

Learning for Liberation:

Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy

And Transformative Education

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“Jane-Finch youth use voices and art to inspire change” (2014)

Photo by Vince Talotta for the Toronto Star

{LIVE}

## ABSTRACT

This portfolio examines and employs Black poetry as a powerful strategy for liberation; it is both a sustained discussion of the principles and practices behind the teaching of poetry for emancipatory education and Black liberation, and a toolkit for educators. It specifically addresses Black youth in Toronto. It contains four main offerings addressed to three different audiences:

1. Learning for Liberation: Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy And Transformative Education, *“If We Ruled the World”*: A critical essay which argues that improving the quality of life for marginalized bodies, means highlighting the importance of Arts Education and providing insight into how the black experience may be re-imagined through poetry.
2. Poetry Saved My Life: Winning the Race! A Militant Black Poetry Teacher’s Guide for Social Change: is a Popular Education Toolkit intended to aid first generation Black Canadian youth in the successful navigation of culturally-insensitive/hostile learning environments and racist workspaces.
3. Re-Imagining the Black Experience Through Word-Sound-Power: is an audio recording on traumatic/racialized historical violence and memory; intended to disrupt the dominant discourse on race relations.
4. Poetry Saved My Life! A Black PoeTree Experience (Series): A collection of short and long poems intended as social commentary on racial issues, within a North American context.

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Life, First and Foremost

My Ancestors; Black Poets; Christ; Spirit Guides; HIM

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~

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Jane-Finch Community; Jamaican Diaspora

Hip-Hop; Slam; Dancehall; Dub

...Poetry.

Thank you,

M.

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## FOREWORD

Canada has often prided itself on being an inclusive, multicultural society, where everyone is accepted and has equal access to opportunities and resources- yet statistics constantly prove the contrary to be true. My journey through this maze of fact and fiction has not been easy. ...I have faced and been subjected to institutionalized racism, inequities, discrimination, negative stereotypes, oppression, violence, sexism, prejudice, racial bullying, labeling, and profiling. So how was I, a first generation Black Canadian woman of Jamaican parentage, from a community labeled "at-risk", able to successfully navigate this hegemonic system, and stay true to self? I have to give partial if not full credit to Black poetry (African-American poetry, i.e., Slam/ Spoken Word poetry; and Jamaican poetry, i.e., Dub poetry) for the inspiration, confidence, strength, courage, power, love, and militancy, to stay the course, moving forward!

The three components of my Area of Concentration: 1) Community-Based Planning and Development, 2) Popular Education and Cultural Production, and 3) Community Arts for Social Change. In this Major Research Portfolio these all intersect to inform my focus on finding new and creative ways of improving the quality of life for marginalized bodies. My work focuses on transformation and change because my own life and (that of many others) depends on it. My Portfolio comprises of various components that all work together to substantiate and support my central argument- that Black poetry has the power to re-imagine the Black experience, and transform Black space. Each component responds in a different way to my Area of Concentration, as outlined in my Plan of Study (Community Arts, Popular Education, and Community Based-Planning and Development). I address different audiences in each component: radical black educators, workshop facilitators, and youth who are coming to voice as poets and active participants in Black poetry movements.

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## SYNTHESIS

## Allow Me to Re-Introduce My Self

KEYWORDS: Race, Poetry, Love, Liberation, Pedagogy, Youth, Community, Resilience

I want to begin this synthesis essay by aligning the ideas found in my Plan of Study, with the thoughts and theories of June Jordan, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Paulo Freire- in the sense that my research and writing also seeks to empower the oppressed and transform the world around us. As a poet from Black space, I know first-hand the difficulties associated with living life on the margins, and what it takes to overcome the associated challenges. June Jordan also was no stranger to the hardships of Black life. In fact, in her article “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley” in *On Call: Political Essays* (1985), Jordan irrevocably links Black poetry to liberation, when she writes:

Come to this country to be docile and dumb...how could you dare to create yourself: a poet? A poet can read. A poet can write...A poet writes in her own language. A poet writes of her own people, her own history, her own vision, her own room, her own house where she sits at her own table quietly placing one word after another word until she builds a line and a movement and an image and a meaning that somersaults all of these into the singing, the absolutely individual voice of the poet: at liberty. A poet is somebody free. A poet is someone at home. (Jordan 87-88)

In her essay, Jordan highlights the various emancipatory qualities attributed to being a Black poet in America. Though, *On Call: Political Essays* was published in the year I was born (1985), Jordan’s words still ring true for me, today- as I situate my research and life’s work within the context of Black poetics. In the excerpt above, Jordan builds a poetic house on solid ground, until at last! She is able to provide shelter from the storms associated with Black life.

Unfortunately, in spite of Jordan’s position, illiteracy is a destabilizing and crippling force within the Black community. What I have ultimately learned through research is that black

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youth are in worse condition than I had initially thought. “(Forty) percent of black youth in Canada’s most populous and diverse city aren’t graduating from high school. The reality is that there are already gaping inequities in the public system, and they need to be addressed” (Wallace, “The Case for All-Black Schools”). It breaks my heart to learn the staggering percentile of Black students who were unable to receive the support they need to successfully complete their secondary education.

In his book *“Race”, Writing, and Difference* (1986) Henry Louis Gates, Jr., states that it is precisely the privilege of knowing how to read and write, as Jordan illustrates in *On Call*, that separates the haves from the have-nots (6). Gates, Jr., also calls on Phillis Wheatley to substantiate his claim, about the profound ability of Black poets to write themselves into existence, and make a change. He then urges us to examine the implicit link between literacy/illiteracy and Blackness, (15) by posing critical questions about the historical significance of Black poetry, in relation to Black life. Gates does not tell us how we might motivate folks to write themselves into history, but he does demonstrate the critical historical importance of writing in the history of African-American struggles for freedom.

In spite of Jordan’s assertion that poetry can be a path to liberty, within the context of education, there is often a distinction made between academic work and creative work, one often being valued or held in higher esteem than the other. I propose in what follows that Black poetry is a form of intellectual work, a practice that involves self-reflexivity and social critique. Expressing it requires drawing on the repertoire of orality and literature, passed on through such forms as, hip hop and dub poetry. This insight evolved from my reading of both Jordan and Freire. My aim is to utilize critical Black poetry pedagogy to propel first generation Black Canadian youth towards self-actualization. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that:

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...In the process of learning to read, men and women discover that they are creators of culture, and that all their work can be creative. 'I work, and working I transform the world.' And those who have been completely marginalized are so radically transformed, they are no longer willing to be mere objects, responding to changes occurring around them; they are more likely to decide to take upon themselves the struggle to change the structures of society, which until now have [only] served to oppress them. (Freire 33)

Freire's ability to draw a well-balanced connection between the two (education/creative work), and link this to the meaning-making tradition, offered me the breathing room to pursue and ultimately accomplish my academic and professional goals, in ways I never thought were possible. Through the arts, learners gain the confidence to explore and analyze their environment in new and innovative ways. Freire argues, "in problem-posing education, people develop their own power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire 83).

I argue for linking Freire's position on problem solving with word-sound and power or the achievement of radical Black subjectivity through poetic practice. In section one I want to argue that Black poetry is a powerful strategy for liberation that can help first generation Black Canadian students to successfully navigate racist workspaces, and culturally insensitive/hostile learning environments. I want to argue that Black poetry can be a way to address the gaping inequalities and inequities that Black Canadian students face within the context of public education. I argue this because it is my firm belief that black poetry can connect first generation Black Canadian students to their culture, lineage, history, language, and help them to formulate their own identities, overall. Rinaldo Walcott argues that:

A grammar for black... will take black Canadian cultures beyond the narrow and dreary confines of an anti-racism discourse, and allow us to concentrate on the

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various black selves in a fashion which enhances lives lived far beyond the clutches of racism. (Walcott 156)

Black poetry provides the platform for a thorough exploration of these “lives lived” that Walcott talks about, immersed and embedded in Black poetics. Employing Black poetry (Arts and Culture) and using it as a place to begin reflecting on the Black experience- will help to empower first generation Canadian youth within Toronto’s public education system, who are often left struggling to carve out their own identities. Through interactions with Black poetry, students will be given the rare opportunity to feel empowered instead of powerless about their role in helping to shape the world they live in.

Notable Dub Poet “Dr. Benjamin Obadiah Iqbal Zephaniah was born and raised in Birmingham, England. He cannot remember a time when he was not creating poetry but this had nothing to do with school where poetry meant very little to him” (Zephaniah, “Biography”). He actually dropped out of school at a very early age (another Black student failed by the traditional education system), yet was able to beat the odds and has received numerous honorary doctorates from accredited Universities in the United Kingdom. There are numerous examples of Black poets who were both failed by public education early on, yet persevered to become highly successful professional artists and scholars. I am a Black Canadian poet with a similar story, and so in what follows I draw on the experience of what Zephaniah call the politics of the street to propose a path to an ethical space of empowerment.

#### POETRY SAVED MY LIFE (TOOLKIT)

Section two of my Portfolio, is a Black poetry toolkit entitled “Poetry Saved My Life.” In addition to teaching Black students how to teach and empower each other through Black poetry, in this section, I want to argue that although Black space may be derelict and “uninhabitable,”

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(McKittrick 7) in regards to the built or material environment, there is still an abundance of life in Black space. Poetry also creates space and space is necessarily re-created through the making of new poetry. I will argue this by reading Langston Hughes's long poem *Montage of a Dream Deferred* through the lens of Katherine McKittrick's article "Plantation Futures." Through Black poetry and prose I will explore issues such as the pitfalls of urban planning and design, in relation to community development and developing more effective strategies towards improving the quality of life for Black bodies.

In regards to community planning, it has historically proved challenging for members of (the Black) community to obtain any real or ample decision-making power, in regards to the process of community planning (Hodge and Gordon 315). Community Development (CD) entails strengthening and improving a community from within. Through orature, Black poets have been able to regain a significant amount of the decision-making power needed to redesign and re-imagine Black space for the community and its inhabitants. Members of the Black community must commit to living lives that constantly challenge and resist the hegemonic system. Complacency and conformity act in opposition of true liberation. Self-care, perseverance, and consistent self and collective reflection represent the praxis of community empowerment. Realizing these values in poetry can be a step toward resisting complacency.

#### RE-IMAGINING THE BLACK EXPERIENCE THROUGH WORD~SOUND~POWER

In section three of my Portfolio I will be using "the recording of an authentic black voice," (Gates, Jr., ed. 11) my own- to argue my main point through spoken word- that Black poetry has the power to re-imagine and reclaim Black space. This audio recording will be featured on a Website I designed for the purpose of my MRP. The web address is:  
<http://poetreebee.weebly.com>

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### POETRY SAVED MY LIFE! (POETRY SERIES)

Section four will feature poems that I have written, that can be taken up as social commentary on race, class, education, work, art, war, love, peace, and power. This section speaks directly to learning objective [3.1] of component three (Community Arts for Social Change) in my Plan of Study. Which is, to thoroughly examine, utilize, and interact with art (specifically Black Poetry) as a tool of resistance against systemic racism, cultural hegemony, social and environmental injustice, and oppression. This poetry series will include, but will not be limited to, my personal experiences of dealing with racism within both work and educational spaces. Featured works in this section respond to all aspects of my Area of Concentration, as I intend for this poetry series, which should be read after reading the academic essays and listening to the soundscape, to also function as my conclusion.

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*“If We Ruled the World”*

In 2007 a white female journalist from the *Toronto Star*, wrote an article with a headline that read, “Empowerment at heart of poet’s positive message.” A year later, a white male Master of Arts in Popular Culture student, by the name of Chris Richardson, submitted a Master’s thesis to Brock University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of his degree. He titled his thesis: “‘Canada’s Toughest Neighborhood’: Surveillance, Myth and Orientalism in Jane-Finch” (2008). In the section of his thesis entitled “Part Two: Speaking Truth in Jane-Finch,” Richardson posed the following questions: “Who can speak for the objects? What truths are sayable? And how are these truths articulated?” (99) Richardson then went on to write about the aforementioned 2007 news article from the *Toronto Star*; under a subsection of his thesis entitled “*Subjugated Knowledge Sources*,” (120) where he examined how the media interacted with “non-traditional experts” (99). To further substantiate his research, Richardson added an image, which he borrowed from the *Toronto Star*, and labeled: “Article featuring spoken word poet Melissa Dean (*Toronto Star*, 2007)” (124).

My name is Melissa A. Dean. Seven years ago my poetry video “Open Your Eyes,” (2007) was featured on the Jane-Finch.com website. Coincidentally, my video was uploaded unto the website by director Paul Nguyen, the same day that a pre-dawn gang raid took place in Jane-Finch. My personal artistic expression quickly took on a deeper meaning in light of what was taking place in the community, at the time. The media tried to get in contact with me, though, initially turning down requests for interviews, I eventually realized the positive impact that

telling my story could have, and decided to meet with one journalist. She came for an up to the minute sensational story about crime and violence, but left our meeting with much more. What she now had in hand was a personal account of how black poetry works to transform lives. She still had a story to write. It wasn't too long afterward that I received a full page spread in the *Toronto Star*, and front-page recognition of "*Poetik Justice*." I think Freire would call this, "Dialogical Action," at its finest! "Dialogical Action"-social transformation through communication that promotes solidarity and liberation- in a sense that as a marginalized body I was able to voice my opinions and gain recognition and validation in an arena that has historically silenced similar voices.

Seven years later, I am now a Master in Environmental Studies candidate at York University, submitting this document in partial fulfillment of the requirements of my degree. Although the ways in which the media chooses to portray the Jane-Finch community, is in fact a cause for grave concern, this essay will not be focused on the inner workings of the media. Instead, this self-reflexive essay with accompanying toolkit will focus on Cultural Production and Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy, containing strategies from self-healing through creative writing to community building through art. Using a qualitative research approach, I will be exploring my own poetic practice and the role of cultural production in relation to community development and youth empowerment- in attempt to illustrate my main point that Black poetry is transformative.

