

SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

*The* INAUGURAL  
SYMPOSIUM:  
DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION

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*Prepared remarks*

**Art, The Many Publics, and Education as Democracy**

“If humanity has made some headway in realizing that the ultimate value of every institution is its distinctively human effect—its effect upon conscious experience—we may well believe that this lesson has been learned largely through dealings with the young.” — John Dewey (1916)

I am honored to join this conversation, which gives us an opportunity to really reflect on the role that colleges and universities can play in responding to, intervening in and shaping some of the most pressing issues of our time. I am also humbled by the invitation from Cristle Collins Judd to reflect on such a bold topic as “democracy in education” on the morning of her presidential inauguration at Sarah Lawrence College. I have had the distinction of personally getting to know President Judd over the last few months, known her work for much longer than that, and had the great honor of teaching her brilliant daughter, Hannah, at the University of Pennsylvania last spring. This is simply another way of saying that Cristle’s life and work have already modeled the kind of interventions and intersections that I hope that we can deliberate on this morning and though the future feels quite dim these days, it is brightened by the fact that Professor Judd and Sarah Lawrence are leading the way.

**VIGNETTE #1**

I first read John Dewey’s 1916 classic “Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education” during the summer of my sophomore year at the University of Pennsylvania. I was enrolled in special class for undergraduates that focused on nutrition and community education which was created by a joint partnership between Penn’s Office of Community Partnership and Turner Middle School in West Philadelphia. While we spent our weekdays developing and

implementing a curriculum for 6th graders that included gardening, health sciences, and cooking, our evenings were spent in a seminar with Dr. Ira Harkavy, waxing philosophical about Dewey's ideas (our main text for the course) and the relationship between the university as a place of higher education and community engagement. We asked each other:

*What was the responsibility of our Ivy League school to our mainly working and middle class African American neighbors of West Philadelphia?*

*What knowledge could we students share with children at Turner Middle School?*

*What could we learn from them?*

To certain degree, I feel a bit silly even bringing up these queries now. I have integrated some of these concerns so deeply in my ethical DNA that I forget that I even asked or debated them in the first place. But, those early conversations that I had as a seventeen year old with my peers really imprinted me - I began to see universities as both "laboratories" (to pull from another Dewey idea) at which we should deeply engage topics like race, gentrification, gender, and social justice *and* extensions of the very communities in which we reside.

In other words, in those hotbed days of the cultural wars of the 1990s, my commitment to the West Philadelphia "community" became more and more obvious as I began teaching courses every Saturday morning at the Turner Middle School on African American history and literature. Classes that often mirrored the courses that I was taking at Penn, but with a difference. I was not only teaching middle schoolers who volunteered to take my class, but I also had the rare opportunity to teach predominately African American students, many of whom did not feel welcomed on a campus that was less than ten blocks from their home. In response, I continued teaching on Saturdays, but also developed the SHARE tutoring program that invited African American students from all over West Philadelphia into our dormitory home - the W.E.B. Du Bois College House - and paired them with African American students at Penn.

At its peak, SHARE had about forty kids, ranging from 1st grade to 8th grade, and eventually even some of my Saturday school students joined as well. By the time, I left Penn, my experience as student and teacher helped me understand what kind of university life I wanted to shape for myself - one deeply devoted to engaging many publics and to creating an intellectual home for students that lived within the campus environs, not simply those enrolled there.

## VIGNETTE #2

Every summer, I travel to Chicago to work with the Girl/Friends Leadership Institute, a program for teen girls that A Long Walk Home, the nonprofit I cofounded with my sister, Scheherazade Tillet, host at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Our mission at A Long Walk Home is to use art to educate and empower young people to end violence against girls and women on their campuses, communities, cities, and our country at large. Originally, the 6-week summer intensive of Girl/Friends was housed in North Lawndale on Chicago's Westside, a community that is besieged by poverty, police violence, gang and gun violence, sexual assault, and just a few years ago, unprecedented public school closings.

Most of you are familiar with North Lawndale because it was neighborhood that writer Ta-nehisi Coates profiled in his 2014 cover story, "The Case for Reparations," in which he reported that this predominantly African American neighborhood has a homicide rate is 45 per 100,000—triple the rate of the city as a whole. The infant-mortality rate is 14 per 1,000—more than twice the national average. Forty-three percent of the people in North Lawndale live below the poverty line—double Chicago's overall rate. Forty-five percent of all households are on food stamps—nearly three times the rate of the city at large. In addition, despite the fact that North Lawndale has one of the highest incidents of sexual assault in Chicago, and is one of only five neighborhoods in which the reported number of sexual assaults has not decreased within the last decade, there was no declared rape crisis center from 2011 and 2016.

Our Girl/Friends live at the intersection of these various trauma and oppression, 95 percent of Girl/Friends reported a family income at or below the poverty line, and 75 percent have one or more incarcerated parent; while 47 percent have witnessed or experienced a hate crime. They joined Girl/Friends because they want to tackle these problems head on, not as single platform issues, but through a lens of intersectional feminism, an acknowledgement that for some member of our society multiple forms of oppression work in tandem to limit their life choices and life chances.

And yet because we are an art organization, we did not simply want to activate policy without a change in political consciousness, pop culture, and even how the girls perceived themselves and other girls and young women in Chicago. And so we formalized our partnership with the School of the Art Institute in order to house our artist-activist summer intensive in downtown Chicago. This relationship has enabled yet another moment of collaboration and reciprocity - the university becomes a safe, creative, space for young African American girls from the Westside of Chicago, and our Girl/Friends imbue the space with a sense of innovation, critical consciousness, and social justice. One moment this summer was especially striking to me: we invited over 100 black girl artists, activists, and citizens, ranging in age from 2 to 19, to join us for our "Visibility Project" community exhibition at SAIC. For that evening, SAIC had

become a communal space, a community space, a public space, and most magically a black girl space that featured the photographs, poetry, music, and virtuosic games of some of most vulnerable *and* invisible citizens.

### **VIGNETTE #3**

In downtown Philadelphia today, adjacent to City Hall, lies Hank Willis Thomas's "All Power to All People," a larger than life sized women's Afro pick, with a titled playfully invoking the Black Panther Party. As the debut of Monument Lab's series, the sculpture has garnered great excitement and some backlash because of its intended proximity to the bronze statue of Frank Rizzo, Philly's controversial police commissioner from 1968 to 1971 and mayor of Philadelphia from 1972 to 1980. I bring this up because project like this firmly situated in the public, but also created by an academic, Paul Farber, and yet in conversation with artist-activists, like Thomas and Mel Chen, and supported in partnership with Mural Arts and the University of Pennsylvania embodies the kinds of collaborations at which I think universities and colleges should be at the forefront. Currently, I am trying to create a sustained space on campus that is a Center for Public Art and Social Justice. As I develop such a place, new questions and challenges have come up for me:

*Should it be housed in the community or campus?*

*What is the role of the university in conversations about art and social justice?*

*And finally, what are the limits and possibilities of art to be an agent of change and social transformation?*

And while I am still working my way to these answers, I am guided by the Dewey's closing vision in "Democracy and Education":

"The school becomes itself a form of social life, a miniature community and one in close interaction with other modes of associated experience beyond school walls. All education which develops power to share effectively in social life is moral. It forms a character which not only does the particular deed socially necessary but one which is interested in that continuous readjustment which is essential to growth. Interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest."