

Lear Reassembled in a Rust Belt City: Playing with Intercultural Insights

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Abstract: This article describes my attempt to apply insights from a Fulbright teaching experience in Semey, Kazakhstan to a Shakespeare classroom in the Rust Belt city of Flint, Michigan. Returning to a monolingual classroom in the United States, I sought to import the anthropological component of foreign teaching, in which students are guides to culture and the classroom is a space of intercultural exchange, by using a strategy that worked overseas: designing a class around a major collaborative project. The task of adapting *Romeo and Juliet* to contemporary Kazakhstani culture inspired my decision to use William Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a bridge between the lives of commuter students who are fearful of Flint and the people they pretend not to see—the homeless, schizophrenics, and drug addicts. Any collaboration (at home or abroad) must draw on student strengths, and, as a result, my pedagogical projects exposed the strengths and weaknesses of post-Soviet collectivism and American identity politics, respectively. While the bulk of the essay examines the way the class and I explored and revised our views of a defamiliarized city, its people, and one another, I also reflect on the greater difficulties of being a teacher-anthropologist in one's home culture. Teachers who have unpacked their book bags in foreign classroom have, by necessity, found ways to bridge the gap between books and the world, and they bring home important paradigms and a sense of urgency to live what they teach.

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Before I began teaching at the University of Michigan-Flint (UM-Flint) in 1996 I had spent a year teaching at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. My Turkish experience led to a curiosity about the wider Turkic world. When I came to Flint, I still dreamed of going to Central Asia. A Muscovite work-study student in our department who had been there asked me, “Kazakhstan? Why would you want to go there? It’s just like Flint.” After having taught on a Fulbright in Semey (formerly Semipalatinsk), a Kazakh city that was subjected to Soviet nuclear testing every Saturday for forty years (a friend recalled that the china in the cupboards rattled), I came home with an understanding that there were similarities between the two places: Soviet industrial imperialism made Semey a dumping and testing ground, and a similar kind of imperialism, the General Motors’ strain, had built and destroyed Flint. Despite the shared fate of being industrial wastelands, Semey and Flint could not have been more different as “teaching places.” In Semey, where foreigners are rare, students were excited to attend lessons for the chance to communicate with me; as they filed out of the classroom, almost everyone said “Thank you for you.” By contrast, Flint students, who are more comfortable texting than talking, seemed apathetic and disconnected from me, one another, their educations, and even the real, as opposed to the virtual, world.

Upon reflection, I decided that what made the foreign teaching experience so powerful was the anthropological component (Kietzman 104). Because I spoke little Russian and no Kazakh, the students in Semey were my guides, and I left each class with rich insights into their cultures. Knowledge is frequently enhanced by an awareness of difference, and displacement helped me see clearly that real education happens when teacher and students feel a current of mutual desire to speak themselves to one another. I learned to trust the passionate, emotive force that pushes people to communicate: it was the common “language,” more important than English, that enabled us to overcome and even appreciate our lack of words, faulty grammar, and cultural differences.

Coming to know the students felt a lot like falling in love. “All men by nature desire understanding,” says Aristotle (12). If this is so, it tells us something important about the analogous activities of knowing and

desiring—both have at their core the same delight of reaching and entail the same pain of falling short:

Stationed at the edge of itself, or of its present knowledge, the thinking mind launches a suit for understanding into the unknown. So too the wooer stands at the edge of his value as a person and asserts a claim across the boundaries of another. Both mind and wooer reach out from what is known and actual to something different, possibly better, desired. Something else. (Carson 71)

Most classes in Kazakhstan felt like leaps of desire, faith, and, sometimes, despair. I had to creatively adapt the material I had planned to teach to the needs of my students. I remember being particularly fearful that my all-female class of beginning students would not understand the difficult essays that dealt with the American immigrant experience. Interestingly, it was this class of unadulterated beginners who, more than my advanced students, regularly commented on the beauty of particular passages. In retrospect, I wonder why I doubted their ability to connect with the Russian immigrants of Vivian Gornick's Brooklyn childhood, memorably evoked in her essay, "To Begin With." I did not understand until that class period that Kazakhstani, who became independent in 1991, were nostalgic for the Soviet past when, as one of my students said, they "were one people belonging to one big state." As a springboard for discussion, I had prepared a handout of passages that I thought were especially important, and we took turns reading them aloud. After only two examples, it seemed that everyone wanted to read. "May I?" shouted at least six girls in unison. Tanya and Masha took turns reading the young Gornick's excitement at sitting at her kitchen table where sewing-machine operators, truck drivers, and plumbers became thinkers, writers, and poets in Brooklyn circa 1930:

Oh, that talk! That passionate, transforming talk! I understood nothing of what they were saying, but I was excited beyond words by the richness of their rhetoric, the intensity of their arguments, the urgency and longing behind that hot

river of words that came ceaselessly pouring out of all of them. Something important was happening here, I always felt, something that had to do with understanding things. And “to understand things,” I already knew, was the most exciting, the most important thing in life. (Gornick 76)

Tanya and Masha read. Then I repeated phrases that were especially moving. The girls repeated over and over “that hot river of words.” “It’s so beautiful!” exclaimed Tanya. “Ideas *are* everything,” stated Lyudmila emphatically. I had to pinch myself: we were in Kazakhstan. It was March 2010. By the time we got to the section of the essay that addresses the ways these passionate talking relatives created themselves, my students were articulating connections to our own classroom discussions. We read chorally:

