Marcelle Haddix and Georgia Popoff

Writing Outside School Walls: Marcelle Haddix & Georgia Popoff Talk about a Movie

On Thursday, October 8, 2015, the YMCA's Downtown Writers Center in Syracuse hosted a conversation between ***Georgia Popoff,*** *community poet and coordinator of the DWC's Young Authors Academy, and* ***Dr. Marcelle Haddix,*** *director of Writing Our Lives, to talk about the growth and prospects for support of young writers outside the traditional school setting. They, videographer* ***Malinda Massing*** *and I met beforehand to discuss the project, plan the filming and to generate a set of points to include in their conversation. The occasion of this conversation was the plan to include a short film,* Writing Outside School Walls *in* Stone Canoe's *special Moving Images section commemorating the late filmmaker, Thea St.Omer. Haddix, who now chairs the Reading and Language Arts department in Syracuse University's School of Education, had collaborated with St.Omer in 2010 in making* Writing Outside School Walls *when the Writing Our Lives project was just getting underway. Haddix and Popoff found much common ground in their two programs and occasion for future collaboration while talking over this film.*

St.Omer was already well-known to the DWC because she had used the space, part of the Arts Branch of the YMCA in the heart of downtown, to film interviews for her own documentary projects. Videographer Malinda Massing also works with the Syracuse Stories Project, which has also used the DWC space, and Syracuse Stories will also share this video on their YouTube channel.

You can watch Writing Outside School Walls, *a ten-minute short, with an edited video of the Haddix-Popoff conversation, elsewhere on the section's homepage as well as Marcelle Haddix's account of working with St.Omer on this project. Here is a full transcription.*

– Nancy Keefe Rhodes, Ed.

Marcelle Haddix (MH): I'm Marcelle Haddix, a faculty member in Reading and Language Arts at Syracuse University in the School of Education.

Georgia Popoff (GP): And I'm Georgia Popoff, Downtown Writers Center workshops coordinator and teaching artist.

MH: I came to Syracuse University in 2008 and I came here as a professor in English education. Writing is a passion of mine. And one of the things that was important to me in coming to Syracuse University was also becoming grounded in the community and situating myself and members of my family as members of the community. So in 2008 I attended several community forums. One of them was about the state of education for African American children. It was important to me to be part of that conversation because I too was sort of navigating the educational system for my own child. During that forum I recall hearing re-

ally a lot of frustration from families and parents about the educational situation for their students. Many were saying that their kids couldn't read, they couldn't write. They were dissatisfied with the educational resources, the teachers weren't teaching. So I, as someone who is very passionate about teaching, about writing, and someone who had some capital as a professor at Syracuse University, said what can I do—not only as a parent and community member but as a faculty member and as a writing scholar—to support the needs of youth, families and community? And so, I just started offering writing workshops. So I said, just let me go find space in a local library. So I was working in a library in the summer of 2009 and young people just started showing up for writing workshops. And so it just became very apparent to me that there was a growing need and an interest for people just to write creatively but also to receive support in terms of academic writing. So that grew and continued to grow. In 2009 I sponsored my Saturday conference, the program we've called Writing Our Lives. On a Saturday in November at the Dunbar Community Center here in Syracuse, about a hundred students came just to write. We offered workshops in poetry, journalism, fiction and creating comics—just a range of multiple genres.

I was just amazed by the outpouring. At the time, my dean, Doug Biklen, attended the conference and I think he too was just kind of overwhelmed at the presence of young people when you have these myths, you know, and scholarship in a society about what young people don't do or won't do. And then you see, you know, that one, it's false, and to see them so actively engaged and so excited about writing on a Saturday when there are a plethora of other things that they could have been doing. He was really inspired by that and wanted to further support my efforts to help cultivate the youth writing community. So Doug—his medium in terms of his own scholarship is film and documentary. He said, "You know, I think you should document this. You have something really special here." We wanted to get the word out to other people and let other people see the kinds of things that are happening here in Syracuse. And also, if you do a documentary it can also be a pedagogical tool, something you can use in teaching. And so, I said, "Okay, that's a good idea. I've never done film before, um"—*[Laughs]*— "wouldn't know where to start."

He had worked with Thea St.Omer on some other projects for the School of Education and some other of his film projects and so he introduced the two of us and thought that it would be a good pairing, given the type of work that she had been doing. And I didn't realize at the time, when he introduced the two of us, I knew Thea because I had attended a screening of her film, *Nigger,* which she screened in Maxwell Auditorium at Syracuse University the year prior. I had

seen her work but, again, I wasn't familiar with her. So, Doug introduced us. My first meeting with Thea, we—we vibed instantly. My thing about anytime you do research or even with film, when I want a community to document their lives or their experiences, I'm always a little skeptical about the perspective and the person and what their intentions are? One of the things that I really appreciated about my interaction with Thea was that she just really wanted to learn about what was going on. She was an ethnographer in many ways. So she said, "Well, let me just start coming to some of the programs and you know, meet people—talk to people, participate, engage. And so before she even started any filming—at the time we were doing some workshops at one of the local high schools—and Thea just started to join me after school, learning the community, learning the environment. And from that, when she started to film, it was almost as if she wasn't there. It didn't feel intrusive.

GP: That is so important!

