



Hearts and Wings:

Using Young Adult Multicultural Poetry Inspired by Art as Models for Middle School Artists/Writers

We were recently invited to lead a summer writers' workshop for racially-diverse, at-risk middle school students in Emporia, Kansas, population 26,000. How, we wondered, could we inspire these students to look at their world in a new and meaningful way? And then enable them to communicate their observations and insights to an audience?

We began the week-long "Hearts and Wings" workshop by introducing participants to two recent young adult collections of multicultural poetry and art—Jan Greenburg's *Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century American Art* and Belinda Rochelle's *Words With Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art*. Greenburg's collection offers nearly fifty pieces of art work and a poem stimulated by each of the art pieces. Rochelle's book pairs twenty poems written by distinguished African-American poets with twenty works of art created by African-American artists.

In her introduction, Rochelle quotes a line from Georgia Douglas Johnson's poem "Your World": "Your world is as big as you make it." If this is true, writes Rochelle, "then the poems and paintings in this book enable us to make our worlds bigger. Poems are words with wings, wings made out of words. But we just help give the poems and art their wings by bringing to them our own experiences and histories, and our willingness to let them take us somewhere new."

We had two goals for the workshop: (1) to immerse workshop participants in the richness of the color, texture, and imagination of the art and poetry

included in these two collections and (2) to inspire them to discover something about themselves and to capture it in art and poetry.

The "Hearts and Wings" five-day workshop was conducted in two hour sessions. We worked with fifteen students in the mornings and another fifteen students in the afternoon. We met in the Emporia Arts Center because we wanted the students to be surrounded by art in the gallery. Each participant was given a journal, and the art center provided art materials and two art instructors to assist us. For most of these at-risk students, this was a first visit to the arts center; their world was already expanding.

After a tour of the gallery, we gathered around a table to get to know each other and to chat. Participants shared earlier experiences with art. Where had they seen art? Had they ever created a piece of art that was later displayed? Did they know any artists? Did they enjoy the art we had just viewed in the gallery? What did that art make them think about? How did it make them feel?

We then introduced the two books and gave them a few minutes to look through the books with a partner. We looked together at Greenburg's introduction. Most students were interested in Greenburg's memories of visits to an art gallery as a youngster and her responses to the sculpture *Little Dancer* by Edward Degas.

We spent the rest of the first day examining more closely several of the art reproductions in the books and the accompanying poems. We responded to the art work in Greenburg's book by using the four modes

of expression she uses to categorize the pieces in her collection—“stories,” “voices,” “impressions,” and expressions.” Greenberg explains that the poets responding to the art pieces chose either to tell a story the art work suggested to them, or wrote in the voice of one object in the painting, or used description and “vibrant word pictures,” or transferred “the artist’s considerations of form or light or space into poetic language.”

As a group, we discussed three pieces of art and their accompanying poems from *Heart to Heart* and one set of art and poetry from *Words with Wings*. We began with Cesar Martinez’ “Bato Con Khakis,” a mixed media painting depicting a young Hispanic man. Several told stories they “found” in the piece—they related closely to the young man’s dark glasses and pose. Next, several shared what the figure in the painting might be saying to us—they gave him an accent and their own jargon. Others described what they saw in the painting—the colors, texture, lines, contrasts—and talked about why the painter showed only part of the figure, used a dark background, etc. Finally, we talked about what thoughts and feelings the painting elicited from us—an effective way to teach visual literacy.

Then we examined Jainto Jesus Cardona’s accompanying poem. We looked at its form and the words the poet used. We noticed that the poet connected to the painting in a very personal way by comparing himself to the man in the painting. The students admired the poet for doing this, even if he did describe himself as a “bookish bato.”

We next looked at Kiki Smith’s 1990 print “Untitled (Fluttering Eyes).” The print, using blacks and grays, shows four pairs of eyes in a vertical arrangement. Again, we tried telling a story, gave “voice” to the eyes, described the artist’s techniques and choices, and explored the feelings this print elicits. Perhaps because this print appeared simple to them at first, the students felt comfortable talking about it. We then read Kristine O’Connell George’s “Pantoum for These Eyes” and guessed what George meant in her last line, “Let yourself slide under their spell.” We also observed the pantoum poetic form with its unusual repetitive pattern and decided that using repetition to describe this painting is effective since the painting itself represents a repetitious pattern.

After viewing the starkness of Kiki Smith’s print,

students were drawn to Georgia O’Keeffe’s colorful 1927 “Poppy” oil on campus. The students especially enjoyed comparing the poppy to other familiar objects and experiences. They were delighted with the poet Janine Pommy Vega’s metaphor of the swirling skirts of a Spanish dancer in flamenco rhythms in her accompanying poem “The Poppy of Georgia O’Keeffe.”

