

“She’s Saying the Thoughts I Didn’t Know Anyone Else Had”:

YA Verse Novels and the Emergent Artistic Voice of Young Women

While collections of poems for young readers are not a new phenomenon, the verse novel has emerged as a powerful trend in young adult literature since the turn of the century (Cadden, 2011). This movement began slowly with just a few notable works such as Virginia Euwer Wolff’s *Make Lemonade* (1993), Mel Glenn’s *Who Killed Mr. Chippendale? A Mystery in Poems* (1996), and Karen Hesse’s Newbery Award-winning *Out of the Dust* (1997), all published in the 1990s (Van Sickle, 2006). The trickle became a flood post-2000, and the verse novel form has gained greater critical acceptance and earned more widespread acclaim with the publication of award-winning multicultural works such as *The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba’s Struggle for Freedom* by Margarita Engle (2010), *Inside Out & Back Again* by Thanhha Lai (2011), *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander (2014), and *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds (2018).

As the verse novel has enjoyed increased popularity, its form has inspired research and debate regarding genre (novel, poetry, or hybrid), uses in education, and the reasons why this literary form has been enthusiastically embraced by young adults. However, aside from Krystal Howard’s recent publication, “Influence Poetry and Found Poetry: The Reflection of Creative Writing Pedagogy in the Verse Novel for Young Readers” (2018), little attention has been paid to the fact that a considerable number of recently released verse novels for young adults concentrate on the education and development of the young writer or

artist, as well as the way these depictions might act both as mirrors in which young readers can see themselves and as maps that delineate a path to becoming artists in their own right.

In this article, I first consider how the verse novel and characteristics particular to its form facilitate emotional involvement and identification with the character on the part of the adolescent reader. Reading narratives that resonate with their own experiences allows readers to grapple with questions of identity and perceptions of agency by participating in imaginary situations, exploring themselves through the world of the story, and considering how to approach similar episodes in their own lives (Rosenblatt, 1994). The discussion then focuses on the verse novels *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson (2014), *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo (2018), and *Blood Water Paint* by Joy McCollough (2018), and the way that these texts portray complex, realistic protagonists whose stories are reflective of the contemporary experiences of young women who develop voice and identity as artists through telling their stories. Finally, I consider implications for classroom practice, specifically regarding how these texts might be used to make creative writing more accessible to students in the secondary classroom by modeling a path that young adult readers can follow to embrace their own voices and become writers themselves.

I chose to focus on verse novels that tell young women’s stories of empowerment and self-discovery, specifically as they relate to developing identity as an

artist, because of the growing realization (propelled by the #MeToo movement) that the voices of young women have often been silenced, distorted, or under-represented in media, art, and literature across the board. At a young age, girls are often exposed to subtle messages in stories and in their own experiences that invalidate their feelings, limit their ambitions, and encourage them to doubt their own potential (Lamb & Brown, 2006). Because adults often do not want to recognize the discomfiting (and often traumatizing) depth of experience to which girls may be exposed, young women are habitually encouraged to push their feelings and desires aside in order to please others or “for their own sake,” because they are told that making waves and demanding recognition and resolution will only cause further harm. Therefore, this article will concentrate on stories of emergent voice and artistic identity among young women.

Theoretical Framework

Bean and Moni (2003) point out that adolescent readers tend to perceive characters in young adult novels as engaging with real problems close to their own life experiences as teens, and that these challenges often center around questions of character identity and values. A critical literacy framework is especially suitable for exploring these themes because it “begins by problematizing the culture and knowledges in the text—putting them up for grabs, critical debate, for weighing, judging, critiquing” (Morgan, 1998, p. 157), allowing students to evaluate “information, insights, and perspectives through an analysis of power, culture, class, and gender” (Lapp & Fisher, 2010, p. 158). In questioning these knowledges, students may also be encouraged to examine the ways that “they are being constructed as adolescents in the texts and how such constructions compare with their own attempts to form their identities” (Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 639).