MH: It was so important, because she was already a part of the community. She really tried to understand from my perspective as well as the young people in Writing Our Lives and why these out-of-school writing spaces were so important to us. And that's how this documentary, *Writing Outside School Walls,* came about, from that experience.

GP: I think in watching the film, one of the things that I appreciated was the authenticity of the students' reactions. I have not—first of all, you had such luxury in the fact that you were encouraged to document your work! Because I've been doing this work since 2000 in earnest. I've done workshops on and off for years, and started with workshops—oh, actually longer than that, because in 1995 or '94 I started working with ACT-SO as a mentor, because it's so hard to get one-on-one mentorship. Yeah, NAACP ACT-SO program. I workshopped the kids at Happy Endings *[a local coffee house]* because I was running an open mic there. So my niece actually got me involved. I got a call from the local ACT-SO committee, saying, "Oh, we want you to—your niece said that you would be her coach for the ACT-SO competition." And I'm going, "Oh!" *[Laughs]* She hadn't discussed it with me. She was fifteen and she just, "Aunt Georgia will take care of it." So I started coaching a group of ten students. Our thing was, we're competing with each other and against everybody else. But I was able to start that process of peer critique so that everyone rises to a level. So in 1994 one of my

students took the national gold medal. And that's a great story that I'll tell you sometime about how she came to make the decisions she did about the poem she was doing, but anyway—since that time, and now it's 2015, I spent many years in arts-integrated learning through the New York State Council on the Arts, in many schools throughout New York State. I've done after-school programs and now with the Young Authors Academy here at the Downtown Writers Center—we're closing in on our fourth anniversary—working with young people I have documented very little. I have a lot of stories to tell.

MH: Mmmm, yes.

GP: But I didn't have what you had. The fact that Thea went in and became part of the community, to be invisible in a way, she was no longer an intrusion—she was a part of the community and she was just a grown-up they didn't pay attention to. So her camera wasn't intrusive either and the responses—I've seen a lot of documentary evidence of the effectiveness of arts-integrated learning over the years, and the power of language, the value of what we do with young people.

MH: Right, right.

GP: One of the reasons I do it is that poetry saved my life. It has at three different times, but as a teen-ager, it definitely saved my life. Knowing that from personal experience has always fuelled me to work with young people. And when I watched the documentary—these very earnest conversations!—these comments from the heart, of "This is my life. This was necessary for me and I'm a stronger human being now." It was very powerful work. And I think if it had just been somebody saying, "Oh, we're coming in on Saturday and we're filming…" but they were used to her.

MH: They were used to her.

GP: And they were also comfortable with her, because it was easy to be comfortable with her. I didn't know her very well but she attended our readings, she filmed here. She was such an important part of the community—everyone is still in shock.

MH: That was really, as I reflect back and remember, on her role as a filmmaker, she was also about building relationships. So you know, it extended beyond just the film. She really got to know those students and the teacher. Because there were times that I wasn't there, that I wasn't present, that she went around and

met with people and worked with people. So she really became a part of the fabric of the program in many ways. But to your point about hearing the students' voices, that was really one of the reasons that I wanted to do the work and to start Writing Our Lives. There was a young man who participated—he wasn't in this film, but he participated in the programs. And he said, "I need writing because it's like breathing for me." He would say, "It saved my life." So it's so important to cultivate and create those kinds of spaces. I don't think I realized the power of it when I started doing the work, because it was something that came so natural for me. The documenting of it and then hearing other people's stories validated and helped to raise my own awareness about how important this work is. So now, seven years later, as we continue to do the conference, the school programs, the summer institutes, and when I get tired, I'm like, "Okay, I don't think that there's a need," or, "We have this conference coming up and how are we going to get a hundred kids?" and you know, I don't think it's that important—I'm instantly reminded and I think having this film, every time I revisit it is, you know, a way to stay committed to it and to realize the importance and the utility of the work.

GP: You bring up a couple things that I want to go back to. One is this building relationships. What I learned when I was working for Partners for Arts Education and through the New York State Council on the Arts and Education—that work was thriving in the 90s and up until about 2008—what we had was that notion that relationship was really important in arts education. And that empowering people to be who they were and not pushing in with a program—you know, things are grown organically from the need.

MH: Yes.

GP: Such an important lesson! At times I was guilty of trying to push in. I learned pretty quickly that you don't do that, you don't do that. If you answer a need and you build relationship, you can build trust with anybody.

MH: That's right.

GP: And that inclusion, safe space, the ability to speak your own truth will be trusted, if it's given authentically. That's a core value at the Young Authors Academy. It's a very diverse community of young people. It's very common, the first week a young person will come—and we're middle and high school—if they say, "I don't fit in in school," the kids say, "Oh, you belong here." This is where we are. Every so often we'll have some bickering and we have to talk about it, but it's understood: we're writers here together and it doesn't matter how you express

yourself, bang! There's honesty, truth and inclusion.

MH: Mmmm-hmmm!

GP: This is a safe space. And another piece is when you let it grow organically. If your funding is such that you have to hit certain numbers—you know, and it's about numbers, it's about product and not process—it's not going to have the same level of authenticity and value.

MH: That's right.

GP: When you are given the opportunity to grow as the need grows, and answer the need because you recognize it, because you've built relationship within community and you've built relationship with the people with whom you're working, it doesn't matter if it's young people or adults, then you have investment. So authenticity and true buy-in is built on trusted relationships. And the other thing I've learned is that trusted relationship is built on the ability to say, "I don't know."

