

Early College Folio

The House of Education Needs Overhaul

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Rikers Island and *The Crisis* Storytelling, Scholarship, Activism

Shana Russell, PhD
Bard High School Early College Newark

EDITORS' NOTE: *This piece, originally shared by Dr. Russell as the 24th annual W. E. B. Du Bois Memorial Lecture at Bard College at Simon's Rock, has been edited slightly for publication. Dr. Russell was introduced that evening by her colleague Jehan Senai Worthy, and those introductory remarks are included here as well. A recording of Dr. Russell's lecture, which took place on Monday, February 22, 2021 can be [viewed here](#).*

INTRODUCTION

BY JEHAN SENAI WORTHY

*Writing and Thinking workshop has this magic about it. Over ten years ago, when I participated with my workshop leader the late Gabriel Asfar, I made lifelong friendships, as I am sure you did too. So when I was presented with the opportunity to take the training as an adult and educator I was so excited. It was there, during day 2 of the workshop, where I was able to get to know Dr. Shana Russell. She was in this blue, "We Dance" t-shirt from the musical *Once on This Island*. "I have the same shirt," I thought. I can't believe she saw the musical too. And then after hearing her magical and wondrous thoughts on the readings in our Writing and Thinking Anthology, I knew I wanted to get to know her more. "I want to be your friend," I wrote in our three-column response journal. And I decided, yes, I decided, we would be friends and we have been friends ever since. I am so happy and honored to introduce her as the 24th annual W. E. B. Du Bois lecturer here, at Simon's Rock, the school closest to my heart.*

Dr. Shana Russell is an Assistant Professor of English at Bard High School Early College (BHSEC) Newark where she is a highly respected and well-loved teacher by all of her students. In addition to being an educator, she is also a literary scholar, historian, storyteller, and organizer. Her research combines history and literature, past and present, to construct narratives of resistance among women workers of color and she serves to give a voice to those incarcerated at Rikers Island, where she serves as the chief historian for the Rikers Public Memory Project. "The stories

of Rikers,” Dr. Russell says, “have never been told from the perspective of the people who have been detained there.” And that’s what Dr. Russell does. She gives rise to the voices of those people refuse to listen to. The People’s PhD, she is. It is in telling those stories where her passion for public humanities comes from. There is no doubt that Dr. Russell embodies the legacy of Du Bois and I can’t think of anyone else better suited to give this year’s lecture. It is my pleasure to introduce you to my friend, Dr. Shana Russell.

W. E. B. DU BOIS MEMORIAL LECTURE BARD COLLEGE AT SIMON’S ROCK FEBRUARY 22, 2021

It’s a brisk September day in New York in 1935. On the corner of 167th and Jerome Ave. A group of black women are gathered at what is known as the Bronx Slave Market, hoping to secure a day’s work from the numerous white housewives who travel there in search of domestic help. Known as the “paper bag brigade” these women are easily identified by their pristine uniforms and the paper bags they carry containing the tools necessary for cooking, cleaning, ironing, and serving. Soon, a lower middle-middle class Jewish woman arrives at the market. She asks the first two women she sees, “You girls want work?” Unable to pay the wage demanded, she eventually finds a woman who is willing to work for the lowest price, a mere fifteen cents an hour.

On the adjacent corner, another group of women gathered, also in search of work. This time, a day’s labor comes from men who approach the corner and offer money in exchange for a “good time.” A day’s wages for these women is slightly higher than those of their comrades in the “brigade.” But in the midst of America’s economic recession, both groups of women barely made enough to survive. This was the story recounted by Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke in their groundbreaking exposé, “The Bronx Slave Market,” that appeared in *The Crisis* in 1935.¹ The street corner markets rendered these two seemingly invisible workforces, domestic workers and sex workers, hypervisible. The exchange of labor for wages on street corners meant that these two groups of workers faced their oppression as black women laborers on a miniature and very public economic battlefield. Yet to journalists, activists, sociologists, and scholars of the period it was the severity of their degradation rather than the possibilities for resistance that mattered in the midst of the recession.

