

Days I Moved Through Ordinary Sounds

The Teachers of WritersCorps
in Poetry and Prose

Edited by Chad Sweeney

City Lights Foundation Books
San Francisco



© 2009 by WritersCorps

Unless otherwise noted, all works are © the individual authors, and are printed with their permission.

All rights reserved.

Managing Editor: Melissa Hung
Editorial Assistant: Caitlyn O'Connell

Cover art © Jenifer K. Wofford
Book design by Linda Ronan

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Days I moved through ordinary sounds : the teachers of WritersCorps in poetry and prose / edited by Chad Sweeney.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-931404-10-5

1. Teachers' writings, American. 2. American poetry—20th century. 3. American poetry—21st century. 4. American literature—20th century. 5. American literature—21st century. I. Sweeney, Chad. II. WritersCorps. III. Title.

PS591.T4D39 2009

810.8'0054—dc22

2008046624

The City Lights Foundation was formed with the goal of advancing deep literacy, which is not only the ability to read and write but fluency in the knowledge and skills that enable us to consciously shape our lives and the life of our community. We believe that nurturing the ability to think critically, to discern truth, and to communicate knowledge is essential to a democratic society.

Visit our website: www.citylights.com

City Lights Foundation Books are published at the City Lights Bookstore,
261 Columbus Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94133

Contents

History of WritersCorps 5

Foreword 7

Introduction 9

I Revolution of the Ordinary 13

Maiana Minahal 15

Kenneth F. Carroll 19

Ishle Yi Park 23

Jeffrey McDaniel 27

Melissa Tuckey 31

Elissa G. Perry 35

Beto Palomar 44

Aja Couchois Duncan 49

Monica A. Hand 56

D. Scot Miller 58

2 Dirty and Alive We Cried 61

Danielle Montgomery 63

marcos ramírez 67

Alison Seevak 71

Michele Kotler 75

Gamal Abdel Chasten 80

Chrissy Anderson-Zavala 87

Cathy Arellano 91

Paola Corso 100

Myron Michael Hardy 104

Kim Nelson 107

3 The Only War is the War Against the Imagination III

Joel Dias-Porter (DJ Renegade) 113

Mahru Elahi 118

Thomas Centollela 124

Hoa Nguyen 128

Christopher Sindt 132
Stephen Beachy 135
Colette DeDonato 142
Ryan Grim 145
Joy Jones 147
Katherine LeRoy 150

4 Birthright 153

Uchechi Kalu 163
Will Power 167
Judith Tannenbaum 171
Kathy Evans 175
John Rodriguez 179
Seshat Yonshea Walker 183
Livia Kent 187
Leslie Davis 193
Milta Ortiz 195

5 The Shapes of Listening 199

Ellis Avery 201
Michelle Matz 206
Michele Elliott 209
Andrew Saito 213
Mary “Maya” Hebert 216
JoNelle Toriseva 220
Barbara Schaefer 224
Peter Money 227
Cindy Je 231
Chad Sweeney 237

Acknowledgments 240

WritersCorps Teachers 240

A History of WritersCorps

WritersCorps is a celebrated national program that brings creative writing into the lives of youth. Each year, hundreds of young people living in some of the nation's most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods experience firsthand the power of writing. WritersCorps' dedicated teaching artists, all published writers themselves, employ innovative curricula that makes literature relevant to the experiences of their students. With its award-winning publications and its popular reading series, WritersCorps has become a national arts and literacy model.

WritersCorps was born out of discussions between Jane Alexander, former chair of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and Eli Siegel, then-director of AmeriCorps. Today, hundreds of writers have taught in their communities, inspiring youth and working diligently to create a safe place for young people to discover themselves through writing. WritersCorps teachers make lasting connections within their communities and become valued mentors and role models.

San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Bronx, New York, were selected as the three sites for WritersCorps, chosen for these cities' exemplary art agencies with deep community roots and for their traditions of community activism among writers. In these three cities, WritersCorps' teaching artists, working at public schools and social service organizations, have helped young people of virtually every race, ethnicity and age improve their literacy and communication skills, while offering creative expression as an alternative to violence, truancy, alcohol and drug abuse.

