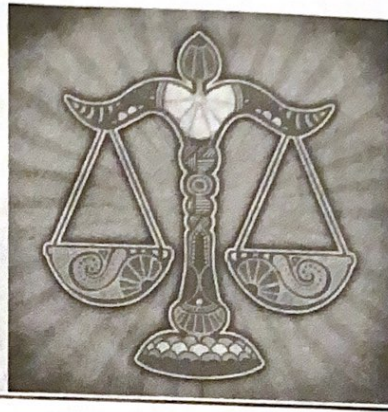


Despite the rhetoric, teachers and students are succeeding

by Eric Cooper¹



In his important new book, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*, author Ian Haney Lopez defines “dog whistle politics” as veiled references meant to “carefully manipulate hostility toward nonwhites” rather than deal honestly with the racial issues of our time.

American public education is full of these high-pitched battles. Privatizing schools because too many (poor minority) children “fail” to be educated by public systems is one. Another “failure” is that urban (read: “minority”) parents are not interested in their children’s education. Frankly, having spent significant time working with urban schools and parents, I have never met a parent (whether in Harlem, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, Newark, D.C., San Francisco, or Los Angeles) who is not passionately concerned about the success of a child. Instead, I’ve met single-parent mothers who hold two or three jobs, working six or sometimes seven days a week just to stay slightly above the poverty level. They are some of my heroes, but in spite of their relentless perseverance, they remain untapped resources in a movement for change.

Teachers are demonized as “failures” in the classroom. Fortunately for all of us, more and more are banding together as agents for justice by believing in the inherent capacity of all students, and seeking strategies and instructional pathways to improve student performance through professional development and collaborative learning.

¹ Permission given by Dr. Eric Cooper on e-mail to Joan Wynne on 4/3/2015 for reprint from his blog on Huffington Post: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-cooper/despite-the-rhetoric-teac_b_6993668.html

To add to this narrative, I share an experience from Newark through the words of Dr. Alexis Leitgeb², a superintendent in a small Midwest school community and a consulting mentor at the National Urban Alliance (NUA) for Effective Education:

In one of the K-8 schools, I was in charge of teacher professional development. On one particular day, a teacher asked me to come to her classroom because she was struggling with classroom management. In her classroom was an African-American middle-school student named Amos. I observed immediately that the students were not focused on the teacher's presentation and a lot of teaching time was lost. The teacher is very hard working, capable and passionate, but, at the time, did not have the help needed to be effective with this particular class of students. As a consequence, with every visit to that school, I taught the class to demonstrate for the teacher how to engage students through lessons I modeled.

The students started out unengaged in the learning process and chaos was the order of the day, even with the best efforts of the school staff. Throughout the year, more and more teachers began to engage in the professional development we offered, and were always surprised when their students were focused on the subject matter I demonstrated and modeled for their teachers.

Amos, in the back of the classroom, consistently struggled with writing and speaking.

A student mentor program was implemented, and it was here that I became close to Amos. He was a natural for NUA's student-voice initiative, where students become teachers along with their teachers. Amos slowly rose to the top as the leader of the student project. He became so enthusiastic over time that he asked if he could create a website so teachers could read what was taught during my sessions, brainstorm ideas for struggling students, and find a calendar where they could sign up to have a student mentor demonstrate pedagogical strategies in their classroom. We received approval from the school and administration and Amos took off on his own. When he did not feel enough teachers had signed up, Amos took the calendar around to teachers, asking when his group could come in and teach.

Some of the students began to develop ideas on how to use strategies for reading, vocabulary and math.

Toward the end of my final year in the Newark initiative, Amos explained that he and several students were going to attend another school. He indicated that the students who were learned to their new schools.

Right before summer break, when I was leaving and Amos was moving to his new school, I asked to meet his mother. She came after school, and I gave Amos a laptop computer, printer and digital camera so this amazing young student could work at home on schoolwork,

² Permission granted by Alexis Leitgeb on e-mail to Eric Cooper on 6/11/15 for use of quotation.

creative artwork and design, and videos. I did not want his lack of financial means to prevent him from having the equipment I knew would help him meet his full potential.

Amos went on to the Poetry Out Loud 2015 competition. He made it all the way to the state finals at Princeton and took second place. Amos discovered his strengths—leadership and speaking—while engaged in the student-voice project of the NUA.

There are tens of thousands of stories just like this one, starring teachers who move from being “just a teacher” to justice in teaching, due to their personal commitment to student potential, and, at times, thanks to the professional development and teamwork in which they take part. They don’t give up on their students, nor do they give up on each other as they move toward school transformation. In spite of the politics of education, they find a common pathway that leads to improved achievement and social justice.

Let’s allow these stories to be told, so that the success Amos has can be taken to scale, and the doomsday cacophony—those dog-whistle politics—about education in America is muted.

Courts to play on

by Omo Moses



When I volunteered to go to Mississippi, I was signing up to get myself together. I followed my younger brother, Taba, cousin, Khari, and father, Bob Moses, to the Sam M. Brinkley Middle School in May 1995, after an unremarkable college basketball career ground to a halt when the George Washington Colonials lost to the Ohio University Bobcats in the Big Apple NIT Classic. I had spent the last decade pursuing the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the accumulation of material things important to most 20 year olds; failing, for the first time, to become the person I imagined. The disappointment arrived at sunrise each morning as I sat, out of habit, on my mother's porch in Cambridge, MA, a ball under my armpit, returning to the street to dribble between passing cars, past phantom opponents. What had been a throne became a coffin. I wouldn't be paraded in the streets like Patrick Ewing after he won his first Olympic gold medal. I wouldn't declare, as Rumeal Robinson had, that I wanted to become as big as the moon to a field house full of high school students. A sign on a pole on a corner wouldn't bear my name as it did his after winning the national championship at the University of Michigan.