As I reflect upon the transformational process I have undergone during my graduate studies at York University, key moments of learning come to mind. Through research, I acquired the cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary creative skills needed for classroom, community, and school leadership. The practice based course that helped me to grow the most as a Critical Pedagogue,

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was “Cultural Production: Performance,” with Professor Honor-Ford Smith-- where I produced a black poetry soundscape intended to combat systemic racism and oppression within post-secondary education and workplace settings in Toronto. Some of the key principles I learned from this performance course and have applied to my teaching practice include: empowering and transformative education, collaboration and communication, critical reflection, improvisation, a combination of analytic strength, technical precision and high levels of creativity in performance, multidisciplinary (voice, body, image, text) artistic processes and interventions. The key question that informed the development of my cultural production was “*how do marginalized bodies thrive in hostile learning and work environments?*” My overall intention for this cultural production project was to visually communicate specific and abstract ideas and concepts, and to “find sites of intervention.” (Butler preface)

As an Artist Educator, I want to argue that Critical Black poetry pedagogy is a powerful strategy for liberation and Black youth re-engagement in school-- that can help Black bodies successfully navigate racist culturally insensitive/hostile learning environments. In section one I will be outlining the various ways in which the current public education system is failing Black youth. I will also be discussing the “hidden curriculum,” (Apple and King 341) and summarizing the work of relevant race and education theorists, such as Carl E. James and George J. Sefa Dei-- whose body of work reflects the notion that: “stakeholders in the provincial education system who take credit for student success should also find it incumbent upon themselves to accept responsibility for any failures” (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, Zine 11). Black students are often left on their own to silently suffer the entirety of the blame for dropping out of school. I want to argue that it is the current public education system that is failing Black students, and not the other way around.

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After pinpointing and addressing the problem in section one— section two will be geared towards presenting what the research shows as the way forward...Critical Pedagogy. The key concept that will emerge in this section is transformative learning, as an alternative to the “banking” model of education that Paulo Freire talks about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I will then turn to *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* by Bell Hooks as an insightful critique on Freire’s pedagogical work. In section three I will highlight some relevant critical pedagogies including, Narrative, Hip-Hop and Spoken Word. In section four I will explore Black Revolutionary Thought and the ways in which the question of race is taken up and addressed by various scholars, such as Malcolm X and Cornel West. Turning to the seminal works of June Jordan and Gwendolyn Brooks, section five will bring into focus my own approach to teaching, and learning, where I employ Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy, as the key strategy for reimagining the Black experience. I will conclude by summarizing my main points, arguments, and objectives in relation to race, education, and cultural identity.

#### RACE, EDUCATION, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

*“KKK” ... Three letters written in white chalk, by a white hand on the black board, above my black head; “Hey nigger get off our land!” said a white talking head in a white room, four pristine walls closing in on me as I choke on the realization that even though I was born in this “multicultural” city my blue black skin makes me a stranger in white space. Non-standard ... Special... I stand out! The three letters on the board scream get out and stay out. My black body a threat by mere presence, being a descendant of slaves has not adequately prepared me for this/ race-place reality; and coming from a lineage of ancient Kings and Queens failed to effectively counter this white “superior” figures directives to vacant the premises, at once! The clock ticks... I stand, still.*

- [The Outsider-Inside Me. Journal Entry based on real events that took place while I was pursuing graduate studies in Community Planning.]

*If I ruled the world  
(Imagine that)  
I’d free all my sons, I love em love em baby  
Black diamonds and pearls*

*(Could it be, if you could be mine, we'd both shine)*  
*If I ruled the world*  
*(Still living for today, in these last days and times)*  
 —Nas Featuring Lauryn Hill, “If I Ruled the World”

During my M.E.S. program, I developed a youth mentorship project, entitled, “*If We Ruled the World*,” in partnership with the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU), and Success Beyond Limits Education Program (SBL). My intention was to find new and innovative ways of incorporating youth voice into the Community Planning decision-making process. Created to heal, restore, tear down illusions, and re-imagine a community problematically labeled and deemed “at-risk,” this youth mentorship project was recently featured in the *Toronto Star* (2014), with a captivating headline: “Jane-Finch youth use voices and art to inspire change.”

Leading up to the article—Motivated by Black rage, due to the trauma I had endured as a black body pursuing graduate studies in Community Planning, and inspired by the empowering song “If I Ruled the World,” by Nas featuring Lauryn Hill, I led Black poetry workshop sessions for four consecutive months at Westview Centennial Secondary School— a school located in an area where the high school dropout rate for Black youth has reached upwards of forty percent (Wallace, “The Case for All-Black Schools”). The staggeringly high number of black Canadian students leaving school too early is of grave concern (Wallace, “The Case for All-Black Schools”; Smith ed. 310) for the Black community.

Theorist Carl James (2012) conducts research regarding the theories of race, identity, and education in Canada. His body of work explores the ways in which race and education, intersect and overlap with each other within the context of North America. In *Life at the Intersection: Community, Class, and Schooling*, which is specifically about the Jane-Finch community— A thought- provoking question James poses in his book is: “what accounts for the young [Black

Canadian students] poor schooling and educational participation, their underperformance and disengagement from school?” (27) James discusses the external forces that contribute to black students dropping out of school, proposing that race blind language masks the ways in which anti-black racism works.

According to James (2012), “urban” has become the new code word for racialized or marginalized. Proving less palatable for non-racialized bodies, telling words get discarded and replaced by the new label of “urban,” for a number of reasons – James argues that these terms result in over-generalization that masks injustices against the marginalized and oppressed; ease of cultural appropriation; relieve those who use the term from social and political responsibility and accountability -- none of which are beneficial to the Black community. Using Jane-Finch as a case study or prime example of a racialized and troubled community, James goes on to discuss the stereotypical labeling of the public education centers in Jane-Finch as, “urban schools” (21).

Focusing more on the stereotypes associated with the Jane-Finch community, James analyzes youth violence, examines the presence of police officers within the learning environment, and discusses “fatherless” (through the incarceration or death of the marginalized and oppressed black paternal figure) and “broken homes” as deterrents to black student’s successful completion of school. In support of James’s research, according to the “Relevance and Legacy of Parental Involvement in the Achievement of Black Learners” article by Tracey Thomas, found in the book *Theorizing Africentricity in Action: Who We Are Is What We See* (Eds. Bernard and Brigham 2013), “there are many articles and studies linking parent involvement to student achievement in various ways.” (29) This is also an indication of the negative affect that a lack parental involvement throughout the educational process, can have on students.

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My only concern is that James's concern with parental absence may unintentionally perpetuate some of the same stereotypes he wishes to dismantle and explore, such as the much studied but pathological Black family, which since the era of Edward Franklin Frazier (Frazier 1939) has been blamed for-Black criminality and powerlessness. Such an approach focusing as it does on "fatherlessness" and male "irresponsibility" can end up blaming the victim rather than asking—how black working class parents struggling with low incomes, long working hours, unemployment and state surveillance might find greater social support for their parenting needs and educational desires.

My poetry video featured on Jane-Finch.com entitled, "Open Your Eyes" (2007) aligns with James's argument that- to an extent we are all reflections of where we are from. But my main concern is this: if racism emerges in the ways in which the schools in this community are viewed and looked down upon by society, how do we cope with it and rise above it both personally and as a community, and how do we move beyond the stereotypes of victim and criminal that encircle Black lives? I argue that, "as predestined products of our environments," (Dean, "Open your Eyes") or as individuals who have been socialized in a particular context- we may be able to rise above the negative attributes of our community, but overcoming adversity will not stop outsiders from making assumptions and trying to maintain discriminatory and oppressive views of community members.

Individual success and acts of transcendence will not change the root causes that produce the problem in the classroom itself. To begin to address these root causes we need to be attentive to the actual dynamics of the classroom and the hidden curriculum within it. Michael Apple's (1971) theory of the hidden curriculum is often referred to throughout Dei's work. The hidden curriculum relates to the covert academic and social norms, beliefs, and values that govern a

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school or classroom environment. A tactic of the hidden curriculum is the unspoken negative message conveyed to Black students by the absence of prominent Black figures and their contributions of national merit in standard requisite Canadian and U.S. History textbooks. Whiteness is therefore not just about biology, but includes the culture and history of those “privileged” members of society who fall within the lines of this social construction.

Social construction refers to the ways in which power and privilege are distributed amongst different groupings of people, under such classifications of sex and skin color - determined by society- and then imposed upon individuals. These categories and boundaries cause social separation based on race and gender, and ultimately perpetuate and reinforce negative stereotypes. Furthermore, Euro-centrism, as it relates to the hidden curriculum and Western culture, is education centered on Europe and Europeans. Addressing the hidden curriculum may help us to begin to put in place the strategies that are needed to support Black youth while they are actually in school, such an in-depth analysis is offered by George Dei.

In *Reconstructing 'Drop-Out': A Critical Ethnography of the Dynamics of Black Students' Disengagement from School*, Dei et al. (1997) examines the details of race in the classroom. For Dei, race is a social construct that directly relates to the current dropout rate, within the context of Canadian society. Using the qualitative research method of “Critical Ethnography,” Dei and his team conducted research that consisted of interviews with drop-outs and students deemed “at-risk” through focus groups with Canadian youth from grades ten through twelve. Also they interviewed teachers, school administrators, including principals, vice-principals...guidance counselors, and school psychologists, and parents (37). The main argument that emerges from this work is that Black students are being strategically pushed out of public

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school--where “much of the hidden curriculum is realized through the subtle behaviors and attitudes of teachers and guidance counselors” (231).

As hierarchies prevail in school and differences get silenced and shut out (35), this study shows that “a series of racially charged moments” often led to black youth dis-engagement. I would like to add that Black student dis-engagement also affects those who do choose stay within the system, where a gradual “fading out” often occurs. “*Fading out* in the sense of (marginalized youth) who appear to be in school but who are absent in mind and soul” (Dei 6). *Differential Treatment and Student Resistance*. In this study Black students reported receiving differential treatment within the classroom setting: “the educational experiences of Black drop-outs have been characterized by a series of moments when they were evaluated and treated differentially on the basis of their race” (253).

Lower expectations for black students mean some students will just pass through the system without receiving proper education. “Low expectations...conveyed through the hidden curriculum within school. These expectations translate...into behaviors and attitudes on the part of certain teachers and guidance counselors which relayed messages of inferiority,” (131) white guidance counselors often advise Black students to take courses that lead to general labor jobs, rather than higher education. Black students are being steered away from pursuing higher education and are ultimately being misguided by white school officials. Labeling and racial profiling often leads to Black students internalizing and then acting out the negative stereotypes thrown upon them.

This differential treatment often prompts Black students to resist this covert racism in indirect ways. Students display “oppositional behavior” such as truancy, arguing with teachers. Ultimately this leads to students dropping out as their response to being Black in a predominately

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White school system. In this way, Black student resistance “to the social, cultural, and academic subordination that they, as Black students, face within schools,” can be seen as an innate reaction to an educational scheme which seeks to bury their hopes and dreams, reject and ridicule their realities and needs, devalue their cultural heritage, and stifle their senses of identity (238-9). Assimilation fails at authentic integration, and in the end only promotes conformity and compliance, to the rules and regulations of the system and structure currently set in place.

Zero tolerance helps to push Black students out of school and into the hands of law enforcement. In addition to euro-centrism, loss of cultural and self esteem, a disconnect between home and family cultures, “devaluation of Black culture” the “hidden curriculum,” institutionalized racism, “color-coded” streaming, feelings of subordination and alienation, Black students also drop out of school and dis-engage from pursuing their education because of poverty. With its reputation for perpetuating the “normativity of whiteness and the otherness of color,” (227) euro-centrism is a loaded and controversial term that directly relates to the current state of public education in North America.

In regards to what has seemingly been able to take place behind the scenes, systematic oppression and cultural hegemony have been found embedded in the dirt beneath the surface of the so-called “traditional” education system. Whose tradition are we referring to when we use the term “traditional education”? With curriculum that does not reflect the historical contributions of Black Canadian students, (69) it is not surprising that, according to Dei et al. “Black students identified specifically, and often immediately, that the absence of Black history/Black culture could be a reason for dropping out.” (68) For Dei, Africentricity (or Afro-centrism) is therefore, the counter-hegemonic response to euro-centrism, which devalues and excludes the black experience and places whiteness on a pedestal within the classroom setting.

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*Race and Class*. Racism is one of the main reasons why black students are having trouble within the public education system but racism emerges as a justification for material difference and as an effort of it. “Racial difference” and otherness are thereby motivated by economic factors (Gates, Jr., 80). In “*Colonialism and Racism in Canada: Historical Traces and Contemporary Issues*” (2010), Galabuzi points out that “poor social and economic conditions and inequalities in access and services affect an individual’s or group’s health and well-being” (227). Malcolm X says it best:

They know that as long as they keep us undereducated, or with an inferior education, it’s impossible for us to compete with them for job openings... we’re trapped. We are low-wage earners. We have to live in a run-down neighborhood, which means our children go to inferior schools. They get inferior education. And when they grow up, they fall right into the same cycle again. –*Malcolm X Talks to Young People: Speeches in the United States, Britain, and Africa* (1990)

To further contextualize Malcolm X’s statement, I offer the following statistical information. For Black students, the current concerning high school dropout rate in Toronto is directly linked to the unemployment rate. “Unemployment in Toronto’s Black community is at 20% (two or three times higher than the city average)” (Galabuzi 206). In Canada, racialized jobseekers with varying degrees of education or professional training, have often either had to settle for being underemployed or unemployed (Galubuzi 2005; Lee and Todd 2006). A large majority of those faced with unemployment end up having to turn to the social welfare system, in order to survive.

According to Lee and Todd (2006), this particular form of racial injustice is called “creeping economic apartheid” (Lee and Todd viii). Galabuzi (2005) has broken down “economic apartheid” to mean the premeditated configuration of two separate employment

sectors in Canada. One, which has constricted and forced people of color into specific kinds of jobs, the other being a job market that has sought to exclude them, completely (206).

