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### Taking Scissors to Shakespeare

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**Abstract:** Despite ongoing and prolific critical scholarship arguing for the widening of the secondary language arts curriculum, many practicing teachers are required or encouraged to teach a curriculum dominated by canonical texts. This is often the case at schools with highly diverse students whose varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds have historically been silenced by traditional forms of language arts instruction. In this article, the authors critically reflect on their collaborative attempts across multiple years to decenter and destabilize a required 10<sup>th</sup> grade unit on a Shakespearean play. They describe a shift in focus from a unit originally centered on traditional literary analysis of *Hamlet* to a unit rooted in discussions of how power and privilege operate across varied texts. Describing their use of the graphic novel *Yummy* to complicate understandings of *Hamlet*, the authors discuss how an emphasis on critical reading and critical multimodal composing across both texts allowed them to reflect on and challenge their own teaching practices. The authors then conclude with an acknowledgment of the risk, flexibility, and reflection needed to do this kind of critical work in canonically-centered classrooms.

**Keywords:** critical literacy, multimodal literacy, young adult literature



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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

**A**n energized chaos permeates the classroom. Poster boards, sharpies, scissors, glue, rulers, and colored pencils are spread out across tables. Students chatter intently, their voices ebbing and flowing as they move from talking with one another to glancing through scattered pages of G. Neri's (2010) graphic novel *Yummy* and poring over underlined sections in photocopies of Shakespeare's (1994) *Hamlet*. Some students are brainstorming on pieces of scrap paper while others lean over their group's work, checking with peers as they glue images, panels, and pages from *Yummy* on chosen areas of their poster board. Others take scissors to *Shakespeare*, cutting words, lines, and dialogue from *Hamlet* and placing them in relation to images from *Yummy*. At each table, a narrative is unfolding that is neither *Hamlet* nor *Yummy*, but a student-envisioned understanding of the dialogue between both.

The collaborative multimodal composing described above served as the culminating activity in a 10th grade language arts unit that thematically explored power and privilege across two seemingly disparate texts. As a practicing high school teacher at the time (Annmarie) and university researcher (Ashley) who planned, taught, and reflected together, we created this unit to engage students in the purposeful destabilizing of dominant narratives by placing a Shakespearean play in dialogue with a text of a different medium. We situated this particular unit of study in the second half of a year-long curriculum grounded in multiple perspectives and multimodalities, a curriculum we were able to experiment with, reflect on, and adapt across two school years. We hoped to provide opportunities for students to position themselves as authors and artists

(Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020), a goal that both drew from and expanded upon our prior work in critical, multimodal approaches to teaching the canon.

## Disrupting a canonical classroom

**Who we are.** When we collaboratively developed our power and privilege unit, I (Annmarie) was in my tenth year of teaching language arts at a medium-sized, diverse school in an urban southwest city. Situated within the community where I grew up—a linguistically and culturally diverse area known as the “International District”—the school was (and continues to be) delineated by the rich diversity of its student population but also by the undeniable struggles with poverty faced by many of its students. One hundred percent of the student body qualified for free or reduced lunch and a large percentage of the students lacked access to resources such as shelter, healthcare, technology, and transportation. Though the majority of the school's students identified as Chicanx or Latinx, the school was home to growing populations of other immigrant and refugee groups as well, with at least 28 different languages spoken across the campus. Fewer than half of the students identified as native English speakers.

As a Latinx/Irish daughter of immigrants, I (Annmarie) had experiences as both a student and a language arts educator at this particular school that led me to eventually problematize the English department's stark emphasis on the Western tradition as the crux of its curriculum, despite the linguistic and cultural diversity of both the school's students and teachers. After my first few years teaching 9th and 10th grade language arts, I became increasingly frustrated by the predominance of canonical text sets as the sole teaching options to be found in the school's bookroom, the lack of funding

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this

article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

to purchase contemporary books by diverse authors and in diverse forms, and the external pressure from other teachers in the department to align my curricular and text choices with that of the department at large. Through critical reflection, I also began to interrogate my own role in teaching within dominant frameworks historically responsible for the silencing of marginalized populations instead of in opposition to these same narrow and often oppressive pedagogies (Spring, 2016; Sheahan, 2020).

