

"CAN'T LET IT ALL GO UNSAID": SISTAHS READING, WRITING, AND PHOTOGRAPHING THEIR LIVES

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In *The Peaceable Classroom*, Mary O'Reilley (1993) asks, "What would it be like to teach from the conviction that our students are artists, poets, indeed, from the knowledge that we ourselves are poets?" (p. 87). Throughout the 2002-2003 school year, I have been facilitating a photography and writing elective course entitled "Sistahs" with a small group of young women at a charter high school in Philadelphia¹. Starting with the premise that we are all artists and poets, we have pursued critical engagements with autobiographical writing and photography both in and out of school. In conceptualizing our work together, I have been inspired by Lois Weis & Michelle Fine's (2000) contention that it is in the transgression of boundaries between schools, communities, and students' lives where "youths' sense of possibility, imagination, social critique, outrage, despair, aesthetics, and social action lie" (p. xii). Within the artistic and reflective practices we have been engaged in through the literacy and photography work of this year, recurrent themes of home, neighborhood, sisterhood, and self-representation have emerged. We have gathered these themes into the four sections represented above, which you can enter by clicking on the photographs above.

The work we have collected here provides only a partial, yet hopefully suggestive, representation of the young women's artistic and activist endeavors as poets and artists who, as Sonia Sanchez writes, "can't let it all go unsaid." Collected here are works-in-progress. Here are poems written in school while gathered around an oval-shaped table covered with journals, photographs, cameras, and photocopies. Here are poems written after the voices of June Jordan, Lucille Clifton, Sandra Cisneros, and Ntozake Shange have filled the room. Listen closely and you will hear these voices in the background, sometimes whispering, sometimes shouting their connection. Here also are poems written on scraps of paper on a long bus ride home and poems written surreptitiously in math class. Here are poems composed in ten moments of concentration and poems desperate to be shared immediately and here also are poems painstakingly revised and worked through over time. Here are works written to and about the members of the Sistahs community and here are works created purposefully to make a statement to a larger audience. Here are writings composed in a flash of brilliance and sometimes in a cloudy atmosphere of doubt, boredom, confusion. Here are writings that find their source in the reflection on a photograph and a collaborative endeavor to make meaning from each other's images. Here we include images that speak to us in ways words cannot and that challenge dominant representations of young women of color. Here we have collected images of friendship, home, community, culture - images and words collected not solely for their aesthetic merits, but also for their personal and political meanings.

As a collaborative group, we made decisions together about how to present our work in this on-line journal. Here is how two of the students in Sistahs, Madonna Delfish and Yasmein James, describe the work collected here and the choices we made in the process:

We would like to share with you the writing and photography we have created together. We think this work is a reflection of the things that are left unsaid because of the scarcity of opportunities that are placed in schools for young, strong sistahs to find a way. As we do in almost all of our classes, we will share poetry written by women of color. We will also share our own poetry that was written in and out of the classroom. Our individual poems emerged from our past and present experiences, the problems we face as young females trying to make our way, and the way we are being represented in society. We start with a section on sisterhood, since this is a very important part of Sistahs; it shows how women have come a long way through writing in terms of expressing themselves. We also include two sections on our photography projects - "Where I'm From" and "Self Portraits" - that we are working on. Finally, we share some reflections on writing.

The Sistahs course also serves as the site for my practitioner inquiry dissertation². In my research, I seek to develop and document an educational arena for young women of color that is collaborative in nature and that recognizes young women as meaning-makers, image-makers, and storytellers of their own lives. I am curious about the possibilities of creating feminist and anti-racist arenas in schools and I wish to explore how young women - to paraphrase Paulo Freire (1987) - read, write, and image their worlds. I am also exploring the nature of the literacy and photographic practices that occur within a setting designed to provide opportunities for making explicit and on-going connections to students' out-of-school lives³. Perhaps most importantly

I am curious about exploring with the young women how we - as educators, students, activists, community members - can work toward the creation of educational spaces that support young urban women in "making a way."4

I would like to extend special thanks to the staff of High Tech High Philadelphia Charter School, particularly Deborah Stern and William Walker, for their support of this work. I would also like to thank Lalitha Vasudevan who devoted her considerable creative vision and technical knowledge to bringing the Sistahs' work to this venue.