Fragments of glory could be gathered from the cracked asphalt of Corporal Burns Park, on the courts at the bank of the Charles River opposite Harvard's Business School, where generation after generation of black and brown-colored boys came to mold themselves into basketball players. I could have competed for status among them (pounding dreams of teenagers; bitter men still looking for a reputation) and the legends (without legs) clinging to the fence, until the debris from bones pestling concrete consigned me to the mob, loitering (seated and standing; their backs to the water) on the curb running the sideline, until it was their turn to claw at the next young player who earned the right to be king of the court.

The burial of my self-portrait—a benevolent, albeit, envied hero, strapped with enough cash, cars, jewels, and eye candy to scatter throughout the neighborhood—was protracted. The possibility continued to arrive at night, soldering desire and fear—that I had one more year of college eligibility, another moment to live before a million eyes. My redemption began with the pain burrowed in ankles already fractured and sprained irreparably. In a rare unmasked moment, I shared with my dad that I would no longer be a basketball player. He offered, *America is filled with courts that you can play ball on.*

Without purpose or clear direction, I asked if I could spend the next year working in his classroom. He was surprised. He had spent the better part of the last 10 recruiting his children to work with the Algebra Project (which he characterized as the family's business). I was the last one he expected to sign up. But, I needed the desolate Mississippi Delta roads which stitched rectangular and square patches of cotton fields, the blues from sharecropper to sharecropper; the obscurity of a classroom punctuated with the infectious curiosity of 7th graders searching for images to attach to themselves; the anonymity of Southern hospitality—to reimagine who I could be. Unlike most of the boys who traveled to Corporal Burns to become Dr. J, my family was stable, my parents made the public schools work, wrapping us in love and the type of experiences that continually expanded what we thought was possible. I left high school with the belief coded in my DNA, that if I put the time in, I would be successful at whatever I put my mind to. Failure, no matter how painful, was just another beginning.

Within a week of my arrival in Mississippi, my dad began declaring, “The young people need to get their act together.” There was a sense of urgency in his voice that we didn't share. He talked about jail, saying that if young people didn't do well in math, they were going to end up in jail. The cover of the February 21, 1993 edition of the *New York Times Magazine* had a picture of him with children from the Mississippi Delta beneath the title, “We Shall Overcome This Time with Algebra: Bob Moses and Mississippi Children Focus on a Plastic Learning Screen—A Path out of Modern Bondage.” It's difficult to make the connection between success in algebra and serfdom (Silver 2008; NYT, 1993).¹ When I was playing at George Washington, my dad came to town to give a speech to a bunch of mathematicians. A decade before Google and Facebook, he told them that whether they liked it or not they were the leaders of the planet. It was difficult for them to imagine the

¹ There is a very high correlation between success in Algebra in high school, graduation from four-year colleges, and work. Students who complete Algebra II in high school more than double their chances of earning a four-year college degree. In Los Angeles, like in most urban districts, 65 percent of the students who didn't pass Algebra by their freshman year dropped out.

role history and the evolution of technology had conceived for them, harder still to enlist them in a struggle for freedom and democracy.

Taba, Khari, and I worked to create a Math Lab out of an unused science classroom: arranging tables laminated with primary colors, building a network with a dozen Macintosh computers, clearing the walls of chipped paint before covering them with affirming words (*math is what you make it*) and images. Taba found a pair of college students (male and female artists) who showed up like Panthers (bobbing afro, black leather jacket, tight jaws) and began sketching with him on the bare primer, first a colored boy standing with a number in his hand before strips of wood patterned into a path extending into a universe of stars and planets and brown, yellow and red children exploring it. A jungle of animals covered a wall. A sketch of my dad was quickly erased as he huffed and puffed at our (affectionate) attempt to memorialize him. Khari—cocky scowl, dreadlocks pointing toward each corner of the room—was immortalized next to the light switch by the door.

Always conscious of how and where he stood in relationship to the people he led and organized, my dad encouraged us to join, from the classroom and school building, the struggle where he and students our age participated on the streets of America during the Civil Rights Movement, confronting the nation on paper and in practice, as they removed Jim Crow from public accommodations and the democratic political apparatus. Jim Crow was the specter drifting through the pages my parents left open in the living room: a crowd of white-colored faces bearing witness to black-colored bodies burning at their feet, Ross Barnett, then Governor of Mississippi, standing in the doorway of a school to prevent black-colored boys and girls from entering, canine teeth extending a white arm's length into black thighs, a pig-colored sheriff struggling to rip the American flag from a five-year-old brown-colored boy as he clutched with two hands his right to be among the "We" that gave birth to the nation.²

"It was easier when it was obvious," lamented a veteran of the civil rights movement—to confront the persistent pernicious shove of black-colored people outside the "We" and into a permanent under-caste. Who would deny the contiguous line from slavery, convict leasing, chain gangs, Jim Crow laws, Rockefeller drug laws, stop and frisk and three strikes policies? What is the cumulative impact of this from black generation to generation? How does it show up in the body, mind, and spirit of every black child and the environment that he or she inherits? What is the work that each subsequent generation must recognize and embrace to lift itself up?

² *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and We the People of the United States* begin the preambles to The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; those sacred documents that prophesize America's promise and possibility.

