

Teaching Poetry as Cultural Transformation

by Holly Bass

My mother was my first teacher. She taught me how to read when I was 2 or 3 years old, first through rote memorization of favorite books read aloud repeatedly and then by good old fashioned phonics. From my father, I developed an ear for rhythm and sound through Saturday morning sessions in front of the record player where he spun everything from straight-ahead jazz to rock, funk and fusion.

By age 6, I was already reading “big girl” books. As a seventh grader, I finished all of my independent reading modules halfway through the year, so my teacher had the great idea that I could tutor one of my peers. Let’s say his name was Todd. He was big for his age, with blue eyes and sandy blonde hair that nearly covered his eyes. He had a reputation for being a bit of a bully, but mostly because the other kids teased him for being “slow.” Looking back now, he might have had a learning disability, but this was the early ’80s—terms like dyslexia and ADHD were not common parlance like they are today.

I would meet Todd in a room with a handful of other children who were deemed Special Ed. The “teacher” in the room was a glorified babysitter and she liked it that way. She expected order and nothing more. Todd and I were both kids, but I took my duty seriously. I had learned from my mother the basics of phonics and the importance of patience. We would sound out letters and take our time with the words.

One day I had the idea to add rhythms to our exercises. For the first time in Todd’s life, learning wasn’t a chore or a painful reminder of his lack of abilities. It was actually joyful. And way too much for our academic overseer, who loudly shushed and berated us before returning to her book. That moment crystallized for me what good teaching should be-- joyful, creative, rigorous, encouraging and fun. And how often public schools fail to meet that mark.

American culture often devalues the education that comes from family and community settings, describing those trained outside of the academy as “folk,” self-taught or products of “the school of hard knocks.” In the art world, community-based knowledge is at times viewed as more authentic. Within the hierarchy of academia, it can be a double-edged sword, conferring street cred but perhaps viewed with less prestige than an Ivy league education. For many of us, our earliest and most successful learning happens outside of school. This is especially true for artists and creatives.

Think back to an early memory of someone teaching you something you didn’t know and your pride when you could do it on your own. Was it learning to cook in your grandmother’s kitchen, or a cousin showing you how to tie your shoes? Was it loving or stern? Our first teachers are part of our DNA as educators. How has that impacted you in positive

or negative ways? What strands do you want to hold onto and what, if any, do you want to release?

In 1994, after finishing school in New York and moving to DC, I was fortunate enough to find my way into a brand new program: WritersCorps, a new branch of AmeriCorps. We received a stipend and a promise of reduced student loans upon completing the program. We were young and inexperienced, for the most part. But we loved poetry, loved our city and believed in the transformative power of words.

The majority of us were assigned to local public schools but some of us also taught in jails, homeless shelters, and programs for survivors of domestic violence. I vaguely recall that our program director, the poet Kenny Carroll, Sr., was supposed to follow some sort of formal training manual created by the government, but we went rogue, relying heavily on June Jordan's *Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint* instead. I don't know of any other book that centers the values of community, culture and social justice as much as the practical literary and pedagogical tools of teaching poetry. (Published in 1995, it still stands up today and I recommend it for any writer or artist interested in working in community settings. As of the writing of this essay, used copies could still be found from online retailers.)

My first assignment with WritersCorps brought me full circle to that earlier teaching experience. Only now, I was facing a classroom of Todds, at an all Black middle school in Southeast DC. The academic overseer was also present—most memorably a veteran fifth grade English teacher so completely disinvested in teaching, she let you know that she was just there to collect a check, merely biding her time until the bell rang... until summer break came... until retirement, which was still three years away!

I quickly learned that my particular Black experience (middle class, West Coast born and raised, Southern-born parents) did not give me an automatic insight into the lives of my students. I had been around poor folks, but my family's brand of small town, rural poverty did not prepare me for the challenges facing young people living in the city's most under-resourced and willfully-neglected neighborhood.

Siced, shorty, bama, jont—my students' slang was totally different, despite only having a decade in age difference. Their accents were foreign to me and my accent immediately marked me as an outsider, despite our shared skin tone. At times my co-teacher, a young white woman from New Orleans, could relate more to the students' urban experience more than I could. Together we struck a good balance in class.

