

The Slam Poetry of Xiomara: Analyzing the Assertion of the Adolescent Dominican-American Female Identity in *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo

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Abstract

Language as a societal and personal construct, tends to be at the center of identity formation and the assertion of the *self*. Akin to the variation in language structures and language patterns in different cultures and nationalities, the usage of language varies according to identities of age, race and ethnicity. This peculiar yet crucial intermingling of race and age in the poetry of Xiomara and the poetic verse of Elizabeth Acevedo's verse novel *The Poet X* (2018), is integral to studies relating to the patterns of self-assertion and identity formation. As the young adolescent population often find themselves silenced or their presence subdued by the structures of family, religion and patriarchy demanding conformity to established norms, the rebellious and transgressive poetry of Xiomara represents the forms of self-expression, self-assertion and protests against these dominant structures by adolescents. Xiomara's defiant slam poetry in the verse novel *The Poet X* marks a strong statement of the racio-cultural and age identity, attacking the superstructures and superseding these structures and the restrictive norms with triumphant free flowing verse true to the *self*. Language thus, serves as a racio-cultural 'markedness' in the text as Xiomara's poetry serves as a marker of her Dominican identity and a defiance against the language patterns of the Whites. It is both a tool for cultural revival and cultural survival. Xiomara's powerful rebellious teenage slam poetry is a revolution in itself that questions existing dominant dogmas and serves as a discourse about freedom, identity and assertion in itself.

Keywords: Assertion, Identity, Language, *The Poet X*, Slam Poetry

Language is an instrumental tool in the hands of civilizations to mark their culture, solidarity and collective identity. It acts as a medium of self-assertion and identity making for individual users of languages. The societal and cultural role of language closely interacts with the dynamics of language proliferation by involving, engaging, transmuting and evolving language through the individual *selves* who play, transform and experiment with language making language a constantly evolving and transforming entity. The multilayered and multidimensional aspects of language facilitate its interaction with social structures and dominant ideologies,

incorporating them into its folds. Language and language systems interacts with other socio-cultural elements to be continually in a state of transformation, renewal and evolution. This living “organic” nature of language, hence, is a synthesis of a multiplicity of meanings and symbols from various cultures and ethnicities. A crucial part of the transformational dynamics of language and its proliferation is the evolution and engagement of the socio-cultural elements with the linguistic elements of the individual self. The vibrant and interweaving tapestry of language is also inclusive of various racial, geographical, ethnic and gendered linguistic elements and vocabularies which while enriching language also challenge hegemonic discourses and language patterns.

Literature, with its ancient role of *mimesis* of reality, mirrors and mimics lived realities and depicts lived historicity of individuals and communities. The verse novel *The Poet X* (2018) by Dominican-American author Elizabeth Acevedo, reveals the deep intricacies of language with its interesting representation of gender, race and age informed subjectivities. At the core of the verse narrative is the teenage character Xiomara, powerful for her rebellious personality and a strong feminine poetic voice. The religious and gendered repression is challenged by Xiomara’s deep interior subjectivity expressed through her verse poetic language. Language is the medium through which Xiomara’s subjectivity is expressed and played out in a very dynamic manner. The narrative of Part 1 begins with the epigraph, “[i]n the beginning was the word” (Acevedo 13), signifying the importance of language in communication, formation of individual identities and social identities. Throughout the verse-narrative of *The Poet X*, language explores the internal subjectivity of Xiomara and facilitates in the external assertion of the self in protest to oppressive societal structures. It is with the play, manipulation and revolt through language that the revolution initiated by Xiomara’s poetry achieves its purpose. Her poetic innovation and play of language highlight the negation of her power over language and morphology as evident when she says, “I am unhide-able” (Acevedo 16). She narrates how her body corresponded to her strong assertive voice, “[t]aller than even my father, with what Mami has always said was ‘a little too much body for such a young girl’” (Acevedo 16).

