



Poetry in Public Discourse: Reading, Writing, and Circulating the Political Poem

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Introduction and Context

Often times we teachers are inspired to create a unit of instruction because we see something important and we want to bring this thing into our classrooms and share it with our students. This unit began with the opposite impulse: I was inspired to explore political poetry in the classroom because of something important I did *not* see. As people explore their own political views and engage in new political conversations both in person and across social media, poetry seems strangely to be missing from commonplace discourse. This is particularly strange because social media seem to be particularly suited for the short and dense forms poetry takes. I'm curious to find out whether it's possible to validate poetry for the students as a viable means of personal political expression. Can students have authentic experiences engaging with their political world by reading, writing, and sharing poetry? What are legitimate ways –social media or otherwise – for a high school student to engage with and participate in poetry with their community? This unit aims to create an environment where these experiences can happen, and ideally set students up to continue to see poetry as a form of political expression in the future.

From a practical perspective, the students will study poems written and circulated in the traditional way (e.g., books, periodicals, anthologies), but then we will also challenge the mythologies around what makes a poem or poet successful. Is a poem like W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" successful because it was recorded, published, and passed on for decades into thousands of English classrooms? Or might that poem also participate in failure because there are almost certainly thousands of students who read it with a response resembling, "This is dumb. I hate poetry," or some other invective? This sounds silly, but it's really meant to set up this question: If canonized poems can be unsuccessful, does that open the door for uncanonized poems to be successful in a different way? I believe it does, and I would like to show the students how a poem with a circulation of one and a lifetime of a moment can still be a profound success, and I would like the students to experience this success for themselves.

These students participating in the political poetry unit attend 11th grade in a New Haven STEM magnet school focusing on engineering and robotics. The course is called "English 3," and it's the only other English class for 11th grade apart from the Advanced Placement classes. This being a general course, the students have a wide range of academic abilities and dispositions to reading and writing, but generally the students in this English

class are not always the most passionate readers and writers. In my experience I've found that students at this grade and level tend to be reluctant readers of extended narratives but thoughtful readers of shorter works. In the same way, they often tend to resist writing extended essays but do well with informal reflective or analytical pieces. Because of this, poetry has the potential to be something the students engage with easily in the classroom and write about (informally) without difficulty. In fact, the school is a little unusual in that it has many students already who read and write poetry for fun, and it's not uncommon to see students sitting in clusters in the hall to share their poetry or rap with each other. There is a Poetry Club dedicated to creating a space to write and share poems, and some students even have school-wide recognition as poets - something they have earned through successfully competing in poetry slam competitions. So given this setting, this unit seeks both to create engagement with poetry in the general population of 11th grade students and to tap into and direct a ready enthusiasm for poetry active outside the classroom.

Regarding time and the overall curriculum, this unit will take place at the beginning of the year. Because it concerns itself with poetry that students will easily make personal connections with and it concerns itself with creative writing and work-shopping, this is a unit that can create a high level of personal engagement for the students. It has a high potential to hook them on literature and create a significant positive momentum that further units will build on. The duration of the unit is flexible: it can run anywhere from four weeks to an entire nine-week marking period, with more time allowing for greater scope, depth, and pacing for the students' writing.

As a side note, teaching this unit at the beginning of the year allows for a continual awareness of and engagement with political poetry. I don't imagine students will stop writing poetry after the unit finishes, and room can always be made for a student to share on any given day something they wrote and feel to be important. Likewise, we don't teach in a bubble, so we certainly will remain concerned with political issues as they arise over the course of the year, and when something significant happens it will be natural either to allow the students to write about it or to pull in poetry from outside sources that might interest the class. I think it would be a great benefit to the students to keep a degree of flexibility with which, even if in the midst of reading a novel for another unit, we are able to take a break to make time to pay attention to our politics and poetry.

Content Objectives

The opening lines of Allen Tate's 1937 poem, "Ode to the Confederate Dead," suggest the function of a political poem: "Row after row with strict impunity / The headstones yield their names to the element." The speaker is meditating on a cemetery, this one dedicated to those who fell in battle. Realistically speaking, people walk by cemeteries' seemingly sacred ground often without even noticing their existence (so long as one isn't in the way of course). If a person does notice it, they don't often think about the mechanisms that created these rows of buried corpses. Even a person entering the cemetery is concerned with their own mourned dead, walking by and not noticing countless other headstones on the way to their destination. Now, a poem draws attention to something otherwise not noticed, mourned, or celebrated. A poem about a cemetery or about the dead will make the reader think about the headstones in a new way. This is not a normal poem, however, but a political poem, and as such Tate not only draws our attention to the headstones, but he brings judgment to them. This poem takes something unnoticed and unjudged, standing with "strict impunity" and brings it to our consciousness for consideration and judgment. That is the maneuver of political

poetry: it forces our attention on something we don't otherwise see or perhaps don't want to look at. The poem seems urgently to say, "Don't turn away even if you don't want to see this - even if you find your own guilt in the headstones, you *need* to see it." This call, this claim the poem makes on the reader's attention, is the backbone around which everything else is built.

There are three objectives for this unit. The first, more traditional, and overall aim of the unit is to give students a sensitivity to the value of political poetry and an understanding of how it works and can work for them. After participating in this unit, students should be able to recognize when a poem is addressing a political issue or situation, how it deals with that issue, and what different forms and conventions the poem uses to achieve its rhetorical goals. This is essentially conventional poetic analysis applied to a specific genre of poetry except that it is grounded very much in the situation of the poem as well as the poem as a work in itself. Instead of treating the poems as purely aesthetic objects, students should see the political poem as both something beautiful and something timely, with universal appeal and localized, specific importance. Students will ask and answer questions like, "Why would this poet write this poem?" or "What in this poet's life and circumstances led to this poem?" They should have an eye to look for latent energies in the poet and their society that sparked the creation of a poem, and a curiosity to discover how brightly it burned once circulated (and whom the poem burned the most).

In the midst of these analytical practices, the unit also seeks to create a learning environment that fosters meaningful experiences reading and writing poetry. Real, authentic - even emotional - engagement with the poetry in the political discourse is just as important as the concrete academic skills the students learn to apply. This second objective demands that students read poetry that deals with political issues in which they have some stake. Consequently, the unit will need time to present a thorough variety of poems so that every single student can at least once see something of themselves in a poem. That connection, that recognition of "That's me! That's my life!" is absolutely crucial or else this becomes only an academic exercise. This may sound as familiar as it is idealistic: of course we always want students to relate to poetry, don't we? We tend, however, to ask students to relate to the poem by identifying with some universal principle or idea of beauty that a poem represents. This unit asks that the connections be more concrete. For instance, to teach Audre Lorde's "Hanging Fire," without a sense that at least one student will see themselves on the other side of the door when "momma's in the bedroom / with the door closed," or at least one student might feel that "my skin has betrayed me" in some immediate sense is counterproductive to this unit's objectives. The poems selected must make students feel like they and the poet are participating in a community of insiders, rather than in the sadly more customary reading experience of being an outsider looking in.

