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Empowering Student Voice through Poetry and Multimedia

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Introduction

"[...] I want poems that are portable, poems that dare to try to carry the world of worldmaking in scant space, poems that conjure aesthetics to materialize cosmologically."

-Kevin Quashie, Chapter 3 of *BlackAliveness*

If you ask a middle-school student what poetry is all about, they are likely to mention that poetry expresses strong feelings. They may share their frustration that the writers disguise their message in figurative language and rhyme instead of just coming out and saying what they mean. This may be due in part to the way poetry is taught. My students are exposed to different types of poetry at each grade with increasing levels of complexity. In sixth grade we introduce haiku, limericks, and concrete and blackout poems; in seventh grade they learn about narrative, lyric, free verse, and imagist poems; and in eighth grade we expose them to odes, elegies, villanelles, and sonnets. In general, there is a focus on analysis of text structure and figurative language, which are key aspects of understanding poetry. However, in order for students to see poetry as relevant to their lives, they need to see how it can be used beyond the classroom.

While poetry can be a powerful tool for self-expression and can certainly be opaque in its language, it can also be a catalyst for change, a protest, or an affirmation of humanity. In this unit, students investigate several types of video poems that combine text, images, and sound to explore social issues. These poems are portable in that they can be accessed by anyone with a cell phone and an internet connection, and they engage in Quashie's desired project of "worldmaking" by imagining the interior lives of those who are different from us or by giving voice to those who have been historically excluded from positions of authority. At the end of the unit, students use poetry to call attention to the pressing issues in our world. In order to do this successfully, they need to imagine a better world and think carefully about how best to use their voices to bring about change.

Background and Rationale

School and Classroom Environment

I teach at P.S. duPont Middle School, a public school serving students in grades 6-8 in Wilmington, Delaware's Brandywine School District. Based on data from September of 2023, there are a total of 749 students in the school. The majority of the students identify as Black (50.33%), with 27.37% identifying as White, 9.48% identifying as Hispanic/Latino, 7.61% identifying as Asian, and 4.94% identifying as multiracial. We are a Title I school, and 30.17% of our students are identified as low income. Our school is unique compared to the other two middle schools in the district in that it houses the district's middle school gifted program, and about 30% of the student population receives gifted services. 21.76% of students receive special education services, and there is some overlap between the two groups[1] .

The students I teach are all part of P.S. duPont's gifted services. I teach both seventh and eighth grade classes, but this unit is designed with eighth grade students in mind. I currently teach fifty-six eighth grade students. Their racial demographics are representative of the district as a whole, but do not mirror the building's demographics. Of my eighth-grade students, 25% identify as Black, 50% identify as White, 23% identify as Asian, and 2% identify as Native American. It is no secret that Black students, students with disabilities, and students whose first language is not English are traditionally underrepresented and underserved in gifted education[2] . At P.S. duPont, we attempt to make our identification procedures more inclusive by incorporating parent and self referrals along with teacher referrals, and we make identification decisions based on a host of factors including, but not limited to, standardized test scores. As a district, we define giftedness based on Renzulli's model of above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity[3] . All of those factors are considered in identifying a student for gifted services. We take the same holistic approach toward students who are twice-exceptional. Several of our students display academic gifts as well as learning differences and/or neurodivergence; these students are served in our program with accommodations.

A key component of my instruction and curriculum writing is the Parallel Curriculum Model (PCM), which is used by all teachers of gifted students in the district. The PCM guides teachers to consider the different ways in which students engage with the material as they develop expertise. The four parallels are core (the essential facts and knowledge of a discipline), connections (the relationships among knowledge within the discipline and across disciplines), practice (the ability to apply the skills of the discipline), and identity (seeing oneself as a practitioner of the discipline and reflecting on one's role in that capacity)[4] . Any instructional unit I create needs to address all four pillars in some way.

Why Videopoetry?

I teach poetry at the beginning of my narrative writing unit. I find it to be a useful vehicle for reviewing literary concepts like figurative language, mood, tone, style, and theme before exploring these topics in longer texts. Poems are typically short texts that pack a punch–we can spend an entire class period discussing two or three poems without running out of things to say. Students make different connections to or observations about the poem, which leads to divergent interpretations and opens new avenues of conversation. Armstrong, Lutze, and Woodwoth-Ney also point out that videopoetry can build empathy[5] . This is true of traditional poems as well. As we read poetry, we are encouraged to get inside the author's head and consider questions like, *What are they trying to say?* and, *Why did they make that choice?* In a world where students often feel lonely and

disconnected, poetry can reaffirm our connections to one another across space, time, and other differences.

In particular, video poetry lends itself to my 8th-grade curriculum for several reasons. As I have been reading/watching videopoetry, I notice that many poets and filmmakers use this medium to discuss social issues. This dovetails with a year-long service learning project my 8th graders engage in called Power of the Individual (POI). At the beginning of the year, students identify causes they feel passionately about. Throughout the year, they develop research, writing, and speaking skills while delving into their chosen causes. At the end of the year, they pursue an independent project in the area of community service, visual art, music, film, creative writing, or technology to make a difference in their cause. Typically this project is not strongly tied into my narrative writing or poetry units. However, with videopoetry my students can explore the ways in which video poets use text, sound, and images to convey meaning and to make a point about the world or a particular issue. Poetry is more than a tool for self-expression; it can inform movements and inspire positive change. In addition to giving students a new path to explore social issues, videopoetry also capitalizes on students' strengths and interests. Many of my students are fluent in digital media, interacting with online videos both as consumers and creators. Further, Armstrong, Lutze, and Woodworth-Ney point out that having students create video poetry incorporates skills from multiple disciplines and increases motivation by giving the students a chance to experience aesthetic satisfaction[6] . By incorporating videopoetry into my curriculum, I hope to increase students' engagement with poetry and motivation to read and discuss it. My students are already living on YouTube, TikTok, and SnapChat; why not teach them to harness the power of these and similar platforms?

