

# Cultivating Citizenship as Feeling

## A Conversation with Three Digital Alchemists

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OUR RELATIONSHIP TO FEMINISM and our world is bound up with a proclivity for the percussive, as we divorce ourselves from ‘correct’ or hegemonic ways of being in favor of following the rhythm of our own heartbeats.

~ Crunk Feminist Collective (<http://crunkfeministcollective.wordpress.com/>)

*As I finish this article, I am sitting on the grass under a Spanish moss-draped live oak tree in the yard of the Penn School. Now a Black history and Gullah culture preservation center, the school was founded in 1861 – just before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued – as a school for free Black folks. I am here as a member of a self-identified set of queer, LGBTQ or queer affirming Black people who journeyed to St. Helena Island, off the South Carolina coast, to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Harriet Tubman’s successfully led battle on the Combahee River. To honor the 750 enslaved people who fought together with the Union army to free themselves, we traveled here also as a component of our own self-liberation. Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, a queer Black troublemaker, love evangelist and space cadet, organized this “Combahee Pilgrimage.” Recognizing the importance of place, time, and struggle, we have convened on the Sea Islands; the site of the Combahee River Raid. This morning we began our shared time by chanting the affirmation, “Black women are inherently valuable” 108 times. We understand we are engaging in a pedagogy of resistance. We realize we are co-constructing a pedagogy of blasphemy. We journeyed from the northeast, Midwest, deep south, and mid-Atlantic to learn more about Tubman, the battle, the ecology, the geography, and the legacies of enslavement and liberation. We are fully immersed in a pedagogy of liberation.*

## Contemporary Citizenship Education

A commonly articulated purpose of public schools in the United States is to prepare students for active and engaged citizenship (Banks, 2004; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Hahn, 1998, 2005; Parker, 2003). Within the official curriculum, citizenship education takes place in the social studies, usually in civics and/or government courses. Numerous scholars have shown that the official, intended, and implemented civics curriculum is taught in an assimilationist framework that favors an Anglo ideal of a “good citizen” (Banks, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Schmidt & Mayo, 2008; Thornton, 2003) and omits human rights discourse (Branson & Torney-Purta, 1982; Ford, 2008; Gaudelli & Fernekes, 2004; Hahn, 1985).

Conceptions of citizenship vary widely. The concept’s subjectivity requires common working definitions as a foundation for generative thought and discussion development. Osler and Starkey’s (2005) conceptual model concerning the ways in which issues of citizenship are taught and learned distinguishes between citizenship as status, citizenship as practice, and citizenship as feeling. The first two are commonly theorized dimensions; citizenship as feeling is newly emerging as a space in which citizenship can be considered. Osler and Starkey describe *citizenship as status* as that which

...describes the relationship of the individual to the state. The state protects citizens through laws and policing. It provides some collective benefits such as security, a system of justice, education, health care and transport infrastructure. In return, citizens contribute to the costs of collective benefits through taxation and possibly military service (2005, p. 10).

Most official social studies curriculum is heavily comprised of static facts about institutions and processes related to status. In many classrooms, the concept of status serves as a demarcation between insiders and outsiders, particularly regarding issues around immigration, naturalization, and citizenship documentation.

*Citizenship as practice* refers to the ways in which people engage in the public sphere individually and collectively. According to Osler and Starkey (2005), “[a]ctive citizenship is facilitated by awareness of and access to human rights” (p. 14). In both the official and unofficial social studies curricula, citizenship as practice is narrowly defined, including minimal civic responsibilities such as voting, paying taxes, and sitting on a jury (Kennedy, Hahn, & Lee, 2007; McLaughlin, 1992; Parker, 2003). Additionally, students experience a widely disparate quality of instruction and a range of exposure to how the practices of citizenship might take shape. These differences are based largely on race and socioeconomic status, wherein students of color and students from low-income families often have fewer models of civic engagement to imitate, practice, and imagine than do their White, middle-class counterparts (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008, 2010).

Thirdly, Osler and Starkey (2005) describe *citizenship as feeling* as “a feeling of belonging to a community” (p. 11). They assert that individuals and groups possess varying degrees of affiliation to particular nation states, regardless of legal citizenship. This third dimension emerges in the official and unofficial curriculum, but it is most often regarded solely as patriotism for the United States of America. The absence of intention to help students think about citizenship as feeling in complex ways is a barrier that impedes holistic civic development.