As Dr. Afua Cooper's poem "Oh Canada II" so eloquently states, Canada's current education system is failing Black students. Black Canadian students are not receiving the proper support needed in order for them to successfully complete high school, let alone university. In fact, they are being strategically and systematically pushed out of the traditional education environment:

Oh Canada II

Canada  
Of genocide you are accused  
why is it your jails are filled with Black men  
why is it your prisons are filled with Native men  
what are your intentions Canada  
that you seek to bound us so

Canada of genocide you are accused  
why is it 60% of Black children will not finish  
high school  
why is it that those who do are streamed into the  
lower levels

Canada  
Of genocide you are accused  
why is it your police officers  
constantly shoot Black youths in the head and back  
why is it your officers constantly rob Black mothers  
of their sons and daughters? (Cooper 85)

The questions Dr. Afua Cooper poses in "Oh Canada II" are not new. Throughout the years, progressive educators and community leaders, dedicated to transforming the educational experience for black students, have been searching for permanent solutions to these pervasive problems.

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*Poetic Resistance as a catalyst for Change: The case of Huey Newton.* Drawing on Dei's work, I propose that it is only through awareness and resistance of the detrimental conditions that plague public schools that social change can begin to take place, within these defunct structures of traditional education. For an example of resistance from within the system I turn to the black historical figure, Mr. Huey P. Newton. In 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale co-founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. In *Revolutionary Suicide*, Huey Newton's personal and political manifesto, he offers insight into the life of a leader seemingly "unafraid of death". The chapter in *Revolutionary Suicide* that relates to the topic of race and education is "High School." In this chapter Newton shares his personal experience as a Black male in the public education system in North America. He talks about the negative interactions he had with the teachers and principal and these white school officials ploy to silence, break, and disempower him within the classroom arena.

In class Newton "was forbidden to ask questions" (6) and recalls the difficulty he faced with trying to learn in such a hostile environment. Newton eventually drops out of High School, unable to thrive in a racist classroom setting. After getting into trouble with the law as a result of peer pressure Newton would return to school in pursuit of obtaining his High School diploma. During his years of struggle with white High School teachers and the police, Newton credits Black poetry for helping him cope with the societal pressures that sought to overwhelm him. Significantly for this study, Newton mentions that his ability to recite memorized poems in public, helped to empower him, shift power dynamics in his favor in various social situations, and boost his confidence and self-esteem. He was extremely proud of his poetic skills and abilities, and realized his ability to mobilize Black people in his community through his gift of spoken word.

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Recognizing the importance of education, Newton stayed in school but resisted and rebelled against the white teachers and other persons of authority. His argument being that only through resistance of institutionalized racism and oppression can Black students thrive and maintain high levels of self-esteem, within a system that seeks to dismantle and destroy anything or anyone that is seen as different or “other”. As I reflect on Newton’s story, I begin to see how High School became the space where Newton learned how to resist hegemony. The classroom became the training ground for Newton’s Black revolutionary worldview and political stance. It was in this space that Newton developed survival strategies that would later come in handy in the political arena. Poetry was one of those survival tools. The process of learned resistance begins with self-awareness and is realized through resilience and commitment to improving your own quality of life, even in the face of opposition. Poetry nurtured his heightened self-awareness and his mastery of the performance of poems enabled him to develop a sense of identity and possibility. Black students today could learn a lot from Huey P. Newton, about how to resist oppression from within the public education system.

*Afrocentric Schools: Militant Black Teachers.* I argue that culturally conscious Black teachers are needed to help Black students succeed, Black education administrators are essential to transforming the current public education system, and Black guidance counselors can help guide Black Canadian students toward realizing their full potential. Representation also plays a crucial role in regards to Black students learning to strive for attainable goals that they can see- with Black bodies in position of leadership and authority. On the contrary, a glaring absence of Black teachers, and administrators in the public school system strongly adheres to the hidden curriculum. I propose that racism persists in public education because racists are being hired and placed in positions of power. Racism is an ordinary outcome of Eurocentric discourse and

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material inequity. In *Racism and Education: Different Perspectives and Experiences* by the Canadian Teachers' Federation, a white teacher had this to say about how systemic racism is learned:

I am a product, as the majority of teachers in Ontario are, of a White middle-class family; White middle-class neighborhoods; a White middle-class education and a White middle-class profession, so how could I not be racist? Everything I learned, saw, heard, and absorbed taught me racism. I am learning not to be racist, and it will take me the rest of my life. (15)

As the quote above so violently spells out and brings to the forefront of the discussion on race and education, a predominant percentage of Canadian educators come from culturally insensitive white “middle-class” homes and upbringings; whereas, a disproportionate number of Black Canadian students come from lower income and marginalized communities. White teachers are culturally disadvantaged in the way of a sheltered and narrow perspective, where white is the norm because that is all they were taught to know. Direct or indirect cultural insensitivity negatively impacts the lives of black students, who seek support, encouragement, and stability within the educational environment, yet are often faced with the opposite.

The bottom line is that most white teachers will not be able to reach or get through to Black students. This is because they fail to see what Black students see from their own social location. When an institution fails to realize that Black students are “at risk”, not because of external forces but because of the racism and inequality within the confines of the institution, the black students experiencing turmoil usually end up slipping through the cracks. Hostile learning environments disempower students, and negatively impact the learning experience. Culturally hostile (work and classroom) environments which make students continually aware of their subordinate difference or their exceptionality discourages students from excelling, cause

distractions and damage to learners and workers, and are exclusionary and isolating for Black bodies.

The scholars I have discussed all agree that the current public school curriculum and learning environment is not helping Black students to do well in school. Research shows that under this current system, Black students have little to no chance. That being said, it is crucial for Black youth to be encouraged to think about the world around them not as something they have no power in changing, but on the contrary, a place that is theirs to form. No one is exempt from the confines of social construction. Learning more about *self* and *society* is the only way to start tackling some of the issues that individuals face on a daily basis. Education must help build self-awareness in addition to social structural analysis regarding the forces that shape individuals. Education based on critical pedagogy can help us to do this.

#### CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: THEORY

In this section I will examine Critical Pedagogy as a key theoretical term, within the context of community development and transformative education. Guiding questions that I have formulated for this section are: What is Critical Pedagogy? What are some of the ways that Critical Pedagogy manifests and re-invents itself? Why is Critical Pedagogy important? And who is Critical Pedagogy for?

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) Paulo Freire provides us with essential strategies for creating a more democratic society. Based on his pedagogical work in the Global South- combating illiteracy through Adult Education in Brazil- Freire theorizes and critically examines the complexities of class, the relationship between “the colonizer and the colonized,” and the power dynamics at play within environments of teaching and learning. In addition to outlining key strategies for liberation, Freire equips us with the “language” needed to decipher the codes

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and schemes of the dominant culture. By analyzing oppression and the motives of who Freire refers to as the “oppressor elites,” Freire maps out a clear process of liberation for the oppressed and marginalized of the world. In this book, Freire offers “problem-posing” education-where learners are encouraged to critically question the ways of the world in order to change it- as an alternative and in response to the “banking” model of education, which Freire identifies and critiques as an oppressive teaching tactic that promotes conformity and assimilation.

Two fundamental principles of Freire’s concept of transformative education are dialogue and a genuine love for the people. The dichotomy of theories that emerges from Freire’s work, “Antidialogical [Action] and “Dialogical Action,” (138) contextualize the urgent need for Freire’s concept of education, not just in the south but worldwide. According to Freire the principles of “Antidialogical Action” are-- “Conquest,” (138) “Divide and Rule,” (141) “Manipulation,”(147) and “Cultural Invasion,” (152) whereas the principles of “Dialogical Action” are-- “Cooperation,” (167) “Unity for Liberation,” (172) “Organization,”(175) and “Cultural Synthesis” (179). I will now examine and compare the aforementioned principles of “Antidialogical Action” and “Dialogical Action,” as they relate and contrast.

*Conquest vs. Cooperation.* “Conquest,” when the oppressors present the material world as a static, problem-free, and unchangeable reality- the oppressed and marginalized are often left feeling hopeless, alienated, powerless, and twice defeated (138-41) –the catastrophic end result is mass assimilation and national passivity. “Cooperation,” on the other hand, occurs when a community, nation, or group of people is/are able to mobilize in order to transform their present day reality (167-72) - by standing in solidarity against oppressive regimes, and working together to address and critically analyze the pressing problems of the world.

*Divide and Rule vs. Unity for Liberation.* “Divide and Rule,” in order for the minority group (the oppressors) to stay in power, they must promote and instigate disharmony and disorganization amongst the majority group (the oppressed). Two ways in which the oppressors accomplish their plan, are by sparking internal conflicts, and by tokenizing members of a community (141-47).

“Unity for Liberation,” a difficult task! As the oppressors seek to keep the oppressed disorganized and in disaccord with one another, revolutionary community leaders must work just as tirelessly to restore peace and harmony within the community. Here Freire asserts “cultural action” as the unifying strategy for liberation (172-75).

*Manipulation vs. Organization.* “Manipulation,” In order for the oppressors to maintain power and control over the oppressed- the oppressors must strategically steer the unsuspecting majority like cattle into the direction they wish for them to go (147-52). “Organization,” is an emancipatory learning process that builds upon the foundation of “Unity for Liberation.”

Community leaders must work in collaboration with the people to build a militant and unified body that fights oppression and thrives instinctively on the premise of freedom (175-79).

*Cultural Invasion vs. Cultural Synthesis.* “Cultural Invasion,” the final principle of “Antidialogical Action,” correlates with hegemony to create superiorities and inferiorities, by positioning the oppressor’s culture over all others. The less educated the marginalized are during the cultural invasion saturation the easier and quicker it will be for the oppressors to complete the cultural transition. Freire states: “all domination involves invasion—at times physical and overt, at times camouflaged with the invader assuming the role of a helping friend” (152-53). “Cultural Synthesis,” for the final principle of “Dialogical Action,” Freire focuses again on what he calls “cultural action,” - where the oppressed and marginalized become fully integrated members of

the cultural mosaic and cultural producers, who actively contribute to the naming and shaping of our world (179-83) through praxis.

Based on Freire's approach, I firmly believe that successful social change will result in the oppressed regaining power and control over self and surroundings, and the oppressor elite readjusting to this shift of power and treating the once enslaved, as equals (Freire 2000; Incite! 2007; Shragge 1997). Freire's 'bottom up' approach, as opposed to a hierarchal top down approach, empowers community members by meeting people where they are, and allows for successful community development.

According to Antonia Darder (2002) in her book *Reinventing Paulo Freire: a Pedagogy of Love*, Freire's work teaches us that education is integral to the success of a community (157). Darder then goes on to urge us to make the connection between "school" and "society" (158), so that we will avoid making the mistake of isolating the traditional learning experience from our personal "lived" experience. Freire championed integration. In "Freire's Education for Development: Past and Present" by Moacir Gadotti and Carlos Alberto Torres, featured in *First Freire: Early Writings in Social Justice Education*, it is argued that Freire's approach in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* can be applied and utilized when looking at the relationship between race and education (10). African-American author Bell Hooks has even gone so far as to say that she "felt [herself] included" (Hooks 150) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire. Nevertheless Freire himself did not make race or its social construction central to his analysis. While his ideas are significant they do not tackle the specifics of race or gender, which are subsumed under a theory of marginalization and class oppression.

Bell Hooks (1994) builds upon the work of Paulo Freire in her book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* and attends to questions of race in ways that

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offer “insights, strategies, and critical reflections on the pedagogical practice” (10). One of her key contributions to the development of critical pedagogy and transformative education is the feminist antiracist lens in which she views and critiques Paulo Freire’s work through. Learning from Freire’s transformational teaching work with peasants in Brazil, and bringing his critique of class into the classroom, Hooks adds the element of “excitement” from the African-American tradition to the core elements of critical pedagogy.

She then introduces us to “engaged pedagogy,” which she asserts as a teaching strategy focused on the “well-being” of students, (13) and the fostering of well-balanced and healthy classroom environments through improved teacher-student dynamics. Similar to Paulo Freire, the key principles that govern Bell Hooks’s teaching practice are dialogue, solidarity, and community building. Language is also a guiding light to her educational process of liberation. In addition to mastering the language of the oppressors in order to decipher their codes and agendas, Hooks highlights Black English vernacular as a communicative community-building apparatus.

In chapter eleven entitled “Language: Teaching New Worlds/New Words,” Hooks expands on the work of Freire by paying particularly attention to the black experience. Here she uses Adrienne Rich’s poem “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” (167) to help illustrate the importance of language to the struggle against racism and classism: “*This is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you.*” From this line of Rich’s poem, Hooks explores the relationship between Standard English and Black English vernacular. She historicizes and unpacks language in relation to the lives of the oppressed and marginalized. Proposing that, for oppressed bodies, mastery of language is linked to physical liberation.

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In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Hooks asserts language as a “potential site of resistance,” (170) and positions learning as “a place where paradise can be created” (207). Words are powerful. Acquiring the ability to eloquently articulate one’s own lived experience is emancipatory, therapeutic, and redemptive. In this reading, Hooks helps us to realize the importance of active listening, stimulating conversation within the classroom setting, and relationship building between teacher and student. Dedicated to youth empowerment, I, myself, wage a struggle for social justice through my poetry teaching practice. A prime example was the special moment along my journey when I was invited back to where it all really began... my alma mater, Brookview Middle School (located at Jane and Driftwood); where the motto is, “The Dream Starts Here”. I volunteered there by going into the classroom to share my life story with the youth of my community. We shared stories with each other, through poems, and by their invitation I returned to support and perform at their youth-led talent showcase.

According to Leistyna, Woodrum, and Sherblom. eds., (1995) in the book *Breaking Free: The Transformative Power of Critical Pedagogy*, at its core, Critical Pedagogy seeks to empower students by helping to guide teachers through the process of becoming better educational leaders (3). Through in-depth analysis of the ideology of “hidden curriculum” (Apple 1971) that governs the current structure of traditional education, Critical Pedagogy seeks to democratize the classroom environment. And as controversial as it may be, beyond the standard static and historically systematic approach to learning and teaching, research shows that Critical Pedagogy is both a “political and cultural production” (Trend 1992: vii).

According to Darder, Baltodano, and Torres, eds., (2008) in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, the first documented use of the specific term “Critical Pedagogy” is credited to Henry

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Giroux in his *Theory and Resistance in Education* textbook, which was published in 1983 (2).

One critical pedagogical problem: One identified problem with critical pedagogy is its theoretical inaccessibility to the oppressed and marginalized bodies that it was geared toward liberating from the onset of its conceptualization (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres, eds. 2008: 15). This is what I will now address.

#### CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: TECHNIQUES

Critical Pedagogy is an umbrella term. Critical pedagogues (Brown and Kwayke 2012; Giroux 1993; Goodson & Gill 2011; Herndon and Weiss 2001; Hooks 1994; Irvine 2003; San Vicente, ed. 2014; Trend 1992) have identified and/or implemented one or more of the following critical pedagogies:

*Narrative Pedagogy* (Goodson & Gill 2011) as it relates to auto-ethnography and the power and value of life experience; *Hip Hop and Spoken Word Pedagogy* (Brown and Kwayke 2012; Herndon and Weiss 2001; San Vicente, ed. 2014), education through elements of Hip Hop culture, such as DJ-ing and emceeing. In *Brave New Voices: The Youth Speaks Guide to teaching Spoken Word Poetry Pedagogy* (2011), Herndon and Weiss define Hip Hop and Spoken Word Pedagogy as an educational process of writing and performing that helps young people to find their own voice.

According to Herndon and Weiss, Hip Hop and Spoken Word Pedagogy relates to popular culture, self-expression, valuing both the written and the spoken word (balance of writing and performing), and Spoken Word in relation to traditional poetic forms, literary tools, and themes. Hip Hop and Spoken Word Pedagogy is often implemented in a classroom setting, in order to create a community of trust where youth can build their confidence and self-esteem, and feel safe enough to share their creative writing with their classmates.

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*Engaged Pedagogy* (Hooks 1994-2010) conducive to student-teacher research and learning collaborations within the classroom environment; *Humanizing Pedagogy* (Leistyna, Woodrum, Sherblom, eds.1996), which calls for a “cultural democracy.” (249) According to the *Critical Pedagogy Reader* in an essay entitled “Beyond the Methods Fetish: Toward A Humanizing Pedagogy” by Lilia I. Bartolome, *Humanizing Pedagogy* relates to teaching approaches that connect to the various cultures represented within the North American classroom setting. Addressing the differences within a classroom and critically analyzing the “one size fits all” method of teaching, Bartolome highlights Donaldo Macedo’s “anti-method pedagogy” (341) as a counteraction to the traditional educational model.

In “Beyond the Methods Fetish: Toward A Humanizing Pedagogy” Bartolome offers two teaching approaches-- that value home language and life experience of students as opposed to silencing student voice. The two teaching approaches, which can be identified by their emphasis on the importance of the teacher-student relationship, are: “culturally responsive education,” and “strategic teaching”. In regards to these two approaches, “students can become active subjects in their own learning, instead of passive objects waiting to be filled with facts and figures by the teacher” (346). Returning to Freire’s ideological perspective that dialogue should not be reduced to mere teaching methods, the concept of humanizing pedagogy confronts the oppressive and dehumanizing nature of instruction offered to linguistic minority students (351) and disrupts the systems in place through deconstructing the power dynamics at play within the traditional classroom setting; *Cultural Pedagogy* (Trend 1992) regarding politics, art, and education.

According to Giroux (1993) *Representational Pedagogy* should also be added to this list, as a critical pedagogy that addresses “cultural racism” (122). The best educators know how to bring out and uproot the personal experiences of their students in creative ways. Narrative rap,

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story-telling, free-styling (a lyrical improvisation technique), spoken word and dub poetry—all work to disrupt the dominant discourse regarding race and class, and offer linguistic liberation to the marginalized and often silenced members of society.

#### A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON BLACK REVOLUTIONARY THOUGHT AND THEORY

As there are differences in the way black thinkers approach the question of race, in this section I will explore Black Revolutionary Thought-- as an anti-racist critique of the dominant discourse regarding critical thinking and critical pedagogy. I will begin by critically analyzing my connection to a culturally relevant film. Not too long ago, I watched a film entitled “Anne B. Real” (2003), directed by Lisa France, about a young Latina writer/rapper growing up in the inner city. The film follows her journey as she tries to safely navigate school, the streets, and a fatherless home. This story hit home for me because it reminded me of how I grew up- a young person with a lot of potential seemingly trapped in a bad environment. When I was a teenager, reading books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, or *Assata: An Autobiography* provided me with a much needed escape route and kept me safe and out of trouble. Throughout the film Anne is seen reading a book, entitled the *Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) by Anne Frank. For me the integration of excerpts from this book spoke to the power of storytelling and how sharing your own personal experiences can motivate others to overcome obstacles and fulfill their own dreams.

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964) is another book that enables this. It begins with a detailed and graphic account of racism at its most vile—a description of a life-altering incident between the Ku Klux Klan, (a white supremacist group that seeks to silence the Black voice,) and Malcolm X’s parents, that ended in X’s father being assassinated by members of the KKK. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is about Black identity politics, self-consciousness, self-worth

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vs. self-hate, liberation vs. integration, white-black relationships, survival, and mental health in the black community. As a champion for Pan-African unity Malcolm X's key principles outlined in his autobiography are: truth, self-defense/ violence, equal rights, and justice. Through a critical self-reflexive lens, X compares himself to who he calls the "non-violent" Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., while referring to his self as the "so called violent" Malcolm X. Similar to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., X also had a dream. Fueled by the memory of his father's untimely passing, Malcolm X's dream and also life's work was to disrupt the "smugness," "arrogance," and "complacency of whiteness," (434) in order to dismantle and shatter the existing power structures and empower members of the Black community- to create a more equitable society.

Whereas, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is about the Black man's struggle, *Assata: An Autobiography* (2001) by Assata Shakur is about the "impact of racism" on a black female member of Black Liberation Army (BLA) and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Another Pan-African thinker, Assata Shakur unapologetically states: "we must gain our liberation by any means necessary" (49). This in-depth autobiography about growing up Black in America goes hand in hand with the principles of equal rights and justice found in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. For Shakur: "the revolutionary struggle of Black people had to be against racism, capitalism, imperialism, and sexism and for real freedom under a socialist government" (197).

In her autobiography, Assata Shakur recounts a statement she made that attempted to tear down and destroy all of the negative stereotypes and labels that whites had assigned to members of Black community—Such as, the negative depictions of Blacks as murderers and thieves in the media. In Shakur's statement she argues that whites are in fact the real murderers and thieves, and presents supporting evidence to support her argument. This statement forces us to recall the politically motivated incarceration of black women such as Angela Davis, and the assassinations

of Black men and children (166-71) such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Emmett Till.

Shakur then speaks out about the millions of black bodies stolen from Africa and forced into slavery. In this autobiography, Shakur captures the lived experiences of those on the frontlines, and through her poetry she speaks to some of those militant members of the black community, saying: “*They think they killed you/ but I saw you yesterday/ standing with your hands in your pockets/ waiting for the real deal to go down/ I saw you smiling your “fuck it: smile blood in your eyes/ your heart pumping freedom/ young blood...”*” (164). Assata Shakur does not conclude her autobiography with a call to universal love across color lines. Instead, Shakur argues that: “to become free [one has] to be acutely aware of being a slave” (262). A clear connection can be drawn here between Shakur’s argument and the lyrics to “Redemption Song,” (1980) where Bob Marley sings: “*Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our minds...*” Along the same vein, political activist Angela Davis (2012) can be seen standing in solidarity with Shakur, when she writes: “the struggle for freedom continues” (20), in her book *The Meaning of Freedom: And Other Difficult Dialogues*.

Similar to Assata Shakur and Angela Davis, critical Black feminist-theorist Bell Hooks, is also a revolutionary female soldier on the frontlines of the struggle for Black liberation. In her book *Killing Rage* (1996), Hooks tackles racism from a feminist perspective, in attempts, she states, to create “a politics of solidarity,” amongst Black women. The conversation of race in the larger political arena is a male dominated discourse between the white male and the Black male. The Black female voice is often silenced or just not heard in the public sphere on the topic of race. Sexism and feminism are often seen as distractions from the main conversation regarding race relations. Black women who try to incorporate these factors into the larger conversation

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about race are often perceived to be in competition or conflict against not only the white male but also the Black male.

Concerned with race, class, and gender--Hooks offers this collection of essays as a voice for the often-silenced black woman. Early on in the text, Hooks' writes: "I am writing this essay sitting beside an anonymous white male that I long to murder." *Killing Rage* critically examines race as it relates to white supremacy, and "systems of domination." Hooks argues that it is the very act of breaking away from "whiteness," that forces us to remember our history and provides us with the opportunity to re-imagine the Black experience. Thus the overarching theme of *Killing Rage* is a form of "militant resistance" to white supremacy and cultural hegemony. The key principles of *Killing Rage* are self-determination, Black beauty, Black power, identity, integrity, accountability, and responsibility.

According to Hooks: "we [CAN] resist racism and in the act of resistance recover ourselves and be renewed." (7) *Killing Rage* moves from the intent to kill to self-healing through the process of critical race writing. Hooks concludes *Killing Rage* on an optimistic note, with a chapter entitled "Beloved Community: A World with Racism." In this chapter Hooks reflects upon the contributions and sacrifices made by both Blacks and whites against white supremacy, and calls for "solidarity across racial differences." It is here that Hooks suggests that the way forward is through building "anti-racist [pro-peace] communities of resistance" (272). Through critical race writing, Hooks exemplifies "revolutionary hope" by successfully transferring her emotions unto the page, so as to set herself free from the Black rage she holds within.

In *Race Matters* (1994) Marxist influenced philosopher Cornel West argues that race is the "catalyst, but not the cause" of economic disenfranchisement and decline—the ultimate deterioration of the Black community. In this regard, West states: "the major enemy of black

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survival ... is loss of hope and absence of meaning” (23). West then goes on to discuss “historic inequalities” such as poverty, slavery, discrimination, institutionalized racism, and unemployment as major contributors to overall sentiments of self-loathing, worthlessness, and “nihilism” within the Black community. Moving from resentment to love, like Bell Hooks in *Killing Rage*, West talks of Black rage—and also highlights Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*. West urges us to combat this persistent negativity and “white racist legacy of the modern western world” (98) with meaning making, community empowerment, and the continual building up of our cultural identity. According to West, Afro-centrism is our responsibility. As seen with the Black middle class and “affirmative action” we must work tirelessly to make lasting changes in our community, so as to set a solid foundation for the next generation. According to West, we each need to dedicate ourselves to making a change in our own lives thereby making the world a better place over all. The way forward is through self-love and love for all people. For me this means finding the right balance between (Black) pride and humility.

I conclude this section on Black Revolutionary Thought with an analysis of the work of Jamaican political theorist Anthony Bogues. I want to point out the importance of closing this section with Bogues, after looking at the varying ways in which African-American thinkers approach the question of race. I want to argue that critical race theory in America often excludes the work of Black theorists located outside of the United States. There are many sides to the Black experience, and Bogues urges us not to “pigeonhole” critical Black thought. As said in a TEDTalk, entitled, “The Danger of a Single Story” (2009) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “Africa is a Continent not a Country.” In fact, according to Bogues, the Black experience: 1) is a human experience; 2) is bigger than what has taken place in the West; and 3) transcends the North American ghetto.

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Martinique-born philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (2008) further explains the processes of isolation and self-alienation in his seminal work, *White Skin, Black Masks*. Fanon easily identifies these processes, which include the stripping away of identity and language, as ploys of the oppressor. Psychological tactics used to divide and conquer. Building upon the work of Fanon-- in "Race, The Floating Signifier" (1997), directed by Sut Jhally, Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall examines and offers an in-depth analysis of race as a "discursive construct," merely an illusionary image, like that which can be seen through a distorted mirror in a fun house at an amusement park. According to Hall, the ever-evolving nature of race is often held in place by dogmatic and outdated worldviews, thoughts, and language/ linguistic sensibilities. As Fanon and Hall outline and examine historical racial pitfalls, Bogues compiles counter hegemonic examples of how to overcome these racial woes and break free from colonial confines that seek to keep us mentally enslaved.

In *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (2003) a collection of essays on critical race theory, by Bogues. The author contextualizes and historicizes Black political thought. From black praxis to 'redemptive poetics' Bogues constructs the epistemological lens from which to examine black revolutionary thought. As stated by Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets* arose from conversations he had with a group of young Jamaican men during night classes he taught on Black History. Integral to the development of the book were the opinions of these young Black men-- inspired by "the key political ideas of Walter Rodney," (ix) author of: *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, (1972) and *the groundings with my brothers* (1969). The guiding themes of *Black Heretics, Black Prophets* are liberty, equality, and "human equity," (123) which relates to looking past a person's physical attributes (example: skin color) to see them for who they really are (example: personality).

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There are two streams of Black radical thought identified in *Black Heretics, Black Prophets*. They are: “Heretics and Prophets.” The book is therefore divided into two sections: Section 1) “the heretic” which features critiques on *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution (1938)* by C. L. R. James, “the political thought of Quobna Cugoana,” the socio-political ideologies and principles of W. E. B. Du Bois (double consciousness), Julius Nyerere (decolonization), and Walter Rodney (revolution), and “the radical praxis of Ida B. Wells-Barnett”. Section 2) “the prophetic/redemptive” featuring critiques of Rastafari and “The redemptive poetics of Bob Marley.”

In an attempt to cover all of the bases of critical race theory, In *Black Heretics, Black Prophets*, Bogue lists all that is involved with the inner-workings of revolutionary Black political thought. “Prophets, heretics, history, politics, revolution radical political thought, freedom, redemptive utopias, equality, symbolic life, counter world orders—all these swirl and collide within the black radical intellectual tradition” (207). Bogue concludes *Black Heretics, Black Prophets* with a chant for human freedom. He states: “resistance must now turn to rebellion and freedom” (205). Interestingly enough, all of the critical Race theorists in this section attest to self-love, as the way forward.

In this section I have outlined both the stumbling blocks and catalysts of Black survival. The deterrents being: unresolved trauma, disorganization, hopelessness, colonization, institutionalized racism, purposelessness, self-alienation, un-channeled Black rage, double consciousness-or seeing ourselves through the eyes of the oppressor, an inferiority complex and self-hate. Principles of Black survival: decolonization of the mind-body-soul, revolution, rebellion, Pan-African unity, truth-telling, recognition of the multidimensionality of the Black experience, resistance, self-love (individual and community), Africentricity is our responsibility,

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self-respect, integrity, justice, equality, reclamation of language-identity-values-experiences-self, constructively channeling black rage through writing and chanting. Moving forward, the main ideas and philosophical principles I have gathered from this critical reflection on Black revolutionary thought will only prove useful for my work on liberation through Black poetics.