For Taba, Khari, and me—camouflaged in gold herringbone, diamond earrings, nugget pinky ring, shorts sagging toward Timberland boots—the work was discovering the obvious parading in and out of the Math Lab and through the halls and classrooms of Brinkley Middle School. There was no epiphany, just a gradual realization of the connections between the conflict and contradictions that rose from the pages left open in my parent's living room, what Brinkley was preparing most of the 99 percent black student body to do, and what we had experienced in the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Cambridge—where, confounding the city's vanguard liberalism the Advanced Placement and honors classes at the high school remained segregated. (Khari and I were the only two brown-colored boys in our honors classes for four years.) What became clearer to me was that the Nation's native conundrum transcended generation, region, class, and politics.

The question, *What to do about the slaves and their descendants*, was alive and well in contemporary form: *What to do about black boys*, whether sons of sharecroppers or 2nd generation doctors, in both 6,000 and 20,000 dollar per pupil public school systems, above and below the Mason-Dixon line.³ I've been wrestling with this question for as long as I've been aware of being black. My take on it is that there is either an implicit assumption or explicit accusation that we are complicit in our failure. As a kid, the basketball court and the corner were two places we could go without that burden—we were supposed to be good at hanging on rims and hanging out. In the Math Lab, we confronted with other people's children what was buried in our psyches as kids—"Be good at this? Pay attention to that." I learned quickly about the significance of attention—you can't teach someone without it. Because we looked like East Coast rappers, we had a small window of opportunity to earn the trust and respect of the students by demonstrating that we appreciated who they were and where they were coming from.

They arrived with a teacher or deputized classmate, in single file or defiantly breaking rank. They sat in groups of five or six on wooden stools pulled from slots underneath the table tops, some erect in anticipation, others wilting. The lessons were structured like a Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) meeting, organized to unleash the energy of the students by creating space for them to have a stake in what we were learning (Moses & Cobb, 2001; SNCC). My dad usually facilitated while we worked at the tables, helping them reflect on an experience or build consensus about mathematical ideas like equivalence or equality. Eventually I began to facilitate activities. I would begin with a hand in the air and a request for the student's attention, relying on the leaders at each table to help their classmates

³ My mom says that in the 60's we struggled in color, but not in kind—referring to the class divide that persists in black and all colored communities.

turn their eyes toward me. The students I relied on weren't necessarily the ones their teachers anointed; they were generally the ones we shot ball with during gym, hung out with during lunch, or in their neighborhood after school. Regardless of the content, the goal was the same—to have a collaborative conversation based on shared experiences. This required that each student exercise leadership as an individual, as a member of a small group and classroom community. More important than paying attention to me was that they pay attention to each other and what was going on around them.

I would watch the students in the marching band parade home after school: plastic Tuba wrapped around a waist, trumpets to lips, snare and base drums, clarinet and sax, boys and girls shedding rigid notes, uniform steps in the parking lot between the school and a row of shotgun shacks as they marched up Ridgeway Street, past St Peters Missionary Baptist Church, an abandoned bar, the parking lot of the adjacent Laundromat and candy store, stopping at each other's stoop until the last instrument arrived in its front yard. Noisy at first, by the time they approached Shady Grove Church on the corner of Ridgeway and California, they were making music. Good days in the Math Lab looked and felt like that.

As my dad pushed us to do more, we began to organize ourselves, partially in response to him, partially in response to a desire to do something that extended beyond the school building and into the crux of our lives. I began to count the students in each class I was able to reach and imagine how many we could reach if we turned our energy and attention toward each other. Dave Dennis, a Freedom Rider out of New Orleans and the Director of the Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project, encouraged us to meet at his office in the Standard Life Building: built in 1929 to attract more business into what was then an industrial city, it had been the largest reinforced concrete building in the world and remained the tallest in Jackson; standing like a decayed minaret beside the King Edwards Hotel (empty since 1967), casting its shadow among the abandoned downtown streets. Dave would bring food, we'd bring students from Brinkley, and talk about how we could take what we were learning in the Math Lab on the road and turn it into a business. The power embedded in the relationships and learning experiences we shared with the students emboldened us to imagine that we—like Curtis, Hollis, Chuck, Charlie, June, Judy, Margaret: the students whose names and faces, bodies, were deserted in the chapters my parents left open—could do something to push America to become America (Banks, 2008).⁴

⁴ It was only after the Civil War that the United States became America the nation-state. There was a shift there in terminology, too, moving from being the United States of America to "America," from being a fairly loose consortium of separate but united states, pulled apart at times, pulling together at others, into something that was a single word: America.

That's my teacher! Mummy, that's my teacher! I've heard the story a number of times. Stizz the rapper, two years from high school graduation, animated in a polo shirt and skinny jeans, brings it to life as he describes walking through his neighborhood and the pride he felt when an elementary student he taught introduced him to their mom. There's another story the students I work with often share about the rush they feel when they are able to help another student understand a concept or solve a problem. In 1996, Tabia, Khari, 8th-grade Algebra Project students from Brinkley, and I, founded The Young People's Project (YPP). YPP is a Math Lab on wheels. Our first enterprise was conducting graphing calculator workshops for teachers and then students in Jackson and the Mississippi Delta to prepare them for the statewide Algebra 1 exam. Over the last 16 years, we have successfully unleashed the energy of thousands of high school students in urban and rural communities across America to work to ensure that mathematics isn't a barrier to high school graduation, college entry, or career. YPP trains and employs teams of high school students, coached and mentored by college students, to conduct math-based workshops for 3rd–8th graders in community and school-based after school programs. We call this math literacy work; enlisting the very students expected to fail (and whose failure is exploited economically) to be resources to their communities (YPP website).⁵ Through this experience, they are developing competencies critical to their future success, like teamwork and cooperation, self-confidence, achievement, relationship building, and conceptual and analytical thinking.