That students are not given tools to critically analyze citizenship as feeling in social studies classrooms is problematic for both middle class, mainstream White students around whom the allegedly neutral curriculum was built, and the large sets of students who are excluded from the curriculum altogether. The reality of the skewed curriculum makes many mainstream students prone for the traps of privilege-induced blindness. For numerous marginalized students, contemporary citizenship education is disjointed and irrelevant (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). For Black students, this curricular disconnect is often met with determination to seek civic and cultural understandings of belonging in out-of-school contexts.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the work of three people who cultivate cultural learning experiences across identities, generations, eras, and planets – to name a few of many categories – both online and in shared physical space. These uniquely created learning arenas for growth are one example of engaging deeply in existential questions related to belonging and connection, which I argue is a manifestation of thought about citizenship as feeling. L’Erin Alta-Devki, Moya Bailey, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs are “digital alchemists,” from whom curriculum theorists, developers, and all educators can learn. Bailey describes alchemy as

...the “science” of turning regular metals into gold. When I talk about digital alchemy I am thinking of the ways that women of color in particular transform everyday digital media into valuable social justice media magic. We turn scraps into something precious. Like chitterlings, the discarded pig intestines of the internet can be reworked into a delicacy. As Tricia Rose (2008) notes, however, there can be unintended and long term health effects from making a way out of no way. People can assume that leftovers are enough and abandon efforts to make sure everyone gets their fair share. It is the delicate balance of making do and pushing for more that informs my thinking on women of color’s transformative digital media magic (Bailey, 2013).

Each of the digital alchemists in this discussion strikes that “delicate balance” masterfully, in distinct, overlapping, and complementary ways.

I wrote the opening vignette while engaging in one of these culturally situated experiences designed to help participants recognize and nurture our relationships (e.g., with one another, nature, the past, present, and future) and broaden our notions of belonging. What follows are excerpts from three conversations I had with Alta-Devki, Bailey, and Gumbs during the fall of 2012 about their current alchemistic projects, their views on Afrofuturism, and their sources of inspiration. Though none of the three sought formal k-12 teacher preparation, each is a pedagogue in her own right. By drawing on Black queer feminist thought from multiple perspectives, the three women create space for libratory pedagogy, and help others to understand that “getting free” can be a daily embodied experience, instead of a series of isolated events.

Official social studies curriculum does not broach Blackness, queerness, or feminism as means of authentic learning, nor do I argue that contemporary schools – characterized by hyper-testing and capitalist races toward privatization – are necessarily the places to do so. This paper is part of a larger effort to document organic pedagogical projects that serve to liberate marginalized peoples.

**L’Erin Alta-Devki** is a transformational teacher, speaker and sacred space facilitator. She started SisterFire as an open-mic-night-meets-spiritual-jam-session at her alma mater, Spelman College. (It’s still going strong — 13 years later.) After years of facilitating SisterFire workshops and retreats all over the country, she has carried its mission online, with

SisterFire.com — a sacred space to inspire, coach & mentor as many women as she possibly can. Say . . . all 3.2 billion of us. (she dreams BIG.) She is in LOVE with our planet. The sacred commonalities — and the outrageous diversity. And speaking of outrageous diversity: She is a trained & certified yoga instructor, teen talk counselor, empowerment facilitator, birth doula & reiki practitioner . . . a self-published author . . . and a one-time Microsoft employee (Alta-Devki, 2011).

**Moya Bailey** is a graduate student at Emory University and blogger for the Crunk Feminist Collective. She is interested in how race, gender, and sexuality are represented in media and medicine. She is the founder and co-conspirator of Quirky Black Girls, a network for strange and different black girls. She attended Spelman College where she initially endeavored to become a physician. She fell in love with Women’s Studies and activism, ultimately driving her to graduate school in lieu of medicine. As an undergrad she received national attention for her involvement in the “Nelly Protest” at Spelman (Bailey, 2004) a moment that solidified her deep commitment to examining representations of Black women in popular culture (Bailey, 2013).