In the same way, this unit asks students to participate in this discourse by writing poetry that addresses and communicates their own political circumstances or events. The experience here is important too. The students must feel the struggle to put a complicated political situation into words that captures something of the experience in the writing. By asking them to write aesthetically, this unit engages students with the creation of beauty ("beauty" meaning here something not necessarily pleasing, but powerfully and authentically human) where they are accustomed to creating thesis statements and logical arguments. They will have to write with the logic of beauty and experience, and struggle to make it come out right. Then they must experience communicating it in an authentic way. Handing in the political poem to the teacher for a grade turns their struggle into a transaction; instead students must communicate the poem to listeners who are important to them. Students have to think, "Who needs to hear this?" and use whatever channels they have available to them to get it out there.

This leads to the final objective of the unit: overcoming the mythology of "making it." Students have an idea

of literary success that is tied to space and time. If they create a poem, it can only be successful if thousands (or ideally millions, if it goes “platinum”) of people hear it. Such success is magnified by how long the poem remains in the public imagination. In this “bigger is better” way of thinking, the poet takes the role of shaping the public consciousness, making a difference by giving voice and inspiration to others inside and outside their political communities. Of course it’s impossible to argue that this isn’t success, but I think there is something in the literary nature of poetry that this model of success overlooks. A poem, especially a political poem, wrestles with the most powerful and significant but complex factors in a writer’s way of life and captures them through scratches on a piece of paper or pixels on a screen. Through a poem the writer can open a person’s eyes to a way of life they didn’t even recognize, let alone understand, and then give them a sense of what it’s like to live it. It’s a transfer of lived experience, essentially. It’s hard to believe at all that poetry is capable of doing this! The fact that so much poetry is written, and so much of it has this effect so often on so many people has seemed to make it commonplace, but really it is of profound importance in every circumstance. What if a poem is heard by only one person – maybe read to somebody in the seat next to you while riding the bus – and the poem lasts only as long as the poet’s voice hovers in the air, but it opens that someone’s eyes to something they’ve never seen before, and they consequently never see their world in the same way again? Can’t this too be called an unqualified success? This unit hopes to create experiences where students share poetry in these kinds of micro-transactions to create a sense that they can circulate poetry immediately with powerful, meaningful results.

Strategies

This unit has a variety of strategies that work concurrently throughout the unit’s duration. The unit’s three objectives (learning about political poetry, having meaningful experiences working in the genre, and taking advantage of legitimate, local channels for circulating poetry) essentially only require the students’ sustained practice studying, writing, and sharing poetry. There isn’t a list of skills and texts where students move from one to the next, checking off boxes as they go. The unit functions in a recursive way instead where studying, writing, and sharing poetry are practices that constantly speak to each other. The following strategies should be considered practical ways to cultivate the habits and practices that will lead to a successful learning experience. The culminating assessment, the Poetry Project, appears first, as it’s the project that brings students to success in the three objectives and receives attention throughout the unit. The general practices, exercises, and classroom conventions that help move students to this goal follow afterward in order of importance and usefulness.

Poetry Project

The culminating assessment for this unit is a project that has multiple aspects involving the interpretation of poetry, writing of poetry, and circulation of a poem. First, students must select some poetry that was not discussed or studied in class and submit it for approval. This may be one complete poem, a series of closely related shorter poems, or a short but meaningful selection from a longer poem. The idea is to make students explore where poems are written and circulated on their own, using what they do in class as a starting point. By giving the background of the poems I bring into the classroom, students have starting points of authors, publications and web sites, historical periods, and poetic genres where they can begin to research poems on their own. The reason students must submit their poem for approval is because, for such a high stakes assignment, it’s important to give them some immediate feedback on difficulties that might arise from their

selection that they don't anticipate. It shouldn't matter if the student's poem comes from *Poetry* magazine or their best friend, but it is important that the poem have enough sophistication and political relevance that the student can write about it, and this is what the teacher looks for in the submission. It is helpful to stress to the students that they should choose a poem that they find both interesting and confusing. They may think it's easier to choose a poem they understand already, but they'll quickly find that there's not much to write about when they sit down to interpret it. If the poem confuses them, the students can write about that confusion and (along with easily hitting a word count) that will help them make new connections to understand the poem, creating meaningful and lively writing in the process.

The beginning of this writing process is an annotated close read. Students take the poem they chose and copy it neatly by hand, word for word, with every typographical character and punctuation mark exactly reproduced. This act of copying is the first step in reading closely, as students must slow down and pay attention to every distinct element of the poem (handwriting as opposed to typing it is an obvious tactic to keep students from copying and pasting from the internet, and even the earnest student with terrible handwriting will benefit from the process of handwriting even if the product is a mess). Next, students should read the poem aloud to themselves, making notes on the paper (ideally in different ink or color) when they hear something interesting or notice something happening in the act of speaking it (for instance when a series of words twists their tongue, a line makes them run out of breath, or they discover unexpected rhyme).

After hearing it in this way, it's time for the student to read the poem closely and annotate. By "annotate" I mean for the student to have a sustained conversation with the poem, using writing as a tool both for analysis and self-discovery, filling the page with their writing. The point being a conversation, it's impossible to evaluate their marks for correctness, so students should be directed toward quantity over quality. This sounds strange, but at this stage of analysis I'm counting on the writing process to *use* quantity to *create* quality. In other words, after enough writing, students will start seeing things they simply wouldn't otherwise discover.

Now, even with these open expectations, for many students annotating can be incredibly intimidating: "Writing all over pages and making those smart notes are what English nerds do, not me - I have *no* idea what I'm doing." Along with providing samples (See Appendix) and modeling the simplicity of the process in front of them with the poetry we study, there are six discrete steps that students can look to if they are uncomfortable or inexperienced annotating a poem on their own. They are:

1. Somewhere on the page where there's room, write down some information you know or have looked up about the poet. When did they live? What was their family situation like? What kind of life did they live leading up to this poem? What kind of living was imposed on them, or was happening around them? What kind of person wrote this poem?
2. Circle words, phrases or parts of the poem that jump out at you for any reason. Make notes in the margin of the poem recording your reaction to these words or phrases (e.g., "What's this about?" or "strange image" or "beautiful" or "sad," whatever you're thinking). Try to record your changing responses as you move through the poem: for instance, if a line break leaves you with an expectation of what will come next, note what you expect, or what you're wondering at this point in the poem.
3. If you notice interesting patterns or contrasts in the language or ideas—sounds other than end- rhymes that repeat or contrast (including consonance, assonance, internal rhyme), a metaphor that develops or reverses an earlier metaphor, a sudden change in tone or kind of language used—mark those patterns or breaks by drawing connecting arrows between circled words, and make a note of the pattern or change in the margin.
4. Put a question mark next to any words you don't know or references you don't recognize. Look them up,

and write the definition or identification in the margin.

