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The Poet X: Disrupting Shakespeare, Healthy Relationships, and Language Dynamics

CARRIE M. MATTERN

Why we doin' this now?" a student in the back sighed as I passed out *Romeo and Juliet* books. We completed a social justice unit focused on *The Hate U Give* a week prior and culminated with an analysis of how the film whitewashed Angie Thomas's story of Starr Carter, which is a similar story to Black students at Carman-Ainsworth High School, my teaching home for the last fourteen years. I stopped for a moment and looked at the classroom in front of me: a majority of Black and Brown ninth graders sitting atop tables, sprawled on yoga mats scattered across the aisles, and even on the warmth of the heating registers in the back. There were a few white faces, too, but in the last ten years or so, the student body evolved since nineteen Flint public schools closed. Carman-Ainsworth High School is not an anomaly; school populations have been shifting for decades as we continue to see the global majority represented more in classrooms across the United States: "In all 50 states, the percentage of students enrolled who were White was lower in fall 2017 than in fall 2000, with the difference ranging from 24 percentage points in Nevada to 3 percentage points in Mississippi" (NCES, 2020). If our teaching practices do not evolve to be inclusive of this shift, we will continue to cause harm for students, particularly students of color, who have not experienced authors outside of the canon. We also continue to perpetuate harm by not illustrating a diverse group of texts to white students causing them to egotistically think that writers solely write for them.

"Ms. M, c'mon. I actually read *The Hate U Give*, and it was good. Like I read a whole book written by a strong Black lady," he persisted.

He actually read it, I thought to myself. How often do educators create a space brave enough to hear that phrase in class, aloud? How often do we dismiss it when we do hear

it? How often do we genuinely ask? When we hear this, we must halt our plans and use it as an opportunity to allow this moment to drive our teaching practices rather than the continuation of norms established in the past. It takes flexibility and further research, but if students call for it, we should heed the call to deepen their understanding rather than creating an even more conflicted view of literacy.

A book written by a strong Black lady, I thought, considering how often we cause further harm to students by selecting texts that do not illustrate their world view, their cultures, and their language. How often do they see themselves represented in texts as characters, and even more so, how often are they seeing themselves as the author? This work is also necessary for white students to experience as readers and thinkers, rather than solely providing them a typical English class experience that is rooted in white supremacy ideals.

Why are we doing this now? I continued thinking as I simultaneously said aloud what so many ELA educators use as a catchphrase in their careers as teachers: "It is definitely something you should be familiar with before leaving English 9."

"But, like, why, though?" the student persisted.

"That's a great question," I said, trying to sell him on the poetic language and vivid metaphors that Shakespeare brings to the stage.

"But this isn't a stage. It's life," he continued gazing around at the packed classroom full of young people of color being led by me, a middle aged white woman. This student's line of thinking was challenging me. And he was right.

Guiding Questions

Why are we continuing to teach the white-centered literature that we were taught decades ago? Why is the canon,

the canon? are questions I grappled with the more I learned about what other educators, particularly Black Indigenous People Of Color (BIPOC), were doing in their classrooms across the country to disrupt the canon (Ebarvia et al., 2018). As a white woman taught by predominantly white educators, I knew I had work to do. My work directly led me to Black historians and educators of the past, and indirectly to the #DisruptTexts group on Twitter; they were leading the way by challenging “the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve.” The questions that would center my work with this unit came directly from their tenets: “Who does it serve? Who does it represent? Whose canon?” (Ebarvia et al., 2018). With that as my focus, I decided to shift from teaching a common English 9 play *Romeo and Juliet*, and use it only as an entry point into a unit on Healthy Relationships. It would center *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo, and it would allow students to ask themselves what qualities matter most in relationships, both platonic and romantic, and why knowing this information is also central to exploring their own identities.

Education that continues to center whiteness and oppress diversity has to end. It can end with educators who are willing to take steps to not only diversify texts, but to diversify the frameworks or lenses that they teach from. This is essential work for white educators who may be teaching the text rather than the students in front of them. This is also essential work for educators who are teaching the text the same way they were taught, or the same way they have taught it since they began teaching. For me, it reflects back to the curious student yearning for answers about *Romeo and Juliet*, but really desired more texts that could act as his mirror (Bishop, 1990). Students were taught about Dr. Bishop’s theory (1990) at Ohio State University while reading *The Hate U Give (THUG)*. The windows, mirrors, and sliding glass door theory is a framework that calls into the experiences and prior knowledge students have and how that lens can be applied to texts. All students need to do this work because it inherently calls them into action while reading. When they ask themselves about what books have given them a new perspective (window/slider) and what book mirrors their life experiences (mirror), they activate a critical framework for all texts they consume. They were able to apply this to *THUG*, but I wanted them to begin applying this framework organically. My challenging student had been in school for nine years and had not completed a book

until he was provided an opportunity to read Angie Thomas’s work that valued, reflected, and honored his existence rather than oppress his Blackness, his language, and his culture. Educators must heed this as a call to action from our students.