In 1997, WritersCorps transitioned from a federally funded program to an independent alliance, supported by a collaboration of public and private partners. D.C. WritersCorps, Inc. is now a nonprofit organization, while the San Francisco and Bronx WritersCorps are projects of the San Francisco Arts Commission and the Bronx Council for the Arts, respectively. WritersCorps has developed a national structure administered by these three sites to provide greater cooperation and visibility, while at the same time encouraging the independence of each site to respond most effectively to its community.

To learn more about WritersCorps contact:

Bronx WritersCorps: 718-409-1265, www.bronxarts.org

D.C. WritersCorps: 202-332-5455, www.dcwriterscorps.org

San Francisco WritersCorps: 415-252-4655, www.writerscorps.org

Foreword

One week ago, Barack Obama was elected president of the United States.

Many of us have experienced epiphanic moments in the wake of this election. Mine came at Mount Hope Cemetery in Rochester, New York. I was in Rochester to read at a local community college. When I discovered that the grave of Frederick Douglass was ten minutes away, I asked my host to bring me there. Little did I realize that the grave of an escaped slave had become an altar.

Frederick Douglass lies beneath a stone slab inscribed with his name and the dates of birth and death. Scattered across the slab there were withered flowers, pennies, piles of acorns and stones, a tiny American flag. There was an Obama button carefully placed in the O in *Douglass*. There was a service employees union T-shirt—with an “I Voted Today” sticker—draped at the base of the tomb. There was a newspaper unfurled above the dates *1818-1895*. The headline said: *Obama Wins*.

Douglass believed so deeply in the power of the word that he published a newspaper in Rochester more than one hundred and sixty years ago to demand the abolition of slavery and the recognition of Black people as human beings. Now someone had left a newspaper at his grave with a headline that recalled the words of William Blake: “What is now proved was once only imagin’d.”

The writers and teachers of WritersCorps embrace the same faith in the power of the word to revolutionize society, and this anthology is the proof. Their belief in literacy has sustained them and their students through the Illiterate Presidency of George Bush. They bring poems, stories and plays into so-called “non-traditional” settings, which are, in fact, the most traditional settings of all, given the communal origins of poetry, storytelling and theater. No doubt they have saved lives. This is not hyperbole.

These writer-teachers, and the communities they serve, reflect the rise of new voices in a new America. They are immigrants and the children of immigrants. They are the descendants of slaves. They elected Barack Obama.

The writers of WritersCorps represent the spirit of this society at its most generous. These writers exemplify the ideal of service to the community. We could even call them “community organizers” (insert Republican sneer here). Oh yes: They can also write. It is only fitting,

after the WritersCorps writers have enabled so many of the damned and despised to find their voices, that they should speak for themselves in the pages of this anthology.

And how they speak, with compassion, intelligence and fire. The most striking characteristic of this collection, however, is the quality of fearlessness. These writers are unafraid to explore the most intimate details of their own experience; they are equally unafraid to take strong political stands on the great struggles of the day. They have a keen sense of history, paying homage to the grandfathers and grandmothers who labored in the fields before them; they have an equally sharp sense of the future, embodied by the students and communities they know so well. Again and again, there are manifestations of that faith in the power of the word to heal, console, redeem and transcend.

This anthology is more than a record of WritersCorps. It is a chronicle of our times. It is a newspaper fluttering on the tomb of an escaped slave.

Martín Espada
November 2008

Introduction

By Chad Sweeney

There is no single portrait one could paint of a WritersCorps teacher—avant-guardist, slam performer, comedian, gothic novelist, playwright, lyric poet, storyteller. *Days I Moved Through Ordinary Sounds* offers the range of the writing of these teaching artists, and in a parallel gesture, investigates the vision, commitment and practice of those who shared writing with young people in public schools, detention facilities, homeless shelters, and with newly arrived immigrants in San Francisco, Washington D.C. and the Bronx. “Poetry is not a luxury,” according to Audre Lorde, “It is a vital necessity of our existence . . . [as] survival and change first made into language, then into idea, then into tangible action.” In my seven years as a teaching artist in WritersCorps, I learned this not as an instrument of faith, but as hard fact, reinforced by daily witness in my own life, in classrooms and in community theaters. This collection celebrates the personal power we achieve through writing, a return to our birthright in language, and a transformation of the world—one student, one teacher, one writer at a time.