5. If the poem uses end-rhyme, mark the rhyme scheme by putting an “a” next to the first rhyme, a “b” next to the second rhyme, etc. Try to determine whether the poem uses a regular meter—a set pattern to the rhythm and number of syllables per line. (Sound it out.)
6. When you’re done, make a quick note below the poem of your reaction or response to the poem as a whole—what feeling or thoughts does it leave you with?

The students now have a political poem with which they are highly familiar, but they haven’t yet brought their thinking about it to maturity. Writing an interpretive essay is a natural next step. Students should formally write an essay that explains deliberately and systematically the meaning they find in the poem and how that meaning is constructed or developed. Another possible approach is to allow students to write a narrative telling the story of their reading of the poem. They can describe their initial confusion, how they worked with and through that confusion, and what they discovered on the other side. Both expository and narrative writing achieve the same purpose of articulating their best and more mature thinking about the poem. The length of this paper should take care of itself: it’s my experience that setting a word limit of 1,000 words shocks high-school students into thinking they’re expected to struggle with writing too much rather than too little, and free from the pressure to hit a word count their writing becomes more organic, natural, and concise.

The final stage of the project is to bring the poem into the community. The student must, somehow, in a way of their own devising, share their poem with someone in a meaningful way. Technically, the student could crumple it up in a ball and throw it at someone from a moving train and say they’ve “shared” it, but of course this is nonsense. Only slightly better is posting the poem on their Facebook wall or Twitter timeline, taking a picture and adding it to a Snapchat story or Instagram post, or stapling it to a telephone pole: they’ve presented the poem to their community, but they haven’t really communicated it, they haven’t committed to the poem or their audience. It must be a deliberate, specific, pointed communication of a poem from one person to another using the medium they consider most appropriate. If they like, the student can post it on someone’s Facebook wall and indicate they’re eager for that person to read it. They could read it aloud to their friends at the lunch table. They could email it to an older sister in college. The point of this part of the project is to force the student to think about the channels available in his or her life to share poetry, decide which seem most promising (or least humiliating), and take a chance on using it. Afterwards, the students should write a reflective piece narrating the events of the exchange and the subsequent conversations, how they felt the poem was received, and what they learned from the process. Most pertinent is the question of whether the student – outside of classroom or course demands – would share a poem again and why they might or might not. Their answers to this, which sadly I can’t anticipate, will go a long way toward refining this unit for future effectiveness.

As is now apparent, this is a large, comprehensive project, so it should be spaced out with plenty of time for each step. Before selecting a poem, students should have experience working with political poems so they can get a sense of what distinguishes political poetry dealing with public life from personal, confessional, or private poetry. They shouldn’t begin annotating it obviously until they’ve had experience analyzing poems together in class. They’ll need to write the essay early enough in the unit to allow time for them to share the poem and reflect on it. Five weeks is a reasonable minimum time to complete the unit, but a full marking period of nine weeks seems more appropriate.

Poetry Journal

The poetry journal is a tool for students to record and collect their thinking about the poems they study.

Whenever a poem is assigned, whether for homework or in class, the students should read it carefully and record their thinking about the poem in their journal. If they have a goal to fill an entire page about a poem, they are forced to think through the poem for an extended period, and this flushes out ideas they might not otherwise have. Furthermore, the poetry journal and its writing requirement make it impossible for a student not to have something to say about a poem. When a student responds to a poem with, "I don't get it. I have nothing to write," they can be encouraged that those are two sentences already that they can write down, and they're not far from much more. I've had countless conversations with students that start here, and it often moves as quickly as:

"I don't get it. This poem sucks."

"Why does it suck?"

"It's stupid."

"What's stupid about it?"

"Petals on a wet black bough? What the hell is that?"

"That's it! Now you're confused and that's what you can write about! What the hell *is* that? And while you're at it, isn't it curious that *that* part of the poem drew your attention? I wonder why that is too. Now do you see all you have to write about?"

I include dialogue to show that the journal provides a field for these kinds of conversations to happen, and a place for students to start to become accustomed to persistent thinking through puzzlement and confusion. Whenever they are puzzled, but expected to write anyway, they learn to find an access point from which to analyze the poem no matter how simple. Sometimes it's counting the words, or listing the words a line breaks on, or writing free-associations on words or images. Soon the connections happen, and what's even more important than the connections is the students seeing themselves making the connections and growing in confidence to engage with difficult poetry. Since political poetry often forces us to challenge our natural ways of seeing and being and understand something that can be uncomfortable, this kind of analytical backbone is absolutely necessary. Consequently, these poetry journals should be graded purely for fulfillment of the length requirement. When collected and handed back, written feedback for the students pointing out the characteristics of their thinking (always positive) or asking questions that push their ideas farther can only help build this confidence and should be provided as frequently as possible.

Socratic Seminars

I've always found Socratic Seminars somewhat paradoxical. The point of the conversation is to use the collected energy and intelligence of the class to make new meaning and discover new ideas, while at the same time questioning those ideas and undermining constructed interpretations until the students find themselves in a state of *aporia*. I suppose a true Socratic Seminar leads the students to an already formed, mature interpretation ("Yes, that is certainly true, Socrates!"), but it always feels a little wrong if the entire class comes to a conclusive reading of a text, just as it seems strangely successful when students leave the class scratching their heads and thinking they now have *no idea* what the text means. This inconclusiveness fits with the aims of political poetry, which, instead of declaring to readers, "This is the way things are," forces the reader instead to deal with a specific, intensely familiar or often unfamiliar reality - to confront a lived

experience. These are poems, not political tracts, and I believe confusion is a valuable experience worth cultivating in the reading of them. Students should furthermore become comfortably uncomfortable in a world where political realities are so complicated they can't ever be conclusively fathomed while at the same time our stake in society demands that we take positions on things we only loosely understand.

One of the first discussions should confront these fundamental truths and their relationship to poetry. The questions, "What does politics mean?" "What do poems do?" and "What is a political poem and what does *it* do?" deserve space in their own right, and a discussion that creates tentative answers and definitions can help ground students in the study of the poetry that follows. Of course their ideas should be returned to and questioned whenever a poem challenges them or opens up a new possibility, even up to the very end of the unit. Whatever happens, the dictionary should be kept out of this discussion at all costs – do not even let a student say the dictionary's definition even if it means shouting them down! The instant a student turns to a dictionary they have (literally) deauthorized themselves from owning the meaning of the word, and this sense that it is necessary to appeal to outside authority can be toxic to a discussion. In the same way, it's extremely dangerous for a teacher to give their own ideas on a word's definition or a text's meaning, as students tend to see those as "correct" instead of helpful. Asking questions is almost always more helpful, unless students have the confidence to challenge the teacher's views and opinions – something that is unlikely at the beginning of the year.

