Teaching Artists as Culture Shift Workers

by Holly Bass

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

By age six, I was already reading "big girl" books and had become an avid reader, a trait that would endure throughout my school years. As a seventh grader, I finished all of my independent reading modules halfway through the year, so my teacher suggested that I 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 commonly known as 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 who 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. Suddenly, the dull lists of vocabulary words transformed into catchy song hooks, as we sing-song chanted in unison to the beat. Before my eyes, I could see Todd's brain making sense of language in new ways. He was smiling and fully engaged. Perhaps for the first time in his life, learning wasn't a chore or a painful reminder of what others saw as his limitations. This kind of learning was actually joyful. And way too much for our academic overseer, who loudly shushed and berated us before returning to her book.

That moment—my finding a way to meet the challenge of Tood's learning differences, his sudden joy, our mutually surprising connection of what we achieved together, and the shutting down by someone who did not approve—crystallized for me what good teaching should be—joyful, creative, rigorous, encouraging and fun. And how often schools fail to meet that mark.

Mainstream white American culture often devalues the vital education that comes from family and community settings, particularly in the case of artists of color. The language used to describe those without a formal education—"self-taught," a product of "the school of hard knocks" or even "community-based"—often comes with a side of condescension. Even for those

of us who have successfully navigated the academic hierarchy, maintaining our standing in that world sometimes requires downplaying or negating the richest sources of our cultural foundations. For many of us, our earliest and most successful learning happens outside of school. This is especially true for artists and creatives.

> ***Reflection:*** *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 graduate 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 that aimed to send writers out into community spaces such as schools, homeless shelters, prisons and programs for domestic violence survivors. 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.

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 central government agency running the program, but we went rogue relying heavily instead on June Jordan's *Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint*. I don't know of any other teaching guide that centers the values of community, culture and social justice as much as practical literary and pedagogical tools. (Published in 1995 and now out of print, I turn to my well-worn copy again and again, finding it still stands up today. I recommend it for any writer interested in working in community settings. Used copies often pop up from online booksellers though the price rises as copies become more limited.)

My first assignment with WritersCorps brought me full circle to my pre-teen teaching experience. Only now, I was facing a classroom of Todds, at an all-Black middle school in Southeast DC, one of Washington's most under-resourced and willfully-neglected neighborhoods. The academic overseer was also present—most memorably a veteran fifth grade English teacher so completely uninvested in her work, she told everyone in earshot 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 have relatives who are poor, but my family's brand of small town, rural poverty did not prepare me for the challenges facing the young students before me.

Siced, shorty, bama, jont—my students' slang was totally different, despite the mere decade in age difference between us. 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 white New Orleans native, could relate more to the students' urban experience than I could.

That encounter with the diversity and specificity of Black regional subcultures 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—that it was dangerous, and full of criminals, including my students—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 native 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 its mix of Latin American, Asian-American, Black and white students, my neighborhood more closely resembled the multicultural California community in which I'd grown up. Despite my willingness to learn about Southeast DC, 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 gave me a deeper connection as a community member and role model.

> ***Reflection:*** *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 an open mic. Were you welcomed right away or was it a struggle? If missteps were made, what was the process to recover and rebuild trust? As an educator, how do you cultivate and sustain a sense of community in your workshops and classes?*

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.

Not long after I began WritersCorps, I experienced what would remain one of my most profound learning experiences as a teaching artist. I was invited to be a part-time substitute teacher for my friend Erica Doyle. At that time she was a teacher for a small, arts-based alternative

elementary school in Northwest DC. In order to create as much continuity for the class as possible, it was decided that I would shadow Erica for several days.

I was pretty comfortable teaching 4th grade and up, but Erica taught mixed ages pre-K. To my surprise, she expected me to lead them in writing classes. These were students who couldn't even write their own names in crayon. I was understandably skeptical.

