

# Starting with Puppies Instead of Pit Bulls

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## Introduction

In the latest PISA report, 57–58 percent of Swedish 15-year-olds state that the only time they read is when it is an obligatory school task. This number has increased by 17 percent since 2009 (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2018: 45). Even more alarmingly, 38-40 percent of the students see reading as a waste of time which is a 10-11 percent increase since 2009. Given this negative stance to reading literature, the solution to the conundrum of how to incite student interest no doubt becomes even more elusive for practicing teachers. In the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, the language barrier may of course further dampen motivation. One possible solution is offered by the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature 2020-2022 Jason Reynolds. He argues in a segment on PBS Newshour (2016) that poetry can act as a gateway to literature for students who have not yet found their way into reading. He uses the metaphor of pit bulls vs. puppies to illustrate the effect on not-yet readers<sup>1</sup> by different kinds of literature, and advises teachers to recognize that with novels, “the amount of words – is equivalent to a snarling dog. So why not start with the less threatening, palm-sized pup in the window? In this case, poetry. Poetry has the ability to create entire moments with only a few choice words. The spacing and line breaks create rhythm, a helpful musicality, a natural flow” (Reynolds 2016: 2.01). If a teacher wants to incorporate a reading project in their course, an individual poem will hardly suffice, and it can be time-consuming to create a collection of poetry that adheres to a certain theme. This is why choosing a verse novel might be a viable option. The amount of text on the page will be reduced and it will take less time to read. Such a combination offers great potential in the EFL classroom context, especially since verse novels generally have a less complicated narrative structure than regular novels which may lower the threshold for language learners.

In the Swedish EFL classroom, it may also help that most students are used to consuming media in English via music, streaming services, social media, and videogames etc. Regarding the aural aspect of poetry that Reynolds mentions, this can be further augmented if the audiobook format is added as an option for all students. Not only does this format offer students a chance to hear the rhythm and the sounds of the words as part of the aesthetic experience, but it may also improve their listening comprehension skills

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<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Carol Dweck’s growth mindset and wary of assigning labels to students that may become self-fulfilling prophecies, I use the term not-yet readers instead of reluctant readers or non-readers.

which is an objective in the EFL classroom (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2022 “Syllabus”). From an accessibility standpoint, adding the audiobook format adheres to the principle of multiple means of representation formulated in the pedagogical approach called Universal Design for Learning (UDL).<sup>2</sup> What is more, in the age of YouTube influencers and slam poetry, the high impact factor of the rhetorical prowess of the performer may appeal to students and empower them to build on literacies acquired outside of school. Indeed, having accomplished authors narrating their own audiobooks can serve as a vehicle of high interest in the school setting. A third alternative could be the graphic novel adaptation in which visual elements provide scaffolding that may be useful for language learners in terms of extra contextual clues (Wolfe and Kleijwegt 2012).

In this article I will discuss the pedagogical potential of two verse novels: Reynolds’ *Long way down* (2017) and *The poet X* (2018) by Elizabeth Acevedo. The reason for choosing these two is that they function not only as examples of recent YA novels which have received awards and critical acclaim, but also as powerful counternarratives to the representation of minoritized groups in the dominant discourse in the United States. *Long way down* condenses even a strict interpretation of the Aristotelian unities in its depiction of a sixty second elevator ride down eight floors for the fifteen-year-old African American William Holloman who has tucked his brother Shawn’s revolver into his jeans after he was “shot // and killed” (Reynolds 2017: 3–4). In Acevedo’s verse novel, the reader meets the fifteen-year-old speaker of Dominican-American descent Xiomara Batista. She battles constant sexual harassment and wrestles with repressive norms from Latino culture and Catholicism as she seeks to find her own voice and independence.

My aim is three-fold, first to investigate what the juxtaposition of these two texts will yield, second to problematize the texts’ pedagogical potential, and third to argue for their function as counternarratives in the EFL classroom. In this article, I will use Critical Race theory (CRT) focusing on empowerment and intersectionality, as well as analytical tools from Gender Studies. Furthermore, I will in a very concrete manner discuss possible pedagogical implications as a service to practicing teachers who may want to incorporate these two novels in their teaching.<sup>3</sup> While I have not tried out this teaching unit in an upper secondary school classroom myself, I have used all the learning activities and the materials in my own classroom as part of

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<sup>2</sup> For information about UDL, see for instance the CAST website: <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>

<sup>3</sup> One of my reviewers commented that the teaching unit comes across as hypothetical and speculative. Therefore, I would like to clarify that my intention is not to propose an ideal way of teaching these verse novels. Since I am well aware of how little time is available for curriculum design for in-service teachers, I wanted to provide something concrete aiming to translate a theoretical argument into a practical unit mindful of potential pitfalls. It is my wish that the activities might serve as inspiration or starting point for a reading project with all respect for the various contexts in which teachers find themselves.

experiential learning for pre-service teachers. Prior to becoming a teacher educator, I worked as an EFL teacher in secondary school, upper secondary school, and at a community college.

## Theoretical Framework

Over the last few years, CRT has become an emblem of the raging culture wars in the United States, and Conservative media and legislators have used it to rally support for a crackdown on diversity issues in the educational sector. This critical approach was initially an expression of the disappointment many in the Civil Rights movement felt when discriminatory acts continued to be rampant despite new legislation that allegedly should protect people of color. It is no surprise then that the theory “emerged from critical legal studies (CLS) in the mid-1980s [... CLS] argued that legal language is a discourse that continues to perpetuate hierarchies [...] Whites over Blacks and other people of color (Ladson-Billings 2009: 88). The main tenets of CRT are more expansive than other literary theories since they center on how multiple factors are conjoined. As the following quote implies, CRT does not shy away from socially fraught issues and there is a clear focus on activism. These aims include: “studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power [...] in a broader perspective [...] economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious” (Delgado et al. 2017: 28).

For the purpose of this article, the emphasis on storytelling in CRT allows me to elucidate what the inclusion of diverse voices can bring to an educational context. According to Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019), “CRT places value on the personal experiences and stories of people of color as a means of building solidarity, inspiring change, and challenging dominant ideology” (p. 9). The role of storytelling in CRT therefore takes the shape of counternarratives, something that “highlights and rejects the ordinariness of racism, decenters race as the primary identity marker for people of color, and rewrites alternative realities” (Mullins 2016: 459). To clarify, this critical lens enables perspectives which often have been denigrated and glossed over in the dominant discourse to take center stage in the classroom. Indeed, counternarratives have been conceptualized as a method in CRT aiming for “centralization of the voices and lived experience of people of color” (Johnson 2018: 106), “an active opportunity for better understanding multiple viewpoints and ways race intersects with the experiences of everyday life [...] inherently productive theory [...] encourages response and actions” (Garcia 2013: 46–47). The task to cultivate an open mind set aligns with the overarching objectives of Swedish education. Already in the fourth sentence in the Swedish National *Curriculum for the upper secondary school* (2022: 1), it is stated: “[s]chooling should impart and consolidate respect for human rights and foundational democratic values,” and there is also a reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The responsibility of the

school to counteract xenophobia and other types of discrimination is also mentioned, as well as the increasingly urgent demands to learn to negotiate life in a multicultural and globalized society (Nat. Ag. f. Ed. 2022). This is all well and good, but for the individual teacher these policies can be hard to implement in the classroom which is why CRT as a critical lens can offer valuable guidance.