Another practical matter is the arrangement of the classroom. The environment has a profound influence on the conversations that happen in it. If desks are arranged in a horseshoe around the blackboard with the teacher sitting in a director's chair up front, then all comments will be directed toward the teacher in a kind of evaluative and competitive transaction. If desks are arranged in a complete circle with the teacher sitting up front, the comments will still always be directed at the teacher, but they won't realize it as much. If students sit in a complete circle and the teacher sits last in whatever seat is left in some strange part of the room, the students will feel slightly uncomfortable, but they're talk to each other more. If the desks are stacked to the side and students have nothing but chairs and the journals and poems, the conversation will be even more open and lively, as an important symbolic barrier has been removed from the discourse. However it looks, it's important to decentralize the teacher and remove as many obstacles to conversation as possible (it should be noted too that removing desks makes phone use less discreet and sleeping impossible – both helpful for classroom engagement).

To have a conversation about a poem, it's a matter of providing the space and holding students accountable to it. The hardest part is not speaking. Students have read the poem; they have ideas already about politics, poetry, and their intersection; they have poetry journals that have their thoughts in them: everyone has something to talk about. Open the discussion with a question or problem. It is often good to begin by presenting some problems or issues but then addressing the class with a simple question to help them get started processing it aloud together. As often as possible redirect students answers back at the class to keep it from being the center of attention: the point of the conversation is for the students to interact with the poem, and the teacher simply facilitates that. Sometimes it's helpful to ask a difficult question or suggest different ways of reading the poem. When students hear difficult questions, they sometimes need time to think of a response. If the question is good, then it's worth it to allow silent time for the students to think, even if it feels like "awkward silence." If the teacher "rescues" students from awkward silence after a good question, the students will learn to rely on that rescue and the discussion will falter. Also, if a student proposes an answer after extended time thinking, no matter how outlandish it may sound they need an affirmation: they must know that if they take a chance with a difficult question, no matter what they will be rewarded. This will encourage all students (especially the quiet ones) to take chances in the future.

The conversation is complete when the time runs out. It's hard to set an intellectual goal on something so organic and unpredictable, so while students may want to find a solid interpretation of a poem by the end of time, it's certainly not a failure if they find themselves still puzzled by the end. The thinking and the conversing are the points, not the product. To help students find value in the experience, sometimes it's helpful to take some time and provide the students with an observation of their discussion, highlighting what they said or analyze that was particularly interesting or useful. It can also be worthwhile to allow students time to reflect on their own conversations – how they contributed, what they heard, what they wish they got a chance to say – either in their journals or on paper to hand in.

It may be tempting to give students explicit guidance on how to conduct themselves in the seminar. Maybe they could have a worksheet that has boxes where they have to check off how many times they talked, and other boxes where they write down what they learned. These seem to be ideal tools as they mandate participation and reflection, but these worksheets also condition the student's attitude to the seminar in a dangerous way. First, it suggests a conversation is something that is built, where each person contributes their equal share until it is complete. Instead of a community of learners, they are workers; instead of listening, thinking, and responding, they try to think of their best point (or any point at all) and where to fit it in. Mandated participation also carries the assumption that the students won't want to talk on their own anyway, and they will respond negatively to this lack of confidence. This premium placed on equal participation also ignores the dispositions of the students. Some students are naturally quiet, yet they find their voice strong in writing. Some students will not have responded to a poem while others may feel strongly about it, and the class will want to hear from them. Allowing the conversation of the seminar to proceed organically will give students space to engage in their own way.

Writing to Learn

Just as students should have conversations about political poems in order to broaden their thinking and challenge their ideas, so too should they use writing to pursue and deepen their understanding of poetry. Writing is developed, uncontested thinking, and a place for students to discover and present their best ideas. This unit presents two channels for this kind of writing.

Essays

Essays for this unit are a place for students to present and explain an interpretation of a poem or series of poems. I understand the word "essay" here in the older French sense, "to try." A student does not figure a poem out and then transcribe their thinking in the essay. Instead, the writing and the figuring out are combined, and the completed writing is the student's best effort in understanding what a poem is trying to do. Essays for this unit should take chances trying to explain something confusing or complicated, even if no conclusive answer is discovered. The writing should freely engage with difficult questions, and it should even be open to contradicting its own thesis, while coming to terms with that contradiction in order to maintain the paper's integrity. This is a messy process, but these essays are practice for the students to work their way through messy writing into a place of clarity and precision. Feedback for these essays should have this unifying goal in mind. Students will benefit from guidance in shaping their essays around a unifying idea (however often they deviate to explore its implications, problems, or areas of confusion) and using paragraphs to present their work on that idea in a way that makes sense to a reader. Again, the use of models (See Appendix) not only of well-written, sensible essays but also of the more disorderly writer-focused early drafts will show students how to let their mind explore in their writing while at the same time revising with a reader in mind.

Essays should be assigned as early and often as possible, beginning with low-stakes grading and increasing in rigor as the teacher holds students accountable for making use of the feedback they receive. The assignment is a tool for students to practice deepening and enriching their thinking while honing the ability to convey that meaning to another. Not only will this repeated practice prepare them for the poetry project, but it will accustom the students to communicate clearly what they think about political poetry. Being able to talk about political poetry concerning public life is just as important as knowing how to understand it. This conversational expectation can and should be applied to expectations about the student's "voice" in their essay writing. This is not the place to discourage the use of "I" in their writing, since they themselves are an intimate and immediate concern in their essays. If a student writes an essay in language that resembles their spoken voice, then they are all the more likely to use a spoken voice that resembles that organized, orderly writing - or so one hopes.

Poems

At some point during the unit, the students must consider their own immediate personal political environment and write at least one poem that not only addresses it, but would show someone different from them what their personal experience of this situation is like. Then, however they like and with the same directions as for the poetry project, they must circulate this poem. The point of this kind of writing is to give students the experience of engaging with poetry as a means of political expression, and the acts of communicating their experience to an "other." It also adds another dimension to poetry analysis since students will be encouraged to consider poems as a writer, looking at the craft as well as the meaning to find aesthetic maneuvers that they can make work for them. Then circulating their work either to someone with a different way of life or someone with a similar way of life who can recognize this life in the work will, hopefully, help students see poetry in a new way. Maybe the person who never thought to write about poetry will consider doing so again; maybe the poet who hides their work will start to share it; and maybe the rapper who dreams of making it will see that in an important sense they've made it already.