The neologism ‘unhide-able’ is a deliberate linguistic innovation and a play with language through which Xiomara exercises her agency over the structures of language. She subverts the authority vested in the age and determined “creators” of language (the elders and males) by reclaiming language as a tool for public expression and also personal experimentation. Ferdinand De Saussure’s discourse on “Structuralism and Language as a System of Signs”, views language as a system of signs made up of the *signifier* (sound/image of the word) and the *signified* (the concept which the word represents). Thus, he emphasizes the arbitrariness of language through meaning of words are socially determined with the images or objects associated with the words. Meanings portrayed through words are not natural and varies according to specific culture. The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, changeable and evolutionary in nature, changing

according to time periods and specific geographical locations and cultures. In *The Poet X*, Xiomara exercises the arbitrary nature of language by rewriting the meanings assigned to words and assigning new *signifieds* to dominant signifiers. This becomes the way by which she resists patriarchal structures through her strong poetic language and asserts her innovative feminine lexicons. As stated by Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*, “[i]n language, there are only differences (120)”. Hence, Xiomara highlights these “differences” confirming Saussure’s stand that “[l]anguage is a system of signs that express ideas (16)”. Xiomara’s experimentation of language also reaffirms Noam Chomsky’s theory of Generative Grammar and Universal Grammar in which Chomsky introduces the idea of ‘Universal Grammar’ - the ability to acquire language is hardwired into the brain. His demarcation of the *competence* and *performance* of language is evident from Xiomara’s utilization of the *competence* of language - the unconscious knowledge of language - through her inner monologues and journal entries. Her *performance* of language which Chomsky theorizes as the actual use of language in real situations, is highlighted through her onstage slam poetry performances and in the spoken word poetry recitations. Xiomara’s innovative words depict Chomsky’s emphasis of creativity in language by which humans produce and understand infinite sentences using finite rules of language. Her creative linguistic competence is exposed through her usage of language to describe and also transform her reality. Her manipulation of language reflects her innate linguistic agency in challenging oppressive power structures. The verse narrative of *The Poet X*, resists imposed social meanings (signified) and creates new personal truths unique to the Xiomara’s personal *self* and its subjectivity. Xiomara’s experimental poetry also reflects her linguistic creativity, highlighting that language is acquired, mastered and re-invented.

The strongly subversive and engaging verse poetry of Xiomara identifies her word creation as a writerly act (Barthes). It diverges from traditional *readerly texts* (texte lisible) which engages the readers in a passive reading experience with closed, linear meaning where the reader only receives the meaning while the text does the telling. On the contrary, Xiomara’s innovative original verses engage the audience in creating new meaning. Xiomara’s form captivates the readers with fragmented narrative structures, experimental poetry forms, gaps, and sudden changes of narratives forms – assignments, journal entries, conversations, and poetry, deviating from the traditional narratives with fixed meaning in readerly texts. Acevedo’s writerly text (texte scriptible) is hence active in its movement of meaning making and draws in the reader in a participatory reading. Its open-endedness, ambiguity and layers of meaning make the readers co-create meaning with the text. This type of texts resist authority and engages with freedom, rebellion and innovation, true to cause of Xiomara’s transgressions. As Barthes states in *S/Z*, “Pourquoi le scriptible est-il notre valeur? Parce que l’enjeu du travail littéraire (de la littérature comme travail), c’est de faire du lecteur, non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte” (Barthes 10, French ed.); “Why is the writerly our

value? Because the goal of literary work ... is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (Barthes 4, English ed.). Xiomara’s transgressive verses make the readers active producers of knowledge instead of passive recipients of knowledge.

