Poets Imagining the City

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Abstract

This unit encourages students to imaginatively engage with the city of Philadelphia, through the collaborative close reading and writing of poetry. The unit is divided into five sections, along thematic lines rather than by chronology or form. In each section, poems by major modern American poets including Whitman, Williams, O'Hara, Hughes, and Sandburg are paired with poems by living poets of color that approach cities and urban life in a similar way. Each section is also accompanied by a writing prompt or prompts that have students use the poems in that section as mentor texts. The culminating assessment is a portfolio of five poems, each with an accompanying artist statement explaining how the student has incorporated aspects of the mentor text into their own work. Each section of the unit is designed so that it could be taught on its own if time constraints necessitate this. Furthermore, the core instructional strategies of collaborative close reading, annotation, and writing with mentor texts are widely applicable across various contexts.

Content Objectives

Problem Statement

The germ of the idea for this unit came from a pattern I've noticed over years of preparing students for state testing in literacy. When there is a poem included on the test, it is very often something along the lines of "Goldfinches," by Mary Oliver, where the major emotional thrust of the poem is the speaker interacting with or observing some phenomenon out in nature, and experiencing some kind of epiphany or insight as a result. Even if my students did happen to know that a goldfinch is a type of little yellow bird, this is not an experience that is going to resonate with many of them. By the time I encountered a subsequent test passage consisting of yet another Mary Oliver poem about a different species of bird, with stultifying multiple-choice questions to match, I was, to put it bluntly, fed up.

My students are city kids. Their perceptive and imaginative faculties have been trained differently, but that does not mean those faculties are in any way stunted. As urban sociologist Louis Wirth puts it, in his seminal essay "Urbanism as a Way of Life," "The urban world puts a premium on visual recognition...We tend to acquire and develop a sensitivity to a world of artifacts and become progressively farther removed from the world of nature." However, this does not mean that the "world of artifacts" is any less worthy of poems than the world of goldfinches! Furthermore, Wirth says, "The heightened mobility of the individual, which brings him within the range of stimulation by a great number of diverse individuals and subjects him to fluctuating status in the

differentiated social groups that compose the social structure of the city...helps to account, too, for the sophistication and cosmopolitanism of the urbanite." My students, like all urbanites, have grown up having to negotiate different groups of people, and rubbing shoulders with many individuals. I have found that my students are often remarkably astute at making inferences about character, perhaps for this exact reason; they have grown up in a densely populated metropolis where there are many more opportunities to observe the full range of human behavior. Their urban lives have trained them to read people, and poems, differently.

I want my students to know that the place they inhabit is just as worthy of a poet's joy and amazement as some bird somewhere out in a field, and just as rich with imaginative possibilities as Yeats' "bee-loud glade." This feels particularly urgent, because the neighborhood where the school is located and where most of my students has grown up has also been an epicenter of Philadelphia's opioid epidemic. Much of the popular discourse about Kensington centers on the drug problem. In October 2018, the *New York Times* ran a magazine feature story about Kensington titled "Trapped in the Walmart of Heroin." The piece juxtaposes quotes from neighborhood residents, lamenting how bad things have gotten, with profiles of homeless addicts and photos of garbage and encampments. To my way of thinking, this is just a further development of a tired, centuries-old discourse: the city as dangerous, noisy hotbed of sin and despair.

Most of my students have experienced traumas associated with poverty or the drug trade, and even the ones who have had fairly stable home lives still have had to contend with walking past encampments of drug users on their way to school. But these traumas are not the entire story of their lives. Focusing on the neighborhood's pain to the exclusion of all else does nothing to help students move past these traumas; rather, it teaches them that their stories of trauma are the only ones they have that are worth telling. This is the opposite of trauma-informed pedagogy. As Jillian Bauer-Reese says, "the rehashing of the same dystopic, drug-war narrative was actually further traumatizing a community already traumatized by structural violence and environmental racism." There are other stories to tell, and other images to foreground. I want my students to find ways to see their neighborhood as a place of joy and beauty and vitality, not just of addiction, poverty, and despair. Imagination is the domain of the poet, and it belongs to the young people of Kensington to imagine their neighborhood's history and its future.

