sup>

She writes of schools as “custodial institutions” that stress “‘achievement’ in terms of marks, IQ, all the things I felt were destructive of real learning and understanding...I’d become convinced that the old schooling is deadening to the imagination, to the growth of the self, that is promotes cynicism and passivity.”<sup>290</sup> Rich’s decision to withdraw her sons from these institutions was a response to their felt sense that they were being oppressed in their everyday lives — something she refused to be complicit in. As the parents involved in the ECSS quickly learned, this is a move available only to those with the material securities confirmed by white privilege: the Black and Puerto Rican families they tried to recruit were unwilling to abandon the institutions they had fought so hard to attend, where the accredited degrees promised the security and modest comforts of a middle class life. Without the material safety net provided by our nation’s “possessive investment in whiteness,”<sup>291</sup> experimental alternatives can be far too risky, reminding us of the importance of thinking both within and beyond institutions about pedagogies of social justice.

Rich’s willingness to send her sons to a school that did not yet exist, where the first lesson was how to squat in an abandoned laundromat and the second how to fix a toilet (under the guidance of an expert plumber) affirms how radically democratic her understanding of learning was. In this school, creating a physical space for their learning — a space that could

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<sup>289</sup> Elizabeth Cleaners Street School, *Starting Your Own High School*, 155.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>291</sup> George Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment*.



address their bodily needs for warmth, shelter from the elements, and plumbing — was as important to their education as debates over what would be studied. Jack Litweka's introduction tells the story of the school's inception, with the students as heroes who continually exceed their parents' expectations and abilities to bring the school to fruition. Litweka shares the rules the students decided upon, inserting his own parenthetical reflections on their decisions:

1. A room would not be the classroom. The city, New York City, would be the classroom.
2. Teachers wouldn't orate from the mount, stuff heads full of facts. Teachers would be learning too, or they wouldn't be teachers. (This was the first hint that the kids would fight for, and win, control over the hiring and firing of teachers.)
3. No individual would have decision-making powers over the educational environment.
4. Attendance would not be mandatory.
5. Subjects to be studied would have to be meaningful to and desired by the students. (This was the first hint that the kids would fight for, and win, control over curriculum.)<sup>292</sup>

The students — those who would be affected by the school's policies — wrenched from their parents the responsibility of setting them: establishing attendance policies, hiring teachers, deciding what classes they would take, and even teaching some of the classes themselves. Their class schedule, which varied from week to week, demonstrates their intense desires to learn a wide variety of subjects and skills: in just one representative week, their classes included surrealism, women's and men's liberation, Marx and Lenin, community law, photography, the women's labor movement, Indian culture, comparative religion, folk music, sociology, macrame, comparative religion, the history of drugs, American history, improvisation and theater, Cuba, German literature, Anais Nin, law and morality, guerilla theater, math logic, creative writing, organic cooking, urban ecology, and carpentry and plumbing (among others).<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Jack Litweka, "Introduction," *Starting Your Own School*, 15.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-79.

Litweka's narrative thematizes the things children can do if given power and responsibility and the ways adults continually underestimate them: "It was now absolutely clear that the kids were completely capable of handling much more than they were ever given credit for."<sup>294</sup> In fact, the idea that students are incapable of making their own decisions is the stultifying "rationale of the oppressors" that maintains extant hierarchies by teaching people that they are powerless. Refuting the common understanding that countercultural education was synonymous with anarchy, Litweka explains that

Like all people, they [the students] dislike authoritarianism, be it by adult, parent, teacher, older sibling, governments. They respect knowledge. They don't have any beef with experience. As long as it doesn't condone or create an oppressor and an oppressed. It's that simple. And it's what they should be teaching in universities and aren't.<sup>295</sup>

But as a university professor, Rich had the power to challenge authoritarianism, to teach collaboration rather than obedience, to enact community control in the classroom, and to teach students to build learning spaces around their desires.

Different subjects — understandings of what it might mean to be a parent, a child, a student, a teacher — emerged through the forging of a school that would allow students to learn different kinds of knowledge, in different ways. New subjects, in both senses of the word, emerged from these experiments in uncertainty, in which there were few paths laid out for them. Instead, they had to invent what they desired and develop a language to communicate what they were learning. Rich affirms this as the very goal of education: "The thing I really hope for in my children's education is that they should experience themselves as subjects, instead of being simply acted-on as objects. The old schooling *talks* about the former, but its methods result in the latter."<sup>296</sup> As an educator, poet, and parent, Rich helped students realize their capacity for action.

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>296</sup> Rich, "Education of a Parent," *Starting Your Own High School*, 160.

Rich's response to her own children's educations sharpens our understanding of the role desire plays throughout her praxis. In fact, Rich uses desire as a metric by which to judge the success of the experiment:

Seeing my children interested in life, in good spirits, taking on very tough problems and dealing with them pretty well, seeing them excited by ideas and people they encounter in school. But above all, seeing that they want it to continue, that for all the difficulties it seems worthwhile to them, a daily life they want to live.<sup>297</sup>

Her teaching materials demonstrate efforts to similarly create a classroom environment that would be part of a "daily life they want[ed] to live." At City College, Rich met students who, to use Jacques Rancière's term, had been "stultified" by their previous educational experiences.<sup>298</sup> She sought to break this spell and instead "turn the students on"<sup>299</sup> to the power of language. Desire is at the heart of this pedagogy, evident in Rich's deliberate efforts to select topics and texts that interest students, to use her own enthusiasm for literature to excite students, to give students a say in classroom procedures so that they feel involved in the process (rather than passive recipients), to explain the reasoning behind assignments, and to connect classroom conversations to real world examples. Her work suggests that education can be reimagined if we begin not from abstract concepts of preparing citizen-subjects for the responsibilities of democracy, but from the bottom-up, beginning with our real, material being in the world, and thinking through our desires.

What emerges from these classrooms stands in marked contrast to a multiple-choice pedagogy that reduces the world to one right answer for each problem. Instead, Rich taught students

to read as if your life depended on it...to let into your reading your beliefs, the swirl of

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> "There is stultification whenever one intelligence is subordinated to another." Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991), 13.

<sup>299</sup> Rich, "Teaching Language," 55.

your dreamlife, the physical sensations of your ordinary carnal life; and simultaneously, to allow what you're reading to pierce routines, safe and impermeable, in which ordinary carnal life is tracked, charted, channeled. Then, what of the right answers, the so-called multiple-choice examination sheet with the number 2 pencil to mark one choice and one choice only?<sup>300</sup>

What would education look like if we assumed a desire to learn to be “carnal,” related to our fleshly desires to feel more things, to feel things differently, to conceptualize/reflect on our feelings from a different perspective? How can we create learning that is so exciting, empowering, transformative (“carnal” in Rich’s idiom) that a multiple choice test becomes a laughably antiquated relic of a time gone by? By teaching students to use their desires as a heuristic for reading the world, Rich connects the standardized, one correct answer way of thinking enforced in schools to the narrow, binaristic modes of heterosexual thought that foreclose rather than proliferate possibilities. Just as she revealed the compulsory nature of naturalized phenomena such as motherhood and heterosexuality—revealing these to be institutions regulated and enforced by patriarchal power — she taught students to attend to the ways that schools shape our attitudes, behaviors, and desires in compulsory ways, erasing alternatives and punishing those who deviate from prescribed paths. While traditional forms of aesthetic education naturalize and romanticize patriarchal, heterosexual, and white supremacist institutions, Rich was part of a pedagogical movement that exposed students to the subversive writings of authors like Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and Lorraine Hansberry — literature that challenges the desirability of marriage, heterosexuality, and motherhood, and charts others modes of being and knowing.

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<sup>300</sup> Rich, *What is Found There*, 32-33.

## Revision as feminist pedagogy

Rich's work demonstrates how revision — taking what we have learned and applying it to our own, earlier modes of thought — is a central component of feminist praxis, whether we are addressing a piece of writing, a discipline, an institution, or reimagining the way society is organized.<sup>301</sup> In her classrooms, Rich continually revised her assignments and her worldview. She offered students “hints on revision,” step by step guidelines for writing: “whether it’s a research paper, an imaginative creation, an emotional argument, [or] a documentation of facts collected...The first principle of revision is the same for all...DON’T LET YOUR FIRST DRAFT BE YOUR LAST.”<sup>302</sup> Rich never let her first draft be her last: she meticulously revised her poems and reflected on these revision processes in published essays such as “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.” Even a published poem was not the final word on the subject: in the prefatory notes to her published poetry collections, Rich often looked back on her earlier poetry to comment on the unstated assumptions and omissions contained in a poem. For instance, in 1984, thirty years after writing one of her most famous poems, “The Diamond Cutters,” Rich would look back and “have trouble with the informing metaphor of this poem.”<sup>303</sup> At the time of its authorship, Rich had been writing about diamond cutting as a metaphor for the craft of poetry, but in hindsight, she realized that she

was drawing, quite ignorantly, on the long tradition of domination, according to which

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<sup>301</sup> I join many scholars in identifying revision as a crucial aspect of Rich's feminist praxis and have tried to highlight the ways this emerged in reciprocal relation to her classrooms. I am especially compelled by Talia Shalev's reading of re-vision in Rich's work as “an act of survival that must not only be ongoing, but collaborative” (660). See Shalev (647) for a review of scholarship on Rich and revision. Talia Shalev, “Adrienne Rich's ‘Collaborations’: Re-vision as Durational Address” in *Women's Studies* 46.7 (2017): 646-662.

<sup>302</sup> Rich, “Some Hints on Revision,” 11-12. This occurred amidst the movement for process-based writing pedagogies which rose to prominence in the late 60s and early 70s. Rich's attention to revision and process helps locate this pedagogical movement in relation to larger social justice movements.

<sup>303</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Notes on the Poems,” *Collected Poems (1950-2012)*, (New York: Norton, 2016), 1122.

the precious resource is yielded up into the hands of the dominator as if by a natural event. The enforced and exploited labor of actual Africans in actual diamond mines was invisible to me and, therefore, invisible in the poem, which does not take responsibility for its own metaphor. I note this here because this kind of metaphor is still widely accepted, and I still have to struggle against it in my work.<sup>304</sup>

Here, Rich looks back on her earlier writing in light of what she had learned about the power of language to erase the realities of labor, exploitation, and violence, and takes responsibility for her abstracting language that obscures the real, material facts surrounding a situation. This commentary reveals the blinders of her privilege relative to those implicated in the actual violence of her metaphor. Rather than renouncing or rewriting the poem, she lays bare for the reader what she had been thinking at the time, a testament to how she once thought and felt, admitting her complicity in that which she has come to critique. Here she details the trials, errors, and missteps — the learning behind the lesson. We might think of this as showing one's work, as in a math problem. At the same time, she admits the difficulty of this task: how we don't simply unlearn habits, but must be careful, reflective, and re-visionary in our use of language. In this instance, she does not call people out but invites us into this self-reflective mode of thought to consider the ways our language and actions have, in whatever small or unintentional ways, perpetuated the status quo, rather than actively working to subvert it. This is not an apology, but an act of assuming responsibility, a commitment to doing better, and a call to action. A more just and equitable future depends on this possibility for learning, revision, and the application of new knowledge to our thinking about the world.

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In Rich's spirit, this chapter concludes with a series of revisions.

In 1977, Rich was asked if she would be interested in helping establish a creative writing MFA program at Rutgers University. In response, she offered a counterproposal, suggesting

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 1123.

instead an MA program in *creative teaching* as a more worthwhile investment with tremendous potential for social good. Citing her aversion to cordoning off “creative writing” from all other forms of literacy, she argued that we need a society with more *creative educators* who can draw out the “talent and expressiveness” that go “undeveloped” in the majority of students—those who do not find themselves at elite universities or enrolled in expensive creative writing MFA programs. In contrast to the ease with which one can teach students who already identify as writers and can afford an MFA program, “remedial writing makes constant demands on the imagination, requires rigorous training, and is finally a far more productive pursuit societally.”<sup>305</sup>

In the late 1980s, when Rich was teaching feminist studies courses at Stanford University, male and female symbols began appearing on her assignments as she experimented with giving different work to students based on their gender identities. Inspired by the pamphlets and manifestos they read during the semester, female students were asked to use what they had learned about “diction, style, [and] tone” to write a position paper for women at Stanford on the issue of sexual harassment. Male students were tasked with writing a position paper to educate other male students about sexual harassment on campus including possible responses. The creative challenge for educators today is engaging students in this kind of thinking about audience and communities of readers differentially positioned amidst intersecting axes of power without subjecting them to rigid gender binaries.

In 1988, Rich co-taught an English and feminist studies course with her then partner Michelle Cliff titled “Women and Difference: Marginality, Art, Politics,” which analyzed how the creation of art functions as a political response to marginalization and oppression. In this course, the art itself, the texts they were reading and aimed to produce, inspired different configurations of power, knowledge, and learning. “Emphasis on creation of the text or artform

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<sup>305</sup> Rich Papers, folder 395.

as response to marginalization leads to delineating issues of legitimation, language, education, reception,” they wrote in their reflections on a course that was co-taught by two lesbian feminist poets, one white and one black, in which students were encouraged not only to lead the class discussions but to make the art that was the subject of the course.

These final examples—a proposal for an MA program in creative teaching, experiments with different assignments for students with different gender identities, and a co-taught course on art, marginalization, and politics—illustrate the ways in which the experimental pedagogical ethos of the SEEK and Open Admissions classrooms continued to inspire Rich for the remainder of her career. If Homer, Shakespeare, Keats, and Melville had all but disappeared by the time of “Women and Difference: Marginality, Art, Politics,” replaced by the increasingly available literature authored by writers of color, activists on and off campus, and the students in the course, what remains is the poetic impulse: the insistence upon possibility, even and perhaps especially when there seems to be none.

Today, nationwide, students of color and their allies are issuing demands from universities to redistribute campus resources and enact curricular changes to include more radically (economically, racially, geographically, linguistically) diverse knowledges, experiences, histories, and literatures.<sup>306</sup> “The moment of change is the only poem,”<sup>307</sup> Rich wrote in 1970, inviting us to admit that we must question what we have learned, loved, and held sacred; listen to those whose voices are deliberately kept silent; and continue to experiment, reimagining an engaged literary studies worthy of students’ visions of collective liberation.

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<sup>306</sup> See [thedemands.org](http://thedemands.org).

<sup>307</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Images for Godard,” in *Will to Change*, 47–49.



“To write stories that save our lives”:  
Toni Cade Bambara and the Art of Polyvocal Placemaking

Toni Cade Bambara’s criteria for a good novel, documentary, or piece of student writing were all the same: have you helped your audience see your subject in a new way? Bambara was a lifelong educator whose work traversed classrooms and community centers, and included activist interventions in curricula, from primary schools through higher education. For instance, Bambara developed enriched arts curricula for high school students in predominantly black schools districts in Newark, Trenton, and Atlanta so that their education would include photography, mass communication, drama, poetry, design, music, and creative writing.<sup>308</sup> As a professor of English, American studies, and black studies, Bambara insisted that students, even in remedial classes, make crucial decisions about the content and the methods of their courses. This pedagogy of active, engaged participation within her own classrooms parallels Bambara’s activism in New York City’s movement for community control of schools, an effort by black and Puerto Rican parents to change “the policies and practices of what was perceived as a rule-laden, bureaucratic, and colonial school system” by involving poor communities of color in educational decision making processes.<sup>309</sup> While Bambara’s formal teaching experiences became more sporadic in the 1970s and 1980s, she dove headfirst into community arts education, serving as artist-in-residence at the Neighborhood Arts Center in Atlanta, where she passionately advocated the artist’s responsibility to their community, and spearheading the Community Visions grassroots videography project at the Scribe Center in Philadelphia. At the same time, she was

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<sup>308</sup> Linda Janet Holmes, *A Joyous Revolt: Toni Cade Bambara, Writer and Activist* (Santa Barbara: Prager, 2014), 103.

<sup>309</sup> Heather Lewis, *New York City Public Schools: From Brownsville to Bloomberg, Community Control and Its Legacy* (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 2013), 4. As Heather Lewis compellingly argues, while the community control of these districts was short lived, the demands, goals, and aspirations of the movement — professional accountability, equitable opportunities to learn, creative and innovative education — extended far beyond 1970.

working on her explosive novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and later co-produced the acclaimed documentary *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (1986) both of which employ the kinds of participatory, polyvocal storytelling strategies that were the subject of her formal and informal classrooms.

In this chapter, I analyze Bambara's archival teaching materials, published anthologies, *The Salt Eaters*, and *The Bombing of Osage Avenue*. Analysis of this multifaceted work demonstrates that Bambara's polyvocal storytelling encompassed not only the literary fiction for which she is famous, but was also a methodology that she explored in the classroom, where she insisted that all students have a voice in producing their shared space of learning. These acts of co-creating the physical space of the classroom and the shared social space of storytelling were means through which Bambara contested the hierarchies of race, class, and gender that structure education and society. Her teaching and art authorized previously unauthorized stories and storytellers; cautioned that institutions actively obscure liberatory knowledges; encouraged readers to seek out perspectives deliberately obscured by power, and to ask, at every turn, *whose voices are not being heard here?*; affirmed agency, vitality, and change especially where it has been erased; and demonstrated that how we narrate people's relationships to place, and how we tell the story of our own relationships to place, are deeply material questions with profound political implications. Bambara's work, I contend, demonstrates how pedagogical praxis organized around collective placemaking and storytelling was part of much larger projects aimed towards materializing social justice.

As an author, educator, filmmaker, and activist, Bambara's blueprints for collective black liberation always exceeded the constraints of an inadequate present, and yet she was ruthlessly materialist in her insistence that art was not a retreat, but a means for intervention. In Bambara's

classes at City College (1965-69), Livingston College (1969-74), Duke University (1974), Atlanta University (1977), Spelman College (1977-79), and Carleton College (1987-88) students conducted research from the very first day of class, experimented with different modes of storytelling, challenged the dominant geopolitics of knowledge production, and were taught to see their learning as a collective and social endeavor that made an impact far beyond the individuals in each classroom.<sup>310</sup> While teaching at Livingston College, Bambara ensured that these lessons radiated outwards by weaving students' writing into the anthologies of black literature, criticism, and children's stories that she was editing, right alongside the work of such literary luminaries as Langston Hughes, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, and Alice Walker. Not only did she publish students' rewritings of colonial, imperial, and racist children's stories (such as "Little Black Riding Hood" and the "Three Little Panthers"), she traveled with them to elementary schools and children's hospitals to share these lessons with a larger audience. Her workshops taught members of working-class black communities how to tell stories through the production of broadsides, journalism, fiction, and film. In these settings, she encouraged participants to "democratize group relations [and] decolonize the tools."<sup>311</sup> When Bambara traveled to Vietnam in 1975, as part of an anti-imperialist feminist delegation, guests of the Vietnamese Women's Union, she drew on her training in theater (she specialized in mime) to guide the women in an improvisational healing session that was as pedagogical as it was spiritual.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Some courses: "Intro to Third World Literature" (Duke University), "Approaches to the Study of the Contemporary Black Woman" (Atlanta University) and "Images of Black women in Literature and Film" (Spelman College), various American literature and black studies courses, and prose, fiction-writing, and film workshops.

<sup>311</sup> Scribe Video Center Workshop 1994, Box 5, Toni Cade Bambara Archive, Spelman College.

<sup>312</sup> Holmes, *A Joyous Revolt*, 83.

Each of these formations — classrooms, literature, community organizations, and film — presented opportunities to intervene in the status quo. In fact, the breadth of activities that Bambara brings forth as opportunities to alter our modes of being, thinking, and relating is central to her pedagogy. In the post Civil Rights era, when many activists were feeling disenchanted, burnt out, or confused as to where all of the “confrontation, uncompromising rhetoric, muscle flexing, press conferences, manifestoes, visible groups, quasi-underground groups, hitting the streets, singing, marching, etc.” had gone, Bambara made it her mission to help others see that “while less visible and less audible and less easy to perceive,” collective organizing and political intervention in “the last quarter of the twentieth century” was “no less passionate and no less significant.”<sup>313</sup> By taking seriously that teaching, literature, and film are all pedagogical modes, we can better understand how Bambara reconfigured hierarchical modes of relationality between teachers and students, authors and editors, authors and readers, and filmmakers and audiences. In this chapter, storytelling functions as an act of poesis and placemaking: of collectively transforming space into place and transforming ourselves in the process. This notion of placemaking draws on Katherine McKittrick’s work, which demonstrates how black feminist texts present landscapes not as neutral backgrounds, but as sites of contested power struggle that illuminate oppositional and subaltern geographies.<sup>314</sup>

While Bambara is most famous for her fiction, she identified more broadly as a “cultural worker,” a term that describes the political nature of her work as an author, community organizer, artist, screenwriter, filmmaker, mother, and teacher.<sup>315</sup> The cultural worker seeks to redistribute power, resources, and pleasure, and understands the terrain of culture as a crucial

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<sup>313</sup> Bambara quoted in Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 13.

<sup>314</sup> Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>315</sup> According to Holmes, the cultural worker “used the arts—literary works, film, theater, music, dance, and the visual arts—as instruments of self-renewal and transformation” (*Revolt*, xviii).

battleground for doing so. The term “cultural worker” collapses traditional distinctions among these activities, instead inviting us to see how these modes present opportunities to mobilize people, transform structures of injustice and inequality, and build better alternatives. “Organize where you are,” Bambara taught her students, pointing towards “a tenant group, a women’s organization, a prison group, a student movement, the release of a Julie Dash film, publication of an anthology of women of color as evidence of continued agitation for social change.”<sup>316</sup>

### Radical listening

In 1965, fresh out of an M.A. program in Modern American Literature at City College, Bambara was hired to teach English at her alma mater in the SEEK program. At that time, Bambara had been recognized for her writing as an undergraduate and had successfully placed a short story in the *Massachusetts Review*, but she was far from the prolific and widely-celebrated author that we know her as today. Similar to Audre Lorde, it was in the classroom that Bambara would come to think of herself as a writer and recognize the transformative work that storytelling could do in the world.<sup>317</sup>

By 1969 it was clear to Bambara and her co-conspirators that the influx of local Harlem students who arrived at City College through SEEK desperately wanted something better than what they found there. Revolution was in the air, resounding in the hallways and pulsing through campus. Bambara captures this spirit in an article published in the City College student newspaper titled “Realizing the Dream of a Black University”:

If the rumblings at the College are anything to go by, if the seriously posed questions our students and white students are raising in classes are anything to go by, if the demands

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<sup>316</sup> Linda Janet Holmes, “Lessons in Boldness, 101” in *Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara* eds. Linda Janet Holmes and Cheryl A. Wall (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2007), 157.

