“Shakespeare 是什麼?”

By Brooke Bianchi-Pennington

“Shakespeare’ is everywhere!”
Excitedly, I’d tell my students.
And once, that was enough for me.
Once, it was enough to see
the ties that bind,²
the ubiquitous footnotes to White culture.

I’d show them how all we consume,
our rich, fatty diet of drama,
our sticky-sweet romance,
is iteration after iteration
of White American idiom.

But, you are what you eat,³
and slowly it seeped
into my arteries, my lungs.
My very molecules replaced,
mere allusions to what once was.

How do we separate
from the culture we create?
How deeply does it penetrate?
How do we differentiate
between ourselves and what we take in?

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¹ A British playwright
² Reference to a Baptist hymn by John Fawcett
³ Western idiom
Where does one end 
and another begin?
If I were to obliterate,
comb through atom by atom,
dismantling myself,
each Adam would still be a White-washed biblical reference.  

Once upon a time,
I spoke to a man from Taiwan,
an educated man, a kind man.
I told him, “今天我很高興因為我看了Shakespeare.”
He said, “What is Shakespeare?”

And maybe this is the obliteration I seek,
A vision of revision
in which I’ve risen above reference.
Where each thought
does not
follow another
in such quick succession.
Where each nod of my skull
is not a nod to Hamlet.

Where my students don’t learn
to see Shakespeare everywhere,
but unlearn
the idea that so much depends upon
one White man’s words.

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4 The Christian Bible describes the emerging of humanity through the first human they name Adam.
5 Traditional opening to European fairytales.
6 Reference to a line from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S. Elliot
7 A play by Shakespeare.
8 Reference to the poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams
Brooke Bianchi-Pennington has been teaching high school English for over a decade, most of which has been at her current institution, Hardin Valley Academy. In 2019 she earned a Ph.D. from The University of Tennessee in Literacy Studies. Her research and writing interests continue to lie in the convergence of literacy, language, culture, and technology. She can be reached at brooke.bianchipennington@knoxschools.org.