

**Civically Hood and Misunderstood:**  
*Intergenerational Healing and the Quest for  
Educational Justice for/with Black Girl Artists*

**Authors:**  
*Jeanelle K. Hope and Vajra Watson*

---

**Introduction**

In 2017, Mercy Lagaaia—a Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS) student—competed in the International Brave New Voices youth slam poetry contest. She stepped to the mic and performed her award winning piece, “Bored of Education.” Drawing from her own experiences navigating Sacramento schools, Mercy rhymes about witnessing her peers being misdiagnosed as having attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); describes the visibility of the school-to-prison pipeline; and voices frustration with having her intelligence, civility, and humanity be decided by disengaged teachers and traditional systems of assessment that lack cultural responsiveness. She spits, “I know I’m smart, but I was taught to never forget where I came from. So for u to see the good in me, best believe u gon see the hood in me.” In embracing her own truth and identity as a youth that has been greatly shaped by her neighborhood—a predominately Black, Southeast Asian, and Latinx community that stands in the shadow of the California State Capitol—Mercy complicates notions of what it means to be civically engaged. As personified in her poem, Mercy evokes important connections between good *and* hood to accentuate the richness, resistance, tenderness, and eminent love Black girls from the block exude in spite of harsh material conditions and oppressive social systems.

Over the last decade, scholarship on Black girlhood has exploded, as scholars like Treva Lindsey (2018), Ruth Nicole Brown (2009), Marcelle Haddix (2013), and Bettina Love (2012), to name a few, have helped usher in a burgeoning field dedicated to better understanding the experiences of Black girls, primarily focusing on their relationship with education and hip-hop, the impact of gendered racism, and theorizing how Black girls navigate their many communities. In the closing argument of Hortense Spillers’ (1987) classic work, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” she argues that perhaps we should own the “monstrosity,” the hypersexualized and emasculated stereotypes that have been blindly placed upon Black women in an effort to radically reimagine a text for women’s empowerment (p. 80). Our work builds on Spillers’ call as we actively transform age-old Black girl tropes like “the around the way girl” and other stereotypes that often deny Black girls’ femininity and humanity, by delving into the nuances of Black girlhood from a Black feminist, critical education, and materialist framework.

While Black women have a formidable legacy of leading fights for freedom that impact society, discourse on their resistance tends to focus on public political activity (i.e. protests), overlooking the varied ways Black women *and* girls embody less visible, yet no less significant, change-making efforts (Perlow, Wheeler, Bethea, & Scott, 2018). Conversely, our work directly challenges traditional modes of civic engagement by providing an explicit space that celebrates Black girls from the block and how they reimagine civics.

Building on this research base, our study takes an intergenerational and intersectional approach to Black girl civics. In this chapter we delve into the pedagogical possibilities and tensions of a high school elective course taught by Black women for Black girls. Specifically, we will use this case study to (1) consider notions of Black girlhood and what it means to be accepted and protected inside a class grounded in sistahood; (2) analyze the ways the students embody and enact a form of activism rooted to their own lives, languages, and youth cultures—what we term *hood civics*; (3) argue for the necessity of this work to be intergenerational and carried out by Black women as the *pedagogy of our lives*. And (4), discuss radical love, intergenerational healing, and critical hope as a means to reclaim educational spaces for Black women’s knowledges, identities, and realities to emerge, providing important subtext for decolonizing spaces—including school systems.

### Research Context

Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS) was founded in 2008 as an innovative critical literacy and teacher professional development organization designed to engage underperforming youth of color in Sacramento. With hip-hop and spoken word performance poetry at its core, SAYS community-based educators work inside middle and high schools to provide culturally relevant instruction to predominately Black, Latinx, and Southeast Asian students via workshops, courses, mentoring, and an annual youth conference that takes place at the University of California, Davis. Over the last decade, SAYS has developed an award-winning youth empowerment model that moves “high-risk” youth to/through higher education. SAYS has also created employment pathways for former SAYS students to become poet-mentor educators and formal teaching artists. In this capacity, they complete a rigorous training that focuses on critical pedagogy, social justice instructional strategies, and educational equity. Subsequently, they work in schools and community spaces to reach and teach the next generation of warrior scholars (Watson, 2013; 2016).

