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*Mira Muchacha*: The Latinx Bildungsroman in Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*

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1 March 2021

*Mira Muchacha: The Latinx Bildungsroman in Elizabeth Acevedo's The Poet X*

Abstract:

This thesis explores how the Bildungsroman's traditional narrative transforms into a window to the Latinx experience in Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*. The traditional Bildungsroman features white, male, and European protagonists, according to Louis F. Caton in "Romantic Struggles: The *Bildungsroman* and Mother-Daughter Bonding in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*" (126). Recognized as the first work in the Bildungsroman genre, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796) tracks the development and education of the protagonist from boyhood to manhood. In 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century literature, the Bildungsroman structure expands to reflect the diverse cultures, lifestyles, and identities of its readers.

Acevedo's Bildungsroman / "coming-of-age" novel is centered on Xiomara Batista, a 15-year-old, Dominican-American teenager living in Harlem who discovers spoken word poetry as an outlet to navigate the world around her. Xiomara's journey illustrates what some children of immigrants and Latinxs struggle with: the stress of dissonant family expectations and ill-fitting parent country traditions; the search for voice and individuality; and the conflict between blossoming sexual urges and the norms of old-fashioned parents. As the novel progresses, Xiomara responds to relatives and friends who help her have important realizations and also present obstacles to her development. This thesis ultimately explores three aspects of the book: Xiomara's relationship with her tyrannical, pious mother; her awareness of her changing and maturing body and the effects of the male gaze on her psyche; and the evolution of her observations about her life from inner thoughts captured in a notebook to her performance of her poems at New York City's Nuyorican Poets Café.

In Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*, the Bildungsroman's traditional narrative expands beyond a focus on protagonists who are white, male, and European to provide fresh insights on the experience of urban Latinx youth in the United States. The original Bildungsroman structure tends to be conservative, however, less because of the identities of the protagonists than because of where they ultimately end up in their understandings of themselves and the world. For example, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96), famously the first Bildungsroman, ends on a rather conservative note. In "Contemporary Bildungsroman and the Prosumer Girl," Leisha Jones makes these observations on the trajectory of the hero in Goethe's book:

*Bildung* dates back to sixteenth-century pietistic theologies about modeling oneself in the image of God, as well as a natural philosophies about the development of potentialities in organisms. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96) defines the genre through its rebellious archetypical hero who rejects his bourgeois origins for more aesthetic aspirations (morphing in later incarnations to the ubiquitous life of the mind), only to be subsumed again through recognition by his masters and the love of a good woman. (445)

The hero ends up "subsumed" by society. In a sense, he rejects his own rebellion. However, as literature evolves and changes, the Bildungsroman transforms with it, becoming more reflective and representative of its reader's diverse cultures, lifestyles, and identities. The structure of the contemporary Bildungsroman still tracks the progression of a protagonist's identity and maturity from childhood to adulthood. These

novels are not just about assimilating back into society but about the end results of an education where diversity can be maintained. Jones says:

the traditional bildungsroman begins with a child coming of age, a rising action event distancing that individual from predetermined assumptions and mores, and the long and arduous process of self-discovery toward a maturity that includes the assimilation of contemporary cultural values and the participation and recognition of that individual by society. (446)

The form's approach is conservative because protagonists assimilate contemporary values and are also in a sense assimilated by those values. However, in adapting to contemporary minority identities, contemporary examples of the form have in turn become much more open and flexible. These novels of education then perform a crucial educational function for young adolescents who might feel that their lives and voices are not being represented in mainstream literature. Jones notes that the Bildungsroman "now reflects the diversity of authorial experience, including the lives and cultures of others such as women, the disabled, gays and lesbians, immigrants, the diasporic, and the girl" (446). Thus the Bildungsroman is now a much more inclusive, universal, and open-ended genre.

Novels like *The Outsiders* (1967) by S. E. Hinton and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee, are popular classroom novels in the United States. They are modern examples of the Bildungsroman and demonstrate how the genre has evolved over the years as white women authors have inserted themselves into what had previously been a genre dominated by European, white, male writers. However, they are no longer contemporary in their focuses. Lee's novel is an important work but it is

regional and its young white heroine, while resistant to racism, still reflects some very Southern, middle-class, white characteristics that can prove hard for some contemporary readers to identify with. Hinton's work is also dated in many respects. In "Young Adult Literature: Finding Common Ground: Multicultural YA Literature.

Discoveries: Some New or Overlooked YA Books Worth Reading," Chris Crowe notes:

quality multicultural young adult books can help adolescent readers find common ground with young people who, on the surface, seem to be very different or almost "alien." Some aspects of adolescence are universal, and because they're universal, they are central to the plots of most young adult stories... it is in these coming-of-age stories where students can discover that even though their circumstances may differ, their essential concerns about life do not. (125)

While *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a classic work, it does not reflect the experiences of urban youth. It particularly does not provide the multicultural lenses that adolescent teenagers from urban areas need in order to feel "included" or "represented." Arlene L. Barry in "Hispanic Representation in Literature for Children and Young Adults," states that "the lack of Hispanic representation in popular books appeared odd, particularly in light of the fact that Hispanics are the fastest growing minority in the U.S., with a 28% population increase expected by the year 2000" (631). This is unsettling especially in urban inner-city public schools where mainly black and brown kids comprise the student body.

Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X* thus becomes an essential "coming-of-age" and "bildung" story for black and brown kids because it represents their lives as marginalized youth. The novel follows the journey of 15-year-old Xiomara Batista, a

Dominican-American teenager from Harlem who is struggling to find her voice at home and the outside world. The novel is written completely in verse, the same style that Xiomara finds is the only format she can use to let go of her demons on paper. Barry quotes Curt Dudley-Marling stating:

Literature written by and for people from marginalized groups can provide to students from more privileged backgrounds a sense of the lived experience of people who suffer the effects of poverty and discrimination. Literature offers all students an opportunity to consider how to challenge practices that diminish the lives of our fellow citizens. (Dudley-Marling 125) (632)

*The Poet X* not only serves as a Bildungsroman, but also a window to the lives of marginalized groups whose voices are never heard or acknowledged. As a young Latinx girl, Xiomara is all too familiar with what that feels like. Barry also notes that “the role of multicultural literature is the connection it allows students to make between home and school” (632). Making these connections is necessary and critical to black and brown teenagers’ development and discovery of their self-identity and their connection to the outside world, especially in cultures where expectations are high and failure is not an option. Acevedo makes these connections through powerful themes she brings forth in the novel: Xiomara’s relationship with her tyrannical, pious mother who controls her movements and dictates how to live her life, her awareness of the male gaze and her body, and the development of her voice and her poetic persona, X. We follow these themes through Xiomara’s growth from capturing her inner thoughts in a notebook to performing her poems on center stage at New York City’s Nuyorican Poets Café. As the novel progresses, Xiomara’s development and self-cultivation is in response to

varying relatives and friends who help her have important realizations and present obstacles to her development. Barry states that, “Adolescents can view physical and emotional changes and relationships as experienced by other teens around the world” (632). And, why not from one that looks and talks like you?

### *La Madre y la Hija*

According to Louis F. Caton in “Romantic Struggles: The *Bildungsroman* and Mother-Daughter Bonding in Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*,” the *Bildungsroman* has a “perceived history of only turning the boy into the man, not the girl into the woman” (126). However in *The Poet X*, this history is centered on Xiomara becoming the extraordinary young woman that she’s destined to be. A female character such as Xiomara “accomplishes this quest by relying on a composite of gender-blended information sources: she often experiences the male dominated outside world through the interpretations of females, primarily her mother, grandmother, and other women friends” (Caton 126). Xiomara learns a lot about men and the outside world through her mother’s lens and strict upbringing and tyrannical rule.

In “Talking Back to the *Bildungsroman*: Caribbean Literature and the Dis/Location of the Genre,” Kaisha Ilmonen says that the relationships between mothers and daughters are metaphorical:

relationships between grandmothers, mothers, and daughters in Caribbean women’s writing are often highly metaphorical. It is particularly common to

describe the problematic relationship between mother and daughter as a metaphor for the relationship between the colony and the colonized. The mother may be imbued with white ideals or too deeply wounded by them to teach her daughter any means of resistance.” (69)

Mami exemplifies the notion of how her education damaged her self-identity as an adult. She wanted to be a nun when she was a teenager in the Dominican Republic. Her life was centered on Jesus and rosaries. Her devotion was extreme and she was most likely abused by the Catholic nuns in her church. Xiomara realizes this when she notices the scars on Mami’s knuckles, “I look at her scarred knuckles. / I know exactly how she was taught / faith” (Acevedo 17). Her devotion was derailed by her parents who forced her to marry Xiomara and her twin brother’s father as a free passage to the United States. This deprived her of the life that she ultimately wanted. Since Mami’s life is unfulfilled, she wants Xiomara to lead the life she desperately wanted and this is where their relationship becomes contentious. Mami has internalized the abuse she endured at the hands of the nuns, so in turn she creates a repressive world where Xiomara is stripped of her voice and any form of happiness. Xiomara’s desires are not respected. Mami’s “education” as a Dominican woman doesn’t allow her to create a world in which Xiomara can thrive in the face of stereotypical norms of what a Latinx woman should be. Xiomara says it best:

When I was little

Mami was my hero.

But then I grew breasts

and although she was always extra hard on me,

her attention became something else,  
like she wanted to turn me  
into the nun  
she could never be. (Acevedo 179)

There is no question that Mami loves her daughter. Although Xiomara has a twin brother named Xavier, affectionately nicknamed “Twin,” Mami isn’t as intently focused on Xavier as she is on Xiomara. However, he still must follow familial expectations. He is the complete opposite of Xiomara: he skipped a grade and is in a specialized school, devout just as Mami is, and he doesn’t question the rules. But, most importantly, he is a man. Although Xavier is fully aware of the abuse that Xiomara endures, he stays out of it to avoid any emotional or physical implications, especially as he guards a big secret. He constantly advises his sister against fulfilling her desires, but Xiomara tests her limits knowing full well the severe consequences. So, Mami makes Xiomara her primary concern. As Xiomara grows up, Mami becomes increasingly controlling and borderline abusive. Mami tries to groom her to her own image, “The young girl is forced to recognize, early on in her life, the presence of multiple mechanisms of marginalization, relating to gender, sexuality, skin colour, motherhood and cultural background” (Ilmonen 70). Mami particularly becomes obsessed with Xiomara’s body and how men see her:

Your mother will engrave  
your name on a bracelet,  
the words *Mi Hija* on the other side.  
This will be your favorite gift.  
This will become a despised shackle. (Acevedo 20)

Xiomara is Mami's prisoner and has to bend to her will whether she likes it or not.

