



The Heyman Center for the Humanities Columbia University

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Letting Scopes Collide at the Kaleidoscope Project

During the closing open mic for the [Kaleidoscope Project](#), a diversity-based literacy and creative writing workshop that I created for underserved teens in New York City, one of my favorite students hung out while I tidied up. Five-foot-nothing with a quicksilver sense of humor, she is the tiniest soon-to-be varsity basketball player I know. I asked her how she felt about resuming school. “I’m looking forward to not being so bored all the time,” she shrugged. “But my English teachers hate me.”

A chimerical grin spread across her face. “They *act* like they hate me. But really, I *know* they love me,” she corrected herself. Then she named a few acts of terrorism she had launched against English teachers for staging such dull classes.

Listening to her grievances, it became clear to me that teachers weren’t the problem. My student was bored with books, conversations, and essays; thus, having a very sharp, nimble mind, aware bad behavior is more stimulating than *A Separate Peace*, she hop-scotched between being a class clown, the teacher’s Cudjo, and the most unnervingly quiet bookworm in the room.

The Kaleidoscope Project, supported by the Public Humanities Fellowship at the New York Council for the Humanities and the Heyman Center for the Humanities, began with a very simple premise: when kids have access to stories that validate their lives, they feel more empowered to learn. Not only that, but they feel emboldened to *become creators themselves*—creators of art *and* knowledge. I know because I *was* a working-class, queer teen in an urban setting: scholarship-bound to a college-preparatory high school, yet alienated by the endless injunction to ponder lives of privilege and power that bore no relation to my own.

To be fair, the competing interests burdening the New York Department of Education (NYDOE) are exceptionally tangled. According to the [NYDOE’s 2013 Demographic Report](#), 85 percent of school-aged children are non-white. Forty-one percent are immigrants from the Dominican Republic, China, Mexico, Bangladesh, Ecuador, Haiti, and elsewhere who do not speak English at home. In a 2009 NGO study, [63 percent of student victims of bias-based violence named race and ethnicity as the highest factors](#), with religion, nationality/immigrant status, gender expression, sexuality, and disability following in descending order. LGBTQI students in New York are three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to feel unsafe at school; [90 percent of students in one psychological study reported being verbally or physically assaulted](#) in the last year.

Yet on the contrary, the NYDOE’s Common Core standards—[like most deployed in the U.S.](#)—are startlingly homogeneous and apolitical. Of nearly 150 recommended literary texts, just under 20 percent are by women, and 16 percent by minorities; only two—count them, *two*—authors

born outside of the Western hemisphere make the list. As one of my students reported when asked to compare our curriculum to her high school's, "I wish that my high school would give fewer classics and more modern pieces. I understand the importance of reading classics, but hardly ever do they deal with issues such as race, equality, gender, and more."

This is where I put to work my expertise as a feminist scholar of contemporary postcolonial literature. I started by seeking advice from my community partner, [Girls Write Now](#), the only arts education nonprofit dedicated to girls in New York City, where I have had the delight of mentoring teens in creative writing for two years. For insight into program planning and outreach, I liaised with other nonprofits like [VIDA: Women for the Literary Arts](#), [We Need Diverse Books](#), [826 NYC](#), [Urban Word NYC](#), [The Octavia Project](#), and [CantoMundo](#), whose co-founder, a poet and visiting Columbia professor Deborah Paredez, generously dispensed invaluable advice and visited my students. For a hot second at a postcolonial studies conference, world-renowned Haitian-American novelist Edwidge Danticat even indulged my yammering about the endeavor.

Although I was terrified that the prophecy of many a curmudgeon would come true—*You'll never convince New York City students to volunteer for school over the summer!*—I received 107 applications after notifying 96 high schools.

In the end, I admitted one boy, sixteen girls, and one gender-nonconforming teen with roots across thirteen countries—Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, China, Korea, Jamaica, Trinidad, Nevis, Russia, Haiti, Ireland, the Dominican Republic, and Martinique. All accepted the invitation.

I created a syllabus with a feminist framework and a few rules in mind. Keep it simple; don't overload them. Treat them like adults. Don't censor your content. Fund everything they absolutely need: MetroCards, notebook, pen, printouts, and dinner. Start frank conversations about uncomfortable topics, like race and sexuality. Speak to your identity, and be honest about your privilege. Don't talk; become their listener. Ask them about how the shooting in this week's news relates to this week's readings. Don't assume a text is too weird or too hard for them; let them tell you what works. Let them correct you when you mispronounce a Caribbean country's name; never shame them for being right. Never shame them for being late, unprepared, or absent; they have more responsibilities than even you had at your age.

By the end of eight weeks, we had covered short stories, memoirs, and poems from 30 authors across 20 countries. In addition to Deborah Paredez, Rachel Adams, a memoirist and Columbia literature professor who works on disability, and Kaitlyn Greenidge, a novelist and fellow Girls Write Now mentor, visited us. About half my students published writing on our class blog, and field trips took us to the Met for ekphrastic poetry, spoken word at Bowery Poetry, and open mics at Urban Word.

Perhaps what surprised me most was teens' excitement about getting the chance to talk about gender and sexuality in a classroom. It never occurred to me that advertising the course as answering the question, "What does it mean to belong?" would attract many kids on the queer and questioning spectrum. Many students explored alternative sexualities through imaginative writing and confided that such open conversations had been banned from classrooms elsewhere.

If I ran the program again, I would make it mimic college even *more*. Across the board in their feedback forms, students recommended required writing assignments to ensure they'd finish reading, longer sessions that wouldn't cut conversations short, and more field trips.

Because [literacy rates for graduating teens are at an all-time low](#) and [illiteracy is statistically linked to poverty and unemployment](#), the need to invest in language arts for New York City students is as critical as it's ever been. Moreover, as the Modern Language Association's recent infographic shows, [the downward trend in literacy rates is nationwide](#). [Making a habit of reading](#) is a tried and true strategy for improving both creative writing and critical thinking skills.

One quote from evaluations summarizes the takeaways best: "The course has exposed me to minority writers (people of color, women, and the LGBT community) that I would rarely find in school. Out of all the writers, I only knew Toni Morrison and James Baldwin, as I've read their novels in school. It's important to gain insight into different cultures, as they have just as much to say as the dead white men in the literary canon. High schools need to implement diverse readings in their curricula." In light of the proven success of initiatives like the Kaleidoscope Project, I hope they do.