

★ 2018 CLA MASTER CLASS

Diverse Children's Poetry in the University Classroom: Exploring Voice, Culture, and Identity

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The 25th annual Children's Literature Assembly Master Class focused on the importance of voice, culture, and identity in children's poetry, as well as its use in university-level courses. This article foregrounds some of the fundamental themes discussed in that session.

CURRENTLY IN ITS 25TH YEAR, the annual Children's Literature Assembly (CLA) Master Class centers on issues, trends, and opportunities related to the teaching of children's literature in university settings. The 2018 Master Class focused on the roles of voice, culture, and identity in children's poetry and the ways they may shape and influence the use of children's poetry in university classrooms. This year's session is a continuation of professional conversations that began formally with the 2016 Master Class chaired by Lauren Liang and Linda T. Parsons and co-chaired by Thomas Crisp. That Master Class session addressed the importance of diverse children's literature at the university level and "initiated a discussion about the complicated conversations that arise in today's college classrooms around the teaching of diverse literature" (Liang, Parsons, & Crisp, 2017, p. e5). Building upon that foundation, the 2017 Master Class chaired by Thomas Crisp and co-chaired by Suzanne M. Knezek and Roberta Price Gardner focused specifically on the role of diverse nonfiction literature in university classrooms. That session highlighted issues related to the selection of books, the positioning of courses in higher education contexts, and the need

for university educators to interrupt intolerance in their classrooms. Further, this year's session draws upon the 2014 Master Class chaired by Laura Purdie Salas and co-chaired by Janet Wong, which focused on poetry across the curriculum and brought poets and authors, librarians, classroom teachers, and university professors into conversation with one another around ways of "engaging students in poetry and putting poems to work in all content areas" (Salas et al., 2015, p. 48).

Participants and presenters in this year's Master Class explored various ways that sharing voice, culture, and identity in children's poetry can have an impact on our world and empower teachers and students to use their own voices to speak out for equity and justice. The session also considered how the exploration and analysis of diversity in children's poetry within university settings connects to the role and function of diverse poetry in K–8 classrooms. Finally, the session addressed the value of literary models and the role of poet-mentors in the teaching of diverse children's poetry at the university level. In this article, we summarize many of the discussions and takeaways from the 25th annual CLA Master Class.

Poetry is a literary genre uniquely relevant to the theme of this year's NCTE Annual Convention, which emphasized the importance of raising voices for equity and justice. As Certo, Apol, Wibbens, and Hawkins (2012) explain, poetry "is language crystalized, language distilled, and it articulates and gives voice to the human experience in a way that often cannot be expressed any other way" (p. 104). It takes tremendous skill to find or forge one's voice, one's self through poetic language; it also takes tremendous courage to make public the experiences and secrets of self. As a result, engaging with stanzas written by poets with an array of cultural identities affords both authors and readers a multitude of opportunities to question, explore, and challenge commonly held assumptions and stereotypes. Yet, despite the power of poetry to convey the lived experiences of all people, research suggests that teachers often view poetry as a genre beyond the reach of some of their students because it can be difficult to comprehend or compose (Hanauer, 2007; Marías, Alcalde Peñalver, & Portela Lopa, 2019). University educators are in a powerful position to help students who are preservice teachers not only recognize the potential power of poetry but also feel prepared to help their own future students understand, experience, and be moved by and through poetry, as well.

The Master Class opened with a welcome from CLA president Jennifer Graff, followed by an introduction and general overview of the session. The majority of the session centered on the prepared remarks and poetry readings given by two award-winning children's poets, Janet Wong and David Bowles, and two poet scholars, Dywanna Smith and Laura Apol. Authors Wong and Bowles read from their own poetry focused on culture, voice, and identity and then shared how they would like to see their poems used in university classrooms and beyond. Apol and Smith also shared their poetry and then initiated a discussion of how poetry might be used as literary models and how poets might be considered as poet-mentors. Below, we summarize the remarks delivered by each of these expert speakers before sharing some of the larger conclusions that emerged during the Master Class.

Summaries of Prepared Remarks

JANET WONG: "FINDING OUR STORIES, SHAPING OURSELVES (ONE POEM AT A TIME)"

Janet Wong is an award-winning children's author of more than 20 books, including seven poetry books. She also co-authored The Poetry Friday Anthology series for children and teachers, as well as *Great Morning! Poems for School Leaders to Read Aloud* with Sylvia Vardell (Vardell & Wong, 2018). *You Just Wait* (Vardell & Wong, 2016) and *Here We Go* (Vardell & Wong, 2017), both Poetry Friday books, are NCTE Notable Poetry Books.