To that effect, CRT has been used by educators under many different guises, such as CRT in education (Zamudio et al. 2010), critical race pedagogy (Mueller 2013), culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 2014), and critical race intersectional pedagogy (Sheth et al. 2022), to name a few. In this article, I will adhere to Tara Yosso's (2002) adaptation of the five tenets of CRT to curriculum design:

- (1) acknowledge the central and intersecting roles of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination in maintaining inequality in curricular structures, processes, and discourses;
- (2) challenge dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding culture and intelligence, language and capability, objectivity and meritocracy;
- (3) direct the formal curriculum toward goals of social justice and the hidden curriculum toward Freirean goals of critical consciousness;
- (4) develop counterdiscourses through storytelling, narratives, chronicles, family histories, scenarios, biographies, and parables that draw on the lived experiences students of color bring to the classroom; and
- (5) utilize interdisciplinary methods of historical and contemporary analysis to articulate the linkages between educational and societal inequality. (Yosso 2002: 98)

Yosso's goals will constitute one part of the theoretical foundation in my design of a teaching unit. In the literary analysis below, I will also draw heavily on Gender Studies in an attempt to highlight issues that may be of interest to practitioners in the EFL classroom when teaching these two verse novels.

## Analysis

### Counterstories

For a Swedish student, Acevedo's and Reynolds' novels can provide an insider's perspective on what it is like to belong to two different minoritized groups in American society. Reynolds' novel delineates the destructive repercussions of a dominant ideology where the chance of success for groups on the margins is slim and the threat of gun violence permeates everyday life. Acevedo's novel illustrates the sacrifices first generation immigrants make in

order to provide a better life for their children. Xiomara's parents struggle to meet ends meet in soul-crushing menial jobs that fail to acknowledge their talents and abilities. Likewise, there is clear evidence of institutionalized racism in Reynolds' novel in the depictions of the intergenerational poverty and the pull of gangs and money in the drug business. In *The poet X*, the institution of religion plays a major role in the oppressive norms and purity ideals that Xiomara finds suffocating. Resistance to oppression is integrated into the strife to find the courage to speak in Acevedo's novel. On the publication of her book, this is something the author addresses in a segment on PBS Newshour (2018). Acevedo speaks of the importance of not only seeing yourself in the books on the shelves but also being the creator of such counternarratives: "our stories are just as important as any other stories." She also highlights how brown girls' voices have found many expressions throughout history. In a radical move, the ethical stance of the reader is brought to the fore by Reynolds (2020) who addresses the issue of the intended audience of his novel in an interview. He clarifies that it is the reader's responsibility to decide how it ends. He implores adult readers, especially educators, to seriously contemplate what their decision says about their biases in terms of how they view African American men and how they may unconsciously be influenced by the ubiquitous and negative stereotyping in media. Consequently, counterstories can function both as validation of silenced voices and moral imperatives to effect change in the reader to take action (Garcia 2013).

### **Violence – Revenge or Defense**

Gun violence is of course at the very center of *Long way down*. The author states in an NPR interview that the novel is based on a personal experience; he was once in a situation when the death of a friend caused emotional turmoil, and he debated whether to lash out or refrain from action. Furthermore, he mentions that by constructing ghost characters he was able to avoid an overtly didactic approach given the morals of the story (Reynolds 2017). Perhaps the speaker's interaction with the ghost characters could be read as an appeal to the reader to become engaged, as in the African American tradition of call and response.<sup>4</sup> To what extent is the reader willing to listen to the call of silenced voices from the past?

A contentious point in Reynolds' novel stems from that the allure of the gun and the inherent power it confers are clearly illustrated. The speaker "felt the imprint / of the piece, like / another piece / of me, // an extra vertebra, /

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<sup>4</sup> Crystal S. Donkor (2023: 60) defines call and response as "an interaction between speaker and listener in which the listener responds to the speaker's call" and as "part of the Black church and song traditions while also functioning in other contexts in which faith, hope, desire, and longing are present." Patrick S. Bernard (2019: 123-124) argues that an early study by Thomas W. Talley shows the evolution from secular slave songs, so-called Rhymes, to call-and-response and also their function as cipher language for enslaved people to communicate without detection by the slavery regime.

some more / backbone” (Reynolds 2018: 97). In the American context, the symbolic value of guns is embedded in political and ideological discourses to an extent that may be difficult to comprehend for an outsider. Even if the overarching impression of guns in the novel may come across as negative, by not shying away from representing also the positive feelings derived from guns and their connection to hegemonic masculinity, Reynolds invites the reader to grapple with the seductive power of a gun. Nevertheless, as stated above, Swedish teachers are tasked with promoting human rights and to “foster in students a sense of justice, generosity, tolerance, and responsibility” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2022 *Curriculum*).<sup>5</sup> Talking about gun violence in a way that could be misinterpreted as relying even reminiscently on the rhetorical moves from the gun-promoting propaganda of the National Rifle Association (NRA) is especially fraught in today’s Swedish context where nationally 62 young people were gunned down in gang-related crimes in 2022 (Swedish Police 2023). Therefore, it is also important to notice how the author calls on the reader to recognize the humanity of the speaker who might at first glance be reduced to a stereotype: “like I was just another / block boy on one / looking to off one” (Reynolds 2018: 151). In this sense the novel acts as a powerful counternarrative validating the embodied experience of living in a society that disregards any value you may bring (Johnson 2018: 106).

