

# “The Beginning of a Beloved Community”: Teaching and Learning Within the Literacy Tradition of African American Women Writers

by Kelly Wissman

Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong?

—Toni Morrison, 1993 Nobel Lecture in Literature, p. 27

For a little over one academic year I taught an elective course exploring poetry and photography with a group of young women of color in an urban public charter high school. Framing the development and research of this learning context were both the expressed desires of the students themselves for a different kind of learning space within their school and my own questions surrounding the possibilities of creating educational contexts supportive of young women enriched by the arts and poetry. Within this time of standardized and scripted curricula, what happens when we craft alternative in-school spaces to “invent what we desire” (Rich, 1993)? Within this time deemed post-feminist and post-racial, what happens if we take seriously that race and gender matter in how we live our lives and the artistic work we produce? What happens when students are invited to consider poetry as a possible venue for, in June Jordan’s words, “taking control of the language of your life” (Muller, 1995, p. 3)?

If inquiry, as Lorri Neilsen (1998) contends, is a “conspiracy, a breathing together” (p. 262), then the kind of air we breathed in the class most often was the socially charged, socially grounded, and socially visionary air of contemporary African American women writers. Their words created the context; their

words became inspiration for the students’ own words. In this article, I explore what happened when I brought into the classroom writers who in richly varied ways engaged the creative process toward the production of what Dionne Brand (1995) calls “relevant, charged, politically conscious, memorable” (p. 167) expression.

## The Course

Starting from the premise that we are all artists and poets, the students and I pursued critical encounters with autobiographical writing and photography both in and out of school. As an intentionally collaborative group, we engaged with the works of socially conscious writers and image-makers; used reflective processes to discuss issues of gender, race, and social injustice; took photographs and wrote poetry to explore lives and identities; and shared this work with each other and with others through conference presentations, exhibitions, and a submission to an on-line education journal. Sixteen students participated in the course; some students participated in all three trimesters it was offered, while others for only one. The majority of the students self-identified as African American. Three students identified respectively as Puerto Rican, multi-racial, and Black/Grenadian. One white student participated before needing to withdraw for academic reasons. The students ranged in age from 14-16. The course met three times a week for 60 minutes a session. While photography was an important component of the class, I focus in this article on the reading and writing of poetry within this setting.

## The Study

Methodologically situated within the traditions of teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999) and feminist research (Fine, 1992), my “praxis-oriented inquiry” (Lather, 1991) involved systematic documentation and analysis of this context and the writing and photography produced by the young women within it. Data sources included my teacher/researcher journal in which I wrote ethnographically detailed descriptions of each class meeting, emerging questions, and reflections on my practice as a teacher and researcher; student writing and photography; class transcripts; and interviews with the students.

My work with the students was shaped by my own life history and experiences as an educator and qualitative researcher located within urban contexts. In conceptualizing this teacher research study, I drew from often overlapping roles and work within community centers, urban public schools, after school programs, and African American communities. I also drew from ongoing explorations of the possibilities and constraints of pursuing this work as a white woman. Embracing an identity as a teacher researcher within this study arose out of a felt desire to enact this work and not just observe it, to create the very conditions for it, to know it from the inside. As Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993) contend:

When teachers do research, they draw on interpretive frameworks built from their histories and intellectual interests, and because the research process is embedded in practice, the relationship between knower and known is significantly altered. (p. 43)

Cochran-Smith and Lytle not only capture the unique nature of the knowledge production afforded by teacher research that drew me to imagine and eventually to design this particular kind of study, but also suggest the intention to work towards personal, institutional, and social change that is often present in teacher research endeavors. As they argue, “At the base of this commitment is a deep and passionately enacted responsibility to students’ learning and life

chances and to transforming the policies and structures that limit students’ access to these opportunities” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 279). In this study I see the multiplicities of my subject positions as a researcher, teacher, co-learner, and feminist as resources and as potential contributors to emerging scholarship that seeks to traverse the in-school/out-of-school dichotomy (Hull & Schultz, 2002) and that seeks to imagine schools as potential sites for socially transformative work to occur for young women (McCormick, 2004; Weiler, 2000).

In their research, both DeBlase (2003) and Sutherland (2005) find limited opportunities for young women of color to have extended conversations about complex issues of identity within classroom literature discussions. Both pose compelling and sobering questions about how classrooms can be designed in ways that support young women of color in negotiating identities and if pedagogies can support all students in viewing literacy as a critical social practice. In my work informed by teacher research I hope to add to that conversation and suggest that while limitations persist in traditional classroom arrangements and school structures, there may be possibilities for imagining different kinds of educational spaces informed by epistemologies of feminism and social justice.