Workshops

There is no better tool to help students make the shift from writing for themselves to writing for a reader than peer-review workshops. These can be applied to any form of writing, be it the close read, the essays, or their poetry. For a workshop day, after informing the students what exactly will be workshopped - for example, a first draft of an essay of their interpretation of a poem - assign the students to bring in three copies of their draft (I often photocopy drafts for students who handwrite their work, but they must deliver them earlier by necessity). Then the students who are prepared form groups of four, and each student gets a copy of the work to read. Working through one person's essay at a time, the students read with an awareness of their reading experience. Instead of acting like a teacher looking for things to correct, they should pay attention to where they responded with interest, where they found themselves confused, where they felt like there was something missing, or where they would be interested to read more. They mark the paper, and then have a conversation with the writer about the writer's aims and how the reading experience played out. There is no worksheet for this kind of exercise: it's simply a conversation. This conversation functions to create a mindset of revising for a reader's understanding, and it will lead to clarifying revisions that increase the readability of their ideas. When they turn in their final copy, students should also turn in their workshopped draft to hold them accountable for their revision.

Poetry Readings & Poetry Slams

Students should naturally be encouraged to participate in the public reading of poetry for this unit. This can

take the forms of bringing a poet or group of poets in to read poetry and speak to the class, having students read their poems to the class, or going on field trips to poetry events. Any time students can encounter poetry outside the classroom will only strengthen the idea that poetry exists in public life and that their work on the poetry project participates in greater conversations that are happening already.

Classroom Activities

Modeling the Read

Just as it's important for students to know that they can work with a poem on their own and draw value from it simply by applying their own thinking to it, so too should students see how methodical and systematic close reading happens. This is really as simple as the teacher reading the poem with the students and showing them the process of a thorough close read from beginning to end. This is an act of guidance, however, not the introduction of a mandated process of poetry study. It's important that the students still maintain agency in forming their own approaches to the study of a political poem. The teacher – as one with more experience and education in poetry reading – is a guide providing help for students and showing ways of dealing with a poem that students might not have considered. There are no worksheets here, no “graphic organizers”, no “Rules for Close Reading” or “SOAPStone” lessons – only the teacher, the poem, and the students.

The actual way this unfolds in the classroom is simple. Every student gets a copy of a poem. Then the teacher, at the front of the class, reads the poem closely and narrates their thinking to the students. As the teacher works with the poem, the students get to see and ask questions about the story of the teacher's reading. Students have their own way of looking at a poem (or maybe they still can't find success in their own personal reading), but they get to observe a more comprehensive approach and glean from the teacher's efforts tools that may work for them. The environment of course conditions how this observation happens: the poem can be written or projected on the board and the teacher can annotate in front of the class; research can be shown “on the fly” by having the teacher look up information with the internet on the projector or the class can be given printed research ahead of time; and with live internet access students can choose a poem to project that the teacher can demonstrate their methods without preparation, just as the students would.

Every teacher's methodology will be different, of course, but it might be useful to look at Robert Frost's “The Gift Outright” as an interesting example of how a thorough political reading can complicate the value of a poem. Given just the most basic information that this poem was read at the inauguration of President Kennedy and then time to read it, most students will cringe immediately with the first lines, “The land was ours before we were the land's.” It seems like this poem is dealing with the claim Americans make to legitimate ownership of the country's territory, but this is problematic considering the violent means we used to secure it. Taking land from Native Americans is one of the great shames of our history, but here it's celebrated! “She was our land more than a hundred years / before she was our people.” The poem goes on to explain the relationship between Americans and the land under the rule of England, then the giving over of themselves to the land, finding “salvation in surrender.” The poem ends with a vague allusion to “Manifest Destiny,” reinforcing the seemingly central idea that there is an intrinsic and natural connection between the American people and the land they claimed. Many students will not respond positively to this.

Here is where it is interesting to walk the students through a political read and show them what else they

might find. Political poems deal with the person in society, so it's a good idea to start with the person writing the poem. Who was Robert Frost, and where did this poem come from? On the projector the teacher can look up biographical information and select the details likely to be important for reading the poem, writing them on the board while students copy everything the teacher writes onto their own copies of "The Gift Outright." The teacher's notes may look something like this:

Frost began life in the city, working various jobs, but always wanting to be a poet.

Serious about this commitment for his whole life.

Highly educated, including some years at Harvard.

He owned a farm for a while that he tried unsuccessfully to manage.

Left for England and worked there with major poets, including Ezra Pound.

One of the Dymock Poets.

Returned to farming on return to the U.S. in 1915. Family place for many years.

He taught and wrote in the highest levels, at Amherst and Breadloaf

Continued to win numerous awards.

Spent his later years in Florida.

Read this poem when 86, but it was published 20 years earlier.

At this point the teacher might bring to light the fact the farming was not just a major part of Frost's life, but something he *wanted* in his life. He was given a farm, he tried and failed to run it, and yet he still returned to it later in life, making it a part of his family life. Considering Frost as a farmer, how does a farmer look at his land? There's a deep relationship, one of seemingly mutual dependence as the crops depend on the farmer just as the farmer lives by his crops. A farmer cannot simply exploit their land without thought for the land's needs or the crops will soon exhaust themselves, growing less every year. Frost would have learned hard lessons from his early failures, and his successes too would be important to him. How does this inform the poem?

When Frost writes, "The land was ours before we were the lands," it suggests the time Frost owned a farm but had no experience farming. He owned the land by title, but he had no relationship with it. What if this poem is about the conflict between political claims and authentic residence? Drawing lines and boundaries and handing out titles without a thought to the relationship between the actual person and the actual ground they walk on? Maybe instead of elevating American expansion and colonialism it's a cry against exploitation of the American land and people? Instead of claiming and exploiting land to make America great, does this poem suggest land is meant to be storied, artful, and enhanced? What *does* it mean to give ourselves outright? Holding these questions in mind, the teacher can return to the poem and examine the overall meaning in a new light. Even more importantly, students see the importance of the poem's author and situation and learn to be flexible in their first reading.

After reviewing Frost's poem with these questions in mind, the teacher might now examine the form of the poem and how this addresses the questions they and the class have been asking. For instance, the sixteen lines of the poem suggest a sonnet, and this creates a series of expectations that Frost will either honor or break. Pertinent questions might be, "Where are the quatrains, sestet, or octaves? Why the enjambed lines when we should expect full stops? With all this disorder, where is the order? Why sixteen lines of blank verse? Where is there word play?" The teacher would ask these questions while writing tentative answers on the poem for the students to follow.

