



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

to strengthen teaching in public schools®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2024 Volume III: Poetry as Sound and Object

Introduction

by Feisal G. Mohamed, Professor of English

This seminar seeks to broaden the avenues leading students to poetry, emphasizing connections to performance and the visual arts. It aims to have students of all ages experience poetry as a living art lending itself to creative engagement in the classroom, allowing even familiar and oft-taught poems to take on new dimensions. Inspired by trends in current poetry, by Black poets in particular, it explores contemporary work in ways focused on its use in the classroom. As a text anchoring these ongoing conversations, we turned repeatedly to Tyehimba Jess's Pulitzer-Prize winning book of poems *Olio* (2016), a history in verse of unrecorded Black performance in the period between the Civil War and the First World War. Through this subject, Jess explores questions of enslavement and freedom, of the liberating power of art and its creation of new social relations, and of the triumph of Black performance in wresting aesthetic achievement from the teeth of anti-blackness. That the book has many visual and tactile components, and that portions have been performed and recorded, make it an excellent example of poetry that demands to be encountered as both sound and object.

In addition, the seminar visited the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library on several occasions, availing ourselves especially of its peerless holdings on writers of the Harlem Renaissance. We viewed, among other things, early modern commonplace books; manuscript and early printed versions of the poems of John Donne; the first edition of the poems of Phillis Wheatley; a telegram from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Langston Hughes inviting the poet to join the Selma to Montgomery march; original photographs of Jean Toomer, the author of *Cane*; and posters and newsprint publications of the Black Panther Party. All of these artifacts place poetry in broader personal and historical contexts, bringing to life the places, events, and poetic minds behind the poems we encounter on the page. We engaged in some hands-on printing, setting type and working the press in the basement of Jonathan Edwards College. We also considered such video poems as Claudia Rankine and John Lucas' situation videos, and took a field trip to Governor's Island for New York City's Poetry Festival, which featured an array of readings and poetry-themed activities lending themselves to classroom use.

The curriculum units arising from the seminar reflect its core aim of making poetry available across grades. They also reflect broad cultural diversity, thanks to the Fellows' wide-ranging interests and expertise. We begin with Elizabeth Isaac's unit for students as young as third grade, which is centered on the Diné (Navajo) concept of *Hózhó*, or "beautyway." A key concept in Diné culture, *Hózhó* refers to a self-cultivation allowing for attunement to beauty that also brings us into harmony with nature, family, and community. Isaac's unit combines traditional Diné chants with contemporary Native American poetry, namely the work of Orlando White and Joy Harjo, the first Native American US Poet Laureate. Also lending itself to early grades is Sharon Ponder-Ballard's unit, "Captain Underpants, Poetry Outside the Box." The unit is centered on two main texts: Dav Pilkey's graphic novel series *Captain Underpants*, and a Tyehimba Jess poem on Henry "Box" Brown. The

former is a springboard to comic book poetry, with students interpreting, and creating, poetry in graphic form. The latter allows poetry to bring history to life, centered on the story of an enslaved man who shipped himself to freedom in a wooden crate. Ponder also increases student engagement with literary texts through such dramatic techniques as reader's theater and improv.

Designed for students in fourth grade, but easily adaptable to higher grades, Damon Peterson's unit takes students to the very roots of poetry through the writings of Enheduana and the Vedic poets. The earliest named poet, Enheduana was active in the Sumerian city-state of Ur until her death c.2279 BCE—by comparison, Homer, if he was an individual poet, is thought to have lived c. 850 BCE. This earliest of poets is also associated with the roots of written language, the Sumerian cuneiform that has come down to us on clay tablets. While those objects have transmitted poetry, so has sound. The unit also focuses on Vedic poetry, an oral tradition that has preserved poems for millennia with remarkable fidelity. Peterson challenges students to think far beyond the usual focus of elementary curricula on the US and on the past 300 years, allowing them to see the long and broad arc of human language and literature, and incorporates such activities as an "archeological dig" for clay tablets.

Addressed to students in fifth grade, Ethelwolda Paat's unit is centered on poetry and art of the Harlem Renaissance, exploring the work of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Jacob Lawrence. Key texts include Hughes's *Black Misery*, a lyrical depiction of the struggles of integration and his final book, and Claude McKay's "America," a sonnet reflecting the Jamaican-born poet's conflicted view of the country to which he had moved. Especially through consideration of Lawrence's art, students are introduced to the history of the Great Migration in engaging ways, notably by writing ekphrastic poetry on his Migration Series. As a teacher in the District of Columbia, Paat also incorporates opportunities for experiential learning at the National Museum of African American History and Culture and at The Phillips Collection.