**Dr. Alexis Gumbs** says "As a queer Black feminist, the adventure of loving myself and the transformative journey of loving other Black women are intricately tied together." By loving Black women, paying attention to Black women, listening to Black women, creating breathing, living, loving space for and with Black women, and AS a Black woman, Alexis is learning to breathe love, learning to live a life that is an act of love designed to empower all oppressed people and to be a gift to our species and to the universe that holds us (Gumbs, 2011).

### **Alchemistic Projects, Afrofuturism, & Inspirational Sources**

Jillian: I chose to talk to the three of you because you create spaces for generative change and growth. Can you describe a few of your current projects?

L’Erin: [I help women] who want to get more clear about what I’m calling “the way to catalyze miracle on the planet.” And so not just figuring out what they want to do, but really what is their souls’ blueprint? What are they born to bring? And can they integrate that into everything, every part of their life? Their relationships, their money, their work, their sleep, their sex? Everything. How can they be fully present and alive for life? The fundament of that work is creating sacred space. But the first part of that is *being* sacred space. How do you embody your own divinity, your own sacredness in your day-to-day lives? For every person it’s different and that’s why it’s such a deep process. What makes your soul sing? What brings you awake? Part of that is writing, music, silence, nature, smells, engaging all of your senses, engaging rituals in a non-dogmatic or static way, or in a “power over” kind of way. But as way that comes from within. As marker for who you want to be and who you’re growing into in the world. So it’s different, every single person I work with is different. But that’s the framework for how you create your own sacred incubator for life... It is kind of like slowing down life so that you can get here. And then you can do it, fully in your power. Which is something that we as women, as women of color, in different places of margin and center have been taught that power is horrible — like we’re not supposed to have too much power — or we’re automatically powerful because we’re black women, and we just have to muscle through

and do it and it doesn't matter if we're on our last leg just hobbling. We don't have to martyr our lives away.

Moya: I'm working with Dr. Deboleena Roy on Social Justice Science, or SJSci, an interactive digital space for folks interested in the intersections of feminism and science. Generally I'm hooked on all the transformative goodness that folks are cooking up on Tumblr and in the real world. "Black girls are from the future" is a phrase coined by our sister in digital alchemy, Renina Jarmon (2013). I think she has named something that's percolated in me for a long time, and the reasons the digital world is important to me. Digital spaces were a means of teleportation and time travel for me as one of the few Black girls in my community. Being a quirky nerdy Black girl in Fayetteville, Arkansas, it was having access to the Internet and to other media that opened up my world and connected me to folks like myself. In undergrad at Spelman College, I learned to use digital tools in my organizing and activism. That experience made me see the web as a useful platform for helping connect to the people I wanted to connect with and then using digital space to amplify the work we were/are doing in the real world. [A]Lex[is Gumbs] and I were e-introduced and built connections to each other and others through cyberspace with Quirky Black Girls, Fire Walkers, Shawty Got Skillz, Beta Come Correct, and others. The digital can be an important form of access for people who are marginalized.

Alexis: Consistently working with youth has been the most challenging and miraculous part of my life. The Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind is an inter-generational community school, so there are people of all ages always involved in it. It's babies to elders; it gives us access to our most brilliant selves on a community scale. But the project that is specifically centered on youth, and is actually youth only – by youth design – is the Indigo afterschool program that has now evolved to the Indigo Journeys program. It is completely inspired by Indigo, Ntozake Shange's (1982) character who created recipes and remedies that are specific practices for herself; rituals for herself that she needed at different parts of her life. So she created them. She also remembered them, through her connection to *the folk*. Indigo *was* the folk, as Ntozake Shange lets us know. The Indigo afterschool program started because there was a 10-year-old who said to her mother, a great Black gay novelist who had participated in Eternal Summer work, "I want to go to an after school program at Alexis' house." That was it! This happened at the same time as the Decolonize and Occupy movements, where people were reclaiming space in different ways, and so this 10-year-old reclaimed my house... for an afterschool program that she deserves to have. The way I really feel about it is it's one of the most major honors that I've ever had in my life – to have the space that I create be the space that a 10-year-old girl would see and say, "there's a space that I deserve to have. I think it can happen there. I think this person can hold it." The Indigo afterschool program last year was for 6<sup>th</sup> grade girls who were all geniuses and artists, all children of queer women of color, and all younger sisters, like Indigo. At my home, they wrote remedies for what they needed during their first year of middle school. All of them had strong critiques of their middle school norms. They were in that transition phase from elementary school, so we practiced creating sacred space twice a week for a year. They did interpretive dance, they dedicated their time to people they love, and they thought about what that provided. Also they thought about how to protect their faith, and how to hold it sacred; even from