In 2016, SAYS piloted a yearlong elective course at a South Sacramento high school called Project HEAL: Health, Education, Activism, and Leadership. This specialized course aimed to work exclusively and unapologetically to address the experiences of 25 Black girls who were disproportionately confronting oppressive social systems, including their school campus. At the onset, students were referred into the course by a teacher, administrator, or campus counselor based upon the following criteria:

- *Consistent absenteeism*
- *Receiving a D/F in more than one subject*
- *Multiple detentions, suspensions, and/or referrals*
- *Recently incarcerated and/or on probation/parole*
- *From a high-poverty area of Sacramento*
- *From a high-violence area of Sacramento*
- *Receive free/reduced-fee lunches*
- *Designated as Emotionally Disturbed by a school IEP*
- *Gang-involved or affiliated*
- *Will be the first in their family to graduate high school and/or first in family to attend college*

While many teachers and administrators considered these students to be menaces, as described in detail on their disciplinary records, this was not the case in the Project HEAL space. Led by two Black women teaching artists in their mid-thirties, this course was designed to align with student's life experiences and elevate their aspirations. Inside the Project HEAL classroom, Black women worked holistically to help Black girls tease through their trauma, providing space to discuss the multiple forms of violence—gang, sexual, and emotional—as well as income inequality and health disparities.

Before delving into our findings, we will first share the research questions that guided our inquiry, the process we used to collect and analyze data, and the literature base that informs the civics of Black girls.

## **Methodology**

Throughout this study, we have been guided by four overarching research questions:

1. *In what ways, if at all, does the Project HEAL elective course disrupt the oppressive nature of schooling for “high-risk” Black girls?*
2. *Does an identity-based Black girl empowerment course change the self-perceptions and academic trajectories of its students? If so, how and why?*
3. *How is this class transforming the students and the teachers as activists within the Black community?*
4. *How does intergenerational healing shape and inform our understanding of Black Girl Civics?*

To answer these questions, we relied on various qualitative techniques. Casual conversations and in-depth interviews took place over the course of two school years (2016-2017 & 2017-2018) with the teaching artists and the students. We facilitated a focus group with students (we also use the term *sister circles*), accompanied the class on some of their fieldtrips, and took fieldnotes during our participant observation of the Project HEAL elective course. Additionally, we received copies of the students' writing from the in-class workshops, analyzed their school records (specifically examining data related to attendance, behavior, and academic progress) and received course lesson plans and syllabi. Altogether, these multiple data sources allowed us to triangulate responses for patterns, accuracy, and helped us develop our findings.

### **The Intersection:**

#### **Black Girlhood Studies, Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy, and Place-Based Education**

Black girlhood studies markedly draws on Black feminist scholars whose pioneering work explored the intersection of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991); challenged the mythologizing of Black women as super-human (Wallace, 1979); moved the voices and experiences of Black women “from margin to center” (hooks, 1984); and provided new theories on Black women's thought, history, epistemologies, identity formation, and cultural production (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1981; Shange, 1976). Black girlhood studies provides a similar space for Black girls to be examined with the same rigor and nuance.

In “Super-Girl: Strength and Sadness in Black Girlhood”, Nia Michelle Nunn uses “super-girl” as a metaphorical tool to elucidate how Black girls aged 8-13 are seen as possessing

an uncanny ability to confront issues of racism and sexism during their educational experiences, while little attention is paid to the sadness that they also endure as a product of their perceived and actualized strength. Nunn’s work calls for the creation of spaces, tools, and strategies that can help Black girls work through this imbalance, specifically within education. Ruth Nicole Brown’s work (2009 & 2013) illustrates the radical potential of Black girlhood studies by providing concrete examples of Nunn’s call in praxis. In *Hear Our truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*, Brown examines how Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), a youth intervention program, provides space for Black girls to express the strength and sadness that Nunn describes, as well as create room for Black girls to envision their freedom, be affirmed, and tell their truths. Utilizing a “performative and creative methodology of a visionary Black-girlhood practice,” (pg. 3) SOLHOT helps disrupt elitist configurations of youth interventionist programming by creating a space that centers Black girls. SOLHOT, like Project HEAL, is an educational space that critically grapples with Black girlhood and youth studies by engaging the lived experiences of Black girls through liberatory pedagogies and teaching philosophies, which have been employed and developed by Black women educators.