Moreover, because “critical literacy transcends conventional notions of reading and writing to incorporate critical thinking, questioning, and transformation of self or one’s world” (McDaniel, 2004, p. 474), students are inspired to question the world in which they live and explore the ways in which change can be achieved. In this article, voice is understood as a principal element of self-realization, with voice being defined as a “metaphor for human agency and

identity” (Sperling & Appleman, 2011, p. 70). As the protagonists challenge the preconceptions and roles that have been imposed upon them, they develop their own sense of self, specifically in regard to their identity as artists, and realize that their voices have the power to change not only the way that they are viewed, but also the world as a whole. In the books examined here, “voice” takes on an additional layer of meaning as the characters’ agency and identity manifests through creative expression, whether it be writing or painting, in telling their own stories. As students read these stories and identify with the

characters who are developing their voices in terms of agency, identity, and artistic expression, the students themselves “create, through the stories they’re given, an atlas of their world, of their relationships to others, of their possible destinations” (Myers, 2014, n.p.) that they can draw upon as they discover their own voices.

Literature Review

Holland (1980) maintains that identity can be understood as constantly undergoing a process of recreation and reconfiguration, and that by reading, “we use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves. We work out through the text our own characteristic patterns of desire and adaptation” (p. 124). The reader accomplishes this act by identifying with particular characters and storylines that resonate with and give insight into her own struggles and transformations. Hubler’s (2000) research supports this supposition, suggesting that the influence of reading on identity construction is much stronger than commonly recognized. After interviewing more than 40 adolescent girls, she found these readers “are not passively shaped by their pleasure reading, but, as reader-response critics argue, actively construct the

Young women are habitually encouraged to push their feelings and desires aside in order to please others or “for their own sake,” because they are told that making waves and demanding recognition and resolution will only cause further harm.

meanings of the texts they read” (p. 90). Indeed, she found in her study that “identification with female characters that the girls describe as ‘outspoken,’ ‘strong,’ ‘independent,’ ‘caring,’ and ‘different’ clearly aided them in their rejection of a stereotype of women as quiet, passive, dependent, compliant, and timid,”

By building a view through the eyes while telling the story from the perspective of a single conflicted source, the single-speaker verse novel’s use of a “relentless first-person point of view and minimal word count strips a story down to the raw inner monologue of the main character,” thereby creating a sensation for the reader of being trapped inside the character’s head.

while enabling these readers to reflect on the way that gender and gender roles are constructed and imposed by dominant groups (Hubler, 2000, p. 91).

Similarly, the cultural and ethnic identity of adolescents is often shaped by a critical life episode or encounter that causes the individual to question “previously held attitudes and beliefs about others and oneself” (Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 642). Reading about these critical life episodes allows adolescents to “participate in imaginary situations, look on at characters living through crises, explore [them]selves through the medium of literature” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 45), and consider how to approach similar experiences in their own lives.

In addition, when students adopt a critical lens, they are more apt to question and actively challenge the position in society to which they have been relegated (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001).

Certain aspects of the contemporary YA verse novel make it particularly suited to do the sort of work that Holland mentions, not the least of which is its form as a novel written in a series of free-verse poems that do not have a regular rhyming scheme or meter, and thus “elicits from the viewer an emotion and a way of thinking that is different from dialogue” (Cadden, 2011, p. 22). Campbell (2004) points out that this type of narration tends to convey a “a vivid and imagi-

native sense of experience” that is “intensely internal, focused on the characters’ feelings,” with the action centering on emotional or critical life events, “and the rest of the novel dealing with the characters’ feelings before and after” (p. 613). Therefore, the structure of the verse novel often differs greatly from that of the traditional novel; rather than being “built with rising conflict toward a climax, followed by a denouement, the verse novel is often more like a wheel, with the hub a compelling emotional event,” issue, or theme that the narrator and the reader revisit throughout the text (Campbell, 2004, p. 615). This is important because questions of identity are rarely resolved all at once. Moreover, by building a view through the eyes while telling the story from the perspective of a single conflicted source, the single-speaker verse novel’s use of a “relentless first-person point of view and minimal word count strips a story down to the raw inner monologue of the main character,” thereby creating a sensation for the reader of being trapped inside the character’s head, and fewer words “often lead to greater emotional development and less emphasis on description of the plot and the scenery” (Friesner, 2017, p. 33). All of these aspects of the verse novel serve to deepen the reader’s identification with the main character. Consequently, as “the narrator grows and changes, often through trauma, experience leads to self-knowledge and a new perception of reality” for both the narrator and the reader (Roxburgh, 2005, p. 7).