All of my skepticism disappeared 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 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 an interesting object, perhaps a sparkly geode or a smooth conch shell, and each student would have the opportunity to briefly and gently hold the object before entering class and taking a spot on the mat. Without fancy words and without restrictive rules, 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 reviewed the day's plan of activities as a group. Everyone was given a piece of paper and a pencil or crayon and 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. These were not drawings or pictograms. Essentially, each student created their own alphabet, punctuation and grammar, with its own logic and rules.

As they finished, each student read back 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.

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 support they were old pros. I remember one student offering that she had trouble visualizing the main character and asked if the author could add more descriptive detail, like the color of the character's hair (purple, as it turns out) and clothes. Students were also empowered to say things like, "I didn't understand the part where the girl left the dog. I was confused." Usually the young authors could quickly clarify the details and would add notes for their revisions, which the adults would add into our transcriptions as well.

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. Writer and activist adrienne maree brown writes that "all organizing is science fiction" because "we are creating a world we have never seen." The same could be said of what I observed in Erica's classroom, which I would call transformative teaching. It's our job to imagine a world in which educators are trained to expect and cultivate this level of creativity and brilliance in their students, and to model those values in our own classrooms.

> ***Reflection:*** *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? Conversely, can you recall when a teacher asked you to go beyond what you thought was possible for yourself? Think about your own experience as an educator. Do you hold or have you held limited ideas about your students' capacity? Who or what sets the standards or expectations of what your students can do? What might move you to believe that your students can do more than you thought was possible?*

From 2014 to 2018, I ran an arts program at a juvenile detention center in DC offering workshops in poetry, dance, visual art, music production and theater. I had spent much of my thirties establishing a reputation as a strong teaching artist with the ability to develop and deliver curriculum on writing and performance. I cultivated my leadership abilities by managing summer programs for various nonprofits as well as training school teachers on how to integrate creative writing into their academic subject areas. I was also beginning to work as a sort of "artistic crisis counselor," helping communities navigate sensitive conflicts around issues of race, gender, gentrification and immigration.

Now entering my forties, I was finally getting an opportunity to design and lead a program on my own terms. I was fearful to step out on my own but also excited. By then, I had long learned how to do the dance of navigating public school culture, nonprofits and government programs. I naively thought the juvenile detention center wouldn't be much different.

From the beginning, the process of being approved to provide arts education at the juvenile detention center was riddled with absurd levels of bureaucracy. Even though I was specifically invited to design an arts program, I had to create a lengthy detailed proposal for which there were no written guidelines or examples to follow. What's more, the only way to submit said proposal was via an outdated internet browser no longer in use. In order to upload to their system, I essentially had to trick my laptop into going back in time twelve years to 2001—a tragically apt metaphor I saw repeated as I dealt with a revolving door of various administrators and city officials. Shortly after receiving the contract, the people in leadership positions who invited me to apply, my allies, left or were transferred to other city positions. The facility seemed

to get a new education director every 3-5 months, as few could endure the stressful combination of city bureaucracy and the facility's own internal power dynamics.

With an annual budget in the low six-figures, it was the largest teaching contract I had ever managed. I was glad to have the opportunity to build a program from scratch and to be able to pay myself and my staff of teaching artists an equitable rate. But I couldn't escape the reality that my financial and career advancement was at the cost of the imprisonment of Black youth.

The children at the facility were almost all Black, save for a few Latino/a students, and almost all from east of the river—the area of the city with the most visible economic divestment. Of course, there were teens of all races and backgrounds committing various infractions and crimes all over the city. But the wealthier the area, the less likely they were to encounter police in the first place. And if their parents had any amount of funds or savvy they would not wind up in that facility. In the four years I taught there, I literally had two white students 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).

It is, to date, 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 Southeast DC public schools that I had taught in for the previous 20 years. They were good kids growing up in exceptionally difficult circumstances. To witness them navigate a system that was not designed for their success, further illuminated for me the high level of intelligence, skill and resilience that many Black and Brown children develop out of necessity.