<sup>317</sup> “Working At It In Five Parts” (2 drafts), box 4, Toni Cade Bambara Archive, Spelman College.

for curriculum change stated by the Onyx Society, the DuBois Club, by SDS, and a number of other organizations are anything to go by, if the responses from the current SEEK poll are anything to go by — then we might be reasonable in saying that there is a great deal of discontent on this campus... an explosion is imminent.<sup>318</sup>

This quote places Bambara within a long genealogy through which the education of racial and ethnic minorities has been understood either as a vital or threatening means of disrupting the status quo.<sup>319</sup> Mainstream media vilified these dissatisfied students as “culturally deprived” and ungrateful for their access to a City College education. As Biondi writes, they were “accused of lowering standards, supporting racial exclusion, and pushing an agenda that was more political than academic.”<sup>320</sup> When students admitted to the college through SEEK expressed dissatisfaction with traditional curriculum, many English professors were quick not only to dismiss their reactions, but also to participate in the media’s vilification of working-class students of color as “ungrateful” and “ineducable.”<sup>321</sup> By contrast, Bambara and her colleagues asked how their classrooms might nurture political desires for change and help turn this discontent into dissent.

One way Bambara contributed to these efforts was by historicizing this moment: helping students see their struggles as part of a longer movement for educational and racial justice amidst institutions structured by inequality. Her newspaper article explained that since the founding of City College in 1847, the working class students who matriculated brought with them unique “skills, needs, ambitions, demands,” quite different from the students who attended Harvard, Princeton, or Yale, and for whom education has historically been designed. “[T]hey played

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<sup>318</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, “Realizing the Dream of a Black University,” *Observation Post*, February 14, 1969, 4.

<sup>319</sup> DuBois writes, “...the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro. And the South was not wholly wrong; for education among all kinds of men has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent.” W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Lanham: Dancing Unicorn Books, 2017), 29.

<sup>320</sup> Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, 116, 128.

<sup>321</sup> Traub, *City On A Hill*.

havoc with traditional education, but not enough for our purposes,” Bambara writes, describing the subsequent waves of students who were gradually admitted to the university through various democratizing measures, “non-upper-class, non-Anglo stock students... the hippie, the yippie, the radical, the militant, the underclassed, the overlooked.”<sup>322</sup> With the arrival of each new group, the “fissures” in traditional college curriculum expanded. She frames this not as the inevitable outcome of the teleological march towards social progress, but as the products of actual marches in the streets, and of battles hard-fought and won. As Bambara writes in this address to City College students, “To obtain a relevant, real education, we shall have to either topple the university or set up our own.”<sup>323</sup>

“Realizing the Dream of a Black University,” echoes Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous insistence that dreams are integral to the struggle for racial justice. As historians Robin D.G. Kelley and Martha Biondi have argued, dreaming, even utopian dreaming, has played a crucial role in black freedom struggles.<sup>324</sup> Bambara, like many in these movements, was actively involved in critiquing the status quo, imagining alternatives, and creating blueprints, or maps, of how we might collectively move from the former to the latter. In a section of “Realizing the Dream of a Black University” titled “Some Possible Courses...” Bambara radically reimagines a curriculum that would help produce a flourishing black community, including courses in “American Justice and the Afro-American,” “Negritude,” “Nutrition,” “Psychology and Blacks,” “Eastern Ethics Through Literature,” and “Revolution.” The instructors for these courses would be activists, Black Panthers, lawyers, members of the NAACP, Addison Gayle, chefs from soul food restaurants, grandmothers, dieticians, students, and dancers. “Nutrition” would provide “an historical account of how the African staples introduced in slave areas (U.S., South America,

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<sup>322</sup> Bambara, “Realizing,” 5.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>324</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* and Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*.

Caribbean, etc.), helped to stabilize the economy and the diet of those areas,” with special emphasis on the “soul food of Black and Latin people from a nutritional, geographical, historical, cultural point of view.” While “Nutrition” would involve field work in restaurants around the city, “Root Courses” would be “part workshop or studio dance, part lecture, part lecture-demonstration” in which a team of instructors would teach students about the historical significance of dance moves such as the “locked leg and the body pivoting around it,” found in Nigerian, Haitian, and Brazilian dance. In “Revolution,” students would read “the empire novels of Conrad, Dostoevsky, [and] Kipling” alongside postcolonial literatures of resistance—poems and letters from the Vietnamese Journal, the works of Chinua Achebe, and guerilla historians such as Che Guevara. Bambara’s proposed courses teach students to locate their lived experiences in global power struggles, thus shifting dominant geopolitics of knowledge production. The holistic education described in “Realizing the Dream of a Black University” and enacted through her teaching refuses Cartesian distinctions, takes seriously embodied ways of knowing the world, and aims to nourish students’ minds, bodies, and souls.

In order to realize the dream of a black university, students, those whose voices have long been excluded from decisions about what they should learn and how they should learn it, must take charge of the movement:

Few of us have been willing to do our homework, really map out the areas that need to be covered...What remains is work from you, students. It will do none of us any good if the Center is run by faculty, if curriculum is designed wholly by faculty, if staff is hired merely by faculty...that job has got to be done cooperatively, with the major work on your shoulders, the thrust and demand coming from you.<sup>325</sup>

The student-centered, participatory ethos of this call to action was shaped by movements for black liberation and self-determination. And the students responded. Just two months later, Black and Puerto Rican students and their allies took over the South Campus of City College,

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<sup>325</sup> Bambara, “Realizing,” 5-6.



transforming it into “Harlem University,” thus enacting the better education they desired, and knew was possible. While it may have lasted only two weeks and certainly failed to enact radical alternatives to gendered power hierarchies, Harlem University was irrefutable evidence that things could be otherwise, the lessons of which extended far beyond its brief existence.

Roderick Ferguson has drawn critical attention to this moment, arguing that U.S. universities responded to student movements at City College and nationwide with representational solutions to material problems, by creating departments of race, gender, and ethnicity that incorporated the movements’ insurrectionary aspirations while ignoring their demands for collective material redistribution.<sup>326</sup> While Bambara was a leader of the movement for black studies, less attention has been given to what she actually did with students in the classroom to materialize social justice. Just blocks away from the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School, the City College SEEK classrooms were their own kind of stages for revolutionary performance, where art was central to social transformation and black liberation. Attending to the classroom as a site of slow movement building provides a different optic, or metric, for this moment, allowing us to apprehend acts of resistance that occurred despite this incorporation and the ways teaching and learning played a pivotal role in movements for racial justice.

Bambara and her colleagues explored how their courses might nurture students’ desires for social change. In her classrooms, Bambara taught students to critique the ways Anglo-Saxon literature is taught as “The Literature,” and that “World History” is taught as White Western History, in short, that their curriculum deliberately overlooked “the role the African and Afro-American tradition plays in our history, our art, our culture.”<sup>327</sup> She taught students to listen to

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<sup>326</sup> Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*.

<sup>327</sup> Bambara, “Realizing,” 4.

the silences in canon and curriculum and recognize these not as casual omissions, but the effects of power in a white supremacist society and insisted they address these absences through their coursework. Her unpublished archival document “Report on the Summer Seminar, Pre-Baccalaureate Program” demonstrates the pedagogical implications of this radical listening.<sup>328</sup>

“Report” describes two SEEK seminars Bambara taught in the summer of 1968. It appeared alongside reflections authored by Shaughnessy, Christian, and Gayle, and is located not in Bambara’s own archives, but those of Rich, testifying to their vibrant networks of pedagogical exchange. Rather than submitting a dry, bureaucratic summary of the summer’s successes and failures, Bambara instead contributed an explosive—alternately despairing and optimistic—document, which captures the affective environment of the classroom. That summer “attendance was spotty, weather singularly lousy, classrooms unbearable, and attention not always rapt.” But it was in these less than inspiring conditions, in classrooms equipped with minimal resources, that Bambara enacted a radical pedagogy that asked remedial English students to make crucial decisions about their learning: to decide not only what they would learn, but also how, and on what terms they would participate in the course.

The narrative begins on a Wednesday night in early June with Bambara and her students gathered in a hot room in the Almac hotel (repurposed as the SEEK dormitory) to “map out their summer course,” a cartographic trope that appears throughout her pedagogy:

One of the final requests I usually make of students before they depart for final exams is to design a course that they would like, that would fulfill their needs...Based upon that feedback, this summer’s classes tended to focus on Black literature, contemporary preoccupations, techniques of argument, and free-form writing assignments...<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, “Report on the Summer Seminar, Pre-Baccalaureate Program, City College,” Adrienne Rich Papers, series 4, folder 385, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe. All subsequent quotes are from this document unless otherwise noted.

<sup>329</sup> Bambara, “Report,” 10.

The students decided the topic would be “Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism and Liberation,” beginning with Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and its influence on radical movements and moving on to texts such as Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, LeRoi Jones’ *Home*, and Andre Malraux’s *Man’s Fate*, placing equal emphasis on newspaper articles from a variety of sources and the students’ own writings.

While liberal education dictates that students must first master an existing foundation of knowledge before gradually progressing towards more specialized research in a discipline, students in “Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism, and Liberation” did research from day one. Anytime an unfamiliar issue was raised by the readings, students investigated the topic and authored a report to teach the class (about Senghor and the Negritude movement, Pan-Africanism since 1950, the Battle of Algiers, etc.). They scoured their neighborhoods for alternative newspapers, reached out to African American community organizations, dug through library shelves, and interviewed their friends and family to find those perspectives deliberately obscured by power. On the one hand, these were deliberate efforts to unlearn the lessons accumulated through years of uninspiring, irrelevant, and whitewashed education in New York City’s underfunded public schools. At the same time, by working in their communities, conducting oral histories, visiting the Schomburg, and traveling to the Chad School in Newark to report on their Afrocentric pedagogies, students learned to see knowledge as distributed and located in places not valued by academic institutions as sites of knowledge production. By taking seriously that a community organization or a local Harlem newspaper had just as much to say as a textbook, Bambara and her students challenged the notion of universities as privileged sites of knowledge production and reconfigured geopolitical relations between the college and its community.

Reassessing how knowledge is distributed resulted in transformations to who speaks and who listens in the classroom. At the beginning of each class, Bambara or a student would “summarize the assigned readings, raise questions, ask for parallels in their own experience that would make Fanon’s or others’ statements valid, relevant, incidental, phony, half-baked or suspect.”<sup>330</sup> The following hour would be spent in discussion, with the final hour reserved for students

who felt they had either acquired a skill which they wanted to demonstrate (the ability to persuade, refute, recruit, mobilize to action, cool out, dissuade), or had hit upon some salient material while working on the special reports in libraries of the city or foundations or other institutes, or had beaten their way toward a ‘position’ and wished to use the group as a sounding board.<sup>331</sup>

While recent scholarship on black feminist pedagogy has encouraged skepticism towards rhetoric,<sup>332</sup> Bambara’s parenthetical verbs describe the skills she aimed to teach using verbs that I struggle to think of in any other terms: “the ability to persuade, refute, recruit, mobilize to action, cool out, [and] dissuade.” Leaving the last hour open-ended created an environment in which students were responsible for their learning and not everyone was expected to be learning the same things. This format maximized their collective potential, taking advantage of one another as a participatory audience full of interlocutors who could offer the kinds of feedback, dialogue, interaction, and alternative perspectives through which we learn. Rather than a space to perform bourgeois civility, Bambara’s classroom was a site of heated conflicts. For example, in what became a pedagogical jam session, a student hijacked their class to rap for nearly two hours on “at least 80% of the themes” they had discussed that summer including “the criminality of education [and] the paternalism of the SEEK Program.” The audience raised their hands to ask

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “Nobody Mean More.”

this student questions about his “treatise on the freedom and limits of learning,” but he refused to stop rapping, instead castigating them for not listening.

In a note to other “teachers who use fiction,” Bambara describes one of the most surprising lessons from the summer. The class, she recalls, lost momentum after LeRoi Jones’ *Home* and got “sluggish” and quieter as they began reading novels. “I’m tired of living through fiction,” one student explained, as the class nodded in agreement. That evening, Bambara received a phone call from another student who defended his recent absences because the class felt like it was losing its urgency: “Identifying with heroes in books is like masturbating,” he told her. This was the height of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement, mere days after May 1968. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been murdered just two months earlier and the ire was palpable. The previous semester, students walked out of and took over schools worldwide in protest against the Vietnam War, authoritarian regimes, and apartheid, including at Columbia University, just blocks away from City College. Listening, Bambara realized that “many a student becomes quickly impatient if not guilty with living vicariously in these times that demand vital and total participation. The wary students find sanctuary in literature; the alert student prefers to respond to writings produced by his fellow classmates.” Rather than dismiss students’ responses to assigned readings, Bambara reconsidered her own relationship to fiction, radically listening to those whose voices are typically silenced. While Bambara herself experienced the “emancipatory impulse” of fiction, she recognized that this moment demanded creative ways to use the art of storytelling to help these students materialize the changes they wanted to see in the world. Long before the widespread use of the internet, and its promise of grassroots, participatory communication, or the advocacy of “multimodal” composition, Bambara enacted a pedagogy that encouraged participants to experiment with storytelling

strategies across different media, genres, and forms. While poetry and theater were the Black Arts Movements' preferred genres, because of their ability to conjure publics and collective experiences,<sup>333</sup> Bambara invited students to compose essays, fiction, films, radio programs, and news articles, understanding the capacity of each mode to reach different audiences.

For their final assignments, students were asked to find or invent a form that would best tell the story of their learning and share these lessons with a public audience beyond the classroom. "Do not write term papers for me," Bambara told students, "Make sure they are useful for somebody else as well," suggesting forms such as an individual or collaborative annotated bibliography, performance art, a short story (for radio or TV), a magazine, puppet theater, a street theater performance, a slide show, or a picture book. The one requirement was that it "can be shared with others."<sup>334</sup> This assignment encourages students to see education not merely in liberal, individualized terms, but in terms of its social impact. Sharing what they had learned with those who didn't have the privilege of being there taught students that their learning was made possible by and had an effect on other people. It made learning into a collective pursuit, through which students contribute to the social good, and thus was a crucial part of feminist and antiracist movements to make colleges more accountable to diverse communities.

Bambara designed this assignment in response to the desires students expressed for relevant learning. This exemplifies the kind of radical listening that "Report" both advocates and performs through its formal construction. The narrative weaves quotes from students in with the story of how, as an instructor, Bambara worked to produce this student-orchestrated scene of teaching and learning. It foregrounds moments in which students' desires were not dismissed, but taken seriously, shaping the methods and content of the course. It records the moments of

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<sup>333</sup> John H Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst, eds. *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).

<sup>334</sup> Holmes, "Lessons in Boldness," 157.

friction, discord, and learning, those that stuck with Bambara even after the course formally ended and illuminated alternative ways of enacting education. For instance, Bambara fantasizes about not assigning a variety of writing exercises, but instead spending the entire course on one assignment, which students would continually revise to better understand the unwieldiness of words and get a feel for the art of communicating an idea.

“Report” includes a striking passage that can be read as the author’s teaching philosophy:

I think a good teacher provokes rather than assuages, raises questions rather than provides answers, allows the students to discover techniques rather than teaches them, and equips the students with skills so that he can sever ties with the teacher quickly and teach himself... The aim of my stumble trial and error approach, then, is to make the classroom unsafe, to bomb the hiding student out of his corner, to blast the insulating walls down, to nimbly take the most rash and contradictory positions so that students do not feel they have to preach the party line to pass the course, to demand that each student participate in the content, direction, and goals of the course, and to provide the kind of relationship in which the student will always feel free to terminate or to change, to walk out of the room to work [on] his project, to do advance work on material he feels more important than what is offered in the classroom.

In this passage, Bambara replaces the verbs of hierarchical pedagogy with those of social justice education. The teacher does not “assuage...[or] provide answers” or even “teach.” Instead, instructors “provoke...raise questions” and create the conditions for student discovery. As an author, Bambara realized that overhauling our educational imaginary in order to empower students who had been abused by their K-12 schools involved changing the very language we use to talk about education, which is so steeped, even at the levels of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, in hierarchical distributions of power and knowledge. She even had to invent new verbs like “teach/learn” to describe this education.<sup>335</sup>

This passage describes the production of an “unsafe” classroom: a space not in which students find shelter from everyday conditions of injustice, but work to address these. While

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<sup>335</sup> Holmes, *A Joyous Revolt*, 134.

Bambara's adjectives resonate with contemporary conversations around safe spaces and trigger warnings, her images of bombing the students out of hiding and blasting down the walls between classrooms and communities reveal an underlying concern with the material, embodied violence of antiblack racism as the classroom's horizon of address. These images demonstrate how Bambara's pedagogy acknowledged the long, ongoing war against black life as liberal democracy's conditions of possibility and the acute threat of state-sanctioned violence against radical Black students. They remind us that structural inequality and state violence against people of color should be understood as the subjects of transformative education.

Bambara's image of exploding the walls between their classroom and Harlem locates this praxis amidst larger social movements that challenged the institutions, curriculum, and pedagogies of a white supremacist society. Rather than cultivating what Ferguson calls a "will to institutionality," a kind of reverence for and attachment to the university as the sole legitimizing source of knowledge, Bambara invites students to disidentify with the university's false pretenses of objective authority and refuse institutionality if their desires exceed the classroom.

On the surface, Bambara's teaching philosophy describes what educators might now call student-centered pedagogy. Bambara had experienced progressive pedagogy as a student, but understood its limits, and sought to move beyond these through her work as an educator. Growing up, Bambara was always listening to—always eavesdropping on—the world around her: the subway, beauty parlors, the Apollo, Speaker's Corner, these were her classrooms, and "Rastafarians, Muslims, trade unionists, communists, [and] Pan-Africanists"<sup>336</sup> were her teachers. But she also attended progressive schools like Greer Academy in the Hudson Valley, which incorporated courses ranging from the arts to gardening and emphasized curiosity and

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<sup>336</sup> What Is It I Think I'm Doing Anyway? (Draft and Proof), box 4, folders 80-82, Toni Cade Bambara Archive, Spelman College.



imagination as crucial elements of a holistic education. She later attended the Katherine Dunham School, which provided a rigorous education in the humanities, philosophy, drama, and languages.<sup>337</sup> Repeatedly, Bambara found herself as one of the few, “exceptional,” Black students fortunate enough to attend these schools and in her later work was determined both to dispel this tokenism and share some version of this aesthetic education with working class students of color. These schools cultivated Bambara’s love of learning, instilling in the precocious youth an image of school as “a great hall filled with books and paper and clay and musical instruments and very knowledgeable people who loved children and boxes of muddy colored knitting wool to make sweaters for the English RAF.”<sup>338</sup> While ostensibly a memory, Bambara’s comic, understated image of students knitting themselves into the imperial matrix of power offers subtle commentary on how aesthetic education trains students to harbor Anglocentric sympathies. She clung to this vision of school as a place of creativity, even as she later encountered educators who were more “concerned with getting that aviator cap off my head” than “getting in my head” and cultivating her imagination.<sup>339</sup>

Reflecting on the progressive schools of her childhood, Bambara noted that while they started from a good premise — that children should be free — they lacked a consideration of social theory and failed to provide students with a compass for social action, intervention, and change.<sup>340</sup> In contrast to progressive schools, which focused too narrowly on training students for an inadequate present, Pan-African schools like the Chad School (Newark), the Nairobi Schools (East Palo Alto), and the Black Panther’s Oakland Community School modeled a more transformative pedagogy. According to Bambara, these schools “start with the premise that

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<sup>337</sup> Holmes, *Revolt*, 27-31.

<sup>338</sup> Holmes, *Revolt*, 10.

<sup>339</sup> Bambara qtd. in *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>340</sup> Abena P.A. Busia, “Teaching Toni Cade Bambara Teaching: Learning with the Children in Toni Cade Bambara’s ‘The Lesson,’” in *Savoring*, 188.

children are responsible, competent, efficient, and principled... kids are encouraged to raise questions. They're encouraged to take on responsibility, they're encouraged to critique everything they read, everything they see."<sup>341</sup> Bambara's pedagogy, like that of the Oakland Community School, was shaped both by progressive theories of education — evident in the school's motto, "learning *how* to think, not *what* to think" — and movements for black studies that issued trenchant critiques of racist public schools.<sup>342</sup>

Bambara's pedagogy challenges institutional hierarchies of knowledge and power, what she called "the coloniality of the student-teacher relationship": the frightening amount of control teachers are given over students' hearts and minds. In the context of SEEK, hierarchical relations between students and teachers replicated social conditions in which decisions are made for, rather than by, poor people of color. Indeed, this was the critique being issued by the contemporaneous movement for the community control of schools, with which Bambara was intimately involved. Having students collectively establish the intents for their learning and negotiate the terms on which their work would be evaluated prepared them for self-governance and collective decision making beyond the classroom. Whereas contemporary educators may read this deferral to students as a sort of neoliberal, customer-service oriented approach to teaching and learning, for Bambara this was an act of decolonizing the classroom and resisting the upward redistribution and consolidation of power. While the SEEK summer courses were intended to prepare students to matriculate into the mainstream curriculum at City College, Bambara understood "remediation" differently: that what these students needed was a political education that would help them better understand the systemic injustices and inequalities in

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Murch, *Living for the City*, 182. As Murch also shows, the school's founder, Ericka Huggins, and other members of the Black Panther Party organized the school on "progressive models of nonauthoritarian, hands-on approaches to learning...[and] explicitly repudiated industrial-style education, which they blamed for reproducing racial and class disparity."

which their lives were unfolding, and allow them to explore their own styles for collective intervention. She made sure that students left her class cognizant of the gaps in dominant, institutional knowledges and mainstream narratives; able to do research and seek out missing perspectives; aware that authority is not synonymous with knowledge and not always legitimate; and with the power to tell stories, rather than be told by them. We are left with little doubt that, faced with a whitewashed syllabus or dull assignments, these students will challenge the teacher, propose alternatives, make art, or “walk out of the room... to do advance work on material he feels more important than what is offered in the classroom.”<sup>343</sup>

City College sharpened Bambara’s sense that there are few institutions more steeped in and productive of modern bourgeois liberalism than the U.S. university, and few disciplines, if any, more structured by its logic than English. As an English instructor, Bambara was working to unlearn her own “bourgeois training that promoted ‘literaphilia’ as a surrogate for political action and ‘sensibility’ as a substitute for social consciousness.”<sup>344</sup> Bambara spent years teaching art, language, and literature, determined not to reproduce a literary pedagogy that substituted appreciation or reverence for structural critique, collective imagining, and action. But Bambara would grow increasingly skeptical of formal educational institutions over the years, and for good reasons. She experienced widespread hostility to the liberatory, collective pedagogy she practiced, and skepticism towards the “legitimacy” of the courses she wanted to teach on Black women writers. At one point, she even went so far as to pledge avoiding campus life altogether.<sup>345</sup> But the lessons of the early years in SEEK stuck with Bambara, who maintained, throughout her life and work, a sense that classrooms could be a place to transform the self, get organized, make art, and have an impact. While Bambara expressed a deep disdain for

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>344</sup> Bambara quoted in Holmes, *Revolt*, 92.

