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“Pero, Tu No Eres Facil”: *The Poet X* as Multicultural Bildungsroman

Elizabeth Acevedo’s 2018 verse novel, *The Poet X*, provides a continuation of the genre bildungsroman, more commonly referred to as coming-of-age. In the 1800s, Karl Morgenstern outlined the stipulations for the Western version of the bildungsroman, and although written centuries later, Acevedo’s work fulfills the bildungsroman form. Through its poetic stylizations, *The Poet X* experiments with and challenges elements of the standard bildungsroman genre through the lens of an Afro-Latina narrator, Xiomara. Using slam poetry, she takes action against racial inequality, her oppressive religious upbringing, and the sexualization of her person. *The Poet X* relies on Morgenstern’s conventions of coming-of-age stories, while also complicating the European standards of the genre due to its Afro-Latina narrator and inclusion of Dominican American culture. *The Poet X* consequently functions as a challenge to the bildungsroman, while also reinvigorating the genre through its contribution as a multicultural coming-of-age story.

***The Poet X* as a Bildungsroman**

When compared to Morgenstern’s bildungsroman standards, *The Poet X* serves as a contribution to the genre. The term bildungsroman was first coined by Wilhelm Dilthey in the 1800s, but Morgenstern’s regulations of the genre influenced the Western development of coming-of-age literature. While multiple scholars have expanded the understanding of the

bildungsroman—from Mikhail Bakhtin’s suggestion that the genre ended with James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* because of its failure of language to Franco Moretti’s insistence that the bildungsroman is “between two classes” (viii)—Morgenstern’s definition of the bildungsroman as a work that “represents the development of the hero in its beginning and progress to a certain stage of completion” serves as a backbone for contemporary coming-of-age scholarship (654-55). The genre is primarily hero- or character-focused, following the protagonist from the beginning to the end of some form of transformation. Xiomara undergoes a severe transformation as she attempts to wrestle with questions of religion, identity, and culture. She writes several poems establishing her identity as a daughter and twin, such as “When You’re Born to Old Parents” and “Twin’s Name.” Through the expression of poetry, Xiomara’s transformation due to her complicated familial relationships is evident in the evolution of her identity.

Bakhtin claims the bildungsroman inherently requires a formation of the focalized person, referring to this transformation as the “image of man in the process of becoming” or the “image of the individual” (21; see also 33-34), which is precisely what Xiomara’s character provides. *The Poet X* adopts Bakhtin’s definition of a bildungsroman by providing an image of Xiomara’s transformation, specifically through the relationships that formulate her identity. In her first poems, Xiomara only sees herself as a part of her family, specifically because of her relationship with her brother. She is protective of and inseparable from Twin, saying that he is a “reminder of the pair we’ll always be,” yet by the end she learns to let him fight his own battles (Acevedo 44). Her identity is formulated through her role as a daughter to older parents; she writes that if one is a child born to older parents, the community is “thankful you were not a tumor in your mother’s belly like the whole barrio feared” (18). Xiomara is revered yet also

treated as a consistent pain in her mother's life. The last few poems of the novel reveal Xiomara's attempts at reconciliation with her mother, such as when she does not complain about her mother's cooking and when her mother tells her to speak up during her performance. Xiomara also undergoes character growth in her identity as a Dominican American, saying, "If Medusa was Dominican and had a daughter, I think I'd be her. I look and feel like a myth" (48). As a Dominican American, Xiomara struggles to reconcile her own identity with her strict religious upbringing and cultural identity. Through her poetry, Xiomara conveys an image of herself and her transformation as she grapples with the gravity of her newfound self. Xiomara's image of her process of becoming solidifies *The Poet X* as a bildungsroman according to Bakhtin's standards.