### *Hip-Hop Feminism & Place-Based Pedagogies:*

Developing educational spaces for Black girls is very much about how we engage them, beyond employing culturally-responsive and “non-banking” styles of teaching. For instance, Black women educators created a pedagogy that rests at the intersection of hip-hop and feminism. In *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Black Feminist Breaks it Down*, Joan Morgan provides Black women with a language to describe their relationship with hip-hop, a genre that has been used to discuss the Black experience, while simultaneously garnering an immense amount of critiques for its marginalization of Black women artists, and the perpetuation of sexism and gendered violence. Morgan posits that we can be radical Black feminists *and* critical hip-hop heads—hip-hop feminists. Morgan’s framework of hip-hop feminism has inspired a new wave of scholarship within Black girlhood and education studies—hip-hop feminist pedagogy. Chamara Jewel Kwakye (2012) argues that hip-hop feminism is,

Marrying the things that we see in our daily lives as Black women and bringing those elements into the classroom in different ways and shapes and forms. The classroom, not just being these formal spaces but being in informal spaces in the community, is where we get together and talk about the ways in which our world is being shaped by—not just the music, but—the kind of things that are going on around (us) and in the everyday-ness in our lives (The Crunk Feminist Collective).

This sentiment is also echoed by Bettina Love in her work, *Hip Hop’s Li’l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South*, where Love examines how youth, in particular Black girls, make meaning of rap music and hip-hop culture as part of their identity development. This research also demonstrates that hip-hop can provide an essential text and common language for examining oppressive systems (Love, 2012). Beyond engaging hip-hop—which has arguably been a youth driven genre since its inception—and providing a space for girls, women, and feminists to challenge the genre while simultaneously finding pleasure and enjoyment, hip-hop feminist pedagogies prioritize the communities and spaces that surround students and shape their identities.

With Nunn and other scholars noting the significant role that familial and neighborhood commitments play in the shaping of Black girls' identities and how they are able to navigate school and educational experiences, finding ways to engage community in the classroom has been a successful pedagogical practice. Emerging in the mid-1990s, place-based education (PBE) is the integration of the local community's history, culture, and natural environment into learning (Demarest, 2005). Black girlhood programs like Project HEAL and SOLHOT leverage components of PBE to help empower Black girls by drawing on the "funds of knowledge" (Moll, et. al., 1992) and "resistance capital" (Yosso, 2005) of a particular area. PBE provides a space for Black girls to discuss how they navigate their specific communities. For example, when the students in our study lament about navigating violent streets, Project HEAL educators strategically create lessons that connect these experiences to sociopolitical and historical contexts (i.e., urban geography, police brutality, & gentrification). Treva Lindsey (2018) examines the schoolhouse, in particular, as an anti-Black girl space and site of state-sanctioned violence. She implores educators to listen to Black girls and elevate racial and gender justice inside schools. PBE leaves room for Black girls to be critical of their schools, which are both an integral part of their communities and often sites of terror. Students in Project HEAL, for instance, often bemoan the presence of school resource officers (SROs), and so this topic becomes a natural component of the class curriculum. Altogether, these bodies of scholarship provide a necessary framework for illuminating how to create radical spaces for Black girls to unpack layers of personal and institutional trauma as a form of empowerment and collective resistance.

### **Our Kitchen Table Talk**

Everyday Denisha Bland and Patrice Hill teach a class at Jefferson High School<sup>1</sup> in South Sacramento for Black girls—Project HEAL. In a city with several programs focused on boys and men of color, Project HEAL filled a major void by addressing the needs of Black girls, who like their male counterparts, also had high suspensions, were involved in gang violence, and were in need of guidance and support as they grappled with a multitude of familial obligations and stressors. The course started in 2016 with 25 young women from various parts of South Sacramento. Hill, SAYS Program Coordinator and Poet-Mentor Educator (PME), states that much of the first year of the course was spent building relationships, learning to be vulnerable with each other, exercising critical listening, and processing discussions around violence, trauma, the girls' often strained relationships with their mothers, navigating the foster care system, graduating from high school, and preparing for college.