#### CRITICAL BLACK POETRY PEDAGOGY

In this section I will clearly define my own approach to learning and teaching, and introduce what I call Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy, in order to substantiate my main point that Black poetry is indeed, transformative. Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy is a strategy for liberation, intended to assist black bodies in the successful navigation of racist workspaces and hostile/learning environments. I want to argue that the current education system lacks essential support for Black bodies dealing with institutionalized racism and trauma, and that Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy can help to re-imagine the Black experience in these racist and culturally insensitive spaces.

I argue that Black poetry can connect Black students to their culture, lineage, history, and language thus helping them to formulate their own ideas and identity within the fabric of North America's cultural mosaic. Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy is, as Freire says, a "Cultural Action" strategy, influenced by African-American performance poetry, and Jamaican poetry. In regards to Jamaican poetry in particular, rhythm and the texture of language often play important roles. Poetry can take the reader on fun and complex journeys of meaning making through interpretation, not quite unlike the task of deciphering riddles, codes, and parables. For example, in "Dutty Tough" featured in *Jamaica Labrish (1966)* Jamaican language and cultural icon, the Honorable Louise Bennett writes:

*Sun a –shine but tings noh bright,*

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*Doah pot-a-bwile, bickle noh nuff,  
River flood but water scarce yaw,  
Rain a-fall but dutty tuff! (159)*

As shown in the excerpt of Bennett's poem, Black poetry can be a way of eloquently expressing longsuffering, hardship, and trauma, and subsequently provides a safe space for personal narrative sharing- a structure steeped in rhythm and orature. My principles for Black poetry are therefore: Lyrical content, musicality, resilience, precision, passion, altruism, community visioning, militancy, unity, consciousness-raising, truth telling, and love.

Black poetry connects with the fast pace of youth culture today, on a deeper level than let's say' an essay or lecture would- because it is easier to remember and recite an entire poem than it is to memorize the words of a lecture or speech. Black poetry is truth telling in rhythm or spoken musicality, where rhythm, like the steadiness of a human heartbeat, is a way to structure time. "The heart beats once. No rhythm. It beats again, and there is rhythm." (Randall 46) Black poetry has a spirit, and that spirit incites action. For as previously mentioned in the section on Black Panther Party for Self-Defense co-founder Huey Newton, once those politically charged poem lyrics resonate within the mind, some sort of movement is sure to follow.

*Black Arts- the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept"*

–Larry Neal

The Black Arts movement of the mid-1960s to mid-1970s was an epochal moment in time for Black America. Black Art had been employed as a powerful strategy for liberation and social change. The tide was turning... Black literary leaders were taking a collective stance against racism and were waking up and actively resisting cultural "hegemony- the process of getting people to unwittingly consent to their own oppression" (Reed 42). The pen became the

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weapon of choice for many human rights activists, and the Black voice bellowed to be respected and heard. Amongst those at the helm of the movement were, the women.

The Black Arts movement poets addressed “issues of racial identity, cultural identity/acclulturation, (sex), social class, language, and worldview” (Greene and Jackson. eds., 3). An integral part of the father of the Black Arts Movement Amiri Baraka’s vision was “an art that was Mass oriented, that could move easily in and be claimed by the Black Community as part of a Cultural Revolution” (Baraka and Neal, eds. xvii–xix). Militant art...

*“I am a 25 years old  
black female poet  
wrote a poem asking  
nigger can you kill  
if they kill me  
it won’t stop the revolution...”* (Giovanni 319)

Black women were frontline soldiers. “The words of (these) women cleaved art and activism, creating dangerous binaries and new possibilities” (Clarke 1). These women were not afraid to write themselves into existence. For after all, “in the case of Black Americans, many sites in white and Black America were very much teaching messages of Black intellectual and cultural inferiority at the moment Black power arose” (Reed 42). The Black Arts Movement changed Black poetry (Reed 42) and Black poetry changed Black lives. “Black women were key poets, theorists, and revolutionists during the era of the new black consciousness movement of the late twentieth century”(Clarke 1). The Black Arts movement sister poets included Carolyn Rodgers, Sonia Sanchez, Naomi Madgett, Nikki Giovanni, and June Jordan.

It is thereby only fitting that today, *June Jordan’s Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint* (1995) edited by Lauren Muller and the Blueprint Collective comes as a how-to manual offering all things poetic. Focused on professional poetic development and community

building, Poetry for the People offers strategies on how to make the move from spectator to poet, and from poet to pedagogue. Curriculum development, fundraising tactics, and marketing and promotion plans are also featured in this text. Above all else, best practices for working with youth to help them find their own unique voice, is one of the most important learning's from this manual. For after all it was June Jordan who wrote *Poem about My Rights (1980)*, which contains the following sentiments:

*...let this be unmistakable this poem  
Is not consent I do not consent...  
I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name  
My name is my own my own my own  
and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this  
but I can tell you that from now on my residence  
my simple and daily and nightly self-determination  
may very well cost you your life. (Jordan 86)*

Through this poetic declaration the poet forcefully reclaims her name and identity. Furthermore, principles of restoration and self-determination are exactly what she passed on to the youth in her poetry workshops, which according to *June Jordan's Poetry for the People: The Revolutionary Blueprint*, Jordan's "class of sixty students [met] once a week for three hours" (13). Beginning each section with an open mic segment, Jordan created space for youth to gain the confidence to share their written poems with their peers. Not limited to just the black experience in America, Jordan's poetry workshops critically analyzed "American poetry including African-American, Asian American, Chicano/a, Irish, Native American, Women's poetry, and 'white' poetry— poetry written by white men." (13) One of the key principles of June Jordan's critical poetry pedagogy is truth telling. Additionally, Jordan highlights the importance of trust building within the poetry workshop.

Because her workshops were multicultural it was imperative for her to create an environment where, according to Jordan “[participants] can expose volatile issues without attacking one another, and can sustain responsibility rather than denial.” (53) In a section entitled “Modelling Poetic Form,” (111) Jordan argues that using poetic forms can help poets organize their thoughts into powerful and profound poems. The poetic forms that Jordan highlights in *Poetry for the People* are rap (115); the Sonnet (I.e. Shakespearian, irregular), in which she offers her poem “Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Miracle Wheatley,” as an example of a poem written in irregular Sonnet form:

*Chosen by whimsy but born to surprise  
They taught you to read but you learned how to write  
Begging the universe into your eyes:  
They dressed you in light but you dreamed with the night.  
From Africa singing of justice and grace  
your early verse sweetens the fame of our Race. (112)*

The third poetic form she highlights is the Blues, which can be identified by its use of “repetition/ call and response” (113). A good example of a Blues stanza is by none other than Langston Hughes, in his poem “The Weary Blues”:

*“Ain’t got nobody in all this world,  
Ain’t got nobody but ma self.  
I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’  
And put ma troubles on the shelf.” (Hughes 33)*

While June Jordan’s book is about poetry writing, it is not explicitly about black poetry writing, for specificity we turn to *A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing (1975)*. Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy works to foster cultural pride. In *A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing*, Gwendolyn Brooks pinpoints and highlights African-American poetry as the literary strategy we should work with in order to achieve true emancipation and liberation for Black bodies, worldwide. According to Brooks, African-American poetry embodies and upholds “black

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identity, black solidarity, black self-possession ... self-address,” and Black history (3). Providing us with eight guiding principles of African-American poetry writing, Brooks begins “A few Hints toward the Making of Poetry,” featured in *A Capsule Course of Black Poetry Writing*, with the effective use of Language. She adds emphasis to her main point about the importance of language, by stating that every word counts.

Brooks speaks of the importance of musicality and rhythm in Black literature. She highlights the anthology *Black Fire* (1968) by Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) as the work of black poetics that incited a National outcry of “reverse racism” from whites, who felt targeted by the Black poetic work. I would like to argue here that there is no such thing as “reverse racism”. Racism directly relates to oppression and power. Severing ties with the dominant culture, Black poetry became autonomous, and those who wrote it were able to move a little bit closer to the freedom they sought. Black poets wrote to enrich lives, teach, and build.

Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy combats systematic racism and oppression that youth often face in traditional education spaces. My focus is on teaching Black youth how to express themselves most effectively and eloquently. “Speech is the effective form of a culture... Communication is only important because it is the broadest root of education. And all cultures communicate exactly what they have, a powerful motley of experience” (Baraka 34). When working with youth, I encourage them to research the knowledge that I share with them on their own, because it is imperative for them to gain their own understanding of the world around them.

#### CONCLUSION

Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, and then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we give name to other nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. – Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

In this essay I have argued that the current public education system is failing Black students. I have: 1) outlined the ways in which this has been taking place; 2) researched the work of relevant scholars on the topic of race and education; and 3) provided strategies for success and potential solutions to the current problem. My teaching practice, steeped in orature, is guided by my passion for providing culturally relevant education for Black Canadian students.

I am disheartened by the current state of the public education system in Toronto and things such as the “hidden curriculum” and institutionalized racism. But I am both hopeful and confident that through Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy, black students will be able to receive the first-class education they need to become leaders of their communities and the world. Art can be used to develop critical ideas. “Culturally relevant curriculum and culturally diverse arts expressions and institutions are vital to creating a new society that values diverse epistemologies and experiences” (Shimshon-Santo 8). Critical and transformational pedagogies differ from traditional modes of education, in that they equip learners with the necessary tools to become independent thinkers who are then able to positively contribute to the development of their own communities. Transformative learning changes lives by encouraging learners to reflect upon the conditions that affect their world. Thus empowering them to make conscious decisions regarding how they choose to react and respond to the dominant discourse that often acts to oppress and traumatize Black bodies.

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## Appendix



RON BULL/TORONTO STAR

Melissa Dean, 21, grew up at the corner of Jane St. and Finch Ave. W. Her video of "spoken lyrics" is posted on the Jane-Finch.com website.

# Empowerment at heart of poet's positive message

The M.A.D. Poet, a.k.a. Melissa Dean, hopes her optimistic lyrics will help to filter out the pervasive negativity associated with the Jane-Finch area

*"So as a pre-destined product of my environment/I take off these labels/and throw off my towel/no more violence/put down these guns and get empowered by the higher power."* Excerpt from *Open Your Eyes* by the M.A.D. Poet.

**BETSY POWELL**  
STAFF REPORTER

Negative images about Jane and Finch, reinforced by this month's gang raid by Toronto police, may endure, but the M.A.D. Poet (a.k.a. Melissa Dean) hopes her powerful spoken-word video — and voice — and all the other "hidden talent" in the area can help filter out those frustratingly pervasive impressions.

Her video, *Open Your Eyes*, was shot just last week and posted on the Jane-Finch.com website the same day police were conducting pre-dawn raids in the area, arresting dozens of young men and women purported to be members and associates of the Driftwood Crips.

It was fortuitous timing and depressing for the engaging young

artist who grew up living in the Palisades apartment complex, at the corner of Jane and Finch, and recently finished a course in entertainment business management.

Writing poetry since she was 15, Dean is featured on *Open Your Eyes* delivering a positive message of hope and empowerment using clever phrases and inventive rhymes spoken, almost sung, in an impassioned, raw style.

Justin Percival Wright, her manager and childhood friend, has watched Dean, now 21, develop as an artist and describes her method as "spoken lyrics."

"Everything that she's saying is relevant" and in contrast to many urban music videos rife with sexism and stereotypes, "which we're tired of. She's in her own genre basically," Wright said. "What she does is very different . . . the things she's saying are positive — it's what youth need to be hearing nowadays. The empowerment of people in general, not just black people, or Asian people or white people."

Paul Nguyen, co-founder of Jane-

Finch.com, shot the video in the computer room of his house against a white screen. The feedback has been positive. "Some people have emailed me and said, 'Oh, that's real stuff,' because they're kind of tired of gangster rappers," he said. "When I heard it, I thought it didn't specifically mention Jane and Finch but I thought it totally related to Jane and Finch."

For her part, Dean initially turned down a request to be interviewed by the *Star*. She's not a fan of the media ("negativity sells"), particularly because of the portrayal of Toronto's so-called at-risk communities. She changed her mind, however, believing that more positive role models need to be in the spotlight. "I'm an example of how a good product can come from a negative environment," she said last week. In *Open Your Eyes*, Dean wears a backwards baseball cap, and a Toronto, Canada, sweatshirt and comes across, well, angry. It seems the M.A.D. Poet is a persona. (They are also her initials.)

"I'm always laughing and happy

**6** *I'm an example of how a good product can come from a negative environment*

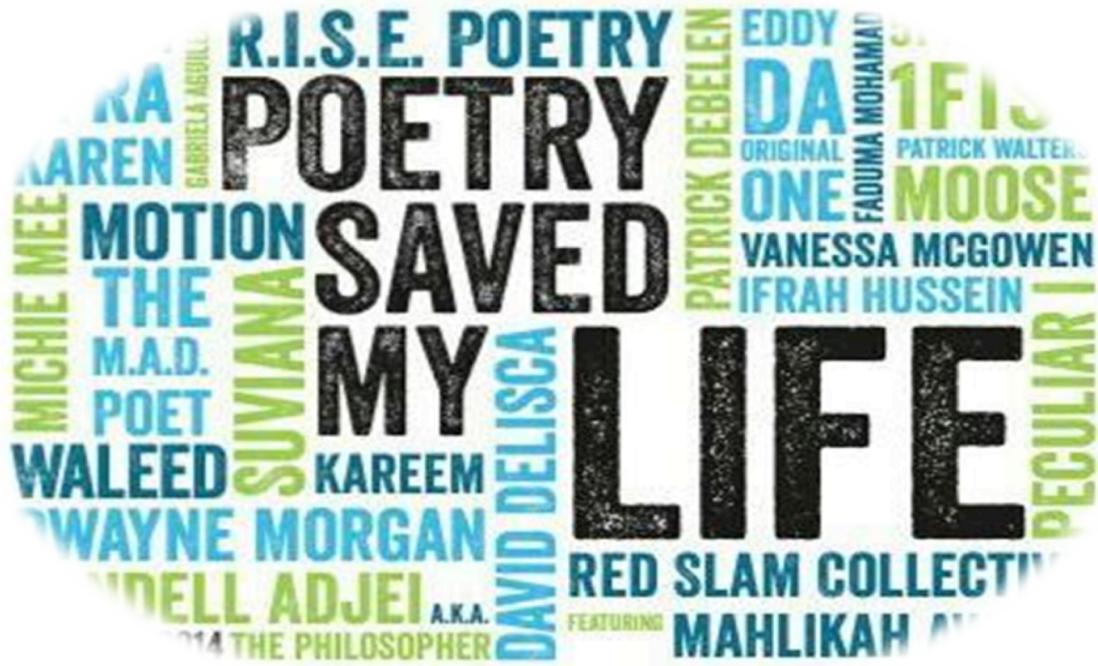
M.A.D. POET (A.K.A. MELISSA DEAN)

**9**

until it's time to get down to business and my poetry," she says. As a teenager she read her poems to family members and first took to the stage in church, where the congregation was "really receptive and appreciated what I had to say."