How the code of conduct that the speaker in Reynolds’ novel *Will* follows is related to protecting the honor of the family is evident when the speaker tries to justify his carrying a gun to his childhood friend Dani: “So that she knew I had / purpose // and that this was about family” (Reynolds 2018: 151). What the speaker calls *The Rules* have been passed down from grandfather to uncle Mark, to Will’s father Mikey Hollowman, to Shawn, and now to Will. The moral quandary then for the speaker, and for the reader, becomes to what extent the value of upholding the family honor is worth the price exacted on the individual. Is there no escape from the cycle of violence? From this perspective, the cost of honor in patriarchy becomes very high because a future with a family is what the speaker will deny himself if he follows *The Rules*: “NO. 1: CRYING // Don’t. // NO. 2: SNITCHING // Don’t. // NO. 3: REVENGE // If someone you love / gets killed, / find the person / who killed / them and / kill them” (Reynolds 2017: 35–37). Significantly, *The Rules* were first instilled in Will by his brother after his childhood friend Dani was shot: “*Shawn taught me / Rule Number One—*” (Reynolds 2017: 145). By being told to hide his emotions behind a hard shell, Will is started down the path of distancing him from his surroundings and adapting to the hard life as an African American male in a society permeated with institutionalized racism. This is implicitly referenced in the poems “THE INVENTION OF THE RULES” and “ANOTHER THING ABOUT THE RULES.” Not only is it unclear who invented them, but the speaker also says: “They were meant for

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<sup>5</sup> All translations of quotes from curricular documents are the author’s own since the translation available online is from 2013 and by now quite dated.

the broken // to follow” (Reynolds 2017: 38–39). The intersectionality of race, class, and gender shows how oppression of minoritized groups are upheld by internalizing the principles of discipline (Foucault 1991) in a way that protects white privilege. According to Wilkerson (2020A), one third of African Americans have an unconscious belief of their own inferiority, that is, they suffer from internalized racism endemic in what she calls the caste system that undergirds American society. Wilkerson (2020B: 18) explains how the caste system based on race in the U.S. “embeds into our bones an unconscious ranking of human characteristics and sets forth the rules, expectations, and stereotypes that have been used to justify brutalities against entire groups within our species.” Thus, by ensuring that members of minoritized groups have low expectations on their life chances, the system reinforces the hierarchy that reserves power and resources to the dominant group something that we see enacted with devastating repercussions on the individual level in Reynolds’ book.

Xiomara, the speaker of *The poet X*, describes herself as a warrior: “combat boots and a mouth silent / until it’s sharp as an island machete” (Acevedo 2018: 8). She is chastised by her religiously devout mother for not being “a lady” and coming home with “bleeding knuckles,” but the truth is that Xiomara often needs to fight to defend her brother: “I never told her / he didn’t fight because my hands / became fists for him. My hands learned to bleed when other kids / tried to make him into a wound” (Acevedo 2018: 45). Mostly though Xiomara is defending herself against sexual harassment: “Today, I already had to curse a guy out / for pulling on my bra strap, / then shoved a senior into a locker / for trying to whisper into my ear” (Acevedo 2018: 46). The relentlessness of the onslaught is outlined in detail in the poem “After”: “I should be used to it. / I shouldn’t get so angry / when boys – and sometimes / grown-ass men – / talk to me however they want, / think they can grab themselves / or rub against me / or make all kinds of offers” (Acevedo 2018: 52). The extent to which the speaker is objectified and harassed by men of all ages is harrowing and serves as an important testimony of the inflicted trauma on young girls.

Although it is clear how angry this makes Xiomara feel, she is trapped in the web of patriarchy. Just as Wilkerson (2020A) argues that racist ideologies filter into the consciousness of minoritized groups, so does sexism. The speaker’s internalization of patriarchal values is evident when she expects her boyfriend Aman to defend her against a boy who gropes her: “Aman is here. He’ll do something about it . . . he’s not going to let someone touch me / and make me feel so damn small inside” (Acevedo 2018: 219). Xiomara is shattered by the realization that she will continue to be at the mercy of the attackers: “Because no one will ever take care of me but me” (Acevedo 2018: 219) and she breaks up with Aman for failing to intervene. On the one hand, we see here an illustration of how the hegemonic masculinity is hierarchal; males on the lower rungs cannot with impunity attack those higher up on the

ladder. On the other hand, and from a pedagogical perspective, it could be seen as problematic that Xiomara's first response tends to be violent even if she is acting in self-defense. In that light, this incident could be seen as refusal by Aman to resort to violence. Since we only see the situation from Xiomara's point of view, we do not know if he seeks to take the higher moral ground in a practice of non-violence or if he is afraid. Non-violent measures are used also by the speaker who has harsh retorts at the ready for assailants throughout the novel. In an earlier scene, she says "Homie, what makes you think you can 'handle' me, / when you couldn't even handle the ball?" (Acevedo 2018: 51). By ridiculing her attacker, she threatens his position in the hierarchy in alignment with patriarchy. She could also be seen to uphold the hegemony in that her statement might seem to imply that an alpha male would be able to subjugate her. In the scene where Aman fails to stand by her side, she tells the perpetrator: "If you ever touch me again, I'll put my nails / through every pimple on your fucking face" (Acevedo 2018: 220), which is a threat of violence and a reference to the low standing of the male student when it comes to appearance. In the first part of the novel, Xiomara mostly uses her power with words not as an alternative weapon but to bring her message home loud and clear.

Speaking up is a prominent theme in Acevedo's novel also because Xiomara is in the process of developing her voice as a poet. In this context, she is afraid to use her voice, both due to self-doubt and cultural norms. We see her attempt to abide by cultural norms when she writes: "I keep my mouth / zippered shut. / And every day / I wish I could / just become / a disappearing act" (Acevedo 2018: 250), and we see her desire to be heard in "My little words / feel important, for just a moment. / This is a feeling I could get addicted to" (Acevedo 2018: 259). Hence, Xiomara gradually learns to trust her voice, and, in the process, she discovers that there are other spaces in her life where she will be listened to and respected because of the power of her words. In these spaces she is not reduced to a sexualized object, and she is able to make new friends. The growth of the speaker comes across towards the end of the novel as she asks: "When has anyone ever told me / I had the right to stop it all / without my knuckles, or my anger, / with just some simple words" (Acevedo 2018: 333). One message to the reader might be that the power of words supersedes other forms of resistance. There is a more effective, or at least less self-destructive, defense than violence.