MH: Yeah!

GP: Let me find out. Teach me. Teach what you need to know. I'm always asking our kids, "What do I need to know?" And I think was a core value for Thea. She was always investigating, "What do I need to know? What will the world show me?" Not so much, what will I see? But, what will the world show me through the lens?

MH: Yes. She didn't go into it with, "This is what…" Because yes, she interviewed me and we talked about what the overall goals were, but we didn't know what we were going to end up with. We were willing to kind of go down that rabbit hole together and see where it would take us and it was a lot of learning in the process. Some of the things that you just said really struck a chord with me when I think about where Writing Our Lives is now and some of the challenges that we've had over the years—which I'm sure you've probably experienced too.

GP: *[Laughs]*

MH: A lot of the work that I do at the University as a professor I connect to my teaching—and somewhat to my scholarship—but definitely to my teaching. So one of the hallmarks of Writing Our Lives has been that I'll bring my student

teachers, or students in my class—you know, I've taught 21st Century Youth Writers, Civic Engagement—and so students from those classes come and they do the work in Writing Our Lives. Undergraduate students, graduate students—and so there's also kind of an apprenticeship and a mentoring-into in the process of how we do the work. And so I think at times I definitely have felt a sense of—I don't know if "obligation" is too strong a word, but responsibility to the learning of those students to make the program happen. But that's the authenticity sometimes. We had an incident just this Tuesday at one of the community centers where we have Writing Our Lives. There was some tension between the students and the staff members there, almost to the point of a physical altercation, and so the staff member said, "The center's closed—everybody out." And I had graduate students there, like, "I'm supposed to be doing this work right now!" And the kids all have to go. And so there's a constant, for me, having to remind them that when you do work in community spaces, you have to kind of go with the flow. You know, we're not architects of this. We're there to learn and we're there to participate, so I can't guarantee for you what's going to happen. I can't guarantee—students, middle and high school students, are not required to come to our program. It's their choice. So someone may come this week and he may walk past the program next week and say, "You know, today I don't feel like coming." And you have to honor and respect that student's need or desire or whatever it is that they get from the program. At the same time we have students who will come to one of the after-school programs that's in the middle schools and they want to get a snack *[Laughs]* …

GP: Yup! *[Laughs]*

MH: …because that's important, and we'll have writing activities and things and they may not want to do those things. They may want to just come and have a snack and hang out, because we're in the library—a space that, ironically, they don't get to go into during the academic day!

GP: That's a whole other conversation!

[Both laugh]

MH: So after school, it's like, "Oh! I can go into the library!" You know, "I can be in a space that is off-limits to me during the academic day. And there's a program happening here, Writing Our Lives, and I'll see what that's about. But I just want to be in the space. I want to be free. I just want to be able to be—for this next hour or hour and a half." So we try to honor where the students are and

meet the students where they are. That's something that I definitely have learned and continually have to remind myself, when I sometimes feel, oh, one or two students showed up today. Well, those one or two students showed up because they wanted to be there, for whatever, and they're getting something from it, because they don't have to be there.

GP: Right. It's not quantitative, and I have a very different journey into this work. Not academic. In fact, in the 90s I was trying to figure out where I fit in and I was in the Slam movement and, after coming out of ten years of not writing, discovering poetry slam and I went, "Ohh! I want to do that!" That became my drug of choice for a while. But after a while—I was already in my forties and it was skewing toward youth and I wasn't fitting in and I wanted to investigate poetry from a different perspective than just spoken-word sensibility. And then I didn't fit into academia either. But I was starting to do a lot of community work with organizing readings and producing spoken-word events—Slam Master and working with ACT-SO—and I said, "Well, how do I identify myself for a business card?"

MH: *[Laughs]* What do I call myself?

GP: What's my title? Tell me, please! And I came up with "community poet." And that's who I've named myself since 1994. And claiming that role of poet first in my life was a huge change. So I have been teaching in non-traditional ways and in non-traditional settings, but what I learned is this ear that you're giving your students, and it's very authentic, that you never know what's going to happen in a classroom. When they get done with it—even if they're in regular class rooms, but they know it—teaching is performance art.

MH: Oh yeah.

GP: And you have to be able to improvise at the drop of a hat. You have to know when the teachable moment is, as opposed to the curriculum, which is why the Common Core is decimating education, in the way it's constructed—it's constructed by politicians and corporations—so we don't have the ability to be authentic in the teachable moment and answer that need. The best moments I know in teaching came out of those moments of either resistance or questioning. You know, query. Well, how did that happen? How did okra come to the United States, as a group of sixth graders in Watkins Glen were reading Nikki Giovanni's "Knoxville, Tennessee," and talking about okra and some of the kids

knew what it was and some of the kids didn't and that wound up with us using the smart board to trace the journey of okra from Africa to the United States, and how did it get to the United States? It was the slave trade. So we weren't talking about poetry anymore. We weren't even talking about Nikki Giovanni anymore. We were talking about what it would be like if you were carrying that on your body so that you would have something from home.

MH: Mmmm-hmmmm.