Few things in life equal the power and joy of experiencing oneself. Rousseau said there is nothing in life but the experiencing of oneself. Gorky said he loved his friends because in their presence he felt himself. “How important it is,” he wrote, “how glorious it is—to feel oneself!” Indeed how impossible it is not to love ardently those people, that atmosphere, those events and ideas in whose presence one feels the life within oneself stirring. (Gornick 78)

We were giddy by the time we got to the end of the passage. We were no longer just reading but declaring what we knew to be true. And it was true that I felt myself as a teacher much more vividly in oriental Siberia where, despite the -30 Fahrenheit winter temperatures and the necessity of a space heater in class, I had never felt warmer in my life.

I was depressed upon returning to a monolingual classroom where, ironically, it can be harder for teachers and students to tune into the emotional syntax at the core of educational exchange. I missed the excitement of standing on the extreme verge and readying myself to jump. I missed the current of desire that pushes teacher and students toward the strange worlds that each inhabits. To bring the energy, high stakes, and anthropological dimension I had experienced in a foreign teaching

place home to Flint, I created a class around a project.¹ In Semey, I had worked with students in an extracurricular drama club to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* to a Kazakh context, and I decided to take a teaching leap of faith with *King Lear* as a lens for studying the city of Flint, a place that is foreign and frightening for most UM-Flint students.²

I decided to use *Romeo and Juliet* in Semey because I thought it would have broad appeal. But my students at Semey State Pedagogical Institute (SSPI), for whom English is key to participation in a broader global imaginary, were most impressed by the way that *Romeo and Juliet* use words to challenge and, arguably, prevail over a culture of violence. I later learned that Semey native Mukhtar Auezov, the leading Kazakh literary figure who translated William Shakespeare's work into the Kazakh language beginning in 1939, wrote the country's first modern play, *Enlik-Kebek* (1917)—a native version of *Romeo and Juliet* that features star-crossed lovers from rival tribes. A monument to the legendary lovers' baby, thrown brutally from a cliff to his death, exists in the steppe south of Semey and is a destination for pilgrims, as is a nearby cave where the pair are supposed to have hid from their vengeful families. Such local associations may have made the students more confident in their abilities to adapt a famous Western play to their concerns and cultural context (Kietzman 105).

In Semey, I learned just how much Shakespeare's language could do when liberated from a traditional pedagogy that often gets bogged down in the minutiae of scanning verse and placing works in their historical contexts. For my students, who were a mix of ethnic Kazakhs, Russians, Tatars, and a Kurd, Shakespeare's language was a new idiom of English to which they responded holistically and playfully, even trying out phrases like "Holy St. Francis!" in their everyday speech. The characters offered "new" versions of masculinity and femininity that the students compared to their own lives. "Romeo is more romantic," said Aydin, who played the part. "I live in this world." Mara, our Juliet, identified with her character more closely: "I learned all her words, her feelings, and they were close to me. I like her problem solving and her behavior in general." The inevitable challenges of adapting the script to fit the Kazakh situation involved the students in an exploration of personal

and national identities. Could we use the *dombra*—a long-necked instrument that traditionally accompanied epics sung by Kazakh bards—to “accompany” our play? The students initially resolved that we could not: “No. It is not right for *Romeo and Juliet*. It is the Kazakh national instrument and only Kazakh melodies sound right on it.” Yet in risking experimentation and finally deciding that the rhythmic strumming of the *dombra* sustained the energy of our play, the students overcame their fixed ideas about a Western literary giant as well as their fixed notions of Kazakh culture and identity. The experience convinced me that literature, as Martha Nussbaum argues, is central to educating world citizens who must cope with cultural difference, seek to understand it, and learn to adapt borrowed ideas from others to compose their own more flexible and resilient cultures (*Cultivating Humanity* 110).

Cecily Berry, voice coach for the Royal Shakespeare Company (whose generous support of my Kazakh venture in advice-laden emails was invaluable) asks a very suggestive question in her handbook for directors: “Can we do Shakespeare any more in the west? Do we really hear it any more?” (5). She suggests that it is easy for the hyperliterate and affluent to forget that “all the heat in the language, the coarseness, the violence, the passion, the sorrow, came out of a very basic sense of survival” (Berry 6). When I returned to Flint and taught *King Lear* again, I knew instinctively that UM-Flint students could connect viscerally with the central drama of this play that involves characters thrown out of jobs and families, cast onto the nowhere of a barren heath, and challenged to remake themselves.