I Want to Write

In my practitioner research, I have noticed that the Sistahs' literacy practices - both written and visual - are certainly full of creativity and self-expression. Yet, the more I consider their creative practices and the more we talk about their work in interviews and group discussions, the more I see their literacy practices reflected in Jacqueline Jones Royster's (2000) concept of "literacy as sociopolitical action." Royster develops this theoretical framework to consider the writing of nineteenth-century African American women writers, specifically essayists. She writes:

These women were publicly asserting themselves not only as writers with skills and abilities but also as writers with intellectual, social, and political intent. Their essays offer us prime examples of the will and capacity to use literate resources in order to participate in public arenas, and also of the desire to generate, and not just participate in sociopolitical action...These writers demonstrate that they see language/literacy/rhetoric as action. (pp. 24, 50)

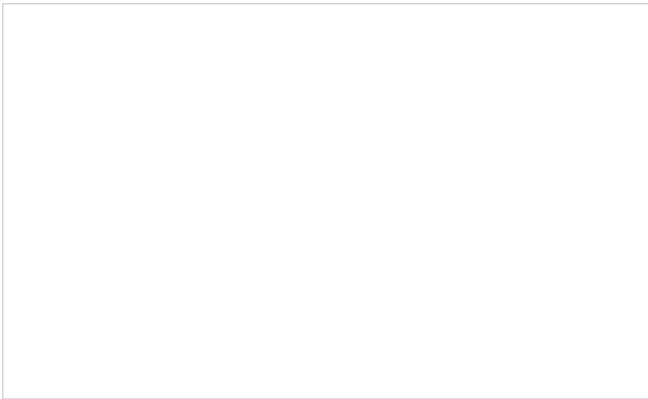
The poems gathered here were written in response to Margaret Walker's poem I Want to Write. In rich and complex ways, these poems suggest the deep social and personal significance of writing in these young women's lives. Here literacy is envisioned as a kind of forum for writing about life, documenting it, exploring it, and perhaps transforming it. Following Royster, I would argue that to share these personal and political writings in the Sistahs community and to share them in the even more public arenas in which we have presented this work can position the young women as authors with "social and political intent." When the students share this kind of writing, their literacy work moves from a private transaction to a more public kind of action. This action often inspires, educates, and affirms other students in Sistahs. In addition, it is also possible that in making this work more public this "literacy as sociopolitical action" may intervene in and challenge the dominant discourses that shape public perceptions of young women of color.

I want to write Page: 1, 2, 3

I want to write
I want to write about the struggles of
being a teenager growing up in a world
where you have to scream to be heard
I want to write about being heart broken
by someone you loved and having them
not feeling the same
I want to write about wanting
to live out our dream and wishing it comes true
I want to write about holding on to the
past and not being able to see the future
Surviving the present
I want to write about happiness that
lasts forever, and not only in my dreams.
I want to write about the pain and stress
that I have endured from being me.
I just want to write.
By Lauren Vaughn (listen)

I want to write.
I want to write about the pain that I endure.
I want to write about the hurt that will be
forever mourned.
I want to write about my tear-filled eyes.
I want to write about my calling sighs.
I want to write about the laughter in my
words.
I want to write about the freedom like a
bird.
I want to write.

By Yasmein James (listen)



Photograph by Madonna Delfish

I want to write
I want to write about the mentally oppressed
and we females who are distressed
I want to write about discrimination
that is blinding our generation, causing us the
youth of tomorrow's future to fall in the line
of demoralizing the we's and us, and the they's and yours
I want to write about the givers of
life, showing the world their strife, to come up
from under dominant figure
I want to write about our liberation
and will, to win this rat race
I want to write
I want to write about life.

By Madonna Delfish

Issues of identity - specifically as they relate to race and gender - are consistent themes in the poetry we read, the writings we do, and the photographs we look at in Sistahs. In the Self Portraits project, many of the young women began to deal with complex issues of self-representation and to ask some serious (and sometimes light-hearted) questions about how to represent themselves and how others perceived them. A poem by June Jordan entitled A Short Note to My Very Critical and Well-Beloved Friends and Comrades that we read and wrote about in class suggests a little bit of that struggle and possibility of representation.⁸