WritersCorps was born in 1994 out of the traditions of AmeriCorps, the National Endowment for the Arts and a long line of government-supported programs like Roosevelt’s WPA which employed artists to teach and to produce significant literary work. San Francisco, Washington D.C., and the Bronx were chosen as the three WritersCorps sites because of the strong arts organizations in these cities. Jeffrey McDaniel, from that first year in Washington D.C., recalls “the camaraderie with other writers, the fertile energy of this dynamic group of beautiful, poetry-crazed lunatics.” In the fifteen years of the program’s life, more than 250 writers have worked with thousands of young people: youth who live in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods; who have recently immigrated to the United States, often into cramped spaces with distant relatives; who are struggling to maintain the sense of self through a period of incarceration. WritersCorps teachers create innovative lessons to make literature relevant by meeting the youth where they are, and by providing platforms for these under-represented voices to be heard, through award-winning publications and reading series.

The writers gathered here discuss their process and inspiration,

and many point out that teaching with WritersCorps was a turning point in their careers, as it both expanded their artistic vision and solidified their relationship with community. They saw words transformed into action. Chris Sindt, who went on to direct the creative writing program at St. Mary's College, tells us that WritersCorps "provided urgency and specificity to some vague notions I had about social engagement." Maiana Minahal taught for WritersCorps before becoming the director of June Jordan's revered program, Poetry for the People, at U.C. Berkeley. She recalls: "I was changed, as a teacher and as a person, by working with the many homeless youth, young women, teen moms and first generation immigrant children . . . who came to internalize the belief that they couldn't write, or that their stories weren't important." Milta Ortiz's journey mirrors those of many of her students at Mission High, as she describes coming to the U.S. from war-torn El Salvador at the age of eight. "When I learned that my mother's uncle in El Salvador was murdered for sharing political ideas . . . I would never again take lightly my ability to formulate a critical opinion."

Teaching is not martyrdom. I often hear people say, "Oh it's wonderful, that you're willing to work with *those kids*." What I believe these people miss is that teaching is not a one-way vector of giving, but an exchange—not even a circle, but a circle of circles. Every WritersCorps teacher gathers a different montage of experiences, but one common refrain is that the work is surprisingly rewarding. I was privileged to teach for WritersCorps in schools in the Mission District of San Francisco and in a housing project near "Crack Alley." My theories about humanity were quickly hammered flat to make a table for us to sit around and write together and share our stories. We nurtured one another with our presence and with language, and I have never felt more complete. Novelist Ellis Avery explains, "Writing in community gathers us around the proverbial campfire and reminds us why we do this: because hearing stories helps us make sense of the world. Because telling them helps us make sense of ourselves." Aja Couchois Duncan testifies, "It was in *writing through it* that those young people taught me something I will carry always: sometimes the most we can do is to show up for ourselves, for one another." This *showing up* Duncan speaks of is not an easy matter, as the real human work is not a flash of heroism, but a daily dedication to being awake, sensitive, available for the people around us.

Days I Moved Through Ordinary Sounds gathers the essence of these experiences together in the writings of fifty energetic teaching art-

ists—from that first year in 1994 to the present, where a new generation of WritersCorps teachers, like Milta Ortiz, has entered the field. I am happy to report the field is expanding, through WritersCorps and programs like it all over America. These pages celebrate the extraordinary commitment and ability of writers who have chosen to live in the world and to serve it with their hands and with their words.

Revolution of the Ordinary



Maiana Minahal

When I immigrated from the Philippines to the U.S. as a child, I quickly realized that one of my most important tasks was learning to master the English language—my daily currency. While I worked hard at school to gain sophistication in English and to lose my “accent,” at home I began to understand less and less of my own parents’ conversations. I lost native fluency in the languages I was born with—both my family’s dialect (Cebuano Visayan) and the Philippine language (Tagalog). I came to a complicated appreciation of the power of language(s), and my writing springs from this paradox: how language both holds the power to communicate and create a shared understanding of humanity, as well as to silence or rend the possible connections between people.

WritersCorps was a turning point for me—my first teaching experiences after college—before I went on to direct Poetry for the People and to lecture at U.C. Berkeley. Those first WritersCorps classes gave me a place to attempt, as bell hooks says in *Teaching to Transgress*, “(t)o educate as the practice of freedom.” I hoped to cultivate my students’ creative and liberatory thinking, while sharpening their writing skills. I’d tell my students that in building construction, the builders are limited by the materials at their disposal, by the kind of rock, metal and wood available—whereas writers, in building texts, are limited only by the words they know and, more importantly, by their imaginations.

