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The Power of the Poetry Club

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Yo misma fui mi ruta

*Yo quise ser como los hombres quisieron que yo fuese:
un intento de vida;
un juego al escondite con mi ser.
Pero yo estaba hecha de presentes,
y mis pies planos sobre la tierra promisoro
no resistían caminar hacia atrás,
y seguían adelante, adelante,
burlando las cenizas para alcanzar el beso
de los senderos nuevos.*

I was my own path

*I wanted to be as men wanted me to be
an attempt at life;
a game of hide-and-seek with my own being.
But I was made of the present,
and my feet, flat on the land of promise,
couldn't resist walking backward,
they kept going, going,
mocking the ashes to reach the kiss
of new paths.*



In the lines above by Puerto Rican poet and activist Julia de Burgos, the poet asserts the notion that, to achieve liberation and personal fulfillment, women must forge new paths for themselves. Herself an iconoclast who broke with convention in both her writing and her life, de Burgos wove themes of feminism, anticolonialism, and personal identity into her work (Pérez Rosario, 2017). She pushed back against oppression and hegemony, serving as a feminist icon for generations of poets to come (López Springfield, 1994).

Poetry has a unique capacity for making us see the world in new ways. It

creates spaces where young people can come together to read, write, and share poetry built on constructivist principles that highlight the learning that takes place at the social intersection of students, adults, and peers (Applefield et al., 2000). These spaces offer young people a place to express themselves, as well as developing “soft skills” like critical thinking, empathy, and creativity (Wilkie, 2019).

Student empowerment is a key element of poetry spaces. The very name of the “Power Writers,” a group of teenage poets who met after hours in a New York City high school, represents this sense of empowerment. The predominantly African American, Dominican, Puerto Rican, and West Indian students and recent graduates convened on Mondays, Fridays, and even some Saturdays to read and share poetry with Joe, a high school English and music teacher. Fisher (2005), who conducted a qualitative investigation into the group’s activities, noted that the Power Writers constitute a Participatory Literacy Community (PLC). PLCs are chosen spaces, organized outside of work and school settings, where literacy is seen as a social practice learned through participation in

events like open mics and writers' collectives. In Power Writers' sessions, Joe encouraged a "read and feed" system, with everyone making contributions by a) sharing their writing and b) actively listening and giving constructive feedback to other members of the community (p. 128). The graduates took on the role of mentors for younger poets. For this community of marginalized students, poetry offered an opportunity for self-expression and personal growth, as the students attested.

In another New York City high school, participants in poetry workshops also experienced poetry as a form of liberation. McCormick (2000) details how poetry provided an "aesthetic safety zone" for free self-expression among youths who underwent daily surveillance in their urban school setting (p. 191). Choosing four young women's writing to analyze, McCormick found that poetry offered them a sanctuary to forge their identities without either self-censorship or judgment from others. In the workshops, the young women had the opportunity to share their writing—which touched on sensitive subjects like sexual assault and witnessing a shooting—in a safe environment where they received encouragement and feedback. The impact these poetry workshops made on the young women's lives is evident from the author's account of Tanzania, who returned to her former junior high school to teach poetry to younger students.

Mahiri and Sablo (1996) carried out investigations into urban African-American youths who were disengaged in school-based literacy activities but voluntarily participated in out-of-school literacy practices in their home communities. The authors described Black students from an urban high school in the San Francisco Bay

Area who, though disenchanted with school in general, were highly engaged and active contributors to Friday sessions at which students gave impromptu performances of original rap songs (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996). In their study, the authors analyzed the out-of-school writings of Troy, a 17-year-old Black student. In his rap songs, they found evidence of sophisticated descriptive techniques and figurative language within the descriptions of everyday life. Troy, who had been composing and performing rap songs for years, considered himself a writer and signed all his work "writer/lyricist, TROY" (p. 172). The student empowerment component of poetry spaces was also evident in the writing of both Troy and Keisha, a 15-year-old Black student whose writing depicted the intense peer pressure a student faced in the decision to join or not join a gang. By writing about the struggles in her life, Keisha found a safe and healthy way to work through them.

