



Introduction

by Paul H. Fry, William Lampson Professor Emeritus of English

The curriculum units I received for my Summer 2017 seminar, “Poetry and Public Life,” reflect the possibilities of this topic in wonderfully diverse ways. Our poetry seminars are always an occasion for teachers to learn about poetry as a medium in order to teach it with more confidence, and that purpose is reflected in most of these units. In the seminar we had mainly to do, however, with the kind of poetry that openly addresses public affairs, not the “private” or “personal” kind that comes to mind for most people when they think of poetry. Hence politics, protest, and social identity were topics that loomed large both in our discussions and in the Fellows’ teaching plans. It would be possible to cluster these units according to subject matter, as my summaries below will make clear, but to honor the diversity of approach and interest that I mentioned above I shall simply review them alphabetically.

Rich Cuminale of New Haven wants his high school students to write and in the process to become expert in responding to the writing of others, both published poets and the students’ peers. He wants his student poets to reflect their communities in a critical spirit, and in the process not just to articulate a poetry of public life but to experience the public life of poetry by circulating their work among relatives, friends, and even strangers—not online merely but in direct social interactions.

Matt D’Agostino of Chicago has an ambitious year-long project in which his unit plays an intermittent part. In his high school English classes he teaches an impressive list of quite difficult novels (Woolf, Camus, Achebe, for example) and plays (*Lear*, *Streetcar*, and *Godot* in this latter category), all of which concern our social existence in all its amplitude. In his unit he has chosen a different poem to use as a point of departure for interpreting each of these novels and plays in turn. My favorite is Margaret Atwood’s poem on King Lear in a nursing home.

Liz Isaac teaches fourth and fifth graders in the Diné Nation, and needs at once to improve their skills in English (in effect most of them are ESL students), to introduce them to poetry (about which they have mandated testing), and to acclimatize them to descriptions of their own culture. With these goals, to convey a sense of sound and rhythm she has chosen both nursery rhymes with poems by Shel Silverstein, and also, to make the world of poems seem congenial, poems by Native Americans on familiar topics.

Jenny Kim of San José is a middle school American history teacher whose unit introduces poems in a comparison of the Progressive Era with recent times. She starts with Whitman as bard of industrialized democracy, then moves to the Dunbars and Edwin Markham as voices of protest still marginalized in the Progressive period, pointing out that Roosevelt supported poetry but not Black poetry, just as union leaders excluded Blacks and immigrants to support white workers. These early poets she places alongside Kendrick

Lamar, Dolly Parton and other lyric voices of our era to underline the persistence of their themes.

Mike McClellan is also an American history teacher from San José. His unit focuses on the Revolutionary and Federalist periods, and he wants to show how the Hartford Wits—Joel Barlow, David Humphries, and John Trumbull in particular—influenced sentiment against the British first and then, in opposition to widespread support for state sovereignty, the movement for federation under the Constitution. In the course of making this claim, hoping to recover the Wits from obscurity, he examines the public roles of satire and panegyric.

Kathleen Radebaugh of Philadelphia has devised a unit responding to the concerns of the growing Muslim population in her middle school classroom. She will juxtapose relatively secular modern Middle Eastern poets in translation--showing how they negotiated rigid poetic conventions that were first Persian and then Islamic--with a popular podcast by two young Muslim women living in Los Angeles who balance their beliefs with living realistically in a secular world. All students will learn about poetic conventions while applying the ambivalences of these poems to their own social experiences.

Jo Anne (Stafford) Flory of Tulsa, the Coordinator of our seminar, has amassed a large repertoire of ethnic voices, especially Hispanic and with special emphasis on Juan Felipe Herrera, to impress upon her under-represented high school students the commonality of their concerns. Like Terry Anne Wildman below, Jo is interested in situating her students in their immediate environment, waking with them through Tulsa neighborhoods to inspire writing about their own condition in emulation of the poets they have been studying.

Debra Titus teaches young students in an Afro-centric Pittsburgh school, and wants to introduce them to poetry from traditional hymns to Langston Hughes to the present as a form of both analysis and self-discovery. She hopes first to focus the theme of beauty in relation to Black identity, next to show how her chosen poets negotiate the issue of acceptance, self-acceptance as well as acceptance by others, all in relation to the problem of race. In keeping with her school's curricular emphasis, she wants students to take pride in their origins.

Tara Waugh teaches high school in Tulsa. In response to current political rhetoric, she has organized a unit to bring attitudes to America into dialogue, using the medium of poetry. Drawing on Tulsa's Woodie Guthrie and Bob Dylan archives, she will emphasize a tradition that begins with Whitman and passes through Langston Hughes and on to Guthrie and Dylan, with attention paid too to Gil Scott Heron and the Malvina Reynolds of "Little Boxes" fame, mindful that Tom Lehrer called that song the most sanctimonious ever written, and eager here and elsewhere to balance attitudes of celebration and critique.

Terry Anne Wildman teaches fourth and fifth graders in Philadelphia, and hopes to instill a sense of being Philadelphian through poetry. She will begin with Jack Prelutsky's use of place names in his book of children's poems, *Ride a Purple Pelican*, then turn to Rudyard Kipling's very interesting poem called "Philadelphia," followed by Sandburg's "Chicago" and other poems. In walking her children through neighborhoods and having them write about what they see, she hopes to show the difference between stereotype and authentic observation.

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