<sup>345</sup> Holmes, *Revolt*, 107.

universities as institutions, it was the promise of taking control over the means of producing knowledge and culture, and empowering the disenfranchised, that kept her attached to the scene of teaching and learning.

### **Anthologizing alternatives**

The dearth of women assigned in “Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism, and Liberation,” reminds us of the paucity of publishers for Black women writers at this time and the exigency of Bambara’s anthologies: affordable collections of Black women’s writings, including many pieces authored by the students in her classes. Teaching in the SEEK program inspired the groundbreaking collection, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970), which includes the writings of Black women students, activists, authors, parents, and community members, all of whom were writing about possibilities for liberation from a dehumanizing society that values profit over people. Similarly, Bambara’s experiences teaching at Livingston College — “one of the most stunningly profound periods of my life,” during which she was “thoroughly enmeshed with students and their academic and otherwise lives”<sup>346</sup> — contributed to the production of *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* (1971), a collection of “kitchen table wisdom” published to counter the lies that children read in textbooks. The scene of teaching and learning shaped these anthologies, which helped pave the way for later feminist, antiracist, and decolonial anthologies like *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) (for which Bambara wrote the preface), *Some of Us Are Brave* (1982), *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983) and *Black Women Writers at Work* (1984). While we often think of editing, like teaching, as a dictatorial act of power, Bambara reveals how offering feedback on other’s work — as instructors often do with students’ writing — can instead incite the author to deeper critical and creative thinking. Moreover, deliberate

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<sup>346</sup> Bambara, “Working At It,” 3. There is a minor discrepancy between drafts.

critical attention to pedagogies of editing helps dispel the myth of individual authorship, even as these anthologies sought to empower those whose writing has historically not circulated in the world.

*The Black Woman* begins by marking a geopolitical shift: Bambara explains how Black women are “turning towards” one another, rather than relying on white male “expert” scientists or white women to envision a better society and bring it to fruition. This shift in both authorship and audience is repeatedly figured as a physical “turn” away from the “experts” who have systematically enacted injustices against Black women, and towards one another, embracing a participatory, hands-on, grassroots, arts and research based approach to the injustices faced in their daily lives. These reconfigured relations of power and knowledge emerged through “work-study groups, discussion clubs, cooperative nurseries, cooperative businesses, consumer education groups, women’s workshops on the campuses, women’s caucuses within existing organizations, [and] Afro-American women’s magazines,” new pedagogical spaces that emerged in reaction to the inadequacies of racist, patriarchal, and capitalist institutions.<sup>347</sup> In their biographies, several of the contributors affirm the importance of these oppositional pedagogical spaces by listing “SEEK” and “Harlem University” as their affiliations — an act of disidentifying with the official City College, and creating new formations within, through, and against its institutional politics. Recognizing the limits of formal education, how it can foreclose as much as it makes possible, was central to Bambara’s pedagogy. As Eleanor Traylor writes, echoing a common refrain throughout Bambara’s work, anthologies like *The Black Woman* pick

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<sup>347</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, introduction to *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), 4.

up where educational institutions fall short: “In this collection, we gain the pedagogy of those who think better than they’ve been trained.”<sup>348</sup>

In contrast to the multimodal assemblage of *The Black Woman*, *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* is comprised almost entirely of fables and parables—stories that “instruct” and “teach” while entertaining. For instance, “The Three Little Panthers,” co-authored by Bambara and her student Geneva Powell, begins: “Once upon a time, there were Three Little Panthers. They attended Freedom School, not to learn how to make their fortune, but to learn how to survive in this world.”<sup>349</sup> By invoking another contemporary pedagogical space, the Freedom School, we are invited to read the collection as an effort to make up for the inadequacies of formal education. Through the story of an assignment, in which a cunning teacher sends three little panthers to live in the suburbs, where they are greeted with a specious welcome, the story trains children to recognize the thinly veiled racism and white supremacy that may present in the guise of benevolent integration.

Anthologies are a profoundly pedagogical genre. As scholars such as Kenneth Warren and Cynthia G. Franklin have argued, while anthologies are often constructed specifically for classrooms, their making is typically removed from the site and sight of the classroom.<sup>350</sup> Because they can affordably aggregate work that was first published in different time periods and by various authors and publishers, anthologies are often used to teach American and English literature and thus disseminate dominant ideological notions of national belonging and aesthetic value. As such, literary anthologies are famous sites of contestation, where debates over

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<sup>348</sup> Eleanor Traylor in *The Black Woman*, xv-xvi.

<sup>349</sup> Toni Cade Bambara and Geneva Powell, “The Three Little Panthers,” in *Tales and Stories for Black Folks*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (Garden City: Zenith Books, 1971), 140.

<sup>350</sup> Kenneth Warren, “The Problem of Anthologies, or Making the Dead Wince,” *American Literature* 65.2 (1993): 338-342 and Cynthia Franklin, *Writing Women’s Communities: The Politics and Poetics of Contemporary Women’s Anthologies* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) 6, fn 7.

inclusion/exclusion and what gets to count as literature are hashed out. Bambara's anthologies challenge the very terms of these debates through their argument that the best which has been thought and said, those texts that are politically urgent to address contemporary conditions of injustice and inequality, are the ones being written by radical Black students, teachers, parents, artists, authors, educators, and activists, within and beyond formal classrooms.

In an unpublished document titled "What Is It I Think I'm Doing Anyhow," (1979) Bambara advances an understanding of literature as an inherently collective endeavor. When asked who her favorite writer was, she refused to "swing over to that frame of reference so dominated by solo-voice thinking," maintaining that "I'm but one voice in the chorus. The literature(s) of our times are a collective effort, dependent on so many views, on so many people's productions."<sup>351</sup> Bambara's radically democratic vision wrenches literature from its individualist cult of the author, insisting instead that anyone can be an author with a story to tell and that great literature can proliferate in abundance. However, despite the fact that anyone has the potential to be an author, working class Black women have historically been denied the status of authorship through the exclusionary practices of formal education and elitist publishing. Through these anthologies, Bambara sought to shift the material structures of education and publishing so that Black women's authorship could flourish. Bringing about the community control of literature would help ensure that their untold stories circulated among one another and in the world.

Picking up on Bambara's musical metaphor of the chorus, Holmes describes Bambara's work as an educator as an effort to put on a "concert" that moves not only an audience, but structures, producing real, material forms of change: "One of Bambara's primary principles in her organizing work on campuses was to create collectivity and to unite forces that could more

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<sup>351</sup> Bambara, "What Is It."

effectively create institutional change in concert.”<sup>352</sup> These anthologies, like Bambara’s work on campuses and in classrooms, enact what Traylor calls Bambara’s pedagogy of “gathering”: bringing unlikely people together to “think deeply and act decisively.”<sup>353</sup>

These anthologies enact the tenets of Bambara’s pedagogy by placing student voices at the center, challenging power hierarchies, and giving readers strategies for healing, flourishing, and thriving. They exemplify Bambara’s humanistic praxis, which challenged hierarchical distinctions between writing and reading, literary and non-literary texts, fiction and nonfiction, authors and students, and different media such as film and written language. Rather than dictating the forms their stories should take, Bambara guided authors in the telling of their own stories, in whatever form, media, and language would be most effective. In fact, we might even think about Bambara’s teaching as a form of editing. By treating students and community members as knowledge producers and theorists who have important things to say, in their own ways, Bambara challenged the colonality of the student-teacher relationship. As these anthologies help illustrate, Bambara’s pedagogy is grounded in learning as a collective and social, rather than individualistic, endeavor to materialize social justice.

### **The polyvocal pedagogy of *The Salt Eaters* (1980)**

As an educator, someone in a structural position of power, Bambara understood that withholding an answer can be even more empowering than providing it, a narrative technique used in her storytelling as well. This is most obvious in her novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980), which refuses to orient its readers, instead thrusting us into the richly textured, sensuous world of Claybourne, Georgia, replete with sounds, smells, and movements, but with few clues as to how

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<sup>352</sup> Holmes, *Revolt*, 123.

<sup>353</sup> Traylor in *The Black Woman*, xvii.



we should get our bearings.<sup>354</sup> The novel is woven together through the voices of the Claybourne inhabitants, only loosely bound by the story of Velma Henry's healing at the hands of Minnie Ransom, and Ransom's spiritual guide Old Wife. Velma is a political organizer, computer programmer, sister, wife, and mother, who has withdrawn from the world, pulled apart by the inordinate demands of these oftentimes competing positions. Whether Velma can learn to move, physically, spiritually, and emotionally from the "dry, stiff... frozen" position we meet her in, is the ostensible drama of the largely plotless novel.

*The Salt Eaters* eschews the conventions of a chronological, linear healing narrative in which the protagonist moves from sickness into an identifiable position of wellness. Instead, Velma's story fades in and out as the narrative throws us into the worlds of other Claybourne residents, all of whom exist with some proximity to Velma. The novel is constructed through vignettes, as we peek in on what people are doing, thinking, remembering, feeling, and dreaming as Velma's healing takes place in the Infirmary of the Academy of 7 Arts. A busdriver, Fred Holt, is feeling ill, driving his passengers to Claybourne while haunted by the memory of his recently-deceased friend, Porter. On his bus are the 7 Sisters, a group of political performers (imagined in an earlier draft as a study group) and artists from different countries who are traveling to Claybourne for the annual festival, where there is rumored to be a re-enactment of a slave insurrection. We eavesdrop on the gossip, rumors, intimacies, fantasies, and bruises of the town, from the mundane to the scandalous, producing a felt sense that Velma's healing is interlaced with all of these stories, though there is no clear causal relationship among any of them.

Velma is one of Bambara's favorite types of heroines — a leaky protagonist — women whose bodies are flowing out of control, producing pain and discomfort in a world designed for

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<sup>354</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (New York: Vintage, 1980).

them to be plugged up, static, and contained selves, or “border guards.” In one of Velma’s vivid flashbacks (but are they really back, or copresent and coterminous?) we witness her at a grassroots political meeting trying to perform the undervalued labor of getting people organized all while worrying that her period has seeped through her pants and is visibly running down her leg. Later, at a Civil Rights march we are with Velma in a filthy gas station bathroom as she rolls up a painful wad of newspaper to try and stop the flow. Her feet cold, wet, and swollen, having walked for miles with sharp newspaper wedged between her legs, and her stomach entirely empty (the men who organized the march did not consider people’s needs for nourishment), she collapses on the floor of a hotel lobby.

Velma, we learn from her friends Ruby and Jan, has gone to great lengths to avoid having a personal life, a space that is under her control: “Velma has worked hard not to hollow out a safe corner — yeh, quotes around the safe — of home, family, marriage and then be less responsive, less engaged.”<sup>355</sup> While the two acknowledge the “dodgy business” of trying to suss out the personal from the public, Jan argues that “it’s good she has put herself at center at last.” Ruby retorts with a poststructural pun: “Jan, I’m sick of the subject.” Velma is the kind of cultural worker that Bambara herself sought to be — someone who saw possibilities for action, intervention, and change everywhere. The danger of this, as dramatized by the novel, is trying to be a healer and teacher to everyone and materialize change in all of these different arenas, to the point where Velma forgot that her own well being and pleasure are part of the production of a better world.

After pages of physical, psychic, social, emotional, and spiritual escapades, Velma remembers (or imagines, there isn’t a clear difference in the novel) a very unilateral conversation with Barbara “Sweatpea” Watson, who has returned to the South after the excitement of SNCC

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 241.

and the 1960s to mock Velma and her comrades for continuing on with that “idealistic nonsense.” Watson’s condescending question, “You honestly think you can change anything in this country?” seems to dislodge a force of anger and bewilderment in Velma, finally opening her up to the vital flows of healing Minnie has been sending her way.

The moment of Velma’s healing is portrayed as an opening to learn, in the infinitive: “‘I want to learn to grow, to become...’ no longer talking to Barbara Sweetpea Watson. Her lips soft against each other, Velma was searching for a way to finish the sentence, wondering if indeed it was already complete.”<sup>356</sup> The ecstatic scene of Velma’s healing portrays her “outrunning disaster, outrunning jinns, shetnoi, soubaka, succubi, onnocuii, incubi, nefarii, the demons midwifed, suckled and fathered by the one in ten Mama warned about who come to earth for the express purpose of making trouble for the other nine” and dancing through the cosmos in dizzying page-long sentences suffused with “sheer holy boldness.”<sup>357</sup> This scene, like many in the novel, resonates with the celebratory, heretical, and promiscuous Afro-futurism of 1970s postmodernism, evident in novels like Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*. However, there is much greater attention throughout *The Salt Eaters* to relationships of care, nurturing, and *teaching*, suggesting that the hands of patient healers like Minnie Ransom are necessary to guide us towards our styles of flourishing: our path, our movement, our verbs, our dance. Unpredictably, for both the healers and the reader, dancing emerges as Velma’s unique way to open herself up to the world—both its acute dangers and wondrous possibilities. “Let her go,” Old Wife advises Minnie, “dancing is her way to learn now.”<sup>358</sup> As an educator, Minnie helped a dancer find her dance and knew when to “let go,” exemplifying a pedagogy that closely approximates Bambara’s own.

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 264-65.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 264.

The novel's symphonic heteroglossia suggests that our stories, our wellness, and our learning are not our own. As much as it is Minnie's job to heal Velma, she cannot do so without the help of her own guide, Old Wife; the spiritual energy of Velma's godmother Sophie Heywood; the conversation occurring at the Avocado Pit cafe between Jan and Ruby; the sidelong thoughts of the young, pregnant couple passing by the infirmary; or Palma's increasing concern for Velma's wellbeing. Velma's unlearning, letting go of the illness that has made her want to end her life, is described as a collaborative effort:

sometimes a person held on to sickness with a fierceness that took twenty hard-praying folk to loosen. So used to being unwhole and unwell, one forgot what it was to walk upright and see clearly, breathe easily, think better than was taught, be better than one was programmed to believe—so concentration was necessary to help a neighbor experience the best of herself and himself.<sup>359</sup>

Through her life, work, and love, Velma had woven herself into a network of care, even as that network came to threaten her very livelihood. This scene with Velma positioned at the center of a healing circle echoes the pedagogical jam session of the SEEK classroom, with a student at the center, rapping, learning to listen to the powers that surround him amidst an audience of students rendered more active by the performance. In order for Velma and the residents of Claybourne to flourish they, like the SEEK students, must learn to think better than they've been taught by dominant institutions.

Through its strange and oftentimes jarring juxtapositions of characters, scenes, dialogue, and worlds, the novel makes for a disorienting reading experience. *The Salt Eaters* raises the question of what novels can do if we forego the pleasurable comfort of orientation, such as knowing who speaks each piece of dialogue and when and where in space and time we are located. Formally, the reader's predicament parallels Velma's own: at every turn, we are caught

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<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 109.

between the temptation to withdraw and toss the world of Claybourne aside or continue reading, letting go of our customary reading strategies and allowing the novel's unpredictable music to wash over us.

*The Salt Eaters* imagines a savvy, curious reader willing to work with the author to collaborate in the storytelling process. And in this sense, the thoughtful, powerful student imagined and produced through Bambara's assignments was not unlike the engaged reader solicited through her fiction. Similar to the fictional world of Claybourne, her classrooms were immersive orchestrations, taught with an eye not only towards the whole student but the staging of a classroom environment that would jolt students from the rhythms of everyday life and, like good experimental prose, challenge our habits of being and knowing. They could be disorienting, for instance, when instead of carefully scaffolding assignments in a creative writing class, she let students go, asking them at the end what they learned from their own life and work in the absence of discipline.<sup>360</sup> Her classrooms were transformative, as when she cautioned activists in her videography course that they would inevitably discover things, potentially difficult and unpleasant, about their organization through the process of making a video, and were they prepared for learning that might change them?<sup>361</sup>

*The Salt Eaters* challenges us to talk with others in order to navigate this fictional world. It explodes the seemingly solitary form of the novel and instead produces a sense of the individual's embeddedness within the social fabric. It is what we might call a "teacherly text": one that wants to be taught and discussed with others and that has implications for how we think about relationships of teaching and learning. In *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, Gloria T. Hull describes both the difficulty of the novel and its importance in strikingly pedagogical

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<sup>360</sup> Down to the Wire, 1987 Writing Workshop, box 5, Toni Cade Bambara Archive, Spelman College.

<sup>361</sup> Community Visions Notes, box 5, Toni Cade Bambara Archive, Spelman College.

terms (she also designed an intricate map to help readers orient themselves in the world of the novel, for which I am very grateful):

...many people are having difficulty with it. They are stuck on page ninety-seven, or have given up after muddling through the first sixty-five pages twice with little increase in comprehension, or they can not get past chapter one... Students experience no less difficulty with the text. Lost and bewildered, they decide that it is ‘over their heads’ and wonder what made you assign it in the first place...*Salt* is long, intricately written, trickily structured, full of learning, [and] heavy with wisdom...Reading it deeply should result in personal transformation; teaching it well can be a political act.<sup>362</sup>

*The Salt Eaters* demonstrates how reading a novel can be more than just a privatizing and individualizing pleasure, but a “political act.” Through her experimental storytelling and pedagogy, Bambara challenged the dominant distributions of power, agency, and authority; imagined alternative arrangements of subjects, objects, and socialities; and questioned what is elsewhere taken for granted or assumed to be true. As a “teacherly text,” one best read through discussion with others, the novel thematizes our interdependency with others and possibilities for collective transformation. Rather than providing a map or holding the reader’s hand, the novel challenges us to work with other people to carve pathways through the difficult prose. In doing so, Bambara challenges us to unlearn the individualism associated with reading narrative fiction in favor of social reading practices.

In 1968, Paulo Freire famously argued that education is suffering from “narration sickness,” an excess of unilateral knowledge transmission from the ostensibly educated, authorial teacher to the passive, reading, and receiving student. By contrast, Bambara devoutly believed in the “emancipatory impulse” of storytelling — that a story like Velma’s could actually save lives. Amidst the trickle up economics of racial capitalism that were experienced by black

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<sup>362</sup> Gloria T. Hull, “What It Is I Think She’s Doing Anyhow: A Reading of Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table—Women of Color Press, 1983), 124.

communities as enclosure, dispossession, segregation, forced integration, and incarceration, “stories,” evidence that things could be otherwise, could not be more urgent:

In the ships, in the camps, in the prisons, on the run, underground, under siege, in the throes, on the verge—they snatch us back from the edge and replay the past and present in which we are the heroes of the tales. They whet our appetite for the future, the next chapter, the next generation of listeners to pass the document on. How it was. How it be. Preserved. That’s what I want to do. To write stories that save our lives.<sup>363</sup>

In the post-Civil Rights era, when real activists like Velma and her fictional comrades were experiencing exhaustion, confusion, despair, and dismay, *The Salt Eaters* emerged in part to help these cultural workers heal, and to help them see political action continuing all around them in different registers and scales. By telling the story of the smallest imaginable shift, Velma gradually coming to a position, over the course of two hours (and 300 pages), where she can stand up off of the stool on which she is seated, Bambara envisions cosmic healing and flourishing at even the seemingly most micro of scales. At a meta level, the story of neoliberalism is itself a form of enclosure that restricts, rather than expands, our capacities for intervention and action. I want the narrative of pedagogical resistance in this chapter, and the dissertation as a whole, to “replay the past and present” with new heroes and new tales, with narrative pathways that create space for movement, action, and intervention in our present.

This is just one example of how Bambara’s fiction employs the kinds of participatory, polyvocal storytelling strategies that were the subject of her formal and informal classrooms. As education became increasingly privatized throughout the late twentieth century, Bambara explored how fiction could activate the kinds of critical, creative, and collective subjects she incited through her pedagogy.

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<sup>363</sup> Bambara, “Working,” 29.

### **“The Text as a Rite of Recovery”**

Bambara taught *The Salt Eaters* as “a political act” in her 1987 course on the contemporary American novel, “The Text as Rite of Recovery,” during her time as a visiting professor at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. “The Text as a Rite of Recovery,” was organized around three novels — Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, and Bambara’s own *The Salt Eaters* — “ground-breaking works,” she writes on the syllabus, that can be read as “diagnostic probes into the question of what constitutes health — for an individual, a downpressed community, a country not yet a nation.” The course was organized around readings, class discussions, a paper on perception, several in-class and take home exams, and a final project. The methods Bambara uses in this course guide students in discovering the subversive lessons of these literary texts and illustrate how reading, analyzing, and producing texts can change the way we see the world, and our own place within it.

“The Text as a Rite of Recovery,” was divided into thirds, with each third devoted to a novel, beginning with *Ceremony*. As announced on the syllabus, their reading focused on 1) the “sociopoliticoaesthetic context in which the book was produced, published, and read” 2) the historical context of the novel including “the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the American Indian Movement...the history of physical genocide,” 3) “the place of storytelling, tradition, remedies, attitudes toward health...” and 4) “the body of distortions, stereotypes, lies that Silko and any other writer from a systematically downpressed group is up against when addressing a reader.”<sup>364</sup> Through this framework, Bambara theorizes the novel as a material object that responds to

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<sup>364</sup> Syllabus for The Contemporary American Novel: The Text as a Rite of Recovery, Carleton College, 1987, box 5, Toni Cade Bambara Archive, Spelman College.



historical conditions, is written by a real person, and that is itself theorizing the process of storytelling and interrogating the dominant culture within which it exists.

Bambara's syllabus includes a section of criteria for "evaluating a literary work," that provides an array of questions that can be used to analyze a cultural text. When evaluating a literary work, Bambara asks students to consider "how it honors and/or advances the particular tradition from which it is derived... what importance it has to a particular community, readership, audience... how it relates to an ongoing movement... [and also] reflects(s) areas of new scholarship... the way it engages the reader, its process in relation to the author," and, most importantly, she encourages students to ask, "Does it offer new categories of perception// encourage and equip the reader to change or otherwise alter her/his perspective// challenge us with a new analysis of the past, present or future?" Through these evaluative criteria, Bambara theorizes literary texts as densely textured acts of communication, that exist within, move between, and produce histories, cultures, and traditions, and may hold different meanings for different readers. Above all, literary texts are equipment for living if they are able to alter our habits of perception; help us see, name, and interrogate the inaccurate, dangerous fictions of common sense, and expand the ways in which we understand the past, present, or future.

Bambara encouraged attentiveness to the ways aesthetic encounters shift our habits of perception by assigning an open-ended paper on "Perception." Students were instructed to watch a film related to the course material with suggestions such as Cheech Marin's "Born in East L.A." for students interested in doing a final project related to Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, or "Hollywood Shuffle" for students interested in stereotypes. To illustrate the range of options available to students, Bambara also suggested that a paper "exploring your own ethnic history and stereotypes of your people in vaudeville, books, artifacts might prove to be

enlightening in a stunning way.” As in her teaching materials from the SEEK program, here Bambara assigns work that taps into students’ interests and allows them space for intellectual curiosity and creativity. Students were encouraged, at every turn, to figure out their own ideas about “The Text as Rite of Recovery,” not simply to reproduce Bambara’s.