Xiomara's mother's relationship to men is tainted from the start. Jones states:

the bildungsroman plots are "shaped by the dominant social norms for womanhood," such as learning to be submissive, accepting pain as a female condition, equating sexuality with danger, marrying after the inevitable failure of a rebellious autonomy, and regressing from full societal participation in order to actualize the inconsequential status of the female self." (440)

Mami's plot line is all of this and more. She begrudgingly marries a man she does not want to be with. She wanted to dedicate her entire life to a man who died on the cross. Her relationship with her husband is nonexistent. Papi is absent just as stereotypically Dominican fathers often are. He barely acknowledges his children and only speaks when Xiomara is in trouble. He's known for hanging out at bodegas and being a *mujeriego*, a womanizer. Mami thought she was being punished for her husband's shady past. Divorcing him was not an option due to her religious beliefs and the "rules" of Dominican culture. After years of infertility, they finally conceived the twins Mami believes are a reward for being devout to her one true man, Jesus. As a result of her unfortunate circumstances, Mami constantly advises Xiomara that men are terrible. With that mindset, Mami establishes stringent rules that Xiomara has to follow. Xiomara is not allowed to date any boys until marriage. She is constantly reminded to not be a *cuero*, a whore:

You think I came  
to this country for this?  
So you can carry

a diploma

in your belly

but never

a degree?

Tu no vas a ser

un maldito cuero. (Acevedo 204)

This is typical of immigrant parents when their child is disobeying them or doing something shameful; they didn't come to this country for all of that. Xiomara's purity is so important to Mami that she has to control her every move. Since she doesn't tolerate any disobedience, she forces Xiomara to attend Mass and weekly confirmation classes. Disgrace is not what Mami will allow, so the only way to make sure Xiomara stays pure is by keeping her on a very tight leash. Since her devotion is rooted in pain, whenever Xiomara steps out of line, she forces her to kneel on rice and pray in front of an altar of the Virgin Mary, a deity she idolizes. Again, Mami loves her daughter but doesn't necessarily like her behavior, "Mami says she thought it was a saint's name. / Gave me this gift of battle and now curses / how well I live up to it" (Acevedo 7). Xiomara's name means, "ready for battle." She is fully aware of the differences and expectations that she and her mother want for *her* future. And her mother is not the only one who holds these expectations. Her brother, father, and best friend, Caridad, expect better from her too:

But everyone else just wants me to do:

Mami wants me to be her proper young lady.

Papi wants me to be ignorable and silent.

Twin and Caridad want me to be good so I don't attract attention.

God just wants me to behave so I can earn being alive. (Acevedo 333)

With all of these expectations weighing heavy on her shoulders, Xiomara puts up a fight every time, which is why her abuse is far more extreme than her brother's or lack of.

There is a distinct disparity between the way Latinx boys are treated as opposed to how the girls are. The boys are groomed mama's boys, dependent on and catered to by their mother. Their masculinity and sexual conquests are celebrated while the girls have to be pure and virginal.

Mami doesn't know Xiomara. The real Xiomara. Not the young woman who is sure of herself in the words she scribbles in her notebook. Not the woman that she *thinks* Xiomara wants to be. She is constantly working to provide for her twins and never takes the time to know her children and learn about their likes and dislikes. Both siblings are secretive about their passions and true identities: Xavier is gay and in a relationship with Cody and Xiomara writes poetry about who she truly is and thinks. Both of these secrets would set Mami over the edge. Both secrets shatter the expectations that she demands in her home. Their home is not a safe haven for them to be their true authentic selves, so it is best for the twins to repress any feelings or desires in order to survive. The only fond memory Xiomara has of her mother was when she would take off work during the holidays to take them to the ice skating rink. Besides that, her memories are limited to coming home on time, getting good grades, and staying out of the gaze and hands of men. Again, Mami doesn't know Xiomara so when she ultimately finds out her secret: the notebook full of truths where she discusses her real feelings about boys and expresses her voice, Mami is outraged, "What kind of

daughter of mine *are you?*" (Acevedo 301). As Xiomara struggles to get a hold of the notebook, Mami sets it on fire while praying. As she is burning the notebook, she tells Xiomara, "If your hand causes you to sin... / If your eyes cause you to sin... / If this notebook, this writing, causes you to sin..." (Acevedo 304). This is all Mami is concerned about, that the daughter that she barely knows sins in a way that is comparable to how Eve sinned by eating the apple from the Tree of Knowledge. The most cathartic moment is when Xiomara begins to recite her poems as Mami prays. For the first time she is actually freely expressing her thoughts and feelings to her mother. As she is pouring her heart and soul out, letting go of her demons; Mami is trying to save her soul by praying to the only man she trusts:

"I'm where the X is marked,

I arrived battle ready--"

"Dios te salve, María,

llena eres de gracia;?"

"I am the indication,

I sign myself across the line."

"el Señor es contigo;

bendita tú eres

entre todas las mujeres,"

"The X I am

is an armored dress

I clothe myself in every morning." (Acevedo 306)

Caton references Adlai Murdoch who states that, “the issues surrounding the mother-daughter plot do not require an exclusively feminine response, but problematic in that the “coming of age” literary tradition of the quest cannot easily and uncritically be applied to any story about a young woman’s development” (134). However, this does not apply to Xiomara and Mami because within this quest of self, there is transformation and not only within Xiomara but in Mami as well. Caton states, “a quest narration now includes appropriating, disrupting, and revising our expectations in order to reveal agency in the woman hero” (134). Xiomara and Mami’s relationship has reached a breaking point; in order for Xiomara to actualize her identity, she must break through and destroy Mami’s unhealthy and repressive expectations that she could never live by because ultimately that is not who she truly is. This disruption in Xiomara’s journey of self-discovery is necessary for her to grow and find her voice. As a result of this breakthrough, Mami becomes more understanding and embraces Xiomara’s true passions and desires.

When Xiomara begins to practice for the poetry slam competition, she performs her poem in front of Mami and Papi. Surprisingly, Mami gives her advice, “Use your hands gestures a little less / and next time, en voz alta. / Speak up, Xiomara” (Acevedo 350). She is telling her to project her voice. Mami becomes lighter and happier and allows Xiomara to blossom. She lets go of her archaic expectations and allows room for Xiomara to grow and continue her path to self-discovery. Xiomara seems to be happy for what is to come and Mami gives her a piece of advice that can also be applied to herself:

I catch Mami’s eyes in the doorway

of the living room; she smiles at me and says:

“Pa’lente, Xiomara.

