

# SEEDS MEANT TO SPROUT: HOW JOHNS HOPKINS RECREATED SERVICE-LEARNING COURSES



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17TH MAR 2016 IN INTERVIEWS

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A new kind of class started at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore this spring. Driven by the need to reimagine the role of community service on campus, JHU's [Center for Social Concern](#) (CSG) created the "Engaged Faculty & Community Fellows Program."

Associate Director for the CSC Gia Grier took up her position as such back in 2007. She says at that time students were coming to her with all kinds of questions, the most prominent of which was, "Hey, I've got friends at other institutions who have these classes—these service-learning classes—and we don't. How come?"

It was this kind of student interest—and the energy of one pupil in particular, who went knocking on faculty members' doors with Gia later on—that sparked the creation of Hopkins Community-Based Learning courses.

The interest in these courses grew quickly. "In the field of higher ed civic engagement, there's a common saying that community partners are considered co-educators in the process of learning with students and I wanted to create a program that did that, literally," Grier says. "That said to me, 'OK, so we say that they're co-educators; let's put them in the driver's seat *with* the faculty member to design the course from the start, and then to help execute it throughout."

And thus began the Engaged Faculty & Community Fellows Program.

The three inaugural courses were:

- Dan Pasciuti's "Homelessness, Vacants, and the Right to Housing," which partners with Housing Our Neighbors
- Lester Spence's "Power and Democracy in the American City," which partners with the Right to Housing Alliance
- Dora Malech's "Readings in Poetry: 'Of Late'—Poetry and Social Justice," which partners with Writers in Baltimore Schools.



The "Poetry and Social Justice" course organizers include: Jaida Griffin, a Baltimore City high school student; Dora Malech, a Hopkins professor; Patrice Hutton, the founder of [Writers in Baltimore Schools](#); Shangrila Willy, a WBS board member; and Writing Seminars graduate student JP Allen.

After a month of collaboration, they sit in their class of thirty or so Baltimore City high-schoolers and Hopkins undergrads.

The first event of the course is a visit by poets Safia Elhillo, Quraysh Ali Lansana, and Tony Medina—editors of and contributors to the 2015 anthology *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop*.

Between the high-schoolers, the undergrads, and the class organizers, the room is loud. In the moments before 5 o'clock and the start of class, Dora, Patrice, and Shangrila pass out cupcakes, chocolate milk, and copies of the *BreakBeat* anthology. JP runs to find extra copies of the book, napkins, and a lost student. Dora misplaces her phone. Friends talk, people go to the bathroom and come back; eventually, the din quiets down.

Quraysh says hip-hop is a genre about recognition, the Black Lives Matter movement, and representing your city. Tony tells us to write a poem that takes for its title the name of our hometown and then describes the town.

Safia says, "Get your books out and turn to page 220," in her best teacher voice, and everyone laughs. She reads Joshua Bennett's, "When Asked About My Hometown: An Admission" from the anthology and we get started.

For fifteen or so minutes, the room is quiet except for an occasional joke from the visiting poets. Then Tony, a nerdy and warm-hearted facilitator, calls for volunteers.

Bry, a high school student from Baltimore City, wrote about the difficulties of growing up in Baltimore, her last lines reading:

*"If you not from here don't come here, cause everyone tryna get out."*

So the class went on, Tony calling on students and the students reading to the class:



**Jaida:** *"They raised me on Hot Cheetos and sunflower seeds. We were shells to be spit on the concrete, not seeds meant to sprout."*

**Rejja:** *"Remember the neighborhood kids, that lady with the Jamaican house that smelled like cats and incense when you walked in? Remember you had to be at home when the streetlights came on? Remember granddad sat on the porch with his forty and hollered at the young shorty who name was Dreamer? Remember blue shirt khaki pants green pants blue shirt yellow shirt khaki pants now black or white shirts and black pants? Remember lightning bugs, catching them with your hands, dancing and setting them free?"*

**Davon:** *"We danced, gyrating to the chime of the never-ending elevator music tinkling through the floating grasses in the harbor. We danced around the dead fish. We danced between gunshots like never-ending drug beats and pretend they are the breaths of poets. We dance to the cracking of eggs and sizzling frying pans and the promise of something new to swallow. The day my brother fell, the only thing I knew to do was dance."*

**Yasmine:** *"My fate sealed in plastic, in permanence, in faces that are frozen, in women that don't age, and many don't love, but need for your teeth, for your lawn, for year-round sunshine for anxiety medication and wine first thing in the morning and the gates behind gates keeping you in."*

**Christian:** *"West Side was no escape. Dad wants to go to PA. Straight A's, college tours, scholarships. Pray that's my golden ticket."*

Tony asks one student to read a poem, and she's hesitant; she warns him that it's graphic. He encourages her, and as she starts to read a poem. We all understand that she is struggling with the content. She doesn't finish reading it, and the room is quiet. But it's an accepting quiet. Many people nod, and then we move on.