Content Objectives

Types and Techniques of Videopoems

In *Videopoetry: A Manifesto*, Tom Konyves defines videopoetry as:

> a genre of poetry displayed on a screen, distinguished by its time-based, poetic juxtaposition of images with text and sound [...] the principal function of a videopoem is to demonstrate the process of thought and the simultaneity of experience, expressed in words – visible and/or audible – whose meaning is blended with, but not illustrated by, the images and the soundtrack[7] .

It is important to note that the video does not simply illustrate the poem. Instead, the images and sounds may complicate or even contradict the poem's text to make new meanings. Konyves identifies five categories of videopoems: kinetic text, which presents animated text over a neutral background; sound text, in which text is read by a human with images juxtaposed on the screen; visual text, in which the text is displayed on the screen along with images; performance, which features the poet or an actor on screen speaking to the camera; and cin(e)poetry, in which the text of the poem is animated or superimposed over computer-modified graphics.[8] Videopoems tend to be fairly short and easily accessible on any internet-connected device, conforming to Quashie's preference for a poem that is "portable". By the end of the unit, students should be able to think critically about the strengths and drawbacks of each type in order to select one (or combine multiple) for their final project.

In addition to the typical poetic elements like sound devices and figurative language, video poets also employ

tools unique to their craft. Konyves points out that repetition of images in a videopoem creates a rhythm similar to the way repeating sounds in a text poem creates rhythm[9] . Transitions like cross-dissolve and fade add structure, while split-screen, acceleration, or slow motion affect the pacing and the viewer's perception of time, similar to the use of punctuation in a text poem[10] . Acceleration and slow motion can also set the mood, with a quick succession of images creating a frantic feeling and slow motion instilling a dream-like quality. A second important objective for this unit is for students to recognize some common elements in videopoems and use the academic terminology associated with the genre to analyze videopoems in discussion and writing. After examining five examples of videopoems, students work collaboratively to create their own videopoems using the types and techniques discussed above.

Performance: "Wade in the Water"

Walidah Imarisha's "Wade in the Water"[11] is a great example of performance poetry. I want students to notice the way Imarisha's delivery through her breath and body language embody the message of the poem. The video opens with Imarisha on stage, in front of a microphone, in darkness with yellow, blue, and green lights flashing to suggest the dire, watery setting of post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. Imarisha begins the poem with a gasp, imitating the sounds of someone struggling to avoid drowning. Throughout the poem, she uses these gasps as punctuation or to differentiate among several poetic personas to whom she gives voice. Imarisha uses gasps to emphasize particular words, like when she describes what FEMA and the rest of the federal government "gave" to New Orleans in response to the hurricane and the humanitarian disaster that followed: "… blood [*gasp*] and blood [*gasp*] and blood [*gasp*] and bullets." Here, the gasps function similarly to commas or dashes and contribute to a desperate tone. Earlier in the poem, she uses gasps to shift from the words of a father being held at gunpoint by law enforcement, begging to be allowed to search for the body of his son, to a brief anecdote about the 1960s dragging of the Mississippi River, which resulted in the discovery and abandonment of the remains of dozens of Black bodies. In this instance, the gasp functions more like a period or a stanza break, separating one section of the poem from the next.

In addition to her breathwork, Imarisha also uses hand gestures to develop the theme of injustice in the poem. When describing the father mentioned above, Imarisha raises her hands, embodying his surrender to police. This gesture makes it clear that he is not a threat, and that the implied force of the police officers confronting him is unwarranted. When describing FEMA's slow response to the disaster, Imarisha indicates the number of weeks that passed without aid using her fingers and then a cutting gesture at her neck after the fourth week. This gesture adds to the sense of the speakers being cut off from the rest of the country, cut off from help, and cut off from life itself. The text of the poem employs some traditional poetic elements that teachers should emphasize with students, such as alliteration in "bloated bodies, / black and brown people", a metaphor in "dreads coiled and purring on his head", and oxymoron and imagery in "An oldyoung woman / stands in her decomposing house, / black mold climbing up the walls, / coating baby pictures / and high school diplomas." In spite of some of the horrific images layered in the text, Imarisha ends on a hopeful note, cradling an invisible baby in her arms as she describes a mother's refusal to surrender to despair: "She means this spark of hope / soggy / sputtering / but burning out / enuf space / to catch a breath." Imarisha's words and body language convey the preciousness of hope and new life amidst the chaos and devastation.

In an excellent analysis of the poem, Moran calls the speakers in Imarisha's work examples of the "transcultural counterwitness," which he defines as a figure outside the structure of mainstream journalism whose perspective allows for a critique or counternarrative[12] . Moran provides context on the origins of the poem, describing how Imarisha's experiences as a volunteer in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina contrasted with the contemporary news coverage, which portrayed Black New Orleans residents as violent and

uneducated criminals[13] . This context is essential to understanding the underlying messages and ideas of Imarisha's poem. By embodying and giving voice to their suffering, Imarisha humanizes her speakers in order to fight back against the racist stereotypes presented in the media. As students explore Imarisha's use of multiple perspectives in the poem, it will be important for them to reflect on how poetry can empower us to counteract false and harmful narratives and bring the truth to light.

Cin(e)poetry: "We Real Cool"

This video from the Poetry Foundation takes the classic poem by Gwendolyn Brooks and depicts the events of the poem along with Brooks's commentary on its inspiration.[14] Using paper cutouts and pen and ink illustrations, the filmmakers represent Brooks, her audience, and the characters mentioned in the poem. The video can be divided into three main sections with a little coda at the end. As students examine the poem, I want them to notice the way sound effects, music, and color set the mood and show transitions in time and place. The first section begins with peaceful images of a ticking clock, a cat dozing on a bookshelf, and the clicking of Brooks's typewriter keys. Brooks then rides the Bronzeville bus to a poetry reading at a library. Slow jazz music eases the viewer into the setting, and audio of Brooks's brief introduction to the poem plays, followed by the audience's applause. Brooks then launches into the story of the poem's genesis. The transition into the second section of the video is signaled by a shift from color to black and white, and the text, "Thirty years earlier" appears on the screen. A younger Brooks passes a pool hall and observes seven young boys loafing there during school hours. Sound effects like the click of pool balls and the clink of glasses set the scene. As Brooks questions, "How do they feel about themselves?," the music accelerates, and she reads the poem. In an example of cin(e)poetry, the poem's text flashes on the screen while Brooks narrates.

The final section of the video turns the poem into a song. The music's tempo increases further, and a younger female voice sings the poem as lyrics. The boys become dancing silhouettes. This section takes the viewer out of Brooks's specific experience and moves toward a more collective experience. These boys can be any boys; what is important is their youth and their energy. By using a younger voice to sing the lyrics, the speaker of the poem becomes more aligned with the youths themselves rather than an older observer. This is reinforced by Brooks's repetition of the word "we" throughout the poem. At the end of the video, when the music has stopped, the boys leave the pool hall. As they pass Brooks, one boy turns around and has a brief but significant moment of eye contact with her. He continues on his way, and she smiles.

In *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*, Melham sees the poem as a maternal lament on the boys' wasted young lives.[15] While many readers see this poem as a judgemental adult criticizing the choices of ne'er-do-well teens, the video and Brooks's introduction complicate that reading. Instead, the video presents the poem as a celebration of the boys' precariously brief lives. The upbeat music, dancing animations, and the shared connection between Brooks and the boy at the end of the video all gesture toward the boys' *carpe diem* attitude without criticizing it. Melham correctly points out, and teachers should emphasize with their students, Brooks's skillful use of repetition and enjambment to create a syncopated rhythm for the poem.[16] It is also important to note how the selection of music reinforces the poem's rhythm. Another prominent feature in the poem is alliteration, such as the sibilant sounds of "sing sin" and "strike straight". With this videopoem, it is important to discuss with students the contrast between the text and the video as well as the musical quality of the language. For this particular poem, I would have students close read the text first and then show the video. It is likely that their first impression of Brooks's attitude toward the boys would be similar to Melham's, and upon viewing the video they may note the contrast between the text on the page and the choices made by the filmmakers.

Sound Text: “Multitudes”

Similarly to the Brooks video, the Poetry Foundation’s sound text rendering of Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself* uses narration and animation to complicate a well-known poem[17] . The video takes lines from different parts of the poem and re-mixes them, providing a model for students of how to select and curate lines from an existing poem to create their own message. In this videopoem, the main character depicted on the screen is a paper puppet rendition of Whitman himself. However, instead of using a single reader, this video uses three different narrators to illustrate Whitman’s sentiment “I contain multitudes”. The choice of narrators and the order in which their narrations are arranged are key features to point out to students when viewing the video. Iranian-American poet Kaveh Akbar narrates the first section of the video, reading excerpts that take us from Whitman’s musing on a blade of grass to his reflections on death. The text of the poem in this section uses playful alliteration and assonance in the lines, “I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.” The animations parallel the text here, with images of the natural world representing life (grass, a ladybug), transitioning to images of death and rebirth (dandelion spores drifting on the wind) and finally to images more obviously connected to death (animal skeleton). As Akbar reads the lines, “A child said, *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands; / How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he,” the image of an animal skeleton appears on the screen, implying that the “it” in the second line could be death itself rather than grass. Whitman, being alive, does now know what death is any more than the child does.

In the next section of the video, narrated by African American poet Duriel E. Harris, the focus shifts from death to life. Whitman leaves behind the woodland setting of the first part of the video and floats through space. All three narrators recite the line “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” in unison, gesturing to a universality in human experience. On the screen, Whitman is replaced by other people: old, young, male, female, Black, Asian. There is an interesting tension here. While the images on the screen represent difference, the text of the poem emphasizes unity. The choice to have writers of color, including a woman, narrating Whitman’s poem is an intriguing one, given Whitman’s historical moment. Whitman wrote and revised *Song of Myself* before and after the Civil War, and the poem reflects his desire for national unity. However, Price points out that despite Whitman’s abolitionist beliefs, he primarily viewed the war as being about the preservation of the union and not the ending of slavery.[18] As a white man in the mid-19th century, there was only so much Whitman could do to imagine the interior lives of Black people or women, though he makes an effort to portray the broad spectrum of American society in the poem. In this videopoem, the selection of the readers and the animations bring the poem closer to the universality that Whitman was aiming for. Where Whitman’s text embraces diversity, it is all expressed through a white lens. The video emphasizes the point that true diversity means not whitewashing society–for the filmmakers, the goal is a plurality that recognizes everyone’s identities and experiences rather than an undifferentiated universality.

As the videopoem continues, Whitman returns to earth, recognizing in fallen leaves “letters from God dropped in the street.” Not only are we back on earth, through this image we are back in the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The final narrator, African American poet Yusef Komunyakaa, is the oldest of the three poets. The order of the narrators creates structure in the videopoem, hinting at a progression of human life from youth to middle age to old age. Komunyakaa reads at a halting pace, with longer pauses between words suggesting a thoughtful elder reflecting back on his life. This impression is reinforced by the on-screen images of hands, with skin replaced by veins, then muscles, and then bones. As the text reflects on mortality, the images show the human body in gradual decay. The videopoem ends with another gesture toward universality, as death is something all humans will eventually experience. We hear all three narrators again on the line, “I am large, I contain multitudes,” and each narrator takes another turn as the poem concludes. The effect is oddly

comforting. In admitting to contradicting himself, Whitman gives readers permission to embrace the contradictory parts of their own identities and the idea that two opposing things can be true at the same time. The videopoem shows that there is life in death and death in life; instead of a binary opposition, the two are deeply intertwined.

