

# Learning to Live Out Loud



Photograph of Erica DeCuir © Students at the Center video project.

*In the following essays, Erica DeCuir, one of the McDonogh 35 students who helped establish SAC, and Adrinda Kelly, a member of the first SAC class, reflect on how crucial their high school creative writing experiences were in countering the harmful effects of racism in their lives and in their communities.—The Editors*

## *Teaching History, Teaching Identity*

ERICA DECUIR

It took me a long time to overcome the speech impairment inherited from my parents. In elementary school, I would listen silently to cruel jokes and constant teasing about my hair, shoes, eyes, nose, and mouth. My mother would tell me to just ignore them, to sit with other quiet students or alone if possible. When I was ten years old a cashier in the local grocery store accused me of stealing gum. There were other students in the store stealing candy and because I was wearing the same uniform and walked in with them, I was considered a likely accomplice. My father told me to forget about it, to never go back there again. I grew up watching my parents do this in all aspects of our lives: avoid the bill collectors, ignore the unruly neighbor, be patient with the family members who take advantage of you. My parents had succumbed to a common trait of tired Black folk in the Deep South: Don't question authority, be honest and hardworking, and focus on the struggle for survival.

I never witnessed my father speak up for himself. He would either leisurely suggest another way of working out the solution or gravely plead for leniency. As a result we always received the bad part of a deal. The car payments with outrageous interest rates, the overtime worked but paid at regular salary wage, the contractors who spent months completing house renovation. I remember when I was twelve years old and we needed to repair a breakage in our roof. We paid the roofer

one half of the amount and paid for all of the materials. When after two weeks we didn't hear from the supposed roofer, my father somberly said that there is nothing we could do about it. We had to wait another year until the roof was fixed. When not talking about bills, or car repairs, or maintenance to the home, he fell silent.

Contrary to my father, my mother spoke all the time. She talked about friends, family, births, and deaths. She talked about her job and asked about our day at school. She talked about Halloween parties and what to cook for dinner. She talked about everything except her thoughts, her dreams, her wishes, her interests. She skirted around problems with happy faces and trips to the ice cream parlor. When my sisters and I got into a fight with other girls in our neighborhood in the lower Ninth Ward, she took us out for dinner and told us to forget about it. Two weeks later we moved to a quiet neighborhood in Gretna, Louisiana. My mother believed that anything could be cured by looking away from it. Her speech impairment was possibly the hardest for me to overcome. And my sisters too.

I struggled with my family's muted existence until high school, where my determination to be cool and popular was a big part in me beginning to gain my voice. Unfortunately, my first attempts were of a disruptive nature. I began to roll my eyes and talk back to teachers. I began to question rumors floating around school and dazzle the boys with sharp comebacks to their flirts. My mother, increasingly alarmed, forced me to apply to the competitively academic high school, McDonogh 35, at the end of eighth grade. I went to the entrance exam, tried to fail it on purpose, and wound up getting a place in the freshman class of 1994.

In high school, my new environment pushed me to focus on academics. McDonogh was reknowned as a hub of the Black intelligentsia, and it prided itself on excellence. A blue ribbon school, it boasted more Black college graduates than any other in our community. Because of the extreme dedication to academics, each student's popularity was in direct proportion to his/her ranking in the class. It was not uncommon to hear McDonogh students speak of "rank"—it guided our lives. Every so often the counselors would announce a list of names on the loudspeaker, students who must report immediately to the office. Sometimes these lists indicated which students were on academic probation, but other times they were lists of the top students. We all fell silent to see if our names had been added to the list.

It was then that I began to write in earnest. I had always written things down; it was my secreted voice in the silence of my home. When I was in elementary school, I would write my retorts to all of the kids who teased me. I would write my hopes and dreams, silly things in a diary about famous rap singers, and my frustrations. But in high school, I learned how to construct meaning from texts. I learned how to weave multiple texts together. I learned how to recognize and convey analytical thought. I learned how to question the writing of my peers and provide constructive criticism. I learned how to value my voice.

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In my English honors class, we read Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. I was sixteen years old. Through the complexities of hegemony and repression under the slave regime, the decision of Sethe in killing her children became powerfully clear—and understandable. In Sethe—and subsequently in Celia the Slave, Harriet Jacobs, and Sojourner Truth—I saw the extreme lengths these women went to to secure their voice. It was so valuable to them. Some made profound statements with their actions, like Celia and Sethe, and others strongly protested orally and in writing, like Jacobs and Truth. They fought so hard for the ability to shape their own lives, to determine their own fates, and to achieve this under the somber realities of their lives.

