“Something Good Distracts Us from the Bad”

Girls Cultivating Disruption

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Abstract: There are increasing demands that scholars of girlhood studies pay attention to the ways in which girls of color challenge the powerful discourses that work to constrain them. I take up this call to action through an analysis of the spoken word poetry of black, brown, and mixed-race high school girls in New Orleans, Louisiana. I discuss varying levels of consciousness about these discourses as represented in the poems of three girls aged 14, 15, and 16 that offer nuanced entry into the ambiguous process of their developing identities. I link instances of disruption highlighted through their poetry to aspects of their day-to-day experience to present a theoretical intervention that I call cultivated disruption that points to the ways in which girls of color are already practicing poetry as pleasurable and creative survival.

Keywords: black girls, discourse, identity, New Orleans, performing bodies, poetry, spoken word poetry, subjectivity

“Down Here, We Will Kiss and then Kill You”: Contradictions and Disruptions

Twenty-five faces, different shades of brown, eyed me from their desks. It was the end of their school day and I was taking up chorus time earmarked for singing, so it had better be good. We were going to spend that afternoon making use of a literary and feminist tradition designed to explore how girls “engage with the complex identificatory possibilities … to negotiate their gendered, raced, classed, and sexed identities” (Gonick 2006: 2) and thus resist the normalized oppression they experience. The spoken word poetry (SPW) examined here was produced at the introductory workshop hosted at a Catholic high school in New Orleans, Louisiana, as part of a global series that implements arts curricula designed specifically for girls. In this article, I focus on how a discourse analysis of SPW created by girls of color might illuminate their adolescent experiences in relation to these “identificatory possibilities.”
Girls of color face many social forces working to subjugate them. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) defines the pervasive “controlling images” that must be confronted “by producing and making visible alternative understandings that reject the dominant group’s definition, [as] a core element of freedom from oppression” (quoted in Jaksch 2017: 120). Girls use SPW to render new ideas about freedom and offer important insights about the discourses dictating their lives as they grow up in New Orleans. Clarsey, aged 16, used her poem to inform us that desire and violence co-exist where she comes from because “down here, we will kiss and then kill you” (Fieldnotes, April 2016). Clarsey complicates the controlling narrative with more context in her following spoken line: “We may bend but we are never broken.” After her performance I probed, “What about Nola makes you proud to grow up here in spite of having to ‘bend?’” She attributed her survival techniques to growing up in her hometown, the same community that placed her in danger. “I’m proud to make it here, good and bad these are my people. I’m proud to excel at school and also know how to get around my city.” Clarsey’s survival was a source of pride for her; she was charting a new narrative by claiming her acumen to navigate academic desire and violence simultaneously, aligning her street smarts with her scholarly prowess. Through the acts of writing and performing, Clarsey found pleasure and support, celebrating herself “[as] valuable [and] responded to … on stage” (Weinstein 2010: 18). SPW offers an effective example of how girls of color practice a politic of survival which ensures that they are listened to, centered, and valued, and which encourages them to revise histories that otherwise diminish their agency. Clarsey’s poetry represented her performances in everyday life, contesting what success means for girls who are positioned in social competition.

Jessica Ringrose effectively dismantles the persistent “successful girl discourse” that assesses success through “individual academic performance which is then used as evidence that the success is achievable, and the current educational policies are working” (2007: 471). Ringrose argues that this definition of successful girls “consistently conceals how equality is related to issues of class, race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship and space/location of schools, as well as to gender” (473) and punishes those who fall short. Successful girl discourse assumes that equality has been achieved, when, in reality, the “inequalities that are racialized and gendered remain entrenched” (Koffman and Gill 2013: 85) and heighten the ways in which underserved girls are positioned to compete for limited opportunities, recognition, and survival. Yet the girls I work with consistently challenge the objectification
of the at-risk girl of color and use poetry to demonstrate that acknowledging their vulnerabilities does not equate to a lack of agency.