Throughout the course, Bambara emphasizes research on the histories and contexts that are engaged through the fictional texts and into questions raised by the novels. When they read *The Woman Warrior*, Bambara gave students a list of historical events to research to understand the context of the novel, including “the modern Chinese revolutions (1929/1949/Mao and the Cultural Revolution)” and encouraged them to develop an “outline of Chinese presence in the U.S. beginning with the railroad-building and the exclusion laws, changing status during W.W. II, the current sweatshops...” But she also instructed students to extend the novel’s lessons about misogyny beyond its immediate context: “Collect sayings from various cultures that signal global misogyny. Familiarize yourself with women’s movements in these cultures.”<sup>365</sup> Bambara chose texts deeply immersed in the stories, epistemologies, and experiences of “downpressed groups” that emphasize the uneven distribution of precarity along embodied axes and acts of resistance to these conditions. Following the lessons of these novels, misogyny was never discussed without equal or more attention to the ways women have resisted their denigration.<sup>366</sup> While this assignment suggests that women of different cultures experience misogyny, it emphasizes the historical and cultural particularity of these experiences, and dispels the myth of a universal, Western framework for either misogyny or feminism. This effort to challenge white, patriarchal, Western frameworks is also evident in assignments such as asking students to

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<sup>365</sup> Exam questions, box 5, Toni Cade Bambara Archive, Spelman College.

<sup>366</sup> This teaching echoes the transnational and decolonial turn in feminism exemplified by texts like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Boundary 2* 12/13 (1984): 333–58.

compare “the modern condition” as illustrated through T.S. Eliot’s “Hollow Man” and Silko’s character Tayo.

While Bambara could have just as easily lectured on global women’s history, literary history, and modernity, she insisted that students discover this knowledge for themselves. This emphasis on student discovery is also evident in a consciousness-raising survey that Bambara designed for a course on “History Through Literature” to have students evaluate how well they understood the world from the perspective of racial and ethnic minorities:

- i. Fill in the blank: Ellis Island is to European immigration as \_\_\_\_\_ island is to Asian immigration.
- ii. Can Puerto Ricans on island of Puerto Rico vote in U.S. presidential elections?
- ...
- v. Name ethnic groups who make up the population of your home state. Did you include Anglos? If no, why not, so what?
- vi. Name three famous American Indians.<sup>367</sup>

Having students take an inventory of their knowledge makes visible the criminality and coloniality of education: how dominant educational institutions actively suppress minoritized knowledges and perspectives. It also shows Asian, Puerto Rican, and American Indian students that they bring important knowledges and perspectives to the classroom. Rather than shaming or pathologizing students for gaps in their knowledge, students read novels and did research to make up for what was missing.

Through these questions, Bambara induces a sense of America as a colonial fantasy structured by material injustices and power struggles. As these examples illustrate, Bambara’s pedagogy involved withholding information in order to challenge the colonial nature of the student-teacher relationship: how much power someone in a position of authority has over others’ minds. Bambara’s teaching created spaces for students to challenge authority, make their own decisions, and figure out what questions mattered to them and then how to answer them.

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<sup>367</sup> History Through Literature lecture notes, box 5, Toni Cade Bambara Archive, Spelman College.

Bambara described the final exam for “The Text as a Rite of Recovery,” as “An Opportunity to Showcase Your Knowledge of Three Novels,” and instructed students to choose one from among three questions that address the central themes of the course:

1. The turbulent rites of passage in each of the three books occur within a context of sociopolitical upheaval. Describe the process the three protagonists undergo and the significance of wars, revolutions, and movements to their traumas and their recovery.
2. The focus on unhealth in the three books is split; that is, the protagonists struggle toward health in a society that damages and sickens. Describe the characters’ struggle and identify those aspects of society that are dangerous, corrupting, or anti-human.
3. Formal schooling in each novel is identified as limited and limiting in its monocultural bias. In each novel, an alternative education (or educations) is presented and mentors (often more than one) are described. Discuss.<sup>368</sup>

Amidst a dominant culture of unbridled liberal individualism, these questions address the ways that protagonists’ paths and possibilities are not their own, but are, in fact, embedded in a social, cultural, political, and economic context. Through these questions, Bambara illustrates how literary texts tell the kinds of histories that don’t make it into textbooks; critique a culture that has resulted in widespread “unhealth” for so many; and serve as alternative educations that share the kinds of knowledge about living and flourishing that are absent from curricula. Rather than providing their own immediate reactions and responses to these questions, students are taught to provide textual evidence: to read and listen to what another person, an author, is saying, and to learn from the lessons of fictional protagonists.

Bambara challenged students to consider reading, even a novel, as a collective and social, rather than individual, act. She also challenged students to translate their reading experiences and make their new perceptions useful beyond the classroom. In addition to the final exam, students were assigned a final project to revisit themes of the readings through painting, collage, music, recitation, or theater, all of which were publicly presented as part of an exhibition at the school’s

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<sup>368</sup> Exam questions, box 5, Toni Cade Bambara Archive, Spelman College.

performing arts center.<sup>369</sup> The one requirement was that it help others see the world in a new way. This assignment encourages students to see that the learning they were doing in the classroom, their analysis of literary texts in relation to the historical conditions of “downpressed peoples,” was not only about their individual transformations as students. Sharing what they had learned with those who do not have the privilege or pleasure of being there reminds students that their learning was made possible by and had an effect on other people.

### **Respatializing resistance: *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (1986)**

Bambara’s 1986 documentary collaboration with Louis Massiah, *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* responds to the bombing of the MOVE organization by the Philadelphia police that occurred on May 13, 1985.<sup>370</sup> The film, which first aired on PBS in 1987, presents the untold stories of members of the Cobbs Creek community who were affected by the bombing. In doing so, it respatializes an act of state-sanctioned violence, wrenching the narrative away from dominant, racist media, and placing it in the hands of the neighborhood residents it affected. Foregrounding the stories of Cobbs Creek residents and using storytelling to help them through their pain, grief, anger, sadness, and suffering, the documentary sought to contribute to communal healing and justice. Karen Beckman explains how *Bombing* countered dominant media narratives: whereas “official” versions lacked historical perspective, pathologized the black community, and exceptionalized and homogenized the event, Bambara and Massiah collaborated on a multivocal, complex, historical, and Afrocentric presentation that emphasizes the everyday nature of state-sanctioned violence against black people, the various perspectives

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<sup>369</sup> Rudolph Byrd, “The Feeling of Transport,” in *Savoring*, 179.

<sup>370</sup> MOVE was a Philadelphia-based black liberation group founded by John Africa in 1972.

on MOVE held by different members of Cobbs Creek, and the healing and resiliency of the community.<sup>371</sup>

Film, for Bambara, had a unique role to play in learning to see the world from the points of view of those who are historically silenced and excluded. Bambara's later writings, published posthumously by Toni Morrison in *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*, illustrate her increasing fascination with film and growing concern about the ways that Hollywood colonizes our senses and national imaginary. Hollywood, Bambara argues, trains our viscera, selling us imperial, colonial, sexist, homophobic, patriarchal, misogynistic, racist, and white supremacist desires, using pleasure to seduce audiences into thinking that these ideologies are desirable, inevitable, and fun.<sup>372</sup> Bambara highlights the ways that alternative, collective art-making practices can help us unlearn, or learn to recognize, the conventions of the culture industry through which we are sold dangerous desires. Films like Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, those produced by the Sankofa film collective, and those Bambara taught students to make can help retrain our viscera.

One particularly pernicious way that Hollywood sells these violences is by hiding the historical production of place: making our inherited geographies seem inevitable, already there and given, and ideologically neutral.<sup>373</sup> As scholars such as Katherine McKittrick, Walter D. Mignolo, and George Lipsitz have argued, this fantasy of space as something that simply exists as given or neutral bolsters the colonial matrix of power.<sup>374</sup> Whereas Hollywood films obscure the histories and power struggles that produce our notions of place, camera work, Bambara

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<sup>371</sup> Karen Beckman, "Black Media Matters: Remembering the Bombing of Osage Avenue," *Film Quarterly* 68.4 (2015): 8–23.

<sup>372</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 117, 124, 150.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>374</sup> Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*; Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011); and George Lipsitz, "Space" in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

argues, can “stress the communal” and emphasize the social production of place—a project taken up in *Bombing*.<sup>375</sup>

The hour-long documentary opens with relaxed smooth jazz, footage of young Black boys smiling and riding bikes, and neighbors laughing on their porches, as the words “Cobbs Creek, Philadelphia” flash across the bottom of the screen. It foregrounds the geographic imaginaries of the residents through interview clips, in which each person seems to be answering the question, how do you know where you are? How would you describe what it is like to live in Cobbs Creek? A teenage boy, later identified as Baba Renfrow, speaks the first words, describing the stark contrast between the landscapes of Center City’s skyscrapers and the row homes in Cobbs Creek: “It’s not like downtown where they have a lot of stores and tall buildings, you can tell that you’re going back into another neighborhood.” Renfrow elaborates on this contrast, using landmarks and intersections to create a map of his neighborhood: “you would come past 58th and Walnut and you’d come past Sayer Junior High and you’d say, oh I know where I’m at now. You know, you come past 60th street, I know where I’m at and everything. The houses, the row homes, you know, up and down the block, you would notice that it’s just changing to a different neighborhood.” As community members are interviewed, their addresses are listed below their names, underscoring their relationships to the places they describe. These maps, personal accounts of people’s relationships to place, complicate the ways that the media depicted Osage Avenue: “When you’re part of a community, at home in the rhythms and rituals of a place, you don’t imagine that you’re living on the edge of hell,” Bambara’s confident, rich, and melodious voice narrates. By foregrounding the ways that the inhabitants of Cobbs Creek make sense of their neighborhood—how they tell its stories—the film legitimizes the perspectives of those who are left out of or demonized by mainstream media

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<sup>375</sup> Bambara, *Deep Sightings*, 120.

accounts: it redistributes the power of placemaking and creates an expansive, thick, and interwoven sense of place.

Following footage of the bombing, the conflagration that ensued, interviews with devastated community members, and a numerical account of the damage (11 people dead, 61 homes destroyed, 100 other houses wrecked) Bambara's narration makes a surprising shift to the land on which this violence occurred and the stories that have shaped it. She describes the land's original inhabitants: the Lenni-Lenape indians, the oldest Algonquin confederacy, who named the land with regard to its co-inhabitants, referring to it as the place of wild geese, and "called it home." Osage Avenue, like many of the streets in Philadelphia, is named after a native American tribe, creating what John Edgar Wideman describes as a city "haunted by Indian ghosts."<sup>376</sup> Others would come to claim and name this land, Bambara continues, with "their guns, their plows, their dreams." By starting with the stories of the land's original inhabitants, this mode of storytelling teaches us to see places not as neutral and simply given, but through layers of violence, dispossession, struggle, and dreams that thicken the materiality of the present. History, in this documentary, can't be confined by the temporality of "once upon a time," and conceded to the victors; it exerts an active, material force on the present, shaping people's paths and possibilities.

Through its very title, *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* respatializes this event, so that it becomes about a quotidian street, rather than an exceptional act of violence against a radical black organization. The documentary reconfigures the bombing as an act of dislocation: "The dismemberment of a community, the relation of a people to a place, ruptured...250 residents made refugees and relocated." What mainstream media depicted as a unique, singular, and isolated event is shown to implicate not only the residents of Osage Avenue, but also those of the

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<sup>376</sup> John Edgar Wideman, *Philadelphia Fire* (New York: Holt, 1990), 159.



Cobbs Creek neighborhood, Philadelphia, and ultimately, through its history of state-sanctioned anti-black racism, the United States.

Crucial to this reimagining is the idea that “what happened with the MOVE situation is nothing new in the history of blacks in Philadelphia.” In their interviews, the residents emphasize how it is a relatively autonomous, friendly neighborhood that didn’t require regular trips to Center City. That bombing would be seen as a viable solution to a conflict in the largest per capita homeownership black residential community in Philadelphia, we are invited not to see as a surprise. Through archival footage of building blueprints, early maps, and drawings and photographs of the city’s earliest inhabitants, the film describes the history of black people’s placemaking efforts in Philadelphia. It traces the arrival of Africans in Philadelphia to 1639, when they arrived with the Dutch and the Swedes and later the English, “with dreams of their own.” The movement to establish autonomous black communities was continually met with white supremacist violence. Bambara uses the particularly telling example of Pennsylvania Hall, built by abolitionists as a lecture hall, meeting place, and convention center, to illustrate the nothing newness of white supremacist violence against black placemakers in the U.S. We are dropped into the story of this building on May 13, 1838, exactly 147 years prior to the MOVE bombing in the midst of the excitement surrounding the structure as “Black and white abolitionists prepare for the dedication ceremonies.” Four days later, the building was burned to the ground by pro-slavery rioters, exemplifying the destructions of black property and potentiality that have built our current national landscape. In fact, the documentary suggests, it is only by recognizing the historical depth of the state’s racial violence that we can begin to think about social justice.

Another strategy the documentary uses to reimagine the social space of violence is to include the stories of members of the MOVE organization alongside those of the long-term residents of Cobbs Creek. The narrative asks of all these residents a series of questions about their relationships to place: How did you come to this place? Who was here? How were they living? What was life like here? How did you want to live? Where were the points of conflict? How did this feel? How were decisions made? The film describes how the MOVE members built a bunker around their house at 6221 Osage Avenue and used bullhorns to sonically express (often loudly, with profanity, and for many hours on end) their dissent with state violence against their members. By espousing certain beliefs of how to live in harmony with nature, their residence attracted rodents, insects, and other animals to the surrounding area. Longstanding members of the Cobbs Creek community express the emotional, psychological, and physical toll this took on many of them. While some residents respected the MOVE members for their incisive critiques of antiblack racism, others thought their disregard for their neighbors lost them that respect. Still others remark that there would not have been a problem provided they did not push their beliefs beyond their bunker. The sense we are left with at the end of the documentary is that these conflicts did not, in any way, warrant the bombing by the Philadelphia police in order to “resolve” this tension.

The documentary thematizes the real, material, potentially violent and liberatory effects of how we narrate people’s relationships to place. It suggests that narrative, how we tell the story of “what happened,” has the potential to contribute to the collective healing of the Cobbs Creek neighborhood. Rather than just an outwardly facing documentary to influence those beyond the community, the film, and the act of making the film, was intended to help in their collective healing. The documentary concludes with an interview with Teri Doke, a counselor from

Philadelphia Mental Health Centers, who was working with members of the community to help them realize that they did not ask for and were not responsible for this violent “solution” to their shared problem. The film’s pedagogy uses participatory storytelling to help these victims make sense of their sorrow, grief, and anger, and shift the blame onto the racist, capitalist state. The film helped the neighbors locate their seemingly personal reactions and experiences in a long history of antiblack racism, a mode of structural critique Bambara taught in classrooms as well. It ends with footage of the row houses and a voiceover by one of the Cobbs Creek residents: “A community of people should never ever relinquish the power that they have in their community.” It ends with a call for community control: people making decisions about the distribution of material resources that will affect their lives, including how their stories are told.

The documentary techniques used in *Bombing* were also those that Bambara taught in her summer 1994 “Video for Social Change” course as part of the Scribe Center’s Community Visions project in Philadelphia, an organization founded in 1982 by Massiah to “advance the use of electronic media, including video and audio, as artistic media and as tools for progressive social change.”<sup>377</sup> With advances in technology that made production more affordable, Bambara explored the potential of film to become another means for besieged communities to seize control over cultural narratives. There she taught courses explicitly on filmmaking for community organizations and collaborated on short films such as “More Than Property,” (1993) which looks at the urban transformations produced by low-income people of color in Philadelphia. According to Bambara’s biographer, “in her approach to teaching workshops, Bambara continued to be a community organizer in her unique way as she challenged students to use the video lens as a tool for transforming institutions rather than merely documenting

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<sup>377</sup> According to the Scribe website, “it was Toni Cade Bambara, the writer, who pushed Scribe to look at video as cultural form that would thrive in neighborhood settings and as a creative tool to explore community issues.”

them.”<sup>378</sup> Inspired by the black insurgent demands of the UCLA film school, Bambara’s film pedagogy rejected the classics promoted by Eurocentric and Anglo-American academia, insisting instead on world film culture and understood “the community,” rather than the classroom, as both the site of, and audience for, their work.<sup>379</sup>

Participants in “Video for Social Change,” were taught to use film as a medium that delivers pleasure and information and to explore through hands-on making the aesthetic strategies at their disposal for doing so. Bambara’s notes for the course highlight the kinds of cultural work they would learn to do through film: “Explore a community concern, demonstrate an innovative approach to social change, portray aspects of community life from a new point of view....reconstruct gender ID, recode representations, un-mask retrograde ideologies... demystify, decolonize, clarify (unmask) power configuration, promote the overthrow of internalized oppression.” Film, she argues, ought to make the audience think, feel, and act differently: “What ought to be done? In what ways should the spectator be thinking or feeling differently? How can I hit the point again?” At stake here is a fundamental question of how to influence human behavior. Similar to “Colonialism, Neocolonialism, and Liberation,” “Video for Social Change,” twenty five years later, treated the subject as also the methodology of the course beginning with the collaborative act of establishing the intent for their work: “What do you want to do, and why, and in whose name, and so what?”<sup>380</sup>

According to Bambara, the tools of filmmaking and other arts are tools of colonial power: “the very conventions—the very tools, practices—in which that filmmaker has been trained were not designed to accommodate her or his story, her or his people, her or his cultural heritage, her

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<sup>378</sup> Holmes, *Revolt*, 172.

<sup>379</sup> Bambara, “Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye,” in *Deep Sightings*, 91-92.

<sup>380</sup> Video for Social Change, Scribe Center Video Workshop, box 5, Toni Cade Bambara Archive, Spelman College.

or his issues...”<sup>381</sup> Learning the various tools and techniques necessary to produce a documentary (storyboarding, lighting, interviewing, camera work, film and sound editing, budgeting) was a way to “train in visual literacy/the politics of imaging.” Teaching people who have historically been excluded from filmmaking to use these tools in the service of social change shifts control over the means of production and representation so that working class people of color can produce their own worldviews that challenge the inadequacy of dominant mainstream representations. Facing the filmmaker, or cultural worker more generally, is a choice: “either to devise a new film language in order to get that story told or to have the whole enterprise derailed by those conventions.”<sup>382</sup> It is really not much of a choice at all. In Bambara’s work as a filmmaker, screenwriter, film critic, and film instructor, she taught audiences and students to make films that challenge dominant ideologies, alter perception, and make people think and feel in new ways. And in this sense, she taught film in the same ways she taught writing and reading.

### **Decolonizing aesthetic education (or, from democratic to decolonial pedagogy)**

In Audre Lorde’s poem dedicated to Bambara, Lorde recounts their peregrinations along Harlem’s Convent Avenue and imagines Bambara “...in an office down the hall from mine/calmly studying term papers like maps.”<sup>383</sup> Cartographic tropes abound in Bambara’s writings on education, in part, I suggest, because the SEEK program changed the geographies of New York City: how people imagined their belonging and moved through social space, especially in relation to the Gothic college shining, or taunting, the neighborhood from atop its

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<sup>381</sup> Bambara, “Language and the Writer,” in *Deep Sightings*, 143.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Audre Lorde, “Dear Toni Instead of a Letter of Congratulation Upon Your Book and Your Daughter Whom You Say You Are Raising to Be a Correct Little Sister” in *From a Land Where Other People Live* (Detroit: Broadside, 1973), 40.

Harlem hill. Students' final projects can be read as blueprints of possibility, what the Detroit Geographic Expedition called "oughtness maps": cartographies of justice that outline how the world *should* look.<sup>384</sup> But what interests me most is how Bambara deliberately took up this remapping in both her classrooms and her artwork. As a cultural worker, Bambara redistributed the power she was granted by educational, cultural, and literary institutions by demanding participation, collaboration, and creativity on the parts of her audiences. Bambara challenged the coloniality of pedagogy and storytelling through collective acts of poesis—worldmaking — figuring out how to share, inhabit, and relate to one another amidst institutions structured by white supremacy.

In the 1968 City College SEEK summer program, Bambara asked the working class students of color in her remedial classes to shape the content, methods, and means by which their learning was assessed. When they said they were tired with fiction, she was willing to diverge from their plans and allow "the 'I' to take precedence." Helping these students tell the stories of their lives and sharing these with the world through published anthologies was a means of empowering historically-silenced voices and authorizing — putting into circulation — the perspectives obscured by hierarchical power relations. As much as this affirmed the students whose writing she published, this pedagogy was also aimed beyond the classroom towards the working class Black women whom she hoped would learn, through these anthologies, that their lived experiences can be understood in relation to structural, historical conditions and that their voices, stories, and perspectives matter for the production of a better future.

By contrast, in 1987, when Bambara walked into the classroom at Carleton College — a school with a largely white, affluent student body — to teach "The Text as a Rite of Recovery,"

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<sup>384</sup> Catherine D'Ignazio, "The Detroit Geographic Expedition and Institute: A Case Study in Civic Mapping." <https://civic.mit.edu/blog/kanarinka/the-detroit-geographic-expedition-and-institute-a-case-study-in-civic-mapping>

she came with a syllabus and with novels. There, Bambara encountered students who had been taught that their voices *did matter* and whose stories *did count*, and were poised to graduate and join the ranks of power. These students also chose a medium for their final project, inspired by the fiction they read that semester, and even negotiated their grades with the instructor on a note card,<sup>385</sup> but they would be reading *The Salt Eaters*, *Ceremony*, and *The Woman Warrior*, whether they liked it or not.

Democratic pedagogy encourages us not to see these differentials of privilege and power among students, instructors, and the communities in which institutions are embedded. It encourages us not to locate the subjects of education in a particular historical moment or within structures of power. “This happens to be in Michigan, but it could be anywhere,” states the narrator of the 1953 educational film “Practicing Democracy in the Classroom.” In the film, the students learn about democracy by learning “how to put democracy into practice” in their classroom through collective decision-making, problem solving, research, and debate. In its attempt to convince the viewer that the democratic pedagogy it advocates could be effective “anywhere,” in the U.S., the film asks the audience to imagine the entirely white, upper middle class students we are watching as universal student-subjects who exist outside of geography, history, and place. In mock interviews with town members and parents, they offer varying perspectives on the purpose of education, but the one thing they agree upon is that “schools oughta turn out good citizens.” But what happens to that objective when we consider that U.S. citizenship has been predicated on indigenous dispossession, slavery, and exploitation and the ways “protecting U.S. citizens” is regularly mobilized by the state to enact violence against racialized people within the nation and far beyond its boundaries? In the film, the students learn

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<sup>385</sup> “Note: Grades will be negotiated on an index card that you submit. Criteria includes – the quality of class participation, in-class reading, submission of mss., the broadside, final exam reports.” Down to the Wire, 1987 Prose Writing Workshop, box 5, Toni Cade Bambara Archive, Spelman College.

the history of democracy by enacting a classroom debate among the nation's founding fathers. Absent from the panel are Sally Hemings, George Washington's chef Hercules, the enslaved people that ran colonial America's plantations, and the Native Americans killed and dispossessed in order for such debates to take place. These absent perspectives, which challenge the desirability and effectiveness of liberal, constitutional democracy, never come up in the film, in part because there are no racial and ethnic minority students. It is their histories, their stories, and their perspectives that are missing from the classroom.