That was the crisis for me as a second year graduate student who was just beginning to conceptualize an interdisciplinary dissertation that considered black women’s labor in a way that gave them dignity and agency. Up until that point I had read countless pages of history, sociology, philosophy, Marxist theory, government documents, dissertations, and countless other texts that rendered domestic workers passive victims of capitalism and white supremacy. That’s the

academic explanation. The real situation was that there was something about those documents, no matter how respected they were as primary sources, that just didn't sit well with me. I did not know, had not heard of, nor could I imagine a black woman who would just take this kind of oppression sitting down. But there was no way to explain to my dissertation chair, a respected historian and Marxist literary scholar, that my intuition told me that all this was nonsense and something was missing. To her, I may as well have written a novel.

That's when I discovered *The Crisis*. The magazine was co-founded by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1910. He and his colleagues intended it to be the official publication of the NAACP, which, in 1910, had been in existence for barely a year. Subtitled, "A Record of the Darker Races," the publication was a tool of education, politics, culture, and resistance. Du Bois made it very clear from the beginning of his nearly 25-year tenure as editor that *The Crisis* was meant to be a "vigorous"² publication that unapologetically fought on the side of black people in the battle against racist violence, Jim Crow, economic exploitation, and the unfreedom of black people in America.

I am going to pause my own story for a moment to explicate the historical significance of *The Crisis* as an archive of black life. It is, in my view, one of Du Bois's greatest contributions. *The Crisis* has been in continuous publication since its founding. That's over a century. More than 100 years of text that makes black folks the actors who star in their own narratives, rather than those who are acted upon. An archive that is unmitigated by the white gaze. Unmitigated by European intellectual contexts or more mainstream ways of knowing. Baker and Cooke started their article with a compelling narrative that placed readers on the corner of 167th and Jerome Ave. along with them.

Wrapped inside this captivating story is an analysis that could very well be included in a Marxist studies, feminist studies, or sociology text book. Instead, the students of what we might call *The Crisis* School of Black Life and History were regular, everyday black folk. And for them reading about the state of black education or Historically Black Colleges, the black labor movement or the emergence of black businesses, political demonstrations, and reports of lynching was just as important as the latest jazz album, or the newest Harlem renaissance writer, or the next black cinematic masterpiece. That's what *The Crisis* had in store for its readers in every issue.

What's even more significant about *The Crisis* is that this century long archive is digitized and freely available on Google Books—entire issues from 1910 to 2010. That is quite a statement on who owns information and where learning happens. If I want to read issues of *The New York Times* from 1910, I have to pay for it or have an institutional affiliation. If I did not send my own articles and book chapters to my family members, they would have to pay upwards of \$30 for just one. I send them because it would be a shame for me to expect my parents and my older sister (who taught me to read) to pay for the fruits of their

own labor. It's also an embarrassment to our society that we have somehow made knowing and learning a for-profit system.

But you don't need to be a college student, a researcher, or a journalist to gain access to *The Crisis*. You don't need access to a fancy library, historical society, or university campus. There is a tradition here in America of barring black folks and working class folks from these institutions entirely or (in the contemporary moment) creating new and innovative barriers to access. This is why Bard Early Colleges exists.

After reading "The Bronx Slave Market" for the first time, I discovered in *The Crisis* a century-long archive that rigorously examined the truth of black life in a way that conformed to my own ways of knowing. For me, there is no history without storytelling. No sociology without literature and music. No politics without culture. *The Crisis* was like a blueprint for my own life. I'd like to think that had I been born in the 1920s, my family would be regular subscribers to *The Crisis*. The magazine would be passed around a busy kitchen at breakfast time, much like our local paper was when I was growing up. Like Du Bois, I, too, graduated from a Historically Black College. In fact, it was at Florida A&M University where I learned to pronounce Du Bois's name correctly after hearing an archival recording of his voice from a professor who made it her business to ensure that her students would never insist on such a colonial pronunciation.

