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Uncovering Voices: Middle School Poetry Anthologies

by

Stacey L. Eisenkraft

A Letter from Zora

A wide grin spreads across my face when I discover Zora's letter in my mailbox less than one week after the conclusion of the summer reading program. I observe her careful print and the smiley face with winking eyes that she drew on the front of the envelope. I read eagerly, delighting in Zora's unique expressions and the details about her life away from school. But I slow down when I come to her comments about the class to absorb their weight:

Dear Ms. Eisenkraft,

...Thanks to teach us to do the anthology that make me know how hard I can work, do you know I feel I nervous when I have to read my anthology to the other class, because I am scare. That's the first tune and I can't handle it. However, I had a nice time at your class. I am proud that you are my teacher...

...Thank you Ms. Eisenkraft, I won't [forget] that I have a good time with you and other students.

In my mind, I see Zora shifting nervously as she stood before the classes to read from her own poetry anthology. I remember how quickly she shared the poems she had prepared and then her shy smile as she proposed to keep reading. I reread her letter several times before tucking it in my journal where I am sure to rediscover it.

Something Borrowed

I had come to teach in New York City's Chinatown straight from a Master's of Arts in Teaching program on the west coast. Finishing up my graduate classes and choreographing the cross-country move had left me little time to plan the seventh grade language arts class I would be teaching. I knew only that I intended to focus on poetry within a Reading and Writing Workshop and planned to borrow an idea for creating personal poetry anthologies from my mentor, Sharon. I spent most of my spare time before the move perusing used book stores, collecting a variety of poetry books with which I would stock my classroom library.

Over the course of our time working together, Sharon was always pulling student work and assignment guidelines that she thought might interest me from the depths of her files. When Sharon handed me a few student poetry anthologies that she had photocopied, she stressed how rewarding this work had been for her students the previous year. She smiled as she recalled students who had hounded her to finish her assessment so that they could take their projects home.

"These are amazing—they're beautiful!" were the first words out of my mouth as I flipped through the carefully illustrated pages of poetry. The art media and style of the anthologies ranged from black ink line drawings to pastel washes of watercolor. I was immediately struck by

the uniqueness of each project. Every personal collection of poetry was testimony to the individuality of each student as a writer, reader, artist, and graphic designer. I read through the reader-response style reflections which accompanied many of the poems, noting the diverse approaches the student writers used to discuss the poems they chose to include.

I paused to linger over an anthology which belonged to a foreign exchange student at the high school, because I knew all of my summer students would be non-native English speakers. I read with much interest this student's commentary that he had included a lot of Shel Silverstein's poetry because his limited English did not prevent him from understanding and enjoying his reading. This student's statement returned to me a week later following a phone conversation with Alice, the principal at the middle school in Chinatown. She reminded me that, although my students from the summer program would be rising seventh and eighth graders, I could expect some reluctant readers and an average reading level of close to fourth grade. With this piece of information, I tried to anticipate my students' needs. I turned the phrase "reluctant readers" around in my mind, wondering if I had what it takes to help these students become "good" readers. I define these readers as the kind who expect to burrow into a book and completely lose themselves and who know how to seek out literature which can provide this experience, no matter their reading level.

Within a strong Reading and Writing Workshop framework, the anthology project could, I decided, provide an opportunity for my seventh graders to learn how one goes about finding literature that appeals to the heart and mind. I appreciated the guidelines that Sharon and her class had brainstormed for the project, because they took into consideration the value of choice in reading and writing, the need to explore personal connections to literature through written reflection, and the power of aesthetic or visual expression. I was also quite simply won over by the individual anthologies' charm and recognized how much more meaningful our four weeks together might be if each student had her own book to take away from the class.

Chinatown, New York 10002

I embarked on a journey, in all senses of the word, when I began my four weeks of teaching English at this large middle school in the heart of New York City's Chinatown. The adjustment to New York left me in a perpetual daze as I tried to absorb the richness of such a culturally and ethnically diverse city. Each morning as the packed city bus I rode to work bumped and lurched its way downtown, I marveled at how the signs in each neighborhood changed from Arabic to Russian to Bengali to Hebrew to Chinese all within the twenty minute ride. Another world greeted me as I descended from the bus: glazed ducks swung in restaurant windows, newsstands sold Chinese newspapers, electronic gadget stores blared Chinese pop music. My senses zigzagged as I was simultaneously lured by the mouth watering displays of exotic fruits and repulsed by the pungent odor of rotting garbage, both of which are so distinct to Chinatown.