I was changed, as a teacher and as a person, by working with the many homeless youth, young women, teen moms and first generation immigrant children who were my students at Central City Hospital-ity House, the Center for Young Women’s Development, and Career Resources Development Center in San Francisco. These were youth who were labeled “at-risk,” who came to internalize the belief that they couldn’t write, or that their stories weren’t important. None of them came to writing easily, yet they didn’t give up. With each poem they struggled to create, they showed me honest examples of what it really means to own the power of language, to be socially engaged writers—and I thank them for that.

You Bring Out the Filipina in Me*after Sandra Cisneros*

you bring out the filipina in me
 the language born of blood in me
 the *p* instead of *f* in me
 the glottal catch in me
 the visayan the tagalog in me
 the ancestors in me

you bring out
 the murder of magellan in me
 the revolution of seven thousand islands in me
 to survive 500 years of colonizers in me

you bring out the guerrilla soldier in me
 the olongapo bar hostess in me
 the mail order bride in me

you bring out the *bahala na* immigrant in me
 the *god they're so american* in me
 the *yes, i do speak english* in me
 the tnt green card in me

you bring out the pinay in me
 the sass in me smartass badass in me
 the proud walker shit talker
 third world girl the majority in me

you bring out the barkada in me
 wolf among sheep in me
 the danger the desire in me
 the drink til i'm drunk
 fuck til i'm good and fucked

you bring out the queer in me
 the dyke in me
 the brave beautiful butch in me
 voracious femme in me
 the *bastos* the *bakla*
 the *walang hiya* in me

you bring out the wake up

laughing laughing
 not crying
 in me
 my brother
 my brother
 mahal mahal kita
 yes you do
 oh yes you do

bahala na – “what god wills”
barkada – friends
bastos – rude; bakla – faggot
walang hiya – shameless
mahal kita – i love you

Ordinary

Our honeyed tongues elude the rib of words
 that could climb into open sky
 or choke us like a pillar of salt.

We've approached flight before.
 Found it too unguarded.
 That gem whose absence hadn't yet wounded

decades ago, when as a girl I hopscotched
 under magnolia tree shade, next to the house on Samar Avenue—
 and as a girl, oceans away, you might have pressed palms
 against a glass window,

perched in the back seat of a car crawling the crumbling road to
 San Salvador.

I can almost picture you, years later, navigating the corridors of a
 strange university,
 suddenly in the land of Clorox and strip malls.

In what cities since then did we pack suitcases with filings of
 grief, airplane across time zones between tropics and tundra?
 When did we decide to shave down our wings?

Poem for Alegria

sometimes i think
 i want to say
 you a honeysuckle smell
 on a hot hot day/ n
 you the sculpture come from
 a wet bar of clay/ n
 you a new love letter
 every day of the week!/ n
 you a song song sonata
 i got to keep singing
 can't help but be singing

n then again
 i think
 you more
 you a operatic orchestration
 a movement in the key of "a"
 a symphonic suite of arias that start
alegria
alegria
alegria

you the pure pool of water
 cool rain leaves
 you low rumbling thunder
 rolling along the sea
 you strong strong for speaking/ n
 i want to say
 you living breathing dancing singing
 you flame fire earth
 you a song song sonata
 i got to sing

Maiana Minahal was born in Manila, raised in Los Angeles, and now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. At U.C. Berkeley she lectured and served as director of Poetry for the People. She received her M.F.A. from Antioch University and is the author of the poetry chapbooks *closer* and *Sitting Inside Wonder*. Civil Defense Poetry will publish a collection of her poetry, *Legend of Sondagyo*, in 2009.



© Mary Swift

Kenneth F. Carroll

My writing and service began with my mother, who believed that true charity was giving when you yourself may not have much—like sharing a few slices of bread with a neighbor when you are down to your last loaf. So writing and service were never separate acts for me. This was later affirmed when I read writers like Frederick Douglass, Amiri Baraka, June Jordan, James Baldwin, Lucille Clifton, Gaston Neal and hundreds of others who believed that their art carried with it the responsibility of witness-bearing and advocacy. WritersCorps provided a structure and form to a service I had begun years before when I used up my vacation and sick leave from my corporate job to go into Washington D.C. schools, prisons and community centers to conduct readings and workshops. WritersCorps' greatness is in its ability to provide an opportunity for hundreds of writers to use their art in service to others. Its greatness is also exemplified by the thousands of new writers it has helped to create, a generation of young people who have defined themselves as artists and activists. As my mother knew, sharing does not require riches—only that we see ourselves in each other.