their parents and their siblings. The culminating event was their creation of The Sisterhood Museum. Visitors to the museum [e.g., families, friends, community members] had to sing an affirming song to get access to come into my house. The Indigo participants created the music that played in the space, and they created different installations and self-portraits. They even created the 11 Commandments of Sisterhood, which is an articulation of the behavioral norms that must exist in the space that they have claimed. So that was just an incredible experience over the last year.

Jillian: Does Afrofuturism<sup>2</sup> or science fiction figure into your work? If so, how?

L'Erin: Imagining new futures plays a central role in what I do. I think of myself as a legacy architect, and so for me, my work, lineage and legacy are super important. Not just the lineage or legacy that we come from, or through, or choose, but also being very intentional about creating the lineage and legacy that we are going to leave for those coming behind us. I think of myself as being that kind of center point to help other women get extremely clear about why they're on the planet, doing their most sacred work, and crafting the legacy and the lineage, and literally blazing the trail – even though it's a clichéd term – but literally creating new paths that haven't been there before. So I'm in a constant place of visioning, but also supporting women in their own visioning. So I am not super-imposing my own vision, but I am helping cultivate and curate that curiosity and creativity for what they *really* want to do, not just who they're "supposed" to be.

Moya: I do see Sci-Fi and Afrofuturist elements deeply connected to all the things I'm doing. I am very invested in youth lives and the continued living of black people and black queer people particularly, and I see the work that people are doing on the web in digital space as one of the ways that people are creating new paths – basically continuing what they've already been doing – but it's another avenue to create interesting life in a digital world. My dissertation looked at how representations in the medical school curriculum have impacted black women in not so cool ways, but I see that people are creating work on-line that is a challenge to that; how people are using digital space to create their own avenues towards health and healing for themselves.

Alexis: I feel like every day, even in the way that I dress when I'm seen in public, has to do with how I strongly identify as a time traveler and space cadet in the infinite, simultaneous world of Black feminism. I think that it does take sci-fi to really understand what it is that we do, and for me, some of the portals that are most activated right now for time travel have to do with the archives, so for me spending time with archival materials. In particular, Black feminist ancestors' archives like folks who are no longer here, organizations that no longer exist, or projects that never actually did exist but were dreamt about. To me, that's a form of time travel that's really amazing, and it does give you the feeling that "I have a message to bring to our present moment." I feel really specific about my role as a time traveler in that way, and I think a lot about what it means to carry the information across time, and what it means to operate the oracle that lets us examine what our concerns are presently and utilize those tools that are necessary. The set of prophets that I'm focusing on are really particular and they're all Black feminists. What is the moment of divination that we can have that lets us know that we have access

to all the brilliance in the universe? That all the brilliance that ever was, could be described as the manifestation of the Black feminist sacred? It can all be described as that. All the brilliance that ever existed. And of course I'm biased, but I just also know that that's true.

Jillian: What are your sources of inspiration?

L'Erin: The book that Alexis is building work around is my favorite book on the planet: *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* by Ntozake Shange (1982). I love that book and I love the work Lex is doing around it, because it's so vital. That book is like a biblical text for me, just so nurturing and so imaginative. I also draw on other spiritual texts – more traditional and less traditional. *A Course in Miracles* [Foundation for Inner Peace], *Women Who Run with the Wolves* [Clarissa Pinkola Estés], and *Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* [Deepak Chopra] for example. So, for me, it's spiritual teachers who are reinterpreting ancient texts, or philosophies for this contemporary world. I find that they don't have the critical analysis around race, sex, gender, or many other social constructions, but I appreciate the philosophies. It's my work to apply the appropriate filters and lenses to make it relevant to the communities of which I am a part. Those are some of my masterful teachers. My ancestors and the ones who I don't know, like the nameless ones, continuously inspire me. I talk to them every day. I have so much gratitude for whatever it took – and that I have *no idea* what it took – for me to be here and to have this conversation with you all. I feel humble, I feel grateful, I feel overwhelmed with honor, that I can be part of that legacy. It makes me teary even just now thinking about it and talking about it. I literally have no idea what they had to do for us to be able to have this conversation. I know I cannot imagine what they had to do, so they inspire me, because I feel I have a responsibility to bring even more freedom forward. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't be here. I want to make sure that the people who come behind know what freedom is.