All fifteen of my seventh-grade students were recent immigrants from mainland China and Hong Kong. In English, they kept their heads ducked and their eyes lowered as they spoke in whispery voices. When I didn't understand and asked a student to repeat, I risked embarrassing her and losing her participation all together. I leaned forward constantly, straining to hear their comments and questions. But in Chinese, my students' voices rang out in the singsong tones of Mandarin and Cantonese as they called out unabashedly to each other from across the classroom. In Chinese, they jutted out their chins and stared each other down as they boldly argued their opinions.

Most of the students lived in Chinatown, many within walking distance of the school. As I interviewed each of the students during the first week of class, I learned that all of them spoke Chinese at home; none of their parents spoke English as fluently as their children. Most of the students surprised me by expressing their contentment at spending three hours at school each weekday during their summer vacation. "It's so boring to be at home," Benson explained to me. "There's nothing to do. I just sit, watch TV, play video game." As I learned more about home life for the students, I became increasingly aware that few of them had opportunities to explore the city which lay beyond the borders of Chinatown.

This became especially apparent when Chen Bin, who lived near the school, asked me where I lived.

"Manhattan," I replied broadly. Chen Bin nodded slowly, pondering something.

"Manhattan?" he checked, "I think I've been there before."

On another occasion, I took my class to the local branch of the public library to apply for library cards and browse. I stood at the circulation desk with a group of students, coaching them through the complicated library card application form. "You need to write your address—where you live—on these lines," I explained, pointing to a section of the form I was holding. I walked behind the students and peered over their hunched shoulders. I quickly observed that several of the students were filling in their city as "Chinatown." They exchanged doubtful looks as I corrected them and told them they actually lived in the city of New York.

One day, I placed postcards of various Manhattan sights and skylines on my students' desks before the morning bell rang. They examined their cards at length when they arrived, moving around the room to view the others. When they had settled down, I borrowed Chen Bin's card, which sported an aerial view of Manhattan, to conduct a pithy geography lesson. Together, we located Chinatown within Manhattan, and I watched as a satisfying look of "ah hah" registered on Chen Bin's face.

I empathized enormously with my students' state of confusion. To varying degrees, we were all newcomers to a city that runs at a dizzying pace. I empathized with their loneliness. In a sudden move across the country, I, too, had removed myself from all that was familiar. I often found myself marveling at the irony of life in the big city: even as one shares every square foot of land and air with others, it is possible to feel terribly isolated. Like my students, there were many mornings when I also breathed a sigh of relief upon arrival at school. The structure of school and my work there offered an anchor while I was still in transition: living out of boxes and trying to negotiate a new way of life.

I wish the solution to my students' sense of displacement was as simple as showing them a postcard. If only those grainy pictures, which had offered a visual connection of Chinatown to the rest of Manhattan, could also renew the emotional connection they had suffered when their lives in China were uprooted. Instead, I had only my version of Reading and Writing Workshop to offer; with them, I brought my strong conviction that they both matter. I believed that during our four weeks together, through the reading and writing of poetry, I could reach my students and help them reach within themselves to find their voices, in English.

The First Plunge

The summer weather was unbearably hot and humid in New York City. The air felt thick in the classroom, weighing down our movements and impeding clear thinking. On our first day together, I observed the rivulets of sweat which rolled down some of my students' faces and the bangs which lay plastered to others' foreheads. "Here we go!" I thought, as I introduced myself and shared my hopes for our time together. With a tremor of nervous excitement rippling through my stomach, I saw us diving into our class, pulling ourselves through the soupy humidity which filled our classroom.

I didn't introduce the anthology project right away. Instead, we settled into a rhythm of regular reading and writing, sharing and discussing. Like the bus I rode downtown each morning, we bumped and lurched along at first, negotiating and compromising until we settled on a Workshop schedule that best accommodated our needs. I was grateful for our three hour block together, because it provided what one might deem to be the most essential element for an effective Workshop: time. Three consecutive hours together afforded us the luxury of extending our day's reading time if the class was absorbed or adding a Writing Workshop for which there was a sudden demand.