When we dribbled from sun up to sun down at Corporal Burns Park, we weren't thinking about our character or the skills we were developing that would enable us to be successful in life. We were all in, NBA or bust. In Mississippi, I began reflecting on the thousands of hours we spent formally and informally training to become basketball players, and how that experience helped shape who I am, how I do things, and what I'm able to do off the court. The pressure to perform, encountered in real time—a man guarding me, the clock winding down before a million eyes—wasn't limited to those moments. My ability and inability to overcome fear in a gymnasium or arena became reference points for how I approach success. As a teenager, I didn't attach these experiences to a future self, other than the image of Michael Jordan spanning the width of my wall finger-tip to finger-tip, or the one of him tilted on a 45 degree angle, ball palmed, tongue out, suspended between the rim and floor. It wasn't until I was much older that I began to intentionally translate and apply what I learned on the basketball court to other areas of my life and other images of myself. It's a lot, but necessary, to tell teenagers,

⁵ YPP currently operates programs in 10 cities, employing 400 high school and college students who work with 1,600 elementary students annually.

particularly black- and brown-colored youth to “Pay attention to what you’re learning while dribbling a basketball or marching home from school.”

When my brother and I were eight and ten, my dad moved us from the campus of Harvard University, where he was finishing a Ph.D., to the street across from the Newtown Court housing projects; conscientiously placing us among the children whose failure is predictable and profitable for American business (Whitehead, 2012).⁶ It wasn’t clear then where the choices our 10-, 11-, and 12-year-old selves made were coming from and where they would lead. Now, at the median of our lives, the various outcomes include: dead; 15 years in jail for murder; school committee member; jail for assault and battery; general contractor; jail for selling drugs; jail for drug use; meter maid; homeless; IT technician; nonprofit executive director; and financial manager. In the shadows of institutions like Harvard and MIT, most of us couldn’t see beyond what was in front of us, couldn’t imagine making other choices, and had no clue as to how they became available.

For the last 15 years, we have worked to build a healthy organization with the young people who have inherited the corners and courts; a rapper’s persona. The “We” now includes my sister Maisha, with whom I share leadership as YPP National Co-directors, and the young people who have grown with the organization (all beginning as elementary, high school, or college students), who now comprise the overwhelming majority of our central and local leadership and participate on the national board of directors (Khari is an advisor to the board). As we strive to grow as human beings and as an organization, we have spent a lot of time thinking about success at an individual level (students and staff), organizational, and community level.

Many of the questions we’ve been confronted with relate to the work of the Leadership & Sustainability Institute (LSI), which will provide member organizations with access to resources that build their capacity to make tangible progress on issues such as expanding work opportunities, strengthening family structures, and increasing educational equity. In the last three years, we have had the opportunity to work with Root Cause—the nonprofit research and consulting firm based in Cambridge, MA that worked in partnership

⁶ Between 1900 and 1975, the nation’s incarceration rate remained at about 110 prison inmates for every 100,000 people. In 1973 the first drug laws with mandatory sentencing guidelines were enacted and incarceration rates climbed immediately, doubling in the 1980s and 1990s. As of 2010 the rate was 731 per 100,000; among Black and Hispanic adult men 4,347 and 1,755 inmates per 100,000. Private prisons have grown from a billion dollar industry in 1984 to over 30 billion in 2010; its forecasts for expansion influenced by 3rd grade reading and math test scores and the passing of three strikes laws.

with the Campaign for Black Male Achievement at the Open Society Foundations to develop the plan for the LSI—to develop a business plan, and David Hunter to develop an organizational logic model and blueprint (Growth Plans, 2012). This work has clarified how we think about student, staff, and organizational success. As we build central capacity and local leadership, we seek to accelerate our ability to ensure quality programming, achieve targeted outcomes, and meet existing demand. When we began in the Math Lab a decade and a half ago, the Algebra Project provided the space, wisdom, connections, encouragement, and love for us to grow. The work that the LSI is preparing to do is invaluable in that regard. There is a need for black founded and led organizational equivalents to a City Year, Youth Build, Year Up, or Citizen Schools in both scale and ambition that are working to improve the quality of life for black-colored children in America (Black Male, 2012).

In recent discussions with students, success was described as: *happiness, always growing, having a vision and working hard to get there, overcoming obstacles, helping others on the way to success, and the ability to rise after failure*. I asked a childhood friend to join our conversation about institutional obstacles. He sat on the edge of the circle as I hesitated, unsure how to introduce him. He has been Fat Daddy or Fats for as long as I've known him and I felt awkward referring to him by his legal name. A year out of a 15-year prison sentence, he hasn't had a job his entire life. As we began talking about barriers to success, the students struggled to define "institution." Some of the ideas they came up with were *institutions have rules and expectations, they are bigger than you and impact how your life plays out whether negative or positive, sometimes they can be controlled and sometimes not*. Fat Daddy wanted to know why I had invited him to join our conversation. In his mind, these students weren't the young people confronted with the choices he had faced growing up.