The innovative narrative structure of *The Poet X* is a resistance to dominant narrative structures. In addition, Xiomara’s morphological defiance which involves a deviation from standardized language, protests against social expectations of gender which conditions women into silenced and subdued performativities, embodying Judith Butler’s “stylized repetition of actions” as voiced in her essay “Gender Trouble”. Butler states:

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (Butler 180)

Xiomara’s strong performance of her voice and “violent knuckles” to combat eve-teasing of boys in a patriarchal society question the notion of fixed identity performed through silenced and repetitive acts, including language. Xiomara’s spoken-word poetry is an act of self-defined womanhood, defying the expectations of silence, obedience and submission. She liberates herself from gender performativity with her defiant knuckles and rebellious acts. She strays from traditional gendered expectations, thus liberating herself ‘gender performativity’ echoing Butler’s statement, “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” Xiomara’s voice hence, protests against the subjective experiences of women that make their bodies always “seen, sexualized, judged, or shamed”. Her linguistic innovation contributes to the process of her independent identity-making. Language is the way by which she defines herself according to her own terms and engages the reader in the discussion of her body, gender and performativity. Just as the public gaze sexualizes her body highlighting the external power over the self, she creatively invents new words to exert her personal power over public language and expose its limitations. The structure and form of Xiomara’s poetry rebels against the phallogocentric language systems developed by males. She experiments with language, sentence structures and forms in asserting her female autonomy in creating language and using it to question existing dogmatic realities. Her verses sometimes centrally aligned, at times aligned left and at other moments even right is suggestive of the free-flow of language and its fluid and transgressive nature, subverting forms and rules of language as determined by males. She writes:

. It happens when I wear jeans.
It happens when I stare at the ground.
 It happens when I stare ahead.

It happens when I'm walking.
It happens when I'm sitting.
It happens when I'm on my phone.
It simply never stops. (Acevedo 52).

In addition, Xiomara's experimentation with forms and structures by incorporating a variety of narrative forms like haikus, poems, essays, assignments, journal entries and even dialogues point to a dialectic conversation in her writerly text. This contradicts traditional narrative forms in literature which is either poetic or narrative. Xiomara's language also involves the vernacular African-American Spoken English form which discards the didactic rules of grammar as evident from, "What Twin be knowing" (Acevedo 67). By narrativizing the form and structure of poetry, Acevedo's choice of the verse novel format incorporates free verses, enjambment and line breaks to reflect Xiomara's emotional state and inner world. This fragmented and rhythmic poem-like structure while replicating Xiomara's fragmented identity and her search for wholeness and unity amidst her various interior selves, also depict the non-linear stream of consciousness and nature of language usage in human minds. While Xiomara uses short, punchy stanzas to depict moments of emotional intensity, her long and structured assignments highlight her public performance of upheld language structures and polite language. In addition, her Spoken Word poetry performances mirror ancient African and Dominican oral narrative traditions with a clever usage of diction, repetition and rhythm. The performance of her poetic language ensures her a wider reach, creating urgency, resistance and empowerment by bridging the elite and bourgeois population through written and oral language. The symbolism and imagery of Xiomara's poetry also assimilate recurring images of the mouth, fire, body, church and the mirror. These repetitive words articulate her conflict with the power structures of family and religion regulating her own body and speech.

Xiomara's verse-poetry is a strong evolution of her suppressed voice from silence to resilience. She uses language to oppose the rigid power structures of patriarchy, family and the Church. As much as she uses her voice to assert her individual identity and challenge the power structures within and outside her home, her private journal entries equally reclaim her voice from strict dogmatic instructions. Language, hence, for Xiomara and in general operates as the instrument for *becoming* the self and *unbecoming* the conditioned self. The protagonist transforms silence into speech and internalized shame into poetic expression through the conduit of language. She reclaims her power and voice by viewing silence as oppression and defying the "imposed silences" by her mother, the church, school, and patriarchal society. She also questions language and the connotations of her poetic language as "inappropriate, loud, or sinful" by the structures of power and reclaims the authenticity of adolescent subjectivity of young girls like her with developing bodies. Thus, she frees language from the restrictive structures of social institutions which render her body "voiceless"—and hence her silencing becomes an embodiment of her powerlessness. Her poetry is her voice when she is

repressed:

“Oíste?” she asks, but walks away before I can answer. Sometimes I want to tell her, the only person in this house who isn’t heard is me.” (Acevedo 15)

Xiomara’s poetic verse is as much a defiance of the oppressive power structures as it is a bold assertion of her adolescent female Afro-Latina identity. She questions orthodox gendered religious dictates and adult supremacy over her life and ensures liberty with her poetic language – striking in its rebellious outspokenness- and she reclaims the individual self with its independent thinking. Language in *The Poet X* is both multicultural and multi-dimensional. It incorporates both Xiomara’s identity as an Afro-Latina and Dominican-American. The power structures of race position Xiomara at the lowest rungs with suppressed autonomy and a repressed voice. Her poetic verse developed in utmost secrecy and shared with a small empathetic community, which incorporates her brother, her boyfriend Aman and her spoken word poetry club community in her school, is a powerful yet authentic protest against the didactic structures of race, family, religion and gender. Challenging the colonial discourses, her poetry also represents her Afro-Latina identity and her Dominican roots. Her fierce rebellious spirit is evident through her mother statement regarding her: “‘Pero, tú no eres fácil. You sure aren’t an easy one’” (20). Her questioning of religion is evident when she logically reasons, “[a]nd about this apple, how come God didn’t explain why they couldn’t eat it? He gave Eve curiosity but didn’t expect her to use it?” (Acevedo 104).

Most significant however, is the symbolic power of Xiomara’s poetic language in the reclamation of her individual and personal self, the making of her identity and the assertion of her poetic identity as “The Poet X”. This is Xiomara’s triumph over her repression and silencing by a gendered and orthodox society. She epitomizes bell hooks’ idea of ‘language as resistance’. hooks states that language is a site of struggle, especially for Black and marginalized women. Hence, speaking, writing, and storytelling are acts by which the black female can assert her freedom and express her opposition to white terminologies and language systems:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (hooks 29)

Xiomara’s poetry acts a way of rebelling against the imposed silences of patriarchy, religion, and family. Her words serve as her weapon. The act of renaming herself is a necessary act of the oppressed object to gain selfhood. Her subversion of the structures of age is crucial as her poetry opposes the domination of her strictly religious Dominican mother. This subversion of the rigid structures of age in social systems by asserting her adolescent identity in her verse poetry is a powerful act of liberation of the repressed self. It challenges the power structures

of age and facilitates the navigation of adults through the rigid systemized rules of the adults by uniting a community of adolescents as an alternate site and voice of power. The shared voice through slam poetry events and spoken word poetry classes where like-minded and powerfully defiant voices like Xiomara's take part in, invoke a community of subalterns and the marginalized against ideologically repressive and dominant power structures.

Her poetry operates as a means to reaffirm her subaltern adolescent Afro-Latina female intersectional identity, subjugated by the structures of patriarchy, race, age and religion. Her language is the voice of protest and a rewriting and renaming of the self as *The Poet X*. The power to name and describe her own body and *voice* through her desires is key to her liberation. Her liberation of the self through the sexual agency of her relationship with Aman is an assertion of female sexual desire which is largely undermined, erased and even subjugated by dominant religious and patriarchal discourses. Her poetic language subverts dominant language patterns, thereby representing the repressed and subordinated groups. Language proves as a powerful tool for Xiomara to subvert dogmatic ideologies and also question, challenge and rebel against oppressive forces. Her voice is a refusal to submit and be silenced. It serves a powerful awakening through which racio-cultural superstructures are subverted and attacked for their duality and hypocrisies. Her "free-flowing" verse poetry is a rebellion against poetic and linguistic discourses which celebrate the usage of "high" refined language. Her deliberate inclusion of "ordinary" free-flowing verse narrative is a triumphant transgression in celebration of the "ordinary" and "everyday" rustic language. Thus, Xiomara deviates from societal refinement and sophistication of language and expresses the oppressive mundane existence of the subalterns. Michel Foucault in his theories of language as instruments of power and discourse, articulates that language is not just a tool of communication—it is a form of power that constructs knowledge, truth and identity through discourse. Foucault powerfully asserts that "discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle" (Foucault 52). Xiomara's transformation of the discourse of sin, shame, and silence by creating her own language through poetry is remarkable. Her assertion of her racial identity is also significant as language operates as the means for survival and liberation. Audre Lorde theorizes that poetry is a lifeline for women of colour. It is not a luxury, but a way of naming the coloured self and resisting the systems of white domination. Lorde writes, "[f]or women, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence" (Lorde 37). Xiomara's poetry is necessary for her survival in the face of emotional, religious, and gender oppression becoming her spiritual and psychological liberation. It also serves as a voice against the symbolic power of linguistic capital (Pierre Bourdieu). Language acts as a symbolic power in the hands of those with the access to "legitimate" language (standardized English, academic speech etc.). While such language is distinguished as cultural capital, the other forms of language expressed by the marginalized groups (slang,