Our guiding question for the summer was extremely broad: "What is poetry?" Yet, when I introduced the unit to the class by posing the question, I received a limited range of responses. "Poetry rhymes," almost all of the students agreed. Several people suggested that it should be funny or sad. "Poems have to tell stories," Benson offered. When I questioned them about the different forms that poets use, Xu Dong and Mary recalled learning and writing Haiku, and a few students described the forms which traditional Chinese poetry takes.

I supplied a box of colored chalk and invited the class to write their thoughts, hypotheses, and questions about poetry "graffiti-style" on one of the chalkboards. I encouraged them to add to the board as they had realizations or made discoveries throughout our unit. During the transition between Reading and Writing Workshop, I delighted in observing as a student or two sidled up to the board to draw arrows between connecting thoughts or otherwise revisit their views on poetry. By the end of the summer, the board was colorfully peppered with words and phrases in both English and Chinese: "light versus dark," "tragedy," "poetry is many feelings," "nature things," and "It is for everyone."

The "research" we conducted as we continued to search for answers to our question took place during Reading and Writing Workshop. We spent a chunk of class time each day spread out around the room, silently reading poetry of our choosing. Following this time, the class always came back together—either as a whole group or sometimes splitting into smaller ones—to share poems or information about the poets we had discovered. I relied on a variety of activities to facilitate this sharing time. We held many Read-Arounds in which we sat in a circle and took turns reading favorite poems. As an alternative to Read-Arounds, the students broke into groups of four to select a poem and perform a group reading/skit.

Sometimes, I asked the students to talk about the covers of their poetry books or their illustrations. We discussed how certain covers attract the reader, how the illustrations complement the poetry, the kinds of choices artists and poets make, and our own ideas for illustrating and creating covers. We also held Book Auctions at which we dynamically advertised favorite books of

poems and “bid” on volumes which we wanted to borrow. Sharing and discussing helped all of us to enrich our understanding of our reading and to discover new writers.

I used Writing Workshop to introduce the students to a variety of poetic forms and styles. I wanted them to know that Haiku is not the only kind of poetry that young people can write successfully and to believe that wonderful poetry does not have to rhyme. Using Nancie Atwell’s mini-lesson format, I offered new poetic forms and listed the characteristics of these poems. I made copies of several examples of the new type of poetry to hand out to the class to read and discuss together. Sometimes, it was helpful and an opportunity to strengthen our class community to begin writing a poem as a class in the introduced form.

During one memorable Writing Workshop, we explored Dadaist poetry as an opportunity for words to meet, by chance, and become their own poems. We spent some time simply snipping words of all lengths, size, and personality from a box of magazines. I combined the many scraps of paper in a bag and invited the students to pull out a handful. Some of the students spread their words out on their desks and then manipulated the bunch according to their poetic senses while others recorded their poems in the order in which they plucked the words from the pile. Mei Rong Ou Yang created the following Dadaist poem (Figure 1):

American
by Mei Rong Ou Yang

People on California
plant trees.
Our homes on town
are little and simple.
Lot of flowers are
best-selling
George Washington is
a history president
and that is my
story.