Our collaborative work as a practicing teacher and university researcher stemmed from our mutual desire to subversively push back against a curricular overemphasis on the Western canon in secondary language arts classrooms. I (Ashley)—a white, female assistant professor at a nearby university—had a vested interest in working with teachers in local classrooms. I met Annmarie through colleagues because of our shared interest in critically approaching multimodal texts in ELA spaces. Additionally, we both identified (and continue to identify) as practitioner researchers who seek to interrogate and improve educational spaces and our teaching practices within them. Our collaboration was initially driven by Annmarie’s critical investigation of and reflection on her previous pedagogical practices. We both held a deep conviction that the linguistically and culturally diverse students in Annmarie’s language arts classes needed more opportunities to engage with texts in critical ways that explored the value of multiple voices, including their own (Aston, 2017; Morrell, 2005).

In our early work with Annmarie’s 10th grade classes, we deemphasized the Western canon as the singular

focus of our classroom units of study (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2019) while also acknowledging the realities that necessitate a curricular emphasis on required texts such as Shakespearean plays and other works of the literary canon. Keeping these requirements in mind, we focused the first half of our initial year of collaboration on the *decentering* of canonical texts in our classroom, a pedagogical move that we defined as the conscious choice to no longer teach works such as Ray Bradbury’s (1953) *Fahrenheit 451* and Dante’s (Dante & Ciardi, 1996) *Inferno* as the central or sole text in a unit of study. Wanting to increase the voices and mediums present in our curriculum (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2019), we thematically paired works of the literary canon with graphic novels and films, presenting these texts as equal in value. In doing so,

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we were heavily influenced by critical scholarship that problematizes oppressive models of literature instruction in language arts classrooms (Dyches & Sams, 2018) and emphasizes the importance of providing diverse students with a varied, authentic curriculum that fosters dialogue with multiple perspectives (Duncan-Andrade &

Morrell, 2008).

**Re-envisioning what we do.** During the first year of our collaboration, I (Annmarie) was planning to teach *Hamlet* for the fourth time, adhering to school departmental requirements that held language arts teachers responsible for including a Shakespearean play within the 10th grade English curriculum. Prior to my work with Ashley, I taught Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as the sole, central text of a unit on Elizabethan drama, focusing primarily on reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and characterization. Upon critical reflection, I began to problematize the ways in which I was approaching *Hamlet* with my students, realizing that I was

teaching the text in the same way it had been taught to me in traditional high school and college English classrooms.

This cycle of familiarity is discussed by hooks (1994), who claims that many teachers are educated in classrooms upholding a singular notion of truth and knowledge, and thus end up believing that such notions should be continually and universally taught. Because it is highly difficult to escape “the cookie-cutter mold of traditional pedagogical methods” (Stallworth et al., 2006), many secondary English teachers continue to teach the same canonical works within a similar pedagogical framework within which they remember being taught.

Desiring to break with the cycle of familiarity in my pedagogy, I recognized that my previous approach to teaching *Hamlet* was narrow in scope, not allowing my students to go beyond the four corners of the text itself (Gallagher, 2015) and often resulting in an understanding of Hamlet’s character as merely that of a sympathetic protagonist. As Ashley and I began to collaboratively re-envision a new way of approaching *Hamlet*, our goal was to expand the voices present in this unit, inviting students to become the artistic and creative authority on Shakespeare’s text as we offered them the tools to both understand the play and interrogate it (Janks, 2019).

In designing our unit on *Hamlet*, we recognized Shakespeare as a canonical staple of many high school language arts classrooms (Sataraka & Boyd, 2018), including Annmarie’s, even as we were simultaneously influenced by critical scholarship calling for a widening of secondary English curriculum to include young adult, contemporary,

and pop-culture texts not traditionally taught in school spaces (Morrell, 2015). Because “the canon represents a cultural construction of knowledge centered in Whiteness that institutions deem superior and essential,” we sought to challenge a canonical play while being required to include it as part of the curriculum (Worlds & Miller, 2019, pg.43).