He and I sat on the steps of the brick apartments his grandfather had purchased (and where his parents now live) across the street from the Washington Elms projects, a few blocks from where I grew up. *They ain't . . . but they are*, was my response. In my mind we've all inherited an equivalent margin for error. "When your dad was trying to get us to go to do math at the King School on Saturdays I wasn't trying to hear it. I had already made up my mind to go this way." He pointed away from me. "What about the ones who don't wanna join YPP and already made up their minds to go this way?"

A couple weeks ago I had lunch with him, Alex (another childhood friend who made similar choices and also ended up incarcerated) and Barbara Best who lives in Cambridge and works for the national office of the Children's Defense Fund on their Cradle to Prison Pipeline initiative. I thought they should meet. At some point the conversation became me, Alex, and Fats

talking about the choices we'd made, where they'd led us, and kids facing similar challenges. We seemed to agree on the need to build relationships with them, particularly the young people who are influential in our neighborhood and in their peer groups, and see if we can get them to experience and think about some other things.

A kid approached on his bike while Fat Daddy and I sat on the steps. He wore a Harvard jersey and shorts. They began talking shit about their game against each other the day before. The kid is wiry, approaching six feet and seemed comfortable confronting adults.

"You play for the high school?" He pointed to the bracelet on his ankle.

"How'd you get that?" He shrugged his shoulders. He'd spent the better part of the last year in jail or on house arrest. Fats tells him to bring five and we'll bring five and play on Sunday. Fat's Uncle Donny pulls up while the kid is riding away. Donny used to take us around the state when we were 10 and 11 to play in tournaments. I asked Fats, "How'd you get a bracelet at 15?"

"I don't know." He was in Billerica. How do you get sent to Billerica, a men's correctional facility, at 15?

Donny said he'd been watching the kid since he was waist high. "He can play; there hasn't been one in 20 years—he was the next you."

I show up early that Sunday to stretch and get some shots in. We are playing at The Terrace, on a court across from the apartments where the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans used to live. The park has been renovated. The neighborhood has gentrified. You get a ticket for smoking weed: the white black brown-colored arms and legs hang in clouds, listlessly from the benches. The court is empty except for a handful of boys whose shots barely touch the rim. There is no evidence of Pat and his heroic deeds. The street sign a block away with Rumeal's name has been torn down (Saslow, 2012). Fats shows up late. He brings Alex and a couple others. The kid comes with his five—three played for the high school. The ball goes up as the afternoon service at the Pentecostal Tabernacle Church on the corner concludes—Dip arrives unannounced in a two-piece suit. He watches from the fence. He had been drafted in the 1980s, led the Big East in scoring and graduated from Providence College. He played in Turkey and got hooked on drugs. When I was a kid he was the king of the court. When I was seventeen he told me I could play in the league. I believed him. Every summer I brought a jersey back for him from college; even then he would school me. 50, his knees are shot. Happy to see him I reach through the fence for his hand.

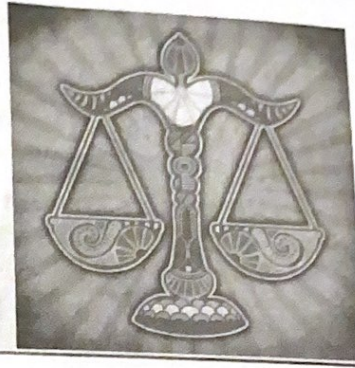
The kid can play. He can shoot, can handle, has a mid-range game, can stop and pop and get to the rim. He has the talent, skills, and heart to command

this generation of black- and brown-colored bodies lured to the chain link, below the nets, attached to the three-point line on Columbia St. We didn't let them win. We played five games, two full-court and refused to let them win. I played well enough for them to ask who I was.

The kid lives across the street from the park. I went to see him a couple days later; he was watching his son who is almost a year old. I told him I was expecting my first any day now; he seemed happy to hear that. We talked about Tommy Amaker's basketball camp at Harvard (I could try to get him in), about Lew Zuchman, a Freedom Rider, member of YPP's board and Executive Director of SCAN, an organization based in New York City that has the best Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) Boys Basketball teams in the country and gets its players into New England prep schools and Ivy League colleges (NY Post, 2012). I told him a little about where I was coming from—he seemed to know about YPP. I asked him about his plans: “What are you gonna do in September when you get the bracelet off?”

Can I Write This?

by Laurel Nakanishi



“Ms. Nakanishi, can I write: ‘You are like a bird?’”
“Okay,” I say, “why is your mom like a bird?”
“No, no, no. You are like my alarm clock . . .”
“Mmm hmm.”
“Because my mom is always waking me up in the morning.”
“Yes,” I say, “that sounds like a great simile.”
Jamy A smiles and begins to write.

*

For the last month, I have been teaching poetry to 3rd graders at Orchard Villa Elementary School in Liberty City. These classes are part of the O, Miami Poetry Festival. O, Miami’s goal is for everyone in Miami-Dade County to encounter a poem in the month of April. Mrs. Finch’s 3rd-grade class has been encountering me.

It is good to be a resident poet in an elementary school. The kids are always excited to see me. I am not constrained by the demands of state testing. I don’t have to get caught up in the bureaucracy of the public school system, but I do get to work with public school kids. And thanks to the presence of the classroom teacher, I don’t need to spend so much time doing classroom management. And best of all, I get to share my passion for poetry with children. It is, pretty much, the best job ever.

*

From a WLRN radio broadcast:

“This is my first time knowing about poetry, and it is fun. And I get to write my own poetry stories and we could talk about our family,” said Kindra Oriental, a 3rd grader.

Oriental is one of the students in the 3rd-grade class learning from poet Laurel Nakanishi.