GP: And then, how did that become more and more and more. If I had to stick to a tight curriculum and feel that's what I had to do, that discovery never would've happened, you know. And the opportunity to freely go those directions, rather than stay to some scripted lesson plan, is a valuable tool and it's the most authentic thing. But in after-school, they're choosing to be there. Even on Saturday. Our kids are choosing to be here on Saturday. This is a voluntary program. We started with six. We have been granted funding that allows us to grow organically. It's mostly word of mouth. And we have a completely diverse group of students. We originally planned four eight-week sessions. They asked us to go to ten. If I take more than a month off, I get all kinds of, "Miss Popoff! When can we come back?" We do a retreat day in the winter time. They asked for two hours instead of an hour and a half. Why? They wanted more time to critique each other. They know the difference between critique and criticism. They're learning the critical skill of looking at a body of work and seeing what's working and saying, "You can improve here." That's the language we use. You know, they're supportive, they're producing great work, they're publishing. They're creating a great sense of community and acceptance. We have students on the autism spectrum. We have students from many different cultures and ethnicities. We have students from different socio-economic classes. All coming together and they are one. It is absolutely stunning. Some days, on a Saturday morning, do I want to go to work for a sixth day? Nah, not so much, you know, and I get here and I sit down with the kids and get my poets going….The fiction kids write about fiction, but the poets get into things a little bit differently and now that they're really strong as a unit, we're talking about so many different social issues. We're talking about gender, we're talking about class, we're talking about politics—in a way that they are really free to say what they think. They jack me up every so often. We had a really interesting conversation about drag—that I had a certain opinion of it and they said, "We don't think you should look at that way."

MH: Okay!

GP: Okay, I'll hear you, you know! It was great.

MH: It's interesting what you're about just reminds me of a lot of times when people question the validity of out-of-school literacy spaces?

GP: Yeah!

MH: And they are challenged to see the connection between the work that happens in these spaces with the tasks of education in school. And everything that you just described that the students are doing in the writing center—you know, when I think about the students in our program, those are the types of skills that, if we look at Common Core, those are the types of things that they say they should be doing, yet students come to these out-of-school spaces to engage in these skills in more authentic ways. So I think that's one of the things that, as an academic, where I'm constantly trying to make my work accessible to a more scholarly audience to understand the connection between what we do here and what students have to do in school. That's not my ultimate goal—I'm not trying to meet Common Core standards or help students with standardized tests—but at the same time I understand that if students are able to do the kind of research they're doing to understand where okra came from, all these skills are skills that easily translate into the types of things that they should be doing in school. But it's upon us to help them to—and to help teachers—to see how you can make those connections and validate and support the things that students are doing outside of school.

GP: I fully agree. The other thing that I really appreciate is that it's not school, so they engage in a different way. I get feedback from parents often about the underlying value of participation, that within their school life, their critical thinking skills have increased. That their writing skills have increased. That their ability to express themselves, their self-confidence—there's been a remarkable change in a number of kids. And it's because they can be free to be who they really are. They come to our programs? They don't have to front. Nobody's there except their own peers and they have the freedom to say what they want, as long as it isn't hurtful.

MH: Right.

GP: And that is truly valuable. I know people—Urban Word, in New York, totally based on that same premise. Young Chicago Authors. Houston's Writers in the Schools. Everybody who's doing this work knows this.

MH: Yes.

GP: You know, there's a huge network of writers in the schools through AWP [Association of Writers and Writing Programs] and all of us know this lesson. The other thing—the training aspect that you're giving your students we're doing it with our students. Last fall I started an internship program for our juniors and seniors. If they are in their junior or their senior year and they have participated in at least two sessions of the Young Authors Academy, they can intern with us for their community engagements credits.

MH: Oh, nice!

GP: And we've been able to start a college internship program. Our first year we had a wonderful young woman from the Creative Writing Program at [SUNY] Oswego who reached out to us. She interned for us one year and taught for us the next year. Lena Gluck. And then this year, we had one of our—Stasia Hawkins, who had just completed her freshman year at Hamilton—she'd graduated from Nottingham [High School] and had been one of our Young Authors Academy writers—and she reached out to us at the end of the semester, saying, "I have to do a summer internship, can I do it with the Young Authors Academy?" And I said sure. So it turned out that the best part was for us: She couldn't be paid. *[Laughs]*

Nancy Keefe Rhodes: It's almost quarter to eleven. Are you covering everything that you've talked about wanting to discuss?

MH: The one thing that I wanted to talk a little bit about is the notion of freedom. That's the theme for our conference this year: "Be Free." I just wanted to bring in the issues around youth writers and their social engagement and how they're using writing as a tool of resistance and that shift in some of the things the students are writing about now and doing with their writing.

GP: I'd like to talk about an issue that we had about language and the difference between censorship and courtesy.

MH: Okay!

GP: I think we should also touch on the myth that young people don't read.

MH: Yeah, that was the last question. We didn't have this conversation but we

were talking about the library and what we found was that, students coming to the Writing Our Lives program after school at Danforth library, is that they want to take the books. They read the *anime* and they can't get—so they love to read!

GP: "These kids"—see, that's a phrase I hate. Because "these kids" is a marginalizing language.

MH: And you hear it all the time.

GP: When you say, "these kids," that's a code.

MH: The way people are using it, they mean to use it in a deficit way.