Antiracist, inclusive teaching understands the dynamic approach to teaching the whole student which includes their family identity, language identity, gender identity, and cultural identity. And using this framework along with guiding questions from #DisruptTexts such as “What voices—authors or characters—are marginalized or missing in our study? How are these perspectives authentic to the lived experiences of communities of color?” (Ebarvia et al., 2018) lead students to think critically about what they have been assigned in the past years of schooling to read. Students note in our district they typically read canonical texts and when teachers do assign “Black” stories, they are often written by white authors (*Huck Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Mississippi Trial 1955*) and they perpetuate stereotypes (white saviorism, Black poverty, Black dialect as ignorance, etc.). Every year, a sample of both twelfth and ninth graders share that Angie Thomas’s *THUG* is both the first assigned book they have completed, and the first time they’ve experienced a mirror (Bishop, 1990). Educators must do better. The tenets of #DisruptTexts combine the necessity of interrogating our own biases as educators along with the practicality of decolonizing our classroom libraries and curriculum, leading us to a place where applying the lens of criticality is natural—and essential—for all students (Muhammad, 2020). White students who are often centered with canonical texts may not ever read a BIPOC author (or have a BIPOC educator) until higher ed. This practice must end. It creates an egotistical ideology centering white students and an erasure of identity with BIPOC students.

The Focus

The three main student objectives for this unit were clear: analyze and discuss healthy relationships, amplify and honor language in various ways, and continue to practice racial literacy and critical thinking while using an anti-racist, inclusive framework previously introduced from the *THUG* social justice unit. My objectives: include caregivers, amplify BIPOC authors and characters, allow and honor all language, and continue to decenter my whiteness and the biases I bring to an already biased institutional system. If I

am unable to reckon with my internalized biases as a white educator, I should not be teaching this unit. The work must begin within, before I bring it to my classroom. This takes constant interrogation of decisions, mindfulness of my own diction choices, and consistent inclusivity of all voices while centering the needs of students.

Healthy Relationships

First, we would create a class set of qualities and criterion that should be reflective in a healthy relationship and an independent set of criteria to self assess, understand, and discuss healthy relationships by applying this set of independent criteria to characters (from both texts), discuss and compare what individual criteria students have alongside their caregivers criteria, and apply racial literacy terms to our discussions on healthy relationships through an analysis of both *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Poet X*.

This unit also asked students to engage in truth seeking when they discussed what qualities their friends should have and how those qualities may differ or be similar to what they want in future partners. It also asked their caregivers to fill out a form answering the same questions.

These discussions were intergenerational and rich—more than I could have hoped for in sending a form home to include caregivers. Many caregivers emailed a thank you response sharing what they learned about their student, and students also shared in class while it was awkward for some, it was a necessary conversation if they had not yet had it. Many of the caregivers vehemently agreed with their student's answers while others ended up having thorough discussions about gender, expectations, pronouns, and identity. Being

inclusive of caregivers is something that “So you want to Do ABAR work?” states as necessary when doing Anti-Bias Anti-Racist work to disrupt the oppressive systems of education policy that are at work in our classrooms (Kleinrock et al., 2020). Often white educators do not include BIPOC caregivers when making decisions on their students' texts, abilities, and lessons—this practice must not continue:

Schools need to consider how they can help create more integration in their community by having open and honest discussions with their parents and caregivers about the benefits of diverse schools (including for white students) or questioning policies (such as requirements regarding tardiness and truancy and dress codes) that have made it historically difficult for more diverse populations to join their school community. (Torres, 2020)

Integrating caregivers for positive, authentic contact in high school creates a supportive community. This speaks truth to what happens inside classrooms also—it's not just a district issue. Educators must reach out to include caregivers to teach the whole child. Even at the high school level. The conversations I held over the phone and email with caregivers were noticeably different than a call home about behavior or a missing assignment. Caregivers were happy to be involved in an assignment and a discussion. They were particularly interested in why we were learning about relationships in English class, and also interested in what their students shared in class. It is an experience that should happen more frequently in secondary classrooms.

