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The role of Poetry in Building Community Identity in Newham, A Psychosocial Exploration.

Sonia Quintero¹

The role of poetry in building community identity

"I am different but not a stranger...I am a poet"

I started the community poetry group answering my own need of belonging and after a realisation that I was missing the poet I used to be. My identity was diluting, and I was not anymore, a poet but just an immigrant, lost in a place where my 'language' was not understood. My inner 'wild child' resisted the temptation of this label in my story. The challenge of using poetry to express my feelings, my fears, and dreams, looked as in an 'impossible dream'. Could poetry, a language-based art, serve me as a bridge to connect with people, build a sense of belonging and somehow reclaim my identity as an artist and a poet? Soon I found that I was not alone in this journey. Many people in this amazing multilingual and multicultural borough were in the same storm and boat as me. People from different backgrounds joined the group, Members of the group are energetic, ambitious, and generous. They share ideas, experiences and continue in touch beyond the group setting. They come from a wide range of ages and cultures; some are homeless, some are coping with mental and physical health issues, some have learning difficulties, many have no access to higher education, and a few have

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published their work. Why do these individuals from Newham gather every week to share deep personal stories, through poetry, with a diverse group of strangers? ...Because they also have refused those labels, because they are also resisting being allocated in categories that do not represent them. They are creative people, they are dancers, photographers, teachers, they are poets.

We Are Poets

We are the ones

Who feel the sting of loss,

The pain and misery of life;

Connected by allowing our emotions,

By not hiding far behind

Rehearsed smiles,

But sharing our frowns as they emerge.

At home,

We might be mothers, sons or wives,

We might be English, German, Spanish, other,

We might be teachers, nurses, men in suits,

Who come from places of divorce

Or happy hearths.

We might be all and more when we're away,

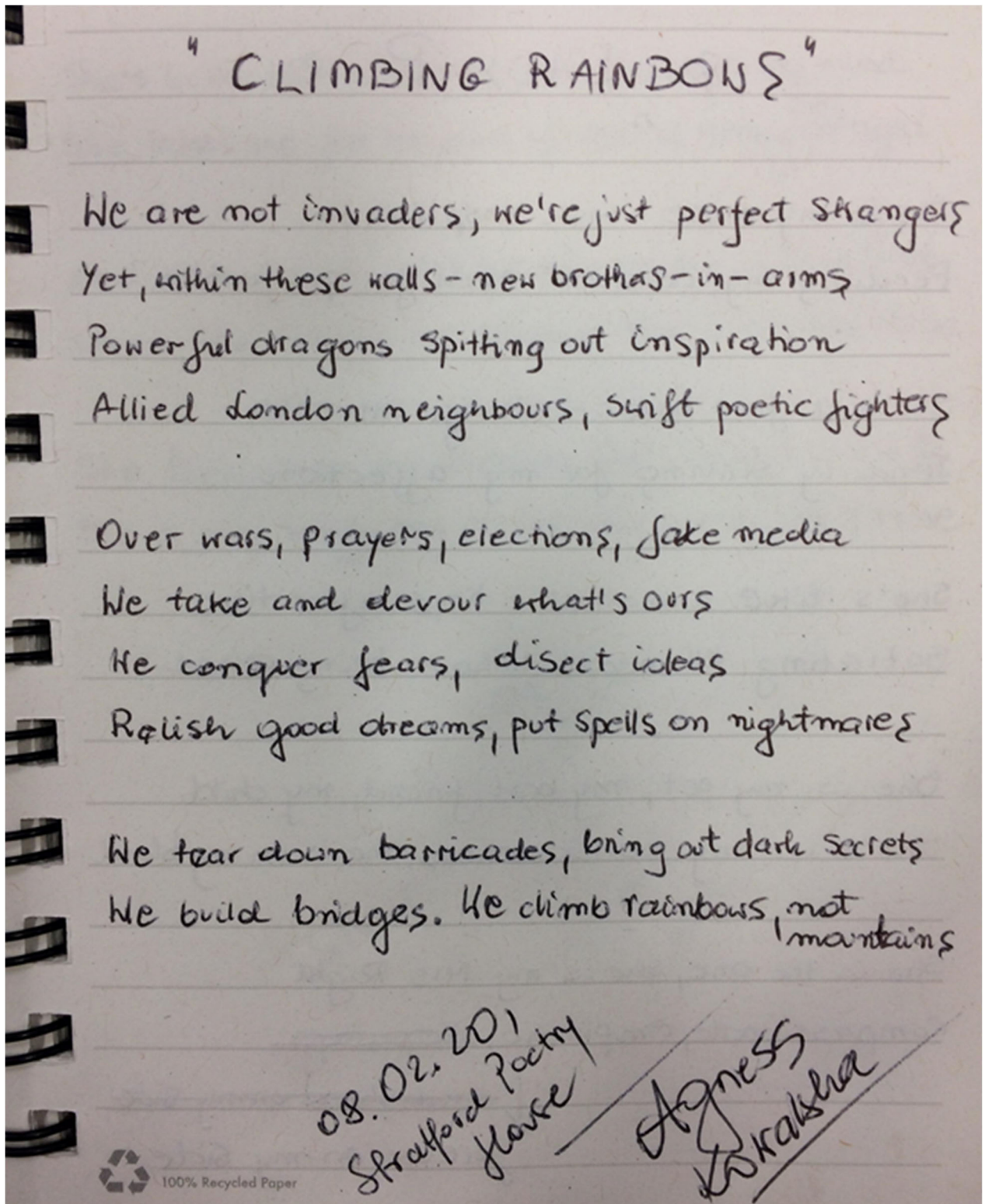
But here, we're poets sharing poetry.