But I think the most important gift that I was given from this rigorous perusing of *The Crisis* over the course of several months was the permission to place *myself* at the center of my research. It's something I do even now. I believe that no matter what I am reading or researching or writing, from Toni Morrison to Friedrich Nietzsche, there is a place for me somewhere. It is also something I teach my students at BHSEC Newark. To quote Du Bois: "Be honest, frank, and fearless and get some grasp of the real values of life...Read some good, heavy, serious books just for discipline; Take yourself in hand and master yourself."³

And that is how my dissertation transformed from a Marxist analysis of black women's participation in the labor movement and the development of their identity as workers to a dissertation about the legacy of black women's labor organizing and a historical narrative written by black people that also happens to be the lineage of the author. I gave myself permission to know and love the figures I was writing about, whether they emerged from the archive or from the minds of writers. Figures like Langston Hughes's Madam Alberta K. Johnson or Richard Wright's Bessie Mears.

And then in 2011, the film *The Help* premiered. Suddenly, people all over the country, inside and outside of academia, were clamoring to make sense of the long history of domestic work. An ongoing conversation among a handful of academics and activists suddenly became a nationwide conversation again. This was not serendipitous. It was the result of the strategic organizing of a group of women who are now known as the National Domestic Workers' Alli-

ance (NDWA). They turned what was supposed to be a feel-good movie about how far we've come as a nation with racism built into its bones into a call to action. Appearing wherever they could, these women delivered the urgent message that the same labor rights that the rest of us took for granted in 2011 were not granted to domestic workers. These women of color were not deemed worthy of things like minimum wage, safe working conditions, and days of rest. The NDWA intended to change that by passing Domestic Worker Bills of Rights in every state. And their most public platform to date was the red carpet of *The Help* premiere.

After months of archival research, eyes crossed from staring at microfilm, allergies aggravated from too much time in dusty library basements, I was sitting on a documented legacy of resistance among domestic workers. I knew that this story was 100 years in the making. I also knew how little difference there was between the treatment of the women of the Bronx Slave Market and these women, some of whom were also day laborers. The NDWA was careful and strategic in their organizing. They had a special call to action for the embarrassingly small community of scholars across various fields who dedicated their careers to the everyday lives of domestic workers throughout history.

As the newest member of this community, I was at a crossroads. I could remain in the relative solitude of the ivory tower. I would be praised for bringing light to these "invisible workers." I might even be rewarded with a diversity hire in a gender studies department. People would use words like *inclusivity* and *groundbreaking* to describe my research. And they would never feel compelled to give the real women who do this work—women like the National Domestic Workers' Alliance members or women in my own family and community—any attention.

Or I could follow Du Bois's example. "Be honest, frank, and fearless . . . get some grasp of the real values of life." I should tell you at this point that historians aren't really supposed to choose sides. But I did. I used my work to hold up a mirror to everyone who benefitted from care labor. That's all of us by the way. Historical study. Discipline. Reading. Researching. And writing. All of those things made me uniquely capable of doing my part to ensure that domestic worker activists, and those who make all other work possible, could weaponize history in the interest of getting what they were owed.

So, whenever they called, I answered. And even when they weren't looking, I made sure that every word I wrote in print was a reflection of the side of history I had chosen to be on. I celebrated each victory with them, which now includes bills of rights in several states and on the federal level.

Writing and researching alongside a national movement was a fortuitous moment that resulted from a radical zeitgeist. I was pretty sure it would never happen again. Eventually, I finished my dissertation and like most people who are able to endure the grueling process of graduate school, I entered the equal-

ly grueling academic job market. I went on several interviews. Gave a few job talks. It was what most academics would call successful. But I was still unsure.

It's kind of like when Du Bois went to Harvard. He famously said that he was "In Harvard but not of it."⁴ He immersed himself, instead, in the black community of Boston. I immersed myself in this wonderfully welcoming community of organizers. They reminded me of the women of my own family. Then there was my community in Newark, a community made up of young people, community elders, poets and artists, scholars and neighbors. In the end, when offered a tenure track position, I decided to be honest, frank, and fearless. I took some sage advice from my sister who said, "Sometimes where you go home is often more important than where you go to work." I turned it down.