SPW can be used to engage with socialized gender practices such as familial expectations around “how [girls] develop relationships and manage conflicts” (Letendre 2007: 357) and their behaviors, abilities, and gender performance. Following Gwendolyn Pough et al. (2007), the major promise of SPW is that its imaginative implementation is a powerful method for unearthing ways in which girls are enduring and confronting such practices. Infused unexpectedly into the school day, the deliberate incorporation of creative practice (such as these workshops) from an outside source recalibrates girls’ engagement with the familiar act of writing. Cultivated disruption transforms how we implement the creative process by embedding an intentional, disciplined procedure of care into cultural practice. Cultivation implies that attention is given to the girl and her disruption, furthering a framework centered on what Ronald Pelias (2004), in the title of his book, calls “a methodology of the heart” that analyzes the feeling that being unsettled can produce. Taken as cultivated disruption, SPW encompasses the communal learning experiences occurring in the processes of writing, revising, rehearsing, and performing. Ruth Nicole Brown (2013) insists on an integral component in her facilitation of black girls’ writing and performing—“the Act of Recognition [of] who walks with us” (64). Following Norman Denzin, I want to “write those histories in” (2006: 427). By actively Recognizing, two things happen. First, expressing gratitude to those who have made it possible to take up the struggle honors community. By making visible the often unseen “intergenerational activism” of the title of Emily Bent’s (2016) article, along with advocacy genealogy, our roles are clarified. Second, acknowledging who walks with us refutes the ideology of individualism and isolation. Walking with me are the girls; they are drawing me beyond our realities toward something greater.

The Act of Recognition matters because girls who cultivate disruption are examining “how [they] belong, or not, to many communities in various ways” in order to “make sense of [their] lives” (Brown 2013: 114). Marla Jaksch situates this epistemological practice that “emerges from the everyday lives of girls” when she insists that “a better understanding of how subjectivity is produced, performed, represented and policed in the United States and beyond” (2017: 120) is critical to survival. SPW does not exclude experiences that emerge beyond normalized social boundaries based on gender. Rather, it delves into complex expressions of love, desire, pain, and more. SPW as a practice of cultivated disruption lends itself to analyzing such productions because it deliberately centers how girls prioritize such expressions.
Performance: Call and Responsibility

For girls of color, performing SPW defies reality without denying the material consequences to which they are subjected, and, according to Susan Weinstein and Anna West, “performance creates a forum for negotiating the tensions between safety and risk.” Immaterial conflicts that occur when we critique the narratives scripting interpersonal relationships are made tangible through performance. Indeed, “performers present critical representations of social realities [and] the dominant culture’s interpretations of those realities are renegotiated by audiences and performers who explore the discursive tensions” (2012: 289). Performance makes such ambiguities inhabitable and proves that subversion is always possible.

When girls understand themselves as performers and constructors of knowledge, the classroom is transformed into a reflexive space (Jocson 2009). Constructing new knowledges in collaboration with an audience allows girls to embody contradictions, performing these roles on their own terms. Attention to the body is critical. As the site of performance, the body is where pain and power are often simultaneously experienced. Hip-hop feminist Aisha Durham insists that we must acknowledge the art that causes us “to react at a visceral level” (2010: 129), especially when considering culture produced by girls of color. Adrienne Rich suggests that laying claim to the heart, body, and how the work feels is the only way to “understand both the loss and the pleasure that is bound up and set loose” (2001: 67) through the poetic performances the body produces. Each performance creates space that simultaneously invites struggle through acts of resistance and an exploration of survival undertaken with the understanding that we “reserve the right to communal pleasure” (Rose 1994: 85). Cultivated disruption can occur anywhere, but in this case, it presents an opportunity to write freely, uncensored, without a grade at stake while inhabiting the space of the classroom. The significance of the classroom is important in New Orleans: the chance to write for fun is uncommon in most high school experiences, but particularly in this district.

