

# From Fried Chicken to Fascination with Home: How Learning about Culturally Rooted Poetry Forms Can Transform Children’s Understanding of Home

by Samira Sadeque

The students did not know what to write in response to the prompt for “home.”

*Should I describe my house in New York or Colombia?*

*...Bangladesh?*

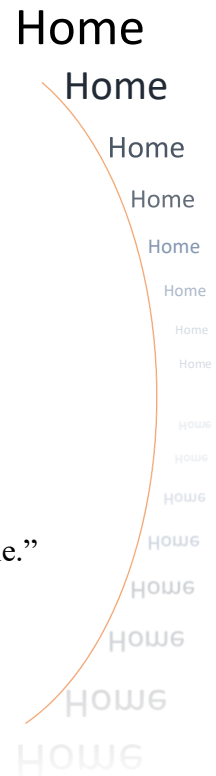
*...Nepal?*

When my co-teacher and I designed this prompt to teach New York City students at P.S. 69 in Queens the traditional poetry form of *ghazal*, we did not anticipate so much confusion. As an immigrant myself, and the two of us poets ourselves, we built rapport with students quickly, so only in hindsight did it make sense that our students—4th graders predominantly from immigrant families from all over the world—would have these questions.

Libby Mislán and I are teaching artists for City Lore’s Homer 2 Hip Hop Project. This is a multi-year program with New York City public schools exploring traditions of oral poetry from around the world in a number of classrooms and schools. Our residency involves following the work of the same cohort of students across three years.

In the first two years, we explored the concepts of “home” and “a journey to home” numerous times given the project’s scope, designed to introduce students to the practices of oral poetry from around the world. Homer 2 Hip Hop operates on the premise that most poetry throughout history has oral roots and this orality still plays an important role in everyday lives of people around the world. City Lore provided numerous resources to teach poetry from Southeast Asia to Africa, including poetry writing, poetry recitation, and poetry duels across these regions and across historical eras.

One lesson included the *ghazal*, which we were teaching toward the end of our second year with students, who were now 4th graders. The *ghazal* is primarily spoken and written in Urdu, Pashto, and Arabic. The process of teaching included adding to a running poetry web, where students put their definitions of poetry from time to time. This development allowed me to document the growth



in their understanding of poetry over the first year. For example, in the beginning, students said poetry meant “rhymes.” As we progressed through the year, their definitions added words such as “reflection” and “feelings.”

Libby and I incorporated videos into our lesson plans during remote teaching during the pandemic of 2020. At first virtual teaching was a challenge, but it gave students an opportunity to watch performance videos of several forms of poetry and to be very creative with their assignments. During in-person classes, students primarily delivered poems that they wrote in their notebooks in the confines of the classroom. Remote learning meant they could use tools such as Zoom backgrounds and videos that they created through their artwork. They enjoyed using these tools to enhance their poetry.

Our first year of work had focused on learning the roots of culturally based poetry from around the world and from different eras. For example, students studied Brazilian *folhetos*—*Literatura de Cordel*—and African American blues. During the teaching process, I took inspiration from contemporary children’s poetry books, such as *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*, by Kenneth Koch (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999).

Oh, Tibet, how you have freshwater lakes, and  
chunks of snow.  
Oh, how I miss you.

How you smell of barley, and wheat.  
When my feet touch your soil.

How you taste like snowflakes falling on my  
tongue.  
I feel so cheerful.

How you sound like cows mooing, cats purring,  
and dogs barking.  
I promise that I’ll be back soon.

How when I’m there, I see relatives, friends,  
and other Tibetans.  
I feel happy.

How I feel happy, to play with the animals, and  
do the chores,  
and see my family.

I’ll see you soon.

–Tenzin Pasang

A Student *Ghazal*.