This activity doesn't give students a checklist of "Ten Steps to Read a Political Poem!" Instead it shows how a simple approach can yield a great deal of useful information. If they learn to read a poem to gain a sense of it without permanent intellectual commitment, then to look up background information that sheds different lights on the poem, and finally to reread the poem with a sensitivity both to form and meaning, they will be ready to read difficult works independently. Because these are intellectual habits more than content knowledge, it's important to repeat this activity with the students as often as possible so that they come to see this as a natural way to work with political poetry.

Draw Sharing

Drawing can be a way into sharing expressions of students' lived experiences without the fear and pressure amateur writers often feel [about] poetry writing. On a sheet of paper or in their journals have students create two columns, one for things, people, or events in their lives that are important or meaningful to them, and the other column for things, people, or events that they tend to experience regularly. The point here is to give the students a space to reflect on their ways of life in both large (moving from another country, the death of a family member, passing a difficult class, winning or losing a fist-fight, etc.) and small ways (eating or skipping breakfast, walking to the bus stop, getting cat-called, texting with friends, etc.). Then, from these columns students should select one or a couple of things they feel like spending some time on, and on a fresh sheet of paper they should draw that experience. They can draw it however they like so long as they feel like it best represents themselves, but it should be something someone else can understand because after a period of time they will share it.

Sharing the drawings is the heart of the activity. First, students find it easier to share drawing than writing: for some reason I don't understand they feel like the stakes are lower with drawing and they often make themselves more vulnerable with this form. To make things even easier, students should share their work in small groups, then each group can present their work (this form allows shy students in the group to ask another to present for them too). Sharing their work creates a valuable sense of community, but it can also help them come to terms with their identities as amateur writers. If the teacher comments on the value of the work and the students are praising each other's efforts too, and then the teacher shows students a masterpiece of political art on the projector (Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, for instance), the class's attention can be drawn to the fact that their pictures were good and valuable even though they did not match the craft of a professional. Furthermore (with *Guernica* especially), the class can see how their work is in fact more accessible than a professional's masterpiece, and this adds to their value. If the teacher likes, they can offer the students another piece of visual art more accessible to them yet not at all less visceral (Francisco Goya's *The Third of May 1808* offers both intensity and accessibility) and ask the students to analyze the work as artists: What is going on in the picture that you notice, recognize, or respect? The connection can then be made to poetry: even though they may (and will, and probably should) doubt their own poetic voice's quality, they should have the confidence that their writing will still have value to this classroom community - to their peers and teacher - and it may even have the potential to have value outside the classroom. This drawing

activity gives students an educational experience that they can remember and gain confidence from.

Another valuable experience comes from their initial examinations of their lives that they carry out in preparation for this activity, and then the decision to commit to one of those experiences for their art. There is potential to explore where politics fits in private and public life. Let's say a student drew something private and trivial – eating breakfast, for instance. The right questions can turn this into a political event: What do you eat for breakfast? Cereal and milk? Does a parent make it for you? You do it yourself? Why? Your mom is at work and your dad is asleep? He works nights? So you're alone when you wake up? Do you make breakfast for any brothers and sisters? A little brother? He's 8? How much do you take care of him?

Obviously this kind of questioning has to be done with discretion and sensitivity, but it's important to see that even the most trivial lived experiences can show something important about political pressures. The student who drew breakfast might be a student shouldering great responsibilities, and there are political and economic reasons for this greater than their own household. There is always a connection to something greater – this faith drives the teacher's questions. The student who has a stay-at-home mother, a wealthy family, and few economic or political pressures also doesn't escape: with privilege comes expectations and responsibilities, other pressures to participate and maintain the systems that created this privileged life, and a line of questioning might explore what those are and how they work for this more wealthy student.

The students' first poetry writing can follow this form, making their initial efforts feel somewhat familiar to them. They can look at the columns they made for their art, they can look at the drawings themselves, and try to represent in words what they did with lines, shading, and color. Just as pencils, erasers, scissors, glue, and markers are tools to create art, so too are figurative language, lines and line breaks, rhyme, meter, length, and diction tools for poetry.

Collaboration

Students have a lot to offer each other when they share their skills, background knowledge, and life experiences as they work together to read, write about, and discuss poetry. Ideally, students do at home the work that is personal and they use class time to work together in a variety of forms. Just as the entire class engages in Socratic discussions, so too can they work with the poems in smaller groups. There are many methods for breaking up the class into collaborative partnerships: ideally the teacher strategically arranges students' personalities and skill levels into a productive unit, but more often than not this is simply not expedient. Random, constantly changing groups ensure a certain level of fairness, while allowing students to choose their own partners provides a certain level of comfort. The greatest factor that mitigates any problems that particular groupings of students can create is clear objectives and clear directions to get there. The following are three broad categories of work that students may collaborate on for their benefit.

Analysis

Collaborative analysis is the backbone of the activities for this unit. Moving from individual readings of a text to an entire class discussion is often difficult, but allowing students to talk in smaller circles gives everyone open space to try out their ideas and see what their colleagues think. The groups are best guided by a question or problem that they can use to frame their responses. After they work, they can either report out or submit a written record of their discussion or conclusions. If students are working on a difficult poem and they all come to class with sparse annotations or puzzled expressions, it can be effective to give them space to work together to analyze and informally record their analysis through annotations. Not only will this encourage a more thorough examination of the poem, but as the students copy each other's analysis onto their own

papers they will have an artifact of this thinking that may help boost their confidence.

Collaborative Essay

It's not often that students are asked to collaborate on formal writing. In fact, it's so rare that they tend to see writing as such a personal enterprise they aren't sure how to begin. Collaborative essay writing is especially important because it draws students together not just to create analysis of a work but also to present it in a clear and reasonable way. Furthermore, it explores the writing process by forcing students to look at writing methodically. As the groups work to formally and completely respond to a question, problem, or prompt (from anything as simple as "What does this poem mean?" to "Do you think the poet escapes the judgment of his own poem here?" - any question the teacher is genuinely interested in the answer to will likely engage the students as well) the writing both unfolds linearly in stages and recursively as their thinking evolves and they find themselves constantly revising their thesis. This activity takes a great deal of time at first, and students benefit from a flexible deadline, yet they should also be pushed to commit to a thesis if they find themselves in an endless circle of revision. Interestingly, this activity tends to work best with a word limit instead of a word minimum, with 300 words being a reasonable number.