Opening the Master Class, Ms. Wong leapt from the stage and walked into the audience immediately after being introduced. Interactive and engaging, she welcomed all while tossing a greenish-yellow pomelo (Chinese grapefruit) back and forth between her hands. She emanated excitement and created an open and authentic space for the poetry and conversation that was to come.

Aligned with the convention theme, Ms. Wong presented poetry as an ideal vehicle to help students raise their voices by finding and shaping their unique stories while recognizing those of others. She framed her talk within the idea that we need to move beyond talking exclusively about race and ethnicity (what she called a centrist position) and "go back to looking at ourselves as individuals." She reasoned that each one of us is made up of many complex parts, some of which come from our heritage but most of which come from individual moments.

To illustrate, Ms. Wong discussed writing poetry that explores her own identity and voice within the context of her Korean, Chinese, and American background. Reading aloud, she helped participants connect with the familiar and identify commonalities across backgrounds through imagery, sound, and meaningful props like the pomelo, and by channeling the voices of her characters with loving hilarity, as she did with her grandfather in her poem "GongGong and Susie" (Wong, 2019). Through her words, voice, and actions, she created a unique, but somehow familiar, image of her grandfather sharing an intimate family story of life during the Depression and revealed a memory that influenced who she is today. (Read the poem and see Ms. Wong perform "GongGong and Susie" at <https://www.janetwong.com/a-suitcase-of-seaweed/>.¹)

Through her work as an author and curator of diverse poetry, Ms. Wong provides opportunities for teachers and students to discuss community-building topics such as acceptance of self and others and advocating against bias. Whether in grade-school or university classrooms, she asserted that writing poetry starts with memories, or "bits of stories," and that sharing these stories through poetry can open avenues for deeper understanding of others and ourselves while generating new ideas and connections. She suggested that one way to support this with students is through transmedia projects, such as poem collages, in response to their own or others' poetry. A poem collage positions and layers words, images, textures, and symbols that are meaningful, and through translation from one sign system (or even genre) to another, new layers of meaning are generated and discovered by the reader and the

Note. From *A Suitcase of Seaweed and More* by J. S. Wong. Copyright 2019.

composer (Siegel, 2006). Ms. Wong stated that “transmedia makes a text GROW” by showing that “there is always more we can learn about the characters and their world” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 8).²

Throughout her talk, Ms. Wong also shared poetry by other authors who raise their voices through their writing, such as Ibtisam Barakat, David Bowles, and Margarita Engle. In closing, she encouraged participants to read lots of this poetry, to imagine the characters and hear their voices in our minds, and to weave the poems together to create and understand their individual stories (Vardell & Wong, 2017).

DAVID BOWLES: “POETRY IS THE CLEAREST LENS FOR VIEWING THE WORLD”

Dr. David Bowles is the author of 14 books, including two Pura Belpré Honor Books, *The Smoking Mirror* and *They Call Me Güero: A Border Kid’s Poems*, and the upcoming *The Chupacabras of the Rio Grande*, co-written with Adam Gidwitz. An assistant professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Dr. Bowles is the recipient of awards from the American Library Association, Texas Institute of Letters, and Texas Associated Press.

As Dr. Bowles began to discuss how he hopes to see children’s poetry shared by teachers in university classrooms, he emphasized the importance of showing gratitude. Speaking from the floor of the meeting room, he recognized and thanked Janet Wong and Sylvia Vardell for reaching out to him and asking him to contribute an anchor poem, written in a child’s voice, for their book *Here We Go: A Poetry Friday Power Book* (Vardell & Wong, 2017). In a voice filled with deep emotion, Dr. Bowles read from the resulting poem, “Border Kid” (Bowles, 2018; Vardell & Wong, 2017), and shared how thankful he is to have grown up in Texas’s Rio Grande Valley, where he regularly accompanied his father on trips across the border to see family in Mexico.

You’re a border kid, a foot on either bank.
Your ancestors crossed this river a thousand times.
No wall, no matter how tall, can stop your heritage
from flowing forever, like the Rio Grande itself.
(Bowles, 2018, p. 9)

The timeliness and grace of his words reflected tensions prevalent today and provided explicit examples of how verse can help readers see and understand both themselves and the world. Dr. Bowles stated that he hopes university instructors help teachers understand that poetry is a way of viewing and knowing. As a writer who feels he has one foot in the United States and one in Mexico, he

Note. See <https://www.pinterest.com/pomelobooks/poem-collages/> for transmedia examples.

noted that he himself found poetry because of educators. An English teacher first introduced him to global perspectives by weaving together myths, legends, songs, and poems from all around the world. He believed her when she said, “Poetry is the clearest lens for viewing the world” (Bowles, 2018, p. 34), and he began to write his own poems.