Although *The Poet X* follows the European model outlined in Morgenstern's article, it also serves as a complication of these European standards. The historical development featured in *The Poet X* is subtle and dissimilar to that of other European bildungsromans, as it incorporates a blending of cultures and languages. The novel challenges the genre because of its format as a novel in verse, as a novel told from the perspective of an Afro-Latina, and as a story with a female protagonist. Morgenstern claims that one of the examples of the genre shows the "modern European man's development" (655), which directly excludes women and people of other cultures and ethnicities, whose experiences are inherently different from those of modern European men. Morgenstern rhetorically asks if there are bildungsromans in other languages but claims that his main focus is "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship" (658) and not incorporating other cultures and languages. Including *The Poet X* in Morgenstern's definition of the bildungsroman fills a gap in his literary theory.

Although not the first outlier in the genre, *The Poet X* functions as a challenge to the primarily white male narratives that have dominated the genre since its origins, both in author and protagonist. Earlier notable examples of gender and racial diversity in the bildungsroman include Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising* (2000). Scholars such as Geta LeSeur have attempted to supplement Morgenstern's understanding of the bildungsroman by including works of other cultures, ethnicities, and languages. According to Leseur, the bildungsroman genre was primarily about white teenage boys until the 1960s (26). The European tradition of bildungsroman narratives and scholarship often overshadows other contributions to the genre and necessitates limitations because of the narrow focus. Leseur asserts that in more recent years, "Black women writers in the United States and the Caribbean are beginning to utilize the Bildungsroman to tell their stories and their sisters' stories" (27). Acevedo accomplishes both by writing from the perspective of a Dominican American narrator. As a bildungsroman of different cultural descent, the novel inherently incorporates different conflicts than do prior bildungsromans. For example, as Leseur notes, "[S]ome problems facing Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean women are not universal but deal with the tragic consequences of prejudice, discrimination and the unfulfillment of the American Dream" (29). Acevedo highlights the typical problems in the standard coming-of-age storyline, while also including issues only faced by minority communities, such as prejudice and discrimination caused by Xiomara's gender, body, and Dominican American identity.

Through the sexualization of Xiomara's body, Acevedo affirms Leseur's assumptions of the Afro-American or Afro-Caribbean bildungsroman. Xiomara slowly begins to comprehend the discrimination she faces due to her appearance and body type. In "The Last Fifteen-Year-Old" she writes, "My body was trouble. I had to pray the trouble out of the body God gave me.

My body was a problem” (Acevedo 151). Unfortunately, Xiomara understands herself to be the problem, not those who objectify her body. Macarena Martin Martinez extensively deals with the appropriation of bodies in *The Poet X* in her research, claiming that “the protagonist’s body is dominated by racial and patriarchal discourses, especially, in the form of the Catholicism imposed both by her Afro-Dominican community and her mother” (2). The appropriation of bodies in the context of religion is not a subject the typical bildungsroman has been forced to incorporate, but the issue seems inescapable in the Afro-Dominican bildungsroman according to Martinez’s research. Xiomara works to overcome the discrimination she faces as a result of her body, according to Martinez: “the protagonist manages to re-appropriate her body and her subjectivity by means of her own sexual desire and self-representative embodied slam poetry” (2). Xiomara utilizes poetry to process her intensive coming-of-age experience resulting from her body type and gender, both elements typically not focalized in the male European model of the bildungsroman.

***The Poet X* as Multicultural Bildungsroman**

By featuring an Afro-Latina narrator, *The Poet X* challenges the bildungsroman genre by approaching it from a multicultural standpoint. Because of the blended cultures represented in *The Poet X*, this essay analyzes scholarship relating to the African, Caribbean, and other cultural bildungsromans, specifically from those who have analyzed the bildungsroman outside of the European model. Ralph Austen focuses on the African bildungsroman as “a reflection on the possibilities of self-formation” (214), as opposed to the misrepresentation of African bildungsroman by previous critics of European variations of the genre. Kaisa Ilmonen attempts

to challenge Western norms in the genre by including Caribbean bildungsromans in contemporary scholarship. She argues that her main goal “is to consider how writers, in particular Caribbean women writers, are ‘talking back’ to the form by making use of it for their own purposes” (60-61), which Martinez argues is possible for Xiomara through her slam poetry (2). The narrator in *The Poet X* is Dominican, so the scholarship by Austen and Ilmonen only represents limited aspects of Xiomara’s culture.