Que para atrás ni para coger impulso.” (Acevedo 355).

Ilmonen states, “...the stories of mothers, grandmothers, and foremothers are a form of feminist history that acknowledges women’s cultural double consciousness between patriarchal language and feminist voice” (68). Mami’s transformation breaks down the social norms that the patriarchal culture has instilled in her. Xiomara needed both hers and Mami’s breakthrough in order to grow and live her life as freely as she desires. Her journey to self-awareness and a full identity has begun.

### *Tu no vas a ser un maldito cuero*

As Xiomara navigates through her tumultuous relationship with her mother, she is continuously berated for her sexuality and blossoming female body. The moment that Xiomara hits puberty, Mami chastises her body. To Mami, the body can lead to sin. So, as Xiomara transforms into a woman, Mami wants to hide her at home for no one to see, telling her that she is not going to be a *cuero*, a whore. Due to Mami’s strict Dominican, Catholic upbringing, Xiomara puts up with Mami’s abuse. Xiomara is coming of age, her body is changing and she is becoming visibly more womanly. It is understandable and natural that she wants to explore and question her sexuality and display her womanly curves.

All of Xiomara's negative associations with her body and sexuality start at home. When Xiomara began to mature at an early age, she became "unhide-able" (Acevedo 5). There was no way of turning invisible or reversing what was eventually supposed to happen to her body. And, Mami was horrified:

Taller than even my father, with what Mami has always said  
was "a little too much body for such a young girl."

I am the baby fat that settled into D-cups and swinging hips  
so that the boys who called me a whale in middle school  
now ask me to send them pictures of myself in a thong. (Acevedo 5)

So, with Mami's fear of Xiomara's physical development comes her attempts at control and punishment of her daughter. Xiomara has to come straight home from school and not talk to any of the men on the block along the way because Mami has eyes on her at all times, "...Mira, muchacha, Marina from across the street / told me you were on the stoop again talking to los vendedores" (Acevedo 6). Mami stops at nothing in trying to hide and control Xiomara's body. From an early age, Xiomara has been conditioned to believe that her body's functions are shameful and that sexual desire need to be suppressed. The most significant moment where Xiomara loses all agency over her body and sexuality is when she gets her period. This is the first step of entering womanhood and Mami's reaction is not a typical one. When Xiomara gets her first period in fifth grade, she doesn't know what to do. She is scared. No one has prepared her for this moment. She Googles what to do and buys a tampon, unaware of how to insert it. Xiomara cries and feels more lost than ever. When her mother comes home

from work and is told what's going on, instead of being compassionate and empathetic, she punishes her daughter and becomes abusive and dismissive:

Mami put her hand out but didn't take them.

Instead she backhanded me so quick she cut open my lip.

"Good girls don't wear tampones.

Are you still a virgin? Are you having relations?"

I didn't know how to answer her, I could only cry.

She shook her head and told me to skip church that day.

Threw away the box of tampons, saying they were for cueros.

That she would buy me pads. Said eleven was too young.

That she would pray on my behalf. (Acevedo 40)

In Mami's perverse mind, she thinks her 11-year-old daughter is having sex instead of teaching her about her body and the changes that will now begin to happen as she is grow into a woman. Mami, with her never ending shortcomings, loses touch with her daughter in this sensitive moment. Xiomara becomes even more isolated as a consequence. Mami warns Xiomara of the trouble that her body will now cause her. Xiomara reflects on her mother's lack of guidance though a time that was bewildering yet tempting:

Boys have wanted to kiss me

since I was eleven, and back then I didn't want to kiss them.

And then it was grown-ass men, or legit men,

giving me sneaky looks, and Mami told me I'd have to pray extra

so my body didn't get me into trouble. (Acevedo 151)

As Xiomara grows up and enters high school, she begins to be at odds with her body; however, she loves the attention she receives knowing the trouble she would get into if her mother finds out or if she gives into her desires:

And I knew then what I'd known since my period came:

my body was trouble. I had to pray the trouble out  
of the body God gave me. My body was a problem.

And I didn't want any of these boys to be the ones to solve it.

I wanted to forget I had this body at all. (Acevedo 151)

To Xiomara and especially Mami, her body brings shame and any thought of sexuality must be avoided at all cost.

Xiomara is fully aware of what attention her body attracts and at times, she likes and craves the attention. Xiomara wants to explore her body and sexuality. Like any normal, healthy teenager, she wants to hold a boy's hand and have her first kiss. She wants to be romantic with someone she likes. On the other hand, her interactions with the opposite sex have often alienated and frightened her. The drug dealers catcall her on her way home and boys in school say vile things to her, "Big body joint," they say, / "we know what girls like you want" (Acevedo 46), Xiomara has never had an authentic, positive interaction with the opposite sex. When her sexuality elicits a physical response from the boys at school who grope and assault her in the hallways, she has no choice but to defend herself:

Today, I already had to curse a guy out

for pulling my bra strap,

then shoved a senior into a locker

for trying to whisper into my ear. (Acevedo 46)

Boys and grown men don't want to get to know her and hear her thoughts and feelings; they only want what her body can do for them. However, she is conflicted when at times she enjoys these interactions while not necessarily her giving consent to them:

And I'm disgusted at myself  
 for the slight excitement  
 that shivers up my back  
 at the same time that I wish  
 my body could fold into the tiniest corner  
 for me to hide in. (Acevedo 47)

Although she may enjoy these interactions at the same time, she is conditioned from a very early on that her body equals trouble, and that expressing or wanting to explore one's sexuality is wrong. Strangely, she confides in Caridad, which might be in part because she is so straight laced and proper that Xiomara gets enjoyment out of her reaction. When she tells Caridad of her urge to kiss a boy Caridad reacts with repulsion:

X: I'm just saying, I'm ready to stop being a nun. Kiss a boy,  
 shoot, I'm ready to creep with him behind a stairwell and let him  
 feel me up.