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My interest in the role of poetry in community building is driven by my passion for both poetry and community. In a society that is constantly changing, new intersections are created, and old paradigms must be challenged. Based on my personal experience of organising poetry groups and working with forced migrants attending a refugee education programme, this article explores the community-building and cohesive power of poetry when working with the most diverse communities.

Through my work, I have understood that the use of poetry gives meaning to subjective words such as 'identity', 'belonging' and 'community', when these concepts are experienced with other group members.

Poetry can demolish language barriers and cultural differences when it is based in open and honest exchanges between participants. Poetry is a language in itself and when used in a safe and welcoming environment it can be a bridge that connects our differences and acknowledges our similarities. The work I have been doing for the last five years, using poetry and creative writing, has increased a sense of wellbeing and belonging in the diverse community of Newham, where this is based. Newham is an inner-city borough in London, England.



A Community poetry group

I am an immigrant poet based in Newham for several years and the founder and organiser of an established poetry group. I feel passionate about how community poetry initiatives support minorities impacted by poverty, inequality, unemployment, language barriers and restricted access to education. It is important to understand how people can use creative approaches to re-write their own narratives and face the identity that emerges from the interjection created by moving to an unknown place. The role of language in this new narrative is crucial and how immigrants embrace it, is a journey in itself. The collection of values, beliefs and attitudes create subcultures in society. Language is a fundamental part of culture and through it, people can express different aspects of that microcosm.

Identity - belonging: "becoming a poet" through bonds and rituals

Members of the groups feel part of a group that makes them feel empowered, safe and seen. They celebrate each other's achievements with neither judgment nor high expectations. During my time as a facilitator, I have witnessed many creative initiatives emerged from the group and how friendships have developed outside our gatherings. If the space is 'safe' and participants can feel supported by the environment, this phenomenon can happen. The sense of being part of the construction of something, in this case a community, helps people to grow a sense of identity and belonging. Trusting each other is very important and the weekly ritual of coming together is essential to the trust building process. The sense of 'group' or community has been developed through a set of rituals. For example, when members of the group were asked about the difference between the poetry group and other groups they have attended, they said that the poetry group is ongoing and reliable. Participants know the group will continue to exist, so they feel safe. A year ago, the group ended up without a venue and even then, the group found a place to gather. The times I was not able to facilitate a session, members volunteered and held it themselves.

The group has become their own project, they own it and they reclaim it. Sometimes a simple ritual like clapping after the sharing of each poem creates an overall sense of validation. In one of our sessions, I asked them to skip the clapping (which is a joint activity we finish each group with so we could finish on time. I remember people laughing and

telling me: 'we could skip everything, but never the clapping'. Celebrating our skills and talents became an agreement in the group. Neither the length of the poem nor the language in which is written, or its structure is what matters; celebrating everyone's contributions comes first. This sense of acknowledgement is a proof of the success of the group. By recognising the potential that we all have within, such as creativity and curiosity, we can acknowledge our similarities and prioritise them rather than focusing on our differences.

Members of the Newham Poetry Group demonstrated the power of being heard and feeling understood in the process of defining themselves. The place they have in the group and the possibility of performing in a safe environment helps them to create strong bonds with those around them. Poetry is the medium they use to create those connections. When the participants feel part of the group, they discover how to put together the pieces of their identity' puzzle. They do not need to use any other description for themselves and no longer feel like 'outsiders. In a group of equals, they can exercise their individuality and their separate identities can be healed and recreated to form new ones. Belonging is developed where our gifts are appreciated and where we can make a difference.

Newham's diversity of people embodies intersections that can be used to express resident's uniqueness. When participants claim the identity of "poet" they strengthen and empower their individuality. Using poetry as a common language and expression brings them together. The poetry group is an example of an 'in-between place' where a sense of belonging can be developed, and a sense of community can be reclaimed.

I see poets

I saw poets where others saw failures

I saw pens and paper where others saw chaos

I saw through the eyes of Cupid himself

I saw you and then I loved you

Because

I see the wings of hummingbirds whispering sonnets that only you could hear

I see privileged creators where others see losers

I see eternal souls where others see shadows and bodies

I see hands, magic hands transforming paper and ink into art

I see your hands

I see them like birds in the desert

I see them circling unknown lands to discover what others cannot imagine.

I see you and I still love you.

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Article is based on the author's BA degree dissertation.