In the process, I also want my students to begin to think differently about what it means to learn. My students have spent much of their lives in classrooms that often prize compliance, or "doing your work" over thinking critically and taking ownership of one's own learning. As Martin Haberman says, "It cannot be emphasized enough that, in the real world, urban teachers are never defined as incompetent because their 'deprived,' 'disadvantaged,' 'abused,' 'low-income' students are not learning. Instead, urban teachers are castigated because they cannot elicit compliance." A pedagogy of compliance and control, "drill and kill," might help to raise scores on high-stakes,

multiple-choice tests. Moreover, it certainly has significant appeal for those who, in Haberman's words, "have low expectations for minorities and the poor" and "believe that at-risk students are served best by a directive, controlling pedagogy." But it is lousy preparation for the rigors of the postsecondary classroom, and even more importantly, it is lousy preparation for being a thoughtful citizen in a free society. By asking students to decide for themselves what a poem means, through collaborative close reading, and asking them to reflect on and reimagine their own lives, through responding creatively to the texts we read, I hope to break free of this "pedagogy of poverty."

Objectives

1. To collaboratively analyze how a poem's form creates its meaning.
This is really the anchor goal for the whole unit. The primary mode of assessment will be formative, during discussion and collaborative close reading of the selected poems. See the "Teaching Strategies" section below for a full explanation of this pedagogical strategy.

2. To compare various poets' interpretations of the urban experience, and make thematic connections across disparate time periods and cultural contexts.

In selecting the poems for this unit, I have attempted to pair works by more canonical 19th and 20th-century American poets with contemporary, living poets of color. I have organized the poems into thematic sections, based on the type of city experience they describe and create for the reader, rather than by time period or any other more obvious criterion.

I have chosen to organize the unit along thematic lines rather than in historical, chronological order for several reasons. First, it will get students talking about aspects of the poem beyond the surface. Even a simple question like "which poem did you like better?" can allow the teacher to push students to think carefully and specifically about what choices the poets made differently, and how that affects the reader's experience of the poem. This discussion can get students thinking in much more depth about what choices they can make in their own writing to produce the best possible work. Second, I want students to see that the work of earlier poets is still very much alive; I hope to pair texts in such a way as to get students to think differently about both the earlier and the more contemporary writers. Finally, I want students to realize that the canon of American poetry belongs to them just as much as it belongs to poets publishing today. This objective will be assessed through discussion, as well as occasional short written responses asking students to make connections and justify their claims with textual evidence. Students will also be expected to demonstrate evidence of learning in the artists' statements which will accompany their final portfolio.

3. To synthesize techniques from mentor texts in the creation of original poems

Each section of the unit will also be accompanied by a writing prompt to help students generate original work. In some cases, there may be a pair of writing prompts that students can pick between. Writing alongside the poets we read is a natural corollary to collaborative close reading. If students believe that they have something new and valuable to bring to a poem like *Song of Myself,* which has been pored over by smart people for over a century, then asking them to create their own original work is a logical next step. The culminating assessment for the unit will be a portfolio of original poems, accompanied by reflections on how the student used the mentor texts as a guide.

4. To explain their thinking in using the mentor texts to generate original work

By reading contemporary poets alongside more canonical poets, students can begin to think critically about influence, literary ancestors, and how stylistic techniques get passed down from one poet to another. If students are used to considering these questions during the collaborative close reading process, it will not be as much of a stretch to reflect on those questions when it comes to their own creative work. Furthermore, by reflecting so carefully on their own choices as writers, I hope to push students to think more carefully about stylistic choices they make in all their writing, not just the poems in the portfolio.

Teaching Strategies

Instructional Strategies

Collaborative Close Reading

The Teacher's Institute seminar where I developed this unit is one of many iterations of ModPo, a course in modern and contemporary American poetry that has taken on a life of its own. ModPo exists as a conventional English course for students at the University of Pennsylvania, but it has also been reworked as a massively open online course, freely available to anyone who wants to register and participate in the dialogue. One of the basic principles of ModPo is that poems we admire "do what they say." By making careful choices about words, punctuation, line breaks, sound, and imagery, the poet creates an experience for the reader that mirrors the experience the poem is about. In more experimental work, the experience the poet creates for the reader, or the process by which a poem was generated, may become even more of a focus; the poem's narrative or emotional arc may be secondary, or glossed over entirely.