Visual Text: “Choices”

In sharp contrast to the vibrant animations and music in the Brooks and Whitman videopoems, I am including the Poetry Foundation’s visual text interpretation of Tess Gallagher’s “Choices” in the unit[19] . This quiet videopoem, created by Carolyn Corbett at USC Film School, is a master class in how pacing, sound, and visual effects can combine to set the mood and theme. It begins with the gentle patter of raindrops. The text of the first line does not appear on the screen until over 2 minutes into the video, preceded by the sounds of the rain and bird calls and sepia-toned images of a snowy forest landscape. The color scheme gives the video a timeless quality, and the use of photographic images rather than animated ones lends a sense of realism and a serious tone. The bleating of sheep and the crowing of a rooster suggest a remote rural location, but humans are still present in the images. A close-up of a young girl’s face, her small hands wrapped around the bark of a tree, implies innocence and connection between humans and the natural world. This contrasts with the sense of weighty responsibility imposed on the only adult featured in the video, who is filmed in slow-motion plodding through the snow. This is the person who will have to make the titular “choices” and live with the consequences. The text of the poem appears on the screen two lines at a time, interspersed with more images of wintry mountains and trees.

When Gallagher’s speaker notices a bird’s nest in the sapling they are about to cut down, the filmmaker uses a closeup of a bird’s nest “clutched” in the boughs of a tree. Teachers should focus on this word choice with students, pointing out how this verb conveys the idea of something precious that should be protected at all costs. Another bird defending its nest is shown along with the lines, “Suddenly, in every tree / an unseen nest,” as the speaker decides not to cut down any of the trees at all in order to protect the baby birds potentially nestled there. Destroying a nest is so anathema to the speaker that she decides it is not worthwhile to “clear a view to snow / on the mountain.” Here, the speaker is prioritizing nature over her own desire for a good view. The video ends with an abrupt shift to spring, showing two children clutching flowers and gazing upward as petals or snowflakes fall. By including the images of children, the filmmaker elaborates on the message of the poem. While the text itself can be read as advocating for the protection of nature for its own sake, the video clarifies some reasons why nature deserves to be defended: because we should view the baby birds as precious, the same way we would view our own children, or because we should preserve the natural world so future generations can enjoy it. This stark videopoem shows students that theatrical narration and animation are not necessary to make an impact on the audience, and that even a poem that seems to be personal, confessional, or autobiographical can also be interpreted in multiple ways by different readers. Unlike “We Real Cool”, I would have students watch the video and generate observations and questions about it before close reading the text of the poem in order to preserve the video’s suspenseful effect.

Sound/Kinetic Text: “Situation 7”

Poet Claudia Rankine describes *Situations*, created in collaboration with filmmaker John Lucas, as “a multi-genre response to contemporary life in the twenty-first century.”[20] Point of view is a key feature of this videopoem to touch on in instruction. Unlike the other texts in this unit, “Situation 7” thrusts viewers into the narrative through the use of the second person “you” throughout the poem. The text describes a scenario in which “you” see a man on the train sitting alone. The other passengers on the train subtly avoid proximity to

the man, but “you” choose to sit next to him. As Rankine puts it in a metaphor, “The space next to the man is a pause in a conversation you are suddenly rushing to fill.” This implies an urgency on “your” part to show solidarity with the man, even as “you” reflect on the fact that other people’s avoidance is probably a daily occurrence for him. “Where he goes,” Rankine intones, “the space follows him.” This videopoem combines elements of sound text and kinetic text. Throughout most of the video, Rankine narrates in a monotone, employing none of the dramatic breathwork or delivery of Imarisha or the syncopated rhythm of Brooks. This conveys the quotidian nature of the scenario: this is the kind of microaggression that happens every day, in all different kinds of settings; it illustrates what Fred Moten, quoting Saidyia Hartman, calls “the diffusion of terror” in mundane and quotidian acts.[21] A sad, tender piano score complements Rankine’s reflective tone in the poem, and the images of flickering lights reflected in glass and the repeated images of walls, bushes, and fences create a rhythm reminiscent of the gentle motion of a train. In a brief example of visual text, the words “What does suspicion do?” appear on a black background about a minute and a half into the film, and a little over three minutes in, Rankine voices this as one of the central questions with which the poem grapples: “What does suspicion mean? What does suspicion do?”

It is significant to point out that the man who is the object of suspicion on the train is represented in the video as Black, even though the man’s race is never explicitly stated in the text. Rankine’s words and Lucas’s images work together to show the impact of suspicion not only on the Black man who is its object, but also on the bystanders including “you.” The poem calls out one woman on the train who would rather “stand all the way to Union Station” than sit next to this Black man. Even though we don’t know the exact time or distance, Rankine’s use of “all the way” implies that they are substantial. This woman’s suspicion drives her to act illogically, spurning a perfectly good seat because the presence of a Black man makes her feel threatened. The man, in Lucas’s rendering, takes a moment to sniff his shirt as though wondering, *What is her problem with me? Do I smell?* The other passengers’ suspicion causes him to doubt himself, even though Rankine suspects he would never admit it. The “you” character in the poem, in contrast, rejects the suspicion of the other passengers. “You” take this opportunity to empathize with the man, imagining what it is like to go through life constantly being mistrusted, and ultimately “you” are willing to declare, if asked, that “you” and the man are “traveling as a family.” Even though this man is a stranger, “you” are willing to claim him as kin. The other passengers’ suspicion has moved “you” to seek a deeper connection with a fellow human instead of keeping him at arm’s length. The poem and video would likely spark rich classroom discussions about pacing, imagery, and rhythm as well as thematic conversations about the types of people whom we treat with suspicion in our society. In this case, I recommend beginning with a close reading of the poem and then showing the video to help students understand how the images in the video clarify the poem’s message about the corrosive power of racial bias.

