

Ain't I a Teacher?

Poetry and Persuasion

BUSHRA REHMA

HOW DOES A POET TEACH persuasive writing? It's not as hard as it seems. For who is more adept at the art of persuasion than poets and revolutionaries? When I think of who convinced me to drop my fears and limitations, my boundaries, to pick up my anger or to set it down again, to love or to know when to cut love off, to stand for life even when it meant injury, I think of the poetic revolutionaries: Alice Walker, Malcolm X, Harvey Milk, Audre Lorde, Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur.

This isn't to say I wasn't intimidated when asked to teach persuasive essay writing at a small public school in downtown Manhattan. I write poetry and fiction, and ten years ago I edited a collection of essays on women of color and feminism. Still, entering those peculiar beige-yellow halls of a New York City public school to teach essay writing using the Common Core Curriculum made me feel a little bit out of my element. The school was transitioning to this new curriculum and had invited Teachers & Writers Collaborative to assist. The administration of the school recognized what was becoming clear. The Common Core's goals are not so drastically different

from those of creative types like myself.

While mining my sources for Persuasive Writing with the Common Core in mind, I rediscovered Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech from the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851. At the time, a debate was raging about whether women "deserved" the right to vote. Through her refutation of someone else's definition of what it meant to be a woman, Truth questioned not only the notion of womanhood but personhood at a time when slavery was still legally practiced in the United States.

After a male critic stated women were too physically, thus mentally, weak to vote, Truth stepped to the podium and spoke:

"The man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or give me any best place! And Ain't I a Woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And Ain't I a Woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And Ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And Ain't I a woman?"

Bushra Rehma is a T&W teaching artist. She is the author of Corona, a dark comedy about being South Asian in the United States, and Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism.

I knew I had found my first reading for the class. Although the phrase “Common Core” would have a whole different meaning for Truth, I knew we could read her words and achieve a variety of standards including studying the ways in “style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of a text.” In preparation for the class, I also studied an excellent text on rhetoric: Bridges and Rickenbacker’s *The Art of Persuasion: A National Review Rhetoric for Writers* (Continuum Intl Pub Group, 1999). Truth had read no such text, but her work hit upon some of the key techniques essential to the art of persuasion: repetition, refrain, re-definition and rhetorical questions.

For the first class, I brought in Truth’s life story, copies of the speech and Maya Angelou’s vibrant recording of Truth’s words. Before beginning, I looked around the crowded classroom. This was an under-resourced transfer school and sometimes there weren’t even enough chairs for the students. But the students made do, patiently shuffling chairs around from class to class. They were intrigued by Truth although many of them had never heard of her before. I told them about how Truth was born into slavery in 1797 in Ulster County, New York, how she escaped with her baby daughter in 1826, and how after receiving a spiritual message to travel the land, she re-named herself Sojourner Truth and journeyed the country speaking on the rights of slaves and women both free and in bondage. I passed out copies of the speech and gave them the context for the Women’s Convention and the Suffrage movement.

First we read the speech round robin, with lots of giggles. Reading colloquially always seems to tickle students’ funny bones. Next, we listened to Maya Angelou’s rendition. Many of the students knew of Angelou and were excited to hear her voice. Through

Angelou, they could feel the persuasive power of Truth’s words. I asked the students if Truth had made her point clear and they insisted she had. *Women are not weak*. I asked them how Truth persuaded the audience to understand her point of view. They called out, “She repeated herself.” “She talked like a regular person.” “She showed her arms.” “It’s like a poem.” “She didn’t agree with their way of seeing women.” And there it was, the brilliance of Truth’s art of persuasion. In everyday language, she had turned the whole equation upside down by redefining the central terms of the argument. What is a woman?

I asked the students, “What are assumptions people make about you? What is it that people say you can’t do?” Since these were teenagers, the question triggered a cascade of responses. The classroom teacher called on students who were bursting with answers. I filled the entire board with their words, barely able to keep up. “Can’t finish high school,” “Can’t go to heaven,” “Can’t be in love,” “Can’t be gay.” The energy was explosive.

Riding this wave, I asked students to use their “Can’ts” and turn them into “Ain’ts” in which they would question the terms used to enclose their identities in suffocating boxes. We wrote some of these “Ain’ts” down on the board as well before we moved to individual writing.

The classroom teacher and I decided that students could write these pieces as poems, speeches or essays, using their Ain’t refrains to persuade the audience of their points of view. This flexibility allowed us to discover that poetry could be used to create unique entry points into a topic and to help write those elusive opening lines of a speech, as well as to flesh out central arguments for a longer essay.

The pieces the students wrote were poetic and revolutionary. One student who had been quiet through all of the first classes, wrote a thoughtful piece about

Exerehenis qui nam fugitas
explabo. Estrum eturia
cone cumquas pelest, ea
suntur, oditionet liam qui
occus, sunt ipis volorum
qui id experum et laborep
ratisquias as essin consequi

being gay and denied entry into heaven:

You say it's an abomination to be gay. You say I can still be saved, or that I'm too far gone in my wicked ways. There's no room in Heaven for someone like me. But Ain't I Human? . . . What makes you different from me? . . . We both have morals. We both love. Is that not human? . . . If God is only love, and love does not judge, doesn't God love me? Doesn't God not care that I'm gay? Doesn't God not care that you're a bigot? Aren't we human?

Another student wrote an amusing piece mocking assumptions about his ethnicity:

That nerd over there says that all Asians are getting 2400 in SAT, and entering Princeton, and having the best boring jobs everywhere. Nobody ever finds me acing the SAT, or Ivy Leagues, or gives me any doctor, lawyer, and engineering job. And Ain't I Asian? Look at me! Look at my eyes! I have borne Kumon, and seen most all sold off to overly competitive wealthy parents, and when I cried out with my Asian's shame, none but Buddha heard me! And Ain't I Asian? . . . Then that little man in black, he says Asians can't have as much creativity as them, 'cause free thinking wasn't for Asians! Where did your gunpowder come from? Where did your Nintendo come from? From God and Asians!

Finally, a student who had been the most vocal throughout the class wrote a gender-bending piece which upturned Sojourner's original question. As a transgendered person, she asked,

Ain't I a Woman? Just because I may be a little different (special) or not seen as a biological woman . . . Ain't I a Woman? I mean . . . I look like any one of your daughters, sisters, nieces girlfriends, or mother. . . . The way I dress to the way I speak, to the way I brush my hair to the way I strut down the street, you would see me as any other woman. So why look at me different? Know just because I'm sharing out

to you the way I was born to the way I think . . . to the way I carry myself in the street. Let me just remind you I am a woman!

I was incredibly inspired by my students, thrilled to know the next generation of poetic revolutionaries was alive and kicking. I also realized that somewhere along the way I had lost my own fear of teaching persuasive writing using the Common Core and even had fun while doing it. As I left the high school that day, I wondered why I had ever doubted myself. After all, Ain't I a Teacher? 🙄