Hill explains that when the class began, "we had all these big dreams" but reality quickly set in. She states it bluntly: "they was not fucking with each other." To respond to these serious frictions, "we really had to scaffold back and meet them where they were at. Like not only in their consciousness and their identity, but how they felt about [being] a young person, a young woman living in Sacramento amongst gang violence, amongst drugs, amongst poverty, amongst abuse and neglect." To shift the classroom dynamics, Hill and Bland made a conscious decision to "put the curriculum to the side" and "share who we were... We had to open up our lives—like, *no, no, no baby, Coco Mama live right down*

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of anonymity, we use a pseudonym for the name of the high school where the Project HEAL course takes place. Additionally, we opted to only use the first names of the students.

*the street... We shop at FoodMaxx too! We right here with you!"* The notion of being “right here with you” is an important concept underscored repeatedly in interviews with the students and educators alike. The familiarity served as the foundation for a family-like atmosphere that would continue to develop throughout the course. Eventually, the students gave Bland and Hill new names; now, they are commonly referred to as “Auntie Coco” and “Mama P.” This terminology demonstrates the closeness of extended kin and care created within the class (Hope, in press).

Hill and Bland describe this first year of critical listening and building sista-hood as “kitchen table talk,” drawing on generations of informal gatherings Black women and girls have had at kitchen tables as they prepare dinner, socialize, gossip, and fellowship with each other. Moreover, this reference to “kitchen table talk” also builds on the work of women of color feminist writers, like Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Cherrie Moraga, who founded a women of color press in 1981, named *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*. Similar to the press, Project HEAL has served as a space for Black women and girls to express their experiences, knowledge, and feelings on their own terms; a space where they did not need to code switch or worry about surveillance (overbearing police presence in/out of school). The students also talk about Project HEAL being the only space in their lives absent of judgement. And because of this level of safety, they consistently show up, open up, and grow. Ashanti, one of the Project HEAL youth shares,

In this class it helps to express and talk about things that I can't with my mom or certain family members. This class also is a good way to express how you feel in writing. Another thing is that you don't have to feel ashamed because the teachers won't judge you, they'll help you get through whatever your going through. Lastly, Mama P and Coco are like moms.

For most of the girls, this class is the first time they have encountered a Black woman teacher. With Hill and Bland often within the same age of many of the girls' mothers, and living in the same area as their students, they are able to foster a relational classroom environment that crosses the boundaries of the traditional role of student and teacher. For both Hill and Bland, these are not “other people's children” (Delpit, 1995), these students represent their younger selves and they often refer to them as “our babies.” This ethic of familial care permeates their pedagogy.

Inside the Project HEAL course, students engage in a myriad of writing workshops and subsequently share their work during the sister circle. The sharing circles are highly personal and many times the participants have to hold space for one another to grieve (Watson, 2017). Marcelle Haddix describes this act of critical listening as “listening face-to-face”, an integral aspect of working with Black girls in educational spaces (2013). Haddix argues that when Black women listen to Black girls, they not only validate and legitimize the girls' experiences, but they also engage in a form of intergenerational healing where they are able to center their own narratives as Black women, as well as those within their families and communities across space and time. This theme was crystallized when Hill and Bland helped the girls advocate for a new SRO. Issues with an abusive SRO were emerging from the students' writing and classroom conversations. Instead of just hearing from the students, Hill and Bland organized to get the SRO replaced. The students witnessed their teacher's agency as Black women who went against school administration and the police in order to protect them. This moment was also significant for Hill and Bland

as they carry with them memories of violence and harassment at the hands of law enforcement throughout their lives.

With the classroom acting as a symbolic kitchen table, Project HEAL has created a welcoming and affirming learning environment for Black girls, and often serves as a driving force for them to even come to school. Within the first two years of the program, we were able to track a 48% increase in attendance and a 17% decrease in suspensions, expulsions, and detentions. Moreover, we examined student transcripts and patterns of achievement began to emerge. The smallest grade point increase was .5 and the largest increase was 2.8 points. Across all students, the average increase was 1.6. In other words, prior to the intervention class, a student had an average cumulative GPA of 1.8 and after the course, the GPA increased to a 3.4. This leap in school engagement and academic success is the byproduct of a classroom oasis that radically engages Black girlhood. For these students in particular, this can literally mean the difference between life or death, between a college dorm room or a prison cell.