Finally, we looked at Horace Pippin’s painting, “Saying Prayers,” found in *Words With Wings*. We focused on the three figures in this painting of African-American family life, the background details, the soft lines, the dark and light contrasts, the textures. Students relished making up stories for this picture and giving voice to the painting’s figures. We then turned to Nikki Giovanni’s accompanying poem “Legacies” and explored why the editor paired this poem with the painting. We speculated on the meaning of “legacies” and why Giovanni gave her poem this title. We also mined the meaning of the poem’s closing lines—“ . . . and neither of them ever/ said what they meant/ and i guess nobody ever does.”

On day two, students leafed through the two young adult collections of art and poetry introduced the day before, looking for one painting they would like to imitate. They read information about the artists found in the back of the books. After they selected a painting, they wrote in their journals three reasons for choosing it and then began sketching their own picture, using the techniques and format of the chosen artist’s painting to capture something about their own lives.

Students continued sketching their paintings on day three. After consulting with an art center instructor, each chose an appropriate art medium for her/his painting. Some used acrylics; others used markers, chalk, pen and ink, or colored pencils. In their journals, participants wrote a story about their painting and/or wrote about what an object in their painting might say.

On day four, after completing a painting, each student made a list of words in her/his journal describing the finished artwork and how someone might feel when looking at it. After rereading some poems from the books, they drafted poems about their own painting, reviewing their journal entries for possible ideas. Workshop leaders conducted mini-conferences with students as they worked on their poems. After students completed their poems, they

copied them on heavy paper suitable for mounting.

By day five, all of the students had completed pieces of artwork and poems to accompany the pictures. They were ready to celebrate! Their family, friends, and teachers gathered in the gallery for a showing and reading. Each student was introduced and invited to talk about his/her painting and share why he/she had chosen a specific artist to imitate. Then each student read the poem he/she had written.

Lucy shared her chalk drawing inspired by artist Horace Pippin's *Saying Prayers* found in *Words With Wings*. [Figure 1] She explained that she had been drawn to the painting because her family also gathers in quiet, peaceful ways. The painting made her think especially about her Tia Lola and Tia Maria sitting on the front porch. Her memories of the aunts are a legacy for her similar to Nikki Giovanni's ideas about legacy in her poem, "Legacies." Inspired by Greenberg's invitation to tell a story about her painting, Lucy wrote this poem to hang in the gallery with her drawing:



Figure 1.

Sunday Afternoon

By Lucy

Two members of our family
Tia Lola and Maria
Talking about people
On the front porch
By themselves
Quiet afternoon
They're getting along
Staying cool, calm, and content.

Patricia continued to be fascinated with Kiki Smith's *Fluttering Eyes*, included in *Heart to Heart*. She used colored pencils to sketch her own eye artwork. [Figure 2] Unlike the Smith painting, Patricia added color to her piece, making each set of eyes a contrasting color. When she began composing her poem, she first decided to describe the eyes by their colors and started with the first set of eyes, the blue ones. A young male at her table said, "Oh, azul eyes!" That was just the inspiration Patricia needed and she began interspersing her first language, Spanish, into her draft. Using the idea of reflection, she wrote about what each set of eyes might be seeing. Her poem "Happy Eyes" relies on what Greenberg labels "impressions."

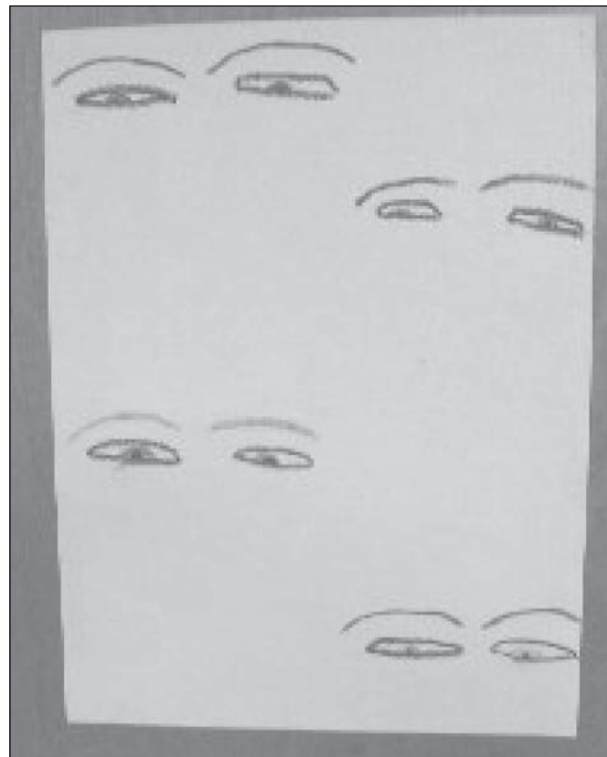


Figure 2.

Happy Eyes

By Patricia

Azul eyes reflect the starry night
Verde eyes mirror tender green wheat fields
Turquoise eyes follow a parrot in flight
El gato eyes hide in the Boston fern

Michael chose Cesar A. Martinez' painting *Bato Con Khakis* as his model. He especially liked the colors Martinez used and could already hear the man speaking. Michael created his painting, using acrylics, similar colors, a plain background, and two figures from the waist up only. [Figure 3] He decided to give his figures voice in his poem.