### **Minoritized Group – Building a Sense of Self**

The looming threat and pervasive impact of racism on one's children for an African American mother in the U.S. is heart-wrenchingly portrayed in Reynolds' poem "I WON'T PRETEND THAT SHAWN" where the speaker reports that his mother Shari "took her hands off him, / pressed them together, and // began to pray // that he wouldn't go to jail / that he wouldn't get Leticia pregnant // that he wouldn't die" (Reynolds 2017: 43). Here the reader is



afforded an insight into the dangers of growing up Black in a racist society in terms of the very real risk of incarceration, the high rate of teenage pregnancies, and the likelihood of a violent death. Not surprisingly, in the Black community survival has been deemed the ultimate resistance to white supremacy. The ghosts who visit Will on the way down could in a symbolic sense be read as the voices from past generations urging the living to honor their sacrifices. The famous quote from the playwright and author James Baldwin illustrates this imperative: “Our crown has already been bought and paid for. All we have to do is wear it” (qtd. in Ferro 1988: 35). Resisting oppression and racism by surviving and making the most out of a difficult situation could therefore be seen as a moral obligation that builds on the legacy of previous generations. In an interview, Reynolds touches upon the collective aspect when he discusses the function of the ghosts in his novel: “it’s about us, a community, thinking about those of our family members and our friends who we’ve already lost to this thing, and allow their haunting to be the thing that creates our psyche and our conscience” (Reynolds 2017). This aspect is also connected to the question at the end of Reynolds’ novel, what will the speaker do?

In both novels, the importance of the collective is thus emphasized and especially in terms of how interdependency can make or break a young person’s life chances. Will struggles with *The Rules* (Reynolds 2017: 39) and Xiomara feels the pressure of a patriarchal culture and the purity values of the Catholic church via her mother (Acevedo 2018: 148–149). Will has a strong bond with his older brother: “because he was my only / brother, and // already my favourite” (Reynolds 2017: 50) and we see their relationship in flashbacks over the course of the novel and in Will’s constant references to what Shawn has said and done (Reynolds 2017: 48, 74, 81, 98, 132 etc.). Again, what is left to the reader to determine is to what extent the collective will prevent Will from following his own path now that his brother is gone.

Already a passionate writer filling the notebook her brother has given her (Acevedo 2018: 41) with poems and observations, it is in the community at school that Xiomara grows as a writer. She participates in the poetry club at school thanks to the support from her English teacher Ms. Galiano (Acevedo 2018: 109) and her best friend who covers for her in Confirmation class. After going to an open mic night, she discovers that she has not only found friends, but also her voice: “And I know that I’m ready to slam. / That my poetry has become something I’m proud of. / The way the words say what I mean, / how they twist and turn language, / how they connect with people. / How they build community” (Acevedo 2018: 287). In short, in Acevedo’s novel we find a coming-of-age story in which a young girl from a minoritized group moves from introspection to connection with other people, in the process gaining admiration from the wider society and reconciliation with her parents. There is hope and closure for the reader at the end of Acevedo’s novel which can be important for young readers, especially in a time of increasing mental health

problems. A recent publication by the Swedish scholar Sofia Ahlberg, *Teaching literature in times of crisis* (2021) offers a wealth of learning activities that have been designed to take into consideration the increasingly demanding societal issues that students need to grapple with due to global warming and societal inequities.

### **Gender – The Male Gaze**

In a classic example of the male gaze (Mulvey 1975), the speaker in *Long way down* describes his encounter with the female ghost in the following way: “[a]nd I was / walking my eyes / up her legs / the ruffle and fold / of her flower / dress, her / arms, her / neck, her / cheek, her / hair” (Reynolds 2017: 119). However, Will soon realizes that this is his childhood friend Dani: “This was Dani. Dani. / Standing in front of me” (Reynolds 2017: 139). It is an interesting choice by the author to present Dani as a sixteen-year-old albeit clad in the same flower dress that she wore when she was eight years old and killed in a drive-by-shooting. There is also a reference to what in another context could have been seen as a silent token of consent when “The girl smiled. / With her eyes” (Reynolds 2017: 133). Such subtle signals are of course uncertain since they may only exist in the interpreter’s mind. Further on, Dani accepts a cigarette, “slipping it between / shiny lips, / leaning forwards / for the light” (Reynolds 2017: 156). Here we see how the female character is reduced to an object of desire in a pose that we have seen in multiple iterations of Hollywood productions or advertisements, all designed to cater to the heterosexual male observer and the pleasure the beautiful woman evokes in him.

Another example of the male gaze is when the first ghost Buck, a friend of Shawn and a drug dealer, enters the elevator and Will admits that while it is awkward to be the object of someone staring (Reynolds 2018: 82) this is explained as what men do to women when they try to get a better look at them without drawing their attention. The speaker implies that this is the girls’ fault: “I’VE SEEN GIRLS // waiting at the bus stop / make men pitiful pieces / of putty, curling backwards, / stretching and straining / every muscle just to get / a glimpse of what Shawn / and a lot of men / around here call // the world” (Reynolds 2018: 83). The men engage in what Freud termed scopophilia which is “a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 1975: 60). This means that the objectification of women is seen as an instinctual response for men when seeing female bodies which is problematic since it justifies a highly detrimental and denigrating practice.

However, Dani could also be read as a love interest produced by the heteronormative matrix (Butler 2006: 208) in which “a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.” There are only a few other female characters in Reynolds’ novel, and they all adhere to the dictates of the matrix.

Shawn's girlfriend Leticia is first mentioned in the scene after the killing as an example of the screaming which only women do, according to the speaker: "moms / girlfriends / daughters" (Reynolds 2017: 15). Then we meet his mother, Shari, whose eczema is one of the reasons Shawn is killed because buying a special soap for her means venturing into the territory of the rivaling gang Dark Suns (Reynolds 2017: 59). In the description of his mother's skin affliction, Kristeva's notion of the abject comes into play: "Pick at the pus / bubbles and flaky // scales. // Curse the invisible / thing trying to eat // her" (Reynolds 2017: 27). In contrast to the common trope of poetic descriptions of women's skin as soft and smooth, Shari's skin is reptile-like and the affliction itself is personified as a predatory entity. Kristeva (1980: 93) argues that the abject is "death infecting life [...] something rejected from which one does not part," thus the connection between the mother's body and death seemingly seethes under the surface in the text. One reading could be that the mother's decrepit skin mirrors her failure as a mother to protect her oldest son from being killed. The implication being that she is quite harshly indicted by her only remaining son in this passage. Yet Kristeva (1980: 93) posits that "[a] wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay does not *signify* death." Consequently, another reading could be that in a state of deepest loss, Shari is "at the border of [her] condition as a living being" (Kristeva 1980: 93). In this vein, we see her depicted with compassion: "sobbing / into her palms, which she peeled / away only to lift glass to mouth" (Reynolds 2017: 32). Later in the novel, we learn that she drinks, which of course detracts from the apparent innocence and warmth in this earlier description. His mother's grief is nonetheless kept at arm's length since it must not deter Will from his plan to effect revenge as he exits the apartment armed with a gun.