### **Write to Live:**

Starting in the 1980s, South Sacramento developed a reputation for its gritty landscape—widespread poverty and drug addiction, thriving gang culture and street violence, and few community resources—which only worsened with “War on Drugs” policies. Black, Hmong, Vietnamese, Tongan, Latinx, and Samoan youth turned to the streets, redesigning South Sacramento’s geography through gang lines, creating makeshift families of their own, and surviving from work within underground economies. Moreover, over the past two years, Sacramento County has made the news on several occasions for officer involved shootings, with often unarmed Black civilians as victims. The March 2018 killing of Stephon Clark in his grandmother’s backyard by the Sacramento Police Department (SPD), created a movement within the city. The shooting, similar to much of the city’s gang violence, took place just a few miles from the school and in the heart of South Sacramento. Being constantly surrounded by death has left many of the Black girls in a constant state of grief, or at an impasse where they are desensitized to death.

During a writing workshop, Mikela explains this grief through a spoken word performance poetry piece:

#### *Blood On the Streets*

Fatal Attraction.

Trigger happy boys always claiming they’re bout that action.

They cling to the streets like it’s the latest fashion.

I’m just waiting for #RIP to go out of style.

Heard my brother just got shot 9 times and you expect me to smile.

Dead in a ditch with no friends beside him but a “friend” was the accused and was standing on trial.

One color can end your life, one word can change their minds.

One word scars all our minds.

INJUSTICE!

114 between 2007 to 2018.

How many more dead teens before the truth can be seen?

There's rising violence in my city.  
The Capital City.  
Divided.  
This definitely ain't one sided.  
One against another.  
Brother against brother.  
Police against "other".  
I'm waiting for the day when gun laws make a difference  
and we can stop harming each other.

This poem succinctly captures the history of gang, street, and state-sanctioned violence in Sacramento, underscoring how perpetual violence impacts youth, in particular Black girls, as they continue to navigate through life without their loved ones.

Part of democratizing the Project HEAL classroom is allowing the girls to curate the art, images, quotes, and overall décor of the space. With many of the girls having lost family members, intimate partners, and friends due to gang and state-sanctioned violence, they insisted on having a space within the classroom to memorialize folks—the RIP wall. The wall is a space for the girls to post pictures of their loved ones; to serve as a reminder of the ills of violence; and to provoke discussions about how the girls can become agents of change.

During the beginning of the second year (2017-2018), a new group of Project HEAL students began to build out their RIP wall. Several girls discussed not wanting to post pictures of their friends and relatives because they did not want to remember them based on how they were depicted in a particular image, or because the picture was only in black and white, or even because their loved one's enemy was also posted on the wall. After several weeks, the wall is now full, probably too full considering that these photos represent young people across South Sacramento that have died far too soon.

A number of school teachers expect students at Jefferson to block out and compartmentalize their trauma, this is antithetical to the Project HEAL pedagogy. Hill and Bland are adamant that it is unrealistic for student's to "block out" their trauma. The only way to heal is to deal with the trauma head-on and heart open. As Bland exclaims, "we got to be able to deal with that and confront that before we can get to learning."

As skilled facilitators, Hill and Bland use the RIP wall as space to build solidarity across South Sacramento. The wall is one of the few spaces where it is acceptable for people from rival gangs and neighborhoods to be seen in such close proximity of one another. The educators are able to delve into discussions around gang prevention by reflecting on the many lives plastered on the wall, using those images as cautionary tales, while leaving the girls with hope and alternatives to what gangs often provided— security, family, and fast money. Many of those posted on the wall have been vilified and dehumanized in both life and death because of their connection to the streets; often seen as not worthy of being remembered. But even though their lives were riddled with violence, they were still someone's brother, sister, uncle, auntie, father, or partner. Bland posits, "we just wanted the youth to be able to keep those people with them because if that person means so much to you," explains Bland, "then how can you take that person [with you and] still navigate" through life so that "you don't die with them." "That's my biggest thing," and she



straightens her back and leans forward, “you can't die because your brother died or your cousin died.”

Shawn Ginwright's recent article (2018), *The Future of Healing: Shifting From Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement*, challenges the ways trauma reinforces harm instead of creating space for healing. He asserts, “without careful consideration of the terms we use, we can create blind spots in our efforts to support young people” (p. 3). To empower young people who are experiencing layers of grief, healing centered engagement is explicitly political, rather than clinical. The Project HEAL classroom reverberates with this philosophy. “We do not reject that death is something that everyone has to face and go through; it's a part of life,” explains Bland. “It is part of the common humanity that binds us. So instead of breaking apart we find ways to bond.” The RIP wall and the discussions that unfold are often therapeutic and one of the few forms of grief counseling available to the girls.

