

# “BECAUSE I WON’T EVER FORGET”: TOWARDS LIVINGNESS IN YOUTH POETRY

**Alisha Jean-Denis**

*Independent Scholar*

**Korina M. Jocson**

*Associate Professor, University of Massachusetts, Amherst*

I come from a bloodline of survivors whose very palms were the  
blueprints of my destiny

– Lily

Trying times all the time  
destruction of minds, bodies, and human rights  
Stripped of bloodlines, whipped and confined  
This is the American pride  
it’s justifying a genocide

– H.E.R.

IN RECENT years, trauma-informed practice has become a buzzword throughout many public school district-wide plans. The mandates for classroom teachers include remaining vigilant for signs of trauma among youth. But what happens when the trauma stems from the very system that is supposedly designed to keep youth safe? For educators and scholars of juvenilia studies, it is imperative to deepen our understanding of the myriad ways that trauma might be expressed in classrooms and, as we have witnessed in our work in the field of education, how it manifests through/despite histories of colonialism, enslavement, and dehumanisation. In other words, we must remain attentive to the hierarchy of humanness and how it may impact youth’s well-being when writing about trauma. With Wynter’s “coloniality of being,” we consider racialising affect—a sociopolitical differentiating of bodies—that must be clearly understood as a “process that is situated in a sociohistorical and material history of colonialism that becomes flesh shaping bodily movement and

(cc) Jean-Denis and Jocson. This article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Licence ([creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)).

Journal of Juvenilia Studies 4.1 (2021), pp. 41–50. DOI: 10.29173/jjs75

EDITOR’S COLUMN: JUVENILIA, TRAUMA, AND INTERSECTIONALITY  
GUEST EDITOR: RACHEL CONRAD

intensities” (Jocson and Dixon-Román 257). There are living intensities that are embodied all the time. Inviting youth to write about trauma may amplify it more if we are not careful about our pedagogical approach. Such are important considerations for engaging the journal’s special issue theme on trauma and intersectionality. In this essay, we draw on black feminist theories and methodologies to consider race, gender, class, diaspora, and time-space in poetry. We are compelled by the question, what happens when trauma appears in youth writing voluntarily or when adults ask them to write about trauma directly? As part of our response, we focus on one particular poem to illustrate the complexities of how arts-based approaches might offer some pedagogical possibilities. We begin with a discussion of collective struggles against dehumanisation and counter-expressions, including music and film/television, and conclude with questions to advance the conversation.

Racial violence is rampant globally. For many young people in the diaspora (including those who have come of age), trauma is argued to be an extension of generational suffering. Katherine McKittrick’s theorisation of black women geographies (*Demonic Grounds*) and bell hooks’s politics of location (“Choosing the Margin”) suggest that humans within the diaspora exist with multiple identities and differences; they are bound up in an ongoing geographic struggle, a struggle that is connected to systems of power that seek to define and hold particular humans in place. Yet young people tactically find ways to navigate and rupture the constraints that often shape their socioemotional well-being and identity formation in culturally specific ways. While it is critical to understand the external forces that threaten young people’s sense of belonging, safety, and well-being, it is also important to revisit normative discourses because “simply naming structures fails to do justice to how they move against (and inside of) our bodies” (Nash 30).

Key studies have shown that trauma in school settings requires more than individualised plans and solutions. There is potential for classroom spaces to be curated with healing-centered approaches through various counter-expressions such as writing poetry, spoken word performance, visual art, music, and dance, among others. Counter-expressions offer creative outlets to break free from the imposed silences/silencing within systems of oppression. Put another way, as bell hooks writes, “The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning; they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle” (“Choosing the Margin” 16). In what follows, we highlight poetry as a tool to reconcile tensions in school and society. Just as important, we connect youth writing to other artistic genres to suggest the rearticulation of racialising affect or the sociopolitical differentiating of bodies with counter-expressions.