Whereas democratic pedagogy trains students to be engaged citizens, Bambara's pedagogy challenges the desirability of democracy given the ways in which it is complicit with white supremacy, racial capitalism, and state-sanctioned violence against people of color. This work was sparked by the post World War II declarations of national independence in many African and Caribbean countries and the use of "internal colonialism" as a framework for critiquing violence and injustice, especially in the work of Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael. On the ground, neither the formal transfer of power from the colonial oppressor to the oppressed, nor the passage of Civil Rights legislation, was necessarily accompanied by widespread material redistribution. In "the last quarter" of the twentieth century it became increasingly clear that neither independence nor Civil Rights are synonymous with equality: that, in fact, colonialism leaves a legacy of material violence — some of it unintentionally internalized in modes of being, thinking, moving, and relating — that necessitates a long and difficult process of collective unlearning. As part of these movements, Bambara, alongside Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and other proponents of Black English, criticized the ways education devalues people of color and called for more accurate modes of education



that include the histories, ways of being, knowing, and expressing, and cultural productions erased by those with privilege and power.

Echoing Audre Lorde's notion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" and Adrienne Rich's understanding that "this is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you," the cultural worker's challenge is that "the tools of my trade are colonized."<sup>386</sup>

Coloniality shapes places through narratives that valorize and legitimize property rights, profit, and ownership above all else. It invents barbaric, traditional, and pre-civilized pasts to tell stories of linear progress that celebrate modernity; it erases acts of material dispossession, violence, slavery, and exploitation when it benefits the ruling class; it renders the world in terms of individuals, rather than interdependent systems, structures, socialities, or ecosystems. It must constantly erase the force history exerts on the present and keep the past held captive in the logic of "once upon a time," in order not to fall apart.

Bambara challenged the coloniality of pedagogy and storytelling through deliberate collective acts of poesis—worldmaking—figuring out how to share, inhabit, and relate to one another in actual spaces structured by white supremacy and colonial violence. Placemaking, and specifically black people's control over land, resources, institutions, and the decisions that affect their lives, is key to understanding this distinction between democratic and decolonial pedagogy. Whereas democratic pedagogies perform a kind of abstraction, through which the classroom is imagined as the space of the nation, decolonial pedagogies demand different engagements with place and with bodies. Decolonial pedagogies/pedagogies of social justice treat education as inherently social and collective; they are not grounded in liberal ideals of producing citizen-subjects.

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<sup>386</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 97; Adrienne Rich, "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" 26; Toni Cade Bambara, "Language and the Writer," 139-140.

Bambara decolonized storytelling by centering minoritarian characters, knowledges, languages, and epistemologies, thus training audiences to see the world from obscured and overlooked perspectives and to recognize when they are absent: “One’s got to see what the factory worker sees, what the prisoner sees, what the welfare children see, what the scholar sees, got to see what the ruling-class mythmakers see as well, in order to tell the truth and not get trapped.”<sup>387</sup> Through her teaching, fiction, films, and stories, Bambara demonstrates how experimental, minoritarian storytelling functions as a crucial means of resistance to stifling, disciplining, and punitive pedagogies of enclosure.

The archive of Bambara’s teaching materials contains a small, torn piece of paper with a short poem by Salvadoran writer Miguel Huezo Mixco:

Because to write is not to run away  
nor to turn off the lights  
It is to love to pardon to redeem and condemn  
to search everywhere  
to break my heart against yours  
and when broken not to tranquilly await the future  
but to go out and light new fires<sup>388</sup>

Here, tranquility is the enemy and the challenge is learning to fight in conditions of brokenness. Bambara’s pedagogy taught students to use words, images, colors, light, sounds, and movements “to love to pardon to redeem and condemn,” to hold the world accountable for its inadequacies and work to change them. As someone who was able to work across and through different media, eschewing distinctions between artist, scholar, and teacher and never afraid to be seen as a novice, Bambara guided students in the process of finding the right media for the story they wanted to tell. The only requirement was that they go out and light new fires.

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<sup>387</sup> Bambara qtd. in Tate, *Writers*, 14.

<sup>388</sup> Untitled poem by Miguel Huezo Mixco, box 5, Toni Cade Bambara Archive, Spelman College.

“This class has something to teach America”:  
June Jordan and the Democratization of Poetry and Pedagogy

“...by 1974, teaching no longer seemed to me like an accident, a stunt, or primarily a distraction from my real work as a poet. Teaching had begun to alter even the way I approached things as a writer. The vast innocence of my students, Black and white, signified a vulnerability that I became increasingly determined not to violate with endless bad news... it is not possible really to teach both Black and white students but to sustain a loving commitment only to some of them. This fact began to change my conception of the community I wanted my lifework to encompass. I found myself becoming self-consciously concerned to dent the extremely low self-esteem, and the commonplace sense of impotence, that seriously disfigured the formulating worldview of my students, regardless of race”  
— June Jordan<sup>389</sup>

June Jordan’s teaching philosophy takes the form of a geometric proof that is at once poetic manifesto and anti-manifesto:

If you value what students can teach to each other and you,  
If you spend at least half of your energies trying to connect students with the world on important, risky, levels of exchange and collaboration,  
If you delete taglines like “multi-cultural” or “gender” or “sexual preference” from your brain and, instead, look to see who are the students you hope to interest, inform, include, and enlighten—through the literature you assign as well as through the sharing of the new American writings you will invite and enable them to create,  
If you dream and scheme about the self-evident, as well as the potential, reasons why public performance, publication, and media appearances are natural and necessary steps to the acquirement of power through language,  
Then: You will probably find yourself launched on an unpredictable, nerve-racking, and marvelous adventure in democracy and education!”<sup>390</sup>

This blueprint begins not with learning objectives, but a way of being in the world: an open and honest belief that one’s students have things to teach each other, the instructor, and ultimately, the world. While not ostensibly radical, this notion actually undermines centuries of educational thought structured around the reproduction of expertise. This statement provides a pedagogical grammar: a way of organizing subjects, objects, verbs, and time. Absent are the kinds of subjects

<sup>389</sup> June Jordan, “Notes Toward a Black Balancing of Love and Hatred” in *Civil Wars* (Boston: Beacon, 1981), 84.

<sup>390</sup> June Jordan, “Introduction” in *June Jordan’s Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint*, ed. Lauren Muller et al. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.

we typically see in course catalogues: African-American literature, Asian-American literature, women's literature (though all were central to the project); in fact, the statement is almost entirely methodology. It is the grammar of an environmental designer: someone who surveys Harlem and sees history, reparations, and possibility and commits to restructuring society and redistributing resource in order to produce human flourishing. While this statement evokes a union resolution, the conditional "if" is substituted for the diagnostic "whereas," demonstrating that this is just one model for teaching in the service of social change: a way but not the only way. Its conditional tense does not dictate; instead it performs the pedagogy it describes as various efforts to "interest, inform, include, and enlighten," appealing to the reader as a complex, intelligent, and desiring subject. This is the "if-then" grammar of praxis: of taking a hypothesis and testing it, then revising your philosophies, theories, and assumptions based on what is learned from the experience. In contrast to the disdain with which Jordan wrote of her own education and her scathing critiques of abusive public schools, this grammar is celebratory, intoxicated with the possibility that things could be otherwise.

This teaching philosophy was the culmination of many years of experimental, trial and error teaching in classrooms across the country. Jordan taught intermittently in the English department at City College (1967-1978), including courses in the SEEK program, in an Upward Bound program, and with the extracurricular Teachers and Writers Collaborative. In subsequent years, Jordan taught both introductory and advanced courses on topics such as "Literature and Social Change," "The Art of Black English," "The Art of the Essay," and "Black American Fiction" at Connecticut College (1968), Sarah Lawrence (1971-1975), Yale University (1974-1975), Macalaster College (visiting poet, 1980), SUNY Stony Brook (1978-1989), where she was tenured, and the University of California at Berkeley. While existing in proximity to formal

academic institutions, many of the spaces in which Jordan taught — Upward Bound, The Teachers and Writers Collaborative, Poetry for the People — were peripheral, or even extra-institutional, which both intensified struggles for resources and allowed for greater experimentation. Throughout her career, Jordan was also involved with the fight for Black English, Black Studies, and bilingual education, crucial aspects of larger struggles for racial justice.

In all of these classes, literature was taught alongside history, sociology, and journalism, and collaborative work, such as performances and publications, was undertaken to help students strengthen their own voices by intervening in contemporary social problems. Jordan's teaching methods were the products of extensive education research, and at UC Berkeley she designed a graduate course on "Education: What's the Point? What's the Potential?" in which students would not merely analyze the educational theories of Alfred North Whitehead, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks but "test the theories of critical pedagogy against what actually happens in a classroom setting."<sup>391</sup> At the same time, Jordan enacted these theories by making herself the teaching assistant and giving primary authority to a new female professor of color as a way of mentoring her.<sup>392</sup>

While Jordan is a key figure in genealogies of women of color feminism, deservedly celebrated for her poetry and essays that theorize the intersections of sexism, racism, homophobia, and imperialism, scholars have only recently begun considering the ways that Jordan's aesthetics were shaped by classrooms and her interactions with students.<sup>393</sup> This chapter

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<sup>391</sup> Syllabus for "Education: What's the Point? What's the Potential?" box 78, folder 13, June Jordan Papers, 1936-2002, MC 513, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>392</sup> At one point Jordan was also approached by an editor about publishing a collection of her writings on education. It's not clear to me what her response was, though no such collection currently exists.

<sup>393</sup> Wonderful examples include Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega, "June Jordan's Radical Pedagogy: Activist Poetry in Public Education" and Jonathan Stalling, "Finding a Democratic Speech: The Intercultural

analyzes Jordan's teaching archive, poetry, and essays to highlight the multiple modalities through which Jordan materialized a radically democratic pedagogy grounded in the art of structural critique and using language in the service of social change. While we are all inherently vulnerable merely by existing, Jordan's work allows us to think about what we owe to others who are more vulnerable than us, who are vulnerable in different ways, and whose vulnerability we might be complicit in producing and therefore capable of addressing. In doing so, Jordan models ways to help students move from an awareness of their vulnerability and complicity to collective actions across multiple scales. Jordan's work, I contend, is deeply grounded in a structural understanding of inequality, and, as such, it allows us to apprehend an alternative future for aesthetic education, imagined in grassroots terms and enacted from the bottom up, starting with the needs and desires of those located in the classroom.

### **How to begin is also where**

The Harlem Riots of 1964 marked a turning point in Jordan's thinking about the possibilities for black flourishing in white America. In the wake of this uprising, Jordan embarked on an urban redesign project with architect and planner R. Buckminster Fuller titled "Skyrise for Harlem": "a proposal to rescue a quarter million lives by completely transforming their environment...which may actually determine the pace, pattern and quality of living experience," a veritable blueprint for reparations.<sup>394</sup> Harlem, at the time, was the focus of much pathologizing media attention, which Jordan counters through statistics that point to the state's

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Poetics and Pedagogy of June Jordan's Poetry for the People" in *Still Seeking an Attitude: Critical Reflections on the Work of June Jordan*, eds. Valerie Kinloch and Margaret Grebowicz (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005) and Gumbs, "Nobody Mean More." I am especially compelled by Ortega's argument that Jordan's teaching practices "provide a model of activist involvement in the community through the teaching of creative writing skills like poetry writing...[and] anticipate the twenty-first-century need for radical change in public education at all levels" (189).

<sup>394</sup> June Jordan, "Instant Slum Clearance," *Esquire*, 1965, 109.

neglect of the neighborhood: inadequate housing, dangerous traffic, and underfunded schools that effectively *lowered* children's IQs.<sup>395</sup> The article outlines a carefully researched plan for an environmental solution to these problems, including how to fund the project. What stands out are the conical skyscrapers — cornerless, concrete towers that would house families, direct traffic, and serve as centers of commercial and recreational life. Surprisingly, they most closely resemble the nuclear power plants constructed during these years, which Jordan so vehemently opposed. What if, “Skyrise” suggests, those contoured cylindrical towers could be used not to endanger but shelter the city? In a deceptive turn of events, the editors of *Esquire* published the article, attributing the design wholly to Fuller and renaming it “Instant Slum Clearance,” thus bolstering a white supremacist geography of Harlem as a dirty, worthless neighborhood in need of erasure, rather than a neighborhood *that is owed* clean air and water, safety, quiet, parks: deliberately designed spaces that would make love a reasonable response.

In a 1964 letter to Fuller, Jordan reflects on the aims of this project:

I would wish us to indicate the determining relationship between architectonic reality and physical well-being. I hope that we may implicitly instruct the reader in the comprehensive impact of every Where, of any *place*.<sup>396</sup>

We see a similar attentiveness to the particularities of place in the teaching Jordan undertook in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As an educator, Jordan “implicitly instruct[ed]” her students and young readers in cultivating a structural imaginary that locates one's seemingly idiosyncratic experiences in relation to physical spaces and the power relations they materialize. While Jordan would continue to address those in positions of power, like the readers of *Esquire*, for the remainder of her career, these teaching experiences are some of her earliest efforts to involve those rendered most vulnerable by the social order in the process of addressing inequality.

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<sup>395</sup> Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, *Youth in the Ghetto: A Study of the Consequences of Powerlessness and a Blueprint for Change*, 1964.

<sup>396</sup> June Jordan, “Letter to R. Buckminster Fuller” (1964) in *Civil Wars*, 28.

Jordan had sporadic higher education — a few years at Barnard, Hunter College, and the University of Chicago — during which she was disenchanted by the “nonexperiment” pedagogy: classes in which the answer was known ahead of time and students were graded, for instance, on whether they correctly counted the number of white, red, and purple corn kernels.<sup>397</sup> It is no surprise, then, that Jordan focused instead on her writing and urban design projects. And yet something happened during the 1967 Detroit riots — commemorated in her poem “The New Pieta: For the Mothers and Children of Detroit” (1971) — that made Jordan feel powerless:

After Detroit, I had been looking for what I described to myself as real work: something unrelated to farce, and something poised against tragedy. After Detroit, everything in America seemed old to me, and repetitious, fraudulent, powerful, or powerless. I had no job, nothing to do that I wanted. This was September, 1967.<sup>398</sup>

After the Detroit riot, Jordan was presented with opportunities to teach in the activist educational milieus of the Teachers and Writers Collaborative and at City College in a program “experimental enough to allow college instruction by a college dropout.”<sup>399</sup> Somehow, Jordan understood that returning to the scene of power, the classroom, might be a way to take her experiences as a writer and do more to address the everydayness of institutional racism.

On October 7, 1967, Jordan arrived at the Community Resource Center in East Harlem eager to meet the peculiar students — ranging in age from a mere twelve to fourteen — who had elected (or, more accurately, were nudged by their school teacher Terri Bush) to take an extracurricular Saturday writing class offered at no cost to the children through the Teachers and Writers Collaborative. The Teachers and Writers Collaborative was a group of authors and educators including Anne Sexton, Phillip Lopate, Muriel Rukeyser, David Henderson, Herbert

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<sup>397</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, the insights of psychology and progressive education were applied to New York City public schools, educators placed more faith in the scientific method to solve educational problems, and schools became increasingly bureaucratic and standardized. See Ravitch.

<sup>398</sup> Introduction to Tomorrow in English, Teaching and Academic Work, box 76, folder 13, June Jordan Papers.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.



Kohl, and Kenneth Koch (among many others), who believed that writers could help working class children in New York City by sharing the skills possessed by artists: problem solving, comfort in open-endedness, an empowering relationship to language, and creativity, among others.<sup>400</sup> After a few shy exchanges, Jordan's students began their first warm up writing activity (a predictable prompt: introduce yourself to the class). As the children tentatively shared their writings with the group, Jordan swallowed deeply, fighting not to let the supportive smile stray from her face.

It was here that Jordan first encountered, as an instructor, students who spelled "him" with an "n" and could not distinguish a fragment from a sentence, producing in Jordan "a sense of desperation," that threatened to derail the entire undertaking. To be certain, this experience will resonate with many educators: by design, teachers are those who were successful students, those who cared that "him" was spelled correctly and that sentences were bookended by proper punctuation. In contrast to the pathologizing journalism of the time, Jordan's published diary entries depict these students not as unintelligent, but as arriving with a "history of no education" already battered by years of "shit treatment" and "despisal pedagogy" at the hands of underfunded public schools.<sup>401</sup> As these reflections indicate, Jordan's work belongs amidst a body of late 1960s writings that sought to explain the underperformance of black and Puerto Rican students in New York City's public schools as the product of racist institutions and not individual deficiencies.<sup>402</sup> The question then became, "How can you correct completely illiterate

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<sup>400</sup> Phillip Lopate and New York Teachers and Writers Collaborative NY, *Journal of a Living Experiment: A Documentary History of the First Ten Years of Teachers and Writers Collaborative* (New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1979).

<sup>401</sup> June Jordan, "The Voice of the Children" in *Civil Wars*, 32.

<sup>402</sup> See, for instance, Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1989); Jonathan Kozol, *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools* (New York: Plume, 1995), and the works of Preston Wilcox and Livingston Wingate.

work without entering that hideous history they have had to survive as still another person who says: You can't do it. You don't know. You are unable. You are ignorant."<sup>403</sup> Determined not to be part of this stifling history, Jordan set about exploring other ways of being together and doing things with language that taught these young people that they are capable of action.

The Teachers and Writers Collaborative addressed the inadequacies of New York City's underfunded public school system — schools that Jordan had firsthand knowledge of growing up in Brooklyn:

When I was going to school, too much of the time I found myself an alien body force-fed stories and facts about people entirely unrelated to me, or my family. And the regular demands upon me only required my acquiescence to a program of instruction pre-determined without regard for my particular history, or future. I was made to learn about 'the powerful': Those who won wars or who conquered territory or whose odd ideas about poetry and love prevailed inside some distant country where neither my parents nor myself would find welcome.<sup>404</sup>

Here, Jordan uses the passive voice to connect an alienating curriculum dominated by the victors of history to a disciplining pedagogy that punishes those who don't conform to pre-established ways of being and knowing. Alienating and irrelevant schools maintain dominant power hierarchies in part by convincing young people they are powerless.

Rather than asking students to write about "those who won wars or who conquered territory" Jordan asked the children in her weekend workshops to write about what they knew: New York City, riots, love, American history, blackness, fragility, Nina Simone, and schools that taught children that they "are slaves to teachers."<sup>405</sup> Through poetry, prose, and song-writing assignments, various field trips to inspire writing, and the publication of their poetry in anthologies, Jordan exposed students to the power of language: writing that might have an

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<sup>403</sup> June Jordan, "The Voice of the Children Diaries" in *Journal of a Living Experiment*, 401.

<sup>404</sup> June Jordan, "UC Berkeley Merit Review Statement," box 78, folder 8, June Jordan Papers, 1936-2002, MC 513, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>405</sup> Isabel Velez, "Children Are Slaves" in *The Voice of the Children*, eds. Terri Bush and June Jordan (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1968).

impact in the world beyond the classroom. Together they worked to unlearn the disempowering pedagogies of “confrontation,” “despisal,” and “nonexperiments,” taught by dominant institutions, learning instead to trust the authority of their experiences, to trust each other, and to use the power of the written word.

Journal writing was a central component of the Teachers and Writers Collaborative pedagogy, not just for the students, but the instructors as well. Jordan’s journal entries carefully chronicle the impact of each space on what transpired. On Saturday, December 9, 1967, Jordan and her son dragged a phonograph, record albums, photographs, paper, and pencils to the Harlem Community Resource Center eager to teach the students about jazz and engage them in song-writing only to find that none of them had made the weekend pilgrimage from Brooklyn. In response to her disappointment, poet and activist Victor Hernandez Cruz shared an insight that would shape Jordan’s work for years to come: “These people have problems, plus then you start telling them times and places, they can’t make it. Should be where the people are.”<sup>406</sup> Jordan moved the location of their meetings to Brooklyn. On Saturday, December 30, 1967, “nothing happened” — no writing, meaningful conversations, learning, change — “because they were a bit abashed to be in Terri’s rather posh apartment with three adult strangers.”<sup>407</sup> And on their field trip to Washington Irving’s house in Tarrytown, the experience of eating at a predominantly white Howard Johnson’s proved just as much, if not more so, enlightening than wandering the author’s abode.

From her earliest Saturday workshops at the Harlem Community Resource Center, Jordan was certain of little except the power of transmutation — that binding and publishing students’ writing would help connect their classroom learning to the world beyond its walls. In *soulscript*

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

(Doubleday, 1970), Jordan published the poetry of her young Black students alongside poems by Ishmael Reed, Audre Lorde, Clarence Major, Richard Wright, and LeRoi Jones. *The Voice of the Children* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969) contains remarkable short essays and poetry by Teachers and Writers Collaborative students that, in just the first few pages, respond to prompts such as “what would you do if you were president?” with trenchant critiques of ghetto stereotypes, settler colonialism, U.S. imperialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy made all the more powerful when we recall that their average age was thirteen. In one essay, Vanessa Howard, age fourteen, theorizes the power of stereotypes to reduce the complexity of individuals:

Nine out of ten times when a person hears the word ‘ghetto’ they think of Black people first of all...Ghetto has become a definition meaning Black, garbage, slum areas. To me the word ‘ghetto’ is just as bad as cursing. I think they put all Black people in a box marked ‘ghetto’ which leaves them having no identity. They should let Black people be seen for themselves, not as one reflection on all.<sup>408</sup>

These short essays and poems demonstrate Jordan’s ability to help students locate their lived experiences in relation to structural conditions of injustice and to understand how precarity is unevenly distributed along embodied axes of race and gender.

I read these anthologies as the enactment of a radical pedagogy that Jordan developed alongside colleagues like Toni Cade Bambara, who was also publishing student writing in anthologies. This was an era in which traditional literary anthologies like the Norton were gaining popularity in classrooms. In traditional anthologies, the content is selected by experts in literary history, who determine which texts will be included and which will not. As such, literary anthologies have famously been sites of contestation, where debates over what counts as the most important literature are hashed out among experts. By contrast, Bambara’s and Jordan’s anthologies of student writing challenge the power relations implicit in literary anthologies, which are typically produced *for* but not *by* students in the classroom. Whether “democratic”

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<sup>408</sup> Vanessa Howard, “Ghetto,” in *The Voice of the Children*, 1.

