

Book Notes

OPEN ADMISSIONS: THE POETICS AND PEDAGOGY OF TONI CADE BAMBARA,
JUNE JORDAN, AUDRE LORDE, AND ADRIENNE RICH IN THE ERA OF FREE COLLEGE

by Danica Savonick

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One account of open admissions at the City University of New York (CUNY) might simply deliver the core facts: it was an enrollment policy guaranteeing tuition-free admission to all New York City high school graduates from 1970 to 1976. While “open admissions” generally refers to nonselective admissions policies that require only a high school diploma or equivalent credential, and is most often practiced at community colleges, open admissions at CUNY applied to both its four-year senior colleges and two-year junior colleges, with higher-performing students more likely to be admitted to their first-choice senior college (CUNY Digital History Archive, n.d.). In the years prior, the vast majority of CUNY students had been white men admitted through a selective admissions process, earning CUNY’s City College, for example, the nicknames “Harvard of the Proletariat” and Harlem’s “white citadel” (6). The first year of open admissions produced a significant demographic shift, nearly doubling the size of the incoming first-year class and welcoming significantly more students of color, women, and working-class students onto CUNY campuses (71).

Another account of open admissions at CUNY might detail its challenging road to implementation—how it was fought for, why, and by whom. Like many other educational access initiatives adopted in the 1960s and 1970s in response to student organizing efforts, the dream of open admissions was anchored in the belief that opportunities for transformative learning should not be reserved for affluent or advantaged students but be made available to anyone. As Sean Molloy (2016) has argued, the struggle for racial justice at CUNY during this period mobilized critics of both exclusionary admissions policies as well as rigid instructional and assessment standards. Numerous other scholars, including Roderick Ferguson (2012), Martha Biondi (2014), Amaka Okechukwu (2019), and Conor Tomás Reed (2023), have written about the years-long fight to secure and maintain open admissions at CUNY as a key site of struggle linked to broader collective investments in Black power, ethnic pride, and social change, as well as larger critiques of neoliberal racial logics underpinning universities’ efforts to manage student diversity.

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Danica Savonick's account of the open admissions era at CUNY builds on this body of scholarship but pursues a different question, asking, How did the open admissions ethos lead to important pedagogical and literary innovations? Weaving together an impressive array of historical and literary sources, Savonick argues in *Open Admissions: The Poetics and Pedagogy of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich in the Era of Free College* that the movement for more equitable admissions policies at CUNY both established the conditions for and was produced by the poetics and pedagogies of liberatory learning. Crucial to her narrative is the 1965 establishment of SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge), a landmark educational opportunity program at CUNY's four-year colleges that served as a partner initiative to open admissions. SEEK provided promising students who did not meet the existing admission requirements extra academic and financial support, including tutoring, counseling, and remedial coursework. In particular, SEEK students were required to take introductory writing courses to matriculate. And while the instructors for these courses, some argue, had been hired as part of an institutional effort to enforce standards of conformity on a post-civil rights diasporic student population (Shor, 1997), four of them made their refusals clear. Instead of administering required grammar exams, they prioritized skills in argumentation and advocacy by teaching their students to conduct research, to write and publish literature, and to become leaders of their own educational experience. They were Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich.

Perhaps best known for their influential contributions to literature, the Black Arts Movement, and feminist and queer theory, Bambara, Jordan, Lorde, and Rich are reintroduced to readers of *Open Admissions* as activist teacher-poets who, by 1968, were all teaching at City College, CUNY's founding institution. Each understood her work with words as deeply connected to her work with students and produced a shared corpus of writings that attest to reciprocal relations between teaching, writing, and advocating for educational equity. Moreover, their collaborations as colleagues—exchanging syllabi, adapting each other's assignments, observing one another's classes—map the “networks of pedagogical exchange that go into producing the scene of teaching and learning” (13). To restage these scenes, Savonick draws on their archival teaching materials, including syllabi, lesson plans, lecture notes, and student work, as well as their literary texts—in this case, largely works of feminist literature and criticism. The book takes the central figures in turn, dedicating a chapter to each of their pathways to, through, and beyond CUNY during its era of open admissions.

Chapter 1 illustrates how Toni Cade Bambara developed a community-controlled and multimodal pedagogy for her students. Savonick offers snapshots from her SEEK classes, where students searched for knowledge beyond the walls of the institution, digging through archives at the Schomburg Center and conducting oral histories with friends, family, and community leaders (27). Rather

than assigning traditional final papers, Bambara invited students to produce projects that engaged diverse formats and audiences, including annotated bibliographies, performance art, short stories for radio or television, and magazines (41). One final project tasked each student with designing a syllabus for their dream course, submissions that Bambara later, in a summer course for returning SEEK students, circulated as resources for an actual exercise in coconstructing the course syllabus. After hours of discussion and debate, the students agreed on a course titled “Colonialism, Neocolonialism, and Liberation,” the syllabus spanning works of fiction, memoirs, social theory, and films (31).

Chapter 2 turns to June Jordan and the evolution of her public and project-based pedagogy, which pushed students to cultivate a “structural imaginary” as they sought to understand the far-reaching consequences of systemic inequalities and acknowledge their role in challenging such conditions (66). Assignments like the “problem paper” tasked students to analyze social issues in their local neighborhoods, such as poverty and poor health, as the products of long, ongoing histories of discriminatory policy decisions and unequal resource investments.

