

**Difficult, Beautiful Things: Young Immigrant Writers Find Voice and Empowerment
through Aesthetic Education and Poetry**

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This chapter describes a collaboration in aesthetic education between an education professor and a high school English teacher of refugee and immigrant students in a newcomers' high school in the Bronx, New York. According to Maxine Greene,

Aesthetic education is an approach to teaching and learning that teaches what it means to pay heed to the appearances of things, the sounds of things, to be responsive to new vistas and new forms. It is--deliberately and delicately--to move students to fresh insight and awareness (1980, p. 317).

In a co-taught workshop that we integrated into the English curriculum, these students explored art through the lens of what it means to be a "hyphenated American" and wrote powerful poetry in response. The poems they wrote were the outcome of an opportunity to engage in studies of works of art that were chosen because of their thematic connections to the lives of these students. Specifically, we chose works that explored ideas about identity, heritage, displacement and its concomitant traumas, as well as some of the more optimistic aspects of the immigration experience and multicultural identity. We began with Frida Kahlo's *Self Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (1932), then continued our study of the complexities of American identity through George Ella Lyon's poem *Where I'm From* (1999), Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series* (1940), and Romare Bearden's *Black Odyssey* (1977), as well as a selection of poetry from sonnets through modern works.

In response to each of these works, students were encouraged to "notice deeply," a practice which Lincoln Center Institute defines as, "to identify and articulate layers of detail in a work of art through continuous interaction with it over time" (2008, p. 6). The students began to move from observation and description to interpretation as they generated questions in relation to their observations. They considered not just what they were seeing, but the choices the artist made in creating the work and the meaning and significance of those choices.

We developed this way of teaching in the midst of a presidential campaign whose rhetoric was increasingly hostile toward immigrants. Our purpose was to create a space for students to develop and communicate their stories and insert their voices into a threatening national conversation as a "who" rather than as a "what" (Arendt) by writing poems in response to works of art that evoked aspects of their lived experiences. For most, it was their first experience of expressive writing in English. Through the poetry workshop students had conversations in which they discovered their common feelings of alienation and struggle to communicate effectively. The process of reading and discussing each others' poems helped to build a strongly supportive community across the various cultures in the classroom. For many, these were the first poems they had ever written in any language.

This notion that works of art could be doorways to lead us into ways of expressing our own experiences is rooted in Greene's belief that "cultural, participatory engagement with the arts" (2001, p. 6) could provoke "an initiation into new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, moving"

(p. 7). These provocations have the power to engage what Greene called the “social imagination,” which she defined as

the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficit society, in the streets where we live and our schools. Social imagination not only suggests but also requires that one take action to repair or renew (1995, p.5).

For students who are new to the United States, their previous education is too often haphazard and based upon their family’s ability to pay. The 12th grade students at the international school in which we worked are mostly identified as Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE). Most of these students arrived in the Bronx traumatized by extended family separations, poverty, crime, war, oppression based on gender or political, religious, socio-economic designations. These students had spent or were still spending so much energy on survival, that reflective, introspective thought was often too painful and repressed in the face of the need to survive and succeed and most simply, learn English.

Given the range of reading and comprehension levels in each classroom, we agreed that teaching students to develop meaningful literacy would be best served by first learning to “read” visual art. Starting with art enabled students to engage in intellectually stimulating discussions about symbolism and creative choices that carried over into subsequent discussions of literature, as well as into their writing. Furthermore, the symbolic imagery in the works of art we studied reflected the students’ own experiences back to them in ways that they understood and wanted to express. Telling their stories necessitated finding their voices. Seeing how Kahlo, Lawrence, and other artists had found and expressed their voices showed the students that this was possible.

Our initial foray into the creative writing process was through an activity created by the New York City Writing Project’s Melicca McCormick inspired by Sherman Alexie’s character Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Trying to figure out where he fit in as an “apple” (red on the outside and white on the inside) Junior looked at the small and large of who he was. We thought this brainstorming work was a great frontloading for the work to follow as much of the thinking and discussion would allow students to start their *Where I’m From* poems at a higher level. The conversations often returned to the public discourse around immigrants and how alienating that could be. Students wanted to show the complexity of their identities to those who dehumanized them through caricatures. The power to connect to another’s heart through language was a conversation from the day poetry was introduced. Here is an example from Marisol, a student who was one of the more advanced speakers in the class but had not previously written any poetry.