bilingualism) are sidelined and neglected. In *The Poet X*, Xiomara's bilingual speech and the usage of street slang represent the less validated languages to mark a blow to the powerful hegemony of standardized language. This is a deliberate incorporation and elevation of the marginalized languages in the literary narrative. Thus, it dismisses the social powers and privileges associated with certain languages (e.g., standard written language, educated speech etc.) and asserts the bilingual multicultural language which she uses to write, as a linguistic capital equal in prestige and power, validating Bourdieu's statement:

Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power. A person speaks not only to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished. (Bourdieu 648)

The dialogue of the public and personal variation of language is a significant dimension of Xiomara's poetry. Xiomara's rebellion against the socially sanctioned language and ways of expression is evident in the drafts for her assignments representing her personal voice remaining true to her independent self, varying from the refined and repressed "acceptable" form of language in her actual submissions. The free flow of her linguistic interior self is evident from the variations of language in her numerous drafts which she prepares before submitting the organized "structured" assignments in formal acceptable language:

Rough Draft of Assignment 4—When was the last time you felt free?
I must have been five or six,
because the memory is fuzzy.
But my father had been watching a karate movie on TV,
and my mother was at church,
so there was no one to bother us.
Twin and I tied long-sleeved T-shirts
around our heads
and used the bows from my church dresses
to tie like karate sashes around our waists...(Acevedo 207)

Her actual submissions mark a distinct variation from the drafts she makes. For instance, what she actually submits for her assignment on "When was the last time you felt free?" is:

Freedom is a complicated word. I've never been imprisoned like Nelson Mandela or some people I grew up with. I've never been encaged like a Rottweiler used for dogfights, or like the roosters my parents grew up tending. Freedom seems like such a big word. Something too big; maybe like a skyscraper I've glimpsed from the foot of the building but never been invited to climb. (Acevedo 210)

The drafts – often incorporating "outrageous", "immoral" and taboo subjects and discussions repressed by religion and age- represent the repressed and silenced deliberations in her actual standardized "acceptable" formal submissions. The drafts reveal the personal self-independent of conditioned dogmatic behaviour and highlights variations and differences in language usage according to age, gender,

ethnic and religious identities. The alterity and variation of adolescent language is evident in sentences like, “[a]fter two weeks of bio review, safety lessons, and blahzayblahblah” (65), “[t]hat’s when I feel like a fake” (57), “You got this, Xio (234)” etc.