Instead, I entered the world of public history. I was the program manager for a traveling national exhibit on the history and legacy of mass incarceration. And then there was a need for my weirdly obsessive dedication to uncovering history and proving that the seemingly unknowable has been documented. Another chance to choose sides. Which I did, this time, without hesitation.

Which brings me to another story 100 years in the making. In 1886, an article appeared in *The New York Times* entitled "To Build a Bigger Jail."⁵ It announced the purchase of Rikers Island by New York City. The island was purchased from the Rikers, a prominent Dutch family who had, by this time, been in New York for several generations. Prior to its purchase by the city, the Island had been used as a training ground for colored civil war regiments, the location of a secret underground 19th century prize fighting circuit, and a dumping ground for the city's waste.

You may have seen Rikers Island on *Law & Order: SVU*. Or *Luke Cage* if you're a Marvel fan. You may have even watched an exposé on Vice News. You might even remember, if you are of a certain age, that Tupac gave one of his most prolific interviews while detained there, just before becoming the first artist to have an album top the Billboard charts while incarcerated. Rikers is one of the most notorious jail complexes in American history. It has been open for nearly 100 years after all. But what many do not know is that Rikers is a pre-trial facility. It doesn't house Marvel-level super villains. It houses those who have been arrested and charged but not convicted. Particularly those whose loved ones cannot afford exorbitant bail amounts. To give you some context, in my hometown, and in most cities, county jails are downtown next to the courts. Right next to the place where most of us go when we need to challenge a parking ticket.

Rikers is an island. There is one way in and one way out: on the Q100 bus that goes across what those who have been directly impacted by Rikers call the "bridge of pain."

Just three short years ago, I barely knew any of this. It was my first week on my new job and the director announced that we, along with our directly impacted partner organizations who were on the front lines of the current movement to close Rikers, had been invited to submit a grant proposal for something called the Rikers Public Memory Project. I was then tasked with writing a full proposal and plan in just a few days with nothing to work with but a few Google Docs, an abstract, and a couple of conference calls. Did I sleep much that next week? Of course not. Did we get the grant? Yes we did.

The first step was getting caught up on the movement to close Rikers. The current campaign to close Rikers was launched in 2016 by a group of formerly incarcerated activists and their organizational partners and allies across the city. The jail is rife with human rights abuses and corruption. It has a deep-seated culture of violence that is perpetuated by corrections officers. As a former waste dump, it is an environmental hazard. The cramped conditions are not fit for human beings to inhabit. The cash bail system and for-profit nature of the jail complex exploit the poorest New Yorkers. And all of this on top of the fact that it is America's last penal colony—not to mention a place where our friends, family members, neighbors, and comrades are stolen from our communities—a place that most New Yorkers pass on their way to work daily, while riding the MTA. But you won't find Rikers Island on a subway map. If you aren't directly impacted, you have no reason to know that it even exists.

But how did we get here? That was the question that plagued me in the weeks that followed the grant announcement. So, like any good scholar, I Googled. Surely there was a book I could read on the subject. Nothing from Google except a few articles and news segments on YouTube. On Amazon? Sensationalized confessionals from corrections officers, fictional treatments, and Lil Wayne's journals. I searched rare book websites, the Library of Congress database, the New York Public Library, and local historical societies. This time my intuition was wrong. Not a single scholar, historian, precocious grad student, no one had written a book-length historical treatment of Rikers Island. It was as though (according to the public record) the millions of people who had been impacted by Rikers for the last 80 years didn't exist.

That became both our biggest challenge and our greatest opportunity. For me, it was an obsession. It was something I might be able to rectify. Either way, I had chosen a side.

We called the Rikers Public Memory Project a “community-based, participatory initiative through which our collective stories about the impact of Rikers are activated to envision a more just NYC.”⁶ It was a way to think through the ways that the process of collectively remembering can be used as a strategic organizing tool in the movement to close Rikers Island. That's the kind of lofty language I learned from reading *The Crisis*. But making it real was another thing entirely.