If part of what is worth admiring in a poem is how well it "does what it says," we have to accept that our own experiences as readers of the poem are part of what the poem means. In other words, we, as readers, co-create a poem's meaning every time we engage with it. The collaborative close reading approach, by its nature, pushes students to engage with poems as co-creators of meaning. Collaborative close reading is a deceptively

simple and transformative way to engage with a poem; it can offer students a way to access and think about even quite difficult experimental works. In this pedagogical model, the members of a class sit around a table (or as closely as you can approximate it in a class of 33). Each person is responsible for explaining, speaking about, and asking questions about a short segment of the poem. Depending on the poem's length and the size of the group, the segment could be a line or two long or only a word or two. In larger groups, especially with a shorter poem, it may make sense to give each segment to two people rather than one. The teacher is responsible only for dividing up the poem equitably amongst everyone present, asking probing questions to push the conversation, perhaps defining a word or giving a bit of context here and there, and managing the time. All discussion of the poem's meaning comes from the participants, as the conversation flows.

This is an obvious departure from the lecture model, where the teacher delivers what is supposed to be the definitive reading of the poem and students are just expected to take notes and perhaps occasionally interject with a question or comment. It's also a departure from the I-Do, We-Do, You-Do model, where a teacher models a process and then gradually releases responsibility to the student. Collaborative close reading demands that the student take responsibility from the outset, but because students are all working together, and each person is only responsible for a small piece of the puzzle, this responsibility is not daunting.

In this model of interpreting a poem, the teacher does not claim to know the right answers. This, in turn, can help students think in terms of what is an interesting question, rather than what is the correct answer. Michelle Burke, in her article "Writing from the Senses," describes the process of collaborative close reading when she states that "When teaching the work of Gertrude Stein, or any challenging poet for that matter, it's useful to emphasize that the questions raised by the poems are often far more interesting than the answers. The poems, in other words, are not codes to be solved or locks yielding to only one key. I will admit to you—as I do to my students—that I am no expert on Stein. Together, my students and I fumble our way through, teaching each other. Each time I teach Stein to a new classroom of students, it is a new experience. The conversation goes where it will, and it is never the same conversation twice." Burke's point holds true, however, with any poem complex enough to hold up under close reading, not just with poets as notoriously confusing as Stein. I have read a particular Billy Collins poem with my students for several years now, and it's never the same conversation, even though Collins is widely thought of as a very "accessible" poet. The common thread is not the poem's difficulty, but the teacher's willingness to abdicate their position as resident expert.

Finally, when we do collaborative close reading, we realize that the most valuable resource in the room is each other. In an era of technology-driven school "reforms," and "interventions," an era when human interaction in the classroom is frequently being cast

aside in favor of the newest, shiniest, most "personalized" digital technology, this is radical.

Color-marking / Annotation

Close reading generally means rereading, especially with shorter texts like poems. Color-marking is an annotation technique that can help students discover additional layers of meaning in a poem as they read and reread. Students use different colored pencils (usually about four or five) to highlight different patterns and features in a poem: for example, sound imagery might be underlined in green, places where the speaker refers to themselves might be blue, a repeated phrase might be yellow. Generally, when I use this technique, the first read of the poem is just to get a handle on what it sounds like, and the second read is for unfamiliar vocabulary. On the third read we take colored pencils to the poem. Sometimes, especially if the technique is new to students, I'll suggest patterns for them to look for. As they get more confident with color-marking I might have them start with one thing that they notice about the poem, assign it a color, go through and mark the poem, and then look at what they haven't marked up yet and see if there are more patterns they notice. Another way to give students an entry point into annotating this way is to start by crowdsourcing a list of everything students see happening in the poem, and then allow them to pick four or five things to mark from the list they came up with together. An example of student annotation / color-marking can be found in Appendix B.

Writing Alongside Mentor Texts

Often, in the secondary English classroom, reading and writing are taught as if they are entirely separate subjects. Though students are often expected to write about literature, they are seldom expected to, as Kelly Gallagher puts it, "read like writers—to notice the techniques, moves, and choices that poets make." Using mentor texts as models, and teaching students to "read like writers" is one way to make the teaching of reading and writing less disjointed. As Gallagher points out, though, "effective modeling entails much more than handing students a mentor text and asking them to imitate it. It's not that simple. Rather, students benefit from paying close attention to models before they begin drafting a piece of writing, as they compose their first draft, and as they move that draft into revision." In this unit, students will be encouraged to revisit the poems not only before they write their own pieces, but also as they workshop and revise their drafts.