"Sometimes they'll be like 'Is it ok to write this?' And I'll say 'Yes! Write that,'" said Nakanishi. "Because they aren't sure if they have permission to get that creative or to write about their personal experience in that way."

Nakanishi received her Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in poetry from the University of Montana and is currently studying at Florida International University.

Isaiah Bell is another one of Nakanishi's students.

"When Miss Nakanishi came here I'm like, 'Yes! We need poetry!' Because sometimes in life you have to write yourself a poetry or someone else that needs help cheering up," Bell said.

*

Isaiah sits at the back of the class smiling knowingly. He is one of the students who has taken quickly to poetry writing.

Angel raises her hand. "Can I write: 'In the evening my mom clips my toenails while screaming into the phone?'"

Yes, yes.

*

I have taught poetry to children in Hawaii, Montana, Nicaragua, and now Miami. Each of these geographical locations and the children who live there, pose different dynamics and opportunities for creativity.

Out of all these places, I am least familiar with Miami. When I moved here nine months ago, I was warned to stay out of Liberty City. "You'll get your car stolen!" a friend half-joked. When I watched the local news, Liberty City is often the background for shoots or hit-and-run car accidents. I walked into Orchard Villa Elementary School with these stories in mind. Sitting in the front office waiting area on my 1st day of class, a little girl stared, bemused, at me. She was too young to have learned to look away like her mother did. The adults in the office were extra friendly to me—the only White face in a school where almost everyone else is Black.

Good, I thought, and I tried to be grateful for the discomfort. I am half-Japanese, but few know it from looking at me. My last name is a

further mystery: "Nakaskisi?" Not exactly. We practiced pronouncing it on that 1st day of class. "Nakanishi. Nakanishi."

*

Jokira is worried. "Ms. Nakanisi, I don't know how to start."

"Okay, start with what's around you. What do you see?"

"My hand," says Jokira.

"Okay, I want you to describe your hand."

A few minutes later, Jokira is raising that hand.

"Is this okay, Ms. Nakanisi?"

I read:

Poetry

My hand,

brown,

it can write words.

*

At first, they were hesitant. Even after an explanation, examples from professionals and kids, a group brainstorm and a suggested format, the students were still uncertain.

"Can I write this?" They would ask. "Is this okay?"

"Can I write about cat poop?"

"Can I write about a square, squishy monster?"

"Yes," I would say. "That is brilliant!" "Yes, yes, yes, write it."

I think that one of the reasons that my students enjoyed poetry class is because I am so positive. I love them. I love what they write. I love how they see the world. What is most important to me is that they express themselves. I want them to take risks.

They still hold their papers up to me and ask, "Is this okay?"

I am not sure why this class in particular was so hesitant to express themselves. Thinking back to teaching in Montana, I remembered that those kids

rarely asked, "Can I write this?" Was that because they were more comfortable with poetry? The Missoula Writing Collaborative has been sending professional writers to public schools for the past 15 years—perhaps they are more used to poetry writing.

Or is it privilege? Do these, mostly White, kids feel entitled to self-expression? Are they more confident because society tells them—these White, mostly middle-class kids—that their ideas matter? I do not know.

My students in Nicaragua began by copying the examples. I would read a poem about birthday cake, and then receive 21 imitations of that same birthday cake. It took about a month to really emphasize that they could have their own ideas. As the students became more and more comfortable, I began receiving poems about solar explosions, giant brains, and wind blowing through the windows. One of my students wrote: "When my mother sweats, it is like the rain in summer."

My students in Hawaii were the most similar to these Liberty City 3rd graders. They were uncertain how to start. They would ask permission before each poem. "Is this okay?" I wonder if this need for reassurance is somehow tied to the way that we test children. In a test there is only ever one correct answer. Students must learn how to block out all of the other ideas and connections in their mind so that they may give the right response. What is the main idea of this text? What is the definition of simile? What is the setting of the story? They must recall and present just that one correct answer.

So how baffling it must be when this White lady with a strange last name walks into your classroom and tells you to write whatever you want. Any answer is correct. Any idea that you have is brilliant. I am affirmative of these students to a fault. I praise them because I want them to gain confidence in their own voice and experience. This sort of confidence is essential to writing. If you do not believe that what you have to say matters, you can never write something that will resonate with readers.

I give my students permission to be weird or silly. I want them to write about the everyday details of their lives. Once they gain this confidence, then we can start working on shaping words into art. But if they are always looking for a "right answer" in their writing, it will never be a poem.

*

Ireanna asks, "Can I write that the stars are tickling?"

*

We are writing about place. I explain that I want them to describe their neighborhood, their house, their room—anywhere they feel at home. I give them examples from my students in Hawaii: "Is your street busy with herds of rusty cars? Is your home quiet as the library?"

Vincent raises his hand. "My neighborhood is loud. They are always shooting guns."

"Okay, write that in your poem," I say. "What do the guns sound like?"

"Pah! Pah!" he says. "Last night there were these boys shooting in front of my house. They were shooting on the street and then some of them ran behind our house. We don't have a gate, that's why. They ran behind and went over the fence."

Suddenly all the words in my head are gone. What can I say to that?

"They're always shooting by my house too. I'm scared of guns," says Katron.

I tell Vincent that his story would make a great poem—"Write it down."

He writes:

I Am From

My city is very loud with the sound of pistols.

I smell the stink of the garbage.

At school, I see Ms. Finch and my paper.

At home, I love to eat crab.

It is so good, I'd eat it 24/7.