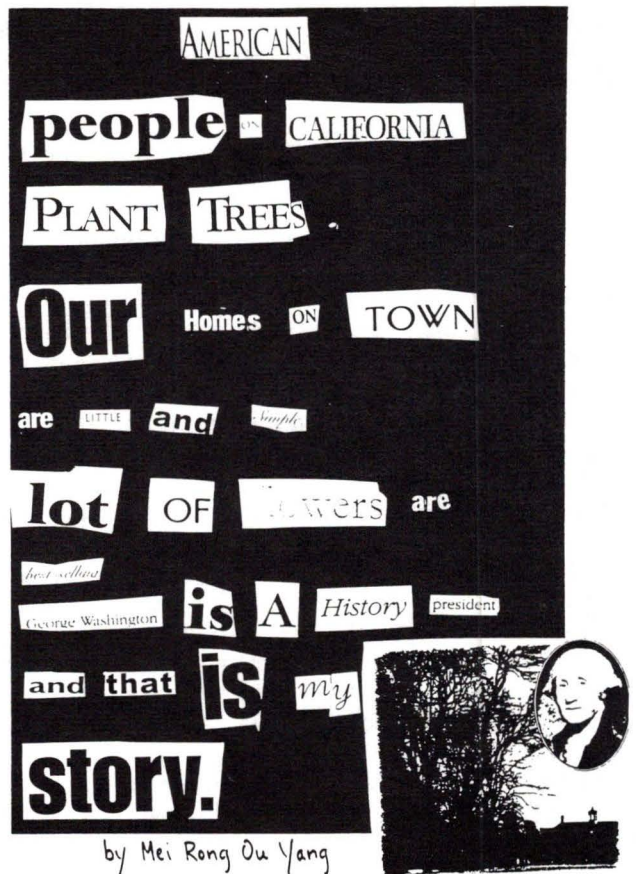


Figure 1

Considering the endless possibilities, it was difficult to decide which kinds of poems I should introduce to my students. Often, I made my selection according to the poetry which caught their eye during Reading Workshop. After I overheard Kam and Zora excitedly whispering over the calligrammes in *A Moon in Your Lunch Box*, I borrowed the book of poems back from them to put together a minilesson about such poetry. I passed Edna Kovacs' suggestion, in *Writing Across Cultures: A Handbook on Writing Poetry & Lyrical Prose* on to my students:

To write a calligramme, begin with the shape of something and let that shape suggest to you what to write. In Apollinaire's calligramme, he doesn't write about rain in general; he writes about a particular rainy day, when he has certain feelings and certain memories. Try making your poem particular in that way. (p. 40)

Wai Ching Yip, who struggled to express himself in English, embraced the calligrammes. The calligramme afforded him a unique opportunity to use both words and pictures simultaneously to get his meaning across. In his poem, *Water Gun* (Figure 2), the lines of poetry intersect each other and crisscross the page, as if they were actually shooting out from the barrel of one of these plastic toys:

Water Gun
by Wai Ching Yip

In the park I saw
many people
playing
with
water
gun.
They had big water
guns
and
small water guns.
Many people
and
babies
got wet.