Considering the “spaces” and literary practices that afford opportunities for black adolescent girls to make meaning of their identities within schools and to “mediate tensions with selfhood” (Muhammad 2012: 205) is critical to the reflective endeavor of transformative pedagogy. bell hooks reminds us that “education as the practice of freedom is not just about liberatory knowledge, it’s about a liberatory practice in the classroom” (1994: 147). As pedagogy, SPW functions “as a new discursive practice by marginalized
youth as a means to invert the practices of power within their own social and political context” (Endsley 2016: 5). The politicized space of a classroom is key because it positions peers and teachers within established boundaries and routine while inverting their positions of power. Because SPW inherently involves risk-taking, “the structure of the experience is predictable; the particular nature of the experience is not” (Weinstein 2010: 19). Cultivated disruption occurs most effectively outside of traditional curricula while maintaining the familiarity of the classroom. This provides girls like Clarsey access to structured time and the safe space necessary for unpacking their desires and reconfiguring the violent manifestations of master narratives.

According to Sarah Projanksy, master narratives are invested in reproducing “a narrow version of acceptable girlhood: the impossibly high-achieving heterosexual white girl who plays sports, loves science, is gorgeous but not hyper-sexual, is fit but not too thin, learns from her (minor) mistakes, and certainly will change the world someday” (2014:1). This version of girlhood excludes all the girls with whom I work. Furthermore, they write poems that are far more complex and rich than the “sentimental political storytelling [and] neo-confessional narratives … that eliminate the larger social and historical context” that Aimee Cox (2015: 148) warns us against. These girls author stories in their poems but what they are rarely offered is a platform from which to share them. When girls take the stage, they breach the distinct borders surrounding their subjectivity so ideologies that have muted or rearranged their stories must rupture. How we attend to these ruptures requires us to be literate in girls’ embodied language including “raised eyebrows, side and rolled eyes, a particular intonation, a smack of the lips, out-of-turn talking, and shared hugs” and, as a result of the physicality that occurs in SPW, “we become aware of what we do not know” (Brown 2013: 186). In recognizing the cultivated disruptions made possible by coming together as artist and audience, SPW attunes us to model accountability through performance “so that leaning on each other becomes more familiar and acceptable” (189) and so we become better at it.

I Come From: Identity and Place

Maisha Fisher suggests that SPW invites us to “value framing [our] own identity through life experiences and sharing critical thinking about local and national issues” (2003: 371) and thus articulates the major objective of this project. The workshop series includes peer-to-peer editing, revisions,
photography, and hour-long sessions focused only on performance techniques. The first prompt is “I Come From” and this invites a consideration of personal contexts through individual writing and asks for words to complete the line. After writing, the girls are encouraged to edit as they listen to each other reading their lines aloud. Uncensored writing allows for the inclusion of contradictory terms that respond to a single prompt. Next, they begin to craft their poems by adding detail and description. The final step is sharing their poems.

The following analysis explores poems that represent three different stages of awareness of the social tensions affecting the girls. The sorts of pressure surrounding their identity vary, as do the tactics they employ to mediate these demands. This outline reflects the fluid process of subjectivity that applies SPW to an attempt to understand girls’ experience without reducing or limiting them to it and becomes a practice for what might “encapsulate experience in order to control it” (Gonick 2003: 29). I selected these examples because they show how girls become aware of dominating discourses, and how they support themselves as they “bring about their own vision for an empowered girlhood” (Walters 2017: 26).

**Lost and Found: Identity in the Middle**

I come from a broken home  
Loneliness  
I come from a city where you’re scared to go outside  
I come from arrogant people  
I come from a beautiful brick house  
I come from mistakes  
I come from intelligence  

I come from a house where it sounded noisy from yelling  
I come from judgmental people  
I come from depression  
I come from confusion, I come from shyness  
I come from God. (14-year-old Sakura)