It is easy to pigeonhole these kids, to see them only as survivors of their violent neighborhood. But, as Vincent reminds us, there are many other things going on. Yes, there are guns and stinky garbage, but there is also the structure and stability of Mrs. Finch's classroom. There are also delicious crab feasts. There are loving families and wildly fun times riding bikes and playing.

*

Jamy A writes:

Five Things I Love

The hug of my little sister—

she is very special and beautiful.

The strawberry and vanilla ice cream

with a cherry on top that my mom and I share.

The pink diamond sheets on my bed

that sparkle so cute.

The candle burning on the dresser

flickering and casting shadows.

The basketball bouncing up and down

baug, baug, back.

*

I am new to Miami. I moved here nine months ago and I am still trying to figure out this city. Like every other place I have lived and visited, I am finding that it is full of complexity. These young poets are my teachers and I am learning that, unlike a test question, there is no one answer.

Miami is many different things: It is the sound of a basketball and chocolate chip cookies fresh from the oven and gunfire. It is these shining, expectant faces asking "Is this okay? Read this." Maybe, in addition to permission, my students also just want to share their poem. "Ms. Nakanishi, read mine!" They want to share their thoughts and perspective and world with me. How lucky I am to be help in such confidence.

*

Mrs. Finch's 3rd-grade classroom is packed with people—parents, grandparents, sisters, brothers, aunts, and teachers. One by one my students stand up and read their poems:

"I remember when I first started walking.
I was small and everything looked big . . ."

"In the middle of the night
I hear my sister in the kitchen
getting a night snack . . ."

"Ms. Nakanishi's glasses are popping
just like Sienna's hair . . ."

"I remember when I was in a body cast.
My auntie called me Mr. Broke-Down . . ."

"I hear people laughing
at people who are poor
because of their shoes . . ."

"Gazing up at the sky
at night
Stars are tickling . . ."

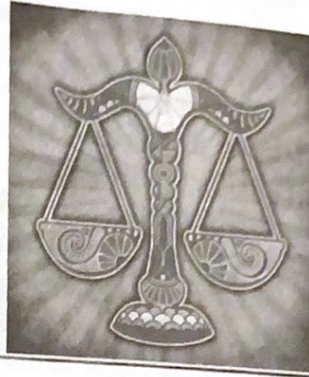
"My brother snoring with little tears
dropping down like rain . . ."

"Your hugs fill me up with love
like a balloon and spits out all the hate."

A roaring applause!

Breaking silence

by Carlos Gonzalez



Dear Students, I want to break the silence between us and talk to you directly. This will be a rambling piece, but one that I offer as a means to help you navigate through what is probably going to be a couple of years of more institutional education. I do this after 21 years or so of teaching in one place, of loving what I do, and hating with every fiber of my body what happens to many, if not most students, as they weave in and through the many obstacles called college.

Silence and Storytelling

My dad asked me to go with him to the store to pick something up. I sat in the car silently, thinking of the other things I wanted to do. I sat silently because at 18, I had no idea who my dad was or what I would ask him. I felt like a stranger to him. We had not spent much time together. Having fled Cuba with no money and little formal education, he was on a continuous survival mode, and work was priority number one.

That absence early in my childhood and my own quiet personality allowed me to make good friends with silence. Yet it's more complicated than that. It always is. As I look back at that ride now, I would do just about anything to have changed the dynamic of the situation and broken the quiet in that car. There was genuine love between my dad and me, but somehow we could not break through to one another, not at that time.

A couple of months later, toward the end of my freshman semester in college, my dad was killed in a terrible work accident. I can still recall the phone call at about 10:15 am on a clear Monday in early December 1984. I can hear my mom wailing as she came to terms with losing the man she

loved. I can feel my heart turning numb, knowing that I would never get to see him walk through our front door covered in the bagasse from the sugar mill. Losing him left a gaping hole in my heart that somewhat healed (but the gaps left by our losses never quite fill in) many years later when I became a father myself. It was then as a grown man that I started to understand my dad and to realize how difficult it is to sometimes let those closest to me into the sounds and rhythms of my heart and mind. We receive from our fathers and mothers what they received from their fathers and mothers. The generational passing down of all that is good in us and the burdens we carry leave us vulnerable to the very opportunities that call us to be our true selves. By the time my three kids reached their teens, I became aware of how hard it is to be a father and also to be a son. I saw many of the same struggles I faced manifested in my own children as they wrestled with their own voices, with their own souls, and with the challenge of relating to me. (I was not my father, but was psychically one with him.) So I entered into a fellowship of love with my children that included the gifts and flaws that make us so fully ourselves.

Over the years I came to know that the people closest to us often present the strongest challenges to our own constructed worlds. Unfortunately, we often place on these struggling relationships the burden of our own happiness and well-being. We often think the false syllogism: *If I only had a better relationship with . . . then*. If the struggles are as intense as mine were and are, they often distract us from the very joy and pleasure of the moment in front of us and move us away from the work of consciously walking down our own creative paths. We too often spend our time looking back and licking wounds than on taking a step forward in fulfilling what is our own song. (Have I mentioned already that life is short?)

If we look carefully at these and the many sources of our own wounds, we may find that these strong challenges can become our best teachers, leading us to find life's purpose and mission. Yet, when I look back at my own life and, in particular, my academic journey, I also know that nowhere in my schooling did I ever find an invitation to really explore these experiences, to look at these values and events with the same curiosity and rigor of a text that held important keys to my own well-being.