Marisol’s Tribes

I know that to them I’m just an immigrant. Someone who is here to “have babies, take their jobs and money”. This is a misconception because I am more than that. Sure, I am an immigrant, but I am also a person who works hard and has hopes and dreams. I belong to that tribe.

I belong to the tribe of those who vehemently dislike to ask others for favors. I belong to the tribe of readers because Quentin Jacobsen’s misfortunes make them forget, but still remember their own. And the tribe of those who cease to exist as the rain pours down.

And the tribe of people who drink hot chocolate with the purpose of burning their tongue, just to spend the rest of the day feeling it with their upper lip.

And to the tribe of El Ensanche Duarte in San Francisco de Macoris who are coming in and out of Dona Juana's house because she had a stroke last night.

And the tribe of people whose organs all sink down to their feet when they see that someone, because they wish they could sit in their underwear at 3am in a kitchen counter with them and talk about the universe.

And the tribe of people who wish to be doctors but sit in their room alone whispering to themselves over and over "I can do it, I can do it, I can do it".

And to the tribe of people who are happiest with the feel of the wind on their face and hair as they're swinging back and forth in the playground at the park.

And from the tribe of people whose favorite color is that of red roses when their petals turn a red wine at its base.

And to the tribe of people who look out into the night sky and wish she was still sleeping next to me, but then, I remember that in the morning the flowers that grew over her will bloom.

In the process of writing their "Tribes" poems, the students described their lives both literally and metaphorically, which laid the groundwork for subsequent writing and also deepened their understanding of the literature they were reading.

She Wanted to "Do Something Hard"

Students who are struggling with language are by necessity, literal, and often seek the language learners holy grail: vocabulary. It is well documented that out of context vocabulary learning yields little growth and deflects from the higher thinking that the learner could employ while engaging with the new language. The opportunity to ask open-ended questions that seek no singular right answer is hugely freeing for anxious speakers who must not only consider the concepts they wish to inquire about, but the language to express them. The open questioning encouraged students to think more deeply. They were being asked not to be certain but to wonder. Instead of the usual school experience of being questioned by teachers, they were now the questioners, and their curiosity determined the direction of the discussion. When we studied Kahlo's *Self Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*, one student asked what it meant that Kahlo held a cigarette, then another hypothesized that the cigarette might be suggesting that Kahlo felt that life in the United States was unhealthy, because the hand that held the cigarette was on the United States side of the portrait. These observations led the students to notice and make connections between other symbolic elements in the painting. Once a significance had been assigned to that cigarette, students went back for a deeper look and asked further questions about the details and composition of the painting. The singular most important pedagogical goal for English language learners (Ells) is for them to be able to engage in authentic discussions. We became acutely aware of how their ideas and questions were building on one another. Now we were helping them to develop a vocabulary of metaphors, and examples of how to use them in creative writing.

After the students had engaged in this process of unpacking symbols and metaphors through paintings and literature, we felt that even those new to poetry were comfortable enough with both reading and writing poems that they could take on some more traditionally canonical works and writers. This comfort with poetry is not to be taken for granted, as even many of the graduate students in our university's English Education program had expressed discomfort with poetry and asked for help in how they might teach it in their own classrooms. Interestingly, the Ell students did not exhibit fear or frustration. Because they were able to understand the logic of language and structural choices made by poets, the students were able to recognize similarities to the kinds of choices they had made in their own work. In the process of poetic analysis they easily made connections between the artistic choices made in the poetry and fiction they read and those that were made by the visual artists whose work they analyzed. One example of how this played out in class involved Bashita, a Bangladeshi student who, like many language learners, had been initially resistant to creative writing. This young woman found herself captured by her independent reading book, *I Am Malala*. When Bashita was inspired by Malala's story to write a poem about her own life, she incorporated insights related to the painting *Face Reality* by Laurie Cooper, which we had studied alongside Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *We Wear the Mask*. Having already studied sonnets and iambic pentameter, Bashita wanted to express her truth in the manner of Dunbar and Cooper, but she "wanted to do something hard" and create a poem entirely in iambic pentameter. She worked in the classroom during lunch seeking the symbols and language to express her feelings, not only of being an immigrant, but of gender bias in her culture. She worked every day for several weeks in order produce a truth she had buried deeply.