Brown Girl Dreaming

In *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Jacqueline Woodson (2014) gives the reader what can best be described as a fictionalized memoir of her childhood as an African American girl growing up in the 1960s and moving between Greenville, South Carolina and Brooklyn, New York. The story is told in verse form and concentrates on her search for identity and developing conception of herself as an author. Woodson’s choice to tell this story in verse is particularly appropriate because the young protagonist is enamored with words and their meanings, and it is through writing imitation poems of Langston Hughes’s work that she first begins to discover her artistic voice and ability. In addition, Woodson subtly draws on both the child’s perspective and the adult’s perspective in a way that allows the reader to gain a more nuanced understanding of the way that the experiences she describes affected her

growing understanding of herself as an individual and as a writer.

This story begins with the narrator's birth in 1963 and reaches even further back in time to trace her genealogy, but the text primarily concentrates on young Jackie's feelings of being torn between two worlds and her sense of inadequacy when compared with her older sister. Just as she describes America as "a country caught/ between Black and White," she feels a similar split even from birth, saying that "I am born in Ohio/ but the stories of South Carolina already run/ like rivers/ through my veins" (Woodson, 2014, p. 2) and "I am born a Negro here and Colored there" (p. 3). This dichotomy deepens after her parents separate and her mother takes her and her siblings to South Carolina, where they spend much of their early years with their grandparents and are raised as Jehovah's witnesses. While Jackie's mother eventually leaves Greenville to look for work in New York City, before she goes, she carefully instructs her children on how to behave in the segregated South: "Step off the curb if a white person comes towards you/ don't look them in the eye. Yes sir. No sir. / My apologies" (p. 31). The children are also liable to face punishment at home if they lapse into what their mother views as "Southern" or "subservient" speech—"ain't," "y'all," and "ma'am." The narrator describes in "the right way to speak" how

The list of what not to say
Goes on and on . . .
You are from the North, our mother says.
You know the right way to speak.
As the switch raises dark welts on my brother's legs
Dell and I look on
afraid to open our mouths. Fearing the South
will slip out or
into them. (p. 69)

Jackie's sense of inner conflict intensifies after her mother establishes herself in New York and returns to take Jackie and her siblings to Brooklyn, because while she is overjoyed to be reunited with her mother, she experiences a deep sense of loss on leaving her grandparents, saying: "How can we have both places?/ How can we leave/ all that we've known . . ." (p. 132) for a place where "there is only gray rock, cold/ and treeless as a bad dream . . . where no pine trees grow/ no porch swing moves/ with the weight of/ your grandmother" (p. 143). Once they leave their grandparents, Jackie and her siblings also struggle

with the decision to continue the strict religious observances required by Jehovah's witnesses; they suffer from feelings of separation as they leave the room during the Pledge of Allegiance and of jealousy as they miss out on the celebrations of Halloween, Christmas, and birthdays. As time progresses, and the children are split between two places—living in Brooklyn throughout the school year and Greenville during the summer—Jackie is increasingly torn, writing that

Our feet are beginning to belong
in two different worlds—Greenville
and New York. We don't know how to come
home
and leave
home
behind us. (p. 195)

Jackie is also plagued by feelings of inadequacy when she is compared with her brilliant older sister, a circumstance that she finds all the more painful since she wants to be a writer. This desire is particularly intense; when reflecting on her first composition notebook, the young narrator says that "long before I could really write/ someone must have known that this/ was what I needed" and describes how "Hard [it was] not to smile as I held it, felt the breeze/as it fanned the pages" (p. 154). However, for a long time, Jackie feels that this dream is out of her reach, calling herself "the other Woodson" (p. 219) and saying that "I am not gifted. When I read, the words twist/ twirl across the page. / When they settle, it is too late. / The class has already moved on" (p. 169). Eventually, though, the young writer gains validation and resolve through seeing a "book filled with brown people, more/ brown people than I'd ever seen / in a book before" and realizes "that someone who looked like me had a story" (p. 228). Jackie is further inspired by poets of color like Langston Hughes, and first finds her voice in using his poems as a template

The last poem in the novel, "each world," can be read as an ode both to self-acceptance as the narrator embraces her duality and to agency as she realizes that she possesses the ability to transform the world.

for her own (p. 245) before writing her own book of seven haikus about butterflies (p. 252).

Finally, the narrator gains confidence in herself as writer, recording that “I didn’t just appear one day. / I didn’t just wake up and know how to write my name/ . . . knowing now/ that I was a long time coming” (p. 298). In doing so, she realizes that the world is hers, both “inside my head and/somewhere out there, too. / All of it, mine now if I just listen/ and write it down” (p. 316). The last poem in the novel, “each world,” can be read as an ode both to self-acceptance as the narrator embraces her duality and to agency as she realizes that she possesses the ability to transform the world.