To overcome Western exhaustion with Shakespeare, I designed an experimental class that asked students to write a script that adapted *King Lear* to contemporary Flint and used Shakespeare’s language as a bridge between our abstracted selves and the people we often do not want to see—the unwashed men holding cardboard signs at intersections (“Help,” “Food,” “Work”), the schizophrenics collecting bits of trash along curbs, the women going door-to-door asking for menstrual pads and spare change, even the oddballs in our own classroom and, closer yet, in our own families. The course design rested on my instinct that *King Lear*’s symbolic landscape could function as a corrective lens

that would enable us to see the small shoots of hope and fertility present in Flint's bleakness.³ If, as Josef Pieper opines, "man's ability to see is in decline" and by seeing he means "the spiritual capacity to perceive the visible reality as it truly is," then we need the instruction of Shakespeare's tragedy that addresses this specific problem through the tragic mistakes of the patriarchs—one of whom, Gloucester, learns, after losing his sight, that human beings only see when we "see feelingly" (Pieper 31). To feel Shakespeare existentially, students needed my permission to use and apply Shakespeare to their own lives.⁴

I also knew that *King Lear* could challenge and trouble ingrained prejudices more effectively if we connected it to the problems we face in Flint: violence, racial tension, joblessness, and post-industrial devastation. The logical positivism of a scientific worldview has banished story—which has, historically, played a central role in most cultures—to the periphery. Gregory Bateson calls a story "a little knot or complex of relevance" that connects us to the collective unconscious of our culture, place, and other people (14). My course put students to work on a story that became their story. It was an apprenticeship for adult life with language and literature at the center—an invitation to experience firsthand what Nussbaum terms the "political promise of literature" so critical for the education of American citizens because of story's unique power to expand sympathies that real life cannot sufficiently cultivate. Story "wrest[s] from our frequently obtuse and blunted imaginations an acknowledgement of those who are other than ourselves" (Nussbaum, *Cultivating* 111–12).

That American public discourse badly needs the fine-grained renderings of personhood and relationship that stories provide became clear during the events surrounding the August 2014 police shooting of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown. In response to the incident, President Barack Obama remarked that "the notion that there's an authentic way of being black, that has to go because there are a whole bunch of different ways for African-American men to be authentic" (qtd. in Baker and Apuzzo A15). President Obama's comment subtly suggests that stereotypes were to blame for the tragedy—those that Officer Darren Wilson had of African American men, leading him to

see Michael Brown as a “demon” (“Read”), and the gangster persona that Michael Brown’s actions suggest he imposed on himself. Moreover, President Obama implied that more and varied stories could stimulate deeper conversations between individuals who coexist in cities like Ferguson, Missouri and Flint, Michigan, despite white flight. Problems are more solvable when they are treated as human problems for which the human community as a whole is responsible. Eric Holder, the African American US Attorney General, addressed the lack of such substantive conversations in contemporary America and called the country a “nation of cowards” (qtd. in Baker and Apuzzo A15) for sweeping the subject of race under the rug with the broom of political correctness. Identity politics dominate the American academy and American political discourse. The attendant worldview depicts the citizen body as a marketplace of identity-based interest groups jockeying for power and difference as something to be affirmed rather than understood. To challenge this fundamentally non-discursive paradigm, we must ask the deep questions that literature is so adept at sounding: Who am I? Who are you? What does it mean to be black or white, American or Kazakhstani? Am I my brother’s keeper? Who is my brother or sister? Most importantly, what can we create together? These are the kinds of questions that cannot be ignored when we teach in foreign classrooms and should not be ignored when we come home to students who we see with fresh eyes. Humanities classrooms, in which texts—specifically imaginative texts—provide an intermediate realm in which we think, feel, question, and construct readings, provide training grounds for citizens who can envision new forms of community.

What if King Lear Lived in Flint?

Since the early 1980s when General Motors (GM) began closing factories in Flint, Michigan, local residents, or “Flintstones,” have witnessed the destruction of their city. Although economic globalization has meant the loss of manufacturing jobs all across America, people feel the losses more acutely in cities like Flint that are built around a single industry. GM employed approximately 86,000 workers in the city in the 1970s (Hakim) and in 2013 employed approximately 5500 (White);

this substantial drop in employment figures over thirty years has dramatically affected the city's culture. White flight to the nearby suburb of Grand Blanc, which began in the 1960s, escalated when GM pulled out and tore down factories, leaving vast "brownfields" behind. Flint, which has been run by the most recent state-appointed emergency financial manager since 2011, has a master plan that calls for the demolition of 60,000 houses—whole neighborhoods really—considered to be eyesores after an arson epidemic that began when I was in Kazakhstan in 2010 and my own house was boarded up.

I have lived in downtown Flint since moving here in 1996, and the "Flintstones" I encounter on a daily basis are far from threatening. The wandering paths many of them take, however, rarely cross the more linear ones of busy, "successful" people and university students, many of whom commute to the university. Robert B. Reich, former labor secretary under President Clinton, writes that "America's wealthy increasingly inhabit a different country from the one 'they' inhabit, and America's less fortunate seem as foreign as the needy inhabitants of another country" (10A). Like Reich, I believe the first step in widening the sphere of "we" is to break down the barriers—not just of race, but also, increasingly, of class and of geographical segregation by income—that are pushing Americans further and further apart.

Students and faculty at UM-Flint are ideally positioned, in the heart of the Rust Belt, to learn to apply the tenets of a liberal education. Founded as a satellite campus of the University of Michigan in 1956, UM-Flint began as what Robert Potter memorably describes as a "cultural service station" for children of autoworkers (46). Writing in 1960, Potter believed that students' working-class backgrounds made the achievement of educational ideals "problematic": students, earnest about education, demand that it have "practical relevance" and be a clear step on an "occupational ladder," which means that the faculty "must exert themselves to demonstrate the meaning of higher education" (48).