Unit Outline

This unit was originally conceived to fit in the 10th grade English 2 classroom. However, it could be easily adapted to another grade level, or to a creative writing or poetry elective, or as a series of standalone workshops. The PA Core standards for high school literacy, with which this unit is aligned, are not grade-specific. Furthermore, though some of the poems I have selected are more difficult than others, none are too obscure for high

schoolers at any level to have something to say about, and all of them will hold up to close reading and substantive discussion, even with a group of advanced juniors or seniors. My classes meet on a rotating A/B schedule for 90 minutes each day; teachers who teach a more conventional 45 to 50-minute period can adapt the activities for their particular context as needed. While the sections are designed to build on each other somewhat, they would each also work fairly well as freestanding mini-units or workshops. I expect each section of the unit to take up approximately three block periods; depending on the group of students, teachers may need to build in some additional time here or there devoted for workshopping, revision, and writing artists statements. Finally, this unit was designed with Philadelphia students in mind. Several of the poems, as well as much of the supplementary material, contain specific Philadelphia references; this is intentional. Teachers in other cities may find it worthwhile to swap out some of this material for alternative texts tailored to their own local audience.

Section 1: Everything Happening At Once
Guiding question: How can a poem create the experience of being in a city where everything seems to be happening all at once?

The first section looks at poems that use lists / parataxis to create the impression of everything happening at once in a busy metropolis, beginning with Walt Whitman and ending with two contemporary Afrolatinx poets, Willie Perdomo and Ariel Francisco. In response, students will generate their own poems that use lists and parataxis to create a similar effect.

Poems:

1. Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself,* Canto 8
In this particular section of *Song of Myself,* Whitman describes the overlapping noises of a busy street scene using parataxis, putting each noise next to each other to create the same overlapping effect as in the street scene. The poem is remarkable not only for the way it "does what it says," creates a particular effect through form, but also for the ecstatic attention the speaker pays to ordinary city sounds.
2. Ariel Francisco, "Along the East River and in the Bronx Young Men Were Singing"
This is a Whitmanesque ode to the Bronx. Like Whitman's speaker, Francisco's speaker is positioned as an observer, listening to all the city sounds around him and creating a rich picture of the neighborhood by layering all the sounds together simultaneously.
3. Willie Perdomo, "Where I'm From"
This is one of my favorite poems to teach, not only because the specifically Puerto Rican cultural references draw my students in, but also because of the skillful way Perdomo weaves together beautiful and ugly images in this ode to the Bronx.

Prompts:

1. Imagine a moment in time, in your neighborhood, in your city, where everybody is out. Maybe it's a Saturday afternoon in summer, or a spring day right after school lets out. What are the sounds? What are people talking about? Write a poem that, like Canto 8 or "Along the East River…" lists all the sounds and conversations and stories that are happening at once in this moment.
2. Write a poem starting multiple lines, as Perdomo does, with "Where I'm from…" What are all the details it's important for people to know about your neighborhood? What is beautiful and what is more sinister, and how do these two things combine in your neighborhood? How does the balance between beautiful and sinister, fast-paced and relaxed, shift over the course of the day and night? How can you mirror this effect in your poem?

Day 1: Introduce students to collaborative close reading protocols. Collaborative close reading of Canto 8. Independent reading and timed journal response to "Along the East River." Begin brainstorming ideas for a poem in response to Prompt #1; draft poem for homework.
Day 2: Read and color-mark "Where I'm From." Discuss the three poems together as mentor texts: which drew you in as a reader most effectively? What choices did the writer make in order to do this? Introduce Prompt #2; give students time to write drafts in class.
Day 3: Introduce and model workshopping and revision norms and expectation for artists statements. Students will workshop drafts of both poems and use class time to revise and begin drafting artist's statements.

Section 2: Moments When The City Stands Still
Guiding question: How can a poem create an image that makes the city stand still for the reader?