Each day a new world
opens itself up to you. And all the worlds you are—
Ohio and Greenville
Woodson and Irby
Gunnar’s child and Jack’s daughter
Jehovah’s Witness and nonbeliever
listener and writer
Jackie and Jacqueline—
gather into one world
called You
where You decide
what each word
and each story
and each ending
will finally be. (p. 320)

Her shift from “you” to “You” in this poem not only further signals the narrator’s empowerment and emergent voice to the reader, but also acts a powerful reminder to the reader that she can shape her own story of self and action.

The Poet X

The Poet X by Elizabeth Acevedo (2018) is the story of Xiomara Batista, a teenage girl born to conservative Dominican parents in Spanish Harlem. She struggles with accepting and expressing herself, eventually using poetry, both written and spoken, to break free from the definitions of identity and worth that are imposed on her. This novel’s message of empowerment through words and community offers particular impact for the adolescent reader thanks to the combination of Acevedo’s strong imagery and the way that “the pacing of words conveys the protagonist’s mood, forcing the reader to feel as she feels and board her train of thought” (Freeman, 2018, p. 1). Although not

strictly autobiographical, Acevedo does mention in her interviews that while she was inspired to write this story so that her students could see themselves represented in literature, the “emotional truths are her own,” and she, in some ways, is telling the story of her own empowerment through poetry (“Follow the Fear,” 2018).

Akin to their male counterparts in YA novels, female protagonists encounter and surmount challenging, unexpected events, but, in addition, “their coming of age is often marked by specific female characteristics”—experiences such as sexual harassment and dealing with cultural standards of beauty and gender (Brown & St. Clair, 2002, p. 81). In *The Poet X*, Xiomara struggles with all of these issues. She suffers from a sense of hypervisibility, both because her birth and that of her twin brother Xavier to aging Dominican parents is viewed as a miracle in her Harlem community, and because at a young age she developed what her mother calls “a little too much body for such a young girl” (Acevedo, 2018, p. 5), thereby drawing unwanted attention and advances from not only boys and but also fully grown men in the neighborhood. She struggles to reconcile her conflicting feelings of pride and shame in her appearance, saying in the poem “Questions I Have” that

It’s so complicated.
For awhile now I’ve been having all these feelings.
Noticing boys more than I used to.
And I get all this attention from guys
But it’s like a sancocho of emotions.
This stew of mixed up ingredients:
Partly flattered that they think I’m attractive,
Partly scared they’re only interested in my ass and my
boobs,
And a good measure of Mami-will-kill-me fear sprinkled
on top. (p. 32)

Xiomara often seems to blame herself for this harassment, or at least feels that she should accept it with more equanimity, stating that “I should get used to it./ I shouldn’t get so angry/ when boys—and sometimes/ grown-ass men—/ talk to me however they want,/ think that they can rub against me/ or make all kinds of offers./ But I’m never used to it” (p. 52). The young poet finds relief only when she is able

To grab my notebook,
and write, and write, and write
all the things I wish I could have said.

Make poems from the sharp feelings inside
that feel they could
carve me wide
open. (p. 53)

Thus, even early in the text, the reader can see how Xiomara uses writing as an outlet for her emotions, but at this point her words are still secret, which implies that she has not yet been able to penetrate the veil of silence inflicted on her by others. She laments that “the only person in this house/ who isn’t heard is me” (p. 6).

Xiomara’s self-image and sense of self-worth are further complicated by the expectations imposed on her by both her conservative mother and the church of her childhood. Xiomara not only feels that “[her] body takes up more room than [her] voice” (p. 5), but she is further silenced by her conservative mother’s insistence on keeping to what is traditionally supposed to be a woman’s place. Thus, she is required to act as “la niña de la casa” and help around the house while her brother is encouraged to concentrate on academic pursuits (p. 42). Moreover, she is punished when she steps out of the feminine role that others have decreed for her: she is rebuked by her mother for defending her brother, for not being “a lady,” even though her “hands became fists for him” and “learned how to bleed when others/ tried to make him into a wound” (p. 45). Perhaps more painful to Xiomara, though, is the way that she is sexualized by not only her peers, but also her mother and her church. Her mother makes her ashamed of her developing body, slapping on her the day that she gets her period because “eleven was too young” and implying that Xiomara is a “cuero,” or whore, whose body will corrupt her (p. 40). The church is not a source of consolation either, because Xiomara sees “the way that the church/ treats a girl like me differently./ Sometimes it feels /all I’m worth is under my skirt” (p. 14); she cannot bring herself to “have faith/ in the father the son/ in men . . . the first ones/ to make me feel so small” (p. 58).