Sakura was a puzzle in her performance. She was not the first girl to volunteer to share, but she did not have to be prompted to do so either. Her voice was quiet but steady and her body was almost perfectly still. She held her paper with both hands until she was finished, turning it as needed. During her entire performance, her eyes never left her paper, and as she walked back to her seat, she never once looked up to acknowledge the applause or verbal
encouragement she was given by the others. Her performance required careful listening. Even in the “less [formal] read-arounds at the end of writing workshops, teens find themselves, their words, and the experiences they reflect” (Weinstein 2010: 18) given focused attention, and the behavior of the audience is regulated. The silence during Sakura’s performance should be read as an indication of her audience’s respect because “there are varying intensities of response to each individual’s performance, but there is a baseline of encouragement for the very act of writing and then performing that writing in front of others” (Weinstein and West 2012: 290). There was no way to know in the moments after Sakura’s performance whether she received what Weinstein calls “the external rewards that generate internal confidence and make the risks worth continuing to take” (22). Did the resounding applause at the end of her performance bolster Sakura’s confidence? I hope so.

What draws me most to Sakura’s written poem is her forthright acknowledgement of the sorts of places from which she comes and the apparent lack of angst she experiences in spite of the contradictions she articulates. States of “confusion” and “shyness” are traditionally viewed as negative ways of being and to be avoided but are claimed here by Sakura in her only line that refers to two states. Throughout the poem, she identifies contradictory parts of her life which is not uncommon for girls who must contend with the “matrix of domination” (Collins 2000: 18) where racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression intersect. Girls facing these challenges are often labeled as being at-risk, described as falling short of a set of standards nearly impossible—and often undesirable—to meet. They are then blamed for making poor decisions and shirking responsibility if they do not excel, amplifying the rise of Projansky’s “spectacular girl” and the subsequent fall of her counterpart, the at-risk girl. Therefore, Sakura’s summation in her final line is important: “I come from God.” Sakura closes with a retreat into a sense of belonging, perhaps wishing to trace the experiences that confuse and isolate her from “judgmental” parents back to an abstract notion of God. The finality of this last line and Sakura’s opening references to dichotomously constructed terms situates her identity in the “thick, complex, richly textured and uncategorizable middle” established by Cox. The middle is what constitutes … ‘truth’ or … legibility as fully human” (2015: 10). Sakura’s poem exposes her struggle to be legible by acknowledging the external forces shaping how she experiences her life, but she is not yet able to name how she might resist them. Sakura moves through a middle that spans her fear and “loneliness,” encompasses her “mistakes,” her “confusion,” and her “intelligence,” while allowing her to abide concu-
rently in a “broken home” and in “God.” Her poem articulates an awareness of the oppositional constructs dictating much of her life and provides a starting point for determining how she might be capable of working towards a different version of success.

Social institutions like family and school consume large portions of girls’ lives, often working to ensure that they are read in disempowering ways while managing them accordingly (see Foucault 1980). These relationships are, as James Gee reminds us, ruled by “institutional racism and reality, created positions from which certain people are expected and sometimes forced to act” according to “traditions and laws [that] define a specific social position” through which “their words and deeds are interpreted” (2000: 105). Sakura records the impact of these realities, resulting in her “broken home” and fear of “the outside.” She perceives that others such as her “arrogant people” are powerful enough to assign her boundaries and she describes her response to the task of embodying fractious modes of identity and social location. She knows these maneuvers are complicated and understands that part of her survival is managing a compartmentalized life. Sakura demonstrates a way of using SPW to cultivate disruption in the midst of being a girl in this particular problematic environment.

Just as her life is taking place on the margins of society, Sakura’s poetry is located there, too, literally written in the margins. Her words frame the edge of her paper, forcing me to read her poem by re-centering where her life takes place: if I want to read her, I have to move to where she is. Through her writing Sakura creates cultivated disruption even as she obediently follows the prompt, although I am not sure that she grasps how skillful she is. Of the poems discussed in this article, Sakura’s is the most troubling because there does not appear to be any appreciation of her own worth in the turmoil she faces. As the youngest of the three poets her age corresponds to the level of awareness expressed in her poem. The only other mark on her paper is a tiny heart with a peace sign inside it, doodled on the upper right-hand corner. She is oriented from and towards the margins; it is here that she seemingly finds peace.