GP: And it automatically implies, with a lot of people, students of color. *[Returns to the internship].* So the best part was she couldn't get paid because the school was funding it. What we were able to do was not just give her Young Authors Academy opportunity, but she worked with us all summer. She was also working with the 9th grade academy at Nottingham [High School] for their summer session. But she was doing anything from counting up paper plates and plastic knives—where were we with the party supplies?—to organizing the library. She was doing assessments from our evaluation of our faculty from the winter during our adult classes. She was teaching in the Young Authors Academy. A student doing lesson plans herself. She got a really good sense of non-profit management as well as giving back to something that had given to her. It was just great. So I'm going to try to do that because we have—probably ten of graduates are in college now, somewhere between their freshman and junior year. We have a group of kids who will be going off to college next year. They've published an anthology of their work as a fund-raiser. They do great things. But mostly we just come here and write.

MH: The students in the film, many of them are now juniors and seniors in college. Some of the students I was working with in 2008, yeah, now they've graduated and now are professionals. The young man who said, "I need writing—it's like breathing to me," he's just applied for—he's kind of traveled the world—he's applied for an internship with *BuzzFeed*. It's called the Emerging Writers Fellowship. So, you know one of the things that I think has been really important too, about these spaces, is introducing young people to professional writers and community poets so that they can see that writing isn't just something you do for school. But there are ways that writing can sustain you. It can be your life's work. Whether you're a writing teacher, whether you're a poet,

whether you are—now, with social media and 21st century writing for young people, there are all kinds of writing careers that are possible for young people. So they need to see. We've introduced them to illustrators and to artists, to people who are published authors. This fall I'm bring Kwame Alexander—who's a poet who just won the Newberry Medal for his book, *The Crossover*—to SU as part of our Urban Lecture Series. He's going to do a visit with some of the students at Danforth Middle School. And so the boys will all read his book and be able to engage with him, a poet, around the writing of his texts and around his own life. And so I think this is important for them to be able to see that they are people, just like me, who write and who are proud to be writers. Because there certainly—I'm thinking of some of the boys who come to our after-school program that's at the middle school—to say, the program's called Writing Our Lives. So by entering into those library doors, you're identifying yourself as someone who's interested in writing. There's still a relationship that they have where they're, like, okay, I'm gonna come into this space but I don't like writing, you know? And I'm, like, okay. But they stayed! *[Laughs]* Okay, so you say you don't like writing, but you're coming into this space. And one of the things that I realized, and we started talking about this earlier, is that, one, they like to write. Their definition of writing is often defined by whatever the school says it is—so it's writing for this timed test or whatever. So in that sense, they don't like writing. But when we start to break down the different kinds of writing and to expand the notion of what writing is, then they can see themselves connected to it and say, oh! I'm drawing a comic. Or I'm working on this story on the computer. That that's a form of writing, that's a form of composing. So this is part of helping them see that. But one of the reasons I know that they come is because there are books in the library.

[Both laugh.]

GP: Right!

MH: And the library space tends to be off-limits during the day. But they can come into the space and they can read the *anime* and they can read the graphic novels and the comics and all the different books and magazines that are there that they don't have access to during the day. They have access to it there. So there's this, you know, we hear this deficit framing of students of color. Around their literacy, around the achievement gap—that they don't read, they can't read, they're struggling readers. And here we have young people who I have witnessed, who are hungry for books! They are stuffing them in their back packs and I'm, like, "Wait! You can't leave off this library with that book!" *[Laughs]*

GP: Let me tell you a story. I used to teach a workshop in the summer at Hillbrook Detention Center. So I had a young man—oh God, this is such a funny story!—he wanted me to bring in Tupac *[Shakur]*'s book *[The Rose that Grew from Concrete, 1999]*. "Miss Popoff, bring Tupac's book!" I said, "Well, I don't have Tupac's book," and he said, "Well, why not?" I said, "Right now I can't afford it!" *[Both laugh]* He goes, "Steal it!" *[Both laugh]* "No, I really can't do that." And he says, "Well, that's what I used to do. I'd go to Barnes and Noble and pick out books and stuff them in my book bag and run. 'Oh! The bus is coming!' And I ran out the door." The first thing that he stole was books.

MH: Uh-huh.

GP: I did have to remind him that he was in jail. *[Both laugh]* His criminal path started as a child wanting access to books.

MH: One thing about it, you know, as I'm listening to you and I think about this, is when we historicize this, it used to be against the law for Black people to read.

GP: Yes. And for women!

MH: So, twenty-first century and we're still seeing this relationship to literacy that is not accessible. So that's really troubling for me. Really troubling.

GP: I'm still disturbed at the concept that any public school's library is off-limits during the school day. That, that—I became a poet in the library in school. I became engaged in reading—well, it was a couple of things. I had a teacher who read to us after lunch every day in the second grade. And then by the third grade I was going to the library and finding books that I would consume. By fourth grade I was leaving poems on the corner of my teacher's desk in the morning. She told me that. I didn't remember that, she told me that. I was fostered by Walt Sheppard—myself, Tom Peyer, who's a noted author of comics, now back in town. We were his first kids. Way before the Media Unit, we were the first kids and Walt encouraged us and taught us how to publish an underground newspaper. So, I feel it's my obligation to give something back. But, that access point. Part of Young Authors Academy is they get journals, pens. I have to re-order a combination dictionary-thesaurus. We often get books we can give them and giving books is very important.

MH: We do the same.

GP: You own this. You own this and take it home.

MH: And it's so important to them. Last year in one of the programs I gave twenty copies of Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* [2014], the national [Newbery Award] winner, and they're like, "I can keep this?" And I had teachers say, "Aren't you afraid they're going to lose it?" Well, they might, but it's theirs. And it's that act of giving a book, you know. It's really powerful.