A couple of sessions later, Erica Green visits. Erica is the Baltimore City schools reporter for *The Baltimore Sun*. Her experience in education shows. She is engaging without being somber; she is funny without being glib; and while she is serious about her work, she doesn't seem to take herself too seriously.

She's here to teach us about interviewing; one of the course assignments is to give a brief interview with a poet involved in social activism. She emphasizes the importance of coming to an interviewee as a person. She tells us to ask them first, as we would ask anyone, "How are you?" She tells us to do our research, but also to pay attention to the weather and to our interviewee's body language.

Erica says that a successful interview shows the reader how interviewee's work illustrates and imitates their life. She tells us that an interviewer's biggest obstacle is that, as humans, "We don't hear, we tell." She phrases her talk in questions, and in doing so she shows us that, in many cases, we have an instinctive understanding of what she's come to teach us.

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Next Monday, the class will meet and continues to think about the prompt: "Where you're from." We look over a handout that encourages us to think about the prompt ancestrally, spatially (the packet includes a map of Baltimore), and to, if we'd like, leave the bounds of realism, as in Margaret Atwood's poem, "You Begin":

*You begin this way*

*This is your hand*

*This is your eye*

*That is a fish, blue and flat*

*On the paper, almost*

*The shape of an eye.*

*This is your mouth, this is an O*

*Or a moon, whichever*

*You like. This is yellow...*

We split into groups of five, and choose one of the prompts, or something we like from it, and begin. Again the class finds that excited near-quiet: mechanical pencils clicking, notebook paper flipping...



Walking home after class I catch up with one of my group-mates and ask her what drew her to the course. It's dark out by this point and the halls are quiet.



"Well, I'm, like, not a poet *at all*," Kennedy says.

Kennedy is tall, and her hair's done in green and black braids. She's got a Maya Angelou t-shirt on, over which she wears an unbuttoned flannel. She's self-deprecating but confident, and quick to laugh.

"I basically write papers and that's it. So, it wasn't the poetry part," she says. We laugh again. "But no, I like reading poetry, and I'm really interested in social justice, and I'm a Sociology and Africana Studies Major, so I'm always looking for classes that have anything to do with social justice, anything to do with blackness. So this was the perfect fit.

Kennedy and I are off campus now. The Sculpture Garden is on our right, and on our left the Circulator passes up Charles.

"Also, I'm from Baltimore. Living in Baltimore and going to an institution like Hopkins is a weird position to be in," Kennedy says. "Hopkins is a really, just kind of like... Hopkins does not have a good relationship with the city of Baltimore. So, being here and being a community member, but also being a Hopkins student, I'm always thinking about 'How am I impacting Baltimore?' It really makes me a lot more interested in the community-based learning process."

When I ask Kennedy if she's been reading anything for the upcoming Write-In at Red Emma's, she said, "Oh no, I'm so nervous—I never perform. And also, I'm not a writer. So I'm like, 'Let's give the people who are really trying to do this a shot.' I'm just here for the social justice."

When I ask her about any ideas she has for how the class might be improved, Kennedy can't think of any: "Even the way the [website](#) is used, the way we're communicating with each other—I've had classes with websites before, and nobody uses them. People are really engaging with each other and commenting, and it feels a lot more communal than any other class I've had."

Often community service courses are criticized because the service lasts only as long as the course does. When I asked Gia about how the Fellows Program plans to address this issue, she said, "I think it will happen in different ways, depending on the faculty member. So, Lester is tenured, so he's like, 'I'd like to do this next year!' Because he can do that. People like Dora are junior faculty, so it's really up to the department to decide whether they can give her the flexibility."

Gia sits back in her chair.

"But hopefully departments will see the value of having an Engaged Scholar Faculty Fellow," she continues. "Writing Seminars was like, so when can we start announcing to people that Dora has this Fellowship?"

Ultimately, it's up to the individual students, faculty, and community partners to continue to engage with one another. It's part of the Center's legacy to be the structure within which close relationships, among individuals who might otherwise remain only distantly connected, can form.

[First published in Baltimore's *What Weekly Magazine*; reprinted in *Queen Mob's Teahouse*.]