Schooling for Silence and Conformity

In schools, heart and mind rarely came together for me. Even when studying poetry and literature, the notion of the personal entering the realm of the academic never quite intersected. For me, being in school meant turning

away from a part of myself that did not belong. Maybe this was dictated by my own outsider status as a recent immigrant. When I started college, I had only been living 10 years in this country, and my parents were not fluent in English. My parents, although intelligent and gifted in so many areas, had little formal education. Maybe this and my own introverted personality were factors in my feeling so alienated. But the realities seem more complex and intertwined. Nevertheless, I hold the adults around me, those who attempted to teach me; the schools I attended; the whole educational enterprise responsible for a large part of my inability to break through. After 20 years of teaching, I now realize that I was never invited to share, to look into my own life story as a source of knowledge, wisdom, and guidance for what I was supposed to do with my academic efforts. I know now that this was a loss, a lost connection, but not an anomaly.

For the most part, school was a place where I studied important subjects, the ideas of important people (mostly dead white men), and never quite broke through to realize that within me, I had an important treasure trove of information that might be essential for my own survival and well-being; that reading my life was essential. What I did not have at the time were mentors that could show me how this was done; people with the courage to model the act of looking deep within, not so much for the sake of introspection for introspection's sake, but for the purpose of freedom and liberation. It wasn't until I left college and began teaching that I realized how the significance of allowing the personal into the academy. I remember reading the work of bell hooks and being electrified at the notion that one's inner life needed to be accessed, honored, and shared with others in order to tap into the full experience of transformative learning experiences.

Cracks in the System

Hooks' words were transformative for me. For the first time in my life, I read someone's work that actually expressed what was muddled within my own mind, that ". . . any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone's presence is acknowledged" (1994, p. 8). But how can everyone's presence be acknowledged if her story or his story is not the ground and source of that space? How can we acknowledge presence, when everywhere the academy itself is all about efficiency and productivity? Everyone is a number, an object: students, teachers, administrators.

The challenges of turning away from the process of transforming humans into objects are monumental. No institution where I've been has engaged in this process. On the contrary, from the start of my educational experience,

I was encouraged to cut out the personal and embrace the objective voice of the academy. The process for most starts in kindergarten, and by the time we finish college, most people have thoroughly been indoctrinated to believe that one's personal life belongs deep within, and that if one is to be professional, the personal has to be cut out and left out.

If we look carefully at the process of excluding the personal, for a society like ours to demand efficiency and maximizing profits would make total sense. With those goals, our educational journey must be built on a foundation of de-personalization. We can't possibly honor the quirkiness of the individual; more significantly, we can't possibly let young people believe that their lives, their stories are the source of wisdom and guidance because if we do, how could we control them? Acknowledging their individuality, their power to resist, their self-assertions, their digging for their lived truths clogs the wheels of efficiency.

The funding for schools is not set up for individual meanderings. When we look closely, we see a factory model where everyone who comes through the doors of an institution of higher learning is expected to come out shaped and marked, "ready to consume," and "ready to support production," a model that has served some people really well, while leaving millions without the ability to support even basic needs.¹ I can still recall President Bush's injunction two weeks after the 911 Attacks: "Go down to Disney World!" (CNN, 2004).

And although computer technology has exploded in the past 20 years, the tools created have moved us no closer to a personalized approach to learning. Schools buy the latest hardware and implement the most recent software, but the educational model is fundamentally unchanged. We continue to have for the most part what the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, (1996) called a banking model, one where students are seen as passive repositories where knowledge is deposited by those in control. Instead of creating a new paradigm where we can relate to one another in human-sized relationships, we create larger, so-called more productive classrooms and tout them as the next best thing that will save ourselves from irrelevance. We initiate online courses that enroll hundreds at a time. We design online degrees where one never has to meet another person. We have developed online K-12 state certifications, where a child for 12 years never has to see an instructor nor another student. We have prostituted education to support corporate greed.

¹ 45.8 million people in U.S. live in poverty. 19.9 percent of children go to bed hungry every night.

Yet, all is not lost and all is not terrible. The fact that I can look back and see the deficiencies of my student experience, and understand as a teacher how caught we are in a system, that by its nature de-spirits rather than inspires, means that there are gaps within that monolithic system. Crevices can open where we connect with others and raise our voices, read and write our stories, and learn from our experiences. Part of the challenge that we face is finding that wiggle room within our places of learning or employment, and do the kind of work that is invisible to most, unrewarded, and, sometimes, misconstrued—and may I say, dangerous.

Bad Advice

The greatest danger, however, is not from anything or anyone outside of ourselves. It is from within. There's no guarantee where the process of self-exploration will take us and how much it will move us away from the beaten paths expected of us by those who genuinely love us and those who don't. Both groups have very little sense of what is really going on within because they are operating in a world where those personal stories, desires, urgings, and callings are ignored or silenced. Lines from Mary Oliver's poem "The Journey" (Oliver, 1986) capture this dilemma:

One day you finally knew
 what you had to do, and began,
 though the voices around you
 kept shouting
 their bad advice—
 though the whole house
 began to tremble
 and you felt the old tug
 at your ankles (p. 38).

The bad advice is not always intended to be so. It sometimes comes from the best hearts and intentions. Everything that I have said here about schools and classrooms, though, is not meant as a condemnation of those who are in education. We are all caught one way or another in a very powerful web that wants us to stay asleep. It is a web that refuses credence to the voice within that is whispering sweet pleasure, love, and liberation. That web refuses any promise to transform our path ahead. But as Mary Oliver says in her poem, one day we finally know what we have to do. Walk away. Step outside. The house is trembling.