In his essay "To the Reader Setting Out," American poet and critic Edward Hirsch (2006) asserts, "Reading poetry is an adventure in renewal, a creative act, a perpetual beginning, a rebirth of wonder." I recently set out to experience this rebirth of wonder with a group of adolescents, all Latinas from 14 to 18 years old, through the formation of an extracurricular poetry club. The plan was to meet weekly via Zoom for five weeks, reading and discussing the work of ten women writers, all Latin American poets or U.S. poets of Latin American descent (Table 1). My goals were to challenge and inspire club members with the beauty of the Spanish and English languages, acquaint them with writers outside the traditional canon, and create a space for academic and personal explorations.

Table I: Latin American Women Poets Covered in Yo Misma Meetings

Poet	Nationality	Themes
Delmira Agustini	Uruguayan	Mystery, passion, personal mythologies
Julia de Burgos	Puerto Rican	Feminism, Blackness, national identity
Rosario Castellanos	Mexican	Feminism, personal identity, solitude
Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda	Cuban	Feminism, love, exile
Ada Limón	American, of Mexican/Indigenous descent	Nature, relationships, chronic illness
Gabriela Mistral	Chilean	Motherhood, sorrow, social justice
Alejandra Pizarnik	Argentine, of Russian Jewish descent	Childhood, estrangement, death
Yesika Salgado	American, of Salvadoran descent	Fatness, love, Brownness
Erika Sánchez	American, of Mexican descent	Rebellion, sexuality, racism
Alfonsina Storni	Argentine, of Swiss/Italian descent	Feminism, rebellion, colorism

We Made Connections

One of the first connections we made was between ourselves and the poetry. We called ourselves Yo Misma, from the poem “Yo misma fui mi ruta”/“I Was My Own Path” by Puerto Rican poet and activist Julia de Burgos. (Note: My choice not to italicize Spanish words is intentional and meant to normalize the use of Spanish in English discourse) The words “yo misma” mean “I myself,” and the narrator’s use of the phrase emphasizes how she herself had to forge a new path, redefining her identity based on new, personal criteria rather than the standards imposed on her by society.



Sometimes I made connections that I invited the club members to explore. For example, I coupled “Nacimiento”/“Birth” by Rosario Castellanos with “The Unknown Citizen” by twentieth century poet W.H. Auden. Both poems grapple with how others’ definitions of an individual can fail to capture their essential nature. When we read Alejandra Pizarnik’s “La juala”/“The Cage,” I told the group about Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, whose depression feels the more overwhelming because, by society’s standards, she should be having the time of her life. Because Erika Sánchez references “I Hated That First Robin, So” by Emily Dickinson in her poem “The Poet at Fifteen,” we read that one too.

Most often, the connections were the girls’ own. They ranged from the personal to the political to the literary. Arabela connected the gay poet Auden’s conception of the citizen about whom every external fact is known without revealing anything truly meaningful about him to living in a time when most queer people were closeted by force. When we read Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s “Salida”/“Departure,” two club members, Mexican-American sisters,

reflected on how they'd felt leaving their country behind in elementary school. In the poem, Gómez de Avellaneda, who began her professional writing career aboard a ship bound for Spain, expresses her ambivalence about leaving her beloved homeland of Cuba. The girls expressed their own ambivalence about leaving Mexico:

Saskia: [The poem] kind of highlights the suffering and the struggle while still looking forward. When I left Mexico, it was... yeah, kind of a struggle.

Arabela: It's like, good and bad at the same time.

Me: How is it good?

Arabela: Well, new opportunities. What did that one woman [Julia de Burgos] say? "The kiss of new paths."

Saskia: Honestly, I really didn't like it. And I still... it's still kind of a challenge.

Arabela: When you grow up somewhere, in that place, yeah, you miss it. You can't completely get over it.

Saskia: It's like, we weren't just leaving Mexico behind. We were leaving our own childhood, you know.

The poem, which described a situation about which they had firsthand knowledge, provided the sisters an impetus for exploring their conflicted feelings about leaving their native country.