After composing for Wong and Vardell’s book, Dr. Bowles shared that he was encouraged by others to continue to write poetry about his childhood. Originally, he hoped those poems would be published as a collection, but Bobby Byrd, a poet and publisher at Cinco Puntos Press, told him he saw the work as a novel in verse. This suggestion struck a chord. Dr. Bowles’s resulting book, *They Call Me Güero: A Border Kid’s Poems*, powerfully explores his childhood experiences growing up as a light-skinned (*güero*) member of a Mexican American family. Dr. Bowles concluded by noting that he hopes his work will be shared in university classrooms in ways that encourage others to explore and write poetry. As he said, “Sometimes a book wants to be written. Sometimes a poem needs to be told.”

DYWANNA SMITH: POETRY AS AN ACTIVIST AND HEALING PRACTICE

Dr. Dywanne E. Smith is an assistant professor in the College of Education at Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Within her dissertation and academic writings, Dr. Smith utilizes ethnopoetics as a tool to bear witness and speak truth, as well as to heal and restore. In 2018, she co-edited a new book, *African Diaspora Literacy: The Heart of Transformation in K–12 Schools and Teacher Education* (Johnson, Boutte, Greene, & Smith, 2019).

During Dr. Smith’s portion of the conversation, she reminded attendees that poetry is a verbal art form shaped by aural characteristics and elements of vocalization often missed during private readings. There was history in her voice: grief, joy, hope, and a deep sense of knowing. The discussion was part testimony and part performance art, what Athanases (1991) would describe as “a phenomenological realization, and living-through, [a] poem” and perhaps poetry itself (p. 124). Her words, as well as the silences and spaces between them, served as a witness to the power and utility of poetry to transform. We could never transfer onto the page the affective dimensions of her conversation as she shared how poetry mattered in her life and why she believes it is not a supplemental or superfluous endeavor in classrooms, but rather an essential tool for helping students (particularly students from marginalized groups) to develop voice and a sense of agency as they navigate life. It was, she said, the only reason she was standing before us. In emphasizing poetry as catharsis, Dr. Smith suggested using poetry as an autobiographical form for writing counter-narratives and engaging in critical literacy practices.

She discussed how reading and writing poetry served as a gateway for her personally and for a group of African American middle school girls with whom she worked. Poetry is a way “into a society that denies you entrance” (Smith, 2016, p. 1), as well as a way out of the despair that may accompany it. Dr. Smith discussed centering the literacies of Black women (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016), using poetry as a critical source for the expression and reclamation of Black female humanity to resist racist and sexist stereotypes and bullying. She argued that poetry was essential for “talking back” to limited ideations about Black female bodies too often viewed as sites for disdain, pleasure, social acceptance, or rejection in relation to color, size, beauty, and comportment.

She shared the personal and painful story of being an adolescent, close to committing suicide, and a supportive teacher who gave her a pen and told her to write her way out. This is why she envisions poetry as an act of love and wisdom. She asserted, “There’s so much trauma and pain we experience in life...and poetry saved me.” It also served as sustenance for her students. As Dr. Smith noted, “We weren’t just writing lines, we are writing our lives.... [Y]ou are bleeding yourself on the page.” She argued that sometimes poetry is the only way to make sense of the world, and emphasized using it to help students discover how different poets see themselves in the world, as well as how style, voice, and writing poetry are inherently political acts. She offered examples of the support and guidance she shares with students who are intimidated or confused by poetry. Dr. Smith stated, “If you get to a place where there’s a change in style, stop and think about it. Poetry is a political act; it is not about perfection.” She summed up her discussion by emphasizing poetry as effectual as a spiritual and emotional refuge and an essential tool for eliciting social change.

LAURA APOL: “POETRY IS SPECIFIC LANGUAGE”

Dr. Laura Apol is an associate professor of children’s literature at Michigan State University, where she teaches courses on children’s literature, poetry, and writing. Dr. Apol’s poetry has been recognized with honors that include the ArtPrize, the Golden Quill, the Pat Schneider Award, and the Oklahoma Book Award.

Dr. Apol quietly began her presentation by situating her comments within her dual role as a teacher educator and a poet, and by contextualizing her talk within the current political and cultural climate. “We live at a time,” she said, “when words have particular power, especially when it comes to identity, voice, and culture.” Her voice deep with emotion, Dr. Apol identified specific recent examples that highlight not only the power of language, but its direct connection to actions, from the framing of immigrants as enemies who need to be kept out—or should be pushed out—of the United States to hate speech that incites mass shootings in a

synagogue, nightclub, church, or school. As Dr. Apol stated, “It is only a small step, then, from words to actions.” She pointed out that the power of language can function in the other direction as well, and can heal or bring about hope, resistance, and justice.