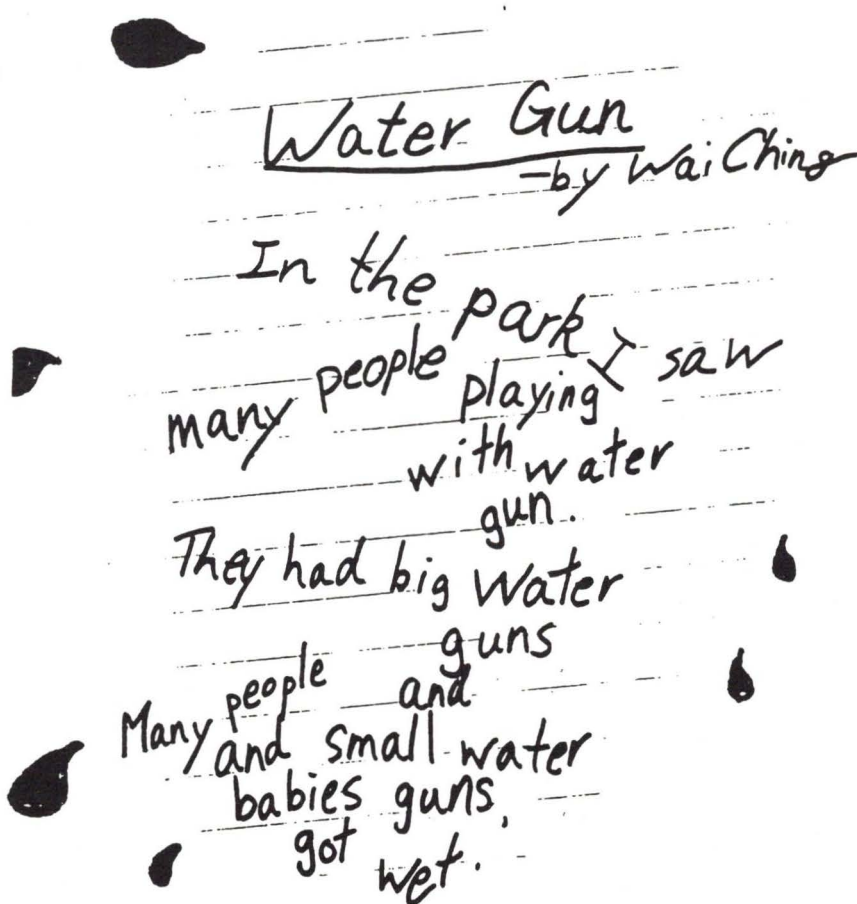


Figure 2

My students enjoyed a shared reading of Pablo Neruda's *Ode to My Socks* and the discussion that followed so much that we went on to write our own odes. The students chose a variety of subjects as the focus of their odes, some humorous and some serious. Mary wrote several odes and finally settled on *Ode to the Humans* for inclusion in her anthology:

Ode to the Humans
by Mary Rao

Ode to the humans
Who have feelings
Love is Romantic
Rich and poor
Always thoughtful
I'm very lucky to be a human

As I brought a variety of poetic forms to my students' attention, I knew I did not want to give the impression that true poetry falls under named categories. I recognize that, as a writer, I tend to rely on free verse more than any other form of poetry. Free verse allows me to shake loose the inner-demon, the one who always insists on following the rules, to express myself with considerably less hesitancy. With this in mind, we read and discussed many examples of free verse poetry. Some students chose to imitate the styles or explore the subjects of the poets we encountered in their own writing. For example, Zora shared Gustavo Gatti's poem *Mama* during a Read-Around and then went on to write *My Mom*:

Mama
by Gustavo Gatti

You smell like milk that's spilled
You smell like honey
You smell like bread and mint
and the freshness of the morning.

My Mom
by Zora Li

I come from my mom
I lived in my mom's stomach
she made me feel safe
And locked me into a healthy life.

Finally, I also used mini-lessons to bring aspects of writing to my students' attention that make any poem, free verse or otherwise, a pleasure to read: metaphor, repetition, onomatopoeia, and blank spaces, for example.

I encouraged my students to try writing in the forms or imitating the styles that we studied and sampled, but I also gave them the freedom to choose *not* to try something. Some students felt they did not know how to get started writing without a prompt whereas other students always needed to be able to decide on their own what to write. The only writing rule governing the class

was that the students had to write during our workshop time. Eventually, even this rule was stretched to accommodate sketching, following a mini-lesson on its value as a prewriting exercise. Several students found that their poetry flowed best from images. I noted that students often revisited the poetry I introduced a few workshops down the road, as though they needed time to marinate in the new form before trying their own hand at it. For this reason, I wrote my mini-lesson notes on large sheets of chart paper that could then be hung around the room and referred to by the students.

By the time I formally discussed the anthology project with my class, we had already established a comfortable workshop for reading, writing, and sharing poetry. I asked my students to spend some time perusing the student anthologies that I had borrowed from Sharon and considering what they might keep, change, and add in their own anthologies. Several small group and whole class discussions later we agreed on these components:

- Original cover design and anthology title
- Dedication
- Table of Contents
- At least twelve poems written by the student-poet
- At least twelve poems written by other poets (can be other students)
- At least ten illustrations/pieces of artwork to accompany the poems
- At least five Reflections (written responses to poems of one's choice)
- Author's Page

Requiring an original cover for the anthology and illustrations/artwork to accompany the poetry within seemed especially significant to me. I am a firm believer in the visual response as a powerful vehicle for interpreting and relating to literature. In my own classroom, I have seen the quiet, withdrawn student find her voice and become an active member of our reading and writing community when I asked students to use collage, paint, or crayons to communicate their understanding and questions of a text.

As the students settled into their anthologies, deciding on guiding themes or the overall look they wanted the book to have, the climate of our workshop intensified. The students found much of their material and direction during Reading and Writing Workshop when they were reading poetry for enjoyment and spending time writing, sharing, and revising their own poetry. They were so involved in their projects that, once I established each student's focus through a quick Status-of-the-Class Conference, they scattered around the room with individual agendas. A number of activities took place at the same time: students browsed through the classroom library, read poetry, read through each others' anthologies, provided feedback, wrote, revised, edited, responded to each other's writing verbally and in writing, painted, drew, cut and pasted, and held conferences with me and/or other students about their work.