In 2015 the university still has a high percentage of students whose parents or relatives work in industry. People employed by GM in Flint enjoyed a comfortable life without needing any kind of formal education, thanks to a strong autoworkers' union. When I began teaching in

Flint in 1996, a number of the students in my night classes were GM workers who sought education because their jobs were being phased out and GM paid for re-training. The changing occupational outlook seemed to enable them to value education for its own sake. Yet today, the growing interest in vocational, rather than liberal, education threatens to turn America into a nation “of technically competent people who have lost the ability to think critically, to examine themselves, and to respect the humanity and diversity of others” (Nussbaum, *Cultivating* 300). Since the GM pullout, Flint, in search of an identity, has reoriented itself around the centrally located university that, if it is to unite a divided and devastated city, must reflect and cultivate the humanity of its students and citizens rather than repeat the mistake of idolizing technology and industry.

To do so, however, teachers and students must apply the ideas of a liberal education to see new possibilities in local places because, as Paulo Freire writes, “authentic thinking must start in the here and now, which constitutes the situation in which students are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they intervene” (66). The trouble is that no one wants to live in or look at Flint. All but three of the sixteen students in my “Doing Shakespeare” class commuted between eight and sixty miles to campus, and one was from Washington, DC; most admitted to being disinterested in Flint or afraid to walk beyond the immediate campus area. A couple of students were so intimidated that they needed a “buddy” to walk from class to their car in the parking structure. Their fears are bred by headlines, statistics, and crime watch emails but have no basis in reality, since most serious crime in Flint is drug- or gang-related and confined to the black “ghettos.” Students suffer from acute alienation and tend to blame the discomfort they feel talking on the phone or in face-to-face interactions with faculty on their addiction to texting and the ubiquity and efficiency of computers and smartphones. Few attribute their malaise to rootlessness—the displacement from any sense of place.

My class offered immersion as a cure: immersion in Shakespeare’s world and in local worlds, using language—both Shakespeare’s and our

own—as the bridge between our selves and the world (Rosenzweig 71). The word “nothing,” which echoes in the empty spaces of the heath and the mad king’s mind, contains an implicit challenge to see ostensibly desolate places as layered with histories made by the people who inhabit them and interact with them. Place should not be taken for granted. It is geographical and psychological, real and imagined.⁵ Maybe place is ultimately a mystery that most are blind to, a country that few have traveled to, because you cannot get there on any road; instead, it can be sensed and felt to be sacred (alive, meaningful, issuing a call) through the inaudible conversation that takes place between two pieces of earth—the human and its environment.

In “teaching” *King Lear* in the context of this experimental class, I wanted students to enter the play as an enveloping reality (not as an object of study) and respond personally to the characters and situations. Early in the exploratory process, I asked them to identify a character or situation they could relate to personally and write a contemporary monologue or a scene from their own experience. One student, Jack, whose girlfriend and best friend betrayed him, connected with Gloucester’s son, Edgar, who, after being betrayed by his brother and misjudged by his father, is forced to disguise himself as a mad beggar in order to avoid being apprehended. “Edgar I nothing am,” says the character in a memorable short monologue during which he strips naked (Shakespeare, *King Lear* 2.3.21), “elfs his hair,” “begrimes his face,” and “blankets his loins” (2.3.9–10). Jack used the assignment to write a poetic speech in which he sought to come to grips with his loss of sanity and the desire to “X [him]self out” (*Lear Reassembled* 7). In the poem, Jack describes himself being cast out by the very people who should “love [him] most forced into the cold storm of the world, alone, as perhaps I’d always wanted to be, in some dark recess of my thinking” (7). Jack wound up playing the Edgar character, renamed Tom in our play, who simultaneously veils and reveals his identity through the persona of a street poet who buys a dollar tee-shirt bearing the slogan “Barack Obama is my Home-Boy” from an enterprising homeless man and, as he transforms himself into an invisible madman, raps:

So I'm going underground.
Wait, wait. Slow it down. Sounds profound.
Either drown in this town,
stay stranger to danger
and let collect disrespect or eject.
Don't expect to see me around.
Yeah, I'm going off the grid.
Slid in on swelling underbelly,
yelling storytelling, compelling
this silence to violence. (7)

The poem describes the character's willingness to strip off the layers of his identity, and, by "ingest[ing] the testament of destitute, resolute, mute madness," he makes others see "nothing where, once, was me" (7). "Yes, it's scary," the character admits, but by adapting the rhythmic lyricism of Shakespeare's character he conveys the power of acting madness and rapping destitution to force us to see, listen to, and remember characters we might shun on the streets.

Jack's metaphor of "going underground" was actually what the class challenged each student to do: bridge the gap between the symbolic worlds of education and harsh realities with an implicit (and sometimes explicitly voiced) faith that their literary education would enable them "not to fall short or miss anything that is there to be seen and cared for" (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* 184).⁶ I asked them to walk out in and around brownfields where factories once stood, urged them to take photographs and create art, and invited them to spend Saturday morning at a local Catholic church's "breakfast program" which feeds over a hundred men, women, and children every week. I urged them to educate themselves by scanning the *Flint Journal*, visiting the Genesee County Historical Collections Center, and reading books like *Tear Down*, which criticizes the plan to revitalize Flint by erasing the ugly and abandoned nothings of homes and business that live like ghosts in our midst. My hope was that my students would be able to apply the dream visions of Shakespeare's *King Lear* to the particular visions they had as they took, as Henry David Thoreau writes in his essay *Walking*,