## Of Traditions and Transformations

In her study of the literacy practices of nineteenth-century African American women essayists, Jacqueline Jones Royster (2000) argues that African American women have consistently conceived of writing as a sociopolitical act and that across generations, locations, and writing genres their work can be seen to “pivot on notions of belief, identity, and social responsibility” (p. 107). By identifying the strategies of Black women to use literacies to “fulfill a quest for a better world” (p. 74) from social locations as mothers, teachers, poets, and essayists, Elaine Richardson (2003) also suggests how literacies emerge from and reflect gendered and racialized experiences and ways of knowing. In my course I chose to draw on the poetic work African American women authors such as Margaret Walker, Sonia

Sanchez, June Jordan, and Nikki Giovanni. These poets envision and enact literacy as a dynamic tool for change and regeneration. Their works reflect an understanding of literacy as embodied knowledge and action. As [Royster \(2000\)](#) contends, “the history of African American women’s literacy is a story of visionaries, of women using sociocognitive ability to re-create themselves and to reimagine their worlds” (p. 109). In this context, the incorporation of these writers infused the course with epistemologies that consistently revealed a critical tradition of literacy and provided ongoing opportunities to participate in and contribute to this tradition. In ways that may at first appear counter-intuitive, then, centering a course in a “tradition,” promoted insights and work oriented toward personal and social transformation.

### “I Want to Write”

The students’ “I Want to Write” poems provide key insights into both the poetic possibilities of emulating African American women writers as well as to the transformative possibilities of centering a course in a critical literary tradition. In [Margaret Walker’s \(1989\)](#) poem entitled “I Want to Write,” she describes her desires to write “the songs of my people.” The images in the poem capture Walker’s own melodic imaginings of these songs emerging from places of both struggle and hope, from “sob-torn throats” to “sunshine laughter in a bowl.” Reprising the line “I want to write” throughout the poem, Walker uses this device to modulate and provide texture to her great desire for writing, most notably her desire to use her artistic talents to “frame their dreams into words; their souls into notes.” The poem ends with an imaginative rendering of these songs being flung into the sky, filled with stars, and becoming a “mirrored pool of brilliance in the dawn.” While the poem suggests Walker’s poetic inspiration and intentions, the final lines of the poem especially suggest the power of these songs – and poetry itself – to be illuminative and transformative. Walker first published this now classic poem in 1934 when she was 19 years old.

After reading the poem I asked the students to talk about the images they most connected to and to

consider the kinds of meanings and purposes Walker assigned to writing. I then asked them to write their own “I want to write” poems. Here are three of the poems:

I want to write  
 I want to write about the struggles of  
 being a teenager growing up in a world  
 where you have to scream to be heard  
 I want to write about being heart broken  
 by someone you loved and having them  
 not feeling the same  
 I want to write about wanting  
 to live out our dream and wishing it comes true  
 I want to write about holding on to the  
 past and not being able to see the future  
 Surviving the present  
 I want to write about happiness that  
 lasts forever, and not only in my dreams.  
 I want to write about the pain and stress  
 that I have endured from being me.  
 I just want to write.

by Lynn

I want to write.  
 I want to write about the pain that I endure.  
 I want to write about the hurt that will be forever  
 mourned.  
 I want to write about my tear-filled eyes.  
 I want to write about my calling sighs.  
 I want to write about the laughter in my words.  
 I want to write about the freedom like a bird.  
 I want to write.

by Jasmyn

I want to write  
 I want to write about the mentally oppressed  
 and we females who are distressed  
 I want to write about discrimination  
 that is blinding our generation, causing us the  
 youth of tomorrow’s future to fall in the line  
 of demoralizing the we’s and us, and the they’s  
 and yours  
 I want to write about the givers of

life, showing the world their strife, to come up  
 from under dominant figure  
 I want to write about our liberation  
 and will, to win this rat race  
 I want to write  
 I want to write about life.  
 by Maya

In rich and complex ways, these poems suggest the deep social and personal significance of writing in these young women's lives. In naming their desires to write, they seem to believe as [Adrienne Rich \(1993\)](#) does in "in art's social presence – as breaker of official silences, as voice for those whose voices are disregarded, and as a human birthright" (p. 99). Lynn writes of teenagers whose voices are disregarded and who need to scream to be heard. Jasmyn's clarity of vision and precision of imagery suggests to me that writing to her is nothing short of her own birthright. And, Maya, frequently the breaker of official silences within our class and outside of it, claims the power of writing to generate liberation. Rhetorically, these young poets seem to recognize the power of writing to assist them in what Maya and Jasmyn would later describe to me as "making a way" ([Wissman, 2007](#)), drawing attention to and naming their yearning for opportunities to address injustice and difference, to contemplate the beautiful and the painful, and to extend the power of literacy to transgress silences within an in-school space. By drawing on the words of Walker, the students were saying something important to themselves and to the other students about how writing can be a place to name desires for personal and social transformations.