Collaborative Poetry

There are a few ways to approach collaborative poetry. Because students are sharing their experience, the writing will have a little more distance than something written by an individual. This distance, potentially, makes the poetry a little less serious than they might write on their own. This poetry must serve a different end than self-expression, and generally group poems can be useful as exercises in form and content. By the later years of high school students have already practiced writing sonnets, and they may groan when asked to do this again, but sonnets are a great way to show them what the actual function of form is. I don't think it's often taught *why* poets write sonnets; it's just understood that they do. If students are given a topic - something local and high-interest, ideally - and then asked to write a sonnet but to break the form deliberately in one or two places, it draws attention to the expectations that arise with form. They might begin to see that sonnets, pantoums, blank verse, sestinas, haiku, and all the various forms are meant to signal to the reader when they initially see the page, "This is what I am. This is what you can expect of me. Read me this way," but then the surprise comes, and the form is necessary for the surprise. No one notices a masked man throwing a brick during a riot when chaos and commotion are everywhere, but the same man throwing a brick in Buckingham Palace makes all the newspapers. In the same way students should work together to create a poem with rigid form, and then ruin it somewhere important and be prepared to explain why.

It is also useful to look even more closely than the details of form to imitate specific poems. This can be done by asking them to write the same poem but about a different subject, keeping (as closely as possible) the tone, meter, rhyme scheme, stanzas, and figurative language. This is ambitious but not impossible - certainly a good project for students to work on together - and like other aspects of this unit the struggle and the experience of writing is more important than the final product. To make it easier, a poem could be provided with a missing stanza, and students have to create something that would fit. It would be interesting to see what decisions they made, how many groups made the same decisions, and what they learned about the poem from the exercise.

All of these activities have as their goal to sharpen students' vision as they look at a poem to notice more of what is going on in and around it. This sensibility is then turned on the poem of their choice for their culminating assignment, and turned also to their own world as they create poetry that speaks to it. They have the further benefit of cultivating in the class the feeling that they are a community of writers, each student

strengthening the confidence of the voices of their colleagues.

Class Anthology

A meaningful activity that can happen for the duration of the unit is the creation of a class anthology of poetry. Students are reading poetry outside of class, inside of class, each other's poems, their own poems, and collecting these into an enduring record goes a long way toward validating their efforts. Moreover, the anthology has instant credibility in any other English class where it's used: students have immense respect for each other's creative writing. Telling students that this is a serious anthology and that, while not professionally published, other people will see their work, the teacher can solicit students to submit at least one poem written by an author they respect that speaks to something true and important about our world (the focus being politics, with the understanding that personal, private, or confessional poetry can be shown to have a broader social application); at least one poem they have written that they feel conveys something meaningful; and, if they like, a short commentary on each that a reader might find informative or interesting. This activity is particularly useful in creating gravity for their work. When they write their poetry, or find a poem that's important, it can be forgotten once the unit is over if it is simply one of many grade-transactions they have with a teacher. If there is a book (and ideally if they each have a copy) of their poetry that is present always in the class, it can be turned to or returned to when a relevant topic arises. The curation of this anthology can be simply hole-punching their work and putting it in a binder, or students can submit their work electronically to be formatted into something more professional. This depends on the resources of the teacher and class.

Resources

The following poems for use in the unit come from a variety of sources. Some come from colleagues or students, others from classes or seminars, and still others from personal reading and research. While these poems are good and useful for instruction, the priority should be given to poems that speak to any teacher's students' personal and political lived experiences. *The Poetry Foundation* (poetryfoundation.org) and the *Academy of American Poets* (poets.org) are reliable sources for quality poetry and a resource students can use to find poems they connect with. They should be encouraged to bring these poems into the class for study, just as they should read them for their poetry project. For students who want to study rap or song lyrics, *Genius* (genius.com) is an interesting place where lyrics are collected, formatted appropriately (e.g., not center-justified) and commented upon by listeners and sometimes the artists themselves.

Beyond the internet, community libraries are excellent starting points to discover local poets and poetry. In my New Haven community, I discovered a Poetry Institute in one of the many libraries, and while I didn't find published political poets from the student's neighborhoods as I had hoped, I did find books of student poetry – something even more immediate to their experience than I had envisioned, some by students in my own school. The library even hosts monthly poetry nights with an “open mic” to read poetry and time to talk to poets about their work, providing the potential for a field-trip or for me to convince a guest speaker to attend the class.

Outside of libraries, I met in New Haven a woman selling books of creative writing by the city's homeless, called the *Elm City Echo*. This is a magazine I never encountered in my research because I never thought to

look for it. Internet searches of “New Haven poetry” miss the magazine entirely, and even “New Haven homeless poetry” does not produce a result. This is likely not the only homeless magazine to include creative writing, and looking for any and all homeless magazines in the students’ communities can unearth some surprising and powerful resources to give the students to study.

This list, then, is a starting point – a place to find useful texts to study and possibly include in a greater collection tailored to the students’ political situations and interests. They are listed loosely in thematic order.

Tate, Allen. “Ode to the Confederate Dead.” *Poets.org*. May 10, 2017. Accessed August 04, 2017. <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/ode-confederate-dead>.

Tate’s poem is an excellent starting point for this unit. The poem is dense but accessible, clear but sophisticated enough to require a slow, deliberate read. Most importantly the poem introduces ideas about what political poetry is and how it functions in the greater social discourse. Students can study Tate’s meditation on the war dead and see how through his poem he forces people to notice and acknowledge something they’re otherwise disposed to overlook.

Vuong, Ocean. “Toy Boat.” *Poetry Foundation*. April 2016. Accessed August 04, 2017. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/88733/toy-boat>.

The students will understand this poem best if they are shown the official 9-minute video of the Tamir Rice shooting. The poem captures the innocence and isolation of the child through some brilliant but complicated metaphors, and it highlights these against the brutality of the police action.

Betts, Reginald Dwayne. “When I Think of Tamir Rice While Driving.” *Poetry Foundation*. April 2016. Accessed August 04, 2017. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/88739/when-i-think-of-tamir-rice-while-driving>.

Betts’s poem is a natural complement to Vuong’s, looking at the shooting from a father’s perspective. A longer, more direct, and more accessible poem, and a great illustration of how two poets can use different forms to address the same topic.

Lowell, Robert. “The Restoration.” *Robert Lowell: Collected Poems*. Edited by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, June, 2003.

A poem examining the aftermath of the Columbia student protests of 1968. Instead of a protest poem, this poem examines the protest, and it shows the point of view of the establishment through the president as he confronts the protester’s way of life.

Scott-Heron, Gil “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” *Genius*. 1974. Accessed August 04, 2017. <https://genius.com/Gil-scott-heron-introduction-the-revolution-will-not-be-televised-annotated>.

A very powerful work of poetry, this should be listened to as well as read closely. Gil Scott-Heron’s tone is remarkable aggressive, staking a claim for a revolution that will not be mediated through white channels, or mediated at all. This poem is an immediate address to a 70’s audience so there are many references students will need to look up, but it’s well worth the effort. Even a poem arising from its specific political circumstances can be timeless.

Lorde, Audre. “Power.” *Poetry Foundation*. 1978. Accessed August 04, 2017.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53918/power-56d233adafeb3>.