Self Portraits Page: 1, 2

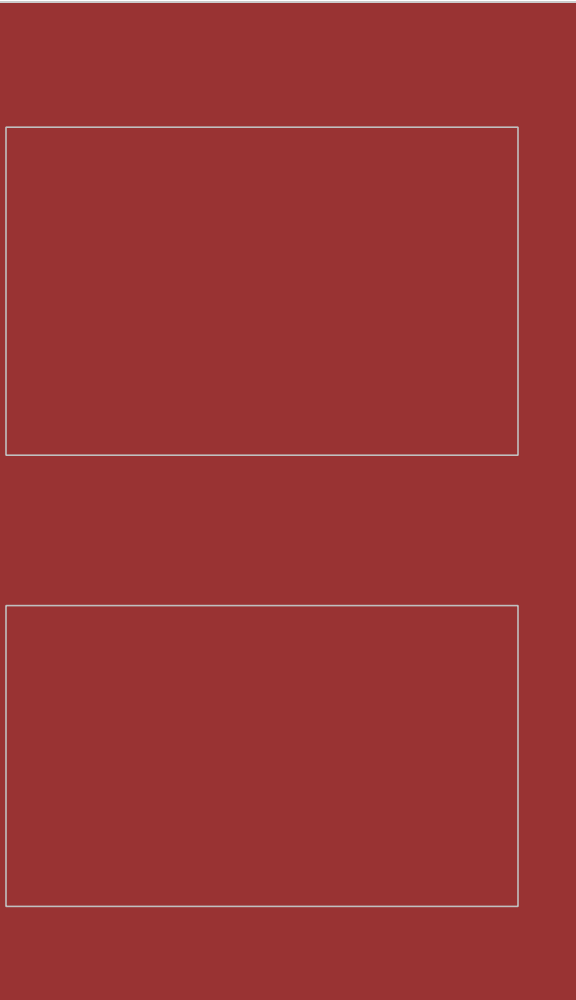
If you could look at me and tell me
who I am what is it that would you
say?

Would you judge me by the color of
my skin or push it all away?

Would you think of me as just
another teen that's confused and lost
trying to find her way?

Or would you try to look deep within?
Before you go through the steps of
looking before you think why don't
you try to get to know the person
who I really am.

By Lauren Vaughn (listen)



I see a young African American
girl wearing long braids like my
African ancestors did.

Eyes that I use to see if
someone is good or not so good.
A nose that I use to smell my
mom's great cooking.

A smile to tell people that I am
happy or wondering and thinking
of all the great things that are
going on in my life.

All these things and more make
me and that is what I see.

(What do you think of me?)

By Julia Harden (listen)

I look at me and see a girl of so
much beauty, style and attitude.
Posing for the camera and showing
it what I do.
One hand on my knee ready for the
flash.
Stylin' like a model ready to get that
cash.
I'm ready for my close up Mr. Deville
Make sure you get my good side; I
got some hearts to steal.

By Yasmein James (*listen*)



Stand up I say, for your right to
be heard, seen and felt for it is
up to you to break the barriers
that stifle and drown you in the
gutters of condemnation
Beat the odds I say for the down
pressers will always be there
making you tremble in their
presence silencing your words
like the muting of a movie scene
raping you of your rights

Face your fears I say because
we are already minorities
because of our race don't choke,
spit them out like the bullets from
a gun f*** the critics they are the
legal prejudice the one left
unseen get up stand up break
the SILENCE

By Madonna Delfish

Where I'm From

Over the course of the year, we have been working with two themes to guide the writing and photography projects: "Where I'm From" and "Self Portraits." For the "Where I'm From" project, I drew upon Linda Christensen's (2000) exploration of teaching for social justice with high school students documented in her book, *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*. The young women in Sistahs first read George Ella Lyon's Where I'm From poem and then read "Where I'm From" poems written by Christensen's students. Then they created their own poems and took photographs under this same theme. The photography component of these projects draws strongly from the work of photographer and educator Wendy Ewald who has engaged children and women worldwide for over 25 years in photographing and writing about their communities, dreams, and lives.⁷

Where I'm From Page: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)

Where I'm From

From 68th Avenue when
the presence of my uncle was
there
From Clearview St. that I lived
on for 5 years
From the playful Stafford St.,
I learned to jump rope there.
From run down Kip St. where
the squads of roaches I feared.
From the corner of Belfield
Ave. where the drug dealers squared.
Now from the quiet, peaceful
Matthews St., I'm happy to be here.

From my closet where the
box of love letters are stored.
From the pictures of my father
where my tears start to pour.
From the love of my ex that allowed
me to see more.

By Yasmein James (listen)

The picture itself tells a
thousand words
Told and untold
The stories of my African
ancestors of long, long ago
The rich culture of African and
African American heritage
mingling...forming the energy
that flows through me in me
and around me every day.