How can educating girls be Haram?
Is her mind more dangerous than a gun?
Is God pleased by those who praise by killing?
Quran, Bible, and Torah proffer love.
Neighbors spot my hijab...a double-take.
Eyes glancing like doves, woodpeckers and hawks.
Judge others not, lest ye be not judged.

Malala combated the faceless ghosts.
Slithering into her home through airwaves.
Her voice is a missile to millions of others;
a shield protecting girls' education
against darkness petrified by knowledge.
Her insistent eye turned evil to stone.

The image of this young woman furiously focused on her screen as she researched ideas and words to both honor Malala and express her truth is unforgettable. She was confident, determined to be heard. She had found and valued her voice.

"Miss—this is me!"

The work throughout the year led to a visual art and poetry project based on Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series* and Romare Bearden's *Black Odyssey*. The students studied *Black Odyssey* with the art teacher and then in English class they analyzed the paintings and accompanying text of the *Migration Series*. By this point they were comfortable with poetry and had developed a strong community in which they learned from and supported each other's creative work. The teacher built lessons around the students' own writing. Kids would get shout-outs in the hall from students in other classes who had seen their writing. Through a grant from PSC-CUNY, we were able to produce an anthology of the students' writing with color prints of their artwork. The anthology was titled *Nobody Knows the Stories of Others*, after a line from one of the students' poems. The opportunity to publish and be heard was motivation, but so were moments like the following:

After viewing each of the 60 panels of *The Migration Series* and the accompanying text, students were given books containing all of the panels and asked to select one or more that connected to their experience as an immigrant. They were looking for a "feeling" connection to the image. One student, Kelvin, a sweet boy with limited English who was often absent as he worked off the books on a construction job to pay the rent, was there that day. A few minutes into the activity he raced across the room with the book splayed open in his hand, excitedly pointing to a page and repeating, "Miss—this is me!" I wasn't sure what he meant at first. The image was from panel #24, whose accompanying text said "The children were forced to work in the fields. They could not go to school." The panel had an image of children bent over picking cotton in a field. "That is me! That's what I did". I looked like that!" Here is his poem, written almost in one draft.

Working since I was a child in my uncle's fields.
getting up when the sun rose and coming back when the sun was going down.
My heart throbbed with sadness because I could not get an education like my friends
I could not have
the same opportunity as them.

Tired of
planting the field
weeding the field
carrying bananas in a bag bigger than me.
bending hundreds of times every day to get potatoes
feeling that my back is going to break
walking in shoes covered in mud.

I went to school without books, both the school and I didn't have any

and only one pencil
and a piece of paper,
walking into my class
with everybody looking at my broken shoes.

Bashita's take on the same panel indicated how art can elicit a sense of empathy as the image of children working in the fields elicited this memory:

As I go to school my friends watch me
with my books in my hand.
They never have had the opportunity to step on the school porch.

While I carry my books, my friends carry *tiffin* to rice paddies
to the person who is working there,
instead of bringing books to school.

Monday morning, I watch my neighbor
carrying a massive fishing net
holding it over his shoulder
and his ten year old daughter following him
wherever he goes with a small basket.

While I carry my books
and go to school
waving my hand to say bye to them.

Conclusion: Writing Difficult, Beautiful Things

By placing the study of works of art at the center of the curriculum for guided inquiry through observation and questioning, aesthetic education encourages students to imagine other possible ways of being in the world. Central to these experiences, which Maxine Greene saw as "integral to the development of persons--to their cognitive, perceptual, emotional, and imaginative development" (2001, p. 7) is the students' own artmaking because it fosters a "distinctive mode of literacy" that Greene believed "must be grounded in actual experiences with the materials of at least one of the arts" (1980, p. 319). The writing community that developed brought together diverse cultures and personalities. The opportunity to produce an anthology of their writing and artwork provided concrete validation of their hard work and growth. The pride they had in the anthology continues on as students return to ask for copies for their college

professors who had seen the work and wanted copies of their own to use as examples of what is possible when young writers are guided to find and use their voices.

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