“that walk, never yet taken by us through this actual world, which is perfectly symbolical of the path which we love to travel in the interior and ideal world” (77). Thoreau’s essay chimes beautifully with a major lesson of *Lear* that to truly see what is before our eyes, our spiritual eyes (of insight) must also be working. Well-tended roads take us easily from point A to point B, but my students had no agenda (no “way” as Shakespeare’s blind Gloucester says) (4.1.18), no delegated job to do or task to fulfill. This was deliberate. I did not want to dictate but instead tried to challenge the students to chart their own courses, write their own characters, and not miss any adventure just because the life of perception feels perplexing, difficult, or unsafe. Because they were going out to see possibilities in themselves and a city that most city planners have relegated to the wrecking ball and iron claw, the abandoned roads and overgrown parking lots where factories once stood were ideal terrains that challenged them to listen and see, but mostly to feel. After she walked through the “scarred land” and discovered a blue tarpaulin tent, covering some ratty blankets, my student Alinda wrote that she saw “lines [of people] lingering for food,” “masks of misery,” and people who “lose the wedding ring, substitute the bottle,” and “shred the family quilt until it is nothing.”

After working with the play and exploring Flint, we had to begin connecting Shakespeare’s world with ours. The question “Why set *Lear* in Flint?” was challenging because it made each of us aware of where we stand geographically (“Do I live in Flint or in the suburbs?”), culturally (“Can I care about Flint or am I only afraid of it?”), and even spiritually (“Am I willing to see possibility in devastation or do I choose to turn a blind eye?”). As I stood at the board writing down students’ ideas as they spilled forth, there was general agreement that the main similarity between *Lear* and Flint was an atmosphere of “forlornness and a sense of abandonment”: “Flint is a divided city.” “Everybody here is out of work, not just the King.” “And people have to learn to reinvent themselves.” “Power is blind.” “Lear is most mad when he is King, trying to make everyone conform to his vision.” “Flint has had too many single industry fixes: back then, it was General Motors, now, it is the university. When will we learn that there is no singular answer to a complex question?”

“Maybe the answer is to *feel* more rather than do more.” “Right. Like in the play, the patriarchs, Lear and Gloucester, had to be cast out and learn to feel with strangers or learn to see feelingly by losing their physical sight.” “I think it’s important to remember that the play tells us that family dysfunction—broken homes, illegitimacy, addictions—this is the seedbed of the violence in our society.” “Absolutely. Here in Flint, we distance ourselves from it by saying, ‘not in my house, not in my neighborhood, the killing is over there,’ but Shakespeare doesn’t let us let ourselves off the hook.” “Maybe instead of making our vice character a bastard, he can be just getting out of prison.” “Can we hint at the racial tensions in Flint?” “No. We are a class of glow-in-the-dark white people. We cannot represent people of other races.” “Wouldn’t it be irresponsible not to reflect this huge issue in our city?” “Tragedy begins at home; but comedy begins out on the heath.” I asked the students where the “heath” of Flint is located, and somehow we all just gravitated to the brownfield up Kearsley Street, called “Chevy in the Hole.” Not only is the name of Flint’s first Chevrolet plant (1910) evocative of Flint’s blight and its signature disaster—the GM pullout—it is also where, in the winter of 1937, the workers of Flint sat down on strike and stopped the line, demanding their rights, which resulted in GM’s recognition of the fledgling United Auto Workers Union. How fitting that our characters would wander this ground, after my students had explored it for themselves, engaged in different kinds of labor but in solidarity with the earlier protesters—people who, like them, refused to sacrifice humanity(ies) to economic necessity.

Devising a Play—Beyond the Limitations of Identity Politics

In each teaching place, the structure of the collaboration mirrored, to some extent, aspects of the social structure. It worked with student strengths and exposed weaknesses that were a product of Soviet and American education, respectively. In Kazakhstan, I broke the eighteen students into smaller groups with occupational roles: directors, writers, stage managers, musicians and dancers, and set designers. Each student had an acting role in addition to his or her occupational role. What I did not realize at the time was that this framework reflected the structure

that Urie Bronfenbrenner describes as existing in Soviet-era primary school classrooms that were subdivided into “nested social units” supervised by an *aktiv* (a leader or core group) (40). Students at SSPI were close-knit, referred to each other as *sgupnitsy* (group-mates), and were at ease with improvisation and any kind of group work. My challenge was to get individuals to take initiative, especially in work that involved solitary invention—writing and making props.

On the Flint project, I assigned students to one of the three storylines, which were produced by days of group brainstorming. Students with bigger egos and voices gravitated toward the Lear storyline in which the titular character is a GM retiree who uses his buy-out money to purchase a scrapyard where he will disassemble cars and sell parts; he has a vision or master plan for putting men back to work and “saving” Flint. The subplot involved Green, Lear’s buddy from assembly line days, who uses his retirement money to buy up abandoned properties to grow marijuana for a cottage drug industry, and his two sons: Ed, an ex-con, and Tom, an aspiring street poet, both of whom compete for turf and their father’s love. Students who worked on this subplot tended to be outsider-creative types. Our third storyline was the “collective fool”—a group of UM-Flint English majors loose in Flint, using their favorite authors and ideas to create roles in the play world just as they will have to do in the “real” world. The students in this group were devoted English majors who had not found their niche or identified with a particular character, and who were apprehensive about acting.