"I realized my poetry speaks better for me." She was inspired to write and perform after hearing Toronto poet Dwayne Morgan at her high school. He was also a counselor at a camp she attended, "leading the youth and trying to make a difference in their lives."

Dean has performed south of the border — including at a casino in Las Vegas — but hopes to do more here at home. The video, she says, may be "on a local website, but I'm talking about everybody. I want this place to be the best it can be."



A Militant Black Teacher's Guide for Social Change  
By: Melissa A. Dean

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## Part One: Introduction

### A Letter from The M. A. D. Poet (aka Melissa A. Dean)

Black poetry saved my life. I found my purpose for living, through black poetry, and I am confident that Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy can change and ultimately save the lives of those who choose to utilize this strategy for liberation.

I was fifteen years old when I moved to Maryland (from Toronto) and performed one of my spoken word poems in front of an audience for the first time. This event, which marks the beginning of my poetic journey, took place at Capitol Hill Seventh Day Adventist Church in Washington, DC. Not long after, I found myself in New York competing in the NYC Teen Poetry Slam. Making it to the finals of the first poetry slam I ever entered was a confidence booster, but what really proved beneficial was that throughout the process I was taught by professional wordsmith's how to master the art of spoken word.

Similar to the performance-based training I received in New York, this toolkit is an accelerated course in black poetry writing and performing. Drawing from over a decades worth of personal experience as a professional poet and mentor, with this toolkit I hope to help young poets perfect their craft and go on to teach others how to do the same.

Geared toward youth who would like to both learn and teach Black poetry and spoken word techniques-- at the end of this course, participants should be able to: a) write spoken word poems based on their own personal experiences; b) apply different rhythms and rhyme schemes to their own work; c) use metaphorical language as well as direct address to eloquently convey their messages through spoken word; d) identify the different literary techniques used in a poem.

Part two of this toolkit will focus on Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy and my educational approach to learning and teaching Black poetry. This section will include useful tools as well as a Race/Education/Cultural Identity Workbook, intended to provide a solid foundation for the personal poems participants will then be able to write, based on their answers to the questions in the workbook.

In Part three of this toolkit the work of the great Langston Hughes will be introduced and presented as an example of poetic excellence. Hughes's poetry offers elements of musicality and cinematography at its best and ultimately seeks to transform the Black experience. From Hughes we will learn about rhythm and how poetry can be used as a strategy for liberating the oppressed and marginalized. Part Four will feature detailed outlines for the seven two-hour workshops, to be led by youth facilitators. Each of the seven Guide keys will offer a *Check-in, Warm Up, Learning Strategy, and Evaluation*.

*M. Dean*

Melissa A. Dean

## How to Use This Black Poetry Toolkit

Created to assist young black poetry pedagogues with teaching black poetry to up and coming black literary soldiers on the frontlines-- this Black Poetry Toolkit offers poetic insight, learning strategies, and activities intended to enhance artistic skills, inspire, motivate, and empower participants. *Poetry Saved My Life: A Militant Black Poetry Teacher's Guide for Social Change*, is a week-long workshop for writers that features seven two-hour black poetry "Guide keys,"



intended to point you in the right direction in regards to teaching poetry, and unlock the true poetic

potential of your participants.

Sessions should be held in classroom or community setting. Approximately ten to fifteen participants, ranging from thirteen to nineteen years old; essential workshop supplies include: a notebook or journal for each participant, pens, markers, flip chart paper, projector, and laptop.

Photo by Chester Higgins, Jr., *The New York Times* (1991), of Amiri Baraka and Maya Angelou dancing at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, which houses the remains of Langston Hughes.

~

**Learning for Liberation: Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy and Transformative Education**

## What You Will Need

A RE: CAP



*Demographic: Black  
Canadian youth, ages 13-19.*

*Group: (approximately) 10-  
15 participants per  
workshop.*

*Supplies: Notebooks or  
journals for participants,  
pens, markers, flip chart  
paper, projector, and laptop.*

### My Principles for Black

Poetry: Lyrical content, musicality, resilience, precision, passion, altruism, community visioning, militancy, unity, consciousness-raising, truth, love.

### My Principles for Critical

#### Black Poetry Pedagogy:

Create ethical space, respect black poets, show mad love, dedication to learning and teaching black poetry, engage (enlist new black poetry soldiers), community-building, appeal to all of the senses, black aesthetics and cultural ambiance, empower, active listening, speak up, focus on the black experience.

### Principles and Goals

#### Goals for Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy

1) To give black youth an outlet where they can express themselves and become conscious leaders and producers of culture. 2) To create and maintain a platform where solidarity is promoted through interactions with Black Poetry. 3) To transform lives through black poetry. It is my firm belief that if individuals become empowered to take control of their own lives then the whole community will benefit. 4) Through Black Poetry equip the youth with strategies to fight against the injustices that are taking place around them, in regards to the built environment.

#### 10 Tips for Facilitation

1. Create an action plan
2. Prepare yourself to execute your action plan
3. Get organized (I.e. make sure you have all of your supplies)
4. Relax! (Take a deep breath before you begin)
5. Be professional (I.e. Arrive early)
6. Create ethical space (set ground rules for participation)
7. Time management
8. Actively listen to your group
9. Remain open to new ideas and don't be afraid to improvise
10. Have fun Community-building!

### A Valuable Verbal Lesson

On the first day of your workshop series be sure to begin by introducing yourself to the group.

[Example]

Who are you? Hi! My name is Melissa A. Dean.

What do you do? I perform Black Poetry, write plays, teach, attend University, and travel.

Where have you been? Thailand, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, USA...

What have you learned during your travels?

A Valuable Verbal Lesson: When I traveled to Cuba (for the first time) on a poetry tour. I was there for only one week, yet ended up learning more Spanish in that short space of time than the French I had been trying to learn for a whole life-time! While I was there, I even managed to write a poem en Español! I have also been to the Dominican Republic, and the first thing I learned in preparation for my trip there, was how to say “¿Donde está el baño?” I will never forget that phrase it was a lifesaver! Without going into too much detail, I will say that that phrase did come in handy during my travels.

Si, Puedo!

¿Donde esta mi amor? ¿Donde esta mi amor?  
 No puedo encontrar mi amigo. Por favor-  
 Socorro, encontrar mi amigo, mi señor .  
 So that I can love him, forever. Siempre mejor.  
 (Por lo tanto, que puedo amarlo a el por... Siempre.)

By: The M.A.D. Poet (aka Melissa A. Dean) - (12/25/2008) - Viva la Cuba!

Foundation Readings: Rhyme and *Reason* (Recommended Black Poems)

Every black poetry pedagogue should have their very own teaching toolkit equipped with strategic plans, activities, and selected black (African American and Jamaican dub) poems. Some of the poems I like to teach with include:

- ❖ “Midway” by Naomi Madgett—*Reason: Rhythm, Racial Justice*
- ❖ “Vision of Niagara” by Marcus Garvey—*Reason: Site Significance, Diaspora*
- ❖ “If We Must Die” by Claude McKay—*Reason: Militancy, Survival Strategy*
- ❖ “Black Mans Struggle” by Peculiar I—*Reason: Social Commentary, Personal Narrative*
- ❖ “No Lickle Twang” by Miss Lou—*Reason: Orature, Language*
- ❖ “Ecology Poem” by Mutabaruka—*Reason: Environmental Justice, Awareness*
- ❖ “Oh Canada II” by Afua Cooper—*Reason: Race and Education*



## Part Two: Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy

### My Educational Approach

There are six steps in the process of creating a good spoken word poem. This six-step process that takes you from the page to the stage, is one I both adhere to and teach. Developed through years of honing my own poetic practice, the six-steps are as follows:

- 1. Reflect on Experience (Tell Your Story)**
  
- 2. Useful Tools**
  
- 3. Write the Poem**
  
- 4. Memorize the Poem**
  
- 5. Perform**
  
- 6. Evaluate**

# RACE/EDUCATION/CULTURAL IDENTITY WORKBOOK

Reflect on Your Experience (Tell Your Story Here)

Write your heart out! Doodle, too!

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How are you feeling right now?

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How do you feel about your own culture, people, Community?

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How do you feel about “others”? What does the term “others” mean to you?

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Have you ever experienced Institutionalized racism?  
(Circle one)

Yes

No

In detail describe your experience.

Where exactly did it take place? Who was involved? Etc.,



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Why is writing important?

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Why are you here?

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Where are you going? How do you plan to get there?

## Useful Tools

Syllables and Word Sounds

Things to Remember about Syllables:

- Syllables are "beats of sound".
- Every WORD has at least one syllable.
- Syllables normally have a vowel (a, e, i, o, u &/or y).
- Syllables can be just one letter or a group of letters –
- It is the sound that matters!

Tips: Clapping your hands while sounding out a word can help you to figure out how many syllables the WORD has.

Iambic Pentameter consists of a line ten syllables long (beat/rhythm).

Word Sounds

If you say these words aloud you will hear the "beats of sound":

June, A, walk, go, home, good (these words all have 1 syllable)

July, August, happy, birthday (these words all have 2 syllables)

September, understand, Internet (these words all have 3 syllables)

Now you try. How many syllables do each of these words have? Write the answers in the space provided.

Syllable\_\_\_ concentrate\_\_\_ youth\_\_\_  
 school\_\_\_ hyperbole\_\_\_ metaphor\_\_\_  
 ballad\_\_\_ alliteration\_\_\_ homonyms\_\_\_  
 personification\_\_\_ onomatopoeias\_\_\_  
 oxymoron\_\_\_ rhetoric\_\_\_ emotional\_\_\_ limerick\_\_\_

### Stanzas

A Stanza is a group of lines within a poem. The blank line between a stanza is called the "stanza break". Stanzas can be given a specific name depending on their structure and rhyme pattern. (In a rap song the stanza would be the "verse" as opposed to the chorus.) Stanza names according to # of lines: I.e. 2-lines = Couplet, 4-lines = Quatrain, 5-lines= Quintain, 6-lines =Sextain

### Rhythm

"Midway" (1959)

Written by: Naomi Long Madgett

I've come this far to freedom and I won't turn back  
I'm climbing to the highway from my old dirt track  
    I'm coming and I'm going  
    And I'm stretching and I'm growing  
And I'll reap what I've been sowing or my skin's not black

I've prayed and slaved and waited and I've sung my song  
You've bled me and you've starved me but I've still grown strong  
    You've lashed me and you've treed me  
    And you've everything but freed me  
But in time you'll know you need me and it won't be long.

I've seen the daylight breaking high above the bough  
I've found my destination and I've made my vow;  
    So whether you abhor me  
    Or deride me or ignore me  
Mighty mountains loom before me and I won't stop now.

As shown in "Midway" by Naomi Madgett, when the last words of two lines rhyme with each other, it is called a "Rhyming Couplet." Limericks also follow a 5-line "aabba" pattern.

Reference:

Madgett, Naomi L. "Midway." *The Black Poets*. Ed. Dudley Randall. New York: Bantam Books, 1985. Print

## Literary Devices

### Simile

A phrase that uses “like” or “as” to compare and describe two things

I.e.

“She is like a delicate flower”

“Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt runs as fast as lightning!”

### Metaphor

A figure of speech that usually uses “is” in the transference of meaning from one thing to another

I.e.

“Life is a journey”

“Love is a battlefield”

### Oxymoron

A contradictory meeting of words

I.e.

“Bittersweet”

“Living dead”

### Personification

Attributing human qualities to inanimate objects

I.e.

“The chair had long legs and could not sit still, yet she hugged me with her loving arms”

“The water danced for the smiling moonlight, and unintentionally caught the eye of the storm”

## How to Memorize Your Spoken Word Poem

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BLACK VOICE

1. Select the poem you wish to memorize.
2. Become familiar with the poem—by making sure that you know the meaning of every word that you wrote on the page.
3. Have a concrete idea of what your poem is about, and be able to clearly articulate your poem's main point.
4. Approach the task at hand with enthusiasm. It is much easier to do something when you actually WANT to do it!
5. Now "Write It Out!" Over and over, again.
6. Record yourself saying your poem, put it on "regular rotation" on your electronic device, and listen to your recorded poem as often as you can.
7. Recite it! In your mind or aloud, any chance you get.

Once you have memorized your spoken word poem(s), you will be well on your way to success as a professional Black poet on the front lines. You will have mastered one of the main challenges for live performers. Now you will be able to focus on your delivery and connecting with your audience in deep and meaningful ways while on stage, which is of utmost importance.

Columbia  
Records  
refused to  
record the  
song and the  
composer had  
to use a  
pseudonym.  
But when  
Billie Holiday  
sang, "Strange  
Fruit," the  
walls of  
censorship and  
fear came  
down. She sang  
it with her  
eyes closed,  
and the grace  
of her voice,  
born to sing  
that very  
song, turned  
it into a  
hymn. (Galeano 300)

Reference:  
Galeano, Eduardo. *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*. Toronto: Nation Books. 2009. Print.