Teaching Strategies

Close Reading

Because poems are dense, close reading will be an important teaching strategy to use in this unit. According to Oczkus and Rasinski, close reading involves multiple rereadings to identify key moments in the text, ask and answer questions about the text, and consider the author’s choices and purpose[22] . When I teach poetry, I typically have students read the poem three times, giving each reading a different focus. I have the students read the poems on paper, with guiding questions for their annotations printed in the margins around the

poem. For the first read, I ask students to notice the structure. I might ask students to discuss whether the poem rhymes and to consider the line and stanza lengths. For the second read, we focus on the author's word choices. Are figurative language or literary devices used? What is the tone, and what words create that tone? For the final read, students summarize the poem and clarify its theme or message. In between each reading, I give students time to talk with a partner or small group and note their observations. We then share our conclusions as a class and try to come to consensus about what the poet is saying and doing in the poem.

Notice and Wonder

While close reading is familiar to my students because I introduce it early in the year, I plan to implement a different strategy for examining the videopoems. The "notice and wonder" strategy encourages students to make observations and ask questions about a text, in this case a visual one. It is low-stakes for students and does not require a lot of background knowledge, which makes it a perfect vehicle to begin discussions on the film aspects of the videopoems. Most students are not familiar with film terminology, even though they may recognize some commonly used effects. I will provide them with a list of common terms and definitions to aid their discussions and writing about the videos. While watching a videopoem, students will record what they notice (for example, *The video in "Situation 7" uses a lot of repeating images*) and what they wonder about it (for example, *Why are those particular images repeated?*). I would give students time to share their observations and questions with small groups, and then ask groups to share out with the class. After listening to each group's observations, we should be able to answer some of the students' questions. This will allow the students to build a collective understanding of the videopoems and the filmmakers' choices as they prepare to write an analysis of one of the videopoems and eventually create their own videopoems.

Accordion Writing

I teach students a specific way of structuring their paragraphs for academic writing called accordion format. In this format, students need to begin the paragraph with a topic sentence that includes starter words, like *many* or *several*. This is followed by a reason, detail, or fact (RDF) supporting their response to the writing prompt. After the RDF, students need to introduce a piece of evidence paraphrased from text, followed by a sentence or two explaining how the evidence they chose supports their answer. Students need to include two to three RDF sentences in the paragraph, and each RDF sentence needs to begin with a transition phrase (a popular sequence of RDF transition words is *first … next … last*, although I push students to branch out from this over the course of the year). I allow students some freedom with the structure within the paragraph; they may write three RDFs, each supported by one piece of evidence and explanation, or two RDFs, each supported by two pieces of evidence with explanation. The paragraph ends with a concluding sentence, where students use a concluding word or phrase (*all in all, clearly,* etc.). The conclusion does not simply restate the topic sentence, but instead reflects on the impact of the topic on the characters, readers, or text itself.

I teach students to outline their paragraphs before writing and to highlight each type of sentence with a different color after writing to check and make sure they have all of the information they need in the right order. Students will use this format to write their own paragraphs analyzing one of the videopoems from the unit.

Collaborative Groups

In their demonstration of the use of videopoetry to engage students in multiple academic disciplines, Armstrong, Lutze, and Woodworth-Ney write that they imagine their project to be completed by groups of three to four students[23] . For their demonstration, each author used their own expertise to tackle a particular

aspect of the project: Woodworth-Ney researched the life of a historical figure, Armstrong composed a poem inspired by Woodworth-Ney's research, and Lutze filmed and edited the video in collaboration with the other two authors[24] . I plan to use a similar approach with this project for a few reasons. First, because of the complexity of the task, students need support and motivation from their peers. They can help and encourage one another, developing socio-emotional skills alongside academic skills. Working with a group can be highly engaging for middle school students, particularly if they share similar interests. Additionally, my students have diverse strengths and weaknesses, and a collaborative structure offers students the chance to play to their strengths within the group. A student who is highly comfortable with technology and has lower confidence in their poetry-writing ability might choose to focus on the technical aspects of editing the film, for instance. With students selecting their preferred roles within the group, I expect to see higher quality final products than I would if I were forcing each student to take on all three roles. Finally, collaborative learning helps teachers to use their scarce resources efficiently. I am referring here both to the technology resources like Chromebooks as well as the intangible resource of teacher time and attention. I can support and guide five or six small groups much more quickly and efficiently than I can individuals.

When students select their topics for the POI project, they tend to fall into several common categories. Environmental issues such as recycling, reducing pollution, and green energy are popular. Many students are also inspired to tackle social issues like racism, sexism, and anti-LGBTQ+ issues. For this project, I group students with common interests together, and then allow them to select their roles within the group. One student will be in charge of either composing or selecting and editing a poem, the second will be in charge of the visuals, and the third will be in charge of the audio. Unlike Armstrong, Lutze, and Woodworth-Ney's project, I would require all students to participate in the research because ultimately they are all approaching their causes from slightly different angles and will be pursuing different independent projects later in the year. However, I would attempt to replicate their collaboration on the video itself.

Classroom Activities

I anticipate this unit taking approximately 10 days to complete. The first three days focus on close reading and analyzing videopoems. Day 4 is dedicated to writing and editing a paragraph analyzing one of the videopoems, and days 5-9 are set aside for students to create their own videopoems.