C: Oh God, girl. I really just can't with you.

Here, here's the Book of Ruth. Learn yourself some virtue. (Acevedo 28)

In "The Female "Bildungsroman": Calling It into Question," Carol Lazzaro-Weis says that novels like Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and even Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* embrace prejudices and do not welcome change:

The classical *Bildungsroman* includes a tendency to make people feel at home with the prejudices and less likely to change. Its characters cannot grow as they claim to desire. Rather, they are constantly setting up limits for themselves so that they can return to a former state of affairs where maturity would be possible and the self would be less besieged. (24)

In the case of *The Poet X*, Xiomara didn't set limitations for herself; it is her mother and those around her that imposed them on her. As she begins her sexual awakening, she questions and challenges Mami's teachings and notions. Throughout the novel, Mami holds on to these prejudices whereas Xiomara craves to learn and explore herself in however way she deems authentic. However, Xiomara's conditioning to feel shame about her body and sexuality sets her up for failure. But as she is growing up, she begins to unweave the thread in order to achieve liberation. So, no matter what Xiomara does, men will continue to vie for her attention and it is her responsibility to stay away from those advances as much as possible. Mami has led her to believe that women are the root of men's temptation, like Eve with the serpent. And, here is where the double standards become apparent. A great example of this is Papi's treatment in the novel. Papi's promiscuity is celebrated and never questioned. Papi is a reformed *mujeriego*, a womanizer. His escapades are well documented in the neighborhood. He drinks at the barbershop, touching women's thighs as they pass by (Acevedo 64). He has sex with any woman he wants. However rumor has it that he was infertile and so when he finally impregnates Mami, he changes his ways and stays at home, seats in front of a TV all day:

They say Twin and I saved him.

That if it wasn't for us  
 Mami would have kicked him to tomorrow  
 or a jealous husband would have shanked him dead. (Acevedo 64)

To the neighborhood, Papi's only saving grace was impregnating Mami. By this divine act, his sins are cleared and forgiven because he gave Mami her ultimate gift: the twins. Regardless of this precious gift, Mami is consumed by the notion that this is how men act. To Mami, this is normal, expected behavior from men:

There be no clean in men's hands.  
 Even when the dirt has been scrubbed  
 from beneath nails, when the soap scent  
 from them suspends  
 in the air -- there be sins there. (Acevedo 207)

Mami doesn't beat him. She doesn't call him names, like *cuero* or restrict him from talking to the opposite sex. In her actions and comments, Mami places the blame on women for the unwanted male attention. It is the woman's fault for the catcalls and the groping. Ultimately, it is Xiomara's fault. Mami's goal is to prevent Xiomara's damnation. She wants to make sure she is as pure and virginal as possible. Xiomara articulates this double standard perfectly in the poem titled, "Cuero." The word *cuero* is a Dominican slang word for whore or slut. It is a woman who is easy and loose with regards to her sexuality. Being branded as a "cuero" is a stigma that Mami fears for her daughter. However, Xiomara reclaims the word and redefines it. In the poem, Xiomara describes a perfectly normal girl who is full of sass, that has piercings and wears

whatever she wants. A regular girl who is free. And, Xiomara comes to a conclusion that shatters her mother's ridiculous notions about sexuality:

I'll be anything that makes sense  
of this panic. I'll loosen myself from this painful flesh.  
See, a cuero is any skin. A cuero  
is just a covering. A cuero is a loose thing.  
Tied down by no one. Fluttering  
and waving in the wind. Flying. Flying. Gone. (Acevedo 206)

Xiomara makes the decision to push back on what Mami has taught her about her body and what it truly means to be a *cuero*. She is pushing back on the negative connotations that comes with the word, and redefines a *cuero*, not as a whore, but as a free woman. Like a snake shedding its skin, Xiomara is removing the negative associations of the word and thereby finding a positive meaning in it. Acevedo is sending a clear message to young girls to shed themselves of these negative connotations and beliefs and replace the negative meaning of these words with their own more creative interpretations. Xiomara ultimately accepts who she is. For her, a *cuero* is not necessarily a bad thing, but a woman who is liberated and comfortable with her sexuality.

Despite the stigmas placed on the female body, men, and sex by Mami, Xiomara's blossoming relationship with her lab partner, Aman, shows how she begins to explore her sexuality and accept her body. She also begins to develop her own opinions and ideas that are completely separate from Mami. Due to Mami's perception of men as evil and careless, Xiomara hesitates if history will repeat itself:

What if I like a boy too much and he breaks my heart,  
 and I wind up angry and bitter like Mami,  
 walking around always exclaiming how men ain't shit,  
 even when my father and brother are in the same room? (Acevedo 32)

However, Aman is nice. He doesn't come on to her too strongly. He doesn't catcall her or touch her in an inappropriate way. Their friendship begins innocently as they hang out in the park and listen to hip-hop music. They share details about themselves that no one else knows. Xiomara's confidence in performing her poetry should be credited to Aman as he was the one that pushed her to share herself on a personal and emotional level. As Xiomara begins to develop feelings for him, her body begins to experience things that she doesn't know how to control or handle:

If my body was a Country Club soda bottle,  
 it's one that has been shaken and dropped  
 and at any moment it's gonna pop open  
 and surprise the whole damn world. (Acevedo 105)

This need to burst the cap right open comes full circle when she masturbates for the first time:

And when it all builds up,  
 I sink into my mattress.  
 I feel such a release. Such a relief.  
 I feel such a shame  
 settle like a blanket  
 covering me head to toe.