When we read "Canción de la Muerte"/"Song of Death" by Gabriela Mistral, one young woman remembered the personified character of Death who narrates *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. My description of romantic depictions of vampire characters in the work of fin de siècle poet Delmira Agustini provoked the

quip, "Ye olde *Twilight*." "The News She Does Not Give Him (Everyone Is Killing Us)" by current U.S. poet laureate Ada Limón served as the catalyst for an uncharacteristically somber discussion about white supremacy and its impacts on the lives of people of color. Time after time, the girls made connections between the poems and their own lives, their reading, and the world around them.

We Cultivated a Love of Poetry

My love of poetry dates back to my teen years (Vázquez, 2023), and one of the most rewarding aspects of Yo Misma has been having the opportunity to share that love with other young people. More than once a club member would say, "This one is my favorite," only to correct herself after a new poem, "No, this one really *is* my favorite!" The girls' comments reflect their enthusiastic responses to poems: "Chills. Literal chills!" exclaimed one. "There aren't many poems by Latina writers getting taught in schools," lamented another. "Like, you can go your whole life without knowing these people, and they should be read." At the end of "Holidays as a Chingona" by Yesika Salgado, the group spontaneously burst into cheers and applause.

The girls' responses highlight the powerful impact of poetry on young people, particularly Latina writers whose work is often underrepresented in school curricula. In the context of Yo Misma, club members were able to express strong emotional connections and enthusiasm in recognition of the importance of diverse literary voices—voices like their own.

We Found Our Own Voices

The experience of discovering one's voice is poignantly described in Nancy Christoph's (2014) account of a poetry class attended by first-generation, low-income Mexican immigrant women in Oregon. Most

of the women had completed only sixth grade. They came from poverty-stricken, rural states in southern Mexico and took the community poetry class as part of a larger test-prep program for the General Educational Development (GED) test. Christoph, their instructor, began by sharing the work of Mexican-American poets like Lucha Corpi, who wrote poetry dealing with the immigrant experience and women's issues, and Angela de Hoyos, who emigrated to the United States as a child and wrote poems in Spanish, English, and Spanglish. Afterward, the women wrote their own poetry, in which the researcher discovered unifying themes like their nostalgia for Mexico, the impact of traditional gender roles on their lives, the struggle with racial discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiments, and their concerns about a loss of cultural identity. The instructor's publication of their poems as additions to the existing landscape of poetry by Mexican immigrant women poets speaks to the vitality of their work (Christoph, 2014).

Our meetings inspired one member, Diani, to write her own poetry. Her poem "The Forest Lives" demonstrates the young poet's interest in using the medium of poetry to reach an audience in order to spread awareness about environmental issues and make a change in the world:

The forest lives,
breathes with life.
A gentle heart beats
within the canopy of trees,
within the animals
who call the forest their home.
It flows through the rivers
inhabited by many.
The forest creates oxygen
for us to live,
gives life to our world.
A mother,
sustaining the very lifeforce

of our being.
But it's being destroyed,
the lifeforce drained,
by our own greed.
We are destroying
the beautiful
and delicate ecosystem.

But it's not too late.
Together we can change.
Together we can help
the forest thrive,
reverse the damage we've caused.
It won't be easy,
but the life must be restored
to the forest.
The forest
which houses millions.
The forest
that produces oxygen.

The forest
that lives
must be saved.



Yo Misma members exhibited a profound emotional and intellectual engagement with poetry. Their responses reflect the transformative power of the genre, which helped Diani make the leap from reader to poet. "The Forest Lives" channels her passion for environmental activism into art, an accomplishment that was facilitated by interacting with the work

of poets she identified with. Even those club members who were not inspired, as Diani was, to write their own original poems conversed about poetry with growing confidence. By the last meeting, even the quietest member of the group had become a regular contributor to our conversations.

Robert Frost said he never started a poem whose end he knew. “Writing a poem,” he declared, “is discovering” (in Fan, 2020). I would argue that reading a poem is an act of discovery as well. Through *Yo Misma*, the girls and I made discoveries about ourselves and our world, some of which inspired the creative impulse to let our own voices be heard. The rebirth of wonder we experienced through *Yo Misma* provided—and continues to provide—a powerful affirmation of the power of poetry.

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