Because of its inclusion of multiple cultures, the novel contributes a new addition to the bildungsroman genre. What Martinez terms Xiomara’s “evolutionary process of self-representation as a poet” enables Xiomara to fight against the suppressive nature of her upbringing (4), which is due to both religion and culture. Additionally, her coming-of-age process is complicated due to what Leseur calls Xiomara’s “sense of ‘two-ness,’ of belonging to a minority group, and being female” (29). Xiomara faces numerous tribulations growing up due to her identity as a female and as Dominican American. Martinez asserts that writing poetry enables Xiomara to process her complicated childhood, as “embodied practices such as sexual desire and its self-representation through performative and embodied poetry are mechanisms to combat the cultural constructions” (19). Poetry functions as a combatant against the constricting elements of her culture, religion, and environment. Acevedo embodied this idea in her personal life by teaching her middle school students the power of finding one’s voice through poetry and writing. Her students realized there were no people that looked like them in the stories they read. Before she began her writing career, Acevedo said that “she knew of only a few Dominican writers,” further inspiring her to represent her culture in the literary canon (de León). The book reviewer Rachel Rae claims that people within minority communities are asking questions similar to the ones that Xiomara posits during her transformation, proving the necessity for

underrepresented people to have literature representing their culture (“*Poet X*” 04:28-04:40).

Through an Afro-Latina narrator, Acevedo contributes Latina representation to the bildungsroman canon, while also reinforcing poetry as a means of expression for the underrepresented in literature. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center has revealed the limited number of minority authors who published children’s books in 2016. Compared to white authors, racial minority authors published twelve percent of children’s books in 2016 (Ro). Because of this deficit, Acevedo decided to personally contribute to Latino representation because she recognized the negative impact underrepresentation had on her students.

Martinez also classifies Acevedo’s novel in verse as a bildungsroman, clarifying that Acevedo’s version of the genre deals with varying subjects not included in the European tradition. Martinez writes, “As a bildungsroman of a diasporic and transnational person, Xiomara’s story is not about the subject being, but about the making of the subject” (12). This making of the subject occurs as Xiomara’s identity is constructed and as she utilizes both English and Spanish to express her identity. *The Poet X* expands the bildungsroman genre, as it is a bilingual narrative. Several of Xiomara’s poems are in Spanish, and while she occasionally translates her Spanish phrasing, she often leaves the Spanish words to stand on their own. To use Bakhtin’s phrasing, Acevedo creates an “image” of Xiomara through her bilingual poems (Bakhtin 21). Xiomara’s identity is at times best described through Spanish phrases and colloquialisms as opposed to English ones. She uses a common phrase to describe herself, “Pero, tu no eres facil” (Acevedo 9), and eventually translates the phrase at the end of the poem, “You sure ain’t an easy one” (10). The inclusion of Spanish amidst primarily English writing is used to describe Xiomara’s identity formation in negative and positive ways. She includes the following in one of her poems as she fights with her parents: “I don’t scream at my father when he calls me

a cuero” (194). Later, she translates “cuero,” saying it is the “Dominican word for *ho*” (205). As evidenced by Xiomara’s bilingual narration of growing up as a teenager, coming-of-age for an Afro-Latina is not without oppressive forces and discrimination. The Afro-American and Afro-Dominican girl’s bildungsroman is not about reclaiming a lost identity but about exposing “those conditions which robbed her of a memorable and happy childhood” (Leseur 27). Acevedo accomplishes this by constructing a multicultural bildungsroman, enhanced by its use of multiple languages.

As a multicultural and multilingual bildungsroman, *The Poet X* continues to expand the genre beyond Morgenstern’s original limitations for it. The previous guidelines for European bildungsroman are not invalidated by the presence of *The Poet X*; rather, the novel fills the literary gaps of previous bildungsroman scholarship. Diversity in the bildungsroman allows for a multicultural resurgence of the genre. Contrary to Bakhtin’s declarations, *The Poet X* revitalizes the bildungsroman by emphasizing racial inequality and social action present in multiracial and multiethnic coming-of-age literature.

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