The second section focuses on how poets create images that stop time, starting with William Carlos Williams and ending with Ross Gay. Lynda Barry, in her beautiful book about creativity, *What It Is,* defines an image as follows: "What is an image? At the center of everything we call 'the arts,' and children call 'play,' is something which seems somehow alive. It's not alive in the way you and I are alive, but it's certainly not dead. It's alive in the way our memory is alive. Alive in the way the ocean is alive and able to transport us, and contain us. Alive in the way thinking is not, but experiencing is, made of both memory and imagination, this is the thing we mean by 'an image'" (14). All of the poems in this section take a moment and pause time, allowing the reader to step inside the image, and inviting the reader to participate in the speaker's experience of the moment.

Poems:
1. William Carlos Williams, "Between Walls"
This poem, like many of Williams' famous, more imagistic works, is very short, but thematically quite complex. On the surface, it seems to be just a still life, a picture of a

scattering of broken glass, but it raises a number of puzzling questions: why write a poem about some pieces of broken glass? what point does the poet make art when he decides to focus on the image of broken glass? what does this image have to tell us about what kind of growth and beauty can be found in cities? To extend the discussion, the teacher will show students images of Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, a gorgeous and monumental construction by mosaicist Isaiah Zagar, who works primarily with pieces of broken glass, mirrors, and crockery along with other assorted bits of discarded flotsam.

2. William Carlos Williams, "To A Poor Old Woman,"

This poem, like the previous poem, takes an ordinary urban image (a poor woman eating fruit out of a bag on the street, a scattering of broken glass) and turns it into something like a painting.

3. Ross Gay, "To The Fig Tree On 9th and Christian"

Like the two poems by Williams, this poem has short lines and pauses time so that the reader can enter the moment. However, it is much longer, has many more people in it, and switches back and forth between the speaker's thoughts and what is happening under the fig tree, giving students a lot to think and talk about. It is also explicitly joyful in a way the other two poems are not, giving students a model for how to write about something beautiful that happened on an ordinary Philadelphia sidewalk on an ordinary day.

Prompt:

William Carlos Williams writes "about broken glass in an alley, a woman eating plums from a paper bag…All these are things that he likes. People are moved by things that are officially beautiful, like roses and the moon; they are also moved by things that aren't usually considered beautiful—neon signs, old stairways, yards, rusty bicycles" (Koch and Farrell, 147). Make a list of things that you like that aren't necessarily "officially beautiful." Using your journal, practice turning a few of your favorite items on the list into images. Start by answering these questions:

"1. Where are you?
2. What time of day is it?
3. What season does it seem to be?
4. What are you doing?
5. Why are you there?
6. Who else is in this image?
7. What's the temperature like?
8. What sounds can you hear?
9. What does the air smell like?
10. What are some of the objects around you?" (Barry, 185).

After you answer the questions, start with the words "I am…" and set a timer for 5 to 8 minutes, writing whatever comes to you. You'll be choosing your favorite one of these to revise as your second poem for the portfolio.

Day 1: Collaborative close reading of both poems by William Carlos Williams. (Though the poems are short, they are both quite complex, and the teacher should expect this to take the better part of the block period.) Explore virtual tour of the Magic Gardens and discuss what connections there might be between Zagar's mosaics and Williams' poetry.
Day 2: Read and color-mark "To The Fig Tree on 9th and Christian." Small-group discussion of what students found when they annotated. After small groups share out, have students write a two to three paragraph response, choosing one of the two poems by Williams and explaining, with evidence, one theme it shares with "To The Fig Tree," and how each poet uses language to create that theme.
Day 3: Open by reading students the children's book *Something Beautiful* to get them thinking about things they might like that aren't "officially beautiful." Introduce the prompt and the process for writing into an image. Give them time to make their lists, and do two or three rounds of writing into a timed list. Devote remaining class time to workshopping, revision, and/or working on artist statements.

Section 3: "I Do This, I Do That": Moving Through City Space
Guiding question: How can a poet use language to bring the reader on a journey through city spaces?