GP: Yes And giving with no strings attached. You take it. This is a gift. I'm not gonna check on it later if you have it. I see the thesaurus come out of backpacks the next week. They have it. If they don't have it, it's not my business. I don't care. By the way, you know *Bronx Masquerade* [2002]?

MH: Oh sure. We brought her [Nikki Grimes] here back in 2008. It's just so important for students to have those opportunities, to one connect with the author, and to have the books. I just feel it's so important to give young people books. I recently was asked by *Scholastic* to be part of a project called, gee—Reading Makes the World Possible? That's not the title, but it was whole movement to get writers and teachers to talk about how reading and books had changed their lives. There was a little essay that I contributed. Walter Dean Myers, Kwame [Alexander]—all different folks. And in mine I wrote about, you know, my own childhood and someone who, as a child, was very to myself. I found myself in books. And there were characters like Ponyboy Curtis from *The Outsiders* [S.E. Hinton, 1967], Celie from *The Color Purple* [Alice Walker, 1982], and Carrie—Stephen King's *Carrie* [1974]. Very different genre! *[Both laugh]* But all of these people were characters that, even though we weren't exactly the same and our lives and experiences were very different, I connected to their stories and to their humanity. And I was able to find myself in those texts and in the words of those books. Alice Walker has been a mentor and a teacher just in the power and the beauty of the language and the words. And so for me, to give young people—*Brown Girl Dreaming* definitely, Woodson's text is just so beautifully written. The poetry is so beautiful.

GP: I think for me it was discovering other worlds, not myself. I was an insular child in a lot of ways. So I found other worlds. I was reading Louisa May Alcott. The Moffett books—loved the Moffett books, cried when I read the last one and there were no more. I was devastated! But then I quickly moved into adult fiction. And adult non-fiction. I mean, in middle school I found *Black Like Me* [John Howard Griffin, 1961]. I read it when I was twelve. I couldn't, couldn't understand. But I wanted to understand. You know, for me it was the discovery of

other worlds rather than validating myself. Or finding little bits of me. I did think that little Laura Ingalls Wilder—I wanted to live in a sod house [*Little House on the Prairie,* 1935].

MH: Everyone loves that!

GP: I think it was a past life thing too!

MH: I still watch re-runs.

GP: Reading was everything to me and then writing became even more.

MH: Exactly.

GP: And then it became my way of being heard even if nobody read it. I had it.

MH: It was on the page.

GP: It was on the page. And all my young people, I tell them, "I'm not even bringing in my high school poetry because you guys write so much more fluently and beautifully than I did." And everybody thought I was pretty talented, you know. But not like them. Their command is wonderful. But there's another value that I want to just step back to, among the things about our programs that are unspoken. We stress with our participants that this will help them get into college. That because they participated they have a plus factor on their applications. We encourage them to publish outside of what we publish. But we also publish them. Because those are plus factors for them. And especially for those students who would be at a perceived deficit in that world anyway. Having these credits is valuable and we anticipate—you're college-bound.

MH: That's right.

GP: Or you're professionally bound, one way or the other. Maybe it'll be a professional trade, and our society seems to have lost some value for that too. But that these are plus factors that show not just that you're participating but that you show up, you show up on time, you follow through. You do all these things if you're involved. And that discipline is a tremendous value.

MH: And that these programs are not about—it's not missionary work, it's not patronizing young people. It really is valuing them as writers. I have an example,

and I'm just thinking about Writing Our Lives and where we are today. Some of the trends have to do with—and I think it just has to do with where we are in our world today and our society. We see a lot of social movements and really the revolution is being led by young people today. We look at issues around racial violence, police brutality, the issues of inequity and the challenge of social justice in our world today. I think young people are really leading the march, they're leading the movement. Writing and digital tools have been a way in which they are. And so in Writing Our Lives, a lot of our work has been around activism and civic engagement because—as we talked earlier about the authenticity of the work—it's where young people have wanted to go with it. So themes for conferences have been around Youth Lives Matter or this year the theme is Be Free and it's around humanity. There's one of the youth writers who's been coming—she's a junior now in high school—she's been attending since she was in middle school. And I work with her. It was shortly after the killing of Michael Brown that she Facebooked a number of us and said, "You know, we gotta do something. This is happening all over the world, all over the country. But it's also happening right here in Syracuse too. And I want to do something." And so we all—myself and some of the other Writing Our Lives facilitators encouraged her and said, "Well, you know, what do you want to do? You know, we will support you." And she decided that she was going to have a protest right here in downtown Syracuse. She created a hashtag, a Facebook group, a poster—she did all of the marketing for it, the promotion. She prepared a speech to give so we worked with her on that. She also was concerned about issues of the school-to-prison pipeline here in Syracuse and she wrote something to the school district, to the school board and then go to a school board meeting and deliver that. So she became—she started to use her writing skills as a means for change. To actually enact change. And to your point about publication, I was invited by one of my scholarly outlets to write a collaborative community piece around the Writing Our Lives Work, and I said, "Wouldn't it be awesome to co-author something with this student who's in high school, one of the Writing Our Lives Facilitators and myself?" So there's a piece now that she has published, documenting what's she's been doing with writing and activism where she's definitely college-bound, she's definitely someone who has a bright future. And she has this on her resume to say, "At sixteen I published in a scholarly journal." So I think it's important for students, one, to be cultivated to be leaders but also to have real authentic opportunities. Real audiences in terms of getting their work out. So when we do spoken-word poetry, yeah, we can do it in this room but we also have the underground poets and Verbal Blend and slams that happen all over. You know, the city where we can get you signed up to present your work to a broader audience and really encouraging them to see the possibilities, because sometimes it's just that they didn't know. And someone

needs to invite them to be a part. So that's something I'm really proud of Writing Our Lives for. Seeing young people kind of taking the lead in keeping it going, because I can't keep it going myself *[Laughs].* You know, the next generation has to be invested in it as well.