Focusing on themes of power and privilege, we introduced multimodal and multi-genre texts to the unit as we had in earlier collaboratively-planned units in the school year, shifting it from the “Hamlet Unit” to the “Power and Privilege Unit.” We were especially interested in how visual texts would provide students with opportunities to complicate connections to and comprehension of Shakespeare. Following the suggestion of a colleague, we looked at the graphic

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novel *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* (Neri, 2010) because of the ways in which it takes up power and revenge, while also complicating race, class, family dynamics, and violence. *Hamlet* offered interesting pivot points to *Yummy* as well, showcasing a

white, wealthy royal seeking revenge for his father’s murder.

As a work of creative nonfiction, *Yummy* documents the true story of an eleven-year-old gang member from Chicago who is eventually gunned down by his own gang after firing a gun that kills a girl in his neighborhood. The themes in the graphic narrative provided opportunities to push against readings of *Hamlet* that did not take into account race, class, and the impact of privilege on the consequences of violence. As Hamlet seeks to avenge the death of his father, readers can acknowledge the hierarchy of power through royal families, as well as across genders. Yet Hamlet also kills and schemes, with few direct consequences and fears. The multimodal



nature of *Yummy* allowed students to explore themes of power and privilege visually. The comics format is multiple, drawing on image, word, spatiality, line, color, etc. Its complex structure can be used to enhance complex stories by literally illustrating opposing truths and ideas within a single panel (McCloud, 1993), encouraging nuanced readings and engagement. Through this form, then, comics potentially cultivate critical literacy practices that welcome opportunities to question and challenge power dynamics on the page (Low & Campano, 2013; Low, 2017).

In thinking about a final project that could stem from our critical reading of *Yummy* and *Hamlet*, we were influenced by scholarship acknowledging the importance of not only analyzing multiple texts but also designing and producing them (Janks, 2010; Luke, 2013). Recognizing that students can learn about critical analysis through writing and design (Vasquez et al., 2019), we decided to end our Power and Privilege Unit with a focus on multimodal composing, work we viewed as complex, empowering, and critical (Skinner, 2007; Thomsen, 2018). Multimodal composing, in our case, included a “merging of various materials . . . into a complex composition” (Thomsen, 2018; p. 58) as a way to “construct and manipulate” (Dallacqua, 2018, p. 275) materials and ideas. It was important for us to keep this assignment as open-ended as possible, centering student groups as the collaborative authority on how they chose to connect characters, events, pictures, and passages across *Yummy* and *Hamlet* while considering themes of power and privilege. We strongly believed that the freedom inherent in this type of final project would position students as active and creative meaning-makers who were experts on both texts (Dallacqua, 2018; Wang, 2015; Wissman & Costello, 2014).

When we introduced multimodal composing as the unit’s final project, we asked students to explore

connections between *Hamlet* and *Yummy* that helped them think about how power and privilege were operating in both texts. We prompted them with questions such as “Who has power? Why do they have it and how did they get it? Who doesn’t have power?” These questions sparked debate throughout the process of multimodal composing and encouraged students to take stances and make arguments. Students often started their compositions by finding images from *Yummy* that displayed how power was working (like images of Yummy with his gun or in his neighborhood) and then used that situation to revisit *Hamlet* (considering his access to wealth and a castle to live in, for example). From there, students cut and pasted photocopied images from *Yummy* and quotes from *Hamlet* onto poster boards, using markers to write, label, and draw symbols and icons (e.g., arrows, staircases, hearts) that supported their thinking about power and privilege across both texts. We asked for explanations of connections that could be displayed through writing and visual composing, and, in particular, we asked students to think about how they could direct viewers’ eyes with the arrangement of words and images on their poster board (see Figures 1-3). This assignment served as a continuation of the image analysis we had been doing all year, this time positioning the students as the composers.

### Teaching the Power and Privilege Unit Across Two Years

We next present a chronology of the unit’s progression over the course of two years. In particular, we focus on how we built, adapted, and extended curriculum over time as real change in classroom practices is never immediate.