My teacher Jim Randels encouraged us to give opinions on the subject matter, to write not only in the traditional discourse but through the medium of our own experiences. At first, we sat in a circular pattern and told stories about our lives and compared them with the decisions these women made. I remember feeling very small and self-conscious—I had never taken a stand in my life. I had been taught to accept, to adapt, and to deal with whatever life gave me. When I told Mr. Randels that I didn't have anything to contribute, he told me to speak to just that: "Talk about why you have never taken a stand in your life, then write about it." Many of the other students talked about defending someone against a bully, or giving help to someone in a situation, but none of us had really taken a stand on something in our lives.

Our conversation then took a crucial turn: "Why didn't we?" Why didn't we call the police and report domestic abuse when we heard shouting from our neighbor's home? Why didn't we confront security men in department stores when they followed us around? Why didn't we react when there were injustices facing us? There was ample talk of fear and acceptance. There was ample talk of hopelessness. Students began to passionately recall situations where they could have done something, should have said something, but didn't. We analyzed historical factors of repression and hate, we examined color consciousness and notions of inferiority, we acknowledged the role of survival and the determination to maintain some kind of peace. I realized that my parents' silence was much bigger than them. It was a pattern of deferred dreams and dead uncertainties. It was a cycle of promise and disappointment. Under the burden of it all my father fell silent. The weight pushed my mother to place all hope in her children and give up on herself.

When I began to write, I became intrigued by the role of history in shaping our current lives. I saw myself in subject matter and began writing from deep inside myself. I compared myself to the "crazed" women described by Jean Toomer and by Alice Walker in her *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. And, like Pecola in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, I shared my own secret childhood fantasy of blue eyes (mine are green). Our classroom became a haven for free thought and comparative analysis to all things: text, self, world. Teacher became co-learner. Students became co-teachers. A radical concept soon emerged: Students at the Center. A pedagogical strategy that combines reciprocal teaching, cooperative learning, and critical thinking based upon a firm belief in the value of students' voice.

And Alice Walker and Harriet Jacobs were only the beginning. Eventually, Plato's *Republic* sparked heated conversations on the role of government. And later, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* led to a debate on the role of women in "The Wife of Bath's Tale." We soon moved fluidly through course content—sometimes meeting the standards, sometimes not—and covered everything "from Plato to Tupac."

Six years out of high school I reflect on my learning style a lot. Now completing my Masters in Social Studies Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, I frequently observe high school classrooms and advise teachers on new studies and methods in the teaching of history. I am always wary of quiet classrooms where students sit listening with hawk-eyes. Are they learning, or are they mentally checking off their to-do lists? When I introduce Students at the Center methods, the class wakes up. I see in them the same engagement, excitement, and passion for writing that I witnessed in New Orleans.

I am the frequent critic of those who say urban students can't make it, they can't pass the tests, they can't grasp higher levels of thinking. Being a product and a teacher of public schooling in an urban environment, I know it can be done. Engage them in practice, make curriculum relevant, allow them to grow through education. Value their voice.

## *Resisting Invisibility: Reclaiming Historical Relevance through Writing*

ADRINDA KELLY

What struck me first was the ease with which he communicated with us. He didn't try to adopt our mannerisms and speech patterns in a clumsy effort to connect with the querulous brown faces staring at him across a divide far wider than the three feet that separated his desk from ours. Rather, his quiet manner and contemplative voice with its strange inflections—inevitably isolated in that enclave of Black Southernisms—still managed to speak without stumbling.

I wasn't expecting that. In eighth grade, I had an arts teacher, also white, whose narrow speech bruised me. One day in class I found myself working with a boy I liked on a clay-sculpturing project—admittedly less interested in the clay than I was in the particular way in which his long fingers molded the gray mounds—when our teacher came over to us, annoyed by our laughter and hormonal display, and declared that "you people" don't know how to act and never should have been allowed in this school. I've long since forgotten that teacher's name, but I remember her look—disdainful, disgusted, sure. It seared my insides until the only thing that filled my vision was her overwhelming, incomprehensible whiteness. I felt overcome by a need to assault it. "Bitch," I said under my breath; in my mind, I screamed it. She heard, and sent

me to the principal's office. Fighting tears and trembling from anger, I stumbled out of that classroom into an awareness that I had never known before.