What made teaching in a juvenile detention center personally difficult for me was being immersed in the school-to-prison pipeline. Once I began working within it, it was no longer the abstract concept I'd read about in books or theorized about in conversations with activist friends. With total clarity, I could see it as an entire system, a structure, a force that has its own power despite the sometimes well-meaning people who keep it running. I was now one of those well-meaning people: complicit, even as I was trying to offer something positive to the young people I met within its walls. As one of the boys aptly put it, "I shouldn't have to be locked up to be able to get poetry and art."

In an effort to overcome this sad reality, and perhaps assuage some of my own guilt that my efforts simply upheld the system, I attempted to set up outside partnerships that would provide free workshops for students once they left the facility. There was plenty of goodwill and a wealth of enthusiastic collaborators, but regulations around protecting the students' identity as minors and ever-changing policies and leadership thwarted any efforts to establish a drop-in center or regular program. And frankly, I got tired of trying and having my hopes dashed by bureaucracy and bureaucrats. If I was feeling this way after just a few years, I could only begin to scratch the surface of how my students felt having spent most of their young lives enmeshed in these systems. The same systems that were set up to make it difficult for me to get into the business

of supporting them outside of the detention center are the same systems that make it difficult for them to get out of these cycles. I had the privilege to choose to leave and work elsewhere. My former students do not.

> ***Reflection:*** *Think about a time when you were offered an opportunity that challenged your values or made you question your integrity. What was your process for making whatever decision you chose? Who helped you navigate that process? As teaching artists, how do we enter and remain inside of a given institution without becoming too much like it? How do we create liberatory space in systems designed for the complete opposite?*

Despite the rocky start, I was able to apply many of the lessons I had learned early in my teaching career to my work at the juvenile detention center. My experience working with Erica Doyle's students taught me to never underestimate my students. 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, while building up a team of other teaching artists, I was often at the facility two or three days a week teaching by myself or trying to build relationships with the facility's staff. I had run daily programs before and assumed this would be similar. But what I didn't realize is that when you work 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 and mentality of the overseer transformed into a living, breathing organism. 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, misogyny, homophobia, ageism, classism, and anti-Blackness (even from Black folks) are socially acceptable. It's a place where hierarchy and control are valued above all else.

In the course of my work there 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. Add to that, contractors like myself were provided minimal training to deal with the high levels of trauma among the teens.

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, 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 educator and a working artist with a practice of my own to maintain. It wasn't sustainable to my spirit to work in the facility several 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 in programs 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 staff resistance before we could even begin to do the work of educating and building connections. And the gaslighting was next level. 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."

The writer and filmmaker Toni Cade Bambara wrote "revolution begins with the self, in the self." Over the decades, I had built up so much material as a veteran teaching artist that I could prepare for a class in 15 minutes. But 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.

In the past few years, there's been more focus on uplifting Black joy and pleasure as tools of resistance. I'm appreciative of writers like adrienne maree brown and her books *Emergent Strategy* and *Pleasure Activism*, which have helped me learn that living out my values of social justice do not need to come at the expense of my own well-being and joy. I stan for 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.

> ***Reflection:*** *Think back to a time when you experienced or came close to feeling a sense of burnout. Perhaps you felt obligated to stay in a situation based on your political or moral values, even if your physical and emotional self needed a break. Try to remember the sensations you felt in your body as you navigated that time. How do you balance doing work for the greater good and being present for yourself and your loved ones? Whether you are a veteran teaching artist or just beginning, who holds you accountable and supports you?*

When we think about sustainability as a teaching artist, we often focus on physical well-being or maintaining our values of social justice. But we also have to take into account our material well-being. Of course no one chooses teaching artistry as a way to become a billionaire, but everybody has to eat. And to paraphrase Bettina Love, we want to do more than just survive.

When I started in my 20s, earning *any* money at all through my art was exciting. I hadn't published very much of my poetry at that time, so being able to say I was a writing instructor 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.