**Year one: What we tried.** In order to focus this unit around “Power and Privilege,” rather than around the play *Hamlet*, we aimed our work toward three

essential unit questions (for more information on this unit, see Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020):

- *What is the relationship between power and privilege?*
- *In what ways does privilege shape an individual's motivations, choices, and outcomes?*
- *How does an understanding of how privilege operates change our perception of characters across multiple texts?* (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020)

We invited students to consider their own experiences with concepts of power and privilege as they were reading *Hamlet* (Shakespeare & Hibbard, 1994). As the class neared the end of their work with *Hamlet*, we engaged in a whole class discussion around these focus questions as a way to look back and reconsider *Hamlet* as well as to set the tone to consider *Yummy*. Because we wanted students to understand *Yummy*'s story as an actual occurrence, we started with the *Time Magazine* article "Murder in Miniature" (Gibbs et al., 1994), a nonfiction documentation of *Yummy*'s upbringing, gang affiliation, and eventual death in Chicago in 1994. We invited students to locate key terms and claims as they read in small groups. We also asked students to consider this text as nonfiction and to consider whether they felt it was a fair and balanced portrayal of *Yummy*'s story. Representation is a crucial piece of how power and privilege operate, and we wanted students to read this article and the graphic novel in order to engage and question them. We also hoped that this inquiry would lead them to further complicate their initial reading of *Hamlet*. As one student shared, the critical, comparative work we were asking them to engage with was "not just facts, facts." This inquiry had the potential to go beyond rote learning focused on one central text.

We believed these varied stories would present students with complex perspectives of power, privilege, and revenge in different contexts while also illustrating the differing degrees of agency that exist for their respective protagonists. Additionally, students were engaging with multiple genres and media forms, further complicating understandings of power and privilege even in relation to the type of texts typically taught in school as they questioned what gets read and honored, when and how. Central to this in-depth inquiry was our focus on collaborative reading between students and their peers and between students and us. These nuanced readings and discussions continued to support considerations of power and privilege through the eyes of multiple readers and perspectives (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2019).

As a final project for this unit, we invited students to continue collaborating in creating a multimodal composition that explored the connections between the two narratives, focusing on power and privilege as central themes. Students were provided photocopies of self-selected pages from *Yummy*, their Shakespeare texts, scissors, glue, markers, and poster board. Working in self-chosen groups, students visually approached their connections and understandings of *Yummy* and *Hamlet*. For example, one group (Figure 1) chose to arrange images of *Yummy*'s life around the perimeter of their poster, demonstrating their understanding that context continually influenced character choices. By framing their chosen quotes from *Hamlet* with images from *Yummy*, this group also positioned *Yummy*'s experiences as a lens through which they were viewing and understanding *Hamlet* as a character. When given the opportunity to creatively address issues of power and privilege through both texts, this group chose to problematize *Hamlet*'s privilege through *Yummy*'s narrative (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020).

This assignment was experimental and therefore very risky for us as teachers and researchers. This precariousness was particularly true for Annmarie, who—in line with other 10th grade teachers in her department—had previously focused on a structured, traditional literary essay as the culminating assignment of a reading of *Hamlet*. In stark contrast, the multimodal compositions we asked students to complete were very open-ended. This shift in assessment required us to be flexible in our expectations and outcomes, recognizing that student groups would choose to engage with multimodal composing in differing ways. This variability proved to be the case, as some groups used the assignment to explore an understanding of both *Yummy* and *Hamlet*, while others worked to compare and contrast central characters and events from both texts. As shown in Figure 1, some groups used multimodal composing critically and visually to make arguments and draw their own conclusions about the texts. One student who worked on this particular project reflected on their group's composition, saying,

When we did the poster on Yummy . . . we had a bunch of pictures. And we could put them all together in one poster and see how, like, pictures from page one help pictures from page two. . . . They are so different, yet they connect in so many ways. . . . And I just think that because you are seeing it, like you can, you understand it.

This student's reflection affirmed our belief in the potential for critical redesign offered by multimodal composing. As we completed the first year of our power and privilege unit, we were fascinated by the ways in which student groups wove together and

made sense of the new compositions they created from the words and images of two existing texts.

