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# Reading and Becoming Living Authors: Urban Girls Pursuing a Poetry of Self-Definition

*Inspired by the poems of several living female authors of color, Kelly Wissman and her students compose poetry to represent themselves "on their own terms."*

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hen Don Imus made his infamous comments about the Rutgers University women's basketball team in 2007, he provoked widespread (yet short-lived) attention to the circulation of language practices demeaning to women of color. In an elective autobiographical writing course that I designed with and for urban high school girls, the students read and wrote poetry as a way to reflect on and resist these "words that wound" (Staples). When I introduced living authors into the curriculum and when the students' writing became central texts of the course, the students began "talking back" (hooks) to slurs and stereotypes. The girls also wrote poems to generate more affirmative images of who they were and who they were becoming.

The girls' poetry of self-definition offers insights into their perspectives that are often unrecognized, distorted, or devalued in broader public discourses. Their writing also provides further insight into the possibilities of framing English education as oriented toward social critique and change (Christensen; Fisher; Kinloch). In the increasingly globalized, virtual, and viral world of the 21st century, it is imperative for students to strengthen their abilities to read the world critically, to decode messages embedded within all kinds of language practices, and to learn rhetorical strategies for representing themselves on their own terms. Reading and writing the autobiographical works of living authors helps facilitate these kinds of critical readings and self-representations. Close attention to the girls' poetry suggests the range of possibilities for understanding autobiography as an act of agency, creativity, and transformation.

## Living Readers, Living Authors

For a little over one academic year, I explored the arts, literacies, and social change within an elective course created with and for adolescent girls in a large, urban school district. My work with the students initially began at the request of two girls at the school who approached school administrators asking for more opportunities to write in school and more gender-specific programming. The majority of the students self-identified as African American; three students identified respectively as Puerto Rican, multiracial, and Black/Grenadian. The students ranged in age from 14 to 16.

I chose to center the course in the literary and artistic works of African American women. The underlying purposes of exposing the students to these works were to create a context for mutual knowledge construction through inquiry into these texts and to inspire the students' creative endeavors. As I wrote in the course description:

We will read about, discuss, and write about the complexities and possibilities of being young women. We will engage with women of color who write, photograph, sing, and work for social justice through artistic expression. Hopefully, their work will inspire our own. We will consider their perspectives on gender, race, and sexuality. We will also consider how our work together can raise consciousness and create change.

The curriculum included writings by contemporary African American women authors such as Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, Ruth Forman, 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 Jacqueline Jones Royster writes, "African American women's literacy is a story of visionaries, of women using sociocognitive ability to re-create themselves and to reimagine their worlds" (110). In her discussion of Black feminist theory, Patricia Hill Collins identifies self-definition as a prominent tenet, a

pursuit evident throughout the poetry we read in the course as well as in the girls' writing. The course also included the opportunity to read poems written by contemporaries of the young women in the course. We read a number of poems written by teenage girls collected in the books *Things I Have to Tell You: Poems and Writing by Teenage Girls* (Franco) and *Voices of Our Own:*

*Mothers, Daughters, and Elders of the Tenderloin Tell Their Stories* (Deutsch). We also explored photography and listened to and discussed the music of Jill Scott and Ursula Rucker.

Creating a context in which we engaged with the poetry, writers, and songwriters of women and girls of color from an inquiry stance was an intentional gesture on my part. The writers embodied an inquiry stance, a critical reading of the "word and the world" (Freire and Macedo 29), an investment in using language to open up experience for examination, critique, and transformation. In examining the works from an inquiry stance, the students and I asked ourselves and each other, What inspires this writer? What inspires me? What kind of truth does she tell? What kind of truth do I want to tell? What kind of change is she seeking? What kind of change am I seeking? Students expressed responses to these questions through whole-group conversations and through writing journal entries, creating poems, and taking photographs. Their work was shared in class, school exhibitions, conference presentations, and on a website. Overall, my pedagogy was characterized by the creation of intentional and ongoing opportunities for the sharing and interrogating of personal experience, for the consideration of the ways social identities shape literary and artistic produc-

tion, and for the validation of knowledge claims made by course members in a community.

### Autobiography as an Act of Social Analysis and Resistance

From the beginning of the course, autobiographical poems prompted the most engagement and interest with the girls. From Nikki Giovanni's "Ego Tripping" to Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise," these poems presented a strong sense of self that critiqued, took on, and ultimately prevailed over the societal voices that would limit and demean. In choosing the poems and in developing ways to engage the girls in reading them and in writing their own poetry, I worked from an understanding of autobiography as reflecting the socially situated and mediated nature of identities and experience. In this way, I followed Wendy Hesford's suggestion that teacher-researchers consider how students construct the self strategically and rhetorically through what she calls "autobiographical acts": "Autobiographical acts (whether speech acts, written texts, visual forms, or symbolic gestures that reference the autobiographical subject or body) do not reflect unmediated subjectivities; rather, they are acts of self-representation that are ideologically encoded with historical memories and principles of identity and truth" (xxiii).