The structure of the collaboration triggered student impulses to act on an already strong foundation in identity politics, which holds that one’s primary affiliation is with one’s local group, whether religious, ethnic, or based on sexuality or gender (Nussbaum, *Cultivating* 109–10). Drug use and racial coding in the Green subplot were the greatest sources of controversy surrounding the narrative thread. Tom, Green’s “good” son, performs rap poetry, which some students thought connoted blackness. These students strongly expressed their desire that ours should be a play “about character not about race.” This opinion had its roots in early conversations about whether a class of exclusively white students could address race onstage; the majority decided that we should not attempt

it. However, I was happy to see that students writing the subplot found ways to suggest, through the Green family, all kinds of marginalized or othered people that could be black or white. Interestingly, after it was pointed out that rap poetry and drugs are not exclusive to either race, the critics attacked behaviors—addiction and criminality.

It was interesting that the student who objected most vociferously to representing drug use was the same student who had been most vocal about representing Flint “as it is without sugarcoating anything” if we were going to write a play that held the mirror up to Flint culture “as Shakespeare did for his.” When her classmates were actually doing what she suggested, Sandra adamantly rejected their plotline, saying that she “was abused as a child,” had “seen firsthand what drugs do to families,” and would “not be part of tacitly supporting a father doing drugs with his kids.” The conflict over the content of the Green subplot threatened to undermine our collaboration because students, depending on their group affiliation, felt outraged, censored, or marginalized. In retrospect, I see that I could have handled the objections to Green and his authors with more detachment, wondering out loud why we are so quick to judge our fellow men when we patiently study and seek to understand similarly shocking literary characters.

While some students used their own experiences to judge others, other students, like Sarah, more quietly sought understanding through the artistic process. Up for every challenge, Sarah demonstrated resourcefulness, flexibility, and a work ethic by collaborating with other students on writing, editing, and revising the script on weekends, procuring set pieces and props, switching roles at the last minute, and rehearsing at any hour. Sarah’s grandfather came from Liverpool, England to work at AC Spark Plug in 1963. The week before technical and dress rehearsals were to begin, I met her at the local art museum on a Saturday afternoon to read over the script and pencil in sound and lighting cues. As we pored over the writing, we identified quite a few places where characters remained sketchy or underwritten and motives were unclear or unexamined. We agreed that there was insufficient motivation for Green’s self-blinding and that weak writing probably contributed to students’ unwillingness to engage with the character. In Shakespeare’s play,

Gloucester is viciously blinded by Edmund's machinations, and the blinding is necessary for the father to learn to see feelingly. The student who wrote the analogous scene in our play was inspired by Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*; Green gets drunk on liquor and recriminations and blinds himself by splashing household chemicals in his eyes. Sarah and I felt that there was inadequate motivation for this act. It was not clear why Green went to such an extreme. Our conversation turned toward the character's drug use and the intense controversy in class about whether we should stage it. Sarah had stayed out of the debate but had been taken aback by the severity of some students' views: "Lots of us," she said, "have had immediate experience with addiction, but that doesn't mean we can't examine it." She told me that her alcoholic father, who had the unfortunate job of driving a beer delivery truck, had become addicted to heroin. Her brother and an ex-boyfriend had the same addiction: "Oh yeah, this is a huge problem all over Flint." When I asked her why, she said, "I think people do heavy drugs like that because they do not want to face reality. It is just too bleak. That's why our project is so important, it helps people look closer at realities that are hard and painful." I was stunned not just by her admission but by her compassion and wisdom. Using the script as her lifeline, Sarah looked into her own family tragedy, and she pulled out the language that communicated Green's regret and guilt and explained that, to some extent, his self-destructive impulse was also creative:

I used to know what I wanted, knew what I was ready to starve for, knew where it would land me. How do we stop the good times from becoming the bad times? We get reckless in comfort. Now I can only pick up the pieces of these broken lives and try to put them together again with a paste of regret and shame. Should come as no surprise when they don't hold. *I have hidden from the world behind smoke. Numb to the pain, high as a kite. I have been a walking shadow—not even in my own body!!! We cannot see if we do not feel.* That's it! [Green leaps up, swipes the stuff off the table. Gets chemicals and pours them into a bucket.] (*Lear Reassembled* 9; emphasis added.)

Sandra, the aggressively judgmental student, persisted with her negativity. In a last ditch effort to incorporate her into our project, I asked her if she would read the role of Lear since she had identified with his character and even signed emails to me as “lunatic Lear.” She told me that she could not perform the role because she “could never forgive a guy like Green who grew weed and let his son go to prison for him.” I asked her if she could possibly “forgive” the fledgling writers, doubting that she would ever see or hear the healing that had taken place for students like Sarah for whom “Green” was a screen that enabled her to make creative use of her own tragedy. To protect the project, eventually I had to “fire” and replace this Lear who, in turn, called me “Lear” and compared herself to Cordelia. I felt sick about things coming to such a point, but recalled the comments of another class member in an online discussion: “It is our negativity that is letting Flint become waste.”