Moya: I am thinking about that Erykah [Badu] song when she says, “we've been living in your Internet.” But I love the things that Erykah says – basically everything she says – I love seeing all the different lives that Erykah leads and that Black women lead. I think that speaks to the fact that black women – or feminists – have our hands in a lot of different pots. We see the connections between all those things. Food is also really important to me in terms of how I think about things in connection. So when we gather together and we eat together – I think of spaces I've been in with all of you – food has been one of the focal points. Food has been an instrumental part of how we create community, how we have conversations with one another, and how we chart actions moving things forward. I think of myself as a gatherer of information through scholarship, and a gatherer of people through friendships. My work is making connections between people and between projects. That's one of my favorite things.

Alexis: *Sassafras, Cypress, and Indigo*. In terms of thinking about how to organically and holistically transform relationship violence in our community, *Sassafras* is the one we need. Shange shows us that we can love through all of it, so the book is a major inspiration. For me there is a set of Black feminist sacred texts: *The Collected Poems of*

*Audre Lorde, The Collected Poems of June Jordan, and June Jordan's Living Room, most especially. For me, it's about looking at these texts that I believe were created that I might live, and to think about those as beacons of eternal life for our love. Spaces created and organized out of love for us; we actually can materialize a sacred, reflective space. As mirror images – those are the tools I go to the most. When I don't know, it is usually a book written by a Black feminist I put in my hand that starts my process of discovery. But I would also say, as a practice, that dance is the most consistent way of doing what L'[Erin] was saying earlier about creating sacred space. Dance is the number one way that I create myself as sacred space. I'm inspired by my dance teachers but I'm also inspired by so many different forms of music that I'm able to dance to, which give me myself. Give me my body. Give me access to the present and access to the work that I feel I'm doing, which is offering myself as a pathway for all the brilliance of the universe to be embodied and to get to our community. My piece of that, and what I'm supposed to do with that, is clear to me. And clearer to me when I dance, and so I dance every day so that I can know what to do. And what not to do.*

Since “Black girls are from the future,” (Jarmon, 2013) it comes as no surprise that these three Black “girls” continue to transcend curricular and pedagogical boundaries. Since citizenship as feeling is excluded from the social studies curriculum – the curriculum that is supposed to prepare young people for active and engaged citizenship – Black folks build communities and experiences outside of formal school walls. The work of Alta-Devki, Bailey, and Gumbs elucidates the power of fostering this dimension of citizenship.

**For more about (some of the) interviewee's projects:**

**L'Erin Alta-Devki:**

<http://www.sisterfire.com/>

**Moya Bailey:**

<http://moyabailey.com/>

<http://quirkyblackgirls.blogspot.com/>

<http://crunkfeministcollective.wordpress.com/>

<http://shawtygotskillz.tumblr.com>

<http://bettacomecorrect.tumblr.com>

<http://sjsci.tumblr.com>

**Dr. Alexis Gumbs:**

<http://blackfeminismlives.tumblr.com>

[www.alexispauline.com/brilliance mastered](http://www.alexispauline.com/brilliance mastered)

[www.mobilehomecoming.org](http://www.mobilehomecoming.org)

[www.brokenbeautiful.wordpress.com](http://www.brokenbeautiful.wordpress.com)

[www.thatlittleblackbook.blogspot.com](http://www.thatlittleblackbook.blogspot.com)

[www.blackfeministmind.wordpress.com](http://www.blackfeministmind.wordpress.com)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In Conversation with L’Erin Alta-Devki, Moya Bailey, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs

<sup>2</sup> “Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might, for want of a better term, be called Afrofuturism” (Dery, 1994, p. 180).

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