**Year two: What we changed.** We had the opportunity to approach our Power and Privilege Unit a second time during a subsequent year of collaboration, during which we reflected and built on our original unit. We positioned this work as part of our professional and personal responsibility as practitioner researchers who continually interrogate, adapt, and improve our pedagogical practice to better serve the students we teach. Operating as critical friends (Anderson et al., 2007), we existed in a perpetual state of reflection and questioning with each other as we approached all aspects of our Power

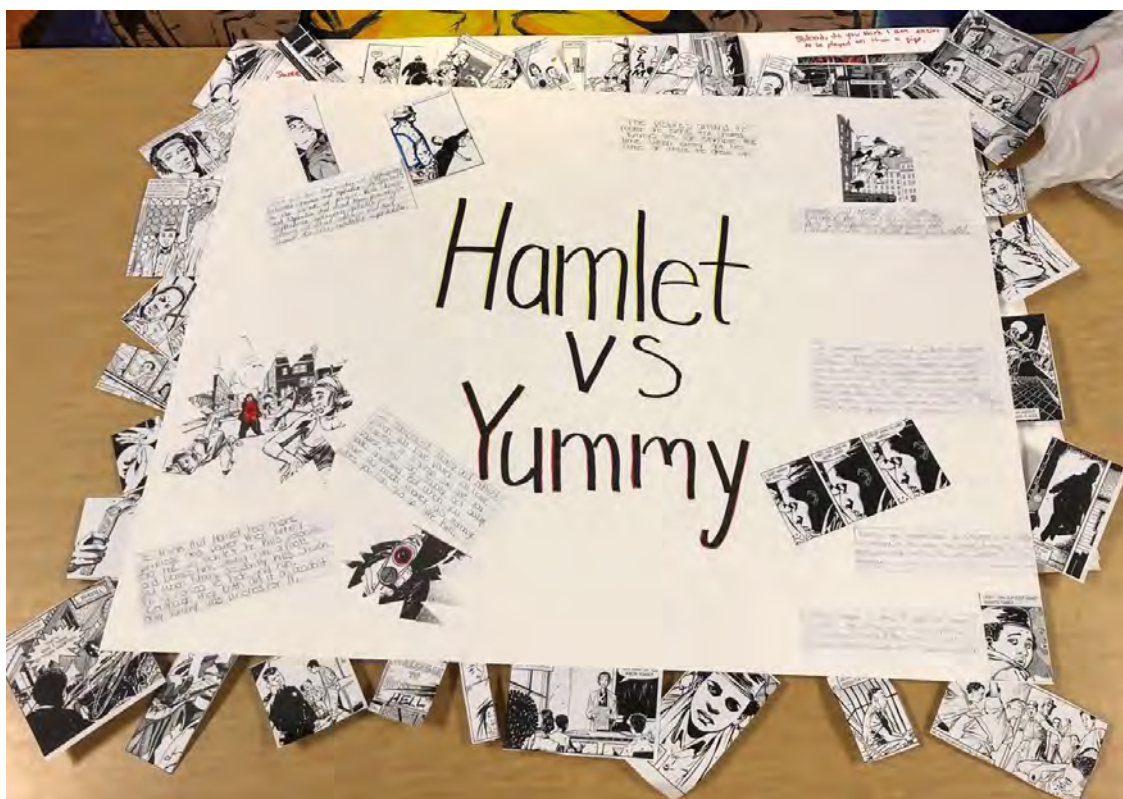
and Privilege Unit the initial time we taught it—in our planning, our assessment, our interactions with students, and our conversations post class. This ongoing collaborative reflection led us to make focused changes to the unit in year two.

We were increasingly critical in decentering *Hamlet* as a central unit text this second time around. Although we

acknowledged the important steps we had taken in our initial year of collaboration to move away from traditional ways of teaching Shakespeare, we also noted that our decision to have students read *Hamlet* prior to a reading of *Yummy* had consequences. We recognized that students from year one still had a tendency to view *Hamlet* as the more authoritative, “academic” text, visible in some groups’ hesitancy to critique Hamlet as a character or to move beyond comparing and contrasting the two texts into critical interrogative work. In year two, we chose to read both the *Time Magazine* article and *Yummy* during our reading of *Hamlet* instead at the end of it. In this way, *Yummy* was literally and figuratively

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Figure 1



interrupting and disrupting a reading of *Hamlet*. Central characters and situations were discussed as students oscillated between texts.