During the first year we did a listening tour. We visited several New York City neighborhoods. We asked directly impacted New Yorkers what they wanted people to remember about Rikers. We asked them what New York would look like without it and how we could pay tribute to all the lives lost there. All the while, I was researching the history of “torture island” at night and on the weekends. Once our partners started hearing about the work I was doing, they began telling me who I should talk to or who might have materials I needed to see. The next year we started our oral history project, which is now made up of over 100 interviews: four generations of stories about Rikers from those who have been directly impacted by it. This time on the public record.

Over the next several months, I did what I know how to do. I visited archives. Library basements. Microfilm machines. I read Civil War correspondence, journals, and historical newspapers. Lots and lots of historical newspapers. Here’s what I learned: During its first decade in operation, Rikers “the jail” was declared cruel and inhumane by the Federal Writers Project, several community organizations, and even a local court.⁷ I learned that everything that those who are most impacted and on the front lines of the current resistance movement emphasize about the corruption that happens on Rikers today also happened during its first few years. At this point, if I were to look at reports from 1940 and 2020 side by side without dates, I couldn’t tell the difference, even after two years of research. Our partners, my comrades, are a part of a long legacy of resistance to Rikers, one that we now know dates back to 1936.

In order to be honest, frank, and fearless, according to the legacy of Du Bois, it became necessary for me to say to anyone who will listen that the truth of Rikers has been its truth since *The New York Times* first announced that the city had purchased land with the sole purpose of ridding itself of those deemed undesirable. I am beyond proud of the role I have played in making sure that the city of New York will never be able to call Rikers Island a series of bad decisions. More importantly, I can help make sure that at every public testimony or city council hearing when my formerly incarcerated comrades ask for reparations (in the form of community reinvestment) that they know exactly what they are owed and who to hold accountable.

All of this work has culminated in the acceptance of my current position as an Assistant Professor of English at BHSEC Newark. Young people are the most honest. The most frank. And the most fearless. I couldn’t bear the process of learning and knowing alone in a cubicle. If you were to take a look at my syllabi, they look a lot like *The Crisis*. At its best, my classroom looks like the exchange of ideas that happens at kitchen tables all over the country. As a teacher I invite my students to bring their own stories and experiences into the classroom and to our texts no matter what they are. I want them to see themselves in the texts that we read. I want them to know that there is always a place for them in the world of ideas.

As Du Bois said in *Black Reconstruction*, the fact that American children can complete college and never know the contributions black folks have made to American history is more than a mere omission or lack of emphasis.⁸ It is by design, which is why I don't believe that a mere inclusion of texts by authors of color will make any kind of intervention if we don't change our pedagogy to make room for our students to, borrowing from Du Bois again, take themselves in hand and master themselves. My students may not choose the path that I have chosen. But they will choose sides and know that they belong any and everywhere they decide they want to be.

DR. SHANA RUSSELL is an Assistant Professor of English at BHSEC Newark. In addition to being an educator, she is also a literary scholar, historian, storyteller, and organizer.

JEHAN SENAI WORTHY is a Bard College at Simon's Rock and Bard MAT alumna, history and literature teacher, writer, and poet. When she is not teaching or writing, you can find her anywhere by the water.

NOTES

- 1 Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke, “The Bronx Slave Market,” *The Crisis*, (Nov. 1935): 330-331.
- 2 Julian Bond, “The Crisis 2020 Media Kit,” 2, https://be496286-08a6-4bdf-bb3b-dc8ed5409664.filesusr.com/ugd/f254bb_5d3cbf25fa0b4ac1b0a-b4e44c07bf7a2.pdf
- 3 Quote from a letter Du Bois wrote to his daughter Yolande on October 29, 1914 in *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois, Vol. 1: Selections, 1877-1934*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).
- 4 W. E. B Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011): 37.
- 5 “To Build a Bigger Jail,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 20, 1886, <https://nyti.ms/34NFMRK> (accessed June 1, 2021).
- 6 “About Us,” *Rikers Public Memory Project*, <https://rikersmemoryproject.org/> (accessed June 1, 2021).
- 7 Federal Writers’ Project, *New York City Guide* (New York: Random House, 1939): 426-427.
- 8 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1935).