## Creative Texts and Praxis

CULTURAL producers in their critique of global forces often utilise their respective mediums to mark the political-historical moment and, more importantly, to *do something* about the moment. Intellectual life is accentuated by the creative praxis of writers, artists, musicians, and filmmakers who are engaging in counter-expressions across disciplinary boundaries. As McKittrick in *Dear Science* asserts about livingness with “relationality, rebellion, conversation, interdisciplinarity, and disobedience”:

Black texts and narratives require reading practices that reckon with black life as scientifically creative; this is a way of being where black is not just signifying blackness but is living and resisting ... the brutal fictions of race (we do not just signify). Reading black this way demands a different analytical frame ... that honors black creative praxis—the practice of making black life through, in, and as creative text. (51)

Intellectual life demands that we desire to know differently with methodologies grounded in creative praxis. The moment is rife to make knowledge differently. If we choose to build a different world, then “the song, the groove, the poem, the novel, the painting, the sculpture must be relational to theory and praxis” (52). Such is the case in youth writing in connection to other creative texts in music and film/television.

In a 2018 ethnographic study, one of us (Alisha) was introduced to Lily (pseudonym), a rising sophomore attending an all-girls private elite school in the northeastern United States. Lily was a member of the school’s Student of Color (SOC) affinity group. SOC offered a space for black girls to commune; it also served as a source of joy and a supportive learning environment for crafting possible responses to trauma experienced within their school. Lily often used that space to express concerns about race and racism that she and other students who deem themselves as part of the African/Caribbean Diaspora were experiencing via classroom curricula, discipline policies, and peer interactions. For instance, in preparation for a Martin Luther King event that SOC was orchestrating, Lily shared with the group her desire to write and perform a poem there. Lily penned a poem entitled “I Can’t Breathe,” which was among several performances at the school’s Martin Luther King Day showcase. Alisha, who had been invited to the event by Lily, listened to her delivery of the poem that day, thinking what it might feel like to be vulnerable in sharing one’s racialised and gendered experiences to a large unfamiliar crowd—speaking words of survival while also acknowledging state violence, systemic erasure, and hierarchical relations of power.

At the event, Alisha observed that the SOC members were sitting together, ready to affirm and hold space for each other as Lily spoke her truth. The following is an excerpt from Lily’s poem:

I will chant I can't breathe to honor Eric Garner even though my  
white principal told me I couldn't  
I will repaint the image of a Black woman that society thought they  
already painted for me  
*I will refuse to let the words of the pledge of allegiance escape my lips*  
*Because as that flag waves freely*  
*I remember the freedom my ancestors never witnessed*  
And when asked what it's like to be Black  
I will say amazing  
Because I won't ever forget that being Black is an honor  
Because I come from a bloodline of survivors whose very palms  
were the blueprints of my destiny

Lily's "I Can't Breathe" is more than a scripted poem about race relations between black and white. It is a political/politicised expression, a collective resistance. Like other black radical feminists, Lily employed oral traditions to speak back through poetry, an approach necessary for survival. In Audre Lorde's words, "I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight" (37). On that Martin Luther King Day showcase, Lily performed her poem against a backdrop of a snowy 100+ acre campus. Her voice filled a fully lit room as she boldly uttered the words "I can't breathe" with a cellphone in hand. She recited the poem with conviction because every single word was important; every stanza illuminated the collective resistance of black girls in SOC, an everyday battle at school and more broadly within the United States. Lily's words reverberated throughout each breath, each line break, a chant, a refusal. Her words unleashed the imposed silence/silencing and repainted struggle in language and imagery, including ancestral "blueprints" to speak truth to power. It was a moment to talk back, a voluntary act of utilising a free verse poem to write outside sanctioned literacies and expectations of the classroom.

Lily participated in collective resistance by joining contemporary adult artists and their legacies of counter-expressions. The production of creative texts marks their realities of/in the world, while also harnessing the power of living or livingness. Specifically, Lily's articulation of survival in her poem echoes in the Grammy award-winning Song of the Year co-written and recorded by artist/guitarist H.E.R. An excerpt from the lyrics is as follows:

I can't breathe  
You're taking my life from me  
I can't breathe  
Will anyone fight for me? (Yeah)  
Will anyone fight for me?  
.....