Lauren Freeman's unit for the fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms seeks to address the decline in reading and writing performance visible after the COVID pandemic. At the same time her unit advances social-emotional learning and seeks to create a space away from technology for the quiet work of contemplation of oneself and one's environment. Incorporating poetry readings that introduce students to various poetic forms, from haiku, to limerick, to free verse, the unit emphasizes place-based learning and inquiry and includes such activities as peer discussion, journaling, and an end-of-unit poetry slam.

Two units address middle-school students, those by Holly Bryk and Alyssa Lucadamo. Designed for a world language classroom, Bryk's unit is focused on Calaveras Literarias, satirical poetic epitaphs, often of public figures, that can offer biting social commentary. The poems are often presented with artwork typical of celebrations of the Day of the Dead. Through these authentic Spanish-language texts, and through related readings, recordings, videos and class discussions, students advance their knowledge of poetic sound and form, of Mexican culture, and of the Spanish language. (During the seminar, Bryk and the other Fellows were able to view examples of nineteenth-century Calaverias Literarias held by the Beinecke Library, including the Mexican newspaper *El Calavera*, which has been digitized, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2043984>.) Lucadamo's unit for eighth grade is centered on videopoetry. Equipping students with tools for analyzing poetry and for analyzing film, the unit features video interpretations of canonical poems—Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* and Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool"—alongside contemporary videopoems—Walidah Imarisha's "Wade in the Water," Claudia Rankine's "Situation 7," and Tess Gallagher's "Choices." Activities include analytical writing about videopoetry and a group assignment in which students create their own videopoem about a chosen cause, contributing to a yearlong service-learning project.

For her students in grades seven through twelve, Debra Jenkins offers a unit focused on the popular contemporary Black poet and hip hop artist Tupac Shakur. Teaching in a classroom in Hearne, Texas where nearly all students speak Spanish as their first language, Jenkins noticed that some still knew, and were fans of, Tupac's music. In the unit this connection between teacher and students becomes a springboard to a broad range of creative activities developing reading and writing skills. These include lessons on traditional poetic forms, such as the sonnet, and more avant-garde ones, such as erasure and blackout poetry. In taking hip hop seriously as an art form, and one that amplifies marginalized voices, Jenkins opens a path to her own students' self-expression and validation. The final unit arising from the seminar is Tara McKee's, which is geared toward the high-school classroom. McKee notes that her students tend to come to poetry very reluctantly. But they are at an age where they are becoming more politically aware, and they do have a strong affinity for expressing themselves through performance, as attested by their uploading of videos to social media. Responsive to all of these givens, her unit focuses on poetry of witness, and two anchor texts in particular: Abel Meeropol's "Strange Fruit," a poem on lynching that he later set to music and which was famously performed by Billie Holiday; and Pablo Neruda's "I'm Explaining a Few Things," which bears witness to the assault on Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Each of these affords an opportunity for connection to Social Studies lessons on a significant historical moment. The unit emphasizes traditional skills of close reading, and more social, collaborative engagement of poetic texts through dramatic performance, including a performance of original work transforming poetry of witness into protest.

The many ways in which these thoughtful and creative Fellows have found to incorporate poetry into various curricula is astonishing. While a curricular push toward "reading for information" has increasingly sidelined poetry in K-12 education, the units here gathered show just how much students are shortchanged by this trend. Paat's observations on her experience as a teacher sum this up well: "I realized poetry is a powerful tool for teaching and learning because I have used it, and I am living proof of its power in students' reading and writing. Over the years, I have found that it is one of the most effective methods for helping students understand language and express themselves through writing." As readers of poetry, students become more alert to the nuances and musicality of language. As writers of poetry, as both Isaac and Freeman emphasize, students become more attuned to their feelings and gain confidence in expressing them, and become more contemplative observers of themselves and of their world. As Ponder, Jenkins, Lucadamo, and McKee's units attest, poetry is not alienating; its versatility makes it a tool for meeting students where they live, in a world of comics, video, hip hop, and emerging political consciousness. And Peterson and Bryk show how it can be used to bring world cultures to life in the classroom, whether those cultures are ancient or modern. All of these qualities seem especially necessary as schools struggle with the setbacks of the COVID pandemic, in terms of student reading, writing, and engagement.

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2024 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use