Similarly, Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade (2009) uses Tupac Shakur's metaphor of roses growing from concrete to describe educators' experiences in teaching youth in underserved communities. He argues that hope has been worn down in these communities, and youth have often been given a false sense of hope. Thus, it is the responsibility of educators to utilize a pedagogy that draws on critical and material hope—teaching that connects the violence, outrage, and trauma youth experience to actions that will help relieve their suffering. The RIP wall, writing and performing poetry and spoken word, conducting research on issues that are stymieing growth and wellness in their communities, taking students to attend city council meetings, field trips, and even helping students find employment and/or extracurricular activities, literally and figuratively turns nouns, like hope, into verbs.

### **The Pedagogy of Our Lives**

Hill and Bland both painfully discuss the present-traumatic stress and persistent isolation their students experience. Often, they do not open up to anyone about what is going on in their lives. Bland remembers a hard day, “This year we had one young sister and she ended up catching an STD; she was hurt. She walked through the whole day of school carrying that she had this STD and when [she] got to seventh period, she just came in the classroom and she was *just crying*.” Instead of probing to find out what was wrong, Bland explains that she “just hugged her. I hugged her for a long time.” After whispering a prayer into this child's ear and letting her weep, she asked what was going on. This young girl shared that she had caught an STD.” After taking the student to get the proper medical help, “we went out to eat so I could make sure that no side effects took place from the medicines.” Bland grins and shakes her head, “we just like spent damn near forty-eight hours talking about why protecting yourself is important.”

Based upon this exchange, Bland designed a follow-up writing workshop for the entire class. She was taken aback that many of the girls did not know about safe sex. As one student told her, “Ms. Coco, I never had a talk about this. I never knew why condoms was important.” Bland's response to this health scare demonstrates a pattern inside the Project HEAL classroom—student's lives *are* the curriculum.

Even though the class focuses on real-life strife and struggles, this is only part of the pedagogy. To avoid an entrapment of low expectations— where everyone wallows in the pain—writing exercises are designed to turn pain into power. Reality must meet rigor in order for the curriculum to become empowering.

An essential component of Project HEAL is using reality to unlock reality. In other words, how do lessons inside class impact larger issues of violence at school and in the neighborhood? How does the curriculum shift student agency, advocacy, and sense of personal and collective responsibility within/for the Black community?

The answer, according to Hill and Bland, are consistent, methodical *rituals of awakening* that occur through dialogue, carefully crafted writing workshops, and sister circles. Writing individually but then sharing publically has a layered impact:

- Even though there is usually a writing prompt to get the words flowing, the free-write process is a practice in freedom; there are no restrictions to what a student puts on the page.
- Most student's open up in their writing and there is a personal intimacy and innocence that lies beneath the hardcore masks and tough fronts (Dance, 2002) they often wear to survive.
- As student's listen to each other share in class, it becomes clear that they actually have a lot in common. Being young African American women from South Sacramento with a range of struggles is actually a foundation for unity, instead of peer-on-peer brutality.

Learning and healing are reciprocal. Bland shakes her head, "I'm healing everyday with these girls. They're teaching me something new about myself. They teaching me how to have my standards. It's helping me find my queendom and also helping me want to be able to walk and live better as well." Bland is describing what her colleague Patrice Hill calls, "a pedagogy of our lives," in that the educators are building a curriculum and employing a pedagogy that also speaks to their lived experiences, and provides space for them to think through their own healing, especially around childhood trauma and educational justice. Hill and Bland provide a classroom experience that they believe they would have greatly benefited from when they were Black girls.

During our interviews, Hill reflected on her own upbringing, "My Blackness was never protected because it was never acknowledged." Patrice carries these intimate, personal experiences into the classroom and is adamant that as a teaching artist she will use Project HEAL to shift students towards taking pride in their Blackness. To achieve this goal, she asks herself a profound question each week: "How do I manifest Blackness and beauty with each lesson that I teach?"