Turning now to *The poet X*, the representation of Xiomara's brother Xavier initially enlists negative stereotypes about feminine gay boys: "My brother was birthed a soft whistle: / quiet, barely stirring the air, a gentle sound." (Acevedo 2018: 45). Another example is when the speaker expresses her disappointment in her brother: "This love and distaste I feel for him / He's older . . . / and a guy, but never defends me" (Acevedo 54). In Latin American machismo, gay men are afforded lower status in the hierarchy because of their challenge to hegemonic masculinity, and this is something that Xiomara returns to when Xavier/Twin tells her to stop defending him: "I only know I've always wanted to keep him safe, / but this makes him a target" (Acevedo 2018: 176). This ambivalence is expressed in the trope of violence against queer characters, and also in the representation of the oppressive Catholic church and subsequently in how Xiomara is convinced that a revelation of Xavier's sexual orientation to their mother would destroy her positive view of him. In Reynolds' book there is similarly an implicit negative reference to being perceived as gay: "his mom made him take / gymnastics when he was a kid, and / when you wear tights and know how / to do cartwheels it might

be a good idea / to also know how to defend yourself' (Reynolds 2017: 55). Even though this depiction could seem innocuous at a surface level, it is in fact an example of the type of microaggressions constantly inflicted on members of the LGBTQ+ community. By normalizing this practice, the status quo is left unquestioned which could be seen as problematic.

To sum up, in Acevedo's novel there is a focus on growth and introspection without glossing over real struggles in an Afro-Latina girl's life. Reynolds' novel covers the pressing issue of gun violence and implicates the reader in the ethical dilemma. Reynolds also relies on the suspension of disbelief with the inclusion of ghosts.<sup>6</sup> In both novels, there is room for individual agency even if there is also a strong emphasis on belonging and collective support, both of which can be either edifying or destructive. The depiction of gender roles and sexual orientation could serve as productive basis for discussion in the EFL classroom. I would argue that the books' stances regarding gender roles and LGBTQ+ at first appear to be inclusive, but on second consideration it is possible that there are ideological conflicts between characters and the implied author. Using feminist or queer concepts such as the male gaze and gay tropes in literary texts can equip students to apply critical thinking skills to other parts of life in a society where our world view may become skewed due to powerful social media algorithms.

## Pedagogical Implications

As stated in the introduction, I seek to provide in-service teachers with a concrete takeaway in the form of a teaching unit based on the primary texts in order to somewhat bridge what is often called the theory – practice divide. Upper secondary teachers rarely have enough time for curriculum design, and I would like to illustrate how literary analysis using critical lenses can enrich the work that educators do in the language classroom. In this section, I will address the classic pedagogical questions when designing a reading project based on Acevedo's and Reynolds' verse novels geared towards the EFL classroom, more specifically English 5 (roughly equivalent to sophomore year in high school).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Given the ghosts in the elevator, it is interesting that Kristeva (1980) talks about how "[t]he phobic has no other object than the abject [...] with a hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer" (p. 94). Since Will's encounters with the ghosts are what forces him to confront painful memories and stories from the past, these hallucinations could be read as an embodiment of his fear of death and of committing similar mistakes as those made by his next of kin.

<sup>7</sup> There is a Reading group guide on the publisher's website for *Long way down* created by Amy Jurskis, English Department Chair at Oxbridge Academy in Florida:

<https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Long-Way-Down/Jason-Reynolds/9781481438261>.

Likewise for Acevedo's novel there is an Educators' guide created by Amanda Torres: [TG-9780062662804.pdf \(rackcdn.com\)](https://www.rackcdn.com/pdf/TG-9780062662804.pdf).

### **The What and Who Questions**

Regarding text selection criteria for the EFL classroom, it is my contention that Swedish students may benefit from gaining access to critical lenses and diverse voices. Since English 5 is a course that all Swedish high school students take, a teaching unit like the one outlined here could set the tone for how to conduct literary studies in the EFL classroom, and help students develop transferable analytical skills. These primary texts in particular might enable students to better understand how institutionalized racism permeates media products from the United States in very specific ways due to the lingering societal impact of enslavement (Delgado et al. 2017). To implement the fourth goal from the CR curriculum as stated by Yosso (2002: 98) which is about validating the experiences of marginalized groups, the introduction of counternarratives such as African American and Afro-Latina literature in the language classroom can be an auspicious starting point. Dehart et al. (2022: 29) propose that “verse novels can be taught as spaces where frequently marginalized voices and languages (e.g., AAVE, translanguaging) can be resonant [...]” The decision to include diverse voices also speaks to the relevance for students in the 21st century. Many students will know about the Black Lives Matter movement and the negative view on immigration from Latin-America in American politics and Conservative media, but they may not be familiar with the historical background. Regarding the topics that these novels broach, Dehart et al. (2022: 29) point out that “[m]any contemporary verse novels also face difficult sociopolitical issues head-on: police violence, the carceral system, racism, immigration, cultural identity, and sexuality.” These are issues which students no doubt encounter in media and/or combat in their private lives, thus potentially highly relevant. In fact, using young adult novels that can be described as “intense and disturbing” (Ivey and Johnston 2018: 143) has been found to lead to higher student engagement in reading among eighth-grade students.

Following from Reynolds’ proposition, novels in verse can be seen as inviting the reader into the text since there is a lower threshold as far as word quantity is concerned. What is more, Macgregor (2022: 1) suggests that “[n]ovels in verse can be a revelation to readers. Connected poems tell the whole story while also playing with the format. Often character-driven and addressing emotional topics, these books invite readers to savor language while delving into moving and innovative narratives [...] Verse novels may also engage readers who shy away from prose novels.” In addition, poetry can be a genre in which the reader gains direct access to the speaker’s thoughts and emotions which allows a view of the depicted world from a different perspective and strengthens the effect of the counternarrative. This unfiltered relationship “can create even stronger connections for readers” (Baron qtd. in Macgregor 2022: 2). Adolescent readers may find expressions of strong emotions validating of their own experience of life in the sense that it may feel as an involuntary roller coaster ride. Likewise encountering narrative

representation of various difficult issues can be reassuring as the reader realizes that they are not alone in their struggle.

In view of the goal to offer multiple means of representation in UDL (CAST), it can be beneficial for students to be able to choose the format of the novel. Both books chosen for this teaching unit have been published as audiobooks, and Reynolds' book is also available as a graphic novel illustrated by Danica Novgorodoff. Regardless, not all students will embrace the task to read a novel in a foreign language. In order to increase student ownership of the reading project, they can be given a choice between two books. The charisma of the chosen authors may certainly help as well in the introduction of the teaching unit. For continued engagement, the structure of a Critical Literature Circle (Thein et al. 2011) might help sustain reading engagement over the course of the reading project. The extrinsic motivation due to the social contract among group members could then further incentivize reading. If everybody else has done the reading, not being up to speed will have repercussions. For the whole class work, students who do not fulfill the reading requirement can still participate in discussions since there will be supplementary texts and activities not directly taken from the two novels.