(Jordan's parlance) or "decolonial" (Bambara's idiom), these writers and educators acted on a conviction that authorship — the power to move people through language — is widely distributed despite cultural institutions that privilege the voices of a narrow, white male elite. Indeed, publishing students' writing in anthologies demonstrates a grassroots approach to the classroom that teaches students the power of their own voices and stories while also addressing the gaps in the literary record.

In 1967, the same year Jordan began teaching in TWC, she also started teaching in the English Department at the City College of New York. The first course Jordan ever taught at City College concluded with students writing final essays to be published as part of an anthology of student writing titled *Tomorrow in English* (intended for publication, but never actually published). The collection includes essays against eugenics, one analyzing how the U.S. ought to respond to the overpopulation crisis, and philosophical meditations on concepts like "hate" and "hell is other people." In one student essay titled "Hell is Other People and Other Thoughts in the Singular..." the student writes, "For this short essay I've done much research in a rather unconventional way. I've used my eyes as I'd hope to use a camera and my ears as I would a tape recorder programmed to pick up unusual statements."<sup>409</sup> While this essay is steeped in literary language and philosophical reflections that arise from concrete observations, other student essays titled "Overpopulation" and "Should the American Sterilization Laws Be Abolished?" are grounded in a different kind of research, with footnotes to sociology, economics, and ecology studies at the end of nearly every sentence. "Good, trenchant, clear & thorough," Jordan wrote in the margin of one essay draft, "I trust you will append a bibliography." On another essay she commented, "I admire your determination to master your own inclinations of style." As these examples demonstrate, Jordan taught students to think

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<sup>409</sup> "Hell is Other People and Other Thoughts in the Singular," in *Tomorrow in English*.

critically by moving through specific examples (from scientific studies, journalism, literature, and their own experiences) to more general claims and propositions, weighing different truth claims and types of evidence against one another.

At City College, Jordan questioned what she called the “insanities” of standard syllabi and curriculum, such as timed writing exercises, which placed students in unrealistic situations of duress: “Only as some kind of bad joke would Freud’s composition, on any subject, be interesting if he were coerced into a 40 minute deadline, in uncomfortable classroom chairs.”<sup>410</sup> This attention to furniture and physical space demonstrates an environmental approach to thinking about the material conditions that enable (or foreclose) thinking, writing, and learning, beginning with people’s most immediate relationships to their classrooms, institutions, and neighborhoods. Just as Jordan was analyzing the institutions in which students’ lives were unfolding, she taught students to do the same. In one assignment, she asked students to read British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s *Aims of Education* and develop criteria for evaluating their own educations.<sup>411</sup> In response to this assignment, one student reflects on the shortcomings of his education: “I was given no concept of life, much less an appreciation of it, with which I could go out into the world on my own and become somebody important and useful to the community.”<sup>412</sup> Rather than treating education as something given and inherited, Jordan’s assignments encourage students to see their education as something they have an active stake in and are capable of improving.

As demonstrated by “Skyrise for Harlem,” Jordan’s journalism explored how writing about the physical conditions of a neighborhood might impact the quality of life of the neighborhood’s residents. At City College, Jordan borrowed Mina Shaughnessy’s “problem

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<sup>410</sup> Editor’s introduction to *Tomorrow in English*, box 76, folder 14, June Jordan Papers.

<sup>411</sup> Whitehead’s criteria: education should teach students “the art of the utilization of knowledge”

<sup>412</sup> Student, *Tomorrow in English*.

paper” assignment, which used Anthony P. Dunbar’s “Will to Survive: A Study of a Mississippi Plantation Community, Based on the Words of its Citizens” as a model for student writing. In 1968, civil rights activist and community organizer Anthony Dunbar spent seven weeks living with and interviewing poor Black families in the Mississippi Delta to figure out how hundreds of thousands of people still go hungry each day in one of the wealthiest nations in the world. Dunbar insisted that the voices and perspectives of those who were suffering would be necessary to achieve any kind of structural change, even if the ultimate audience for this report was not the poor black families themselves, but people in relative positions of power who might help address the problem. Jordan’s students used Dunbar’s work as a model to research local place-based social problems that were important to them, analyze the material conditions of their neighborhoods, and evaluate solutions. Their essays are titled “Inferior Education in the Williamsburg Community,” “Drug Addiction in the South Bronx,” “Inadequacy of Acceptable Food and Inadequate Systems of Food Supply in Harlem,” and “Self-Concept as a Determining Factor in Choice of Occupation: The Black Male Hustler.”<sup>413</sup> As these titles demonstrate, Jordan used writing to help students cultivate the kind of structural imagination evident in “Skyrise for Harlem.”

These classrooms, in turn, expanded Jordan’s knowledge of how writing can be used to influence people into addressing social problems. In a letter to Shaughnessey, Jordan can hardly contain her enthusiasm for the assignment:

Most of my students immersed themselves in this project according to the most ambitious criteria; they were spontaneously striving for usefulness, accuracy, power, and the kind of authoritative tone that can only be earned by defensible research...Dunbar’s model guided us into valuable, tactical conclusions concerning the presentation of a social problem we want to move people (who have money) into solving. Examples: If you delimit the community of your concern, the problem will seem correspondingly limited and, therefore, amenable to solution. If you literally present the people who suffer a particular,

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<sup>413</sup> June Jordan letter to Mina Shaughnessey, box 76, folder 14, June Jordan Papers.

social problem, then the problem correspondingly seems real.<sup>414</sup>

Jordan's letter demonstrates the experimental ethos of the SEEK program: how educators crafted assignments from knowledge of their own educations and their sense of how learning and social change actually happen — we might think of these assignments as hypotheses — and tested these methods, reporting on what worked, how students responded, which assignments catalyzed learning, and what they learned in these classrooms. This quote suggests that educators had a sense of the skills they wanted to help students learn and ideas about how they might get there, but there was an element of unpredictability to each lesson: the possibility that students would learn something different than anticipated. This is what I mean by praxis and experimental teaching, which is not unrelated to the experimental impulse of aesthetics. We have a record of these trials, errors, and lessons because both the City College writing program and the Teachers and Writers Collaborative fostered an environment of writing, corresponding, and dialoguing about teaching and sharing these lessons with a larger audience.

In Jordan's classes, students wrote about their needs, desires, experiences, and reactions and used these to interrogate the environment that produced these responses. Similar to Adrienne Rich, who asked students to describe what was missing from their Harlem neighborhoods, Jordan asked students, "How would you like this place to look?" inviting them to imagine their own where.<sup>415</sup> In these classrooms, "write about your neighborhood" emerged as a pedagogy of social justice through which students could make sense of their lived experiences, diagnose social problems, do research, raise awareness among others, and work towards change. In the SEEK program, Jordan realized the generative reciprocal relationships that can occur when students have "a real, breathing community to which they can return—with newly formed

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

<sup>415</sup> Jordan, "Voice of the Children Diaries," 137.



questions, and newly devised answers.”<sup>416</sup> For years to come, this experience shaped Jordan’s sense of the possibilities afforded by university teaching and insistence that colleges should provide for those in the local community and remain accountable to those who don’t have access to sufficient resources.

In 1970, when Open Admissions was implemented (both hastily and belatedly) throughout the CUNY system without an adequate increase in funding for faculty and student support, the majority of professors panicked about the influx of black, Hispanic, and Asian American students who, in the words of Theodore L. Gross, chair of the City College English department from 1971-72, brought “with them language and dialect problems that prevented them from understanding the most elementary texts.”<sup>417</sup> Professors blamed these students for their alleged “inability” to comprehend great works, their disinterest in elitist literary traditions, and above all, their ostensible illiteracy. In Gross’s mind, these students tarnished the school’s reputation of rigor, and as Roderick Ferguson argues (using Jordan’s “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person” as a key example) this was the era in which “excellence” became a racialized regulatory mechanism through this kind of exclusionary discourse.<sup>418</sup> According to Gross, “The greatest difficulty for blacks...seemed to be to put an “s” on the third person singular.” Jordan tackled this condescending thinking through her writings on and in Black English: “116th Sonnet in Black English Translation,” “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan,” and *His Own Where*, one of the nation’s most acclaimed children’s books of 1971, which demonstrates, in gorgeous prose, the beauty of literature written without the ‘s’ on the third person singular. These texts give the lie to the notion that Open Admissions lowers

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<sup>416</sup> Jordan, “Letter to Shaughnessey.”

<sup>417</sup> Theodore L. Gross, “How to Kill a College: The Private Papers of a Campus Dean,” *The Saturday Review*, New York 1975, 12-20.

<sup>418</sup> See Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*.

standards by interrogating the elitist, white supremacist metrics by which those standards are determined.

While Gross accused these students of killing the English department at City College, Jordan's writings and teaching celebrate the ways these young people's language and lived experiences were breathing new life into American literature and learning. Gross bemoaned television and radio, the preferred means by which these "new" students accessed information. Jordan, by contrast, embraced these modes of democratic public broadcasting and developed a multimodal pedagogy that used literature as one among many means to teach language and the art of communication through different media.<sup>419</sup> Rather than participate in a system that deemed these students illiterate, Jordan's advocacy of Black English and multimodal pedagogy were part of a larger movement to redefine literature, literacy, and learning. While we tend to understand multimodal pedagogy as a response to the digital era, for Jordan, allowing students to participate in different ways and compose in different genres and forms was related to her fight for Black English and expanding what counts as literature and knowledge.<sup>420</sup>

Anthologies are just one example of the collaborative, public texts that students in Jordan's classes produced each semester. As a poet, Jordan was interested in how her own experiences could become useful to a larger collective, how writing within the limits of an "I"

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<sup>419</sup> Multimodal composition grew in popularity in the 1990s with the emergence of the internet and in 2005 the NCTE published their "Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies." <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/multimodalliteracies> However, as Jason Palmeri has recently shown, composition theorists and practitioners have been engaging students in multimodal composition since the 1960s, when new technologies such as slide projectors, photocopiers, televisions, tape recorders and the super 8 camera enabled new forms of recording, editing, copying, distributing, listening and viewing. Jason Palmeri, *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 11.

<sup>420</sup> As Jonathan Stalling argues, Jordan's fight for black English was related to her efforts to democratize poetry. Stalling draws our attention to the ways Jordan's guidelines for Black English are strikingly similar to her rules for what makes a good poem (in many cases they are identical). Both poetry and Black English, Stalling suggests, were ways of contesting the normative limits of standard English (233).

could serve a “we.”<sup>421</sup> As an educator, Jordan challenged students to take the lessons of their reading and writing and make them useful beyond the classroom. Jordan used literary texts like *The Grapes of Wrath* to help students connect contemporary struggles against poverty to the hardships faced by tenant farmers in Oklahoma in the 1930s. Their assignment was then to “hypothesize appropriate written forms, and polemical strategies, to further serve The Poor People’s Campaign,”<sup>422</sup> a movement for economic justice organized by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that was taking shape outside of their classroom. Other examples of collaborative final projects inspired by their readings include a “Wrath Rally” and letter writing campaign against poverty in Biafra organized by students in her Upward Bound Class and dramatic radio productions on children’s welfare and “The Trial of the American Conscience” (the final project for students in “Martin and Malcolm: Flipsides of the Same Black Revolutionary Coin,”) “written by African, Asian, Chicano, Chicana, and White Americans who want to change the destiny of South Central [Los Angeles] from despair and violence to justice, empowerment and reason.”<sup>423</sup> Reflecting on what happens when students are asked not necessarily to write about literature, but to use what they learn about language through literature to move people to action, Jordan notes that “students’ writing leaped into an eloquent fluency that had never even been hinted in their earlier work.”<sup>424</sup> Jordan taught students that their voices, stories, and actions mattered for social change; in short, that each student “had something to teach America.” At the same time, through her essays, speeches, journalism, and poetry, Jordan was doing what she encouraged students to do: sharing the lessons of her experiences, so that others could benefit as well. As Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega writes, Jordan “used every

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<sup>421</sup> June Jordan, “Thinking About My Poetry,” in *Civil Wars*, 126.

<sup>422</sup> June Jordan, “Writing and Teaching,” *Partisan Review*, Summer 1969, 481.

<sup>423</sup> “A Trial of the American Conscience,” Pacifica Radio Archives, <http://pacificaradioarchives.org/recording/pz0218>

<sup>424</sup> June Jordan, “Writing and Teaching,” *Partisan Review*, Summer 1969, 481.

moment in the classroom as an experiment and then shared the results with others by publishing accounts of her teaching experiences.”<sup>425</sup>

As these collaborative projects demonstrate, Jordan did not demand conformity but encouraged creativity and crafted assignments that responded to the particularities of students’ lived experiences. Like all of the teacher-poets I analyze, Jordan challenged the hegemony of academic discourse in formal education by suggesting that “creative writing” (which encompasses both literature and writing) might be a better organizational rubric: “Creative writing encircles all uses of language characterized by precision, imaginative synthesis, and efficiency, with respect to purpose.”<sup>426</sup> Jordan’s teaching archive suggests that distinctions between courses dedicated to literary analysis and those on writing reinforce power hierarchies by teaching students that they are not, themselves, writers, capable of producing something on par with the writings of Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich, James Baldwin, or June Jordan. In courses like “The Art of the Essay” and “The Art of Black English,” assigned readings and student writing were of equal value, demonstrating that students have much to learn from each other and, more radically, plenty to teach the world.

Rather than insisting that students adapt to standardized criteria, Jordan changed the structures of her classes so that students could learn through different modalities and participate in the production of their learning environment. In a SUNY Stony Brook observation report from March 11, 1976, the observer notes that students in Jordan’s class sat in a circle, voted on decisions about class readings and procedures, and collectively established the criteria for evaluating each other’s poetry. Students participated “fully and equally” in decision-making processes in the classroom and on campus, “otherwise, once again, the people most affected by a

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<sup>425</sup> Ortega, “June Jordan’s Radical Pedagogy,” 201.

<sup>426</sup> Description of Literature and Social Change course, box 76, folder 18, June Jordan Papers.

decision will have been excluded from the decision making process.”<sup>427</sup> Here, Jordan uses the language of self-determination that characterized the Black Power movement and the movement for the community control of schools, connecting the distribution of power in the classroom and on campus to the social movements of the era. Engaging students in decisions about the content and structure of the course generates collective investment in their learning and shifts the structures of accountability from hierarchical (between teacher and student) to more horizontal, between peers. Jordan encouraged students not to trust adults or teachers just because they are in positions of power, but to look next to them, to their peers, and experiment with creating worlds that might better nurture their desires. In fact, Jordan went so far as to ban competition from her Graduate Workshop in Poetry: “Competition will be, likewise, prohibited, in spirit, as well as in fact. In common, we shall develop our own satisfactory criteria for the appraisal of works under consideration.”<sup>428</sup>

In her classes, Jordan asked deceptively simple questions that connected the readings “to our actual existence in society,” and it was clear to the observer that “many modes of participation have been established by the instructor and her students.”<sup>429</sup> Expanding the modes by which students can learn is a way of structuring classes for students’ success and is increasingly encouraged by practitioners of disability studies, advocates of universal design for learning, and proponents of antiracist pedagogy. But at SUNY Stony Brook, this determination to help students learn ran up against the protocols of an institutional bureaucracy designed to rank, credentialize, hierarchize, and sort. In October 1985, Jordan received a letter from the director of undergraduate studies in English requesting an explanation as to why more than 40 percent of the students in “The Art of Black English” received an A or A-. Jordan demonstrates

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<sup>427</sup> Letter to President of Sarah Lawrence, box 76, folder 18, June Jordan Papers.

<sup>428</sup> “Graduate Workshop in Poetry” Description, box 76, folder 14, June Jordan Papers.

<sup>429</sup> “Teaching Observation, March 11, 1976,” box 76, folder 14, June Jordan Papers.

the inanity of this nearsighted suspicion, given how many of her students went on to win awards, publish writing, and succeed in graduate school. In this instance, Jordan's "open access" and "educational opportunity" pedagogy — her insistence that knowledge is democratic and distributed — ran up against an elitist university structure designed to stratify knowledge and power.

Jordan's classes were shaped by the debates occurring amidst activist organizations and social movements including the erasure of Black women from the women's movement, the reproduction of gendered power hierarchies in the Black Power Movement, and the fight for Black English and Black Studies. Jordan engaged students in a consciousness-raising education by teaching them to read through the lens of their differences. From her first assignments at City College ("describe the difference between you and your immediate, older family,") through the multicultural and race-radical pedagogy of Poetry for the People, Jordan's writing prompts actualize the estranging possibilities of literature by tuning students into difference, unfamiliarity, and distance from one another. The purpose of studying Black American Fiction, according to Jordan's Spring 1983 syllabus, is "To gradually define Black experience: What aspect of the story is necessarily or distinctively or incidentally Black? [and] To gradually define female experience and male experience: What aspect of the story is necessarily or distinctively or incidentally male or female?" Students were provided with specific guidelines for reading Black American Fiction in terms of "RACE? CLASS? AGE? GENDER?...What would be the effect on a Black reader? White reader? Does it present a man's worldview? A woman's? Where? How? Any difference of impact for a man reading it? A woman?"<sup>430</sup> Not only were they reading about these debates, they were actively writing themselves into these conversations and engaging these

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<sup>430</sup> Black American Fiction Spring 1983 Syllabus at SUNY Stony Brook, box 77, folder 9, June Jordan Papers.

questions of difference firsthand through their efforts to collaborate across gendered, racial, and class differences. While English departments nationwide looked much the same as they had for decades, Jordan transformed the classroom using the consciousness-raising methodologies of social movements, especially their insistence on praxis: that reading and writing about gender, race, and sexuality demanded drastically different ways of thinking about power relations in the classroom.

Rather than assuming that students already know how to listen to and work with others (why would they, when liberal institutions squash our capacities to cooperate and organize?) Jordan taught collaboration as a skill at multiple scales: teaching reading and writing as acts of collaboration, assigning group midterms and finals, and engaging students in the collaborative production of radio programs, anthologies, performances, and teach-ins. In “Contemporary Women’s Poetry,” taught in Spring 1984, Jordan’s midterm asked students to

Choose one poem to discuss: What is the poem saying? Is it good poetry? How does it compare to other poems studied—as a poem, or in point of view, or in voice, or in imagery, or in subject matter? Is this a woman’s poem? Is it ‘true’? Is it feminist? (Feminist: A woman determined to be fully realized as a free human being.)<sup>431</sup>

The catch? Both the midterm and final “shall be undertaken by groups of three, at the minimum, or groups of 5, at the maximum.” These assignments provided opportunities for students to cultivate more ethical relationships with others not predicated on competition or exploitation.

Jordan’s introduction to the anthology of student writing *Tomorrow in English* demonstrates just how inspiring she found the experience of teaching in an experimental writing program:

When I arrived that Thursday morning at eight A.M., I met 25 white, middle-class Americans. And they met me. Our meeting formulated yet another experiment—in black and white, and in differing anger devolved from similar dreaming. I have learned about middle-class white America and I have learned about the fears and the pride and the

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<sup>431</sup> “Spring 1984, English 276,” Box 77, Folder 9, June Jordan Papers.

changing hearts of 25 people I will probably never see again except in the general pain and freakishly occurring happiness of this country. But I have known them, nevertheless, and they have modified what I am willing to believe regardless of what I read, in newsprint, tomorrow or the next day.<sup>432</sup>

Jordan's introduction illustrates the deep respect she had for these students as people and as writers. She describes how teaching middle and upper class, predominantly white "young Americans" shaped her refusal to let dominant fictions of race and class override the complexities and particularities of actual people, depicting the City College classroom as a site of unlikely and intimate encounters across the race and class differences that otherwise structure our everyday lives. Indeed, teaching students differentially positioned in the intersecting axes of power fundamentally shaped Jordan's thinking about difference, democracy, and the audience she hoped to reach through her work. Through her teaching experiences and perpetual, ongoing learning alongside her students, Jordan taught herself "how not to hate school: How to overcome the fixed, predetermined, graveyard nature of so much of formal education.... 'School' could become, in fact, a place where students learned about the world and then resolved, collectively, and creatively, to change it!"<sup>433</sup>

As these assignments and reflections demonstrate, Jordan's praxis was grounded in a notion that poetry and pedagogy "should be where the people are": that creativity and desires to learn are widely distributed; that dominant capitalist, white supremacist, and patriarchal institutions often stifle this potential; that transformative education can occur in those spaces most neglected by the status quo; and that the question of "how" to teach and learn is also "where."<sup>434</sup> Her pedagogy connects questions of how to teach, share, and use language in an

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<sup>432</sup> Editor's introduction to *Tomorrow in English*, box 76, folder 14, June Jordan Papers.

<sup>433</sup> Jordan, "Merit Review Statement."

<sup>434</sup> Jordan, "'The Voice of the Children Diaries,'" 135.



empowering way to the location of those involved: both their subject positioning and their relation to the physical classrooms, institutions, and neighborhoods in which this work occurs.

In the landmark desegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the Supreme Court defined education as necessary for democracy, military service, "good citizenship," preparation for professional training, personal success, "awakening the child to cultural values... and helping him adjust normally to his environment."<sup>435</sup> Jordan's pedagogy was grounded in a belief that "where we are physically is enmeshed with our deepest consciousness of self"<sup>436</sup> and that if people's neighborhoods looked like Harlem in 1965, maybe it's the environment, and not the people, that need adjustment. Several years later, in describing her young adult novel *His Own Where* (1971), Jordan would refer to it as an effort to teach children "activist principles of urban redesign or, in other words, activist habits of response to environment,"<sup>437</sup> which she enacts through her teaching as well.

The idea that poetry and pedagogy "should be where the people are," refuted the dominant discourse of educational equality in the 1950s and 60s: integration through busing. Anticipating our contemporary era's enthusiasm for "school choice," proponents of busing advocated moving students to the most successful schools while geographies of racial capitalism and unequal distributions of wealth remain intact. Both busing and school choice belie a tacit recognition that there will be no investment in public schools located in neighborhoods that serve working class students of color. Jordan's work helps us see irrelevant education, school integration, and school choice as part of the same neoliberal logic. Years before Paulo Freire's writings would be translated into English, and at least a year before he would famously theorize a "pedagogy of the oppressed," Jordan was connecting learning to its material conditions of

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<sup>435</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

<sup>436</sup> Jordan, "Instant Slum Clearance," 111.

<sup>437</sup> June Jordan, "White English/Black English: The Politics of Translation" (1972) in *Civil Wars*, 59.

possibility, drawing our attention to the hypocrisies of liberal education amidst the radical inequalities of New York City. Her teaching, writing, and activism helped reveal to people their collective capacity to change these conditions.