Some of the more thoughtful students witnessed, as I did, the damage done to the political life of the group by divisive factions and a refusal to step outside one’s own group affiliation. I had taught all of the students who worked on *Lear Reassembled* in other literature classes and never witnessed such vicious judgments of characters when we discussed stories or dramas as pure literature. Literature became dangerous (as it is meant to be) when translated to local reality. Doing so also made it alive and essential for bringing invisible people and problems to light and challenging all of us to wonder about other lives. Students who could sit in a Shakespeare class and respond to Gloucester and even Lear compassionately hated the characters the student writers created. Why? Perhaps because those characters were not like them or did not mirror them closely enough. Perhaps because they felt vulnerable—“I was abused as a child”—and could not bear to relive such personal tragedies that whispered the unsettling truth that they may be no better off than their suffering brothers and sisters or that their roles could easily be reversed.

I had hoped that my students could perform the very difficult balancing act of relating to others compassionately without having to recreate them in their own image. Jolene’s experience illustrates how difficult this was, particularly for students whose parents worked for GM. Finally, it was literature—a poem—that enabled Jo to overcome the trap of

chauvinism. Her father spent his life working at Delphi and, to illustrate his character, Jolene shared his motto with the class: “It’s not for me to wonder why, just do or die.” She explained that he was not one to talk about feelings or to cultivate relationships. When he retired, his wife left him, and Jolene had to pick up the pieces when he suffered a breakdown. Understandably, she imagined Lear as her father, especially when the class decided that Lear retired from GM. When several students wanted Lear to use his retirement to live out a vision for saving Flint, Jo protested that she did not “see Lear as a visionary or a businessman. This play is about family.” It was hard to pry her loose from insisting that the play had to reflect her family. I tried unsuccessfully to intervene: “Lear is larger than life. His decision to split his kingdom in three parts is revolutionary, unthinkable politically. His signature characteristic is that he contends with life. How can we just make a play about a GM retiree? It’s so ordinary.” Jo reacted to that word as if I’d slapped her in the face: “It’s not ordinary.” She was right to correct me sternly. Although the will of the class overruled the personal story, Jo was in the group of students who were writing the Lear storyline, and I continued to prod her to draw inspiration from her father’s story to write a brand new King Lear.

Jo’s resistance manifested itself in writer’s block, exacerbated by having to cope with her father’s mental condition and a young husband’s heart condition, raising three nephews, and working for minimum wage at McDonald’s. It took the purposeful indirection of an afternoon walk through Chevy-in-the-Hole that called up memories of her father along with her nephews’ energy and some input from me to inspire her. She appeared touched when I told her that I had discovered the poetic origin of her father’s motto, “It’s not for me to wonder why, just do or die,” in Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade” (lines 13–15)—proof that factory workers need art. The idea that her father appreciated poetry enough to live by it seemed to provide the necessary distance she needed to write fresh and even poetic lines, preserved in the final script as a moment of clarity for a mentally-addled Lear who was not just Jolene’s dad but a new creation. Lear is wandering in the brown-field, hallucinating “avenues of industry, alight with celestial illumination, an orchard of progress, ripe for the picking” when he comes upon

the blind Green, whom he believes to be his employee (*Lear Reassembled* 12). In the course of their reminiscing, Lear acknowledges the way that assembly line (or “shop rat”) culture cauterized certain human feelings and made him an unfit father:

Do you remember the years we spent here? Three and a half decades, Green. Thirty-five years spent trading potentially beautiful moments of our lives for the gray drudgery of cold metal and concrete, the symphonies of machines ushering away the hours. It fits that we should wind up here, once again in the great nothing, trying to yank something out of the womb of the abyss. Can't you see the type of men that this made us? (12)

“The womb of the abyss” is an evocative metaphor: the “abyss” is the brownfield that was once a factory site, but it is also the devastated lives of Flint families whose livings and hopes GM took when they pulled up stakes and closed the plants. The class, when it worked, invited second-generation victims to review and transform their lives and the lives of family members.

A big part of my learning in Kazakhstan was my own transformation from a teacher to a teacher-anthropologist who studied her students and became, in the process, a vulnerable observer who, in the words of auto-ethnography theorist Ruth Behar, “was coming to know herself by knowing others” (33). Perhaps because I was displaced from my home culture it was easier for me to play this part in Kazakhstan where moments of dissonance and conflict between my students and me were exciting opportunities to study our different responses. On the *Lear Reassembled* project, I reverted to solving problems rather than studying them, which often made me impatient and less attuned to the ways the students were succeeding or failing, based on their unique family cultures and personal struggles. Unconsciously, I adopted a managerial model and in doing so missed precious opportunities to understand the historical and psychological conditions entrapping or limiting some of the students.

Teaching interculturally revealed my own weaknesses. I now know that I feel more able to ask anthropological questions about background

and culture and to wonder at student responses in an overseas classroom; with students from my own cultural family, I am more reticent. I also understand that to become a better teacher-anthropologist at home, I need literary lenses to correct my near-sightedness and enable me to see my own students with a dramatist's eye. Sandra signed emails as "lunatic Lear," perhaps in effort to win my attention to her grievances, but I grew weary of her destructive tirades whereas I never tire of the literary Lear's rages. Kevin Dwyer's solution to the way anthropological inquiry creates otherness is to remember and respect the fact that his "informants" bring their own purposes and projects to their encounters with him (Dwyer 147). There were sixteen projects emerging in my classroom and, constrained by time and with little institutional support, I sought homogeneity too quickly. The take-away lesson for my development as a teacher is to hang onto the vulnerability and the posture of humble student which is my natural response to being in front of a classroom of people who are strangers—even in my own city, even if I have taught them before. Never assume a knowing stance toward students or even toward the material; remember Kazakhstan, where teaching was a passionate and collaborative grope toward knowledge, not only of the subject at hand, but of what elementary school teacher Karen Gallas calls the unique and evolving "cultural system" that is the classroom (136).