### **The Why Question**

In curriculum design constructive alignment entails that “the outcomes govern how teaching and learning activities should be designed so that students, in the assessment, can show to what extent they have achieved the outcomes” (Elmgren and Henriksson 2018: 189). Another concept for this idea is backward design which is more commonly used in the teaching community. An important caveat is that this is not about teaching to the test but rather about “[t]houghtfully releasing layers of content to students so they can build on their learning and move toward the intended outcomes is an approach that elevates the impact of the curriculum” (Davis et al. 2021: 438). Conveying an obvious sense of progression and transparent grading practices may help build a positive learning community in class. Backward design can also serve as an instrument for systematic course improvement (Davis et al. 2021: 445).

In line with backward design, the why of a teaching unit needs to be established, which for a Swedish teacher means turning to curricular documents. Apart from the overarching goals in the *Curriculum* regarding competences needed in a multicultural society and for democratic citizenship, the National Agency for Education also specifies learning outcomes in the Syllabus. In the core content for the English subject the following outcomes apply to the reading project in the current study: “opinions, thoughts, and experiences but also relationships and ethical issues [...] current events, social and cultural phenomena and contexts as well as beliefs and values in different contexts and regions where English is used [...] songs and poems” (Natl. Ag.

f. Ed. “Syllabus” 2022: 2). Hence it is well within the purview of the learning objectives to include verse novels written by minoritized authors, and it is in fact an important function of schooling as Davis (2007: 210) argues that “[s]chools function as laboratories for teaching students how to act and interact with people of other races – training for the real world.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps needless to say, talking about racism with students can be a fraught endeavor that educators may be fearful to undertake. Using an established approach such as CR curriculum can be helpful in how to frame issues and how to handle various reactions in the classroom.

### **The How Question**

In this section, I will describe my vision for the first part of a teaching unit more in detail and then provide an outline of the latter part in a table for easy access for practicing teachers. Naturally, all suggestions should be adjusted to suit various student populations and the preferences and teaching style of the instructor.

To intentionally set the stage for engagement, I would introduce the teaching unit by projecting ambient media (jazz music playing; a fireplace on the screen when the students enter the classroom). This set up would be a recurring feature of the unit with the specific purpose to make students feel that they belong in the classroom and that reading is an activity that is pleasurable and important. As a warmer activity in the first session, I would show the YouTube clip with Reynolds talking about pit bulls and puppies and ask students in a turn-and-talk activity to discuss what might make them interested to read a novel and to what extent the format of a book might offer various advantages. The warm-up would meet the learning objective in the English 5 Syllabus under the heading of reception: “Spoken English that is [...] expository, [...] argumentative” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2022). When introducing the genre of verse novels, I would play YouTube clips with Acevedo and Reynolds reading the first part of their books. The next step would entail students working in base groups with multiple perspectives which would aim towards the goals in the *Curriculum* that specify that “Students should train their critical thinking skills, evaluate information with consideration of specific circumstances, and ponder the consequences of different alternatives” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2022). We would start by looking at a picture with an optical illusion and discuss the value of adopting an open mindset (Beach et al. 2016: 142). In their groups, students would read and analyze the first poem from each book using Deborah Appleman’s literary theory cards (2015: Appendices Activity 6) and take detailed notes. The theory cards give a basic outline of each literary theory and an essential question to ask when analyzing the text. Also included on the cards are critical assumptions, and what to do when analyzing literature from this perspective.

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<sup>8</sup> Teachers who would like some practical advice will find this in Davis’ article (2007: 211-13), namely 12 steps to take when discussing race in the classroom.

Once students have finished the analysis, they will move on to the jigsaw activity where each base group member presents their analysis from the theoretical perspective they were given to a new group. This group activity in two parts would be geared toward helping students develop “strategies to contribute to and actively participate in discussions” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. “Syllabus”) since the base group would work as a team to provide all members with unique information to convey to the jigsaw group. It can be helpful for introverted students to act as reporter of what their team has said rather than having to express their own personal take on an issue. As an exit ticket I would ask students which of the novels they would like to read and in which format so that I could divide them into groups for the upcoming lesson. Again, giving students choice, even just between two alternatives, may raise motivation and engender a sense of ownership of the learning.

Lesson 2 would start with America’s first Junior Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman’s (2021) TED talk “Using your voice is a political choice.” This warmer activity would both relate to the learning goals under the heading reception, as referenced above, and the aim in the *Curriculum* concerning the ethical perspective regarding “students’ ability to take a stand and act in responsible ways” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2022). In an effort to implement the international perspective mentioned in the *Curriculum* and the goal in the Syllabus to include “current events, social and cultural phenomena and living conditions as well as norms and values in different contexts and areas in the Anglophone world” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2022), we would talk about CRT and watch a news segment that explains why it has caused such a controversy in the U.S. We would also discuss the Black Lives Matter movement, the 1619 project, and the importance of counterstories. The last item on the agenda for the second lesson would be to organize Critical Literature Circles (Thein et al. 2011; Chisholm and Cook 2021) and introduce the group roles modified by Thein et al. (2011: 22): “problem poser, perspective taker, difference locator, stereotype tracker, and critical lens wearer.” This is an adaptation of the original group roles which were devised by Harvey Daniels (2002) and the aim is to counteract some of the problematic aspects of literature circles, such as the power dynamic between students and the risk of confirmation bias (Thein et al. 2011: 15). The groups would start by setting expectations and then organizing the reading schedule and the rotation of roles. A suggested range of pages for each week is included in the table below.

The Critical Literature Circles would continue for the duration of the teaching unit, approximately seven weeks. In weeks 2-6 the students would conduct a Critical Literature Circle meeting for about 20 minutes once a week. The actual discussions would begin in Lesson 3. I would have students prepare discussion topics themselves according to the group roles, but some educators might want to also discuss themes in class or do close reading activities, so I have included a column for that purpose in the table below. The remaining time would be spent on in-class reading and working with



supplementary texts using a range of analytic methods and graphic organizers to offer students multiple means of engagement in accordance with UDL (CAST). I have included more supplementary texts than can be fitted into each lesson so that there will be a range of texts to choose from. The unit could conclude with a summative assessment task in the form of an oral exam or perhaps in the form of a written assignment in week 7. I have constructed four options for the written task. Should the teacher want to do a less extensive assessment all the while preventing the use of A.I. such as Chat GTP, the one pager done in Lesson 6 could suffice for that purpose. Students could also present their one pagers in a jigsaw activity.

