

## THE FUTURE IS NOW

Luke Rodesiler and Alan Brown, *Column Editors*

*A student teacher reflects on the study of activist poetry with ninth-grade honors students.*

### Calling for Change through Activist Poetry

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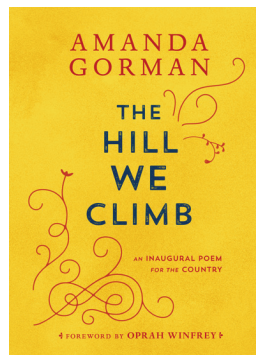
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Young people are often at the forefront of calls for change. Past scholarship suggests that inviting students to become activists for a cause they care about may be one way to highlight and embrace students' unique lived experiences while advancing English language arts instruction (Burr 61; Chapman et al. 539). A. Vincent Ciardiello argued that students "have a natural interest in issues involving matters of fairness and social justice" (465), while James Damico found that incorporating a social justice lens can inform students' attitudes toward poetry (145). Moreover, Patrick Camangian explored how writing

performance poetry dealing with issues of social justice relevant to students' lives could promote students' critical thinking, literacy skills, and voice (45–50).

This current moment of increased activism around racial and gender equity, immigrant and indigenous rights, and climate change inspired me (Sydney) to create a three-week activist poetry unit with the support of Alan, my advisor, in the spring of 2021 during my student-teaching internship at a large, diverse urban high school in the southeastern United States. I crafted this unit for two ninth-grade honors English language arts classes and defined activist poetry as poetry that advocates for a cause or raises awareness for a social issue.



### TEACHING AND STUDYING ACTIVIST POETRY

To initiate the unit, I introduced students to activist poems and invited them to write a reader response. The selected poems included "The Hill We Climb" by Amanda Gorman ("Watch—Amanda Gorman"), "Pledge Allegiance" by Natalie Scenters-Zapico, and "A Small Needful Fact" by Ross Gay. These poems are part of larger social movements and advocate for change in different ways. For instance, "Pledge Allegiance" condemns the inhumane treatment of migrants and immigrants at the US-Mexico border:

I stand and pledge to the country  
that says it loves me so much, it  
loves me so much it wants to  
take  
my mother far away from me. Far  
away, to the place they keep  
all the other mothers to sleep on  
rubber mats and drink from  
rubber hoses.

After reviewing examples of activist poems, students brainstormed aspects they would change about their school, community, state, country, or world.

Then, with those ideas in mind, they each selected an issue to research. Using news articles they read to learn more about their chosen issues, students created “found poetry,” selecting words and phrases and arranging them into a poem. This approach supported students to summarize a topical article and lay creative groundwork for their final project: writing original activist poems.

Students returned to the activist poems they read previously, this time exploring how the poets enhanced the meaning of their poems through the intentional use of poetic devices. I also introduced the song “We Are” by Jon Batiste and the slam poem “Times I’ve Been Mistaken for a Girl” by Alex Dang. These texts offered additional examples of activist poetry; Batiste affirms Black Americans’ identities and ability to enact change, while Dang challenges stereotypes around gender and sexuality. When performed, these two poems include unique acoustic devices (by nature of being a song and a slam poem, respectively) that the poems we read in print do not.

After students considered how aspects such as repetition and tone enhance the activist messages of the poems we studied, they applied various techniques when drafting their own activist poems. For their final project, students wrote



original poems that advocated for their chosen issue or cause. They presented their poems through music or slam poetry, or they published their poems in real or imagined newspapers, magazines, or social media sites. The following are samples of three activist poems titled “The Ocean’s Cry,” “Untitled Poem,” and “Dear, America...,” which were written by students. (All names are pseudonyms.)

**“THE OCEAN’S CRY”**

Quinn decided to focus on environmental issues and wrote a powerful, emotional poem titled “The Ocean’s Cry.” The poem begins (emphasis in original),

Do you know the Ocean?  
Can you listen with your heart?  
To understand the Ocean—You  
must feel her power  
Power that can have waves up to  
1,720 feet—yet it is crying  
for us  
Crying because it has poison  
flowing in its veins  
Poison that mankind created or  
disposed of because we found  
it “useless”

Throughout the remainder of the poem, Quinn balances statistics they researched with an emotional appeal to protect the ocean. They close the poem with the following lines (emphasis in original):

Two thirds of our earth is ocean  
We know outer space more than  
our magic filled sea  
Where there are microscopic  
galaxies where the sun isn’t  
visible  
The Ocean is crying . . .  
She is crying  
Crying  
Can you hear her cry?  
Can you?

Quinn’s use of personification invites readers to empathize with the ocean’s pain. The poem’s repetition of rhetorical questions goes beyond raising awareness and calls the reader to action.

**“UNTITLED POEM”**

In his poem, Tommy decided to explore the intersection of his gay identity and his Central American roots. His untitled poem begins as follows:

I miss the streets of Guatemala  
The aroma of the food, the vibrant  
colors, the culture.  
I cannot make myself miss the  
people, for more reasons than  
one.  
when I was there I was exiled,  
shunned, loathed.  
if I was born to their liking I  
would  
be less hated?  
I would not be attacked.  
I would not be taunted.  
I would not be washed with fear  
as I walked out the door.

He closes his poem with a melancholic question for the future:

I continue to search to feel  
unconditional love.  
One day I will look back and be  
proud.  
Right?

Tommy’s poem incorporates anaphora to emphasize the repetitive, inhumane treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals. He also uses varied, uneven line breaks to create dramatic pauses in his poem, contributing to the mood of uncertainty and searching for belonging.

**“DEAR, AMERICA . . .”**

Zaya’s poem focuses on her identity as a “Mexican and black female

in America.” It begins with the following lines:

It’s all lies, It’s already hard being  
a Mexican and black female in  
America, why make it  
harder by lying . . .  
Why make it harder by telling  
us We live in the “land of the  
free.”  
Why make it harder by saying  
“Justice for all” when you  
know you’re just lying  
Why make it harder by mocking  
and bashing people of color,  
but then use our culture  
just to profit from it.

Zaya’s contrast between common patriotic phrases and her lived experience creates emotional impact and emphasizes the theme of dishonesty in her poem. She closes the poem: “Why Pretend that we live in this so called ‘paradise’ why do i / fear my life in this ‘paradise’ oh—it’s all a lie, Don’t make it harder than it already is . . .” Zaya’s rhetorical questioning implicates readers, nudging them to reconsider how they view their country and whether their perspective includes the unjust realities that Americans of color frequently face.


## IN REFLECTION

I have loved reading and writing poetry for as long as I can remember, though never within the walls

of a school classroom. Poetry always felt distant and mechanical there. In fact, we read a poem, broke it down, and moved on. Nevertheless, I wanted to find a way to engage students in poetry that felt vibrant and urgent, hoping that analysis would stem more naturally from curiosity around the topic, the poem, and my students’ own writing processes.

My experience connecting poetry and advocacy taught me that a unit on activist poetry has the potential to engage students more deeply in the reading and writing of poems, as Damico found with poetry that incorporates a social justice lens (145). As I invited students to write original poems, I witnessed the processes by which teenagers notice flaws in the world around them and use language to effect change. I saw in my own classroom Ciardiello’s observation that students “have a natural interest in issues involving matters of fairness and social justice” (465).

In the most powerful and impactful moments of this unit, I watched students build their confidence as writers, explore their personal identities in new ways, reconsider their perceptions of poetry, and claim their democratic agency as emerging activist poets. As a

result, I hope to continue incorporating activist poetry in my teaching of poetry in the future. 

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