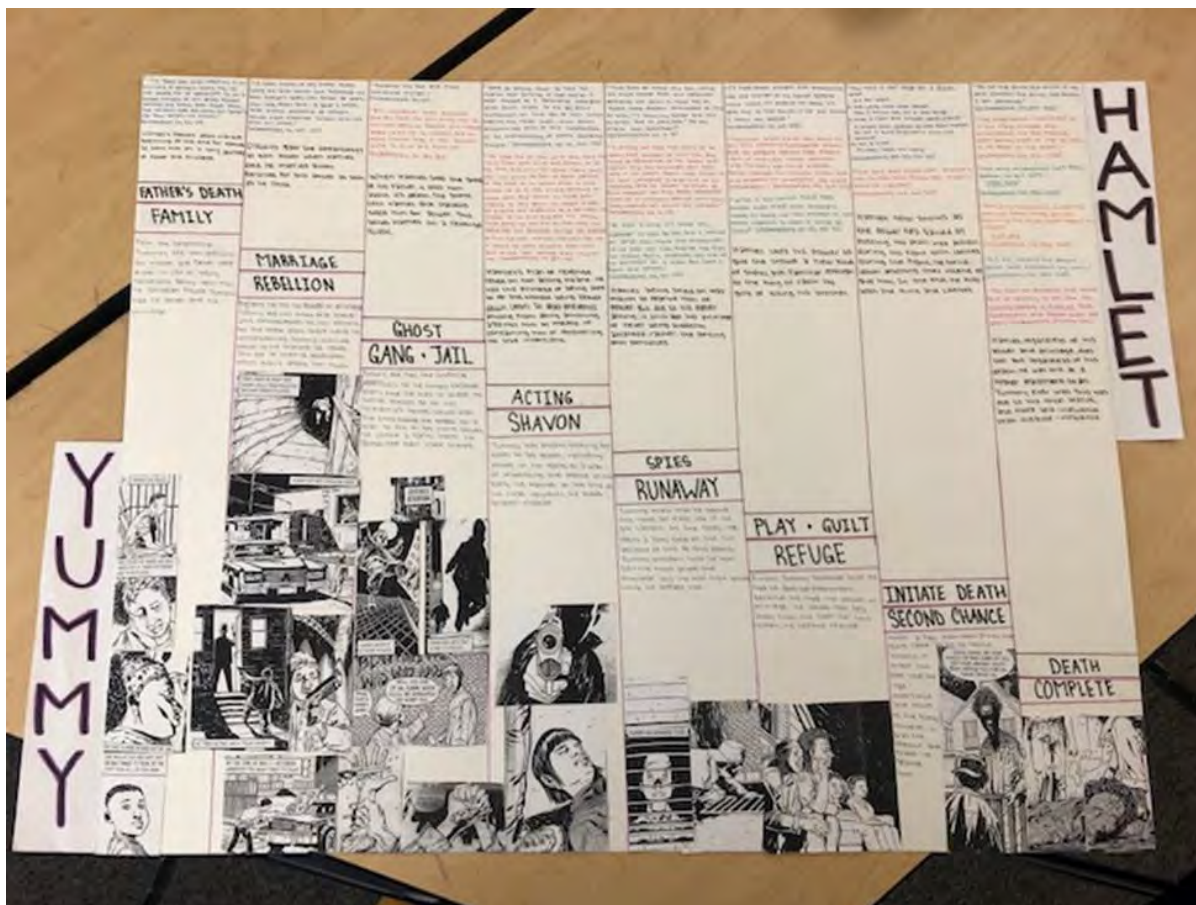
Because of this second-year change in how we approached unit texts, more students seemed confident in voicing frustration with Hamlet as a character, noting how his wealth and home in particular placed him in a privileged position. They continually and critically juxtaposed Hamlet's privilege with that of Yummy, who lived in an abusive household and sought out gang membership for "safety" in guns and street protection. As students took an increasingly critical lens to themes of power and privilege in both texts, they discussed how these same themes played out in their own lives and communities with greater frequency, illustrating a willingness to investigate their own privilege. Reflecting on group conversations that flowed from

placing Yummy and Hamlet in constant dialogue, one student commented that "through these connections we can relate to . . . influences throughout [our] lives and how we grew up and even how much privilege we have. It makes us think of ourselves personally rather than just thinking about, like, how things work in general."