Hook: "Blue Flash Flash"

Students are constantly creating, consuming, and sharing video content on their phones. I harness their thirst for novelty by showing a brief and impactful videopoem called "Blue Flash Flash."[25] The poem is written by Julia Bird and describes the moment a young child learns the word "octopus." At just 40 seconds long, with vivid images flashing rapidly on the screen and narrator Robert Glennie reading the poem in a single breath, this videopoem makes a good launching point for conversations about how poetry, images, and sound effects can combine in new and intriguing ways.

After showing the video, I would ask for students' reactions. This would be a good place to introduce the notice and wonder strategy with guiding questions like, *What do you notice about the narration? What do you notice about the images? What are you wondering after watching this video?* It may be helpful to model some observations and questions in a think-aloud if students are struggling to come up with their own.

Introduce Videopoetry Terms

In order for students to have a common vocabulary to discuss and write about videopoems, it is necessary to introduce some new vocabulary words. It is not essential that students memorize the terms and definitions; I plan to give them to students on a handout or in a Slides presentation that they can refer back to later. Brooklyn College's Film Department provides a glossary of film terms.[26] The list is extensive, but the terms that would be most useful for students are those dealing with transitions (wipe, fade, dissolve), pacing (slow motion, fast motion), and distance (long shot, medium, close up). I would provide students with these terms and definitions, along with a more student-friendly version of Konyves's definition of videopoetry and the five types, and remind students to refer back to their notes on these topics throughout the unit as we complete the other classroom activities.

In terms of the Parallel Curriculum Model (PCM), this activity would be considered part of the Core Curriculum. Students are learning content that is central to the art of videopoetry, but are not yet learning how to apply it to new contexts.

Close Reading of Texts and Notice and Wonder with Videopoems

Once students have a shared vocabulary, we can dig into the videopoems themselves. As discussed above in the Teaching Strategies section, students will use close reading to examine the written texts of the poems and notice and wonder to explore the videos. I begin by having students closely read "We Real Cool". This is the shortest poem in the unit and provides an easy entry point. Students follow the close reading process described above, with guiding questions centered on the use of rhyming stanzas, rhythm and alliteration as well as the poem's speakers and theme. Then, students watch the Poetry Foundation's video. Class discussions based on the notice and wonder strategy should focus on the use of sound effects to develop the setting and music and color to show transitions in time and place.

Next, I show the video for "Multitudes." Both "We Real Cool" and "Multitudes" are adaptations of famous poems, but there is a nice contrast between Brooks's narration and the multiple narrators in "Multitudes." The notice and wonder conversation for this videopoem should be directed towards the use of multiple narrators, imagery, alliteration and assonance. Because *Song of Myself* is a long poem, it would take too much time to do a close reading of the entire poem. However, I would show students the entire poem and talk about it a little bit so they can see how the filmmakers selected certain lines to fit their project. I estimate that the hook, vocabulary, and first two poems would take about one class period.

In the next class period, I begin with "Choices". I show the video first, guiding students to use the notice and wonder strategy. The conversation should focus on pacing, imagery, and sound effects. Then students closely read and analyze the poem in pairs or small groups. After watching the video and closely reading the poem, I lead a discussion about how the poem's message differs slightly from the video's. We then move on to "Wade in the Water." Before watching the video, students read a brief excerpt from the Moran article for context since they would not remember the events and media coverage surrounding Hurricane Katrina. I may even show a news clip or political cartoon from the time. Next, students are ready to watch the video and see Imarisha's powerful performance. The notice and wonder discussion should center around Imarisha's use of breath and body language as well as her depiction of multiple points of view. Students continue their analysis with a close reading of the poem highlighting alliteration, metaphor, and oxymoron as well as the poem's theme of the injustice of the government's inadequate response to the disaster compounded by the media's disrespectful portrayal of its victims. Depending on the background knowledge of the students, some may

recognize the allusion in Imarisha's title to the spiritual "Wade in the Water." If students do not make the connection, I would ask them to read the Song of America essay about the song, which outlines its history through slavery, along the Underground Railroad, and into freedom[27] . I would guide students to think about Imarisha's choice to reference this spiritual in the title of her performance poem. Both "Choices" and "Wade in the Water" are thematically heavy, and I anticipate the discussion taking up an entire class period.

For the third day of videopoems, I introduce students to "Situation 7." Here, as with "We Real Cool", I begin with the poem first and follow with the video. As students closely read the poem, guiding questions will focus on the use of the second person point of view and the theme of the corrosive power of suspicion. After reading and discussing the poem, students will watch the video. The notice and wonder discussion should highlight the imagery and visual rhythm created by the repeating images. A thought-provoking discussion might arise from asking students whether their assumptions about the man's identity based on the poem were confirmed by the video or not. The remainder of this class period can be used to introduce the writing task and give students some time to brainstorm.

Throughout this process, students are engaging with the Curriculum of Connections and the Curriculum of Practice from the PCM. Students are encouraged to compare and contrast the texts to their videos, the different videopoems to one another, and the videopoems to the events or situations that inspired them. They are practicing applying the terms they have learned to new contexts and learning how to think in a scholarly, analytical way about videopoems. The next classroom activity builds on this practice by having students communicate their analysis in writing.