The third section focuses on poems that bring the reader along with the poem's speaker as they move through space. The section takes its title from a phrase commonly used to describe the poems of Frank O'Hara. "Many of these pieces have been labeled "I do this, I do that" poems; they report whole chunks of experience, days of walking, conversing, noticing, with careful specificity. Place-names and the names of friends and acquaintances abound; paradoxically, their inclusion seems to make the poems *more* universal, more available, convinced as we are by their artfully shaped controlling tone of the authenticity of the speaker's voice" (Doty). I have paired a poem by O'Hara with two poems by living Black poets; both poems share O'Hara's "careful specificity" and, like O'Hara, bring the reader along on the speaker's travels.

Poems:
1. Frank O'Hara, "The Day Lady Died"
This poem starts out as a description of the speaker running errands to get ready for an event later, stopping in various shops to pick up various items. When he sees a newspaper headline informing him of Billie Holiday's death, he is overcome and transported back to the last time he saw her perform live. The poem is a wonderful bridge between this section and the previous section because the speaker starts out in motion and then time stops, as it does in the poems in Section 2.
2. Patricia Smith, "Tavern, Tavern, Church, Shuttered Tavern"
This poem, winner of the $10,000 Rattle Poetry Prize a few years back, is a cinematic and loving look at a bus trip through a neighborhood on Chicago's West Side. I love the rich Whitmanesque description but also the way Smith's speaker moves through space.
3. Yolanda Wisher, "5 South 43rd St, Floor 2"

Like Smith's poem, this piece takes the reader along on a walk through the speaker's neighborhood in West Philadelphia. The specificity of the detail, and the conversational tone, are reminiscent of Frank O'Hara. I love not only the description, but also the way it ends with a moment of homecoming.

Prompts:
1. This first prompt is taken from *Sleeping on the Wing:* "Another kind of poem to write is a poem in which the subject is a day, like Frank O'Hara's 'The Day Lady Died'…Your poem about a day might be about a completely ordinary day or, like O'Hara's, an ordinary day on which one extraordinary thing happened—something that happened to you, something you thought, something you found out. If you do end with something like that, be sure to make it just one in a list with the others, described plainly and not prepared for with any special buildup…Let the poem start sometime at the beginning of the day. Try making it a rule that you'll put the name of someone or something in every line—use the names of streets, bridges, friends, movie stars, restaurants, soft drinks, rivers, magazines, whatever" (Koch and Farrell, 252-253)
2. Make a list of at least 3 journeys you take often and know really well. This could include your commute to school, the way from your house to your favorite park, the way home from someone else's house you visit often. Once you have this list, write down at least 5 points on the journey: places you transfer buses, places you turn, landmarks you pass, etc. Write for at least 10 minutes, answering Lynda Barry's 10 questions for each one of the points on your journey, and then writing whatever else comes to mind. The 10 questions are:
    "1. Where are you?
    2. What time of day is it?
    3. What season does it seem to be?
    4. What are you doing?
    5. Why are you there?
    6. Who else is in this image?
    7. What's the temperature like?
    8. What sounds can you hear?
    9. What does the air smell like?
    10. What are some of the objects around you?" (Barry, 185).

Day 1: Collaborative close reading of "The Day Lady Died." Introduce Prompt 1, give students time to draft. If there is time left, they can work on artists statements.
Day 2: Split the class in half; divide up "Tavern, Tavern, Church, Shuttered Tavern" and "5 South 43rd St, Floor 2," into approximately segments and assign each segment of the poem to one or two students. Have students write a few sentences explaining their assigned segment on chart paper. Share out. Then have students color-mark both poems, marking the same elements in both poems.

Day 3: Revisit annotations. Have students write a two to three-paragraph response about the parallels between two of the three pieces in this section. Introduce Prompt 2, setting a timer for each section of the prompt.
Day 4: In small groups, workshop drafts of poems from sections 1 through 3. Students should ask their peers which elements of the mentor text they chose to incorporate, and refer back to the writer's mentor text while making suggestions as to how to improve the drafts. The second half of the block period should be spent independently working on artists statements for sections 1 through 3.

Section 4: City Encounters / City Connections
Guiding question: What can a poem show us about connecting with another person in a city full of people?