Healthy Relationships and Characters

With *Romeo and Juliet*, the students collectively decided upon three focused qualities that we tested with every character using their own ideas and prior knowledge from the caregiver activity. Every student in class was given a dry erase marker and wrote the most important quality in a healthy relationship on the whiteboard.

After everyone had an opportunity, the class returned to the whiteboard to circle their top three qualities. The discourse was powerful; students were arguing with one another using claim, evidence, and warrant without being prompted. They found healthy relationships must include honesty, even to a point of emotionally harming someone with the act of honesty. The next agreement was communication styles that complemented one another: “You can't just take a *Love Languages Test* and know who you are compatible with Ms. M. You have to learn how to



Figure 1. A Healthy Relationships Survey

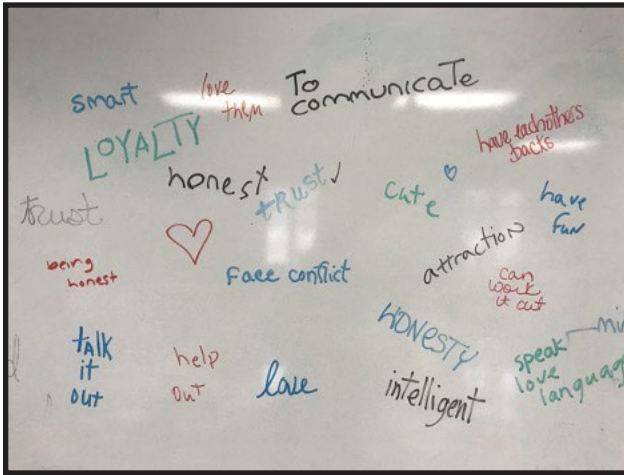


Figure 2. Brainstorming qualities of healthy relationships

be compatible with your partner or friend if they speak a different Love Language,” which is what they told me after we took the Love Languages survey online. Finally they were adamant that in any relationship, if there is no trust, the relationship is unhealthy.

Next we analyzed excerpts of the play and watched Baz Luhrman’s film to help understand inclusive characterization and imagery to complement the excerpts of Elizabethan text. Then we put Shakespeare’s characters to the test. Are Mercutio and Romeo the best example of a healthy relationship, or is the Nurse and Juliet a more viable example? Who exhibits trust, honesty, and clear communication skills throughout the play? This led us directly to how unhealthy Romeo and Juliet’s relationship is and how awful it is that neither of them have healthy relationships modeled for them from their caregivers.

We were able to bring in conversation of gender and identity, the oppression of sexual identity in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the fact that many of our relationships, including the characters’, exist between the dynamic nuances of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Students noted that a Queer, Black Mercutio and a Latinx Tybalt are necessary inclusions today, but also led us to discuss who may have been excluded on stage at The Globe. In fact the conversations were so meaningful, students reflected back to their reading of *THUG* in the unit prior and said Lisa Carter and Starr Carter had the most healthy relationship in the course of their reading so far. The two Black women exhibited honesty, communication styles that complemented one another, trustworthiness, and worked toward improving this communication as noted in multiple scenes of both the book and film.

The final healthy relationships piece in the unit asks students to read *The Poet X* and use the same healthy relationship criterion and apply it to the characters in Acevedo’s story, particularly the protagonist, Xiomara Batista. Are Xiomara and Twin exhibiting qualities that deem their relationship as honest? Is Caridad and Xiomara a healthy relationship? How is Twin hiding his queer relationship similar or different to Xiomara hiding her relationship with Aman? Sample student responses compared Romeo and Juliet’s relationship to Xiomara and Aman’s. Students noted that Xiomara established boundaries with Aman that Juliet did not work toward with Romeo (Acevedo, 2018, p. III, 333). They noticed that Xiomara does not accept the catcalling and harassment which signals self-preservation (Lorde, 1988) and uses her voice to “rechannel rage” (Hardy, 2013) after her mother’s disciplinary acts as an attempt at what Dr. Bettina Love calls “spirit murdering.” The ultimate discussion point was how Xiomara begins to heal from harm, which a student stated: “The slam performance at the end of the book not only emphasizes her growth but also having her family in the first row shows that her mother and father support her. Aman was also introduced to her family after the event. This is necessary for them to move forward as a family and begin to heal.” Overall students were able to use Xiomara and Aman as a healthy relationship model compared to Romeo and Juliet, but also analyze other characters in the text as conflict ensued. This work in class began with self, was applied to fictional characters from two time periods, and will transfer in their future analysis of literature, people, and relationships they encounter.