By Julia Harden (listen)

[Julia's reflection](#)

[Madonna's reflection](#)

Chil' look deep into my eyes
Let me guide you the right way
When all else fails you can always
count on me
Don't worry about what they say or do
Follow your own path and depend on
you.
Looking at you through my eyes have
always been the best
I know that you will make me proud
because you're not like the rest
You set your own goals and follow
what you must
You play when it's the time, and work
at your best
Okay now go off into the world and
show them what you got
Be who you are and the rest will come

By Lauren Vaughn (listen)

Lauren's reflection

Sisterhood

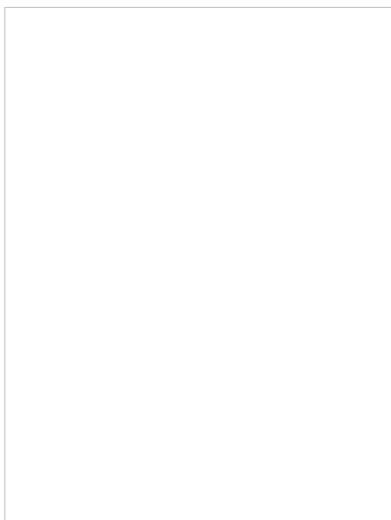
The work in Sistahs has been shaped most dramatically by a desire to co-create a writing and photography community premised on cultivating and exploring sisterhood. I have tried to envision and enact our work with writing, photographing, and sharing as central practices oriented toward community-building and political awareness of women's lives rather than toward isolated learning objectives.⁵ Graduate School, a poem by Ruth Forman that we read in class, suggests the kind of writing and photography community we have been trying to cultivate.⁶

Over the course of the year, the students have written about and photographed various aspects of sisterhood, reflecting the visions they have for it within the course and within their lives. The writings collected here range from free-writes, to journal entries, to poems.

Sister- Evita, Erica, and Alicia the greatest gifts I have in the world to be able to sit, talk and confide in my girls
Sistah- A word usually meaning a woman of color in the struggle. A woman who has had bad times. Women who have been up mountains and into small isolated caves.

Sisterhood-The togetherness of woman in general. All the woman who has ever had a crush, man, boy issues and tear filled nights. The woman who are strong when we are not supposed to be. When we are smart when we're not allowed. When we are brave in the eye of every and any man.

By Yasmein James (listen)



Me and You
(inspired by Lucille Clifton's "sisters")

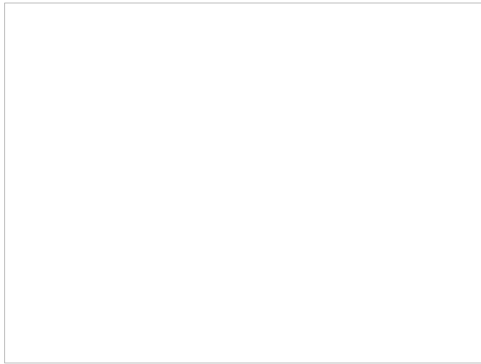
me and you be rided for each other
me and you do dirt together
me and you share with each other
if I have it you know you got it
me and you talk about our problems
me and you share our boy stories
me and you have boy problems
me = I do hair
you = do you

By Sade Cohen (listen)

Me & You: aka Shanté & Sade
(inspired by Lucille Clifton's "sisters")

me and you laugh all the time
we be arguing all the time
me and you
coming from two different places.
me and you
be dressing the same
getting touch-ups on our braids
me and you
speak our mind and we ain't
afraid of nothing
i mean nothing.
me and you
going to parties and shaking our
thing
and my mama laughs and shakes
her head at
me and you
you and me
but sometime you trade
but you're still my friend
me and you
me and you

By Shanté Johnson (listen)



Sistahs Club 2nd trimester

My dream would be
To make me, my family, and God satisfied
To be content and at peace
To find myself
To rest my wandering soul
To die with a smile on my face

For Sistahs
unity, respect, and freedom of speech
to open up their souls and write from within
accepting who we are as women, the future of tomorrow,
to anoint ourselves with words of wisdom, faith and encouragement

For sisterhood
To write about women, bring us together with words
To rise up from the oppressed
To educate ourselves, embrace
Our beauty, curves, sexuality, sensuality
To beat the odds, and stand tall
Look and learn from failures,
To give life, and add radiance to the world.

By Madonna Deflish

Sister, I Love You

Sister, I love you
So I tell you to leave
I see your pain and how you grieve
Sister, I love you
It's time to let him go
But you won't though

Sister, I love you
You shouldn't have tears
and be afraid of your fears.

Sister, I love you
I'm telling you I was there
If you listen to what I say
You hear me clear.

Sister, I love you
It's time to make a change.
You don't have to sit around
and play his same old game.
I'm here and around, not trying to
bring you down. That's why I
call your name to help you
and to care for you
because I'll always be there.

Sister, I love you.

By Jasmine Miller (listen)

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