### **Hood Civics**

With Bland, Hill, and the larger reputation of SAYS in the spoken word community, the presence of creative expression is salient in the Project HEAL course. Bland and Hill instill in the youth that poetry is practice in freedom; a tool of liberation and activism—artivism. Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre (2008) define artivism as, "a hybrid neologism that signified work created by individuals who see the organic relationship between art and

activism” (pg. 82). They posit that for Chicana youth, activism is often deployed as a means to transform themselves and their communities. Bland has a similar outlook on activism and its utility for Black girls. She defines activism as,

Using your art to do better for your community. Or using your art to speak about something... I actually learned it over the years, but just political art. So, like, using my voice and my agency to do better for my community, in some type of way. And I always have that on my mind every time I sit down to write a poem that’s like one of the first things I think about. Is this poem, is this poem for me first? Is it something I just need to write and put in my book? Or is this a poem finna be something that I need to give to the people ...SAYS actually helped me learn that.

Similarly, Bland states: “I think when you are conscious of your art and how it affects people then you become an activist.” Inside the classroom, Bland consciously demonstrates that “art can educate people.” Art helps “create a third space,” she explains.

Historically, marginalized populations have leveraged poetry as a genre and method to articulate their politics, and often to dissent, on their own cultural terms. Sandra Faulkner (2009) argues that poetry often pays attention to the “particulars” of embodied knowledge, providing insight on developing politics and new realities. Furthermore, women and youth have utilized poetry within social movements where they have been silenced. Cheryl Clark (2005) and Jeanelle Hope (2018) posit that Black and Asian American women and youth in the 1960s were major poets of the period as they often used poetry as a form of activism after experiencing sexism and misogyny within grassroots organizations. Thus, youth activism in praxis is using art, in this case poetry, to elevate the voices on the margins to help develop and articulate youth politics; establishing youth agency; and to employ spoken word performance poetry as a vessel for youth to become authors of their own lives and agents of change.

In the next piece, Destiny declares who she speaks for and why.

*My Story*

My story is for the depressed kids.  
My story is for the neglected kids.  
My story is for the stressed kids.  
I come from a city of Black crime and dangerous times.  
My eyes see a crazy city and a work in progress.  
My ears hear yelling, gunshots.  
My city is hate and people dying.  
My home is full of stress and babies crying.  
My school is full of ignorance, discrimination and stereotypes.  
My voice screams love and peace.  
My voice demands control and power.  
My voice dreams of justice.

In 2016 Destiny, a Project HEAL student, wrote the aforementioned during a writing workshop. The poem is centered around her finding her voice to share and critique her surroundings, later calling for justice, demanding control, power, and to be heard. Project

HEAL youth, like Destiny, have shared their poems at city council meetings, performed on local and national slam poetry contests, and presented at local protests and demonstrations. The pieces that they perform in public often discuss Sacramento's current affordable housing crisis/resegregation/gentrification, police brutality, gang violence, public and mental health, domestic violence, and critiques of the foster care system. By using activism as a means to discuss issues around social justice and their community, this is how our Black girls remain civically engaged. Moreover, being unapologetic in the centering of their voices and experiences, as well as holding it down for their hoods, which are too frequently ignored, Project HEAL students expose, explore, and embody the meaning of *hood civics*.

### Conclusion

Many studies focus on the leaves—that is, the facts and figures that are the byproducts of certain kinds of programs. Then there is research that emphasizes the branches, those correlations of how, why, and where the leaves connect. And there are plenty of examinations that simultaneously consider the historical context: the roots. Our intention, however, was to dig (literally and figuratively) through layers of discoveries, constantly triangulating among multiple sources, to uncover the seed that holds the soul of the story—the lifeline. Extending this metaphor of a tree, neither policymakers, scholars, nor practitioners can plant a tree with leaves, limbs, or even roots. To authentically sustain and replicate this work in Sacramento and beyond, the seeds of liberation need to be identified and planted abundantly; this is how a single tree sprouts into a world of Black girl magic.