These circumstances have divested the 16-year-old of her ability to explore or articulate her own beliefs and doubts anywhere outside of her journal, with the consequence that she feels unheard and unseen. Xiomara’s journal, however, gives her the space and a place to challenge what others deem to be her place in the world and allows her to develop her own identity and voice through her writing. In what is presented in

the book as a draft of a school assignment, Xiomara explains that by giving her the notebook as a place to collect her thoughts, her brother also made her believe that perhaps her thoughts were important. Now she writes in the journal every day, often as a way to keep from hurting (p. 41). Perhaps even more essential to facilitating the development of Xiomara’s voice is the realization that she is not alone—a revelation that comes to her when her English teacher shows a slam poetry video in class.

For Xiomara, the poet “is saying the thoughts I didn’t know anyone else had,” and she realizes that “when I listen to her I feel heard” (p. 76). This leads Xiomara to memorize her first poem, even though she still has no intention of performing in public, and to embrace her physical self; she vows to “let my body finally take up all the space it wants” as she acts out how she would deliver the poem (p. 79).

The tension builds when Xiomara falls in love with a boy from school and enters into a secret relationship with him. Again, she suffers inner conflict, this time between the desire she feels for him and her waning religious faith. Xiomara’s mother eventually finds out about her clandestine relationship, and Xiomara ends it (at least temporarily). However, Xiomara’s depression over the breakup leads to a discussion with her English teacher, who encourages her to join a slam poetry club. For the first time, Xiomara has a place to speak out loud and be heard. The first time that she reads, she reflects that “I can’t remember/ the last time that people were silent/while I spoke, actually listening/” and is shocked that “My little words/ feel important, for just a moment” (p. 259).

The young protagonist faces an even greater challenge, though, when her mother discovers her notebook, which her mother sees as a catalogue of Xiomara’s sins. For this reason, she proceeds to burn it in spite of Xiomara’s protests and the intervention of Xiomara’s father and brother (p. 304). This painful experience serves as a catalyst for Xiomara’s develop-

These circumstances have divested the 16-year-old of her ability to explore or articulate her own beliefs and doubts anywhere outside of her journal, with the consequence that she feels unheard and unseen.

ing empowerment and voice, as she shows her mother that she still carries the poems within, writing:

All of the poems and stanzas I've memorized spill out,
Getting louder and louder, all out of order,
Until I'm yelling at the top of my lungs,
Heaving the words like weapons from my chest;
They're the only thing that I can fight back with. (p. 305)

Xiomara then takes a further pivotal step in asserting her agency by leaving to stay at her erstwhile boyfriend's house, but she does not adhere to the stereotypical narratives of "losing" herself in him or becoming a "lost" girl, but rather defends her physical boundaries while still staying with him that night before going to school the next day (pp. 328–331).

Xiomara also shows her agency by returning home to deal with the conflict with her mother rather than running from it; she overcomes her silence regarding her mother and her religious doubts in group counseling (p. 343). Realistically, this counseling does not lead to perfect understanding between mother, daughter, and priest, but it does "work to break up the things that have built up between [them]" (p. 342). Perhaps more meaningfully, she performs for both her family and her priest after her English teacher reminds Xiomara that "words give people permission/to be their fullest self" (p. 345), and so she should not feel doubtful about expressing herself to those whom she wants to be close to.

Ultimately, Xiomara becomes cognizant of her own agency and ability to transform self and world. She acknowledges to herself

That my poetry has become something I'm proud of
The way the words say what I mean,
how they twist and turn language,
how they connect with people.
How they build community.
I finally know that all of those
"I'll never, ever, ever,"
stemmed from being afraid but not even they
can stop me. Not anymore. (pp. 287–288)

The story culminates with Xiomara explaining that "learning to believe in the power of my own words has been the most freeing experience of my life" (p. 357), words that testify to her emerging sense of self and agency and thereby serve as a powerful inspiration for a reader struggling with similar challenges and critical life experiences.