GP: And it has to come from them. You know, I'm a product of the 60s, the 70s, and I was a very active voice as a teen-ager. You know it was during the Vietnam War, I grew up with the Civil Rights Movement, I grew up with a lot of—the Women's Movement. And that was another element of what poetry did for me particularly in high school. I was either writing about my boyfriend or I was writing about the war—*[Both laugh]*—it was one or the other, sometimes it was about both in the same poem which is why I'm not showing these poems to my kids! But they have the ability in class to be writing about anything so they might be writing about social issues or they might be writing about personal issues. We've been writing about cutting—gender issues, domestic abuse. Uh, racial injustice, politics. And not because that's the subject? It can come out of—we can be writing about the word "brown." And what comes out in the different responses can be anything. It can be about a nut or it can be about being Black. And then we have some great conversations because I will always go with the conversation. I have a wonderful young man who has come into the poetry group from fiction. And I don't know why he first made the step but he came in thinking that poetry was much more structured than this, that and the other thing. What it's given him as a teen-age young man is the ability to express his emotions where in fiction he was always—he was creating worlds. And now in poetry, as he's in high school—he started in junior high—in high school now he's examining his emotional truths. And he's also now come out to the group as gay as well as to his family. We have a number of young people who are out. And whatever—so your hair is pink today, that's great. *[Laughs]* It's been really interesting that they don't seem to have any barriers to this. At one point we did have a conversation, and every so often we examine it, where one of the high school students—we have the fiction high school and middle school kids together—dropped an F-bomb in her work. We had to have the conversation about the difference between courtesy for your audience and the authenticity of your writing and what language does. And that same young man was, "You can't censor us! That's censorship!" And I was, "No, we have to consider the fact that we have people who are younger in the group, we have parents sitting in the other room. This is the YMCA." *[Both laugh]* "It's a public venue. You may be out reading. Also, it is authentic to the character? Do characters actually say that? If so, fine, but read it in class and you could use a different word and we'll know what you meant. You know, when you read it to the group you can make

a different choice." If that's just in for shock value, it's really not that shocking.

MH: No, no.

GP: If it really is germane to the writing and you absolutely need to use a curse word, go for it. But when you're in a wider audience, you have to be courteous to people's sensibilities. And that was a great conversation. And I think that's something that would be great if there was more of—you know, we lost a sense of decorum in our society and if people thought a little more. Right now everything's about bullying. In arts and education, they're teaching writers if you want to get a gig, all you have to do is figure out something about bullying. Anything else, it can't work, but if you can do a juggling act about bullying, you know, you can go into schools. Maybe not that bad, but…I keep saying, "Why are we punishing children for being bullies, because everything they see modeled is, you know, bullying. Dancing moms—that horrid woman. Politics. We don't even have to really point out Donald Trump.

MH: It's the culture.

GP: It's a culture of bullying, but we're trying to pass it off to the kids. And they really don't bully as much as we would like, but when bullying happens—we had an incident where one of our kids came in to say that some of the girls were being really unkind to one of her friends in school and they kept putting mean messages into, sliding them into the little slot in her locker. And our young lady said, "You know what we've done? We can't stop them from doing that but we've just started a campaign where we fill her locker with love notes. And then we started doing it to other people." So even on that small of an activism, they were protecting their friend, and it became a movement around school where they were slipping love notes into people's lockers, to counteract the mean girls. There's nothing greater in character than something like that.

I want to mention to that so many of the poets who come here are friends of ours, so I can prevail upon them to stick around because they're usually here on Saturdays too. So we've had a lot of wonderful people here. Of course, Quraysh [Ali Lansana, co-author with Popoff of *Our Difficult Sunlight,* 2011]—every time he comes to town he comes to see the kids. Keith Flynn from *Asheville Poetry Review.* Tarfia Faizullah was here and she was talking about issues in Bangladesh because her body of work is about that right now. So we have that same kind of opportunity to have the kids meet with and talk about craft, and they come in and they talk about the craft of poetry. And the craft of writing, like, "How do you

become a better writer?" That the first draft is not it, that's a starting point. And where you prove yourself as a writer is what you do with the first draft to make it a powerful piece of writing to connect—that builds a bridge. And that writing is communication that builds bridges, either by saying that we're not alone—"Oh, that person felt that too?"—or this is what you need to understand. This is how you know about my life. And we learn about other people and we become more accepting of other people if we read about their experience.

MH: In their writing.

GP: And then we can understand that we're all humans. So we have that same ethic of intention of giving students opportunity of meeting with professional writers, and writers of all kinds of experience so that they can say, "You can be a writer and you can do other things too." You know, I've sold insurance. I sold municipal bonds. I worked retail. I waited table. I was a secretary.