Lorde deals with the destructive nature of power on the communities it oppresses, exploring white police action and its injustices on the African American community. This is a poem that passionately combines the personal emotional responses of the poet to the political forces that gave them life.

Lorde, Audre. "Hanging Fire." *Poetry Foundation*. 1997. Accessed August 04, 2017.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42580/hanging-fire>.

This is both a personal and political poem, and students will have many questions after reading it that will lead to discussions of social issues. Of particular interest is what is happening behind the closed door, and how the students answer this question reveals as much about their own lived experiences as it does about the poem's meaning.

Pai, Shin Yu. "Burning Monk." *Poetry Foundation*. 2010. Accessed August 04, 2017.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/141975/burning-monk>.

Students will benefit from seeing the picture of Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation protesting the Vietnam War in 1963 before reading this poem. Students will want to focus on "How can someone do this to themselves?" but the poem's question is an interesting complement: what does it mean, "his heart refusing to burn"? How was this a protest? Why does this poem commemorate him? How does this poem commemorate him, and in what sense was this a protest? Why does this poem commemorate him? How does this poem commemorate him, and *why* in 2010 (the Obama years, now so fondly looked back on) did Shin Yu Pai bring this to our attention? There is a lot of potential for discussion in this little poem.

Santos Perez, Craig. "Halloween in the Anthropocene, 2015." *Poetry*. 2010. Accessed August 04, 2017.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/141975/burning-monk>.

An environmentalist poem, it explores the impact of man upon the earth. This is a humanist poem too, in a sense, since it deals with issues of dehumanization as people corrupt the world.

Lamar, Kendrick. "Sherane A.K.A. Master Splinters Daughter." *Genius*. October, 2012. Accessed August 04,

2017. <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-sherane-aka-master-splinters-daughter-lyrics>.

The way of life of a teenager growing up in Compton, California. This is a rap, so it should certainly be heard, but students will find that when they slow down and read what they just heard there is a lot more to this rap than they may have thought. Lamar conveys enormous detail about his way of life with great economy and cleverness.

Lamar, Kendrick. "Wesley's Theory." *Genius*. March, 2015. Accessed August 04, 2017.

<https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-wesleys-theory-lyrics>.

The dream for young poets and rappers is to be discovered, published, and made famous. Here, however, Lamar deals with issues of high circulation and what happens when an artist "makes it," paying special attention to why being famous is problematic for the artist. He uses sex as a metaphor here: the vulgar sexual relationship denotes the despicable relationship between Lamar and his label.

Lamar, Kendrick. "King Kunta." *Genius*. March, 2015. Accessed August 04, 2017.

<https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-king-kunta-lyrics>.

In a meditation on the various forms of power and how they interact with artists, Lamar raps about his return home after finding success. Students may need some background in the story of Kunta Kinte from Alex Hayley's *Roots* to understand the central metaphor, but it's an interesting comparison. The song has triumphant lyrics about coming back to Compton as a powerful man, but he refers to Kinte's crippling as his own too. It's also curious that Lamar raps about returning home as "King Kunta" when Kunta Kinte was neither a king nor able to return to his home in Gambia.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. "Riot." *Poetry Foundation*. 1969. Accessed August 04, 2017.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51835/riot>.

The opening quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is enough to begin a strong discussion, and this poem explores white perceptions of African American protests – what white people think the protests ought to look like and how they actually appear. A good poem to expose and discuss prejudices, especially in light of responses to Black Lives Matter protests.

Horton, Randall. "Before the Beauty .Or. How Could U Forget?" *Poetry Foundation*. June, 2017.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/141956/before-the-beauty-or-how-could-u-forget>.

This poem provides fragments of stories and images of life in a neighborhood, showing what one encounters there. Vibrant but dark, it gives clues that students will have to work to put together in order to create a sense of life there as a whole.

Smith, Maggie "Good Bones." *Poetry Foundation*. 2016. Accessed August 04, 2016.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/89897/good-bones>.

Rader, Dean. "When (And Why) A Poem Goes Viral." *Ploughshares*. 2017. Accessed August 04, 2017.
<http://blog.pshares.org/index.php/when-and-why-a-poem-goes-viral/>.

This poem and the accompanying article about it by Dean Rader address the issue of circulation. Maggie Smith wrote a poem that became an immediate internet success. Millions of people read and shared her poem across social media and internet publications, but a careful analysis of the poem makes it difficult to say exactly why. Not to say this isn't a good poem, but instead it's just difficult to discover in the poem something that sets it apart from its contemporaries making it appeal to such a broad audience of readers in so short a period of time. The poem's circulation story illustrates how poetry exists in a moment, in a context, and it has limitations *and* power in this way.

1. "Per Diem Friends." *Elm City Echo*. Issue 12. Spring, 2017.

One of the poems in the New Haven magazine that publishes homeless poetry, this shows students a perspective on the homeless way of life.

Rich, Adrienne. *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 2003.

This incredible book gives insights into how poetry engages political life. Each chapter has its own theme, dealing either with people, events, poems, her own work, or her own thoughts on how life works. It's a patchwork of thoughts from a mature and brilliantly perceptive political mind. I found it best read slowly, with thoughtful attention given to each new perspective.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press. 2014.

Students may respond to Rankine’s form in this book. Rankine writes her observations of what it is like to be an African American in contemporary America in a blend of prose and poetry – it’s prose with a great deal of attention paid to how it looks and sounds. Rankine not only writes of ways of life, but of perceptions of ways of life, and how those perceptions can be dangerous and harmful without people realizing it.

Danticat, Edwige “Poetry in a Time of Protest.” *The New Yorker*. January 31, 2017. Accessed August 04, 2017. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/poetry-in-a-time-of-protest>.

This interesting article insists that numbers alone do not make for an effective protest. She argues for the necessity of poetry to give powerful voice to political opposition.

Implementing Standards

This unit is grounded primarily in the “Reading: Literature” and “Writing” strands of the 11th - 12th grade Common Core State Standards. When students read these poems they will be actively working under Reading standards 11-12.4 and 11-12.5 as they read the poems closely, looking for how words and phrases create meaning and how that connects to the author’s political situation and point of view. Their essays address 11-12.1, 11-12.2, and 11-12.3 when the writing grapples with key ideas and pulls textual evidence and reasoning to support their claims. Naturally the essays cross over to the Writing standards in the same areas, Writing 11-12.1 and 11-12.2 dealing with the written communication of the knowledge students gained in studying the poems. Including the process of writing in class time stresses the Writing standards 11-12.4, 5, and 6. Although the writing of good poetry is not explicitly mentioned in the standards, the production and circulation of the students’ own political poetry falls well under Writing 11-12.4, in letter, if not in spirit. Lastly, the students’ journal writing covers Writing 11-12.10 as they write routinely in manifold ways throughout the unit.

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