Table 1 Overview of lesson 3-6

| Learning Objectives   | Themes from the Verse Novel  | Warmer Activity   | Supplementary Text(s)  | Learning Activities  |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| <p>CR Curriculum Tenet 2 “challenge dominant social and cultural assumptions” and Tenet 3 “direct the formal curriculum towards goals of social justice” (Yosso 2002: 98)</p> <p>Ability to “adapt communication based on aim, recipient, and context” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2022 “Syllabus English 5”)</p> | <p>Lesson 3</p> <p><i>Long way down</i> pp. 1-80</p> <p><i>The poet X</i> pp. 3-89</p> <p>Violence – Defense and Revenge</p> <p><i>Long way down:</i> “THE RULES” pp. 36-39</p> <p><i>The poet X:</i> “Names” pp. 7-8; “After” pp. 52-53</p> | <p>Clint Smith “The danger of silence” (2014) <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiKtZgImdlY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiKtZgImdlY</a></p> | <p>“How do you raise a black child?” (2015) by Cortney Lamar Charleston <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhjCzd7QETc">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhjCzd7QETc</a></p> <p>“The song of the feet” (2002) by Nikki Giovanni <a href="https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/90182/the-song-of-the-feet">https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/90182/the-song-of-the-feet</a></p> <p>“Strange fruit” (1939) performed by Billie Holliday <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Web007rzSOI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Web007rzSOI</a></p> <p>“The rose that grew from concrete” (1989) by Tupac Shakur <a href="https://allpoetry.com/The-Rose-That-Grew-From-Concrete">https://allpoetry.com/The-Rose-That-Grew-From-Concrete</a></p> | <p>Critical Literature Circle 20 minutes</p> <p>Social Justice – Create posters for a sit-in against gang violence or sexism</p> |

|   |   |  |  |  |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| <p>“The teaching should be conducted using democratic methods and develop students’ willingness and ability to take responsibility and actively participate in society” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2022 Curriculum)</p>  |   |  |  |  |
| <p>CR Curriculum Tenet 1<br/>         “acknowledge the central and intersecting roles of racism, sexism, classism” (Yosso 2002: 98)<br/><br/>         “All tendencies to discriminate or harass shall be actively counteracted.” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2022 Curriculum)</p> | <p>Lesson 4<br/><br/> <i>Long way down</i> pp. 81-161<br/><br/> <i>The poet X</i> pp. 90-178<br/><br/>         Minoritized Group – Building a Sense of Self<br/><br/> <i>Long way down:</i><br/>         “I WON’T PRETEND THAT SHAWN” p. 43;<br/>         “NOW THE COLOGNE” p. 50</p> |  | <p>“Immigrants (We get the job done)” the Hamilton Mixtape by K’naan featuring Residente, Riz MC &amp; Snow Tha Product<br/> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_35a7sn6ds">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_35a7sn6ds</a><br/><br/>         “Harlem” (1951) by Langston Hughes<br/> <a href="https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem">https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem</a><br/><br/>         “Home” by Warsan Shire<sup>9</sup><br/> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwHSeppd5fE&amp;t=47sire-">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwHSeppd5fE&amp;t=47sire-</a> YouTube</p> | <p>Critical Literature Circle 20 minutes<br/><br/>         Apply CRT questions<br/>         How is racism perpetuated?<br/>         How can White privilege be dismantled?<br/>         How does this text rely on the knowledge and experience of people of color?<br/>         How can using this critical lens lead to social justice? (Martin 2014: 246)<br/><br/>         Present to class in the form of a concept map</p> |

<sup>9</sup> I recommend that you only use Shire’s poem if you know that you do not have refugee students with traumatic experiences in the class, or, at least include a content warning.

|  |  |   |   |   |
|--|--|---|---|---|
|  | <p><i>The poet X</i>: “Final Draft of Assignment 2 (What I Actually Turn In)” p. 127; “Rough Draft of Assignment 3– Describe someone you consider misunderstood by society” p. 179</p>   |   |   |   |
| <p>CR Curriculum Tenet 5 “utilize interdisciplinary methods” (Yosso 2002: 98)</p> <p>“Nobody in school should be discriminated against on the basis of gender, ethnicity, religion or faith, non-conforming gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age or neuro-divergence (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2022: 1 Curriculum)</p> | <p>Lesson 5</p> <p><i>Long way down</i> pp. 162-241</p> <p><i>The poet X</i> pp. 179-267</p> <p>Gender – Human rights, the construction of gender</p> <p><i>Long way down</i>: “PEOPLE SAID RIGGS” p. 55; “I’VE SEEN GIRLS” p. 83; “SHE CHECKED TO MAKE SURE” p. 119</p> <p><i>The poet X</i>:</p> | <p>“Open your eyes (Pink or Blue)” by Hollie McNish, directed by Jake Dypka <a href="https://instituteofmums.com/2017/07/28/pink-or-blue-hollie-mcnish-shines-a-light-on-gender-inequality/">https://instituteofmums.com/2017/07/28/pink-or-blue-hollie-mcnish-shines-a-light-on-gender-inequality/</a></p> | <p>“History reconsidered” (2016) by Clint Smith <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVowYqRAJE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVowYqRAJE</a> Queen Latifa featuring Monie Love “Ladies first” (1989) <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Qimg_q7LbQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Qimg_q7LbQ</a> “Still I rise” (1978) by Maya Angelou <a href="https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise">https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise</a></p> | <p>Critical Literature Circle 20 minutes</p> <p>Poetry Speed Dating - Students choose one poem from the novel and recite it to each other in pairs three times. They can also discuss different questions taken from Pugh and Johnson’s book (see below) for the three rounds to keep engagement high</p> |

|  |  |  |   |   |
|--|--|--|---|---|
|  | <p>“Okay?” p. 54;<br/>         “Scrapping” p. 175; “In Front of My Locker” pp. 218-220</p> |  | <p>“The ballad to Rudolph Reed” (1960) by Gwendolyn Brooks<br/> <a href="https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43320/the-ballad-of-rudolph-reed">https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43320/the-ballad-of-rudolph-reed</a></p> | <p>Apply Gender and Feminist questions to a poem from the novel. Choose three of the following questions:</p> <p>How are women and men represented differently in the text, and what cultural values are characterized as female or male? How are women’s lives depicted within the text’s historical framework? Do female characters accede to or subvert their historical era’s construction of femininity? Which qualities are associated with female protagonists, which qualities are associated with female antagonists, and how do these structures of character complicate the text’s depiction of women?</p> |
|--|--|--|---|---|