When you see us, see us  
We can't breathe

In refusing the brutal fictions of race, both Lily's poem and H.E.R.'s song insist on living and resisting, a call to freedom. The ending of the latter—"when you see us, see us"—includes a possible connection to another creative text. It is a connection that honours black creative praxis, a connection not about signifying blackness but about the practice of making black life. *When They See Us* is a 2019 Netflix series created, co-written, and directed by Ava DuVernay. The highly-acclaimed and multiple award-winning four-part television miniseries is a fictionalised drama about the Central Park Five, a restorying of the false imprisonment of five teenagers accused of an assault in New York City's Central Park. For DuVernay, the truth about a flawed justice system tells a crucial but often absent part of the story, similar to what Lily articulates about a flawed narrative of American history in her poem. As DuVernay noted in an interview, reimagining in film/television is significant:

Because of a lack of access to tools, because of a lack of access to exhibition and distribution .... Every time a filmmaker of color makes a film, it is a rescue effort. It is an act of resistance and defiance to use tools that were kept away from us, tools that were used to harm us for so long. When I get to a film like this, where there are so very many black people in it, every frame becomes a vitally important demonstration of freedom.

The narrative changes and many more truths unravel. Reimagining through artistic counter-expressions, or as Lily exclaims in her poem, "repainting the image" that society has painted, is about "freedom my ancestors never witnessed." These counter-expressions illustrate how creative texts and praxis are relational, to invite different knowledge-making or, as McKittrick (*Dear Science*) reminds us, to build a different world.

## Double Edges in Trauma and Literacy Studies

INCREASING interests in and applications of trauma-informed practice in education (or trauma-informed care in counseling and social work) guide us toward scholarship in literacy studies to open up conversations about pedagogy. It is well noted that trauma-informed care has often focused on the individual or on the social emotional learning and resources needed in support of "difficult" students. Rather than extend this approach, there is a call to shift from trauma-informed care to healing in order to more pointedly address historical conditions and sociopolitical processes that sustain different forms of violence in young people's lives. It is this shift that we leverage in this essay.

While trauma-informed practice is important, Shawn Ginwright (“The Future of Healing”) argues that it is incomplete (3). The focus on individual versus collective experience tends to center on individual pain (trauma), not well-being (healing). Put simply, the focus on “fixing” the person does not get at the root causes of trauma (i.e., context, social and economic conditions). Drawing on his extensive work in urban education and with black youth in the San Francisco Bay Area, Ginwright in *Hope and Healing in Early Education* encourages educators to consider healing justice practices and suggests ways of supporting youth through complex forms of trauma and through combining healing with hope toward social change (86). Ginwright and colleagues engage in community organising as part of the healing process. Ginwright proposes healing-centered approaches (radical healing) to facilitate quality of life at the level of both individuals’ well-being and the community’s well-being--that is, to attend to and restore the economic, political, and social conditions that allow people to thrive. Aligned with healing-informed practices, Patrick Camangian and Stephanie Cariaga discuss the limits of socio-emotional learning which, in their view, does not address social forces that shape the health and wellness of communities of colour (3). They call for a process of humanisation, “a reciprocal, mutually anti-oppressive process of self and collective care and development in the context of social transformation” (6). As such, these studies particularly with/for youth and communities of colour indicate the limits of trauma-informed care and the potential of humanising pedagogy in education.

The inextricability of the link across trauma, poetry, and literacy is important to interrogate. In literacy studies, Elizabeth Dutro and Andrea Bien examine the role of trauma in classrooms. Using the metaphor of the speaking wound, they consider the adult-authored representations of lived experience and how they position students within/through stories of trauma (9). In later engagements, Dutro (“Let’s Start with Heartbreak”) explicates the prevailing ways that trauma may fuel damage narratives about students and their families (326). More to the point, Eve Tuck emphasises the ways that damage or pain narratives, which are built on notions of brokenness as a “pathologizing approach” (413), reinforce deficit perspectives particularly among indigenous communities and across communities of colour. Kelly Wissman and Angela Wiseman have found in their studies that writing poetry offers an opportunity for students to engage in “narrative control” or “a way of using language to claim the right to name their own experience” (243) as they speak-write in school classrooms about difficult experiences, including family conflict, particularly when conditions at home or constrained relationships limit their conversations. For educators, classrooms necessitate what Dutro in *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy* calls critical witnessing as a way of paying attention to everyday testimonies (22) while resisting deficit narratives as students receive the support they need.