More than a decade later, I am still struggling to understand that moment and its implications. I realize now that my anger had less to do with her racist remark (growing up in New Orleans had prepared me for random acts of bigotry) than it did with the fact that she had made me feel conspicuous. She had singled me out, pointed to my blackness, and said "This is why you are here" and "This is why you don't deserve to be here." In doing so, she had yanked me out of a condition of benign invisibility that I had accepted as my norm long ago.

I carried that moment with me into Mr. Randels's Students at the Center (SAC) classroom. On that first day he asked us to talk about ourselves, to express our reasons for taking the class. I found this extremely difficult. I listened to my classmate Allen Powell speak about his dream of becoming a world famous journalist and make jokes about Mr. Randels's flexible approach to deadlines and assignments. Like Allen, I aspired to become a writer, but felt shy about expressing this in front of the class. I wanted to melt into the shadows. Was I afraid of ridicule? Exposure? Vulnerability? Where did this fear of being seen and heard come from?

I didn't read *Invisible Man* until I was a junior at Harvard, but have long been familiar with the angst expressed by Ellison's unnamed protagonist. I know firsthand what it is like to be rendered invisible because of your likeness to a group—my eighth grade teacher had taught me that. She couldn't look at me—a young woman with a schoolgirl's crush—and see a daughter or a sister whose behavior, while reprimandable, was certainly not reprehensible. Instead, she homogenized me with her ugly and derisive "you people," and enabled herself to dis-remember my individual merits and shortcomings.

But should I blame her?

I couldn't see me either.

In the SAC classroom, I began to understand the mechanisms behind my shadow existence. I was introduced to bell hooks. I read *Playing in the Dark: Blackness and the White Literary Imagination* by Toni Morrison. I realized that my gender as well as my race circumscribed the way that I thought of my presence in the world. The females in my life were all strong, resilient, hardworking models of Black womanhood. Yet the women of my developing literary and historical imagination, who were *they*? What did *they* look like?

As a child, I was a voracious reader of historical romance novels by V. C. Andrews and Kathleen Woodiwiss and contemporary sagas by Danielle Steele and Jackie Collins. My mom encouraged me to read these books, passing them on to me after she was done, teaching me to love the make-believe worlds in which these heroines moved. It didn't matter that I didn't look like them or sound like them, had no experience with the locales that housed their fictional dramas. I forced a connection between myself and these characters: shadow, if not quite reflection. I was Scarlett O'Hara on costume day at my junior high school; I idolized the poster of Vivien Leigh hanging up on my bedroom wall. I escaped from my everyday—overheard parent-talk

about too many bills and no money to pay them, firsthand knowledge of sweet-tooth want but belly-empty can't have—and inhabited the worlds of women who were beautiful and long-suffering but always triumphant in the end. If I encountered no heroines in my particular situation—African-American, adolescent, struggling within an historical legacy I had no words then to designate—it didn't matter, because I imagined myself differently than what I was. It was this self who, during a conversation with my mother about the bewildering antics of “white folks,” declared “Racism doesn't exist anymore!” and truly believed it. More than confused, I was blind, lost. I didn't know who I was, and worse still I had no words or space in which to pose the question.

In class, I discovered I did indeed possess a presence and a voice. There, I was encouraged to look at my world and get angry at my position in it. Why did my all-Black, blue ribbon high school bear the name of one of Louisiana's largest slaveholders? What was the history of the run-down Treme neighborhood that I walked through every day to get to class? What little Black history I knew was watered down and incomplete: Egypt, slavery, civil rights. With no point of historical reference within which to situate my Black, female, adolescent body, is there any wonder that I thought of myself as invisible?

Using the story circle as a tool, Mr. Randels helped me discover an alternative concept of history, one rooted in individual memory, where I could claim such a connection. As I listened to my classmates recount stories about their mothers and grandmothers, I realized that these histories—individual, small, local—were as (if not more) important to my burgeoning sense of self than the canonized histories used to order and divide time and place. These family stories—hidden histories, if you will—spoke to a social and cultural milieu that was defiantly African-American, and helped legitimate my developing sense of presence in and entitlement to this broad, various world.

Increasingly fascinated with the concept of historical anonymity, I found myself forcefully drawn to the story of the 1811 Slave Revolt. SAC had been working closely with the African American History Alliance of Louisiana to plan its forthcoming commemoration activities of the revolt. The fact that I had never heard about the 1811 uprising—inspired by the Haitian Revolution (which led to that more famous event in U. S. history, the Louisiana Purchase)—neither in nor outside the classroom, shook me to my core. What did it mean that I had never been taught about one of the largest (and nearly successful) displays of defiance in Louisiana's slaveholding past?