June Jordan's poem, "A Short Note to My Very Critical and Well-Beloved Friends and Comrades," was the first poem to spark these autobiographical acts reflective of and resistant to multiple social discourses. In this poem, Jordan<sup>1</sup> provides a rich and slightly humorous meditation on the complexities and possibilities of self-representation. She starts the poem by writing "First they said . . ." and then repeatedly uses the line "Then they said . . ." to suggest the contradictory ways in which multiple messages are relayed through discourses laden with judgments and expectations related to race, gender, sexuality, and other social identities. The poem's final lines also provide a clever indictment of the motivations and shortcomings of these individual and societal interlocutors:

Make up your mind! They said. Are you militant  
or sweet? Are you vegetarian or meat? Are you  
straight or are you gay?

And I said, Hey! It's not about *my* mind. (13–16)

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This poem provided a compelling entryway for discussion as well as for writing that gave the girls opportunities to name hegemonic discourses. In addition, the last line especially provided a language to speak back to these interlocutors and the assumptions they made.

Jordan's poem and the young women's response to it served as a kind of watershed event for me in my early attempts to create a writing community where the students had numerous and hopefully socially meaningful opportunities for self-expression. Near the end of our discussion about the poem, Sherry began composing her own poem about herself aloud using the lines from Jordan. While I had not planned to have the students write in response to the poem that day, I asked the other young women if they would like to try composing their own poems using Jordan's lines like Sherry had. What emerged that day was not only wonderful poetry but also a pedagogical way of engaging with writing that became a staple of our future writing engagements. What also emerged was a way of naming and talking to each other about issues of self-representation and, most importantly, the beginning of the development of an in-school space where the students claimed identities as living authors and where our project could be self-definition.

Renee, who self-identifies as multiracial and names her racial identity as "Irish, Dominican, Black, and Cherokee Indian," told me that she composed her "First I Said" poem as a way to reflect the multiple messages she has received about this identity. She writes:

First they said I was skinny  
 Then they said I was a nice size  
 Then they asked me what I was mixed with  
 Then I said many things.  
 Then they said, Oh, that's why your hair is like that.  
 Then I said, Don't worry on how my hair is, but  
     make sure your hair is nice.  
 Then they said I got a big head.  
 And then I said look at yours.

People have a lot to say about other people  
 But really they need to worry about themselves.

Renee calls attention to and resists discourses related to body size, skin color, and hair that surround her as a multiracial young woman. In her first response to her unwelcome questioner she is direct in choosing to reply "many things." Her re-

sponse seems to call attention to the audacity of the question and her ability to reveal only as much as she wants to and to reveal it with a slight sense of sarcasm. In her second and third responses, she responds even more directly to the persona behind the questions, inserting the second-person voice to critique and advise the questioner.

Joy's poem is even more direct. In her reading of it to the class, she not only read the lines she had written in her journal but also added direct and playfully indignant commentary to members of the class (represented in parentheses below):

First they said I was too short. (that's when I was younger)  
 Then they said I was too tall (that's now)  
 Then they said I was too mean (that was back then)  
 Then they said I was too nice (I'm not nice no more)  
 Then they said I talked too much  
 Then they said I talked too little (I didn't ask you)  
 Then they said I was too weak  
 Then they said I was too strong  
 Then they talked about it  
 Then after that I got tired of it  
 Then I smacked all of them in the face.  
 I'm me, and I'm not changing for none of y'all.

Joy's reading of her poem with the parenthetical commentary called even further attention to her authorial presence and confidence. When voicing the parenthetical additions, she looked directly at members of the class as if to assert that she was not only the self-possessed writer of the poem but also that she was asserting control in how her writing would be understood by her audience.

The students used compelling rhetorical devices in these poems to establish a sense of self and to establish an audience. Emulating Jordan's strategic use of a large and generic "they" to hold multiple messengers, and emulating Jordan's strategic use of "too" to accentuate these messenger's value-laden and judgmental descriptions, the students created a textual space to call

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attention to and indict a wide range of harmful perceptions, from skin color and hair to voice and comportment. As critical readers of Jordan's poem and of the world around them, and as living authors, the students talked back to and resisted harmful images and assumptions.