**Perfection and Potential: Identity in Family**

I come from imperfection. I come from a mother who loves me
I come from work, grades, lies, and trying to be perfect.
I come from a family that is broken but it seems like I’m the only one who realizes it.
I come from a family that just puts on an act in front of other people.
I come from tears and heartache.
But then I realized
I come from joy when we all get together and hear everyone making jokes.
I come from smiles and laughter when something good distracts us from the bad.
I come from my family. (15-year-old Saint)

Saint’s hand shot up when I first asked who would like to share her poem. She was eager to write and eager to be right. She could not stop giggling, bringing her paper up to hide her face as she tried to calm down. She had to re-start her performance twice, once because she stuttered over the line “I come from a family that is broken” and once because tears came to her eyes as she read this same line. After a long pause, Saint managed to push through to the finish despite being choked up, and she ran back to her seat. Her emotion caused others in the room to call out to her, and another girl began to cry silently. I looked to the teacher, unsure of what to do about the girl who sat still, making no attempt to wipe away her tears. No one else reacted to the crying girl but they all cheered loudly for Saint when she was done.

Saint’s performance provided a chance for her to be acknowledged for her presence, and “for the hard work of composing and writing the words, the emotional risk of self-revelation” (Weinstein 2010: 19). Saint’s words accomplish what performance studies scholar Richard Schechner suggests as most powerful, the creation of “the very social realities they enact” (2006: 42). Her emotional reaction, and the resulting tears from the audience demonstrate the unpredictable ways in which SPW functions as community advocacy, connecting the audience to the value of the individual experience. Augusto Boal assures us that audience members have the potential to “train for real action” and to “assume the protagonist role [to try] out solutions” (1979: 122). Saint exemplifies Boal’s transactional approach to a performance which “prioritizes embodied ways of knowing” (Durham 2010: 129) and provides a dialogic template to structure the deeply personal feelings as expressed by the girl who cried during her performance. Starting a second time, Saint indicates her desire to rehearse her poem in a different way; she was auditioning different ways of being. “The interpretive possibilities are abundant, especially when we represent embodied knowledge in forms devalued in the academy (e.g., spoken word)” (Durham 2010: 130). Saint’s cultivated disruption encompasses multi-faceted interpretations of the discourse she presents.

Saint’s poem offers a second level of awareness; she identifies as a black girl positioned in social competition and describes this struggle as “trying to be perfect.” Her poem demonstrates that acknowledging her struggle and vulnerability does not mean that she lacks agency, yet she refuses the easy reading of “optimistic stories of overcoming” (Cox 2015: 148) or neoliberal
“redemption narratives.” According to Cox, the fiction of such stories insists on a “black girl [who] is expected to fly without seeking redress or leveling accusations” (149) and Saint’s poem enacts this very fiction, confronting the expectations of the social transaction she is expected to complete in exchange for her being read as a good girl.

Saint writes that she comes from “imperfection” and situates that broad term somewhere between her “mother who loves [her]” and a list of responsibilities including “work [and] school,” and a desire to become the perfect good girl that she is “trying” to be. Her splintered environment is represented by her “family that is broken” and, in “[putting] on an act,” which, along with the rest of her family, she must perform while the pressures she feels are specific to the categories of “grades” and “work” in her attempts to attain perfection. Saint positions herself as the girl subject caught up in striving for that impossible neoliberal ideal of perfection that pervades public discourse and “[creates] massive contradictions for girls” (Ringrose 2007: 474). The contradictions are found in her poem; she tells “lies” and “puts on an act” that appears to follow the optimistic spectacular girl script. She confesses to “trying to be perfect” but does not (or perhaps cannot) meet her goal. Her single story is no match for Ringrose’s “wider popular cultural consciousness” (2007: 474) about who girls are supposed to be. While both Saint and Sakura are deeply connected to family, Saint appears to be using these lines to sort through the “interplay of [the] external and self-evaluations fueled by … representational … labels” (Cox 2015: 10) of popular discourse about girls. Saint’s poem moves past Sakura’s as she goes beyond describing her experience and embodies, instead, the “schizoid pushes and pulls [that] operate as one of the new normative conditions” (Renold and Ringrose 2011: 393) with which girls are forced to contend. We see a girl who wants to be exceptional while also resisting that narrative in acknowledging the value of her family.