### **Poetry for the People: a question of scale**

While classrooms are contoured by admissions criteria and tuition fees, they are nevertheless sites of unpredictable encounters with difference. When Jordan arrived at the University of California at Berkeley to teach her first class, “African American Freshman composition,” upon opening the door, she was greeted with the nervous, expectant faces of predominantly Asian-American, Chicanx, and Euro-American students. For African American composition, Jordan revised her plans and devised

a reading list and a method of handling diverse writings so as to identify, and embrace, what was distinctive to African American experience, on the one hand, and, also, to identify, and to embrace, what was personally relevant (either because of commonalities or because of important differences) to every young man and woman sitting in that same space.<sup>438</sup>

Reflecting on this course, Jordan notes that “the class was producing its own literature: A literature reflecting the ideas and dreams and memories of the actual young Americans at work.”<sup>439</sup>

At Berkeley, students’ “competing opinions and conflicted/commingling identities enflamed my imagination,” challenging Jordan (in a rewarding, creative muscle-flexing way) to develop a pedagogy that would honor “that enormous complexity, and pride—I wondered if I could try to preserve, and even embolden, that fabulous, natural energy of assertive, polemical

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<sup>438</sup> Jordan, “Merit Review Statement.”

<sup>439</sup> Jordan, “Introduction,” *A Revolutionary Blueprint*, 5.

young hearts and minds, inside the classroom.”<sup>440</sup> The result of these encounters was Poetry for the People, Jordan’s most famous pedagogical experiment, a network of students and teachers committed to poetry as a means of “truth-telling,” and the democratization of poetic language. At UC Berkeley, Jordan worked with young people, many of whom were immigrants, students of color, and the first in their families to attend college, guiding them in the development of their own voices through writing, performance, and publication. Each semester, students (with Jordan’s guidance) organized campus poetry readings, where students would read alongside invited poets such as Adrienne Rich and Ntozake Shange in front of a packed auditorium. Students were responsible for every aspect of the public readings: teaching each other the art of reading poetry aloud, inviting poets, reserving rooms, coordinating refreshments, setting up sound and lighting, archiving the readings, and cleaning up afterwards — through which they gained firsthand knowledge of the labor involved in making things happen and worked to distribute these tasks in equitable ways. Crucial to these events was the notion that student poetry should receive the same care and fanfare as that authored by established poets.

These democratizing lessons were reinforced through students’ involvement in the publication of their poetry, each semester, in an anthology: editing, proofing, binding, budgeting, distribution, and marketing. One example is *Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint*, a collection of reading lists, syllabi, poetry, and activities presented as a “how to” guide for others interested in democratizing poetry. The do-it-ourselves aesthetic of these anthologies speaks to the way students and teachers were taking the urgent need to diversify publishing into their own hands through the democratized means of publication that were increasingly becoming available. Students who completed this program then applied to be student-teacher poets, who took a course on poetic pedagogy and led smaller discussion groups and workshops (like recitations)

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<sup>440</sup> Jordan, “Merit Review Statement.”

with the new Poetry for the People students. In addition, they brought this poetic pedagogy into public K-12 schools, community centers, and churches, thus creating a network of hundreds if not thousands of people working to democratize language through their learning. By seeing a poem through from its construction, word by word, to its eventual performance and publication, students learned about the collaborative efforts required to create something you believe in and share it with others, and the method was just as important as the finished products. Through this process, they developed knowledge of injustice and skills with language, performance, publication, and organizing that would ensure a reasonable degree of “self-respecting self-sufficiency” even as they worked to change this structurally unequal world.<sup>441</sup>

Poetry for the People exemplifies what Jodi Melamed would call a “race radical” pedagogy that delves into the unique poetic traditions of people from different backgrounds. One semester, for instance, Poetry for the People covered units on Oral Tradition in African American Poetry (for which students read Adrienne Rich on format and form and revised their “How Do I Love Thee?” poems using songs by Queen Latifah, Toni Braxton, and The Company as examples), African American and Caribbean Poetry, “White Male” Poetry, Native American Poetry, Gay and Lesbian Poetry, The Canon, Asian American Poetry, Chicana/o Poetry, Women’s Poetry, and Irish Poetry. Each unit featured guest lecturers who were experts on these topics and students sharing the poetry they wrote, influenced by each style. One semester, a student pointed out that Poetry for the People neglected a rich tradition of deaf poetry, and invited deaf poets to campus as part of their program. Publishing their poetry alongside the bibliographies they generated in *A Revolutionary Blueprint* meant that educators no longer had

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<sup>441</sup> Statement by June Jordan, Assistant Professor of English, Black poet and Writer, May 5, 1976, box 76, folder 14, June Jordan Papers.

excuses for only teaching “English literature” to “American students” (Gross’s terms) — to deny the literature that is being made all around us in favor of a narrowly-defined literary tradition.

In an era of attentiveness to appropriation, it is worthwhile to ask, what are the politics of asking Black students to write poems inspired by Native American poetry? White students to write poems inspired by Caribbean poetry? Heterosexual students to write poems inspired by gay and lesbian poetry? (We could name any number of configurations.) How does this pedagogy avoid the abstraction of difference? First, in every unit, whether “Native American Poetry,” “White Male Poetry,” or “Chicana/o Poetry,” Jordan and her students studied these poems in relation to the particular lived experiences of their authors and the specific historical, cultural, economic, and political conditions in which the poems were produced. This is important, given that in the U.S., many of us have been taught to read, write, and think according to the protocols of Western modernity without ever being asked to consider the relativity of this knowledge; the historical and material conditions of its emergence and circulation; or the onto-epistemologies it obscures. In addition, Jordan (who encouraged educators to “delete taglines like ‘multi-cultural’ or ‘gender’ or ‘sexual preference’ from your brain and, instead, look to see who are the students you hope to interest, inform, include, and enlighten”) understood that these conditions do not determine what a piece of literature can do in the world — that if you bracket what you think you already know about a poem based on the identity of its author and instead follow where it leads, you might find yourself on an unpredictable intellectual adventure. Jordan taught poetry as “a medium for telling the truth...the achievement of maximum impact with a minimal number of words...utmost precision in the use of language,” as an artform characterized by “vividness of diction...defensible line breaks... alliteration/ assonance/ dissonance... rhyme... dramatic inconsistencies... and punctuation,” and understood that art exceeds the meanings modernity has

attached to racial, class, gender, and sexual difference. Her work reminds us that writing is always collaborative and citational, whether or not it announces itself as such, and how one can write a poem inspired by African American poetry without claiming to be African American while still attending to material conditions of inequality.

Through a set of collectively agreed upon rules, repeatedly revised and passed through the hundreds of students involved with Poetry for the People, students gradually worked to develop trusting relationships with one another not predicated on leadership, which denies the potential for collective power. Jordan writes,

Poetry for the People started as a program for political and artistic empowerment of students at U.C. Berkeley. Originating inside a public institution, and enjoying full academic accreditation, there are certain ground rules that must be respected inside this experimental and hopeful society:

1. “The People” shall not be defined as a group excluding or derogating anyone on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, sexual preference, class, or age.
2. “The People” shall consciously undertake to respect and to encourage each other to feel safe enough to attempt the building of a community of trust in which all may try to be truthful and deeply serious in the messages they craft for the world to contemplate.
3. Poetry for the People rests upon a belief that the art of telling the truth is a necessary and a healthy way to create powerful, and positive, connections among people who, otherwise, remain (unknown and unaware) strangers. The goal is not to kill connections but, rather, to create and to deepen them among truly different men and women.<sup>442</sup>

Here Jordan calls for a classroom that is “safe enough” for students to take intellectual and creative risks; where they can be wrong, honest, fanciful, and far-fetched; a space for radical receptivity towards the possibility of learning, in which students are empowered to change their minds and leave the classroom thinking something different than when they first walked in. The promise of pedagogy is that challenging power hierarchies and punitive practices in the classroom can impact these relations in society. As this example indicates, Jordan and her students were learning to worship, work, and build worlds with the strangers that surrounded

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<sup>442</sup> June Jordan, “Ground Rules for Poetry for the People,” in *A Revolutionary Blueprint*, 16.

them — worship, as in, understand their lives as sacred and important, what Bambara referred to as Jordan's "deep-rooted belief in the sanctity of life."<sup>443</sup> At the same time, the subject(s) of this education included strangers not present in the classroom.

Contemporary poet Solmaz Sharif describes Poetry for the People as "the most rigorous education I've ever received."<sup>444</sup> She recalls that "it was one of the few—if not the only—class that was teaching Arab and Arab American poetry on campus. She [Jordan] started doing that right after the first Gulf War started." Sharif's recollections demonstrate how Jordan's pedagogy emerged directly in response to the absences in contemporary knowledge. Sharif continues:

As a student, you were in a class that you're co-teaching with other undergraduate students and members of the community. You see a poetry that's not being taught, and that you yourself know zero about, and instead of just lamenting that you'll never have the expertise, you just figure it out. You read as much as you can, and you get up in front of the class and give a lecture. Maybe you fail publicly, but it has to be done. When you see work that's not being done, you go and you do it. You don't wait for someone else to.<sup>445</sup>

Jordan guided students from a position of "lamenting" the absences in their educations to addressing these literary, educational, and institutional gaps.<sup>446</sup> In doing so, she cast aside a model of aesthetic education grounded in the reproduction of expertise. This pedagogy creates a supportive environment in which students are empowered to work together and find real answers to important questions (not to correctly count the number of purple, yellow, and white corn kernels, as Jordan was asked to do in her own education). Indeed, Jordan taught students not to be students but to be teachers and researchers: to understand themselves as active knowledge producers with the power to make a difference in the world and guide others along this journey.

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<sup>443</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, "Chosen Weapons," *Ms.* Vol. IX, No. 10, April, 1981, 40-2.

<sup>444</sup> Zinzi Clemmons, "The Role of the Poet: An Interview with Solmaz Sharif," *The Paris Review*, July 27, 2016, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/07/27/the-role-of-the-poet-an-interview-with-solmaz-sharif/>.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> Jordan, "Merit Review Statement."

Jordan recognized the transformative power of this poetic pedagogy and she and her students extended this work beyond the university into Berkeley High School, Glide Memorial Church, La Peña Cultural Center, Oakland's Computer Academy, and a Federal Correctional Institution in Dublin. According to a teacher at Oakland's Computer Academy, a school for those most academically-challenged and vulnerable students, the structure of students as teachers was so successful that they replicated it in their school: "The workshops were so powerful and uplifting that those same students - now seniors - have just spent eight weeks teaching poetry to my sophomores, using many of the same techniques they learned in Ms. Jordan's program."<sup>447</sup> He writes that both the "self-esteem building" and "accessible and fun kind of literacy," that were central to Poetry for the People had "visible, real, and truly life changing" effects on these students who had been most abused by an underfunded, standardized, disciplining, and disempowering public school system.

In 1995, Jordan and Janice Mirikitani from the Glide Memorial Church brought Poetry for the People to members of the poverty-stricken Tenderloin district of San Francisco. They saw it as a way to improve the lives of people recovering from drug and alcohol addictions and people who are homeless and unemployed. The goals of the program were

to enlarge the world view of some members of the Tenderloin population; to enhance recovery, self-esteem, and self understanding of participants; to improve writing skills and literacy; to network with other communities, specifically between campus and neighborhoods, academia and the streets; to empower project participants by providing positive reinforcement through workshop settings, peer and teacher encouragement and feedback; as well as through a public platform and publishing opportunities.<sup>448</sup>

Similar to Audre Lorde's insistence that poetry is not a luxury, but instead a weapon of the dispossessed, Jordan attributes poetry with the power to aid in processes of recovery and social transformation for abandoned members of the San Francisco community. In the progress reports

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<sup>447</sup> Letter from instructor at Computer Academy, box 81, folder 2, June Jordan Papers.

<sup>448</sup> Glide Memorial Church, box 81, folder 12, June Jordan Papers.



submitted to grant funders, Jordan and Miritikami mention “the great transformation of the student-teachers,” who had not previously worked with “the street population.” This echoes discourses of “exposure” that pervade service learning, which has rightfully been critiqued for benefiting privileged students at the expense of those communities they are supposed to help. However, Poetry for the People actually belongs within a genealogy of collaborative feminist pedagogical and research methods, alongside methods like participatory action research (which was emerging concurrently), that seek to create mutually beneficial relationships between university students, professors, and larger communities.<sup>449</sup>

These efforts to scale and amplify Poetry for the People challenge the association of large lecture halls with the passive, banking model of education. They take a real, material constraint (lack of funding for education, which produces giant lecture halls with one instructor and hundreds of students) and, like the turn of a kaleidoscope, reframe this as a tremendous opportunity to democratize poetry, pedagogy, pleasure, and power. Jordan’s initial grant application requested funding for “a coordinated program of poetry and poetry-instruction workshops that would inter-link the university with interested public high school teachers and students from the surrounding villages and towns.” Her application highlights the explicit connections between democratizing poetry and pedagogy: “our proposed development of new modes of study and instruction-modes [is] centered on democratic methods and aims as well as democratic (non-mainstream/non-traditional) curricular methods.”<sup>450</sup> By performing and publishing their writing, Jordan helped students find audiences for their work beyond the

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<sup>449</sup> I am thinking about how institutional pushes for diversity can mean white access to a culturally rich learning environment, or how diversity training efforts can fail by recentring whiteness at the expense of students of color, re-entrenching rather than addressing racial inequality. See also Randy Stoecker, *Liberating Service Learning and the Rest of Higher Education Civic Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016).

<sup>450</sup> Letter to Rockefeller Institute Foundation, box 77, folder 9, June Jordan Papers.

classroom, thus diverting university resources to larger communities and insisting it remain accountable to them.

Jordan was not only the charismatic visionary driving these extensions of Poetry for the People, she did the tedious, potentially mind-numbing bureaucratic labor to scale this pedagogy, and she taught students to do this work as well. As her archives demonstrate, this required massive amounts of unglamorous administrative labor — budgets, grant proposals, schedules, progress reports — much of which Jordan did herself. The amount of paperwork it took to coordinate courses for advanced students on “The Teaching and Writing of Poetry,” who would then lead smaller sections of undergraduate poetry workshops; to secure funding for their performances, anthologies, and bringing famous poets to campus; and to extend this work beyond the university would send many of us running for the hills. While not as thrilling as a syllabus, these forms are further evidence of Jordan’s structural understanding of the material conditions that enable (or foreclose) pedagogical praxis. In addition to everything else she was — brilliant teacher, writer, and activist — Jordan was also (oxymoronic as this may sound) a fierce administrator, who understood this kind of labor, not unlike poetry, as an effort to make things happen within formal constraints: to redistribute power, move people to action, and expand our sense of what is possible.

Jordan consistently connected narrow, elitist, wealthy, white, male, and Eurocentric curricula and pedagogies to the larger institutional funding structures of higher education. Nowhere is this vision sharper than “Finding the Haystack in the Needle, or, the Whole World of America and the Challenge of Higher Education,” which powerfully argues for investment in community colleges. The essay anticipates many contemporary conversations within urban education and critical university studies about why so many tax dollars are devoted to the

already-wealthy, while the vulnerable are shortchanged and plunged deeper into precarity. She argues that “The best universities have continued the worst kind of class privilege” and that the “savagely antidemocratic deficiencies of public commitment to our community colleges” are a “national disgrace” demanding political protest, judicial action, and a “class-action suit.”<sup>451</sup>

Moving back and forth between curricular and institutional politics, Jordan advocates an education that would truly teach students to address the social problems of “the Whole World”: “When the Asians and the Africans and the Indians and the Hispanic peoples of the earth constitute the majority of the human beings in the world, what kind of higher education will not have the history and the literature and the languages of these people at the absolute center of its required curriculum?” Jordan connects this curricular question to education funding through our propensity to obsess over the needle and miss the haystack entirely. In contrast to the huge number of students who attend California’s community colleges (the “haystack”), the number that attend the elite, flagship campuses of the UC system represent a needle’s worth of students. And yet: “Per student, per year, the state spends \$2,899 on the community college level, \$6,617 on the California state university level, and \$13,260 per student, per year, on the University of California level.” While some might consider this a meritocracy, Jordan condemns this structure that is designed to reproduce class privilege: “What’s the operating principle here? ‘To them that have it will be given’? ‘From those that have not it will be taken away’?” Community college students, she writes, are the victims of “state crimes against the people,” her terminology for a campus with “no psychological counseling program...no job-placement center...no women’s center...no African-American studies program or department...no ethnic studies program or department...no doors on the bathroom stalls” and composition and ESL classes with forty

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<sup>451</sup> June Jordan, “Finding the Haystack in the Needle, or, the Whole World of America and the Challenge of Higher Education,” in *Technical Difficulties* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 89-101.

students each, where “the typical composition teacher teaches 150 students every semester, and two-thirds of these are students whose native language is not English.”

Upon arriving at one such community college, Jordan was astounded at the number of students in attendance. She “felt completely inadequate and ill-prepared,” given that many of her poems were written in Standard English, rather than Black English, and none were written in Spanish or any other language. To Jordan’s surprise and delight, “the students of that gathering embraced this language and did not reject its specificity or its frame of reference,” which ended up catalyzing a vibrant conversation (instead of a unilateral reading) about the political possibilities of poetry as a means for idiosyncratic truth-telling. Jordan vehemently rejected the sage on the stage model of both poetry readings and teaching and greatly valued the insights of students, especially those committed to succeeding in a community college despite so many obstacles hurled in their way. Jordan left this conversation committed to “a further diversification and expansion of the language my poetry will employ” and to writing “new poems that will better deserve the gentle willingness of their intelligent attention.” Jordan surveyed her community college audience and saw there tremendous knowledge, creativity, and passion, allowing herself to be altered — to learn— from the experience. She calls on other instructors to join her: to “teach what we are learning, now, with so much pain and with so much eager but timorous hope” in an effort “to understand, not to change or eclipse or to obliterate” each other. As these examples demonstrate, Jordan advocated pedagogical, curricular, institutional, and social change, beginning with honest admissions about education’s failures and a commitment to fighting for material redistribution at every scale.

## From vulnerability and complicity to empowerment

Jordan's poetry and essays demonstrate an uneasy solidarity with Palestinians, Native Americans, Jews, Muslims, Mexicans and people who face discrimination and violence — “uneasy” because it doesn't erase Jordan's own complicity in these injustices:

Yes, I did know it was the money I earned as a poet that  
paid  
for the bombs and the planes and the tanks  
that they used to massacre your family  
...  
I'm sorry  
I really am sorry.<sup>452</sup>

Poetry served as a way of writing herself into accounts of state violence, which can often feel external in a representative democracy. These admissions and apologies are all the more striking given Jordan's first hand experiences of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Through poetry, Jordan implicated herself in violence against the vulnerable and sought to become accountable to them. She used poetry to write back, to, and through the injustices she experienced firsthand and those she bore witness to.

Teaching also implicated Jordan in conditions of institutional injustice. As a teacher in a university classroom, she was part of the problem, positioning the university as a privileged site of knowledge production, churning out individuals, denying collective potential, and even exacerbating economic inequality through admissions policies and tuition fees.<sup>453</sup> Her response to this awareness was neither to abandon universities nor solely to “steal from” them, but to use the power of her participation to enact structural change at every scale: readings, assignments, curriculum, and institutions. She repeatedly condemned universities for their hypocrisies and called for protest, for instance, in her “Address to the Students of Columbia University During

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<sup>452</sup> June Jordan, “Apologies to all the People of Lebanon” in *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan* (Port Townsend, Wash: Copper Canyon Press, 2007), 380.

<sup>453</sup> See Moten and Harney for more on the privatization of knowledge and social life.

Their Anti-Apartheid Sit-In, April 1985.” In another example, when a racist eugenics “scientist” in favor of sterilizing women of color was invited to speak at Yale, where Jordan was teaching at the time, she challenged his alleged right to do so on the grounds of free speech:

Show me the freedom that this University upholds: show it to me in its admission policies. Show it to me in its financial aid programs. Show it to me in its curriculum, in its required readings, in the color, the sex, the viewpoints of its faculty. Show me this freedom that this institution holds so dear.<sup>454</sup>

Since their inception, U.S. universities have legitimized white supremacy and patriarchy by producing “research” and giving speakers who hold these perspectives a powerful platform for disseminating their ideas. The university cannot claim itself as a site of free speech when its steep tuition and exclusive admissions policies, narrowly-defined curriculum, and largely wealthy, white, male faculty actively exclude the viewpoints of many. While legal definitions of “free speech” often appeal to the notion that truth will emerge through competing viewpoints in the “marketplace of ideas,” Jordan attends to the ways the marketplace is weighted to favor some voices over others. In addition to calling out these hypocrisies, Jordan published student writing and guided them in producing radio broadcasts and poetry readings, thus amplifying the voices, knowledge, perspectives, and art largely absent from mainstream media and ignored or disavowed by university hierarchies.

The goal of Jordan’s pedagogy was to empower those whose voices are silenced by this elitist, patriarchal, and white supremacist “marketplace.” Following the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, Jordan told concerned students at Sarah Lawrence, “We have to do something to stop this,” to which they responded, despite their acute sense of injustice, “No...They won’t listen to us. Who are we?”<sup>455</sup> Jordan’s teaching aimed to address this felt sense of powerlessness: “My students have understood—sometimes reluctantly, that the point, at bottom, is for them to

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<sup>454</sup> June Jordan, “On the Occasion of a Clear and Present Danger at Yale,” in *Civil Wars*, 93.

<sup>455</sup> June Jordan, “Old Stories: New Lives” in *Civil Wars*, 137.

assume power—over the English language, over the classroom, over all campus policies, over their own lives.”<sup>456</sup> While we tend to think of power in individualized terms, by helping students find audiences for their writing, Jordan helped reveal the empowerment that emerges when we sense that we have an audience: that there are people willing to change their thoughts, actions, and behaviors — even worldviews — based on what we say. This is the kind of power one learns to wield through teaching and writing.

The most radically anti-hierarchical notion of the classroom would allow students to define empowerment on their own terms. And yet, given the force liberalism exerts on our imaginations, students often arrive in the classroom with a more individualized understanding of empowerment, such as getting a good job, without seeing the larger matrix of power in which the economic stability of a job is one facet. Jordan’s teaching validated students’ aspirations for “self-respecting self-sufficiency,” but at the same time asked, is that all? Central to her pedagogy was helping students discover the multiple forms that “power” can take, beyond just that of financial stability and an individual’s increased understanding of the world.

Jordan’s students attest to the empowering nature of learning in the service of social change. “Most English classes,” one student wrote, are “disempowering,” teaching deference to a literary tradition that students will never ascend to.<sup>457</sup> By contrast, Jordan addressed students who, in one student’s own words, had been in hiding: “you acknowledge me encourage me see me tell me it’s ok you want to teach me reach me and understand me and let me speak, in my own voice from my own heart be my own person. Take down those barriers it’s safe to come out of hiding.”<sup>458</sup> Another student recalls that learning to write poetry gave him “a godlike

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<sup>456</sup> Jordan, “Merit Review Statement.”