### Autobiography as an Act of Imagination and Possibility

While reading living authors prompted expressions of resistance, the students were also drawn to reading and writing autobiographical poetry that inspired the imagination to create new images. We read quite a few poems from *Voices of Our Own* (Deutsch), a book that includes writing and artwork created by teenage girls and women in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, California. The girls in my class were particularly intrigued by a group of poems in the collection entitled "I Seem to Be." The students suggested we write poems with the same title. Like the "First They Said" poems, these poems invited an acknowledgment of, and meditation on, individual and societal perceptions and also afforded an opportunity to write back to, clarify, and oftentimes contradict these perceptions. This particular invitation, however, engendered a more traditionally poetic tone and use of metaphor than the more conversational tone and direct wording of the "First They Said" poems. As a result, these poems seemed to create a more generative

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space for the creation of new images, rather than only a resistance to prevalent images.

In Jasmyn's three-part "I Seem to Be" poem, she explores and complicates issues of voice, sexuality, and intelligence, revealing herself in this poem as a young woman of self-determination creatively employing her self-described tactics of "Beauty-N-Brains"

to move through and make sense of her world and her place within it:

I seem to be quiet  
Leaving my voice muted and stored  
But really I'm like a tiger  
Roaring my roar

Showing the world I am so much more  
More than just a gold-digging "b"  
waiting on the next score  
Busting my guns loud in the air  
Making people stand to attention  
Yelling look over there

I seem to be fresh  
A booty shaking smut  
But really I'm a rose that grows from concrete  
Raising from the muck  
Moving forward showing the world  
I will not be stuck  
Stuck in this world we call the ghetto  
Letting all y'all know  
I will not be held captive  
I will use what I know  
Beauty-N-Brains are my tactics

I seem to be these things  
But I'm really not.  
Because the good qualities in people  
They're often forgot.

After invoking the two main outside perceptions through the "I seem to be" line—that she is "quiet" and that she is "fresh"—Jasmyn utilizes metaphoric language to complicate and supplant these perceptions. Instead of a quiet young woman acquiescent to other people's judgments of her, she is a tiger, "roaring her roar" to define herself on her own terms. Instead of a "fresh" young woman, she is instead a "rose" emerging from the concrete of the "world we call the ghetto." In addition to developing a rhyme scheme that renders this poem especially powerful when she read it aloud, Jasmyn also



directly addresses the reader/listener, writing, “Letting all y’all know / I will not be held captive.”

When I asked the students to reflect on their work, Jasmyn wrote that she was most proud of this poem because it gave her an opportunity to “flip the script.” This evocative and succinct phrase suggests Jasmyn’s awareness of and resistance to stereotypical images, while her poem reveals her desire to create counterimages. Throughout the poem, Jasmyn is holding in tension various external and internal, surface and interior, perceptions of herself and her community. While there is a dynamic movement between these kinds of perceptions in her poem, she maintains throughout the poem her confidence to define herself clearly and definitively on her own terms. She will not “be held captive” by others’ perceptions of her; on the contrary, she’s “moving forward” on her mission.

Janelle incorporates metaphorical language to an even larger degree than Jasmyn to facilitate the self-definition work in her poem. Whereas Jasmyn’s poem pulses with contemporary urban images, rhythm, and language, Janelle uses more classically symbolic metaphors to suggest others’ perceptions of her and to describe her view of herself as an emerging woman of independence and intelligence.

I seem to be the lower class but really I’m the higher power  
 I seem to be a rock standing still without knowledge but really I’m a soaring bird exploring for more wisdom  
 I seem to be that empty hole beneath all earth and sky  
 but really I’m the wide space searching for more challenges  
 I seem to be the weakened child who depends on others  
 but really I’m the strong sensation who grows on her own  
 I seem to be that old dull tree but really I’m a new born angel  
 I seem to be that painful sound but really I bring warmth and joy  
 I seem to be, I seem to be, but really I am ME!

Janelle’s series of naturalistic metaphors all suggest a young woman continually searching, learning, reaching, exploring, rising, and renewing. She uses language to call attention to an identity in a constant state of growth and in a constant state of

movement away from and transcendent of stultifying expectations and assumptions.

Geneva’s poem emphasized themes consistent in most of her poetry: her commitment to exploring her African American culture and heritage. Throughout her poem, she claims her cultural background as a resource and uses this poem’s format as an invitation to use metaphor to express this, writing in the final lines of her poem:

I seem to be walking down a road that leads to the end of my life, but really I am walking down the road which my African ancestors have walked.  
 A road that leads to my future not letting anyone get in my way.