More recently, Gwendolyn Baxter and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz demonstrate the importance of poetry as an art form to “mirror Black resistance” against dehumanisation and offer a window into collective struggle in line with the black

radical tradition. In particular, they illustrate through their own poetry how words heal, or how poetry becomes a medium through which to “bare our soul, release our pain and sadness, and restore ourselves” (312). As Audre Lorde has put it, “poetry is not a luxury; it is a vital necessity of existence” (37). Poetry is a site of struggle and, according to June Jordan, a consciousness-raising tool to speak back through “the system of language that excludes her name and all the names of her people” (5). To utilise poetry in the classroom, then, is to provide a critical space for healing. Various studies on the use of written and spoken word poetry in literacy classrooms or after school programs have promoted a range of pedagogical possibilities with youth’s voice at the center.<sup>1</sup> Healing-centered approaches widen the learning and teaching spectrum for youth engagement in educational contexts.

Scholar-activists, writers, artists, and educators have been gracious in their analysis of dehumanisation to press upon us what is at stake. For instance, bell hooks in analyzing representations of whiteness in the black imagination writes about whiteness as terror, as “terrorizing” (*Black Looks* 169). This terror, she argues, is often not talked about especially by black people who are living through impacts of that terror. So, in our work within education, we turn to a set of questions to incite some thought and conversation about youth writing. What does a long history of dehumanisation and terror intimate about trauma-informed literacies among racialised youth? What does it suggest to black girls and young women as they negotiate racial, gender, class, and geographic lines, as in the aforementioned examples, including Lily’s poem? How do we as educators hold their inquiries, truths, and creative counter-expressions in classrooms and beyond? How do we work alongside parents and community members to focus on youth’s well-being and attend to the sociohistorical contexts that contour their everyday lives?

In asking these questions, perhaps there is an opportunity to imagine healing (*radical* healing) in literacy practices where young people can engage desire and freedom and not (more) pain or broken-ness. Or poetry writing in a *differently* generative learning environment. Perhaps there is a way to consider bodily movements, emergent rhythms, and living intensities in a process of reconstituted racialising affect. To go beyond snaps and applauses in call-and-response. To interrogate the space in between line breaks or the punctuations that appear and disappear. To hear the penned yet unspoken language that may be pointing toward livingness. To be liberated from racial violence.

Pedagogically, it is important for educators to step back from trauma-informed practice. When we ask young people to write (again and again) about trauma, it is very possible that the task may actually be more harmful than we think, not just in the moment but also in other moments to come. Perhaps young people desire something else or would prefer to exercise refusal, because every space is not a space for sharing-listening-witnessing. While it matters to be heard, seen, validated, and affirmed, it also matters to just be, to exist outside the limits of categories. In an adult-driven world where young people are often constrained by rules and norms, the tendency for many

youth is to rely on doing things out of expectations (sometimes against their good sense) in order to be “heard, seen, validated, and affirmed.” As Venus Evans-Winters contends, it is very possible that young people may refuse or may not yet be ready to write about particular moments in their lives, that some young women’s “experiences are hers alone to experience and decide if they should be shared” (105). There might be a need for discretion to understand time-space or context differently, to not push or make hurried decisions about what works and what doesn’t.

Perhaps young people as dynamic social and cultural beings, as co-conspirators, as collaborators in projects of humanisation are already teaching adults to unlearn things that we know. Perhaps they are signaling things that we do not yet know, so that we can get past careless assumptions about who/how young people are or where they are supposed to be. Perhaps young people are inviting us to create openings for different possibilities: to engage writing and learning differently, to seek opportunities for radical healing, to pause and (re)imagine livingness in youth poetry. We believe the openings can be fruitful and enable us to aspire toward pedagogical innovations in juvenilia studies.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to all youth poets who have privileged us with their words across spaces of learning. We would also like to acknowledge the UnderCommons Constellation (UC2) for generating foresight, support, and intellectual practice, making possible different forms of writing and connections in our work. Lastly, many thanks to the editors for their feedback and engagement.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For works on youth poetry/spoken word/critical literacy and urban education, see Fisher; Jocson; Kim; Morrell; Sablo Sutton; Watson; Weinstein and West.