This is just one of the questions I posed in “Resistance,” an essay I wrote in my SAC class as a senior in high school. Rereading that essay now, I am struck by its passion, the weighted anger of every carefully chosen word, and the sense of urgency and fearlessness that comes across. Something important is at stake here. I wrote this essay at a moment when I was just beginning to understand that the world—and all that is wrong with it—was much bigger than the smallish spaces in which I operated. Me—Black, female, public school-educated, underprivileged—I had found a voice.

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**Excerpt from "Resistance"**

Imagine the same hands that cherished a Black woman's hips made bloody in the sugar cane fields of master's enterprise. Imagine having to mend those hands, to cradle the broken fingers that made your children, restoring them with your tears and your care. A cycle of brokenness begins that is bitter to the spirit, and it becomes easy to consider death and murder in the connotations of freedom. "Resistance! Resistance!" The chant begins on the lips of Charles Deslondes and then carries to the church and the cabins of the discontented until one after the other begin to steal away, slaves who are stealing themselves from slavery and returning to the camaraderie of Black men with a cause.

And when the day came to pillage and plunder like some great avenger, Black men again slashed the sultry air with blinding smiles as beautiful as they were deadly. They fitted themselves with firearms and swords and fists and marched in unison to the demand: "Freedom or Death!" They stopped at plantation after plantation, returning a mortal death to the white men who had killed their ancestry and independence daily. Their numbers swelled to five hundred as both men and women joined the battle cry, enlisting each other to be like the Haitian revolutionaries who had won a country in the name of African independence. To be a woman then and have bloody hands sear your hips in a painless lovemaking! To know that this child of insurrection would be your own, no longer having to share your breasts with the greedy pink babies your womb did not remember. This was the reward, and it steeled your soul from remorse. Enough to kill and be judged and know that your babies would own themselves.

Some sentences continue to strike deep chords—"Knowing no examples of African intellect and accomplishment...I marvel at the light-skinned, light-eyed Blacks who are closer to whiteness than I'll ever be"—and prompt me to consider how I've learned to define my beauty and self-esteem in the five years since this essay was written. Other moments astound. The lyricism of the injunction to imagine being "a woman then and have bloody hands sear your hips in a painless lovemaking!" is revealing in its empathy for the invisible dozens who sent lovers to fight. These anonymous women—experienced in this essay as a plural rather than an "I"—seemed to speak out to me from the annals of uncovered history. I became fascinated with their stories—untold and imagined—because in them I saw myself. Like me, they were shadow existences, struggling for historical presence. In re-imagining their stories, I make a move toward recovering my own visibility and, in the re-telling, I probe issues of self-identity, education, and community.

One of the recurring themes in “Resistance” is the notion that mis-education can be as damaging a condition as enslavement or ignorance. I am clearly angered by my lack of knowledge of African history, but in retrospect I’m not sure that ignorance of Africa was the real source of my angst. Certainly, I am more American than African; and while I rightly question an “America that has taught me to disgust my blackness,” I must also acknowledge that the Africa celebrated in this essay is as foreign to me as the received European histories that helped “negate my identity.” In other words, knowledge of Africa is not the answer. Rather, I think that the notion of being conditioned to subscribe to a binary logic that informs every tenet of our society—right and wrong, rich and poor, Black and white—was the real problem I had with my education up until that point. In my essay, I make an intelligent observation about the need to categorize people in order to apprehend them without fear when I write of “beige babies who were cursed at conception for not being classifiable.” An emerging sensitivity to “in-between-ness,” to “liminality” when it comes to these inherited categorizations, is struggling to be expressed here.

Having recently transitioned into an editorial role in trade book publishing, I see a need for the kinds of stories unearthed in Mr. Randels’s classroom. These histories are essential points of reference for the invisible millions who, like me, cannot see themselves in the world, and therefore have no sense of entitlement to it. I’d like to think that I’ve come a long way from that girl who ran crying out of her eighth grade classroom. Certainly there are still moments when I want to shrink back in the shadows and watch the world happen around me rather than take on the burden (and responsibility) of my presence in it. Yet, whenever I feel like that, I hear the voices of ancestral women calling out to me from the grave, and I remember. And because I remember their stories and their struggles, I go on.