Serena chose to write a few of her “I Seem to Be” lines in the second person. This choice gave an almost embodied sense to the source of the misperception and created a textual space where she could respond directly back with an alternative image. Here, she intervenes in the labeling discourses often associated with schooling, writing, “You say I seem to be remedial but really I’m a pretty book worm / A sensational young lady moving graciously upon the world.”

By identifying the discourses of race, sexuality, culture, and schooling, the student poets have faith in the possibilities and power of language—and especially in their abilities to use this poetic and metaphorical language—to supplant limiting, damaging, and restraining images with affirmative, dynamic, and generative ones.

### Autobiography as an Act of Sharing and Collectivity

Throughout the course, the girls expressed great desire to hear each others’ poems and to share their own, often encouraging me to alter the agenda of the class so that there was more time for sharing. In ways that may at first seem counterintuitive, autobiographical work in this context was a social event, both in terms of the content of the students’ creations and the ways in which these creations greatly shaped

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the ethos, relationships, and knowledge production in the group. In fact, the moments when students read their autobiographical poetry aloud and encour-

aged others to do so were often the most electric and the most defining of this class.

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After the students completed the individual "I Seem to Be" poems, I invited them to analyze their poems and to brainstorm what they perceived to be the most common misperceptions of young women of color (represented in all capitals in the poem below). The girls first wrote individual rebuttals to these stereotypes and misperceptions. Three girls then combined their responses into a

group poem. The following week, the girls chose to read their individual poems and the group poem at the schoolwide Poetry Jam in front of their family and friends. Here is their poem:

YOU SEEM TO BE TOO LOUD

Jasmyn: But really I'm just louder than you  
 Sonia: But really that's just the way I talk  
 Joy: But really I talk with a passion

YOU SEEM TO BE TOO GROWN

Jasmyn: But really I've grown to be a beautiful young lady  
 Sonia: But really I'm all grown up and responsible  
 Joy: But really I'm growing up to be an adult

YOU SEEM TO BE UNEDUCATED

Jasmyn: But really I'm just not educated to the fullest extent  
 Sonia: But really I'm still trying to get my education for your information  
 Joy: But really I'm educated to the fullest

YOU SEEM LIKELY TO BECOME A TEEN MOM

Jasmyn: But really I'm a teen Magnificent-Outreaching-Marvel  
 Sonia: But really I'm a teen who is trying to reach her goals

Joy: But really I'm doing nothing at all to be into that  
 Predicament

By composing this poem and sharing it in a public arena, the students expressed a strong sense of determination to use writing and performance as a way to challenge these misperceptions. The language practices in evidence here reveal creative interventions into dominant discourses and ideologies.

**"Making the World Anew"**

Creating a context for reading and becoming living authors encompasses so much of what I think we strive for as teachers and learners of English: to provide opportunities for students to use language precisely and purposefully to live more freely, critically, and powerfully. The reading and discussion of autobiographical poems by women of color infused the course with epistemologies that recognized poetry as a practice ideally suited toward personal and social change; these readings, in turn, shaped the writing produced by the students. Royster argues that the literacy practices of African American women writers are not only revolutionary but also evolutionary. Within this framework it is possible to highlight further how the students' poems of self-definition embody not only critique but also movements toward change, regeneration, and creation of alternatives. To "flip the script," as Jasmyn described it, is an act of imagination and action, a refusal to stay locked in received images and assumptions, and an affirmative movement toward the creation of more socially just pathways. The sense of interest and excitement over these autobiographical poems suggests how the girls desired opportunities to explore their emergent identities through their own creative process *and* through learning from the creative processes of other young women. The girls' poetry that reflected and extended the writing of the living authors we read in the course suggests, therefore, how we can expand our notion of the nature and purpose of autobiographical writing. Rather than a solitary act directed inward, autobiography can be a social act directed outward. In encouraging students to become poets of self-definition, we can begin the movement away from "words that wound" to words that critique social injustice, that inspire the imagination, and that make "the world anew." 

**Note**

1. Although June Jordan died in 2002, I chose to include her work prominently in the curriculum alongside living authors. Given the themes of her work, her poems and her audiotaped voice were a strong presence in our classroom. The relevance and timeliness of her poems clearly resonated with the girls.

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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

Traci Gardner, RWT

Take students' pursuit of self-definition to a different genre with "Having My Say: A Multigenre Autobiography Project." Like the poetry Wissman uses with students, the Delany Sisters' memoir *Having Our Say* describes women of color with a strong sense of self who resist "societal voices that would limit or demean them." Using the memoir as a model, students compose a multigenre paper that includes an autobiographical narrative as well as an informational nonfiction piece that provides context for and connections to the story from their life. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=1103](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1103)