MH: But you're still a writer.

GP: I was a writer. *[Both laugh]* And I heard somebody say—who was it?—it was just this week. You know, if you're a writer, you're always gonna write, no matter what happens. There's always space for it.

MH: Yes, yes.

GP: And I want my students to understand that. We're also teaching them a little bit of advocacy in the classroom for better ways of reading—that "Analyze this poem" or "What does this poem mean?" are two very useless questions. But, what do I believe the poet wants me to think, feel, believe or understand from reading the words?" and "Where is the evidence for my belief?" That's a very valid question.

MH: Oh yes.

GP: And that you can present that question. Where "Analyze that poem"—it's not a formula. But if you experience, examine, interpret and reflect, you will be able to answer the other question—what does the poet want me to understand?

MH: That's right.

GP: But then we had this conversation just Saturday and I said, "Now you can

present this as an option, you can say to your teacher, 'Can we look at this in a different lens?'" But I did say, "When it comes to a test, I have to advise you to answer the test the way the test needs to be answered."

MH: Well, they have all the power. And I think that's one of the things for me, as I think about where I want this work to go and what I want it to be, is a space to have open and honest conversations about writing—writing that we do personally but also the writing that we do for school. I want us to have these open conversations and dialog about writing the purpose of writing, audiences for writing, being explicit with students about expectations in school. Because we do them a disservice when we aren't explicit about these things. I want them to be really able to deconstruct and unpack writing in the ways that you just described, to talk about—too often in school we just assign writing. I want to create a space in school for kids to sit down and talk about their choices—why they did this, why they picked these words, what were their intentions. So when they can do that with their reading, they can take those same skills and apply them to their own writing and to each other's writing. I think that's really important. But I feel encouraged about where we're going and I feel so encouraged about the young writers that I meet, the new writers that I meet each year. You know, there's a sixth grader who I've recently met and am working with and she created a—we did the genre of billboards and protest signs. So we had them create—her big thing right now is school lunches. Well, I have a feeling that's going to be our next movement! *[Both laugh]* She talked about—you know, it's interesting, we talked about the conversation and the dialog. She chose to create a protest sign around the type of food that they're serving in the school lunches. And that incited conversation with all the other kids around her because then everyone else could connect to her story and her experience. And then you have a collective. And you have a movement. So, I think we're in good hands, when I look at the youth writers—who I also see as activists and change agents.

GP: I agree. Our young people are doing small things in schools. One of our students self-advocated—she felt that she was being held back, so she went right to the superintendent and said, "I may be a ninth grader, but I think I need a higher level of English class." And she got herself into, like, an eleventh grade AP class. She's had some interesting experiences with teachers—I very nearly went to her school just because when I heard the stories of the way the teachers were teaching English—teaching my craft?—I was very disturbed. But I chose not to create more trouble for her. The other thing that we've been doing, too, with the poets—this year I said, "You know, I'm tired of being the one to come in all the time with the exercises, right? I'm not going to come in anymore with

the prompts. We're all taking turns." So each week they all have the opportunity to be the one to facilitate the writing exercise. We've talked about—one of the exercises was, "You're going to find out tomorrow that you have Alzheimer's. Write the letter to yourself of what you would want to remember." "Write your poetic last will and testament." So, those kinds of things. The best part is that I'm writing with them, because I haven't thought up the prompt. If I thought up the prompt, I'm not engaged in it? So I have this whole body of work for myself as a creative artist that's coming out of working with my students. And I keep telling them that—that you're generating work in me. Some of our young people have been published in adult forums because when they entered they didn't say, "I'm a teenager." *[Both laugh]* And it's like fifth place in a John Green contest, an international contest, and has been published in the *Comstock Review*—I had a little say in that one, as an editor—but she's been published in the *Comstock Review* and she went to the Skidmore program. A couple of our kids have gone to the Colgate program, they've gone to the SU program. And the young man I was just speaking of just had a short story accepted by *Sci-Fi Daily,* is it? They didn't know he was a kid. He wrote a great story. So, sometimes just the fact that, creatively, they're that valuable is not even anything beyond the creative use of language, and story, and verse. That they are completely affirmed as artists.

MH: That's right.

GP: And then voices—voices for change, voices for acceptance, voices for truth. I think we're very much similar and that's the deeper mission behind our work.

MH: Definitely!

GP: It's great knowing you. *[Both laugh]*

MH: I love that—what you said at the end.

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For **Marcelle Haddix's** biography, see her essay, "Making a Movie with Thea St.Omer," elsewhere in this section.

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Malinda Massing believes in the power of story. Stories shape identity and understanding—beliefs, fears, and hopes. She was lucky enough to become a freelance videographer after graduation and sees herself as a fulltime story gatherer and teller. She equally enjoys and detests being her own boss. Although born into a remote tribe in the Philippines, Malinda has lived most of her life in Southern California. She journeyed from the southwest to the northeast to pursue higher education at Syracuse University. She graduated in 2014, and holds a double major of Television/Radio/Film from the S.I Newhouse School of Public Relations and International Relations. Here in the city of Syracuse, she honed the craft of storytelling. She has filmed and interviewed Syracuse locals of all walks of life through the Know Your Neighbour, Know the World Project (an initiative of Syracuse Stories). She hopes to continue her work with storytelling within the community and abroad.