<sup>457</sup> “Notes by Theresa Tensuan, 26 August 1991, Poetry for the People Workshop 2,” Box 78, folder 77, June Jordan papers.

<sup>458</sup> “Letter to my teacher, 26 September 1990,” box 78, folders 4-5, June Jordan Papers.

feeling...As a god, you begin to make up your own rules, define your own world.” To be sure, this kind of individualized discourse, in which this student imagines himself as a deity, anticipates what have come to be “lean in” and “self care” models of empowerment that focus on the individual’s advancement and well being at the expense of structural change. But the second part of this student’s comment reveals how Jordan avoided an insular focus on the individual at the expense of the collective. Poetry for the People helped this student feel, not like a tyrannical, omnipotent god, but one among a poetic pantheon, part of “a poetic community — joining Joyce, Baraka, Hughes, but on one’s own terms.”<sup>459</sup>

This pedagogy was far from smooth sailing: given its experimental and open-ended nature, multiple misfires necessarily occurred along the way. In these uncharted waters, the vulnerability that Jordan showed and allowed students to show at times threatened to subsume them. In a women’s studies course at Berkeley, Jordan encountered a classroom of primarily white women and decided the course theme would be “The Politics of Childhood,” a subject that would allow them to theorize through lived experiences, consider how U.S. society treats the vulnerable, and use their positions of relative power to improve the lives of children. However, by encouraging students to revisit their experiences of childhood through the lens of the readings, their personal testimonies “became perilously keen and threatened to immobilize/demoralize all participants.” This pain threatened to swallow their work, and with it, the goal of empowerment: “At this point, I tried to invent a route to power: I asked students to conduct research into the status of children in California, and the U.S.A. I asked them to organize their findings and then integrate their individual lives, as children, with the big picture of children’s needs unmet, in America.”<sup>460</sup> Together they produced a radio broadcast that then

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<sup>459</sup> “Notes by Theresa Tensuan.”

<sup>460</sup> Jordan, “Merit Review Statement.”



shared these findings with a larger audience. This assignment provided an avenue for students to rise from felt positions of powerlessness to positions of action and advocacy — a chance to help provide children with all that may have been absent from their own childhoods.

This pedagogy grounded in performance, publication, and collaborative public projects was a means of inventing routes to power where none seemed to exist. Jordan taught students to acknowledge their complicity in structural inequality and acts of injustice, especially when they were not the most obvious perpetrators. She showed students ways that they could do better by those who have been harmed. Through these projects, Jordan revealed to students their collective social power that neoliberal institutions cover over: how their learning, knowledge, writing, research, and art provided opportunities to fight for change.

While Jordan's pedagogy aimed to help others recognize their capacity for action, she also cautioned against identifying with the power we wield – as U.S. citizens, parents, teachers, politicians, social workers, or even poets. In a keynote speech delivered to the Child Welfare League of America in 1978, Jordan both acknowledges the tremendous power social workers have to improve the lives of children and questions their ability to address the massive problems that have placed children in precarious positions:

Who among us is competent enough in genuine life science and life art so that we can foster and appreciate and calmly explore the potentiality of a different way of doing things, a different way of seeing things, a different, a new way of being at home in the world?...To rescue our children we will have to let them save us from the power we embody: we will have to trust the very difference that they forever personify.<sup>461</sup>

This speech encourages critical self-reflexivity and a consideration of our limited abilities as individuals. It replaces the paternalistic savior assumptions that haunt social work, parenting, and teaching with a sense that our liberation is bound together: that listening to the silenced and helping the voices of the vulnerable reach a wider audience might be crucial to the production of

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<sup>461</sup> Jordan, "Old Stories: New Lives," 139.

a world in which everyone has food, shelter, healthcare, clean air and water, and education. In the speech, Jordan shares with the audience a question posed by a creative writing student from Brooklyn in response to Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, "Will they kill all of us?" In response, Jordan switches the pronoun to implicate herself and the audience, using her poetic sensibilities of involvement to affirm their complicity: "Will we kill all of us?" If we are not working everyday to invent worlds in which children don't have to fear for their lives then we best hand our power over to those who are.

Jordan's poetry dramatizes a praxis of implicating oneself in national narratives, challenging the ease with which we read about a police murder or a bombing in the Middle East and continue about our day without questioning the various roles we play in allowing this to happen, or what we owe to those we have harmed. I see in Jordan's refusal to wield abusive authority against students — an excess of force that would be considered "tyrannical" in any other context<sup>462</sup> — something similar to her refusal to quietly accept the violences enacted by the U.S. government. As a teacher, mother, and author of children's literature, Jordan aided children and students in overthrowing tyranny by convincing them "you can handle it, that there is a way and a means to creatively handle whatever may be the pain or the social predicament of your young life...I believe that you can and will discover or else invent that way, those means."<sup>463</sup>

Teaching, mothering, and writing were intertwined efforts to help bring young people "into their

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<sup>462</sup> Jordan's construction of both adult-child relationships and teacher-student relationships challenges liberal constructions of subjectivity, which are predicated on the acquisition of knowledge and agency through education in preparation for adulthood. Jordan locates possibility in the child or the student who has not yet become inculcated into extant ways of doing things. See also Richard Flynn, "'Affirmative Acts': Language, Childhood, and Power in June Jordan's Cross-Writing," *Children's Literature* 2002 (2002): 159–85.

<sup>463</sup> June Jordan, "The Creative Spirit: Children's Literature" in *Revolutionary Mothering*, 18.

own freedom.”<sup>464</sup> She did not pretend that her position as a teacher put her on equal footing with students; instead, she used this power and her social and cultural capital to amplify their voices.

Jordan’s pedagogy emerges from an understanding of location or the positionality of both teachers and students. Teaching at schools like Yale and Sarah Lawrence shaped Jordan’s interest in how those in positions of power — a poet, a teacher — can use that authority to become “allies to the powerless.” In her letter of resignation from Sarah Lawrence, Jordan notes that the students she met there:

affected my thinking about possibilities for social coalition in America that will produce worth, and hence, spectacular change. I used to envision interracial coalition as primarily a chance existing among the poor, of all colors, in this country. I no longer regard any form of poverty as a necessary condition of alliance. Indeed, the opposite of poverty or, in other words, power seems to me an essential ally of the powerless. I realize this sounds fatuously sophomoric, and maybe it is, but it’s true, and I am already acting on the basis of my changed understanding.<sup>465</sup>

Whether she was teaching “The Art of Black English” or freshman composition, whether she was teaching in an Upward Bound program or an Ivy-League college, Jordan approached these experiences with a spirit of creative openness and a determination to make their time together useful. Thinking alongside Samuel Delany, Jordan orchestrated an environment in which “interclass contact” and “the mutual exchange of pleasure in a non-competitive mode” could occur, crafting a kind of flexible, democratic society from within the hierarchical confines of the classroom.<sup>466</sup> They also demonstrate Jordan’s commitment to praxis: making the classroom into a space where she and her students could learn from others differentially positioned amidst intersecting axes of power.

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>465</sup> Letter to President of Sarah Lawrence, box 76, folder 18, June Jordan Papers.

<sup>466</sup> Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.

### **Redefining relevance: aesthetic education from the bottom up**

Dominant notions of aesthetic education are almost always top-down with history, precedent, and professors dictating ahead of time what can and should be learned in a literature course. Aesthetic education remains haunted by Matthew Arnold's axiom of passing down "the best which has been thought and said," whether that's a narrowly-defined, white, male literary canon, or a sense of "the best" that includes writing by white women and authors of color. This kind of thinking has become so naturalized and seemingly self-evident that it is actually quite difficult to think aesthetic education otherwise. And yet recent work by practitioners of women of color feminism suggests that we must, given the role that aesthetic education has historically played in upholding, rather than challenging, a colonial, white-supremacist, and patriarchal status quo.<sup>467</sup> While humanistic education has traditionally been understood as a means to Americanize and assimilate immigrant students, by relocating authorship among those who have historically been silenced, excluded, corrected, and disciplined, Jordan insisted that it was the institutions that needed to transform to better prepare these new students for the world.

Jordan's pedagogy reimagines aesthetic education in grassroots terms, from the bottom up, starting not with the unquestioned prerogative of reading the best literary history has to offer organized by literary historical categories, but by starting with the inadequacies of the contemporary moment, questioning the roles that language, culture, and institutions have played in producing contemporary conditions of vulnerability, and considering the needs and desires of those located in the classroom. Her work encourages us to ask, who is oppressed, exploited, silenced, and dispossessed, and what can we, in this classroom, do to address these conditions? Jordan's pedagogy is "relevant," not in idiosyncratic terms, but in relation to widespread social

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<sup>467</sup> See Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*; Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*; Spivak, *Aesthetic Education*.

conditions of precarity — a pedagogy that is relevant to the poor and working class.<sup>468</sup> Asking how each classroom could become relevant to the vulnerable sidesteps dominant ways of thinking about students as the sole consumers, recipients, or beneficiaries of this learning. It is more likely to lead towards courses on topics such as poverty or “Martin and Malcolm: Flipsides of the Same Black Revolutionary Coin” rather than Romanticism.

Each of Jordan’s courses involved figuring out what could be done in the short, artificial span of a semester given the needs, desires, and perspectives of those located in the classroom. One strategy was teaching students to write to people in positions of power, urging them to fight against poverty, child abuse, and racism. These issues are what contemporary educators call “wicked”: multifaceted, interconnected, and unsolvable by one person or approach.<sup>469</sup> Their enormous scale necessitates new ways of assessing both learning and social change. The ostensible “failure” of efforts such as students’ 1967 letter writing campaign and “Wrath Rally” in support of the poor in Biafra demonstrated the inadequacy of our metrics: “If it can be said that their work produced no necessary legislation and reform, it can also be said that this very failure instructed us all... Everything we read and everything we wrote, quite literally, translated into action: it became part of our hopeful, conscious lives.”<sup>470</sup> Addressing unsolvable problems shifts the temporalities of social justice and confronts us with the need for collective action at multiple scales, including the transformation of the self. In addition, Jordan suggests that the translation of reading and writing into actions — different ways of perceiving, inhabiting, and being in the world — is a better criteria for evaluating aesthetic education.

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<sup>468</sup> “Relevance” was a key term in debates over black studies. See Murch, *Living for the City*.

<sup>469</sup> I mention this, in part, to acknowledge the contributions Black women have made to problem-solving pedagogies. Unlike contemporary discourse surrounding “wicked problems,” Jordan’s pedagogy is more open-ended and does not posit, ahead of time, “design thinking” as the solution to these problems (although it would make sense if she did given that she was an environmental designer). See “Wicked Problems,” [https://www.wickedproblems.com/1\\_wicked\\_problems.php](https://www.wickedproblems.com/1_wicked_problems.php)

<sup>470</sup> Jordan, “Writing and Teaching,” 482.

Jordan's work demonstrates some of the many forms relevance can take: helping students to see the histories and structures obscured by liberalism, cultivating activist habits of response to environment, teaching collaboration as an uneven and difficult skill, and engaging students in the production of cultural texts that circulate beyond the classroom — texts others could read, watch, listen to, learn from, and enjoy, and that might move people in positions of power to advocacy and actions.

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The grammar of this chapter's title reverse a long history of Western liberalism, which imagines education as the means by which men can assimilate into and learn how to live harmoniously within society. Liberalism covers over the structural and obscures our interdependency, individualizing the ways we think about power. By contrast, Jordan's work challenges the authoritarian abuses of the United States, exercised against those both within and beyond the nation's borders, and demonstrates that dominant teacher-student and adult-child relationships reproduce these tyrannies. As a writer and educator, Jordan rejected what she called "the devastating tyranny of syntax"<sup>471</sup>: from how language is organized according to the protocols of Standard (White) Written English to how classrooms are structured to facilitate the success of the few at the expense of the many. She played with these grammars, pushing the ways the world could be ordered. In the classroom, she challenged the rules that have long structured education, including the tyranny of teachers over students, published literature over student writing, and the competition education incentivizes between students. Instead, she published student writing, banned competition from the classroom, and worked with students to define the criteria by which they would evaluate their writing.

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<sup>471</sup> Jordan, Editor's introduction to *Tomorrow in English*.

Just as Jordan used poetry to implicate herself in and ultimately contest conditions of state violence, teaching provided ways to empower, rather than further oppress, those who are vulnerable and silenced. Jordan enacted more horizontal relations grounded in the idea that knowledge is, and power should be, widely distributed, not concentrated in the hands of the few. Her vision of social change was founded on a belief that everyone had something to contribute to the production of a more just, equitable, and pleasurable world, and that classrooms were one site for discovering what that might entail. Her reflections on teaching leave little doubt that students left her courses with a deep understanding of the inadequacy of American institutions and with skills that would help them eke out a living even as they worked for change.

## CONCLUSION

Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich shared a sense of teaching as a lifelong journey, a political undertaking, and a creative artform: something we practice and refine, not something we magically know how to do; something worth not only doing, but writing about. They were four of the most perceptive writers of the late twentieth century, committed to challenging the intersecting axes of racism, sexism, and homophobia (before we had the official name for “intersectionality”), who became even sharper, more critical, nuanced, and inspiring authors through the experience of teaching in SEEK and during the era of Open Admissions. At a time when university faculty were accusing these democratizing initiatives of killing higher education and lowering academic standards, these teacher-poets deliberately researched and invented pedagogies that would help working class students, first-generation students, and students of color become teachers in their classrooms and leaders in their communities. They believed in the transformative power of education and saw how their classrooms could contribute to the Women’s Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the movement for Black Power. While creative and collaborative assignments catalyzed my own social consciousness, after completing this research, I realize now that this was *by design*: that many contemporary pedagogies had their origins in the downwardly redistributive social movements of the late twentieth century.

Critical university studies has told and retold the story of the privatization of higher education. These teacher-poets give this narrative more texture: more concrete and nuanced insights into the complex processes which give classrooms their unique potential to serve as both “prison cells” and “communes,” and modes of praxis that can guide us towards the latter. While they were, in Moten and Harney’s terms, “in but not of” the university, they also acknowledged



how higher education remains one of the most viable paths towards the modest comforts of a middle-class life, especially for students from working-class backgrounds, and how absconding can be too risky for those without an economic security net. Instead, they used the knowledge of their complicity in the academic-industrial complex, or what Sunaina Maira and Piya Chatterjee have rightfully named “the imperial university,” to hold institutions accountable, redistribute educational resources, and build more responsive institutions. Along with their co-conspirators, they built alternative lifeworlds in their classrooms and universities, demonstrating, through their examples, “Look! Things don’t have to be done your way!”

As activists, writers, and educators who circulated in many spaces of “study,” their classroom pedagogies were shaped by an awareness that the university is one among many sites of knowledge production—that universities are authorizing institutions uniquely culpable in reproducing the status quo and with great responsibilities to those they delegitimize and dispossess. They observed how students who entered the university through SEEK and Open Admissions had been silenced by dominant institutions, recognizing the gaps in classrooms, curricula, and institutions not as absences but the effects of power structures. While these poet-teachers were empowered by literature and learning, they observed the ways that schools did not nurture a similar relationship, especially for working class students and students of color. They shared a fundamental respect for students and understood that many had been abused by educational institutions: taught that they were not thinkers, artists, or scholars with the capacity to influence and organize others and enact social change.

These poet-teachers were shaped by their encounters with students, as I, and many people I know have been. They sought to be with their students in their everyday struggles and to understand when and where these battles intersected with their own, and how they diverged. All

of them saw in the teacher-student relationships some version of the tyrannies they were challenging in their writing and organizing. None of them saw themselves as saviors, there to liberate oppressed students. Nor, to take the other extreme, did they think that they had nothing that could help these students, even as they admitted their moments of doubt. Instead, they taught, in Lorde's words, "those things we need to learn for our own survival,"<sup>472</sup> creating decentralized and collaborative learning environments that were sites of knowledge production and not just transmission from ostensible expert to novice. They disidentified with universities' false pretenses of objective, universal authority and admitted their biases to students. Banal as it may sound, they listened to students, including what went unspoken, and changed their approaches to teaching based on what they heard. Together, they developed strategies for getting through the world, even as they worked to change it.

Their poetic sensibilities shaped materialist pedagogies that engage students by beginning with our tangible, concrete, and immediate reactions to other people and the world and then work recursively to locate these experiences in relation to larger structural conditions, moving back and forth between the two (what Lois Weis and Michelle Fine call "critical bifocality"). In doing so, they taught students to use their everyday lived experiences as a critical optic through which to engage questions of institutionality and justice. Reading literature was crucial because it involved immersing in other worlds, encountering different perspectives, developing new categories of perception, and experimenting within formal constraints. It also excited students about the craft of writing and inspired them to make things (a poem, an essay, a syllabus, a blueprint for a new university). As authors, these teacher-poets were skilled in the art of creating what is missing, in this case, the multimodal, project and research-based, student-centered and

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<sup>472</sup> Lorde qtd. in Marion Kraft, "On Difference and Sameness: How Audre Lorde Inspired My Work," *The Wind Is Spirit*, 233.

collaborative assignments that would prepare these students to change the world. They were so thrilled and surprised by these experiments that they found time to write about what they were learning with and from their students, acting on the inclination that these lessons might be useful to others and authoring the literature that has become foundational for our contemporary knowledge of intersectional politics. Their examples demonstrate that the experimental impulse of aesthetics is related to experimental pedagogies: how we traverse the cavernous divides between individuals to communicate a thought or a feeling, how we jolt others and ourselves from our habits of being and knowing, animates pedagogy and aesthetics.

These poet-teachers did not act alone, and they foreground the collaborative nature of their teaching and writing. They taught students to see the uneven collaborations that have produced our present, though they are often obscured from the literary and historical record. Their work illuminates pedagogy as an inherently collective and unwieldy mode of resistance, disrupting the individualism, partially inherited through legacies of the liberal arts, that shaped (and still shapes) the neoliberal mess we inhabit. While we tend to think of student empowerment in individualized terms, these poet-teachers empowered students by helping them locate their lives in relation to collective histories, institutions, structures, and movements. They offer us ways of thinking about education that are bound to location: both the subject-positioning of students and teachers and their relations to physical spaces (the classrooms, institutions, and neighborhoods) in which this work occurs.

For Audre Lorde, poetry was a way to communicate the thoughts, feelings, and ideas that we might not yet have a language or grammar for. Her lyric poems are short; you can read them on the subway or during a lunch break. Her images, her rhythms, her occasional rhymes gave gorgeous language—shared publicly, confidently, and with pride—to the thoughts and feelings

that others had quietly in isolation. They continue to resonate and have become a kind of common language for those building worlds in which precarity is not distributed along embodied axes of race, gender, sexuality, and ability—worlds in which difference can become a creative force. Lorde shows us how aesthetic education can attend to the materiality of difference by moving from “the aesthetics of changelessness” to “the aesthetics of the outsider.” Her work hinges on intimacy, and the notion that how we understand ourselves and relate to others (as teachers and students, authors and readers, or just people) is part of social change. Collaboration through difference was her onto-epistemology: from the way that we, as writers, collaborate with our former selves (revealing the social nature of even the most seemingly liberal and individualistic of forms such as lyric poetry) to the ways the scene of teaching and learning is always collaboratively produced, whether or not it announces itself as such. For Lorde, teaching was like writing a poem: an inherently collective act of inspiring something unpredictable in others.

For Adrienne Rich, poetry created a space to admit uncertainty and question what was elsewhere publicly affirmed—to raise questions—to hold seemingly contradictory ideas as simultaneously true—to not write a thesis statement—and to understand the journey itself as the very irreducible truth of a text. Her work allows us to apprehend a version of aesthetic education organized around the poetics of everyday life: how reading poetry can make us better writers and thinkers who see how the world is constructed through metaphors, comparisons, erasures, disjunctions, and occlusions. This pedagogy emerged from Rich’s experiences in the SEEK program, which raised the question of what aesthetic education might look like if we begin from the premise that the instructor does not necessarily have the right words, stories, or poems that can free students through language, as literature did for them. Her work demonstrates one

person's efforts to move beyond knowledge of her complicity in structural injustice towards actions grounded in this knowledge. What emerges are processes of perpetual revision of her poems, her assignments, and her worldview.

For Toni Cade Bambara, our lives — our knowledge of ourselves, others, and the world — are formed through storytelling, and thus telling better stories and reading differently emerge as crucial worldmaking strategies. As a self-proclaimed “cultural worker,” she puts forth the multimodal nature of decolonization: how fiction, film, and teaching all present opportunities to disorient others; to tell and listen to subjugated stories; to immerse in and experiment with alternative arrangements of subjects, objects, and socialites. Her work encourages us to see racial, class, and gender differences in classrooms and institutions and to use this knowledge to shape the kinds of aesthetic education we engage in: how, in one instance, a student-designed course can be the most effective way to develop students' social consciousness, but in another setting, a lecture and essay assignment on a Native American novel might be more useful.

For June Jordan, poetry was a means of idiosyncratic truth-telling that could pierce through dominant fictions. As a poet, Jordan was interested in how writing within the limits of an “I” could serve a larger “we,” without erasing singularity—particularity without individualism. Her work asks us to bracket what we think we know about others vis a vis rubrics of racial, class, gender, ethnic, and sexual difference and instead get to know whoever we are working with. She frames the task at hand as accounting for the uneven distribution of precarity along embodied axes, while simultaneously acknowledging that our lives, our love, our words, and our work will always exceed the lies we are told about individuals rendered legible and intelligible through fictions of difference. She listened to students and worked with them to figure out how they could gain a “reasonable degree of self-respecting self-sufficiency,” while making their learning

useful to those outside of the classroom, insisting that their learning was both about the people located in the physical classroom and those beyond its walls. Her work also allows us to think in terms of scale—how, if we have developed empowering ideas, insights, stories, frameworks, and methods then *why not* try to reach as many people as possible: not just a class, but a college, a city, a nation.

This creative, insurgent worldmaking praxis urges us to question some of the antiquated hierarchies and assumptions that persist within English departments to the detriment of our students and our society. These teacher-poets show how aesthetic education can better contribute to the production of justice and equity if we question the ways we divide critical and creative work and the power relations at play when we name certain things “student writing,” other things “literature” and other things “research.” Rather than rushing to the defense of a still very white, male, and Eurocentric discipline, their examples suggest that English can be given new urgency if we, as educators, design courses that deeply engage the issues of justice that students are curious about and rethink the hierarchies we have inherited related to writing and literature. What if we put writing at the heart of our work rather than operating in bad faith under the false premise that it is a skill that can be acquired in one semester? What if we aimed to produce savvy, critical, and creative readers *and writers* who could read and write in different genres, using the tools of literary analysis and rhetoric to question the status quo, call people to action, and build better worlds?

These twinned practices—centering social justice and reorganizing our work around the art of writing—will make the language and literature classroom irresistible and indispensable for the production of an equitable future, brimming with possibilities.

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