The student subplot was, in many ways, a microcosm of the larger project. Without models, five English majors had to write roles for themselves and, in the process, articulate our project goals and assess outcomes. One of the student characters, Keaton (named for the student's love of poet John Keats), dies like Shakespeare's Cordelia, trying to assist Lear. This meant that the student group had to write a scene in which they return to the university, meet their English teacher, and come to terms with the death of their friend. It also meant that they had to answer their original questions: Is Flint too dangerous a place to study? Do the costs of learning by experience outweigh the gains? In the end, they decided to use the example and words of their friend Keaton, who lived and died by her belief in a poet's words: "[D]o you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?" (*Lear Reassembled* 9). Earlier in the writing process,

the group wanted Keaton, separated from her friends, to write a letter. After her death, the family finds her lost book bag and gives her grieving friends the letter, which Serena (“Aeria”) reads in the final scene:

I don't know if anyone will ever read this letter, but I'm writing all of this down because words have always been able to comfort me and make me feel better when things start to fall apart. I met a sweet and bitter old man in the middle of an overgrown field in the center of the city. It looked to me like he was standing in the midst of Flint's shadow on a night that pitied neither wise men nor fools. That night, I learned what it was like to see a father feel so deeply for a child that he would mourn, even while they were still alive. He thought I was his daughter and he for sudden joy did weep, and I for sorrow wrote a poem. But, when he spoke to me, I heard the words of the city echoed in his voice. He spoke of a vision of Flint but told me that it had only blinded him and cost him all he had. He treated me with kindness and helped me out of the cold. He helped me to see that leaving my friends in the face of danger wasn't a bad thing because I was still alive. This man, this crazy old man, taught me a lot that night. He taught me to:

Have more than you show
Speak less than you know
Learn more than you throw

We talked for a long time about Flint and how it's turning into nothing but ash and empty spaces. But I told him that maybe, like a phoenix, Flint can be born again. Maybe something beautiful can be made from the violence and the destruction. Part of me fears that maybe Shakespeare was right. Maybe “we that are young shall never see so much nor live so long.”

Keaton (13)

When Serena read the original draft of the letter in class I was moved by the way she had incorporated the group's fascination with the phoenix symbol as a way to positively spin the arson epidemic that has plagued Flint since the summer of 2010. Then I remembered that Keats ends

his sonnet “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again” with the same image: “When through the old oak forest I am gone, / Let me not wander in a barren dream, / But when I am consumed in the fire, / Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire” (lines 11–14). The fire in which Keats imagines being consumed is the passionate life of human beings which Shakespeare renders as “the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassioned clay” (Keats 5–6). This was a perfect example of the serendipitous connections that can be made in a creative process and describes the way literary language enabled us to work through conflict to the deep satisfactions of collaboration. I learned, from students in teaching places on both sides of the globe, that literature really is the best apprenticeship for world citizens because it prepares individuals to work in an increasingly unpredictable and frenetically diasporic world where we must “play well with others” or risk extinction and where we need to see the different and the foreign, even in a Rust Belt city or a college classroom, as an invitation to explore rather than a threat to be resisted.

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Notes

- 1 Turner notes that “the movement of return” or the “purified look at ourselves” has always been part of the discipline’s long-term program (xiii), and he applauds Meyerhoff’s groundbreaking auto-ethnographic work for demonstrating the value of a “double cultural rebirth” (xiii).
- 2 My anthropological approach actually fits into a movement that I did not know existed, dubbed the “new localism,” which is a “response to economic globalization” (Gruenewald and Smith xiv). Whereas this movement privileges the patterns of connectedness and mutuality of local communities, I arrived at my own version of this approach only through the intense experience of coming to know

- a foreign place that characterizes teaching abroad and returning home to apply what I learned. This essay reflects the comparative searching and interculturalism that global teaching requires.
- 3 This is the same approach recommended by “development” educators such as Ryan who seek to integrate the global and local. Ryan believes that development education works best from a local starting point that “engages students in a deeply affective exploration of their connections with their own community” (106).
 - 4 After returning to the US from Kazakhstan, I tried to run an online “Kazakh-American Reading Group.” But discussions of a short novel failed to develop, and a graduate student who worked on the project wondered, in her final report, if this was because “they [the Kazakhstani girls] tend to internalize it so much more than we do. We are trained to use analytical tools to discuss it more objectively.” Yet the Kazakhstani response provides balance and is much closer to the way Shakespeare’s audiences responded to literature. Whitney characterizes the early-modern form of response as “interpretation as application” (1).
 - 5 For a fine discussion of the way art offers a language of inquiry into the depth of place and intensities of our relationships to place, see Graham 29–47.
 - 6 Fontaine and Mexal cite a Stanford survey that suggests that the “long-term value of an education is to be found not merely in the accumulation of knowledge or skills but in the capacity to forge fresh connections between them, to integrate different elements from one’s education and experience and bring them to bear on new challenges and problems” (363).

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