Journaling becomes Xiomara’s private power. It forms the base of her secret, subversive space, where she is free to create meaning outside external control and question and think *freely*. This private rebellion contributes to the public performance of the rebellious voice in the poetry slams later, “[I]ate into the night I write and the pages of my notebook swell from all the words I’ve pressed onto them” (Acevedo 238). The act of writing and performative poetry act as ways of asserting authority over her own body, narrative and identity through the instrument of language. Her spoken word poetry represents the performance of power as she externalizes her own voice, builds a community, defies silencing, and exerts her language in the public realm. Thus, her language becomes public from private, it is shouted, performed, and acclaimed. The interaction and conflict of the personal and political is inherent in the dual versions of Xiomara’s assignments as well Xiomara’s journal entries and poetic performance. Language has the peculiarity of being both a personal asset and a public asset. While formal writing and spoken expression often abide by social approval of “language” and “language structures”, language is also deeply personal. It is a tool to communicate with the *interior self* as much as it a necessity to community with others. While it is a form of therapeutic understanding and acceptance of the self and its individual thought patterns, beliefs and differences, it is also inherently political. Xiomara’s writing – her poetry, journal entries and her stage performances – are all personal ways by which she expresses herself, heals herself, liberates herself from the dictates of external power structures while also being public reclamation of knowledge, beliefs and thoughts through her communication with her readers and audience. “And the more I write the braver I become (Acevedo 245).”

The language of Xiomara is also bilingual and multicultural. She incorporates words, tones and silences that demarcate the assimilation of her African ancestry, Dominican- Latina roots and her Black American identity. Her usage of words like “Papi”, “Mami” signify her cultural roots and mark her identity distinct from the general “American” identity. Her bilingualism and the usage of “Spanglish” - interplay between English and Spanish- hints at the complexities of the interaction of language and linguistic roots of her Dominican identity. Usage of the Spanish phrases – “Mira, Muchcha”, “Oiste” *mujerigo*; evoke cultural intimacy, rich ethnicity, racial identity, and a resistance to linguistic assimilation. She marks her hybrid Dominican-American identity as *different* from her American identity. A post-colonial analysis of the verse-novel, however, hints at the cultural erasure of her African ancestry. It is only her skin colour which speaks of her racial identity and positions her in the African-American community of Harlem. However, Xiomara’s bilingual usage of English and Spanish erases her African roots while expressing her cultural duality. This represents the cultural interaction of the two

dominant imperial languages – Spanish in the Dominican Republic as an erstwhile Spanish colony and English in the United States of America – highlighting the power dynamics between assimilation and heritage. Thus, while the tongue speaks the conditioned and “civilized” imperial languages, the skin speaks of Xiomara’s African ancestry silently. Frantz Fanon elaborated upon language’s relation to colonial domination. Xiomara’s usage of the colonizer’s language also hints at her internalizing inferiority. He states, “[t]o speak is to exist absolutely for the other (Fanon 17).”

Her strong poetic voice not only resists dogmatic religious ideologies and colonial discourses but also asserts itself as a liberal reformist poetic discourse. She liberates the body from the Catholic doctrines of silence and shame and reinstates it in the poetic freedom of expression, questioning, desire. Hers is thus, an embodied language of freedom and power. She speaks what “should not be” spoken and writes what “should not” be written. Her questions in the Church to the Church Father also gets suppressed by her mother’s authoritarian voice as they are “what should not be asked”:

Just seems as I got older
I began to really see
the way that church
treats a girl like me differently.
Sometimes it feels
all I’m worth is under my skirt
and not between my ears. (Acevedo 23)

Her language often blurs the binaries of her body and her voice – in liberating her voice, she also liberates her body from gender performativity (Butler). Language also becomes a contested space between ideological institutions operating as external powers and the personal self with its free-flowing interiority as evident from “[h]olding a [p]oem in the Body... I let my body finally take up all the space it wants”. (Acevedo 72). The shift in authority from external powers (God, Father, mother) regulating the internal self to the internal power taking authority over the self (self, poet, woman) is transformative. The most striking of this opposition between the external power and the personal self is Xiomara’s outrageous rebellion against her mother when she tries to burn her notebook containing her poetry. The mother’s deliberate erasure of Xiomara’s voice through her poetry is counterattacked and checked by Xiomara by reciting her poems by heart, subduing and deafening her mother’s chants of Biblical verses and prayers:

And as she recites Scripture
words tumble out of my mouth too,
all of the poems and stanzas I’ve memorized spill out,
getting louder and louder, all out of order,
until I’m yelling at the top of my lungs,
heaving the words like weapons from my chest;
they’re the only thing I can fight back with. (Acevedo 255)

This serves as the triumph of Xiomara – her voice cannot be erased, subdued, silenced or burnt. It is *she* in all her authenticity and originality whose voice remains triumphant and resists conditioning by external superstructures of power – be it religious, ideological, familial or patriarchal. Her voice echoes over everything else and she questions all the external authority over her by boldly asking her mother:

A roar tears from my mouth.
“Burn it! Burn it.
This is where the poems are,” I say,
thumping a fist against my chest.

“Will you burn me? Will you burn me, too? You would burn me, wouldn’t you, if you could?” (Acevedo 257).

This resistance exemplified by Xiomara against powerful superstructures heightens the tension between the individual and the repressive structures dictating the self. Xiomara’s self-willed and voluntary departure from her home after the violent incident serves as her defiant protest against all external forces of power trying to erase her existence and subdue her authentic voice. In liberating herself from the external forces, she also marks herself free and refuses to be the *silenced object* through which power structures keep their power intact. This liberation from repressive spaces also marks her entry in liberal spaces of free expression and communication. The assertion of her *free* self in more democratic and humanitarian spaces is exemplified by her refuge in Aman’s apartment and her slam poetry performances in front of a liberal and *voiced* community. Her assertion of her right over her female body, her choices and her desires is apparent when she checks Aman’s movements over her body:

I think of all the firsts I’ve given to this day,
and all the ones I chose to keep.
And this is a better thought.
today I’ve made decisions (Acevedo 274)

The revolution brought about by Xiomara’s words and actions is complete when her family is reconciled with the help of Father Sean, Ms Galiano, Aman and Caridad. From her suppressed existence and erased voice within her house, her rebellion serves its purpose by making her family celebrate her slam poetry performances:

When I’m done Twin is smiling.
When I’m done Papi claps.
When I’m done Mami cocks her head
and says:
“Use your hand gestures a little less
and next time, en voz alta.
Speak up, Xiomara.” (Acevedo 291)

Aman’s affection for Xiomara moves from the physical affections to the poetic expressions of his emotions. His poem written for Xiomara raises the female *self*

as desirable in all its entirety as much as the desirable female body. In her New York Citywide Slam Performance, Xiomara speaks about her performance, “With a brand-new notebook: I perform like I deserve to be there” and “I stand on a stage and say a poem. There is power in the word (294).” The restoration of Xiomara’s notebook is a restoration of her voice. The presence of Father Sean, her parents, Twin, and her friends in the slam poetry audience is an achievement of the reorganization of the power structures by drawing all in her powerful poetic reformation.

Hence, Xiomara’s verse poetry serves as a “racio-cultural” markedness as it highlights her racial, gender and age identities while also voicing her strong reformist views about structural orthodox religious systems and the systems of power operating in the familial institution, patriarchy, racist societies and school educational institutions. She refuses to be a passive receiver of dogmatic ideologies of race, gender and religion and instead chooses to “write” *herself* and her undictated views, beliefs and subjectivity. Her language also operates as a cultural survival and cultural revival of her Afro-Latina Dominican identity in interaction with her American identity. Her strong voice as an adolescent and representing the adolescent population is a powerful subversion of power structures based on age. The dialectics of her gender, age and racial identities interweave to present her voice as a revolutionary discourse through her slam poetry. As she narrates on the final line of her verse-narrative, “I only know that learning to believe in the power of my own words has been the most freeing experience of my life. It has brought me the most light. And isn’t that what a poem is? A lantern glowing in the dark (Acevedo 297)”. Thus, the power of language is complete. It is as much a revolutionary instrument as an evolutionary instrument – incorporating and altering subjectivities, historicity and cultural dialogues.

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