That experience taught me how much I needed to widen my cultural lens. I learned to listen more closely and expand my ear to better appreciate the rhythms and styles of Southeast DC. I worked

daily to challenge the biases I had absorbed about the community I was working in, and to be honest and authentic about my background, my intentions and the gaps in my knowledge. I respectfully asked fellow teaching artists in my program who were local Washingtonians or long-time residents to help me navigate this new world.

I also came to the conclusion that I should teach more of my classes in my own neighborhood. I lived in Northwest DC. With a mix of Latin American, Asian-American, Black and white students, the culture more closely resembled the multicultural California community I grew up in. Despite my willingness to learn about Southeast, I recognized within myself a facet of white savior culture, like missionaries pushing their way into indigenous communities as if their practices and beliefs could suddenly solve problems they had helped create in the first place. I needed more time to learn about the city and develop an authentic and rigorous understanding of its many cultures and subcultures and my role in it. By focusing on my local neighborhood, I became a regular, physical presence, someone the students saw on Friday nights as well as Monday mornings. This made me accountable for my character beyond afternoon poetry classes.

Think back to a time when you felt like a fish out of water, a stranger in a strange land. It could be a big shift, like starting a new school or city or a smaller moment, like your first time attending a new open mic. Were you welcomed right away or was it a struggle? How do you invite or create community? What are your cultural values and experiences and how does that lens inform how you view your students and the communities you work in? Are there areas where you need to expand and deepen your capacity even more? Whether you are a veteran teaching artist or just beginning, who holds you accountable and supports you?

The best way to become a good teacher is to spend time in the presence of a *great* teacher. As anyone who has stood in front of a classroom for the first time can attest, reading books or attending webinars and workshops will only take you so far.

One of my most profound experiences of my life as a teaching artist was when I was invited to be a substitute teacher for my friend Erica Doyle. At the time, she was working at a small, arts-based alternative elementary school in DC. In order to create as much continuity for the class as possible, it was decided that I would shadow Erica for several days.

By this time I was pretty comfortable with teaching a range of school ages, usually 4th grade and up. But Erica taught a mixed ages pre-K class. To my surprise, she expected me to lead them in writing classes. These were students who could barely write their own names in crayon!

All of my skepticism came to a halt when I actually attended her class and witnessed for myself what I would describe as a graduate level writing seminar held with “pre-literate” three- and four-year-olds. While it’s true that they couldn’t write out all of the letters of the alphabet, they understood how to tell a good story and how to use their imaginations—which are the two most important things to have as a creative writer.

The class began with a simple ritual. The students would line up by the door. Erica would have some interesting object, perhaps a geode filled with sparkly crystals or a shell from a beach, and each student would have the opportunity to briefly and gently hold the object before entering class and taking their spot on the mat. Without fancy words and without harsh regulations, she was teaching them mindfulness and self-regulation. Only by centering themselves could they join the community, ready to learn.

Once the children were all seated in a circle, we had some group discussion about the day’s writing prompt. The children eagerly shared thoughts and first impressions. Everyone was given a piece of paper and a pencil or crayon. They were instructed to write down their stories--which they did. On the whole, the students made shapes on the paper, some of which resembled actual letters, often in lines going across the paper, but not necessarily. These were not pictograms. Essentially, each student created their own alphabet, punctuation and grammar, with its own logic and rules.

As they finished, each student “read” their story out loud to one of the adults in the room, who transcribed it. We then asked the student to repeat their story one more time, which helped us make sure we had captured it accurately. I was amazed at how closely the first and second versions of the stories matched! But after all, the students were reading, not improvising.

After everyone’s stories had been transcribed, we then returned to the circle and a few students would volunteer to read their story out loud for the class. Over the course of the year, Erica had instilled in the students how to offer constructive criticism, so by the time I came to help out they were old pros. I remember one student offering that she had trouble visualizing the main character of a story and asked if the author could add more descriptive detail, like the color of her hair (purple, as it turns out) and what clothes she was wearing. Students were also empowered to say things like, “I didn’t understand the part where the girl left the dog. I was confused about that part.” Usually the authors could quickly clarify the details and would add notes for their revisions.