Hold Up

Poem for Two Voices

By Michael

Hey You!

Hey what?

Give me your money!

What?

Give me your money

Or I will drop you

Dead

Ahh!! Here, take it!

Fifteen dollars?

What's that gonna

Get me?

Next time, have more!

O-okay

Danielle chose to imitate Georgia O'Keeffe's *Poppy* from *Heart to Heart*. [Figure 4] The painting is much like Danielle—bright, warm, energetic, and assertive. She used acrylics to paint a butterfly, with shading to add dimension and a background to serve as an extension of the butterfly's appearance. She composes what Greenberg would call an "expression" poem.

Georgia O'Keeffe and Me!

By Danielle

Georgia's red poppies

Fill the whole page

Big, bold, alive!

My butterfly

Sits on the velvet orange poppy

Big, bold, alive!

Georgia and I

See things alike!



Figure 3.

The public reception in the art gallery concluded with snacks and informal interaction with the young artists/poets. Their work was hung on the gallery walls and left as the featured display for several days.

Although we were fortunate enough to use the Emporia Arts Center facilities and materials, this project could easily be adapted for classroom use. Although meeting in an actual art gallery was very inspiring, a teacher can quickly turn a classroom into



Figure 4.

a gallery with a few posters on loan from colleagues and friends. Or, the public library or local art center may be willing to provide artwork as well.

Accumulating art materials may be the biggest challenge. If a school has a well-stocked art department, the classroom language arts teacher could collaborate with the art teacher, allowing students to work in both classroom settings. If not, the language arts teacher can collect simple art materials to use in the classroom. Students could draw pencil sketchings. Some students might decide to paint the picture at home. If not, they can simply describe how their pencil sketch would look if painted. Or, the teacher can ask for donations of dried up washable markers, which when dipped in water, gain new life as water colors. Or, several students could work on a mural-sized painting together. A large piece of butcher paper taped to a wall and colored chalk would be easily accessible and inexpensive for mural work. Most printing companies will donate end rolls of paper for classroom use.

When your class is ready for a reading/showing, ask the librarian or media specialist if you could meet in the library. Be sure to display the art work and provide an appropriate spot for the poets to stand as they share their poems and drawings. Invite another class, or families, or school staff. Maybe students from the cooking class will help plan the event and donate a batch of cookies.

In another variation of this project which would foster media and technology literacy within the language arts classroom, ask students to explore the Internet for pictures of art and let them find poems to match each piece of artwork. Students could then create a power point presentation or web site to display their findings and choices.

Using two recent young adult books for inspiration and models, the culturally-diverse, at-risk young people participating in this workshop revisited, captured, and shared parts of their experiences through art and poetry. In the process, their world indeed grew bigger, sprouted wings, and took us someplace new.

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Works Cited

- Rochelle, Belinda, editor. *Words with Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Greenberg, Jan, editor. *Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century American Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

A Suggested List of Additional Young Adult Books Pairing Poetry and Art

- Clinton, Catherine, editor, and Stephen Alcorn, illustrator. *A Poem of Her Own—Voices of American Women Yesterday and Today*. New York: Abrams, 2003.
- A collection of poetry and paintings celebrating the perspectives and insights of American women.
- _____. *I, Too, Sing America—Three Centuries of African American Poetry*. Boston, 1998.
- A collection of poems and artwork capturing the passionate voices of black Americans.
- Folley-Cooper, Marquette, Elizabeth Goldson, Deborah MacAnic, and Janice McNeil, Compilers. *Seeing Jazz: Artists and Writers on Jazz*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books LLC, 1997.
- A compilation of art and poetry inspired by jazz.
- Grimes, Nikki. Ashley Bryan, illustrator. *Aneesa Lee and the Weaver's Gift*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.
- A combination of poems and illustrations capturing the art of weaving and building community.
- Lewis, J. Patrick. Christopher Canyon, illustrator. *Earth and You—a Closer View*. Nevada City, CA: DAWN, 2001.
- A collection of free verse poetry and colored paintings celebrating the connections between all living things.
- Nye, Naomi Shihab, editor. *Is This Forever, or What? Poems & Paintings from Texas*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.
- A collection of contemporary poems and art work from Texas.
- Panzer, Nora, editor. *Celebrate American: In Poetry and Art*. New York: Hyperion, 1994.
- Some of America's finest poems paired with artwork from the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art.
- Siebert, Diane. Stephen T. Johnson, illustrator. *Tour America*. New York: North-South Books, 2004.
- A collection of mixed media artwork and poems celebrating the many treasures of the United States.
- Wood, Nancy, editor. *Serpent's Tongue: Prose, Poetry, and Art of the New Mexico Pueblos*. New York: Penguin, 1997.
- Poetry paired with artwork illuminating the New Mexico Pueblo history and culture.