Performance Blueprint  
CULTURAL PRODUCTION (PERFORMANCE) STRATEGIC PLAN

CULTURAL PRODUCTION (PERFORMANCE) STRATEGIC PLAN M.				
OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	TIME FRAME	ACHIEVABLE	EVALUATION
Organize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Brainstorm ideas</li> <li>-Decide creative output. I.e., solo performance, or team piece (a poem written and performed by two or more poets)</li> <li>-Create performance outline</li> </ul>	Two Weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Performance style and structure is developed</li> <li>- A clearly defined creative direction is mapped out</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clear and concise documentation of creative project idea(s)</li> </ul>
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Gather resources (books, newspaper articles, web, etc.,)</li> <li>-Decide on key names, concepts, ideas, to add to the poem(s)</li> </ul>	Two Weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Learn how to successfully incorporate research findings into performance</li> <li>-Professional Artistic development</li> <li>-Gain a deeper understanding of <i>performance intervention(s)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Breadth and depth of relevant research conducted. Know your stuff!</li> <li>-Ability to integrate research findings into creative work</li> <li>-Social and political context of performance</li> </ul>
Rehearse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Complete the performance piece</li> <li>-Memorize your poem(s)</li> </ul>	Three Weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Enhance technical, creative, writing skills</li> <li>-Strengthen performance skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Final draft</li> <li>-Ability to embody the role(s)</li> </ul>
Perform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-From the page to the stage!</li> <li>-Present the work</li> </ul>	Three Weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Gain new confidence in the process</li> <li>-Improve ability to communicate through art</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Engage</li> <li>-Teach</li> <li>-Provide Insight</li> <li>-Inspire</li> <li>-Connect with your audience</li> </ul>

## Part Three: Life Lines

## Sonia Sanchez and the Anatomy of a Haiku



Sonia Sanchez and The M.A.D. Poet in Toronto, “Celebrating Women’s Voices,” (2014) RSU

Haiku  
 my womb is a dance  
 of leaves sweating swift winds  
 i laugh with guitars.  
 —Sonia Sanchez, *shake loose my skin*

A Haiku typically follows a five-seven-five pattern (=syllables per line). Activity: 1) Describe some aspect of nature. 2) Read Sonia Sanchez’s Haiku out loud. 3) Write a Haiku connecting some aspect of your physical body to nature.

Reference:

Sanchez, Sonia. *Shake loose my skin*. 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. Beacon Press, 2000. Print.

**Learning for Liberation: Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy and Transformative Education**

## Langston Hughes

### And the Personification of Harlem

Black poet and Harlem Renaissance man Langston Hughes (1902-1967) used jazz poetry to unify the black community (Jennings 106) and inspire social change. In *I Remember Harlem*, dance instructor, Mary Bruce can be seen keeping time and keeping track of the movements of young blacks with “*bebop!*” In this documentary, she says “[In those days, Harlem represented] quality of excellence... first class arts and sports.” But black children were still being denied access to standard education, and the black community faced issues related to community health, unemployment, social housing, and social welfare (Maurrasse 24). Through black poetry, Hughes documented and created new life by synthesizing the buzz of the black community through black soundscapes. Black music had always held great significance within the black community, and bebop was resistance music used to empower the oppressed of that era. In “Juke Box Love Song” Hughes personifies Harlem and links the beating of a drum to the pulse of a human heart:

Take Harlem’s heartbeat,  
Make a drumbeat, (227)

How does this rhyming couplet give Harlem a life of it’s own? (I.e. what is personification?)

### *Harlem came alive at night!*

In William Miles’s documentary *Hughes’s Dream Harlem*, Bruce George says: “[Hughes] ran to his blackness at a time when a lot of other people were running from it. He was a human who cared about other human beings.” In that same documentary, Ossie Davis says: “[Hughes] knew how to take the impossible and make it dance.” In this touching tribute to

Hughes, he is remembered as a man who took daily walks through Harlem, a man who loved his people and culture, and a man who saw and “heard everything-- the rhythms, the people, the laughter, the cries, history, aspiration, hurt, and joy.” In “125th Street” Hughes gives Harlem a face-lift by writing:

1. Face like a chocolate bar  
full of nuts and sweet.
2. Face like a jack-o'-lantern,  
candle inside.
3. Face like a slice of melon,  
grin that wide. (*244 numbers are mine*)

In this piece Hughes can be seen describing 125<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem. He uses similes and metaphors to communicate a clear message about 125<sup>th</sup> Street.

Activity: Using personification (attributing human-like qualities to an inanimate object), write a poem about the neighborhood or city where you currently reside.

## References

- Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Vintage Classic Ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1959. Print.
- Jennings, Regina. "Early Influences of a Revolutionary Aesthetic in Black Poetry: Langston Hughes and Marcus Garvey." *Malcolm X and the Poetics of Haki Madhubuti*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006. 104-124. Print.
- Miles, William, dir. *I Remember Harlem*. Feat. Mary Bruce, Rev, Charles Kenyatta, Prof. Yosef Ben-Jochannan, Judge Bruce Wright. New York: WNET/Thirteen, 1980. VHS.
- Maurrasse, David. *Listening to Harlem: Gentrification, Community, and Business*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

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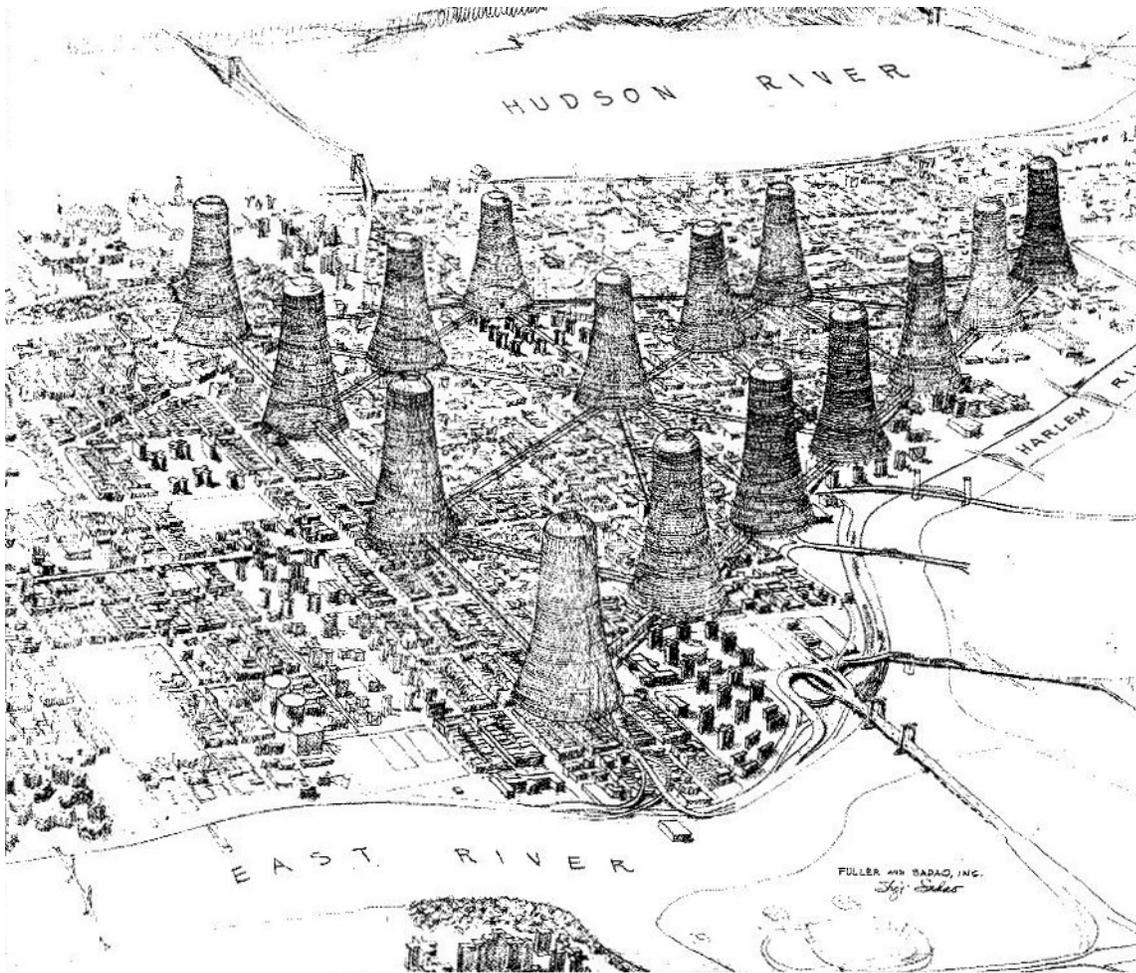
## Part Four: Guide Keys

*“...In the context of social justice, education can never be politically neutral: if it does not side with the poorest and marginalized sectors-the ‘oppressed’-in an attempt to transform society, then it necessarily sides with the ‘oppressors’ in maintaining the existing structures of oppression, even by default.” –Liam Kane*

Popular Education is social justice education that encourages and promotes equal, honest, and active participation in the dialogue surrounding the use of power (and/or the abuse thereof), within the context of Community Development (CD) and Organizing. In this section you will find the seven “Guide Keys” for the one-week Black poetry intensive that you will lead. These seven “Guide Keys” are intended to guide you toward re-imagining the Black experience and unlocking your true potential. As previously stated in the section outlining key principles and goals, one of the main goals of Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy is to equip Black youth with strategies to fight against the injustices that are taking place around them, in regards to the built environment. Our job as Critical Pedagogues is to equip and empower our Selves and our students with the essential skills and resources needed, in order to strengthen our communities from within. Before we can do this work though, we must become passionately aware of who we are, versus, who society thinks we should be. We must at first recognize the problems in order to find the best solutions. This guide covers three main topics: 1) Black identity and Black Poetry 2) Place-making and the culture of community 3) Moving toward a Movement. Within the context of Community-building, all of these seemingly different puzzle pieces work together to create a new and improved Community identity that we can be individually and collectively proud of because of our hands on involvement in its development.

### Reference:

Kane, Liam. *Popular Education and Social Change in Latin America*. London: Latin American Bureau, 2001. Print.



“Skyrise for Harlem” (1965) By June Jordan and R. Buckminster Fuller.

Retrieved from: <http://raceandarchitecture.wordpress.com/>

*“I wonder if our plan for Harlem could provide for access to shoreline and thus to natural fluency that would devolve from dwelling places alternating with circles of outdoor safety along the water’s edge. This would mean domestication of the littoral, but not the occlusion of the autonomous energies of the river. Would you think it worth wile to connect interior green space with peripheral rivers?”* -Letter to R. Buckminster Fuller (1964), by June Jordan. (Jordan 27)

Reference:

Jordan, June. *On Call: Political Essays*. Boston: South End Press, 1985. Print.

**Learning for Liberation: Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy and Transformative Education**

# G

uide Key One

## Rise and Shine

### *Check-In:*

Question: If you were the weather what weather would you be? And why?

### *Warm Up:*

Participants will write a collective poem about their community. Each person writes a rhyming couplet on the page and then passes the piece of paper to the next person.

### *Learning Strategy Activity:*

Ask participants to answer the following questions: Where are you from? Where are you going? Or where would you like to go? What is your favorite place in your community? Where do you currently spend most of your time? What location is most often on your mind? Close your eyes and imagine yourself somewhere... where did you end up? Picture yourself in an airplane that is approaching a landing strip. What landmarks do you notice first that will let you know that you have arrived at your destination? Choose a generic title ... "To Whom it May Concern" or "If I Ruled the World" and write a six line poem based on the title, incorporating some if not all of the answers from your questionnaire.

### *Evaluation:*

Ask participants to... starting with the phrase "To Whom it May Concern" say one thing about their experience participating in this workshop. I.e. "To whom it may concern...I really enjoyed this session"

# G

## uide Key Two

### What's in a Name?

#### *Check-in:*

Questions: What does your name mean? And how are you feeling today?

#### *Warm-Up:*

Ask participants to write Acrostic poems based on their first and last names. An Acrostic poem in this case is where their names will be written down the side of the page, letter by letter, and then they will come up with words or phrases to correspond with each letter of their name.

#### *Learning Strategy Activity:*

Ask participants to write down: their heart, their feelings, and how they feel about the world around them. What would they want people to know about their inner motives and aspirations? Have them write down their understanding of who they are, define their own identity, and detail their intentions and motivations.

Based on this information have participants write a ten line poem (five sets of rhyming couplets) or they can just share what they wrote, as is. Best foot forward!

Let them know that this is their chance to tell the world exactly who they are!

#### *Evaluation:*

Challenge participants to write a free verse poem in their journals based on their names (i.e. the story behind how they got their nicknames, or a poem about the person who gave them their nicknames, etc.,)

**Learning for Liberation:** Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy and Transformative Education

Example of an Acrostic Poem

## Buju Banton

By: The M.A.D. Poet

First Name:

***B**onafide Love, please have no regrets*

***U**ntold Stories, never get old*

***J**ah! *Our Father in Zion* guides and protects*

***U**nchartered waters, purify the soul*

Last Name:

***B**etween the lines, find*

***A**frican Pride*

***N**othing they try can change my mind*

***'Til I'm Laid to Rest**, the truth I will uphold*

***O**nly man truly knows, that it is...*

***N**ot an *Easy Road**

Activity: Have participants write an Acrostic poem about their favorite Black culturally conscious artist, incorporating the titles of their favorite songs by that artist (following the example of the Acrostic poem above)

# G

uide Key Three

## The View From Here

### *Check-In:*

Question: How are you feeling today (high or low)? Why?

### *Warm-up:*

Show a slideshow of “bird’s eye” views of various predominately black communities.

Participants will describe what they see simply by calling it out (this activity is called “popcorn”)

### *Learning Strategy Activity*

Ask participants to talk about maps and birds eye view. Discussion topic: *The people at the top look down on us. They set up traps and limitations through our built environment, policies, policing, education, and work barriers, etc., ...we need to start seeing things how they see it so we can set things right. We must find creative ways of turning limitations into opportunities, re-visioning our world...* Keywords: Awareness; Social and Environmental Change. After the discussion ask each participant to draw a map of the community.

### *Learning Strategy Animated Storytelling and Community-Building*

Have participants get into groups of two write a poem called “Bird’s Eye View” based on the community maps they drew. Then ask them to share their poems with the larger group.

### *Evaluation:*

Ask each participant to come up with a list of demands addressing upgrades for their community.