For me, the whole experience was a revelation. I didn’t know that it was even possible to teach writing to such young children, let alone at such a mature, thoughtful level, because I’d never seen it before. adrienne maree brown says that “all organizing is science fiction” because “we are creating a world we have never seen.” The same could be said of transformative teaching. Most of us have not actually seen it, certainly not on a broad scale. I have had occasions to see this level of mastery in a few other schools guided by exceptional leaders and teachers, but it is sadly rare. Imagine a world in

which all public schools taught this way! Imagine a world in which all educators were trained to expect and cultivate this level of creativity and brilliance in their students!

Think back to a time in your life when someone in authority doubted or questioned your abilities. How did you feel? Did your education system limit your possibilities? Think about your own experience as an educator. Do you hold or have you held limited ideas about your students' capacity? Who or what set the standards or expectations of what your students could do? What might move you to believe that your students can do more than you thought was possible?

For several years, I ran an arts program at a juvenile detention center in DC. To date, it's the most challenging and rewarding work I've ever done. When I make that statement, many people assume it's because I was working with "bad" kids. That wasn't the case at all. The students were by and large from the same schools in Southeast DC that I had taught in before. By that point, I had lived and worked in DC for twenty years. I even knew some of the students from other programs. To witness them navigate a system that was not designed for their success, further illuminated the high level of intelligence, skill and resilience that many Black and Brown children develop out of necessity.

What made the job challenging was being immersed in the school-to-prison pipeline on a regular basis. Once I began working within it, it was no longer an abstract concept. I could see it as an entire system, a structure, a force that has its own power despite the well-meaning people who keep it running. I was now in the system and one of those well-meaning people. I was complicit, even as I was trying to offer something positive to the young people I met within its walls.

The connection between poverty, race and prison couldn't be more clear. The children at the facility were almost all Black, save for a few Latinx students, and almost all from east of the river—the area of the city with the most visible economic divestment. In the four years I taught there, I literally had one white female student, one white male student and one Asian-American student—he had run away from another state and was only in the center to be processed before being sent to his home jurisdiction. Of course, there were teens of all races and backgrounds committing various infractions and crimes all over the city, but if their parents had any amount of funds or savvy they would not wind up in one of my workshops.

When I first started the program, I remember an artist friend advising me to prepare visual lessons because most of them would not be able to read. But I knew from instinct and experience this wasn't true. I had taught at the main "feeder" schools in the local pipeline. Most of them could read on grade level and many were advanced thinkers. They were also brilliant bullshit detectors. They had to be in order to survive.

I quickly learned that I couldn't fake-smile my way through a teaching session. It was much better to be authentic about how I was feeling on a particular day. These young people had had their hearts broken too many times. Trust was tenuous and easily shattered.

My experience working with Erica Doyle's students taught me to overestimate rather than underestimate their abilities. I brought them Audre Lorde passages, Lucille Clifton poems and Dick Gregory speeches. I wanted to expose them to as many writers and artists of color as possible, especially those who were from DC as well as writers like Etheridge Knight and Jimmy Santiago Baca who had served time in prison and wrote their way into a different existence.

In the beginning, before I was able to bring on other teaching artists, I was at the facility 3-4 days a week teaching by myself. I had run daily programs before and naively thought this would be similar. But what I didn't realize is that when you teach in jail, you are in jail. Even if it's just for a few hours. Even if you get to go home at the end of the day.

More than the industrial concrete walls painted in institutional shades of pink and beige, and the airlock doors, jail is the culture of the overseer come fully to life. It's the surveillance cameras in every room and hallway. It's certain disaffected staff, not so subtly escalating small infractions so that they become dramatic confrontations. A place where patriarchy, anti-Blackness (even from Black folks) and classism are socially acceptable. It's a place where hierarchy and control are valued above all else.

Add to that, staff and contractors like myself were provided minimal training to deal with the high levels of trauma among the teens. While I met some incredible people who worked tirelessly to provide the teens with thoughtful care, I also met adults who should not be entrusted with the well-being of anyone's child, adults who abused their power within the lines of what was legally sanctioned.

How could I and my partners create liberatory space in a system designed for the complete opposite? How does one enter an institution without becoming like it? I had learned how to do the dance of navigating public school culture, nonprofits and government programs. But this challenged everything I knew.