Blood Water Paint

Penned by Joy McCollough, *Blood Water Paint* (2018) is based on the true story of painter Artemisia Gentileschi in early 17th-century Italy. Today, she is considered one of the most talented artists of the period, but during her lifetime, she struggled for recognition, since her father took credit for most of her early work. Her tale is told primarily in free verse from the 17-year-old protagonist's perspective, but it is juxtaposed with stories of the Biblical heroines Susanna and Judith. These stories are told in prose, presumably to emphasize that they were told to Artemisia by her mother as she lay dying from a fever after giving birth to a stillborn daughter. These Biblical tales not only function as a source of strength for Artemisia as she struggles with adversity, but also serve as her inspiration for some of her most acclaimed paintings. As such, they show the empowering qualities of voice in a variety of art forms passed through generations and genres.

As Brown and St. Clair (2002) point out in *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult Literature*, we live "in a world where growing up is often equated for girls with the shutting down of possibilities and the diminishing of expectations" (p. 127). Therefore, it can be particularly empowering for young women to read stories in which the heroine proves herself successful creatively, artistically, and economically in a sphere traditionally dominated by men, especially when they face adverse situations based on the gender roles that have been forced upon them. This is the struggle that Artemisia Gentileschi confronts and successfully overcomes in Joy McCollough's depiction of her early life.

From the earliest pages of the novel, it is clear to the reader that Artemisia is an artist as words are used to paint a picture of Artemisia seemingly becoming one with her work. The first-person narrator explains how

I train my eyes
on what's ahead: my purpose
and listen only to the rise and fall
of my own breath as I connect
the brush to the paint to my breath to the canvas.
(p. 4)

However, while Artemisia and the reader know that the true artist is

the one with pigment smeared into her skin
the one whose body
is as permanent as a fixture
in this studio, palette, easel,
the only one whose heart is flung across this canvas

her father denies her that acknowledgment, and he is the one who gets to sign his name to the canvas and take the gold (and credit) for her compositions (p. 5). While Artemisia initially tries to assert herself, her father reminds her that she would never have been allowed to paint in the first place if her brothers had shown any promise, and she silences herself because “dwelling on/ my talentless brothers/only incites him” (p. 7) and may result in his ending her apprenticeship out of spite. Thus, she does not vocally protest as his gaze “lays claim/ to palette knife and easel, / stretcher bars, apprentice” (p. 73) or when he invites men into her studio, her sanctuary, who also make sure that they convey the idea that she is merely “beauty for consumption” (p. 12).

One of Artemisia’s greatest struggles is to hold on to the knowledge that “I am not a thing/Or a possession” (p. 74), since she is objectified on so many levels. Not only is she expected to produce paintings for commissions without acknowledgement of her talent and work, but she is also expected to use her charms at the market and to convince other artists to include her father on commissions despite his subpar painting skills (p. 60). Even when she is successful, her father is sure to remind her of “her place” as an object and a tool, requiring her to pose for him as “he stares/ analyzes/ uses my body” (p. 75) for his own purposes. He even goes so far as to punish Artemisia for her ability when he finds out that one of the requirements of his being included on an important commission is that she do the actual painting: he decides that rather than just showing her calf, she will need to disrobe completely to model for him (p. 75).

Artemisia has a hidden source of strength, though: the stories of strong women that her mother told her as “a child, not the woman of the house” (p. 23). When dying soon after the birth of her last child, Artemisia’s mother

Spent the last of her strength
To burn into my mind
The tales of women
No one else would
Think to tell. (p. 24)

These stories of Susanna, “a righteous woman whose virtue was questioned through no fault of her own,” and of Judith, “a widow with nothing left to lose,” (p. 24) will take on particularly deep meaning beyond simple touchstones for Artemisia as she is cast into both of those roles. Perhaps more important, though, these stories “stoke the flames inside” when Artemisia is objectified

Every time my father shoos me
down the stairs
away from his studio
each time he speaks to buyers
as though I am not there,
each time they leer at me
as I descend in seething fury. (p. 28)

Artemisia is able to channel this rage into inspiration and a quest for justice because she knows that she is the only one who can paint these women authentically; she understands that “one can’t truly tell a story/ unless they’ve lived it in their heart,” and the repeated insults and objectifications that she suffers make Artemisia more certain that

I can do Susanna justice
I can do my mother justice.
I can have justice. (p. 29)

Artemisia draws even more deeply on this source of strength when she is raped by her teacher, the same man that her father had her beguile into giving them an important commission. The betrayal is all the more painful because Artemisia thought that she had finally met someone who saw her as artist first, rather than a woman—an artist who was

an audience,
and not just eyes,
but a mind that understands
the skill required—. (p. 38)

Her teacher, Agostino, flatters and flirts with her, and ultimately leads her to believe that he wishes to share his studio with her as a true equal, only to make his real intentions clear when he explains that he will “make better use of my live model than your father does” (p. 125), implying that he will use her for sex as well. Agostino reacts with rage when she refuses him, destroying her sketches of Susanna, and then raping her when she still refuses to yield to his advances. He then taunts her with the knowledge that the laws of Rome do not allow women to bring charges before the

court, so she will have to convince her father to do it for her, which Agostino doubts he will be willing to do (p. 204).