Written Analysis of a Videopoem

As a formative assessment, students choose one videopoem from the unit and explain how the poet/filmmaker uses literary devices and film techniques to convey their message. It is important to emphasize with students that they need to respond in accordion format using evidence both from the text of the poem and from the video. I stipulate that the theme needs to be mentioned in the topic and concluding sentences, that one RDF needs to be about literary devices, and one RDF needs to be about film techniques. Students can choose to use multiple pieces of evidence to support each of these RDFs, or add a third RDF about a second literary device or film technique. As a first step, students need to decide which videopoem to write about. They then need to review the poem itself as well as their close reading guides and notes on film terms. Next, students create an outline for their paragraphs. Each point on the outline should be no more than a few words; the purpose is to come up with a structure for their ideas, not to write a full draft of the paragraph. Once students have their structure in place, they can begin drafting the paragraph. As students draft, it is important to remind them to use transition words to show the relationships among ideas and to attribute their text evidence. If students are paraphrasing or quoting words from the poem, they should provide the line number. If they are referencing the video, they should provide an approximate timestamp. Once students have completed their paragraphs, the final step is to go back and highlight. I require the topic and conclusion sentences to be highlighted in green, RDF sentences in yellow, evidence in pink, and explanation in blue. This step helps to ensure that students have incorporated enough reasoning, evidence, and explanation into their paragraphs and that all of the elements are arranged in the correct order. If time permits, students can peer-edit one another's paragraphs, offering positive feedback and suggestions for improvement.

I give students class time to complete the assignment, and also provide a grading rubric in advance so students can see how they will be scored.

Collaborative Videopoem Creation

For the culminating activity for this unit, I assign students into groups of two to three based on their POI project topics. Students who have related topics are grouped together. As a group, they decide on a theme or message relating to their topic that they want their videopoem to express. (For example, *We should invest more in renewable energy to combat climate change,* or, *Schools should do more to prevent bullying and harassment*.) This takes us into the realm of both the Curriculum of Practice, as students become videopoets themselves, and the Curriculum of Identity, as they are self-evaluating and taking on roles within the group. There are three roles within the group. The poet must either write an original poem or select and arrange lines from an existing poem. The sound designer is responsible for any sound effects or music choices in the video. They are also in charge of selecting narrator(s) for the video if necessary. The visual artist is responsible for the visual aspects of the videopoem. They may choose to animate the text, use stock footage and images, or create their own animations, drawings, photos, or video. Because class sizes vary, there may need to be two students in a group instead of three. In this case, I would combine the sound designer and visual artist roles into one filmmaker role, similar to the collaboration between Rankine and Lucas. I would use separate rubrics to grade partners vs. triads, and would provide the rubrics to students in advance.

I anticipate this portion of the unit taking the longest, and would allocate about five class periods for students to work together on their projects in class. All of my students were issued a district-owned Chromebook, and I keep several extras in my classroom just in case. Students can use their Chromebooks to look up poems, music, sound effects, and stock images and videos and/or to record their own video and audio. Many students are familiar with the platform Canva, which offers video editing tools, but it is important to allow some flexibility here as its availability may vary. In our district, we use a learning management system called Schoology to house instructional materials and for students to submit assignments electronically. This will be the place for my students to submit their finished products; again, some variation may be needed here if your school uses a different system.

Resources

Armstrong, James, Peter Lutze, and Laura Woodworth-Ney. “VideoPoetry: Integrating Video, Poetry and History in the Classroom.” *The International Journal of the Arts in Society: Annual Review* 3, no. 5 (January 2009), 53-66. Accessed May 4, 2024. Doi: 10.18848/1833-1866/cgp/v03i05/35517. This is a good how-to resource that outlines the steps the authors used to create a video poem. The authors provide resources for using this activity with students, such as checklists, a self-evaluation form, and a rubric.

Brooklyn College Film Department. “Film Term Glossary,” n.d. http://userhome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/anthro/jbeatty/COURSES/glossary.htm. The Brooklyn College Film Department provides this list of film terms and definitions which helps both students and teachers discuss and write about videopoems.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. “We Real Cool.” Poetry Foundation. June 6, 2017. Video, 5:59. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0USvSvhue70. This videopoem is an example of cin(e)poetry which superimposes the text of the poem over animations and music.

Delaware Department of Education. “State Report Cards.” Delaware Department of Education. Accessed May 27, 2024. https://reportcard.doe.k12.de.us/detail.html#aboutpage?scope=school&district=31&school=170. The Delaware Department of Education provides statistics on the racial and socioeconomic breakdown of the state’s public schools based on information gathered in September of each school year.

Gallagher, Tess. “Choices.” From *Midnight Lantern: New and Selected Poems*. Motionpoems and the Poetry Foundation. July 14, 2017. Video, 6:12. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/video/142662/choices. This visual text poem contains no music or narration, just sound effects and images with the words of the poem displayed on the screen.

Imarishi, Walida, “Wade in the Water.” July 2, 2015. Video, 4:19. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJgpkalWSKE. An example of the performance type of videopoetry, Imarisha’s poem critiques both the federal government’s response to Hurricane Katrina and the new media’s racially biased coverage of the hurricane and its aftermath.

Kaplan, Sandra, Guzman, Irene, and Tomlinson, Carol Ann, eds. *Using the Parallel Curriculum Model in Urban Settings, Grades K-8*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2009. Accessed July 26, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central. This text is a reference for teachers interested in learning more about the Parallel Curriculum Model (PCM) and its application in an urban setting.

Konyves, Tom. “Videopoetry: A Manifesto.” *Critical Inquiry*, October 2012. This text defines videopoetry and explains the five subtypes. It also explains the effect of various videopoetry techniques and how they compare to traditional poetic techniques.

Light Up Poole. *Blue Flash Flash - Film Poem by Jane Glennie*, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flhr-OWrGuM. This engaging, 40-second videopoem is performed in one breath and represents the moment a young child learns a word. It is an engaging hook for the unit.

Melhem, D.H. *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014. muse.jhu.edu/book/37108. Melham provides an analysis of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poems, including “We Real Cool”.