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|--|---|--|--|--|
|  |   |  |  | Describe how the characters perform their gender roles. Which characters perform these roles successfully and which unsuccessfully? How is masculinity constructed in the text? Which male characters successfully perform masculinity, and which fail to do so? (Pugh and Johnson 2014: 243)  |
| CR Curriculum Tenet 2<br>“challenge dominant social and cultural assumptions” (Yosso 2002: 98) | Lesson 6<br><i>Long way down</i> pp. 241-322<br><br><i>The poet X</i> pp. 268-357<br><br>“Sexuality, consent, and relationships” (Nat. Ag. f. Ed. 2022 <i>Curriculum</i> )<br><br><i>Long way down</i> : “I WON’T FRONT” p. 132; “FROM WHERE?” p. 133; “MY MOTHER TOLD ME TWO STORIES ABOUT UNCLE MARK” p. 172<br><br><i>The poet X</i> : | Taylor Swift<br>“You need to calm down” (2019)<br><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dkk9gvTmCXY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dkk9gvTmCXY</a><br>Pop culture references explained by <i>Insider</i> :<br><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7ccglnIE_c">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7ccglnIE_c</a> | “Trojan” (2018) by Jericho Brown<br><a href="https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/147884/trojan">https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/147884/trojan</a><br><br>“Dreaming of Lesbos” (2002) by Tatiana de la Tierra<br><a href="https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147272/dreaming-of-lesbos">https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147272/dreaming-of-lesbos</a><br><br>“Look at her now” (2019) by Selena Gomez<br><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8u_64S7pII">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8u_64S7pII</a><br><br>“Quarterback” (2014) by Kira Isabella<br><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUQ2ltrdkTw">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUQ2ltrdkTw</a> | Critical Literature Circle 20 minutes<br><br>Scenario Discussion from GLSEN<br><a href="https://www.glsen.org/activity/i-was-just-kidding">https://www.glsen.org/activity/i-was-just-kidding</a><br><br>Create a One Pager as designed by Betsy Potash:<br><a href="https://www.teachwriting.org/612th/2018/5/18/one-pagers-as-a-response-to-literature">https://www.teachwriting.org/612th/2018/5/18/one-pagers-as-a-response-to-literature</a> |

|  |  |  |  |  |
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| <p>“The school should ensure that students repeatedly in their education get to grapple with questions about sexuality, consent, and relationships. [...] structures of power connected to gender and honor related violence and oppression should be subject to critical review” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. <i>Curriculum</i>)</p> | <p>“More about Twin” p. 45; “What We Don’t Say” p. 176; “Gay” p. 177: “In Aman’s Arms” pp. 323-325; “And I Also Know” p. 326; “Stronger” pp. 342-343</p> |  |  | <p>The instructions for the different parts of the template can be modified to align with a focus on “sexuality, consent, and relationships” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2022 <i>Curriculum</i>)</p> <p>Preparation for the exam<br/>Peer-review of drafts, if using the WA-option</p> |
|  | <p>Lesson 7</p>  |  |  | <p>Summative Assessment<br/>Oral Exam or Written Assignment</p>  |

Since the teaching unit includes Critical Literature Circles, students will have practiced their communicative and analytical skills throughout. According to backward design, a summative assessment in week 7 would then ideally consist of an oral exam that tests such skills, for instance in the form of a Socratic Seminar (National Paideia Center). There could be one overarching essential question that the group decides (e.g., how do you build a sense of self) and three questions formulated by each student so that they can discuss what feels meaningful and interesting to them.<sup>10</sup> In the interest of multiple means of expression as proposed by UDL (CAST), another option could be to offer students to demonstrate their learning in a way that also rewards students who prefer writing. As mentioned earlier, the most straightforward idea from a time-management stance would be to have the one pager in Lesson 6 serve as graded task, but students might also be invited to choose among four alternatives. I would suggest having a creative writing task, a mock-TED talk, a blog post, and a graphic organizer to accommodate for each student’s strengths. Keeping the important goal in CR curriculum to have agency and social justice front of mind, it would be advisable to include the local community in the assessment task. Students could be asked to organize

<sup>10</sup> For more information about essential questions, see McTighe, Jay., and Wiggins, Grant P. (2013), *Essential questions opening doors to student understanding*. Alexandria: ASCD.

a public event, a film clip or a webpage where their work could be presented in a creative and engaging way, the aim being to raise awareness of topical issues brought up in the verse novels.

## Conclusion

In this article I have argued that Acevedo's and Reynolds' verse novels can serve as a gateway into literature for not-yet readers but also as powerful counternarratives. The first aspect concerns how poetry with its condensed meaning is quick to read yet leaves multiple gaps to be filled by the reader. Due to such indeterminacies, students can engage in a genuine dialogue about different interpretations and reactions to the poem in question. Following from Reynolds' proposition, novels in verse can be seen as inviting the reader into the text since there are fewer words on the page. What is more, poetry is meant to be read aloud. Students who choose the audiobook format will subsequently hear the rhythm and the sounds of the words in a way that can add to the aesthetic experience, but this format also serves to improve listening comprehension skills in the EFL classroom. In today's digital society, most students will be familiar with intersecting modalities and some students may prefer to read the graphic novel version, when it is an option. If educators are willing to value these multiliteracy skills in the classroom, students in turn may be more prone to take an interest. Offering students a range of formats is supported in the UDL principle of multiple means of representation which is key for accessibility (CAST).

Regarding the function of counternarratives, in an increasingly polarized world students need to learn critical reading skills to counteract confirmation bias and gain the ability to break out of echo chambers. Gorman claims that for her, poetry is always political. She seeks to honor her ancestors whose resistance to oppression paved the way for Gorman to reach her potential. In a Swedish context, text selection implies political choices because introducing counternarratives into the literature classroom challenges the status quo of using mostly Eurocentric and canonical texts in the EFL classroom. In alignment with CRT, I have argued for the introduction of diverse voices to the EFL context. Hopefully, Swedish students may find verse novels by contemporary authors writing about compelling issues relevant and meaningful to read or listen to. Furthermore, I have conducted a comparative analysis of a few themes in the novels and outlined a teaching unit based on critical race pedagogy and UDL, parts of which in-service teachers may find inspiring to try in their classrooms. For future research, it would be interesting to expand the scope of the investigation by bringing in other recent YA verse novels, such as *Apple: Skin to the Core* (2020) by Eric Gansworth, *The Black Flamingo* (2019) by Dean Atta, and *Ordinary Hazards* (2019) by Nikki Grimes. Instead of having only two novels to choose from in the reading project, students could make their selection from a list of five, thus optimizing the chance that they will find one that speaks to them.

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