Because it was a Black-run facility in a heavily Black city, there were some similarities to working with other local organizations. In the same way that having rapport with the secretary at a public school is essential to getting anything done without major red tape, I knew it was important to build a relationship with the front desk and security staff. They are the eyes and ears of the facility and often outlast those in high leadership positions. Showing up consistently was also important. It takes time to earn trust and for folks to believe it's worth their time to invest in you.

I also had to come to grips with what was sustainable for me as an artist and educator. It wasn't sustainable to my spirit to work in the facility four days a week by myself. Thankfully, I was able to gather a consistent team of teaching artists to support the work. As with my time at WritersCorps, I found it valuable to have a co-teacher whenever possible.

Unlike adult prisons and jails where participants tend to self-select, youth facilities often mandate participation. And many of the more draconian staff members hold the absurd belief that if the facility is too "fun," youth will want to stay detained. As a result, we often found ourselves walking into hostile situations in which we would have to work through student and staff resistance before we could even begin to do the work of educating/connecting. It was so beneficial to be able to debrief with my partner after classes and say, "You saw what that guard did, right? I'm not imagining that he/she intentionally triggered that teen/disrupted that quiet meditation/said that sexist remark."

In the past few years, there's been a focus on uplifting Black joy and pleasure as a tool of resistance. I'm appreciative of writers like adrienne maree brown and her books *Emergent Strategy* and *Pleasure Activism*, as well as artists like Tricia Hersey, who founded the Nap Ministry which posits rest as a form of resistance. As culture shift workers, it's so important to replenish our spiritual and emotional reserves as well as supporting our physical selves. You can't offer joy that you don't have. And this work is nothing without joy.

Toni Cade Bambara famously said, "The job of the writer is to make revolution irresistible." I think it's worth noting that the quote is not "the" revolution, as in an event or upheaval, but revolution as something that is ongoing and constantly changing. Revolution is not a place. It's not a fixed point in time. It's the practice and work of refining who we are and who we hope to be, as individuals and as a greater community.

What is your ongoing revolutionary work as an individual artist? As an educator? As part of a larger community? As you navigate through institutions that may or may not reflect your values? What is your source of joy as you continue to co-create the world that reflects the best of who we are and who we desire to become?

As a teaching artist inspired by writers like June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara, Sonia Sanchez and Gwendolyn Brooks and committed to the work of deep cultural transformation, I understand that my "work" happens on multiple simultaneous levels. This is not just about teaching students how to use metaphors and similes. To paraphrase Sonia Sanchez, teaching poetry is about helping people learn to become more human.

The real work is to be an agent of cultural change. And the primary focus of that transformational energy is towards the students. The second focus is towards the “adults in the room”—teachers, guards, administrators, etc. And the third, and perhaps most inscrutable focus is towards the institutions themselves.

The most powerful approach I’ve found for culture shift work is to simply model the values and behaviors that I would like to see in the world. This is easier said than done, but it is doable. One simple example of this is that in many institutions yelling at students is acceptable. As an educator to make a decision not to yell at students is both simple and radical. In order for it to work, it usually requires an explicit conversation with the students at the beginning of the relationship. Establishing guidelines, and better yet co-creating them, with students models a collaborative approach to learning based on mutual respect and transparency. It may also require unlearning old habits, for both teacher and student, and learning new strategies and techniques.

Toni Cade Bambara said “revolution begins with the self, in the self.” As a veteran teaching artist, I had gotten to the place where I could prepare for a class in 15 minutes. I had scores of poetry worksheets, exercises and prompts developed over the years. Working at the juvenile detention center changed that. In addition to being mindful of issues such as students’ trauma levels and the dynamics of gender-separated classes, I also had to do more internal preparation work as an instructor.

I would check in with myself by doing a “scan” of my physical and mental state that day. If I knew I was stressed or tired, I would generally share that with the students before the start of class as a gesture of openness and a way to level set. Before entering the facility, I would often sit outside and do a quick breathing meditation for a few minutes. Eventually, I came up with a simple litmus for myself: Can I love each one of these children today? If the answer was no, then I knew my work was to shift my mood, my mindset, my physical being until the answer was yes. And if I couldn’t get to yes, it was time to allow someone else to do the work.