As the final speaker in the panel, Dr. Apol wove the presentations of Janet Wong, David Bowles, and Dywanna Smith together with her own poetry and remarks, highlighting the ways in which “words can wound or can bring about understanding, power, and pride.” She explored how the work of each speaker was tied to their own complex and multiple identities. In Janet Wong’s work, Dr. Apol noted the embodiment of Ms. Wong’s multiple “selves” (Korean, Chinese, and American) in her poetry, but also the ways in which readers were positioned to connect with those poems and asked to explore their own identities. She pointed to Dr. Bowles’s work as an exemplar of navigating geographic, social, and ethnic borders, including borders of language, family, and skin. Finally, Dr. Apol spoke of the ways she resonated with Dr. Smith’s “emphasis on the role of poetry in composing a life, on activism, and on bearing witness.”

In the final part of her talk, Dr. Apol turned her attention to the ways in which she wants her students (typically prospective teachers) to engage with poetry. She said, “I want them always to pay attention to the ways their own identities shape them as readers and writers—and someday-teachers—of poetry.” Dr. Apol emphasized the importance of helping our students engage with, understand, and navigate their own identities, but also the identities of others and the ways they can hear their own voices in the words of others. She demonstrated the power of language by closing with two of her own poems, one that dealt with her identity as an outsider in her work in Rwanda, and one that dealt with her identity as an insider, looking back at her childhood in rural mid-America. “With poetry,” Dr. Apol said, “it’s about language. Really, it’s about *specificity*. The image, the concrete details, the conversation and description, the *exact words*. Poetry is specific language in a way that nothing else is. And because of that, the language used there is even more powerful.”

Conclusions

The 2018 CLA Master Class took place amidst heated debates about immigration policies in the United States. Less than a month after the session was held, the U.S. federal government was shut down for 35 days, the longest running shutdown in the country’s history, with positions divided over the funding of a U.S.–Mexico border wall. While scholarship and discussion about representations of diversity in children’s poetry have long encouraged teachers and students to use their own voices to speak out for equity and justice, the voices, identities, and cultures conveyed by the poets and

scholars of this Master Class allowed everyone in the room to feel both empowered and challenged. As many remarked after the session concluded, there was a charged feeling in the room that night.

Through engagement with the panelists, attendees left the session with a better contextual, historical, and political understanding of the importance of diverse voices in children's poetry and the value of sharing and discussing those voices when teaching children's poetry in courses at the university level. These poets and scholars unfolded histories, disrupted bordered landscapes, and articulated the nuances of everydayness; in doing so, they taught us all more about seeing the world and the framing of reality.

The panelists also spoke, in both direct and subtle ways, about how the exploration and analysis of diversity in children's poetry in university settings can influence the way diverse poetry is explored and shared in P-8 classrooms. Janet Wong, for example, showed examples of how she and Sylvia Vardell worked to help children in Grades 4 through 8 think about social change by pairing mentor poems (written by 12 diverse poets) with writing prompts and activities (Vardell & Wong, 2017). David Bowles inferred ways to directly confront gender stereotypes when he read from a poem about how, as a middle school boy, he asked a tough girl to fight on his behalf. He spoke further about his youthful willingness to be soft and to love a strong girl. Dr. Bowles shared that his writing reflects the experiences he had as a child; he believes it can serve as a model for others in both elementary and university settings.

Laura Apol also addressed the value of literary models and the role of poet-mentors in the teaching of diverse children's poetry at the university level when she shared that she often finds that the more her college students are unsure of themselves when it comes to poetry, the more eager they are to teach it. To address this, she encourages these students to slow down and understand themselves as readers and writers before thinking about teaching. She works to

facilitate opportunities for them to discover how grounded poetic descriptions and insights of those who are different than they are can help them to live in and through their poems and consequently live into our own.

Dywanna Smith perhaps best captured the overarching message of the Master Class. Though poetry is a genre proven to be uniquely suited to inviting, encouraging, and celebrating diverse voices, it is also a genre that is seen as contradictory: both overly simplistic and overly complex. Like difficult conversations that often accompany diverse children's literature at any grade level, poetry is often avoided. Dr. Smith, however, stated that poetry is not a luxury; it's a necessity in our classrooms: "We need to see how different authors and poets see themselves in the world. Being a poet is activism in and of itself." ■

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