Artemisia is initially silenced by this reservation, but gains strength from the visions of Susanna, who reminds her that “My own voice saved me. Use your voice” (p. 197), and of Judith, who tells her that “You are not small” (p. 200) and encourages her to face her accuser. And indeed, Artemisia’s father is unwilling at first, trying to dissuade her by convincing her that it was just a “lover’s quarrel,” before finally rationalizing that if she does this, then

Even if you are believed
You are the one who will no longer
be able to show her face.
No society.
No marriage.
What’s more, if this defines you,
there will be no painting. (p. 215)

Artemisia demands that her story be heard, though, deriving resolution from the stories that her mother told her, “the sharpest blade/that she could leave me on her death” (p. 216). The apparitions of Susanna and Judith stay with Artemisia all through the painful trial, encouraging her to “mirror Judith’s stoic face, match Susanna breath for breath” (p. 246) as she testifies, has her reputation besmirched, and is violated yet again when midwives “pry me open, debate the state of my sex” (p. 245). Finally, Artemisia is given a choice: undergo torture and likely lose the use of her hands permanently to prove her virtue and the truth of her statement, or drop the suit (p. 251). Though losing the ability to paint is a terrifying prospect, Artemisia remembers her mother telling her that sometimes a woman must risk her place, and indeed, her very life to speak a truth that the world despises in order to be believed, and she decides that anything is worth it to have her voice and truth heard (p. 252).

Artemisia does eventually receive a somewhat hollow justice: her good name is restored and her rapist, Agostino Tassi, is sentenced to five years banishment from Rome. While the inadequacy of her rapist’s punishment initially devastates her, especially when compared with all that she has been through, Artemisia draws strength once more from Susanna and Judith as they assure her that she will paint a masterpiece, and “plunge [her] fingers into the paint, smear them across the outstretched cloth” in a way that “feels

more precisely right than anything that she has ever done before” (p. 288). The story ends with Artemisia vowing that “I will show you/what a woman can do” (p. 291), which serves as a powerful inspiration for young women who have experienced similar traumas and struggled to regain their sense of self-determination and agency. Indeed, for the author, this novel “is ultimately about how important and powerful it is to tell one’s story and be heard,” because “the more survivors share their stories, the more others feel the support to tell their own stories, or even face and name stories they’d maybe never even recognized as assault” (Miller, 2018, n.p.).

Implications for Classroom Practice

As shown in the discussion, these three books use the verse novel format to share stories of strong young women who make themselves heard and who act to fight the definitions imposed upon them. “The images children glean from books have a powerful impact on their sense of self and their view of others” (Ford, Tyson, Howard, & Harris, 2000, p. 236), so by creating these characters who are inspired by the poetry and stories of others to develop their own artistic craft and voice, the authors supply not only a window through which young readers might see themselves becoming poets, but also a path that they might follow to do so—first reading model poets, then crafting poems in response, and finally workshopping and revising these poems. This progression is one used in many college-level creative writing courses where one of the earliest exercises is often reading works by published authors, and then writing an “influence” poem modeled after some aspect of their work (Howard, 2018). Thus, YA verse novels that focus on the education and development of the young artist, such as those discussed in this article, may be particularly suitable for use in the secondary ELA classroom to model writing behavior. When young readers see the characters in these texts benefiting from reading and writing poetry and becoming artists themselves, they may be less intimidated by the creative process; moreover, “inserting a created protagonist’s own poems into a narrative is inherently pedagogical as it models for young readers how a poet might begin her own writing practice” in regard to getting ideas, choosing form, and developing a unique voice (Howard, 2018, p. 233). In the words

of Jacqueline Woodson, poetry is not some “secret code . . . poetry belongs to all of us” (2015), and these texts may help students embrace this truth.