To make myself feel this way

is a dirty thing, right?

Then why does it feel so good? (Acevedo 130-131)

Xiomara has been conditioned that anything to do with her body is disgusting. So, this simple act of masturbation brings her great relief but also shame. The duality of her response to her first sexual experience reflects her internal conflict. She has been conditioned by Mami and the cultural expectation to be a “good” girl, yet her physical needs are emerging as part of the sexual awakening. Xiomara’s conflicted response to the act of masturbating reflects her internal struggle as she continues her journey to independence and self-actualization.

Xiomara continues seeing Aman in secret in defiance of Mami’s explicit restrictions. Their physical interactions are innocent in nature. They hold hands and kiss. It isn’t until she runs away from home after her confrontation with Mami that she goes to Aman’s house and the sexual tension reaches the tipping point. This is the first time they are in an enclosed space without the threat of being seen. As they begin to make out, Xiomara stops them from going any further but comes to the realization that she needs to shed herself of the shame Mami has instilled in her and finally be free:

I know why island people cliff dive.

Why they jump to feel free, to fly,

and how they must panic for a moment

when the ocean rushes toward them. (Acevedo 326)

Although she was expecting Aman to reject her, she is content with herself because she made a choice that she is comfortable with because she was always conditioned to believe that she never had a choice when it comes to her body:

With Aman's soft breathing in my ear,  
 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  
 than the one that want to break through  
 because in the back of my head I know  
 today I've made decisions  
 I will never be able to undo. (Acevedo 329-330)

Xiomara finally regains her agency over her body and feels a sense of relief. Xiomara's sexual awakening and acceptance of her body might follow that of a traditional Bildungsroman about a young girl, however she does not follow the same path, due to her culture and upbringing, which makes a clear parallel difficult to define. Also, she is a young woman of color. There are different cultural expectations that are reflected in both versions of the Bildungsroman. In the traditional European version, the central figure's journey toward self-actualization and awareness is within the boundaries of the accepted cultural norms. Although Xiomara questions and pushes back against the cultural norms around sexuality and men throughout the novel, she has acknowledged that, no matter what she does, she will, in some way, be defined by her skin color and the cultural stereotypes concerning Latinx women. This is how she is and will always be viewed by those within and outside of her culture. It is up to *her* to make educated

and informed decisions about herself and body and live her life through her sense of her own identity. This realization is reflective of the larger cultural stereotypes around the role of Latinx women that continue to, in some way, will continue to define her and present obstacles that she must push back against as she continues her personal education and growth. As a result of her experiences, she has learned that it is up to *her* to define herself through her new sense of her identity.

*Voz Alta: The Poet X*

Ilmonen states that, “The genre of the bildungsroman is closely connected to the tradition of the modern [novel], its plot line highlighting the developing “I” emancipating itself as a true subject of humanist freedom” (63). When Xiomara finally finds her voice, she’s free. However, that road of self-identity and awareness was not easy for her. As Xiomara’s mother strips away her identity, Xiomara begins to rebel against the rules and norms that are established for her:

My parents probably wanted a girl who would sit in the pews  
wearing pretty florals and a soft smile.  
They got combat boots and a mouth silent  
until it’s sharp as an island machete. (Acevedo 8)

Xiomara is constantly battling to be comfortable with her true self and letting it shine in a way that rings true when she says, “Even with my Amazon frame, / I feel too small for all that’s inside me” (Acevedo 34). Her true self wants to break free but was never allowed

to. All Xiomara wants is freedom, but with freedom come a lot of hard truths, “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 248).

Xiomara’s journey towards self-awareness and identity is seen through her writing in her notebook gifted to her by Xavier, which no one sees. Her true self is evident on the pages of the notebook. She lets herself go, spilling out all her truths, fears, and feelings. Her outside persona remains:

The other girls call me conceited. Ho. Thot. Fast.

When your body takes up more room than your voice  
you are always the target of well-aimed rumors,

which is why I let my knuckles talk for me. (Acevedo 5)

Xiomara doesn’t let anyone in. She is constantly having to defend herself. No one is allowed to know who Xiomara is because her mother has beaten down her voice. She is reduced to writing all her feelings in the notebook. The only two people that Xiomara at first is somewhat comfortable in sharing aspects of herself with are her twin brother, Xavier, and her friend, Caridad. However even with them, her voice is stifled. She can barely share her thoughts on kissing a boy without Caridad responding negatively. Caridad and Xiomara’s friendship is an oxymoron because Caridad is everything that Xiomara’s family want her to be:

I curse up a storm and am always ready to knuckle up.

Caridad recites Bible verses and promotes peace.

I’m ready to finally feel what it’s like to like a boy.

Caridad wants to wait for marriage. (Acevedo 30)

Caridad is a reminder of what life could be if she just followed the rules and remained silent. Xiomara has no one to confide in. However, it isn't until she starts to associate with like-minded people and recite and perform her poetry that she begins to gain self confidence and establish her identity. Xiomara starts to raise her voice louder and louder.