Early in my career, paying the bills meant putting together a patchwork of multiple side hustles. Even when organizations could pay on the higher end, it was usually an hourly rate for just a few hours a week and didn't always 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 I know firsthand the stress and toll of working without the certainty of a contract and without health care coverage or other kinds of benefits.

Later on, I started to reflect on my goals as a professional artist and writer and how teaching fit into that. What does progress or advancement look like *for me*?

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 an existing 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 important to recognize that.

It's 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.

With almost 30 years of working as a teaching artist for countless institutions under my belt, I can confidently say that the biggest factor for success as an artist and a teaching artist is staying in the game. Many of the teaching artists I befriended early on are now successful by mainstream standards—best-selling books, literary prizes, leadership positions at universities and arts organizations and commensurately high salaries. But many of us were broke for a long 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.

Mainstream culture venerates those who excel at a particular art form, often assuming that they will be just as skillful at sharing their knowledge and cultivating similar abilities in others. But that is not always the case. Most of the best teaching artists I've met are wildly talented and have honed their craft as much as those artists who have gained major renown. The difference is that they often have little interest in or patience for the industry-side of being an artist—the constant publishing, touring, pitching and selling. Developing mastery as a teaching artist requires dedication, time and tremendous amounts of generosity. If you realize along the way that you're more likely to become a master teacher than a highly recognized writer, embrace that. Regardless of where you choose to focus your energies, don't let anything prevent you from realizing your creative fullness.

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, I don't care what you do. Just be happy and do your best at it." This freed me to define success beyond material wealth and traditional markers. I lived with a roommate until my early 40s, which was sometimes embarrassing to admit at family gatherings, but it enabled me to travel internationally, attend writers' retreats and not spend energy worrying about monthly bills. Success for me has been about living my best life with intention, cultivating a community of good friends and having opportunities to grow as an artist.

> ***Reflection:*** *Remind yourself of a moment you were really proud of what you were doing and* how *you were doing it? Perhaps it was about an internal goal you set for yourself or maybe it was something you did that generated public approval. How did you define success in that moment? How does your definition of success shift? How do you envision your ideal life in your elder years and will what you are doing now bring you to that vision?*

As a teaching artist who is committed to the work of deep cultural transformation and inspired by writers like June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara, Sonia Sanchez and Gwendolyn Brooks, 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.

My real work is to be an agent of cultural change. And the primary focus of my transformational energy is towards my students. My second important focus is towards the "adults in the room"—teachers, guards, administrators, etc. And through the above, my third, and perhaps most inscrutable, focus is towards the institutions themselves.

The most powerful approach I've found to shift cultures is to 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, like public schools and juvenile facilities, yelling at students is tacitly accepted.

But how radical is it for an individual educator, let along an institution, to decide not to allow yelling? Very. In order for it to work, it requires open and direct conversations with the students at the beginning of the relationship. Co-creating such protocols *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, such as self-regulation, how to de-escalate conflicts, and build deeper self-awareness.

As teaching artists, we are often interlopers in someone else's natural habitat. We can't necessarily come in and start rearranging the furniture. To carry the metaphor through, sometimes to change the space we have to use the power of suggestion to encourage those who have invited us in to make those changes themselves.

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 one event or upheaval, but revolution as something emerging from its root word "revolve," implying movement that is ongoing and constantly changing. For her and for me, revolution is not a place, a one-and-done achievement, or fixed point in time. It is the practice and work of refining who we are and who we hope to be, as individuals and as a greater community.

> ***Reflection:*** *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 and sustenance as you continue to co-create the world that reflects the best of who we are and who we desire to become?*

Sources and Further Readings:

June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint by Lauren Muller & The Blueprint Collective

Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds by adrienne maree brown

We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom

Conversations with Toni Cade Bambara, edited by Thabiti Lewis

The Nap Ministry: Rest as Resistance, https://thenapministry.wordpress.com/