



Introduction

by Feisal Mohamed, Professor of English

As its title suggests, this seminar explored poetry both as performance and as material object. This allowed poems to emerge from the dusty classroom anthology so that they might become a form of living art lending itself to creative engagement in the classroom. Through such exploration traditional poems become more vibrant and trends in current poetry become more visible and available for appreciation. As a text anchoring our discussion, we turned repeatedly to Tyehimba Jess's Pulitzer-Prize winning book of poems *Olio* (2016), a verse exploration of the history of performances delivered in the intermissions of minstrel shows. 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. It is an excellent example of poetry that demands to be encountered as both sound and object. It is available as a sound recording, allowing for an especially compelling experience of its contrapuntal poems. And as a book *Olio* is a beautiful object, with original artwork and tear-out pages meant to be variously folded to give poems various meanings.

In addition, the seminar visited the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library on several occasions to make the most of its outstanding collections. We viewed 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; a letter from Sigmund Freud to the poet H.D. chatting about household pets; and a heavily revised manuscript version of the first of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. All of these artifacts place poetry in broader personal and historical contexts, and also offer insight into the creative process behind the making of poetry. In terms of performance, our seminar was fortunate to attend a poetry reading by Tyehimba Jess and his students, and to attend a concert of Bill Lowe's Signifyin' Natives in their jazz interpretation of Jean Toomer's *Cane*, a classic of the Harlem Renaissance in both poetry and prose. We also considered such video poems as Claudia Rankine and John Lucas' situation videos.

The curriculum units arising from the seminar reflect its core aim of making poetry available across grades and across various subjects—not just language arts, but also science, history, and visual arts. Carol Boynton has designed a unit for kindergarten marking National Poetry Month and inspired by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers's *Keep a Poem in Your Pocket*. The unit combines elements of making, namely the making of a pocket in which students can hold the poems that they will be reading, with read-alouds, a visual poetry toolbox, and other forms of collaborative interpretation in class. Notable in Boynton's unit is a lengthy list of poems that might be selected as a poem of the day throughout National Poetry Month, a treasure trove that is

diverse in every sense of the term. In a unit designed for first grade in a STEAM magnet school, Cary Draper emphasizes the importance of poetic sound as a tool in the development of early literacy, and especially its ability to aid early readers in habits of visualization before they move on to more extended prose works, such as chapter books. Draper structures her unit around four different kinds of poetry: silly poems, shape and concrete poems, science poems, and poems by Black writers.

Three units are geared toward middle-school students. Carolyn Streets has designed a curriculum unit on poetry that is also a unit in social justice education, drawing on the pedagogical value of blackout poetry as a tool of interpretation and creative engagement with texts. Centered on the “herstory” of Black resistance from its roots in the 1960s to the Black Lives Matter movement of the present day, Streets focuses especially on such poets as Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Nikki Giovanni. The unit, as she suggests, can bridge Women’s History Month in March and National Poetry Month in April. Kasalina Nabakooza’s unit for the grade 7 to 8 visual arts classroom employs screen printing and T-shirt making as creative engagement with the poetry of Langston Hughes, and especially his collection *The Dreamkeeper and Other Poems*. Drawing on original archival research, the unit places Hughes’s poetry in the context of the two world wars, and the interwar years, exploring the history of Black service in regiments such as the Harlem Hellfighters of the First World War, a regiment also significant in the writings of W.E.B. DuBois. The unit as a whole, then, marries the teaching of poetry with the teaching of visual arts and history. Matthew Schaffer has designed a unit on urban poetry for the seventh-grade reading intervention classroom. In a wide-ranging consideration of his topic, Schaffer moves from Martial’s ancient Rome to Jamaal May’s present-day Detroit. Treating poetry as sound, Schaffer incorporates student performance of poems in his unit. As object he incorporates Langston Hughes’s “Come to the Waldorf-Astoria!” a spoof of a *Vanity Fair* ad highlighting class tensions of the Great Depression. As Schaffer points out, treating poetry in this way can be especially valuable for students in an urban setting: it allows them to draw on their own experiences of their lived environment in a political act of exercising a “right to the city” in which one composes one’s own “social reality,” in the words of Henri Lefebvre.

The final unit arising from the seminar is Katie Yates’s, which is geared toward the high school creative writing classroom. Yates incorporates bookmaking and performance, as well as historical research, into her creative writing classroom. And she points to ways in which the early modern practice of commonplacing has contemporary equivalents that will be familiar to secondary students: playlists, online galleries, and online messages. The unit thus draws on ways in which students already creatively engage with cultures, environments, and communities. But Yates is concerned especially with the social-emotional learning and community building possibilities offered by the teaching of poetry. As such her unit reaches well beyond particular grades or a particular subject, seeking nothing short of a teaching method centered on “creativity and wisdom” as a remedy to school climates too often characterized by “scarcity, fear, and exhaustion.”

That points to the case made across all of these units for the importance of poetry in the classroom. Schaffer points to research suggesting that the teaching of poetry is on the decline, squeezed out of curricula by various forms of nonfiction prose. And yet Boynton draws our attention to the many ways in which poetry can be an enormously powerful tool in literacy development, with Draper reinforcing that point in light of research on the importance of poetry to visualization, a key step in the early development of literacy. Nabakooza and Streets reveal ways in which poetry can allow students creatively to engage in a broad spectrum of subjects, adding richness and vibrancy to lessons in history and social justice. In these units poetry emerges as a pedagogical star. Its many possibilities in the classroom become apparent through the creative and dynamic efforts of these thoughtful educators.

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