Cookies and Soda: A Writers' Celebration

"I am the author of this anthology, and it is called *Trees*. This is my first book," Xu Dong pronounced these triumphant words with unmistakable pride as he stood up within the circle. The summer program was about to come to an end, and two other teachers at the school, Kiran and Kimberly, and I had brought our classes together in a celebration to recognize and share our students' hard work and successes. I had asked my students to choose one or two poems to read

aloud from their anthology at the celebration. Although they were quite nervous about the reading and the presence of two other classes, their choice of words and upright posture conveyed their personal sense of accomplishment.

Following the students' reading, we toasted their success with soda and elegantly arranged trays of wafer cookies. The three classes displayed their finished pieces on the library tables where the students could take a closer look at their peers' work. As I approached the crowded tables, Zora came rushing towards me with a look of wonder: "Oh, Ms. Eisenkraft! That was so hard for me! My heart was beating too fast—I didn't know if I could do it." I chuckled as Zora clutched the front of her shirt dramatically and recalled how she had chosen to spontaneously share an extra poem while reading before the classes.

Conclusion

The end to our four weeks together arrived sooner than many of us wished. The sixteen of us had become a tight knit community of readers and writers, and we had come to cherish those peaceful hours of collaboration. At our last meeting, we shared the picture book of Maya Angelou's poem, *Life Doesn't Frighten Me*, and exchanged goodbyes. As the students drifted out of the classroom, I waved until they turned the corner, unable to keep from calling after them, "Goodbye. Keep reading, keep writing!"

With the students' permission, I was keeping their poetry anthologies for the month of August and had promised to return them when school reconvened. The anthologies sat stacked on my desk, taking advantage of the students' departure to transform themselves into artifacts of nostalgia. Reluctant to pack up my belongings, I sat down to read through their work and attempt to absorb all that had transpired during that month. My earliest goal for my students, my hope for them to find their voices through their reading and writing of poetry, came to mind. The anthologies struck me as rich testimony to my students' growth that summer. Hao's book, called simply *Poem*, held my attention, and I reflected on this shy thirteen-year-old boy who had remained extremely serious and reluctant to discuss or share his writing throughout our workshop. Despite his tendency to withdraw, I had recognized Hao's growing confidence and emerging voice as a writer in poems like *My Name*:

My Name

by Hao Chen

My name is Hao Chen
last name is Hao
first name is Chen
I don't know
what my name means
I feel my name is good
I like my name
Hao Chen is my second name
My first name was Shi Chen
I always got sick
so my father changed my name
When I was 8 years old.

On Hao's Author's Page, he pasted a photograph of him sporting a half-smile and standing under a sign which claims, "American." Underneath the photograph, he wrote:

Hao Chen was born on 4-10-85 in China. In 1997, he came to New York. Mr. Chen lives with his parents and two sisters. He is now at the school I.S. 131. This is a first book for Mr. Chen.

Hao's final assertion, that this is a "first book," and the implication that there are more to come, reassure me that he will continue to write and discover literature. His current English teacher, Nikoletta, affirmed my hopes for Hao when she shared a reflective piece that Hao wrote the following fall:

I feel the most beautiful place in the world is at I.S. 131 school room 321-C, during the summer time. My summer school was in there. It was not beautiful, but I feel it was beautiful. My teacher is Ms. Eisenkraft. There were only 16 persons. There was not fighting, only reading, writing. There we had only one month.

...At this summer school, I made an anthology book. In the anthology I put the poems that I like, by another people or me, and had a picture for each poem. We have five redactions at the last page. I have my picture and something about me.

...After the this summer, I love poems very much.

Zora's letter and Hao's reflection flood me with the unexpected joy that comes when honest and trusting students help me see and understand what matters. Suddenly, the tables turn and I am once again awed by what my students can teach me. I reread Zora and Hao's words and then pick up *The Five Mountains* and *Poem*, Zora and Hao's beautiful anthologies. I view the inviting collections of poems from the heart and stunning watercolors in a different light. In these two children's words and art, I find the reflection of a determined girl and boy taking risks and looking deep within themselves. I hear the soft murmurs of two courageous young people finding their voices.

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