Painting of Frederick Douglass, 2nd Floor Charles Hart Middle School

"It is easier to build a strong child than to repair a broken man."
—Frederick Douglass

The hallway patiently waits, yearns
for the meticulous brush of janitors
scraping away the vestiges of
children who do not understand

that they are the protagonists
in a centuries-old drama full
of monsters and circumstances
waiting to devour them.

Frederick Douglass is tacked high
above the fray of their precarious

lives, he looks down upon them sternly
furrowed brow in etched face

trying to convince them that the even-
second-rate education they despise
might still be sanctuary, like his education
of wielded whips & wrested words.

I tutor the 7th grader who cannot spell
“cool,” does not know the name of the
continent where Frederick Douglass’
mother was stolen from, the bad

light-skinned boy, who I have reluctantly
let back into the program, asks me if
he should put down the name of his
murdered father on his permission slip.

I think of Douglass, young boy, motherless,
father a mystery—perhaps any white man with
slaves. I think of the children who fill these halls
with sound to keep the drone of their uncertain

futures from drowning out their laughter. I wonder
if they ever look up at the face looking down at them
if they ever remember, wide-eyed, beautiful, endangered,
“that reading makes a man unfit for slavery.”

Poetry Club

for Nikki

a woman is yelling from a doorway,
august lingers like the smell of burning wire,
she is admonishing children who are not hers
“get off that tree, they planted it for the dead girl”

I wonder if this tree will live long enough
to be baptized in a dc thunderstorm
or provide shade for the weary at the bus stop

this sapling, named after the girl you murdered,
reminds me of your first poem
full of promise, in need of care

I looked for that poem
when I got the news
all sudden & sideways
& easy to doubt

not like the movies, where an old white dude
with a calm modulated voice asks you to sit down
instead a 15-year-old blurts out this horror
launching it abruptly into my brain without
count down or build up "Nikki killed dat girl"

I hold myself together with feigned ignorance
wishing to have no knowledge of a language
capable of conveying the story of a butcher knife
plunged into the future of a 14-year-old by a
13-year-old

but the young voice thwarts my retreat
into this mirage of denial, wants to know
when the poetry club will start again
as if there is a poem big enough to fill the
gaping hole that has produced this obscene absence

I watch you walk again for the first time
into my workshop, hands on bouncing, narrow
hips, eyes already rolling without provocation
you pretending not to listen but refusing to
leave, your smile a scrim for your anger

looking for your poem, I find your picture
I want to run to the court where you are being arraigned,
insist that the judge examine your smile & imagination,
demand that they be declared exculpatory evidence

but he will show me this tree,
this thin frightened maple, its root
fertilized with blood & a grandmother's tears
bearing the name of a dc holocaust victim

I remember how you snatched your poem from me
 your response to my compliment, you hop-scotching
 between rage & joyous innocence
 the 15-year-old wants me to believe
 that you would have traded that knife for a pen
 that behind all that sucking of teeth & attitude
 was a poet's face trying to recognize itself

When are we going to start the poetry club again?
 I hear between the pulsing migraine of words
 that tell me you are a murderer, that repeat a
 mantra louder than a February chorus of I've
 Known Rivers, "Nikki killed dat girl"

I long for the belief of zealots & new lovers,
 wish that I could believe in the ability of words
 to replace embraces, could believe that children
 sent to or left to be swallowed by despair on this
 side of the river, can choose life & art when
 death & destruction are more potent & available

I remember how you returned your poem to me
 crumbled up like hardening snow
 unleashed from your fist onto my desk,
 its only edit, your signature & an august
 thunderstorm gathering above your smile

Kenneth F. Carroll directed the D.C. WritersCorps from 1995 to 2008 and is the author of the poetry collection *So What: For the White Dude Who Said This Ain't Poetry*. His work has appeared widely in such places as the *Washington Post* and *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam*. Three of his plays have been produced: *The Mask*, *Make My Funk the P-Funk* and *Walking To Be Free*. He has written for BET Television and for independent film, including the award-winning documentary *Voices Against Violence*, winner of the Rosebud Award.