Throughout the novel, Xiomara has been isolated. She is constantly silenced and with that comes feelings of isolation and loneliness. She knows that anytime she speaks, she will be beaten down by everyone: Mami, boys that catcall her, boys and girls that are threatened by her. It isn't until she meets Ms. Gailano, the English teacher who introduces her to spoken word poetry, that Xiomara finally sees some hope. However, Xiomara never shares her writing with Ms. Galiano either. Anytime, Ms. Galiano assigns her a writing task and she captures her true thoughts and feelings in verse. When she finally turns in the assignment, it is a watered down version of herself written in formal writing. Xiomara likes Ms. Galiano but she has yet to feel comfortable enough to trust her. Ms. Gailano knows Xiomara is interested in poetry club especially when she played a video of a black woman performing her poem with her hands waving, clearly showing her emotions through her words. That excited Xiomara. Xiomara connected with the poet's message and movement. And, Ms. Galiano constantly invites her to join, but Xiomara fights the urge to go. Mami is forcing her to attend confirmation class at church with Caridad. Xiomara is nowhere near ready to take the communion and be part of the flock of God's soldiers. Church is a place that welcomes existential questioning but can also chastise you for questioning too much. Xiomara, at times, uses these confirmation sessions to flex her voice and question her

existence and purpose, “What’s the point of God giving me life / if I can’t live it as my own?” (Acevedo 57). However, her outbursts are met with resistance and leads to even more complex questions that Xiomara is not capable of answering due to her limited knowledge of the world around her. In the poem, “I Think the Story of Genesis Is Mad Stupid,” Xiomara drills Father Sean with questions about Eve and Adam and the creation of the world:

And 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?  
 Unless the apple is a metaphor?  
 Is the whole Bible a poem?  
 What’s *not* a metaphor?  
 Did any of it *actually* happen? (Acevedo 120)

It is interesting how Xiomara questions this because in many ways Xiomara and Eve are the same: they both love apples (well, Xiomara does, Eve just took a bite) and are curious about the world around them but are silenced for it.

For much of this novel in poetic form, Xiomara is alone: alone with her thoughts, her words, and her feelings. It isn’t until she begins to share what’s in her notebook that layers of Xiomara’s identity begin to flourish. The first person to actually see Xiomara clearly is her lab partner and boyfriend, Aman. They form a friendship that allows Xiomara to let down her guard and share her writing with him. They build a friendship

based on their taste of music. They go to a park and sit and listen to rappers such as J. Cole, Kendrick Lamar, and Drake. Xiomara connects to these rappers because of the way they express themselves through their words. She admires how free they are in expressing their thoughts and feelings:

Every day I searched for new songs,  
and it was like applying for asylum.  
I just needed someone to help me escape  
from all the silence.  
I just needed people saying words  
about all the things that hurt them.  
And maybe this is why Papi stopped listening to music,  
because it can make your body want to rebel. To speak up.  
And even that young I learned music can become a bridge  
between you and a total stranger. (Acevedo 82-83)

Through Xiomara's loneliness and isolation, she finds kinship with rap and hip-hop music and these rappers because they share experiences and issues regarding family, love, and violence. Xiomara is trying to find a home because in her actual home she is not *seen* or *heard*, "Sometimes I want to tell her, the only person in this house / who isn't heard is me" (Acevedo 6). After a few hang out sessions with Aman, listening to music and reciting her poems to him, he asks her what's her stage name, "So what's your stage name, Xiomara? / ... "I'm just a writer... but maybe I'd be The Poet X" (Acevedo 133). This is when Xiomara reaches the turning point and the Poet X is born.

In order for Xiomara to grow into herself and continue developing her identity, she needs validation and confidence. Luckily, there is a community that welcomes her with open arms: Ms. Galiano's poetry club. After months of denying herself the freedom to be herself by going to church, she finally attends a session of poetry club. Though it is not her first time performing her poems to another person, these are the peers that will build her up to be stronger and better at their shared craft. As a way to introduce themselves, Ms. Galiano asks everyone to perform a poem. Xiomara attentively listens to everyone's poems and finds that they are people like her who share similar interests. She is not *alone* after all. When it is her turn to perform her poem, she can't get the words out. And after some encouragement from Isabella, "You got this girl. Just let us hear every word" (Acevedo 258), Xiomara lets it all out. When she is done, she is euphoric. People are *listening* to her. No one is talking about or to her, she is *heard*. Xiomara finally feels the validation she needs:

Isabelle snaps, and Ms. Galiano smiles,  
and of course, Chris has a comment  
about my poem's complex narrative structure,  
or something like that.

...

My little words  
feel important, for just a moment.

This is a feeling I could get addicted to. (Acevedo 259)

Xiomara doesn't only need Aman to validate her. She now has a community of fellow poets and artists that affirm and welcome her. She now knows that her voice matters.

She doesn't have to hide behind her notebook, but is free to say what she is feeling out loud. This performance really elevates Xiomara's desire to share her thoughts and feelings publically.

In "The Limits of Development? Narratives of Growing Up/Growing Old in Narrative," Herike Hartung references Marianne Hirsch's statement that the Bildungsroman "is founded on the belief in progress and the coherence of selfhood, striving to inscribe a view of the subject as a unified and singular identity, and chronicling its progression from immaturity to maturity" (52). Xiomara's journey in her development of her identity is gradual. First came the revelations in her notebook. All of her thoughts, feelings, fears, and desires are locked away in this notebook that no one sees. Then, Aman comes. He encourages her to share her thoughts and feelings. He is safe, her safe haven. When she takes her poems and performs them to her peers in poetry club, she is allowing a few more people into her world and welcomes them to know her. She isn't defensive anymore. She doesn't have to fight her way to be heard. Her peers want to listen to her words. Little by little, Xiomara is opening up and letting her true self shine. It is only when Caridad and Xavier invite her out to the Nuyorican Poets Café to watch a live spoken word event and secretly sign her up to perform one of her poems that Xiomara decides to blow the door wide open and allow the whole world to know who she is. Of course, Xiomara freezes with fear. She is now performing in front of new faces. Aman and her peers from the poetry club are not present and so cannot encourage her. However with encouragement from the host and crowd, Xiomara gets over her nerves and performs her poem to the audience:

People watch. They listen,

and when I'm done  
saying a poem I've practiced  
in my mirror, they clap.  
And it sounds so loud  
that I want to cover my ear,  
cover my face. (Acevedo 279)

Xiomara experiences the validation she has been seeking and searching for. This becomes addicting to her. Her voice is heard and not silenced. People cheer her on. Her words matter. At the end of the event, the host invites her to the youth slam and Xiomara is thrilled. However, Xiomara has a roadblock: Mami. Everyone now knows who Xiomara is: inside and out. The true Xiomara. The Poet X. Everyone but Mami. Mami assumes that Xiomara has been attending her confirmation classes like a good Christian girl. However, surprisingly with Caridad's help, Xiomara has been going to poetry club and hanging out with Aman. When Mami and Xiomara's confrontation comes to a head, Mami burns her notebook and inflicts a great deal of pain on Xiomara. Poems that she has been working on and practicing go up in flames. Luckily with the practice she has been getting from poetry club and the Nuyorican Poets Café performance, Xiomara memorizes a few of her poems and recites them to her enraged mother. While Mami wants to erase that part of her, Xiomara becomes a phoenix. She is reborn again because at this point she experiences what it's like to be seen and acknowledged. Xiomara is not going to be silenced again.

Although Xiomara seeks refuge in Father Sean and Aman, the person who really is Xiomara's savior is Ms. Galiano. Her hard truths are what Xiomara needs to hear in

order to move forward not only with her mother, but with her own life as she continues to strengthen her voice and mature into the young woman that she is destined to be, “She tells me words give people permission / to be their fullest self. And aren’t these the poems / I’ve most needed to hear?” (Acevedo 345). As Xiomara finds comfort in rappers and poets that share the same pain she has been experiencing, she in turn becomes the voice for those young women of color who are marginalized and have not found themselves. And, Xiomara understands that. In her final assignment in Ms. Galiano’s class, the writing prompt asks her to explain her favorite quote. Xiomara surprisingly chooses the following quote from Psalm 119:130, “The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (Acevedo 356). Xiomara has been in the dark for so long and now finally her words bring her to the light. She explains in the assignment:

...I love this quote because even though it’s not poetry, it IS poetry. It’s about any of the words that brings us together and how we can form a home in them... 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 to the light. And isn’t that what a poem is? A lantern glowing in the dark. (Acevedo 357)

She found her voice. She will now help others who were experiencing the same internal and external struggles to find theirs. She will give voice to those that feel powerless and defeated. Xiomara becomes an empowering protagonist for young children of color who face these challenges everyday. In “Empowerment through Young-Adult Literature” Belinda Y. Louie and Douglas H. Louie states:

reading about other people's struggles might not be an uplifting experience. The characters can be so trapped by their situations that they convey a helpless, gloomy message. It is when the characters are responsible for solving their problem that adolescent readers are most likely to be empowered to develop confidence in overcoming similar problems of their own. (53)

Readers can see Xiomara's progress from being powerless and constrained by cultural norms and stereotypes to being empowered by her own voice. And, finding her authentic voice is critical in the development of her identity. Her growth is seen as a testimony in believing in your truth and being comfortable with yourself.

In the end, Xiomara matures into a confident, free, young woman. She finds her voice. She finally accepts who she is. In many ways, *The Poet X* fulfills the trajectory of the Bildungsroman framework. However, *The Poet X* sheds light on what young marginalized adults experience and witness every day. *The Poet X* serves as a window to a culture that is often overlooked. As Jones states, "[the] Bildungsroman as a twenty-first century practice is emerging, transmuting the subject formation of the genre into the actual formation of subjects in the world" (447). Although the traditional Bildungsroman framework started off as a vehicle for European, white, male protagonists, it has adapted and been adopted by many subjectivities, genders, races and cultures. Ilmonen emphasizes that the "traditional bildungsroman is grounded in the idea of a developing self for whom life is like a form of art; it depicts the process of development from apprentice to Master" (72). And, this is seen in the novel as Xiomara was at one point voiceless and later becomes empowered and victorious in her growth into womanhood. However, Ilmonen also notes, "In portraying postcolonial reality, this

becoming is not always directed towards harmonious closure, but instead towards fragmentation and friction between the self's different axes of identity" (72). Young people of color might see *The Poet X* as a reflection of how they come to terms with the "fragmentation and friction" of their own layered identities. The book might help young people understand that the journey to self-actualization involves learning how to adapt to cultural norms and expectations but also mustering the courage to break free restrictive or unreasonable norms. While they may end up feeling that they do not have all the answers or can control all aspects of their journey, they can gain insight and resolution. Xiomara can't change her mother's archaic expectations, or how men see her, or that her voice might be silenced again at some point in her life. On the other hand, she can now make decisions about her life that are beneficial to her. She has learned necessary lessons and gained tools to navigate life in a more fulfilling way. While specific to young girls of color, Xiomara's struggles also reflect those of anyone on a journey to find their own voice. However, a young person of color might identify more with Xiomara than with a character from a different time period, race or social class. *The Poet X* begins with a Xiomara who was lost, voiceless and caged. As the novel progresses, she challenges norms and customs and embraces change and acceptance. In her struggle to be heard, Xiomara reflects young people all over the world who feel unseen, unheard, and misunderstood. Youngsters who feel oppressed and lost may find hope in following Xiomara's struggles and ultimate triumph over her circumstances. In this sense, Xiomara's development models a specific type of "bildung" for young people of color.

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