Danica Savonick, *Open Admissions: The Poetics and Pedagogy of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich in the Era of Free College* (Duke University Press, 2024), 264 pp.

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Danica Savonick makes the stakes of *Open Admissions: The Poetics and Pedagogy of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan* clear in the first, beautiful line of the preface: "This book is about what free college makes possible" (ix). *Open Admissions* traces this pursuit of the possible in the literary, pedagogical, and political work of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde beginning when they each taught at the City College of New York in the late 1960s and early '70s. Savonick studies the period 1965–1976, the years of the fight for and implementation of tuition-free public college in the City University of New York system. The temporal reach of this book, though, is far broader: Savonick reveals the lasting effects of the open admissions era and urgently considers what might still be "possible" now. This interest in the legacies of that moment and its meaning for our moment are not relegated to a coda or to endnotes. Rather, every page of this book radiates with an infectious desire to bring transgressive teaching into today's classrooms.

Open Admissions documents City College's SEEK (Search for Elevation Education and Knowledge) Program as a remarkable site of collaboration among important writers who were committed to Black, Latinx, LGBTQ+, and Women's liberation. It also clarifies that SEEK classes, teachers, and students were at the center of direct political action on college campuses in the late '60s and early '70s. In its interest in student activism and the liberatory possibilities of teaching from within the neoliberal belly of the beast that is higher education, *Open Admissions* is in dialogue with scholarship in Black studies and university studies, such as Roderick Ferguson's *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (2012) and Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013).

Savonick is also in conversation with a perhaps nascent, but persistent, attention among scholars to the functions of anthologies in the African American literary tradition. I am thinking here of Theodore O. Mason's "The African-American Anthology: Mapping the Territory, Taking the National Census, Building the Museum" (1998), Howard Rambsy's writings on culturalfront.org (2009-present), and Shana Benjamin's attention to Nellie McKay's labor on *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (*NAAAL*) in *Half in Shadow* (2021) alongside the 2025 arrival of the fourth edition of the *NAAAL* which

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prompts many teachers in the field to (once again) weigh the utility of an anthology against the need to provide students with affordable or open-access readings. Savonick shows that SEEK "gave rise to some of the era's most important anthologies of Black literature and criticism," edited by SEEK teachers including Bambara, James Emmanuel, Larry Neal, and Addison Gayle. She also identifies anthologies of student writing as "one of the genres of open admissions" (65). *Open Admissions* names Bambara's *The Black Woman* (1970) as *both* kinds of anthology, which reframes how I, and I hope others, will teach Bambara's indispensable volume going forward.

Devoting one chapter to each author, Savonick draws on Bambara, Jordan, Rich, and Lorde's essays, poems, fiction, and teaching materials. These authors emerge as "activist teacher-poets: writers who saw their work with words as connected to their work with students and who understood both as forms of political action" (8). It is not necessarily new to remind readers that these were "teacher-poets," but *Open Admissions* brings something new to the conversation by using a deep and varied archive to show that "they saw teaching not as an ancillary obligation but as a meaningful form of creative, political, and intellectual work, deeply related to their writing" (2). *Open Admissions* doesn't just explain this dynamic. Rather, this book extensively documents how these writers collaborated, developed and revised assignments, and operated within the confines of university settings to develop radical pedagogies.

Savonick's methods include archival research, close reading of literary texts, careful historicization—including stark, periodic comparisons of teaching conditions then and now—and centering CUNY classrooms as sites that generated pedagogical theory and new genres of literature. In addition to anthologies that included or were made up entirely of their students' writing, the "classroom lyric" and the "campus essay" are genres of open admissions (16). Bambara, Jordan, Rich, and Lorde each wrote some form of "campus essay," including Jordan's bracing, essential "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person" (1969). Savonick's framing extends recent work by Cheryl Wall in *On Freedom and the Will to Adorn* (2019) and Erica Edwards in *The Other Side of Terror* (2021) to draw needed attention to Jordan as an essayist. Savonick also attends to Jordan's "Black Studies" and other "campus essays" to position these poet-teachers as theorists of pedagogy, women's and gender studies, and Black studies.

One thrilling aspect of *Open Admissions* is its careful attention to materials that consume enormous amount of time for anyone teaching college students, but that reach few readers. These documents include syllabi, versions of assignments revised over time, faculty activity reports required for promotion and raises, course descriptions, notes for lectures, peer teaching reviews, and student evaluations. If it seems ridiculous to say that the ephemera of academia might thrill a reader, consider the context: Savonick

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shows how four powerful women intellectuals best-known as poets deployed their liberatory politics through the same mundane documents that teachers working in higher education today know all too well.

In clear, forceful prose and the distinctive voice of a committed teacher, *Open Admissions* is an academic study, but also as a handbook, workbook, and source of inspiration. In the spirit of *June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint*, Savonick details Bambara's, Jordan's, Rich's, and Lorde's teaching practices in ways that allow a reader to try them out in her own classrooms. Every chapter of *Open Admissions* paints specific, vivid portraits of each of these women's classrooms from their early work at CCNY and later at Livingston College at Rutgers (Bambara), Berkeley (Jordan), Douglass College for Women at Rutgers (Rich), and John Jay College of Criminal Justice (Lorde), among other institutions. *Open Admissions* is thus useful for anyone teaching college students, regardless of field. Teachers from K-12 schools to PhD programs will likely recognize the classroom struggles and triumphs here. Bambara developed what we now call multimodal learning and public humanities in final assignments that asked students to "invent a form that would share something they had learned with an audience beyond a classroom" (41). Rich demystified writing short fiction with what we now call scaffolding: she broke the assignment down into a sequence of five components, each with specific step-by-step instructions; Savonick wonderfully includes the first of these with each step of "Assignment One: Description of Place" quoted in full (110). All four teacher-poets were using low-stakes assignments early in the term, thus implementing nearly fifty years ago what we now know as a best practice, especially in introductory writing courses.

Savonick is attuned to "the structural changes of neoliberalism [that] produced the threadbare austerity landscape we now inhabit" (180). The possibilities wrought by the open admissions era are both aspirational and unattainable. Among the arresting comparisons throughout the book is that Lorde's compensation for teaching basic writing in 1968 amounts to four times as much as teachers of that class make today (145). This change in pay applies whether or not the teacher was an important poet, resulting in increased courseloads and decreased preparation time for today's college teachers, the majority of whom are pro tem or adjunct laborers. *Open Admissions* shows that, in New York, "the withdrawal of state funding and implementation of tuition" was part of a broader Reagan–era "notion that education in art, music, and politics is expendable" (163).

This is, though, at its heart, a hopeful book about "four teacher-poets" who "were part of broader networks of educators who saw their classrooms as sites of social change"

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(169). Even during austerity politics since the 1980s, "it was as if they were all still writing one larger story that began at City College but extended far beyond it" (170). This is a description, but also an invitation: *Open Admissions* overflows with things we can do in our classrooms right now to value students' experiences and ideas, foster independent critical thinking, create lifelong readers, and strengthen the precision of written and verbal expression necessary in the ongoing fight for liberation of oppressed people. Rich's final assignment in American Women Poets was for each student to edit an anthology of fifteen poems by women and write an introduction that explained the theme of the anthology and named similarities and differences among the poems selected. This is an assignment I can't wait to try out in my own 101 poetry course. I know many readers will find similar inspiration in the pages of *Open Admissions*.

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