Language Dynamics

We moved from Elizabethan English to modern English with further reference to Acevedo’s work using “Afro-Latina,” a spoken word piece. One student remarked that she had never heard of this term before and proceeded later as a final culmination choice exam piece to create art based solely on this beautiful new identity marker. In “Afro-Latina,” Acevedo states: “Dance to the rhythm. / Beat the drums of my skin. / Afro Descendant, / the rhythms within.” The poem also directly introduced us to Xiomara and the reason for implementing anti-racist teaching pedagogy in ELA classes: “Our stories cannot be checked into boxes. / They are in the forgotten” (Acevedo, 2015). Black and Brown students must be taught that they are not a box to be checked—their stories are necessary and vital and steeped

in history. And white students must learn that listening to these stories is necessary learning—and it is vital for their development to realize that their stories do not matter more than anyone else’s.

Although modern young adult fiction, Acevedo’s story is not what most teens would say is an “easy read” for them unless the story mirrors their Dominican heritage (Bishop, 1990). In Flint, MI, this was not the case. Many of my students were hearing Spanish phrases centered for the first time in an ELA class. Gloria Anzaldúa speaks to this in her 1987 work:

Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue — my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence. (p. 39-40)

Acevedo’s protagonist, Xiomara, directly reflects Anzaldúa’s words: she is not silent. Xiomara expresses herself in various ways through a journey of self-discovery and healing. Literally in the second poem of the story she states, “I am unhide-able” and discusses her ignoring of comments by peers—and grown men—about her “body that takes up more room than her voice” (Acevedo p.5). And yet, her voice filled our class. The majority of students in my class—English speakers—were not centered for the first time in many of their lives. Students were able to hear Xiomara think and speak in Dominican Spanish which counteracts the narrative of code-switching they were fed with Starr Carter in *The Hate U Give* earlier on in the course.

Many students infer code-switching as a “survival skill” or as a “talent,” but Dr. April Baker-Bell states that Black students are often “silenced” and “policed” by teachers where “[i]t is the belief that there is something inherently wrong with BL [Black Language]; therefore, it should be eradicated. It is denying Black students the right to use their native language as a linguistic resource during their language and literacy learning” (2019, p.9). Black Language should be celebrated and amplified in texts and in classrooms and in law offices, but educators continue to stifle and correct it.

This was true for Starr Carter as she altered her English to white mainstream English (WME) when entering Williamson Prep. Academy and the various white spaces

she encountered with friends Haley and Chris (Baker-Bell, 2020). Students can begin to see that Starr Carter may have felt the necessary pressures placed on her by white America to “reject their language and culture to acquire white mainstream English” and “insist that Black students code switch to avoid discrimination” (Baker-Bell, 2020). In this way, Xiomara Batista acts as Starr’s foil. She does not alter her language for academic purposes or because she feels that speaking WME will get her more accepted amongst her peers. In fact, an early poem titled, “The First Words” repeats “pero, tú no eres fácil,” and readers who are unfamiliar with the phrase do not learn the meaning until the last line: “You sure ain’t an easy one” (Acevedo, 2018, p.9). And later, at Catechism class, she tells Father Sean, “I think the story of Genesis is mad stupid” (Acevedo, 2018, p.120). Illustrating Xiomara’s Dominican Spanish in class, as canon, creates a dynamic shift of fostering dialogue around both Starr and Xiomara and more importantly, around diversifying typical ELA language practices, specifically from white educators. De-centering white norms as an English teacher is necessary for students to learn and witness in community that their language is valued and viable—and it should be studied, read, and shared widely. When we looked at poems closer, such as “Dominican Spanish Lessons,” students were literally being taught by Xiomara the word *brava*, the etymology of the word, and its numerous uses depending on relationship and context (Acevedo, 2018, p. 274). Work like this in ELA can illustrate language as a window, mirror, or sliding door too (Bishop, 1990). Students will make this connection if educators frame everything as a text, not just novels or textbooks.