### **Writing Within a "Beloved Community"**

While members of the literacy tradition of African American women served as touchstones for reading and discussion in the course, the students' own poetry written both in and out of school also became central texts of the course. At the same time, opportunities for sharing poetry became increasingly defining of the context that in many ways became what [June Jordan \(1995\)](#) might call a "beloved community," a context in which students supported each other as poets and

storytellers of their own lives. About midway through the course, Lynn wrote a poem entitled "Damn, I Look Good" after seeing a poem of the same title within a book I brought to class ([Franco, 2001](#)). In certain lines of Lynn's poem, the voice and rhythms of [Maya Angelou's \(1995\)](#) "Phenomenal Woman," a poem we had read earlier in the course, also come through. Lynn's line, "I approach you with the pep in my step, the grace of my smile, the flicker of my eyes," picks up on Angelou's repetition of imagery and the admiring of her own unique spirit expressed through her physical features and movements. Lynn also repeats the line "Damn, I look good" throughout the poem in ways reminiscent of Angelou's repetition of "phenomenal woman" in hers. In the poem, Lynn claims her own attractiveness and assertiveness as a young woman living in and traveling through a contemporary city, evoking images and words suggesting the landscape and language uses that surround her. Recounting her journey as "Miss Diva coming through," Lynn claims her abilities to thrive in this setting and indeed to conquer it effortlessly due to her physical beauty, stylish clothing, and confidence. Yet, like Angelou, Lynn claims her own "inner beauty" and "unique personality" as the true sources of her winning ways. As Lynn writes:

I could wear five layers of clothes  
 And still make a man fall to his knees  
 From head to toe this is all of me, my unique  
 personality to my inner beauty

After Lynn read her poem out loud to the group, the students responded to her confident presentation of herself and evocative language with a spontaneous burst of clapping, laughing, and praise – and immediate requests for her to read it again and to make photocopies for the class. Maya and Jasmyn, who had been in the course with Lynn the previous trimester, looked at me with stunned, amused, and proud expressions and responded:

**Jasmyn:** I was waiting and I was like, this is Lynn?

**Maya:** Right. Whoa. Lynn. Wow. Wow.

**Jasmyn:** She's like...

**Maya:** I've been waiting for something like this for, like –

**Jasmyn:** From her, right?

**Maya:** Go, Lynn.

Both Maya and Jasmyn recognized how Lynn's poem brought out facets of her they had not seen or heard before. Their comments suggest their familiarity with her writing in the course over time and how they "were waiting" for the fuller emergence of her poetic voice. In this way, this example is indicative not only of Lynn's own growth as a poet, but also indicative of the ethos of the group containing members knowledgeable of each other's work and supportive of their efforts.

It is difficult to render in print the electricity that filled the room when the students read their work out loud; however, in conjuring up the immediacy of our context, I find a moving resonance with [Jordan's \(1995\)](#) words about what occurs when people become poets, especially poets in a community:

. . . anyone who becomes a practicing poet has an excellent chance of becoming somebody real, somebody known, self-defined, and attuned to and listening and hungering for kindred real voices utterly/articulately different from his or her own voice. (p. 8)

In creating their own opportunities for writing and in creating habits of being in the group that met their own needs as writers and members of this literacy community, the students were clearly asserting themselves by inventing conditions and processes necessary for the creation of an in-school space responsive to their desires to speak and listen to each other.

### **The Potential of "Beloved Communities"**

Throughout my time teaching and learning with the students, I came to realize the potential of grounding pedagogy within the literacy tradition of African American women and the potential of crafting intentional learning communities reflective of the epistemologies embedded within that literacy tradition. Grounding literacy work within the literacy

tradition of African American women can support learning environments where literacy is enacted as a social practice, where inquiry is pursued, and where knowledge is constructed relationally. This choice may be of particular consequence to young women of African descent given how this literacy tradition reflects back to them images of themselves, centers their experiences and lives, and exposes them to the vibrant and multi-faceted tradition of accessing the power of literacy for personal and community uplift ([Gadsden, 1992](#); [Ladson-Billings, 1992](#)). I would also argue that this tradition could be illuminative for students from a diversity of backgrounds. We should continue to problematize notions that multicultural education means simply adding works to the curriculum that correspond to students' identities. Rather, by considering the dynamic interplay of identity and knowledge-making, of experience and literary production, students can come to enhanced understandings of their own and others' practices of literacies.

[Jordan \(1995\)](#) writes that poetry can "build a revolution in which speaking and listening to somebody becomes the first and last purpose to every social encounter" (p. 3). Within this course, it was this desire not only to write, but also to hear the voices of other young women writing that feels to me most significant. In this regard, we may wish to consider the power of creating multiple arenas for speaking and listening with young women across the domains of teaching and researching and across both formal and informal learning spaces. Jordan further contends that communities of practicing poets hunger for the opportunity both to write and to be in the company of other writers, and concludes that within these spaces it may be possible to form what she calls the "most reasonable basis for the political beginning of a beloved community: a democratic state in which the people can trust the names they have invented for themselves and for each other" (p. 8).

Filled as they often are with surveillance, sexual harassment, and standardized curricula, schools are often far from the "beloved communities" Jordan evokes. Within a "beloved community" created by poetry, it may be possible for a time to move beyond

the trajectory of our current national discourses related to urban students, beyond deficit discourses, and beyond test scores as sole determiners of student identity and potential. By developing literacy theory and practice in conversation with students and with theoretical frameworks attuned to the social nature of identities, literacies, and epistemologies it may be possible to create in-school spaces more reflective of the ideals of democracy and social justice.

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