# G

uide Key Four

## Have it Your Way!

### *Check-in:*

Question: If you were a neighborhood what neighborhood would you be and why?

### *Warm-up:*

Question: What does Chicana cultural theorist and poet Gloria Anzaldua's quote: "I change myself, I change the world" mean to you? Ask participants to get into groups of two or three to discuss this question; ask them to take notes!

### *Learning Strategy Activity:*

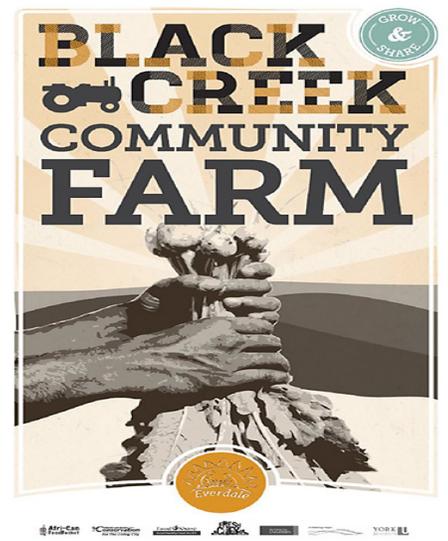
Ask participants to take pictures on their phones of their built environment and have them bring them to session to discuss them. In this session, participants will critically analyze images of various sites and structures found in their community. For example, an image of a McDonald's that is situated in a prime location within a community, that does not have a fresh fruit market.

Questions: Why do you think that there is a McDonald's in that location, instead of a fresh fruit market or first-rate grocery store? How does the McDonald's look in comparison to the other stores in that location? If you had the power to make the change, what would you put in place of the McDonald's? How would this change benefit the whole community? Draw the new site and write a poem that re-imagines the location. *Evaluation:*

Question: Based on today's session name one site in your community that you would like to change. What would you rather see in this location?

Vs.

Black Creek Community Farm



<http://www.kvphotoart.com/kvphotoart-galleries/commercial-editorial/18937650>

McDonalds' in Jane-Finch Community



<http://wattisretail.com/590king/the-future-of-quick-service-restaurants-qsr/>

# G

uide Key Five

## NIMBY

### *Check-In:*

Question: rate your day from 1 (worst day in the world!) to 10 (best day ever!) and state why you are feeling this way?

### *Warm Up:*

Ask participants to pick a topic out of a hat. Topics may include: displacement/migration, from physical slavery to mental slavery, working class struggle- inner city youth, and unemployment.

Once each of the participants have pulled a topic from the hat have them each write a short poem based on that topic.

### *Learning Strategy Activity:*

Ask participants to answer the following questions:

What do you know about the built environment in which you live?

What do you think the acronym NIMBY stands for? NIMBY= “Not In My Back Yard!”

Give an example, and come up with your own definition/version.

Write a poem entitled “NIMBY”

### *Evaluation:*

Question: One word describing the way you are feeling right now?

# G

uide Key Six

## NIMBY 2.0

### *Check-In:*

My community is... (Finish the sentence)

### *Warm-Up:*

After each participant shares an example of how “outsiders” are trying to take over community space, we all say “Not In My Back Yard!” in unison

### *Learning Strategy Animated Storytelling and Community-Building*

Come up with scenarios where the black community could utilize the concept of NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard). In small groups come up with skits where outsiders are trying to infiltrate your space, each skit will end with "Not In My Back Yard!"

### *Evaluation:*

I now feel ... about/of my community. Because... (Finish the sentences)

# G

uide Key Seven

## The Journey Home

### *Check-in:*

Question: If you were a musical instrument, which musical instrument would you be? and Why?

### *Warm-Up:*

“My Black is...” (Activity)- Simply finish the sentence. I.e. “My Black is... Militant!”

Learning Strategy *Animated Storytelling and Community-Building*

Question: We all know how to work independently, but can we work together?

In small groups, have participants draw roadmaps leading to their ideal communities and a map of the actual communities, incorporating the items on their lists of demands from Guide key three. Then ask them to come up with poetic skits based on their roadmaps and the journey it would take them to get to their destination. What landmarks would they see? and What kind of people would they meet along the way? Ask them to find creative and collaborative ways to showcase their personal and collective journeys.

### *Evaluation:*

Ask participants to write poems (four five-line stanzas in form) entitled “The Journey Home”

## CLOSING REMARKS

A true artists' soul knows no fear! Poet Gil Scott- Heron said: “The revolution will not be televised” in 1968. Tracy Chapman sang: “Don't you know, talking about a revolution sounds like a whisper...” Today, Canadian poet Ian Kamau, reminds us that: “We'll never have a renaissance, if we speak about a movement, and refuse to move.” ACTION! We cannot just talk about it. We have got to BE about it, and LIVE it daily. My life has not been easy. But I do realize just how important of a journey it has been for my Self, my Family, and my Community. It is important to think and dream BIG! The most important principles of Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy are Meaning-Making and Self-Love (Individual and Community).



Figure: Eco Art and Media Festival (2014), FES Lounge, York University

## References:

Chapman, Tracy. “Talkin’ bout a Revolution [High Quality]”. Online video clip. *Youtube*. 11 March 2011. Web. 10 November 2014.

Kamau, Ian. “Renaissance.” *One Day Soon*. Creative Co., 2011. CD.

Scott-Heron, Gil. “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” Online video clip. *Youtube*. 9 July 2009. Web. 15 November 2014.

**Learning for Liberation: Critical Black Poetry Pedagogy and Transformative Education**

Re-Imagining the Black Experience  
Through Word-Sound-Power

To listen to “Concept Code Black” please visit the website:

<http://poetreebee.weebly.com>

Click on “My Poetry” and press play!



Figure: Screenshot of webpage (09/03/2015)

Poetry Saved My Life!

A Black Poetree Experience (Series)

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Photo by John Ferri, Digital Editor for the *Toronto Star*, 2011:  
“KRS- ONE Stop the Violence” (2007) by Che Kothari;  
The M.A.D. Poet (aka Melissa A. Dean),  
Curator of *Lost and Found: (Finding) Hidden Beauty in the ‘Hood* (2011)  
Education Artist-in-residence at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU)

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Introductory Message from the Author: WHEN I WRITE

Last night I sat down to write my spoken word poems on paper and got stuck. Why was I stuck? I realized I had a problem. I was never taught how to write in my own home languages of Jamaican Creole and Black English. I felt very uncomfortable with the sight of Black English on the page. I was taught it was incorrect, bad, and all wrong to write in Black English. Honestly, I was tempted to bleach my mother tongue. Yet I knew if I conformed to translating my Black poems into Standard English, my words would be cut from their source, their roots, and in an instance lose their life. Who would I be burying my voice for? Who was I trying to please? Whose eyes were those, glaring at me? The White gaze... the disapproving white male father figure who was always looking over my shoulder. Yes, it was him I seen appear like a ghost in the darkness, trying to force me to conform and clean my blackness off of the white paper. How do I gain confidence in my own words if I am constantly being scolded by hegemonic and racist systems and standards when I write? This is just another form of oppression. So much so, that I find myself telling myself that I am not right when I write. How could that be right? How do I break free from the confines of language and build a healthy relationship with the page?

I have trouble transcribing my black poems unto the page because Black poetry is an oral tradition. In order to write my black poems I have to go against everything I was taught, all of the brainwashing I have endured in attempt to make me stay in line... Though I am still a bit intimidated by the white gaze, I have written these black poems in this series to resist and disrupt the dominant discourse. I have written these words to reclaim space. Finding freedom, cultural pride, and self-love in between the lines of these black poems, I write to re-imagine what it means to be black on paper.

*M. Dean*

## CONCEPT CODE BLACK

~

***Disappearing Acts*** another Black leaves first class

The other students laugh, I stuff my pain in my knapsack

Swallow my pride, fight the way I'm feeling inside

I'll blog about this moment later but right now gotta hide.

***When you're terrorizing theory and theorizing terror***

The process becomes scary, you'll wind up with fatal errors.

In this hegemonic system we gotta peel back the layers

'Cause if they're the vampires then we're the vampire slayers...

***Public participation***, surface the situation

Dig deeper they holding meetings, the reapers are raiding kitchens

And sweeping under the rug, the facts of knives and guns,

Zimmerman's and murdered sons, swimming in their pools of blood.

AIM! ...like Natives biting their tongues,

always tryna keep the PEACE

Institutions are being built on backs, shoulders, and feet.

Packed tight, newly deceased. Act right or you'll be next

Know your place step out of line, wind up losing your neck.

That desk was not created for YOU to take a seat.

(Black) watchu mean you wanna learn?

Only fools try to walk over bridges already burned.

Yet Jesus, he walked on water but you better not rock the boat.

From Gramsci to Mandela, in cells great minds have spoken their

truths

even in silence, solitude often reminds us,  
attitudes and egos blind us  
from seeing the bigger picture, from seeing that picture framed.

You see,

**"Art for Social Change!"**

Is not just some silly phrase To be chanted at home games.  
Point blank, my shooting range. I'm going off! In sane.  
I'm gunning for straight A's and any gal wahn test prepare to  
paraphrase.

'Cause like baby Beluga in the deep blue sea...

Since they don't plan to Free Willy!

I burn it down the Wisdom tree-

Sustains me. Correct the wrong, immediately!

Like a tamed beast, I am so strong but I retreat

Then I stand at ease. Salute the captain of the team

Though I know 'bout dem bwoy deh I've learned to grin through  
gritted teeth.

And by all means... I beat it down Psalm 23

They tried to break my Spirit, but still my Soul it lives and breathes

Like Bob Marley, Marcus Garvey, and all

Black Kings and Queens.

My color can't be erased by little white men

They tried to write me out of history

Good thing I gained control of the pen.

...**GAIN CONTROL OF THE PEN!**

## Part II

Crossroads.

CONCEPT CODE BLACK.

Breaking News!

“School Segregation Banned”

“Hi there!”

Now I sit front row in class.

I guess you never got the memo... I ain't going back!

See, Warriors we don't cry, a post-traumatic fact.

So you can search the archives for moving pictures that-  
display Urgency! As I emerge from this dream,  
you'll catch me well-prepared.

“Ban Racism Forever!” ...is the chant you'll hear.

And “I am Trayvon!”

Yeah, like that young one that your people gunned down.

Ready?

Set?

AIM!

BANG!

(...The Harder They Come)

And as I try to navigate these *Demonic Grounds*This is my process of liberation like I was aboard *Zong!*

I hug my king tight at night and sing “Redemption Song”.

It's Freedom time, y'all!

Free your flesh and free your minds.

Let go of attitude and ego.

Make Art for Social Change!

“The Rose that Grew from Concrete”

was once a delicate flower.

So let's Unite Against Racism

and reclaim some of our Power!

||

# BLACK POETREE SAVED MY LIFE!

*Free our Heroes caged in prison cells.*

*When will we hear more Wedding Bells than gun salutes?*

*Black Power is on the rise again,*

*that strange fruit.*

*Ready-ripe-juicy*

*Bittersweet roots.*

*I rep 3 hoods: Jane-Finch, Weston, and Parma Court.*

*I seen a lot a' black men get dribbled by the courts.*

*Police playing basket-ball with our lovers balls /*

*White sheets stained red. We're not making love no more.*

*Naked as the day me born/a sheep in wolves clothing...*

*Get in bed with me guarantee you'll know me by mourning.*

*Tears stain my pillow cover for my lil' cousin... murdered di day im dawtah born,*

*(I know she woulda loved him). Nuff poems bout dis, hmhm but tell me sumin...*

*yuh tink mi coulda write like dis/ if it neva happn?*

*Ghetto yutes seh free World Boss/I say free Buju Banton! And I say you  
can lean on me,*

*'Cause I'm a strong black ooman. So listen to your HeArts... (We need you)  
don't fall apart.*

*Instead guh listen to Muta... He know what he talkin' bout.*

*Listen Marcus Garvey 'n Nikki Giovanni. Like a child learns to listen to  
Daddy and Mommy.*

*Listen to a lot of Pac and mix it with some Biggie.*

*And I say don't forget to listen to Maestro and Michie.*

*Read scripture to Knight then severe ties with Ethridge.*

*'Cause Crack kills a Haiku-- consists of better lines so instead write rhymes  
for leverage.*

*Black Fire EXI(S)Ts in our souls because we made it through the Middle  
Passage.*

*I'm talking Black Liberation,*

*Your White guilt trip is only Collateral damage.*

*Corrupt governments/\contaminated environments*

*You ask me how dis one so long and I ain't even get started yet.*

*Tightrope walking, this journey is not for cowards.*

*Celebrate your lives now 'cause no one knows their final hours. And,*

*Poetry saved my life... Though I've known great men who got up and died  
for this.*

*Like Baraka who willed his spirit to us poets and Dub poet Mikey Smith.  
This is why I write.*

*Lorde said "Poetry is Not a Luxury," so I stay on the front lines.*

*'Cause like a King I also Have A Dream!*

*Ask m'mom Lorraine, I been writing Black Power poems since preteen.  
Black is supreme,*

*This hegemonic system will not ruin my self-esteem and self-worth.*

*I love you, me, and God first. We're a team, which means this Love should  
not hurt.*

*Free my kings... Locked up for crimes police commit, and get away with  
it...Tired ah dis shit.*

*Dats why this poem stands ground to ward off evil spies,*

*see through all their lies,*

*and sever ties with fake allies.*

*Get it? "Therapeutic Violence"*

*Credit: Fanon.*

*And all him write hand.*

*If I'm married to this stage then this poem is like my best man.*

*Teaching to Transgress like bell hooks,*

*because "Freedom" ain't just a song, man!*

*And I say RISE and Occupy Black Thought, Nelson Mandela.*

*Since you left it's been raining black sons. Be our Umbrella.*

*As we stand hand in hand by the exit of Stuart Hall.*



An Urban Planning Intervention entitled

# **BLACK BY DESIGN:**

~

*...In a Monday morning meeting, downtown ...*

*White suits in a white room conceive failure*

*draft dead-end plans, and map out patterns*

*of early social misbehavior.*

*Luckily, colorful thoughts arrive just in time—*

*to overthrow the secret meeting and free young minds.*

*“The World IS Yours”!*

~

*Dedicated to JR*