### WORKS CITED

- Baxter, Gwendolyn, and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz. “In the Black Radical Tradition: Poetry as a Praxis for Healing and Resistance in Education.” *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2020, pp. 311–21.
- Camangian, Patrick, and Stephanie Cariaga. “Social and Emotional Learning is Hegemonic Miseducation: Students Deserve Humanization Instead.” *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 2021, pp. 1–21. doi: 10.1080/13613324.2020.1798374.
- Dutro, Elizabeth. “Let’s Start with Heartbreak: The Perilous Potential of Trauma in Literacy.” *Language Arts*, vol. 94, no. 5, 2017, pp. 326–37.



- . *Vulnerable Heart of Literacy: Centering Trauma as Powerful Pedagogy*. Teachers College P, 2019.
- Dutro, Elizabeth, and Andrea Bien. “Listening to the Speaking Wound: A Trauma Studies Perspective on Student Positioning in Schools.” *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2014, pp. 7–35.
- DuVernay, Ava, dir. “How Ava DuVernay Made *When They See Us*, the Year’s Best Miniseries.” Interview with Matt Zoller Seitz. *Vulture*, 19 Sept. 2019. [www.vulture.com/2019/09/ava-duvernay-when-they-see-us-netflix.html](http://www.vulture.com/2019/09/ava-duvernay-when-they-see-us-netflix.html).
- , screenwriter and dir. *When They See Us*. By DuVernay (4 episodes), Julian Breece (2 episodes), Robin Swicord (2 episodes), Attica Locke (1 episode), and Michael Starrbury (1 episode). Netflix. [www.netflix.com/title/80200549](http://www.netflix.com/title/80200549). Access requires membership.
- Evans-Winters, Venus. *Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry: A Mosaic for Writing Our Daughter’s Body*. Routledge, 2019.
- Fisher, Maisha T. *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word in Urban Classrooms*. Teachers College P, 2007.
- Ginwright, Shawn. *Hope and Healing in Urban Education: How Urban Activists and Teachers are Reclaiming Matters of the Heart*. Routledge, 2016.
- . “The Future of Healing: Shifting from Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement.” *Medium*, 2018. [medium.com/@ginwright/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c](https://medium.com/@ginwright/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c).
- H.E.R., performer. “I Can’t Breathe.” By Dernst Emile II, H.E.R., and Tiara Thomas. RCA, 2020. [soundcloud.com/iamhermusic/i-cant-breathe](https://soundcloud.com/iamhermusic/i-cant-breathe).
- hooks, bell. “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness.” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36, 1989, pp. 15–23.
- . *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End Press, 1992.
- Jocson, Korina M. *Youth Poets: Empowering Literacies in and out of Schools*. Peter Lang, 2008.
- Jocson, Korina M., and Ezekiel Dixon-Román. (2020). “Becoming Shuri: CTE, Racializing Affect, and the Becoming-Technologist.” *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2020, pp. 257–71.
- Jordan, June. *On Call: Political Essays*. South End Press, 1985.
- Kim, Ruth H. (2013). “‘Never Knew Literacy Could Get at My Soul’: On How Words Matter for Youth, or Notes Toward Decolonizing Literacy.” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, vol. 35, no. 5, 2013, pp. 392–407.
- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984.
- McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. U of Minnesota P, 2006.
- . *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Duke UP, 2021.
- Morrell, Ernest. *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation*. Routledge, 2008.

JJS December (2021) Special Issue: Juvenilia, Trauma, and Intersectionality

- Nash, Jennifer. *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. Duke UP, 2019.
- Sablo Sutton, Soraya. "Spoken Word: Performance Poetry in the Black Community." *What They Don't Learn in School: Literacy in the Lives of Urban Youth*, edited by Jabari Mahiri, Peter Lang, 2004, pp. 213–42.
- Tuck, Eve. "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities." *Harvard Education Review*, vol. 79, no. 3, pp. 409–28.
- Watson, Vajra. "Censoring Freedom: Community-Based Professional Development and the Politics of Profanity." *Equity & Excellence in Education*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2013, pp. 387–410.
- Weinstein, Susan, and Anna West. "Call and Responsibility: Critical Questions for Youth Spoken Word Poetry." *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 82, no. 2, 2012, pp. 282–302.
- Wissman, Kelly M., and Angela M. Wiseman. (2011). "'That's my worst nightmare': Poetry and Trauma in the Middle School Classroom." *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2011, pp. 234–49.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 257–337.