In line with Jordan’s emphasis on cultivating a “structural imaginary,” Adrienne Rich practiced what Savonick calls in chapter 3 a “pedagogy of location,” or teaching methods that encouraged students to analyze the material conditions and power structures shaping their lives (100). Rich’s transition from teaching advanced creative writing seminars at Columbia to basic writing at City College led her toward a more student-centered, access-oriented, and activist-style instructional approach, as well as new critical perspectives. As she taught alongside Black women teacher-poets, immersed herself in Black literature and history in order to teach it, and wielded her influence to advocate for open admissions, Rich gradually deepened her engagement with intersectional and antiracist approaches to theorizing (130).

In chapter 4 we see Audre Lorde teaching across several different CUNY campuses. She taught basic writing at City College for just one year, though a momentous one—1968—in which students famously delivered a list of five demands to the City College administration and got in response dramatic budget cuts to the SEEK program (36). Outraged, students occupied campus and set up a pop-up university, Harlem University, which offered political education classes, tutorials, and various community services (39). In support of her students, Lorde moved her classes to Harlem University. By 1969 she was teaching a course on race at Lehman College for preservice teachers, and the following year she became the first Black faculty member in the English department at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where in her course “Race and the Urban Situation” police officers in training were asked to complete journal assignments that prompted them to connect class discussions on institutional racism, Black history, and power to their own lives and experiences. Savonick calls the strategies Lorde used to teach about race, class, gender, and sexuality across diverse class contexts her “pedagogies of difference.”

Throughout the chapters, Savonick points out that certain elements of student-centered teaching practices—for example, peer review, “ungrading,” scaffolding, multimedia composition—have a longer history than is commonly acknowledged, one profoundly shaped by Black educational leaders and scholars of color who have long prioritized public and community engagement in their research and teaching. Each chapter additionally considers how these educators’ pedagogical and activist commitments in turn shaped their lives as writers, theorists, and public intellectuals. As her portraits of Bambara, Jordan, Rich, and Lorde unfold, Savonick presents what she coins as three literary genres of open admissions, which reflect different forms of education-oriented writing from these women during this period: the campus essay, the anthology of student writing, and the classroom lyric.

Campus essays, like Bambara’s 1969 “Realizing the Dream of a Black University” and Jordan’s 1969 “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person,” are works that “convey alternative visions of higher education that bubble up in moments of tectonic shift” (37) and recognize reform efforts across ostensibly separate domains (i.e., curriculum, admissions and financial aid, research) as interconnected projects in promoting access and inclusion. SEEK also gave rise to seminal anthologies of Black literature and criticism. In Bambara’s 1970 *The Black Woman*, more than a third of the contributing authors were SEEK students or instructors. Savonick encourages readers to view Jordan’s and Bambara’s efforts to publish student work as a form of editorial activism continuing a long history of Black editorial labor, involving “countless uncompensated hours corresponding with publishers, negotiating contracts, and organizing publicity events” to impact the lives of their students and of readers in classrooms elsewhere (81).

While campus essays laid out demands in support of minoritized knowledge and students, and anthologies granted students’ voices and visions a public audience, classroom lyrics like Rich’s 1968 “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” and Lorde’s 1974 “Blackstudies” held the ambivalence, skepticism, and tensions each writer grappled with as she navigated the challenges of teaching and learning in a society so profoundly structured by injustice and inequality. Savonick takes readers along on careful close reading exercises and draws attention to the presence of CUNY classrooms and students in these poems (114, 160). One of the book’s main strengths is how Savonick shows each writer grappling *differently* with a shared set of personal and ethical dilemmas across each of the genres and their stylistic affordances, compellingly illustrating the significance of the open admissions era on their literary production. The book’s contribution on this front is useful in prompting readers to consider more recent examples of essays, poems, and edited volumes inspired by ongoing struggles on college campuses.

Open Admissions follows these figures as they move beyond the borders of the open admissions era at CUNY, in terms of their teaching work outside the context of the university as well as temporally, when they leave CUNY and go

on to teach at other institutions. Each chapter concludes with an overview of how the four women's experiences at CUNY had a lasting impact on their writing and teaching life decades afterward—from Rutgers to the Free University of Berlin to local arts organizations in Atlanta and Philadelphia. At times, such far departures from the era of open admissions create the impression of a drifting sense of focus, but Savonick persuasively argues that in order to trace the full legacy of the open admissions era, an expansive timeline and diverse cast are necessary to consider.

Following a citywide financial crisis in the 1970s, CUNY instated tuition fees for the first time in the institution's history. This on top of insufficient levels of funding and institutional support, as well as the return to restrictive admission standards, effectively ended the era of open admissions in 1976 (162). Given the continued defunding of public universities and the newly imposed nationwide ban on race-conscious admissions policies, Savonick's call for reinvesting in the material and institutional conditions needed to support transformative college teaching takes on a fresh layer of urgency. At the same time, as Bambara, Jordan, Rich, and Lorde demonstrate, the work of study must continue where educational institutions come up short. *Open Admissions* is a crucial and timely reminder not to overlook the work of our contemporary activist teacher-poets and the space of the writing classroom in particular as sites of critical possibility.

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