Family is the arena where Saint first recognizes her ability to actively construct her identity and influence the external factors that shape who she is becoming. She resists performing alongside her family whose members “just [put] on an act in front of other people” but she does not describe what caused her “tears and heartache.” She chooses to protect her family, thus activating her own agency, and holds them accountable yet refuses to dissect their deeds. Her cultivated disruption can be seen at that pivot in her poem where she accepts the responsibility of acknowledging that however “broken” her family is, there is “joy when [they] all get together” and there are “smiles and laughter when something good distracts [them] from the bad.” The family that isolates her is changing her and it is here that she practices that
Act of Recognition. Those from whom Saint initially distances herself by referring to them as “a family” later becomes “my family,” indicating her claim on them, despite their faults, even as she works through her own. Her cultivated disruption rests in the middle, within the same ambiguity she feels while constructing her subjectivity and relationships, “searching for herself in the other” (Gonick 2003: 24) of her family. If her family can be a dynamic embodiment of contradiction, then so can Saint.

For a 15-year-old girl in a tumultuous world, the Act of Recognition is powerful, and it allows Saint to explore the incongruities in her developing identities, reconciling her experiences. Saint puts poetry to work, using her words to disrupt the impulse towards impossible standards of perfection in tracing, instead, a bright thread of possibility.

**Success and Failure: Identity in Community**

I come from Nola
I come from the bottom, tryna get to the top
I come from friendships that never existed
I come from my mother who always uplifts me
I come from happiness always trying to be torn down.
I come from the originals who can’t ever be replaced
I come from beauty that can’t be bought
I come [from] constantly messing up.
I come from always trying to fix it. (16-year-old Ash)

At the end of the workshop, Ash walked calmly to the center of the circle of desks and introduced herself. A clear, loud voice came from this slender girl who took care to act out each line of her poem. Ash made eye contact with different audience members at different times, locating them within the context of “Nola” and making them all shout “Hey!” She brought her hand low for the words “started from the bottom” and then slowly raised it up “to the top” and the rest of the girls continued singing the lyrics to the song. “Started from the bottom, now we here, started from the bottom now my whole team here!” they shouted, in a crescendo of volume, laughing and dancing in their seats, making Ash pause and dance until she decided it was time to continue her poem. The audience was hooked from that point on, snapping for her line about her mama, they claimed “I know that’s right!” after her line about unbought beauty. Ash invited their physical responses and fed off their energy by growing her gestures until she finished, taking a sweeping bow and walking proudly back to her seat.
Ash’s audience was the liveliest. The boomerang of call and response between the artist and the audience in Ash’s example provides evidence of how the girls’ “lived experience mediates how [they] express culture” (Durham 2010: 130). Ash’s poem was well received in part because her performance relied on her identity in relation to the immediate community of her audience. They recognized her in their celebration of relatable experiences which freed them to respond in ways ordinarily reserved for times when they are not around adults. Ash’s confidence is a result of her encountering past “risks and [experiencing] success meeting challenges” (Weinstein 2010: 21). Ash’s control of her body as conductor of this performance relays how such opportunities might have an impact on girls, providing a chance to “continue facing their fears and trying when things seem hard” (22).

Ash begins at home in Nola figuratively and literally. Immediately, she invokes the popular hip hop song by Drake (2013) entitled “Started from the Bottom, Now We Here” that describes the struggle of maintaining authenticity while on the path of upward social mobility. Perhaps most telling in her invocation of Nola and the reference to Drake’s lyrics is that Ash uses abstractions outside of herself to describe where she comes from. The poem rhythmically tracks her climb towards material success while those she assumed to be friends fade away as if they “never existed” yet she “acknowledge[s] the others that walk with her” (Brown 2013: 64) like her mother. Ash’s poem highlights the “ambiguous practices of identity” explored by Gonick et al. which are important in the process of subjectivity negotiation undertaken by black girls who, being neither “agent” nor “compliant” are expected to perform in “normative, socially constraining and often contradictory spaces” (2009: 6). Ash’s words indicate this uncertainty; hers is a less prescriptive experience than Sakura’s but expands what Saint recognizes as the struggle between being considered spectacular versus being at-risk. Ash swoops through the individualistic desires scripting social mobility, fully aware that she “comes from the bottom” level of socioeconomic status but actively working to change how she is labeled. She is aware of the systems that work against her so she relies on herself, signifying action not found in the other two poems.

Ash aligns herself geographically and culturally with “Nola” and later as a descendant of “the originals” thus indicating a more abstract point of origin. Do the “originals who can never be replaced” refer to her ancestors? We are not told. Ash associates “happiness” with something that is “always trying to be torn down” but does not explain. We do know that “[her] mother … always uplifts [her]. Ash describes the complications she experiences and
seems to work towards conceptualizing her own core values—she comes from irreplaceable “originals” and “beauty that can’t be bought”—in spite of succumbing to pressures and “tryna get to the top.” We read that Ash is “constantly messing up’ but “always trying to fix it.” Those “schizoid pushes and pulls” (Renold and Ringrose 2011: 393) operate quite differently for Ash; she is psychologically as agile as her poem is choreographically and is swift to adapt.

Ash’s poem offers a praxis of cultivated disruption, a method with “potential to continually rejuvenate and reorient itself to chart new alternatives” (Cox 2015: 234). Her ideas build on the stages represented by Sakura and Saint, acknowledging that she is familiar with the frustration of “constantly messing up” but she insists that she is capable of something better and we can easily envisage her “always [fixing]” what needs to be fixed. Ash understands herself to be in process. She is aware of her shortcomings but, where Saint was striving “to be perfect” Ash writes instead about always getting it wrong. Does Ash see herself as a girl in process rather than a girl in pursuit of the glossy lie of perfection that appears to tempt Saint? Perhaps Ash understands that evaluated against the spectacular girl, she will always be found wanting, and that a perfect girl is not a real girl. Yet in her claims of inventiveness she seems to understand her own ability to take actionable steps and alter her realities.

An Ending

The stages represented here are marked by the girls’ poetic embodiment of their histories. I recognize them in community and academic spaces as cultivating disruption, lest my work and theirs be reduced to what sister scholar Carmen Kynard warns “can become merely the stage for an academic performance and not a way of engaging the world and the oppression in it” (2015: n.p.). Cox reminds us that while the site of the performances—girls’ bodies of color—are usually the sites at which they experience intense degradation, they are simultaneously the locations of “potentially socially transformative responses” (2015: 2). My bodies of work, the girls’ bodies that are put to work, and these community bodies we assemble to work together have the power to transform us as they are translated. These words are “indications of systems we need to address” (Kynard 2015: n.p.) and connections that must be soldered within the contradictory destabilizing middle where transformation happens.
I conclude by returning to Ash’s last lines, which graciously make room for others who relate to “constantly messing up.” We will be okay as long as we try to fix what is wrong. I hope this is close, Ash, and that I am getting it right. Saint, hold tightly to that bright thread of possibility as you embrace contradiction. Sakura, work the margins but explore the open spaces, too.

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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. My use of the capital R here is intentional given my understanding of the importance of this Recognition.
3. The inspiring work of Adrienne Dixson and her colleagues (2015) investigates the state of public schooling post-Katrina and the intersections of race and critical education in their analyses of the privatization of New Orleans’s public schools. See, also, Donnor and Dixson 2013.

References