Students from year one encouraged us to continue with "hands on" projects, sharing that they "put effort into this" kind of work. With this in mind and having completed the unit once before, we were able to be clearer about goals and expectations with students while still maintaining flexibility and openness. As we came to the final multimodal composition assignment, we also found it helpful to show examples of the previous year's work. In particular, we showcased the exemplar assignment (Figure 1) to illustrate how students could consider their



Figure 2



multimodal choices to make an argument. Though the inherent freedom of the assignment remained, students also understood they had more options after seeing risks past students had taken. Students, given time to talk and plan for this multimodal composition, came to us with clear ideas and requests for images from the text. Of the multimodal composing process, one student shared that "I think it might [have helped] me like, think more about, like, process what was happening in both stories." This student continued, noting that he needed to find words and images "with a lot of meaning." We learned to have plenty of photocopies for students to cut up, and created time to make extra copies as needed. Continuing to use coloring materials was also helpful to students, as some groups used the addition of color to highlight moments, words, or

parts of images (like the gun in Figure 1) as part of their arguments.

During this second year we were excited to see heightened sophistication in multimodal composing choices. For example, one group used the visual metaphor of a staircase to illustrate the life trajectories of both Yummy and Hamlet (Figure 2). Another included the visual illustration of a heart muscle to ground their argument in life and death, considering what guides characters' actions as they live and die (Figure 3). He explained, "Everyone's a person; everyone has a heart. And the heart represents not just life, but like, who you are. . . . A heart can tell a lot about a person." The complex and critical conversations student groups were having in regard to their reading and multimodal composing were influenced in part by the critical, collaborative



### **Final Thoughts: Taking Scissors to a Canonical Unit**

For educators committed to widening and challenging curricula previously rooted in canonical texts, it is essential to remember that destabilizing traditional forms of literature instruction takes risk, effort, flexibility, and critical reflection. (For more on this possibility, follow the Reading in the Gutter Podcast [Kachorsky et al., n. d.]). For Annmarie, this risk involved breaking away from a cycle of familiar and traditional literary instruction still very present in the language arts department of her school. It necessitated willingness to interrogate her own previous role in maintaining this cycle. For Ashley, this risk involved entering a classroom space as an initial outsider to work alongside a practicing teacher in enacting pedagogical change. For both of us, there was risk in trusting one another as critical friends and fellow practitioner-researchers committed to more critical approaches to texts in ELA spaces.

Additionally, we often found difficulty in challenging students to push past more traditional, frequently used methods of responding to multiple texts, such as comparing and contrasting. The critical, multimodal work we were doing was not work we could simply assign and then step back from. It was fully encompassing, requiring us to be constantly engaged with each other, our students, and the texts as we collaboratively moved beyond comparison in building arguments around how power was operating. Because multimodal composing is

unfortunately not always looked at as complex or academic in nature, we and our students also found risk in pushing against external assumptions regarding this kind of creative work in a high school language arts classroom.

Just as we asked our students to reconsider and restructure multiple texts, we demanded the same criticality of ourselves as teachers and researchers, continually collaborating to reconsider and restructure pedagogy across multiple years and with multiple classes. As students authored original compositions and came to new understandings through engagement with the Power and Privilege Unit, we came to a new awareness of the essentiality of affirming our students as critical readers, writers, and producers of text (Morrell, 2005; Vasquez et al., 2019).

For our students, the literal and figurative act of cutting up the words of Shakespeare provided them with an opportunity to use their own voices in designing innovative and critical texts about power and privilege (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020). This same act allowed us to weave our own convictions about critical literature pedagogy into practice, using our power and privilege unit as counternarrative to more traditional ways of teaching Shakespeare. Our work alongside our students and one another became a pair of metaphorical scissors in and of itself, allowing us the freedom to take critical risks in navigating, disrupting, and redesigning approaches to canonical texts in the classroom.



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