Moran, Matthew. “Wading through the Flood: The Transcultural Counterwitness, Hurricane Katrina, and Video Poetry.” *Papers on Language and Literature* 58, no. 2 (Spring, 2022): 135-164,233. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/wading-through-flood-transcultural-counterwitness/docview/2723568672/se-2. In this critical article, Moran gives context for Imarisha’s performance poem “Wade in the Water” and puts it in conversation with one of Claudia Rankine’s *Situation* poems.

Moten, Fred. *Black and Blur. Consent Not to Be a Single Being*, v. [1]. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. In this theoretical work, Moten develops his theory of Black aesthetics and ruminates on the role of suffering in Black art.

Oczkus, Lori, and Rasinski, Timothy. *Close Reading with Paired Texts Secondary: Engaging Lessons to Improve Comprehension.* Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Educational Publishing, 2018. Accessed July 12, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central. This practical guide for teachers defines close reading and explains how to use it in the secondary classroom.

Payne, Alexander. “Equitable Access for Underrepresented Students in Gifted Education.” Reports -

Descriptive, George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education, 2011. This study quantifies the underrepresentation of minority groups in gifted education and explains some of the reasons behind the trend.

Price, Kenneth M. “Walt Whitman and Civil War Washington.” Civil War Washington. Accessed July 14, 2024. https://civilwardc.org/interpretations/narrative/wwacw.php. This internet article, originally published in *Civil War Washington: History, Place, and Digital Scholarship*, ed. Susan C. Lawrence (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), explains Walt Whitman’s experiences and views on the Civil War.

Rankine, Claudia. “From *Citizen*: Situation 7.” American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Accessed July 13, 2024. https://www.amacad.org/mixtape/claudia-rankine-citizen-video. One of several videpoems in a series, Rankine and John Lucas’s collaboration combines sound text and kinetic text to examine an everyday example of racial bias playing out on a train.

Renzulli, J. S. (2011). What Makes Giftedness?: Reexamining a Definition. *Phi Delta Kappan, 92*(8), 81-88. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171109200821. In contrast to outdated and elitist conceptions of giftedness based solely on an IQ test score, Renzulli defines giftedness in this article as a combination of above-average intelligence, task commitment, and creativity. While intelligence is one component, it is not the sole determining factor.

Song of America. “The Shift to the Concert Stage: ‘Wade in the Water’ and the American Spiritual.” Accessed July 26, 2024. https://songofamerica.net/essays/the-shift-to-the-concert-stage-wade-in-the-water-and-the-american-spiritual/. This article gives a brief history of the spiritual “Wade in the Water” which Imarisha alludes to in the title of her performance poem.

Whitman, Walt. “Multitudes.” From *Song of Myself.* Manual Cinema and the Poetry Foundation, read by Kaveh Akbar, Duriel E. Harris, and Yusef Komunyakaa. May 20, 2019. Video, 6:32. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/video/150022/multitudes. Another contribution from the Poetry Foundation, “Multitudes” is a sound text rendering of excerpts from Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

As students engage in close reading, the third step involves summarizing the poems and determining their themes. When students write an analysis of one of the poems, they will demonstrate their ability to analyze the theme’s development in detail.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

During close reading, the second read forces students to consider whether/how the author uses figurative language and what it means, as well as the effects of specific word choices on tone.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

Students will consider the poem's structure during their first close read. When students view the videopoems using the notice and wonder strategy, the teacher should guide them to consider how the video changes the original poem's text structure and/or/pacing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.6

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

At the end of the unit, students will use Chromebooks and the internet to create and share their own videopoems.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5

Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

In students' videopoems, they will need to combine text (visual, read, or both), visuals (animated, still photographs, or videos), and sound (sound effects, music, etc.) in order to enhance their poems.

Notes

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1. Delaware Department of Education. "State Report Cards."
2. Renzulli, J. S. (2011). What Makes Giftedness?: Reexamining a Definition.
3. Payne, Alexander. "Equitable Access for Underrepresented Students in Gifted Education," 5.
4. Kaplan, Sandra, Guzman, Irene, and Tomlinson, Carol Ann, eds. *Using the Parallel Curriculum Model in Urban Settings, Grades K-8*, 3.
5. Armstrong, James, Peter Lutze, and Laura Woodworth-Ney. "VideoPoetry: Integrating Video, Poetry and History in the Classroom," 53.
6. Ibid. 54.
7. Konyves, Tom. "Videopoetry: A Manifesto," 4.
8. Ibid. 6.
9. Ibid. 5.

10. Ibid. 7.
11. Imarishi, Walida, “Wade in the Water.”
12. Moran, Matthew. “Wading through the Flood: The Transcultural Counterwitness, Hurricane Katrina, and Video Poetry,” 136.
13. Ibid. 140, 149.
14. Brooks, Gwendolyn. “We Real Cool.”
15. Melhem, D.H. *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*, 129.
16. Ibid. 128.
17. Whitman, Walt. “Multitudes.”
18. Price, Kenneth M. “Walt Whitman and Civil War Washington.”
19. Gallagher, Tess. “Choices.”
20. Rankine, Claudia. “From *Citizen*: Situation 7.”
21. Moten, Fred. *Black and Blur. Consent Not to Be a Single Being,* x.
22. Oczkus, Lori, and Rasinski, Timothy. *Close Reading with Paired Texts Secondary: Engaging Lessons to Improve Comprehension*, 4.
23. Armstrong, James, Peter Lutze, and Laura Woodworth-Ney. “VideoPoetry: Integrating Video, Poetry and History in the Classroom,” 53.
24. Ibid. 56-60.
25. Light Up Poole. *Blue Flash Flash - Film Poem by Jane Glennie*, 2018.
26. Brooklyn College Film Department. “Film Term Glossary.”
27. Song of America. “The Shift to the Concert Stage: ‘Wade in the Water’ and the American Spiritual.”