In early 2020, before the pandemic lockdown, as part of our poetry class on *folhetos*, we organized a field trip to the Jackson Heights neighborhood, noted for the diversity of people who live there, predominantly South Asians and Latin Americans. We headed to Diversity Plaza, a mini-courtyard by a major intersection populated by a string of shops and restaurants owned and represented by people from many countries. The aim was for students to take notes of different colors, scents, sounds, and shapes that they encountered so they could return to class and draw their impressions for the covers of their *folhetos* collections. We asked them to take notes about these questions:

*What do you see?*  
*What do you hear?*  
*What do you smell?*

Back in the classroom, we put students in groups of four and assigned them to come up with a group drawing based on their notes. This required them to collaborate and negotiate on what each wanted in the drawing. It also gave me an opportunity to observe their decision-making and collaboration skills. I watched them try to agree on whether to put an image of the Number 7 train or a huge watch that one student noted from a store in Diversity Plaza. This inspired one group to make a surrealist painting of a massive watch against the backdrop of New York City.

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Once students finalized their artwork, we worked with another City Lore teaching artist, Alan Calpe, in a printmaking workshop to finalize covers for their *folhetos*. In the assignment and subsequent drawings, almost all wrote mainly about the Wendy’s fast-food restaurant that they saw. One student wrote in an “I wish” poem, “I wish Wendy’s would bring back fried chicken.” Here we had a group of nearly a hundred students, most of whom picked Wendy’s as the most interesting thing to observe in a neighborhood known for its different languages, cuisines, and colors, with one of the busiest train junctions in the city. In the follow-up to that field trip, students had fun writing poems about fried chicken and drew the “W” of Wendy’s for their *folheto* covers.

I realized that children may view the concept of culture differently from how we expect. This was a learning moment for me in how powerful students' work can be and the complex concepts that even very young students may show when they are free to choose how to represent what interests them and what they believe in.

Although this experience differed widely from my expectations of what they might observe and what I had hoped to achieve through the field trip, I found their work honest. And this honesty laid the foundation for how they would interrogate themselves in the coming year while writing their poems about home. This honesty was at first a seed and then the fruit of their ability to ask questions about their identity. This search for honesty is what would cultivate the practice of asking questions, building up to this moment, a year later, when they peppered us with questions about what defines “home” for them. In the prompt for the *ghazal*, one stanza asked them to write details of their home. They wondered whether to write about the color of their house in their parents’ homeland or the color of their current building in New York City. Many struggled to articulate whether their parents’ homeland is also their homeland or whether where they currently live is their home. In these instances, I observed how difficult it is to interrogate yourself when you do not even have the language to form your questions. As teaching artists who used the tools of folk arts and poetry to engage students in learning, I realized that we were also providing students foundational scaffolding to build not only the word literacy, but also the cultural literacy that can help them better understand and represent their whole selves.

In teaching them about the different global traditions from *haiku* to *ghazals*, *Ars Poetica* inspired by Horace, and contemporary spoken-word poetry, we were laying the groundwork for this search for honesty. In all their work, we actively encouraged students to write words in any language they spoke or heard in their homes; we also encouraged them to include foods from their dinner table; and we encouraged them to include words they use to refer to family members—from Baba to Tia, without disclaimers.

Every time we did so, we saw in them a sense of fascination. They were building the language they did not initially have to form their questions about home. The idea that they could merge the world they were living at home with the world they were living in at school changed how they wrote their poetry. They held this idea like different pots of Play-Doh, merging and mixing the colors into their own, unique stories.

We are at a time of cultural shift focused on identities rooted in history, language, culture, and inequity. This moment can make for a crucial time for us, as artists and teaching artists, to ensure students' identities are highlighted and given space in their works—and through that, cultivate a practice in which they are free to write about whatever they would like: from fried chicken to the five different ways of writing about home. Maybe both.

Oh the beach, how you make sand castles,  
get a tan and even embarrass yourself.

Sometimes you dance in the dark on the beach  
til the sun rises, and sometimes just come to  
admire the ocean and sand.

How you smell the coconut water or coconut milk  
made of coconuts on the palm trees planted in the sand.


How you taste the yummy ice cream to beat the  
heat, and sometimes get a brain freeze.

How you sound like the music you dance to, and your friends, too.  
How you see the stars in the dark in the starry night sky.

—Diana Alvarado

A Student *Ghazal*.

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