The After Poems

Conversations about language created an opportunity to introduce After Poems to conclude our unit. In this case, ninth graders were invited to write an After Poem using Acevedo’s structure from “How I Feel About Attention.” In this piece, Xiomara delves into if Medusa had a daughter, it would be her. And she would teach her “how it is that her looks stop men / in their tracks / why they still keep on coming / how she outmaneuvers them when they do” (Acevedo, 2018, p.48). One student wrote, “how my Blackness and fro stop men in their tracks / why police keep coming after us / killing us / for no reason.” This space to write helped my students connect their fears to Xiomara’s and their use of language to hers. It fostered my students to think critically about how WME is considered normative

and professional in society yet according to Dr. Baker-Bell's research, their language—Black Language—has many more forms of the verb “to be” than white normative English. Nonetheless, educators continue to stifle their Black students' language (Baker-Bell, 2020). This activity and overall unit is one way to honor and amplify all language by allowing its use in both conversation and formal writings, practice its use in creative writings, and be sure to remove the stigma that you may be associating with anything other than WME as an educator.

In class, a final After Poem assigned is based on two choices: “First Words” or “Mira Muchacha” (Acevedo, 2018, p.9, 6). The goal of this is for students to use their language (not WME unless it belongs to them) and also connect back to where the unit started with including family—as an intergenerational connection using language from home. Centering language as identity is new to students who often have been corrected on the “right way” to speak and write. Many English learners, especially Arabic-speaking students in my class, express that this is the first time they have been allowed to use their language in English class. What is interesting is to see what students decide to do when given the freedom of honoring their language identity. Some students who are inspired by “First Words” use a repeating line that they have been told growing up by their caregivers. One example that stands out is from an ELL learner who expressed a phrase in Arabic that is loosely translated into “Drop everything and study” which he hears numerous times a day, every day, from his mother. Students who wrote after this poem do not reveal the translation until the final line, which is interesting for them to write in both languages and share with the class. Students wonder what their caregivers say and how even though they may be said differently, they hear similar advice regardless of cultural background and upbringing. When students choose to write after “Mira Muchacha,” they tend to highlight the phrase “Sometimes I want to tell her, the only person in this house who isn't heard / is me” (Acevedo, 2018, p.6). This line provides them with an entryway into what they want their caregivers to understand. These assignments are important to include in this unit as understanding the dynamics of language but also as a form of self-care in writing, especially if the communication is challenging like it is with Xiomara's mother. Journaling the same topics that Xiomara's teacher assigns in the text is also an activity that allows students to write authentically without fear of being corrected or being unable to say it in WME when it may be a phrase that is not easily translated. Using Acevedo's work as inspiration

amplified students' understanding of power dynamics in language and how educators or people in power, particularly white folk, can hinder the voices of students of color or choose to amplify them. It also provided students a space to use their language in a variety of ways and begin to understand that it is indeed integral to their identity.

Reflection

Audre Lorde said, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (1988). Students should recognize this quote in the importance of Xiomara as Afro-Latina, who chooses to save herself amidst the consistent harassment under the harmful male gaze in the text. Students of color will come to recognize this in their own sense of self-worth, especially during remote learning when educators, most of them white, as the majority of educators in Michigan is 93% white, are policing their language, their bodies, and their bedrooms through a screen rather than honoring them as fully capable young people first (MI DOE, 2018-2019). This unit highlights students as whole people who need to express their thoughts and wonderings in their authentic language, analyze characters and language using a racial literacy lens, and begin to realize that the qualities they respect and admire in characters can also be worth upholding as they begin to explore intersectional identities and future relationships. Students also come to understand a foundational introduction of anti-racist teaching and the fact that it honors all stories in an inclusive way rather than oppressing and erasing stories of color. It builds a complex view of storytelling, allows for possible mirrors, windows, and sliding doors to be discussed, and using examples from their readings, becomes an entry way for tough conversations with peers and adults to be more equitable and nuanced. Xiomara Batista teaches this. Starr Carter teaches this to an extent. Juliet Capulet does not. If all three are used collaboratively, educators can point out where the canonical text falls short, where the characters in one book might be a solid representation of a healthy relationship, and how one young woman, Xiomara Batista, can speak to students of all races, ages, and ideologies about why healthy relationships matter, using your voice is necessary, and being Afro-Latina is something to not only shout from the stage, but also to nurture deep within as a point of power and pride.

A character like Xiomara Batista from Acevedo's *The Poet X* does all this—still—educators are being stifled in

classrooms or too nervous to teach something new. Students who ask, “Why we doin’ this now?” do not need to continue hearing that “Romeo and Juliet is taught to every ninth grader in the United States. It’s about two star crossed lovers who...”. What students need to hear is that they are reading an award winning novel about a young Afro-Latina written by an Afro-Latina who is a former Slam Poet Champion, they are studying language and how words are powerful, they are analyzing relationships from various texts and yes, they will actually use this critical thinking later on in life. This is how we must answer.

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