Emilie N. Curtis is a doctoral student in the Literature for Children and Young Adults program in the Department of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University, where she teaches undergraduate courses in children’s and young adult literature. Her research interests include the ways that adolescent identity is depicted and constructed in young adult fiction as well as the role that formats such as the verse novel and the graphic novel may be particularly suited for not only recounting stories of emergent voice, but also encouraging the development of agency and empowerment in adolescent readers.

Literature Cited

Acevedo, E. (2018). *The poet X*. Waterville, ME: Thorndike Press.
Alexander, K. (2014). *The crossover*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
Engle, M. (2008). *The surrender tree: Poems of Cuba’s struggle for freedom*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Co.
Glenn, M. (1996). *Who killed Mr. Chippendale? A mystery in poems*. New York, NY: Lodestar Books.
Hesse, K. (1997). *Out of the dust*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
Lai, T. (2011). *Inside out & back again*. New York: Harper.
McCullough, J. (2018). *Blood water paint*. New York, NY: Penguin Group USA.
Reynolds, J. (2017). *Long way down*. New York, NY: Atheneum.
Wolff, V.E. (1993). *Make lemonade*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.
Woodson, J. (2014). *Brown girl dreaming*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

References

Bean, T. W., & Moni, K. (2003). Developing students’ critical literacy: Exploring identity construction in young adult fiction. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 46, 638–648.
Brown, J., & St. Clair, N. (2002). *Declarations of independence: Empowered girls in young adult literature, 1990–2001*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
Cadden, M. (2011). The verse novel and the question of genre. *The ALAN Review*, 39(1), 21–27.
Campbell, P. (2004). The sand in the oyster: Vetting the verse novel. *Horn Book Magazine*, 80, 611–616.
Follow the fear: An interview with Elizabeth Acevedo, author of *The poet X*. (2018). *Black Nerd Problems*. Retrieved from <http://blacknerdproblems.com/an-interview-with-elizabeth-acevedo/>.
Ford, D. Y., Tyson, C. A., Howard, T. C., & Harris, J. J., III. (2000). Multicultural literature and gifted black students: Promoting

self-understanding, awareness, and pride. *Roeper Review*, 22, 235–240.
Freeman, L. (2018). *The poet X* is a stunning amplification of the Latina experience. *EW*. Retrieved from <https://ew.com/books/2018/03/14/the-poet-x-book-review/>.
Friesner, B. (2017). *The verse novel in young adult literature*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
Holland, N. (1980). Unity, identity, text, self. In J. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalist to post-structuralism* (pp. 118–133). Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins UP.
Howard, K. (2018). Influence poetry and found poetry: The reflection of creative writing pedagogy in the verse novel for young readers. *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 42, 218–237.
Hubler, A. E. (2000). Beyond the image: Adolescent girls, reading, and social reality. *NWSA Journal*, 12(1), 84–99.
Lamb, S., & Brown, L. M. (2006). *Packaging girlhood*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press.
Lapp, D., & Fisher, D. (2010). Critical literacy: Examining the juxtaposition of issue, author, and self. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 12, 156–160.
McDaniel, C. (2004). Critical literacy: A questioning stance and the possibility for change. *The Reading Teacher*, 57, 472–481.
McLaren, P., & Farahmandpur, R. (2001). Teaching against globalization and the new imperialism: Toward a revolutionary pedagogy. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52, 136–150.
Miller, E. C. (2018). *Blood water paint* is inspired by the true story of the first time a sexual assault survivor won a legal battle against her assailant. *Bustle*. Retrieved from <https://www.bustle.com/p/blood-water-paint-is-inspired-by-the-true-story-of-the-first-time-a-sexual-assault-survivor-won-a-legal-battle-against-her-assailant-8257084>.
Morgan, W. (1998). Critical literacy. In W. Sawyer & K. Watson (Eds.), *Re-viewing English* (pp. 154–163). Indianapolis, IN: St. Clair Press.
Myers, C. (2014). The apartheid of children’s literature. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/the-apartheid-of-childrens-literature.html>
Rosenblatt, L. (1994). *The reader, the text, the poem*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
Roxburgh, S. (2005). The art of the young adult novel: The ALAN workshop keynote address. *The ALAN Review*, 32(2), 1–7.
Sperling, M., & Appleman, D. (2011). Voice in the context of literacy studies. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 46, 70–84.
Van Sickle, V. (2006). Subcategories within the emerging genre of the verse novel. *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children’s Literature*, 10(3), 1–3.
Woodson, J. (2015). Essay on children’s poetry: Lift every voice. Poetry Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/children/articles/detail/70271>.