As teaching artists, we are often guests in someone else’s home. We can’t necessarily come in and begin to rearrange the furniture. To carry the metaphor through, sometimes to change the space we have to use the power of suggestion to encourage the home owners to make those changes themselves.

Think back to a time when you faced a challenge that required you to go against the tide. This could be a moment when you were a lone voice, or where you were representing many voices in opposition to an established authority figure or system. Try to remember the sensations you felt in your body as you navigated that time. Were you able to hold true to your personal values? Who or what supported you in the actions you ultimately decided to take? How did you define success in that

moment and reflecting back now? What did you learn and how have you applied it to other situations?

Generally speaking, teaching artist work is not the most lucrative field. When I started in my 20s, earning any money at all through my art was exciting. I hadn't published many poems yet so being able to say I was a teacher helped legitimize my self-view as a serious writer. It also gave me the opportunity to live out my values by providing a platform for young people to express and refine their creativity, emotions and ideas.

Teaching artist work often requires putting together a patchwork of multiple gigs. Even when organizations pay on the higher end, it's usually an hourly rate for just a few hours a week and may not take into account classroom preparation time and travel between sites. As a younger artist, I enjoyed the flexibility of not working full-time and the novelty of working in different environments. But the stress of not always having a contract, limited healthcare and working in sometimes hostile environments can take a toll.

Often at the start of our careers we're so busy just trying to get work and then do the work that we don't allow ourselves time to reflect. It's important to be intentional about our desires and goals. What does progress or advancement look like?

Mainstream ideas of moving up career-wise usually means moving away from working with children. That might look like training other teaching artists, developing curriculum, becoming a program manager, becoming the Executive Director of a non-profit or starting your own 501c3. None of these are inherently good or bad. The important thing is to not get swept into the current of others' expectations. Let's be honest. Few things match that feeling of success and pride when a student has a breakthrough. It's a straight dose of serotonin. If you love direct interaction with students and dislike working mostly with adults, it's good to recognize that.

It's also important to recognize that "career advancement" tends to require highly developed skills of navigating and tolerating white supremacist culture. The folks that get the promotions, the grants, the fellowships, the press coverage, etc., are often the ones that don't ruffle feathers, or have found a way to remain palatable to the powers-that-be while conducting their culture shift work in stealth mode. Culture shift work is a spectrum and between Booker T. Washington, Harriet Tubman and Nat Turner there are many degrees of difference. It's important to know in which frequency you operate best and ally yourself with others who fall at different points along the spectrum.

I was fortunate to be raised by parents who valued my happiness and encouraged me to pursue my dreams. My mother would say as long as you can pay your rent and go to the doctor, do whatever job makes you happy and do your best at it. This freed me to define success beyond material wealth and traditional markers—a house, car, spouse and 2.5 children. Success for me was about living my

best life with intention and ensuring I had the resources to have a cute apartment, time and money to travel, a community of good friends and opportunities to grow as an artist.

With over 25 years under my belt, I can confidently say that the real marker of success as an artist and a teaching artist is largely about staying in the game. Many of the teaching artist friends I started out with are now successful by mainstream standards—best-selling books, literary prizes, secure teaching positions and high salaries. But many of us were broke for a loooong time before that. We made choices to delay our gratification for our values and our dreams. And we stayed the course in our 30s and 40s, even when people doubted us or looked down on us for not having “adult” things.

Being a teaching artist can actually be an art form in and of itself. If you realize along the way that you’re more likely to become a master teacher than a master poet, embrace that. But if you know your calling is to continue your artistic craft, don’t let anything prevent you from realizing your artistic fullness.

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HOLLY BASS is a multidisciplinary performance and visual artist, writer and director. A Cave Canem poetry fellow (1997-1999), she has published poems in numerous journals and anthologies. As an arts journalist early in her career, she was the first to put the term “hip hop theater” into print in *American Theatre* magazine. She is a 2019 Red Bull Detroit artist-in-residence, a 2019 Dance/USA Artist Fellow and a 2019-2020 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow. A gifted and dedicated teaching artist, for four years she directed a year-round creative writing and performance program for adjudicated youth in DC’s Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services as well as facilitating workshops nationally and internationally. She is currently the national director for Turnaround Arts at the Kennedy Center, a program which uses the arts strategically to transform schools facing severe inequities. www.hollybass.com

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