Why is the seed so important? Because it holds the essence and presence of being and becoming. As a lesson, nature implores us to re-center the seeds of transformation and growth towards a Black feminist epistemology. Moreover, since Black women are the original women of this earth from whom all humanity comes from, then returning to these roots might move us past reactionary politics that engage whiteness. What if to be civically engaged meant to be away from the white gaze? What if this is the praxis of freedom that grows, shapes, and reconfigures society at the social, material, racial, cultural, and intellectual levels? What does it mean to not only teach, but nurture the next generation towards greatness? As a small process of inquiry, we delved into a classroom that reverberates with the heartbeats of Black life, Black sistahood, and Black activism. This is precisely what Mercy is urging us to do at the beginning of the chapter. By seeing the hood in Black girls, and them claiming it, we not only rewrite a text for Black girl empowerment, but also see how this generation is redefining the politics of place and complicating how to be, civically.

## Bibliography

Clarke, C. (2004). *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

CrunkLife. (2012, October 17). Learning Community with Black Girls. Retrieved November 30, 2018, from The Crunk Feminist Collective website:  
<https://crunkfeministcollective.wordpress.com/tag/feminist-pedagogy/>

Duncan-Andrade, J.M.R. (2009). Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(2), 181-194.

Dance, L. J. (2002). *Tough Fronts: The Impact of Street Culture on Schooling*. London: Routledge.

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: The New Press.

Ginwright, S. (May, 2018). <https://medium.com/@ginwright/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>

Haddix, M. (2013). Chapter 7 Visionary Response: Listening "Face-to-Face" and "Eye-to-Eye": Seeing and Believing Black Girls and Women in Educational Practice and Research. *Counterpoints*, 454, 191-199.

Hope, J. K. (2018). Chapter 5 Poetic Justice: Bay Area Afro-Asian Women's Activism through Verse. *Freedom's Racial Frontier: African Americans in the Twentieth-Century West*, 128-145.

Hope, J. K. (in press). I'm a Artist and I'm Sensitive About My City: Black Women Artivists Confronting Resegregation in Sacramento. *The Journal of American Studies*.

Love, B. (2012). *Hip Hop's Li'l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South*. Peter Lang Publishing Inc.: New York.

Lindsey, T.B. (2018). Ain't Nobody Got Time for That: Anti-Black Girl Violence in the Era of #SayHerName. *Urban Education*, 53(2), 162-175.

Nun, N. M. (2018). Super-Girl: strength and sadness in Black girlhood. *Gender and Education*, 30(2), 239-258.

Perlow, O., Wheeler, D.I., Bethea, S.L., Scott, B.M. (Eds.) (2018). *Black Women's Liberatory Pedagogies: Resistance, Transformation, and Healing Within and Beyond the Academy*. Palgrave Macmillan: London.

Sandoval, C., & Latorre, G. (2008). Chicana/o Artivism: Judy Baca's Digital Work with Youth of Color. In A. Everett (Ed.), *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media* (pp. 81-108). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

- Watson, V. (2012). *Learning to Liberate: Community-Based Solutions to the Crisis in Urban Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Watson, V. (2013). "Censoring Freedom: Community-Based Professional Development and the Politics of Profanity." In *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 46:3, 387-410.
- Watson, V. (2014). *The Black Sonrise: Oakland Unified School District's Commitment to Address and Eliminate Institutionalized Racism*. Final evaluation report submitted to Oakland Unified School District's Office of African American Male Achievement. <http://www.ousd.org/Page/12267>
- Watson, V. (2016). "Literacy Is A Civil Write: The Art, Science And Soul of Transformative Classrooms." In Papa, R., Eadens, D. M., & Eadens, D. M. (Eds), *Social Justice Instruction: Empowerment on the Chalkboard*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing. (Book Series on Education, Equity and the Economy)
- Watson, V. (2017). "Life as Primary Text: English Classrooms as Sites for Soulful Learning." Invited submission for The *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, an affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English. *JAEPL*, Vol. 22, Winter 2016–2017.
- Watson, V. (2018). *Transformative Schooling: Towards Racial Equity in Education*. New York: Routledge.

## Appendix



Fig. 1. Illustration of Patrice "Mama P" Hill. Drawn by Tessa Russell-Harde, SAYS Poet Mentor Educator



---

Fig. 2. Illustration of Denisha “Auntie Coco” Bland. Drawn by Tessa Russell-Harde, SAYS Poet Mentor Educator





Fig. 3. A group photo of some Project HEAL students, Patrice Hill, and Denisha Bland attending a community event



Fig. 4. A group photo of some Project HEAL students