Cities have a way of simultaneously fragmenting human relationships and offering new possibilities for human connection. As Wirth says, "While on the one hand the traditional ties of human association are weakened, urban existence involves a much greater degree of interdependence between man and man and a more complicated, fragile, and volatile form of mutual interrelations over many phases of which the individual as such can exert scarcely any control" (103). The advent of the internet and social media has only magnified this effect, making people at once more connected and more alienated. The poems in this section explore the "complicated, fragile, and volatile" connections formed between people in a city. Students will respond to these texts with their own poem, inspired by Craigslist "Missed Connections."

Poems:
1. Frank O'Hara, "Ave Maria"
This poem seems to start out as an ode to the movies, but it quickly becomes clear that O'Hara's speaker is much more interested in the people he might encounter in the dark theater, whether on screen or in the seats. The poem also raises a number of questions that will be fascinating to young people: independence in the city is exciting for young people, but is it safe? How do we experience public space differently than O'Hara's speaker, in an age where many of us are more likely to watch movies on Netflix than in the theater?
2. Langston Hughes, "Juke Box Love Song"
This short poem uses images of Harlem as material for a love song. Though it is missing some of the more startling tensions of "Ave Maria," it also raises questions of its own: What does it mean to put buses and subways in a love poem instead of flowers and nightingales? What is significant about this seemingly "uncomplicated" love poem, given the positionality of the speaker and his beloved? Is this a part of the human experience that everyone has equal access to?
3. Major Jackson, "Urban Renewal XVIII"
In this poem, the speaker talks about being on the outside of the high school social world, watching power dynamics play out between teenagers and feeling the gravitational pull of

them himself. The poem is set in Philly, and it also provides students an example of how even people you only see in passing can generate intense emotions, which in turn will give them a model to work from when they write their own "missed connections" poem.

Prompt:
After reading the article by Mariam Dembele, write your own poem, at least three stanzas long, with each stanza taking the form of a separate "missed connection." Think about all three poems as you come up with ideas: what is exciting, complicated, or forbidden about this encounter for the speaker? How could the speaker use images of the city to get the other person's attention, romantically or otherwise? What was it like for the speaker to feel so intensely about the other person who might not have even noticed them?

Day 1: Read and color-mark both "Ave Maria" and "Juke Box Love Song." Discuss both poems, addressing some of the questions above; have students pick one of the discussion questions and write a 1-page response in their journals. Collaborative close reading of "Urban Renewal XVIII."
Day 2: Discuss some of the random encounters students have experienced in the city. Read and summarize Mariam Dembele article about Missed Connections. Collaboratively create a "missed connection" poem in the persona of one of the other three poems' speakers; draft student responses to the prompt and share out. Work on artist statement with any remaining time.

Section 5: Mythologizing The City
Guiding question: How can a poem help us define our city's mythology?

When the Eagles won the Superbowl in 2018, I asked my students if they thought Philadelphia had arrived as a "world-class city," and if not, what they thought it would take for Philly to become one. The responses were illuminating. Some students thought Philadelphia would never be a world-class city, others thought it was possible with some sustained work to alleviate poverty, homelessness, and illegal dumping, and still others said that not only would Philadelphia never be a world-class city on the level of London or New York, but that Philadelphia did not and should not care about achieving this status.

Philadelphia has had something of an underdog complex for generations; as a city, Philly often seems like it has something to prove. Though we were the nation's original capital, and the birthplace of the U.S. Constitution, we also must contend with more difficult aspects of our history. We are the only United States city that has bombed its own citizens; while some neighborhoods are gentrifying at a dizzying pace, others remain defined by deep poverty and violence. What is Philadelphia's true identity as a city, and who gets to define it? In this section, I invite my students to take the lead in creating their own mythology of Philadelphia, choosing for themselves what is most important to highlight about their city.

Poems:
1. “Chicago,” by Carl Sandburg
In this poem, Sandburg personifies the city of Chicago as “City of the Big Shoulders.” The speaker considers the city’s reputation as an industrial center and also a place of violence, and still finds the city worthy of praise. The poem offers students a model for how to acknowledge some of the difficult parts of a city’s history and reputation, while still finding something to celebrate.
2. “I come from the fire city.” by Eve Ewing.
In this poem, Ewing uses different aspects of fire to describe different facets of her city, Chicago. I love the way this poem gives a mythological significance even to Flamin’ Hot Cheetos, and I think my students will too. I’ve used other poems by Ewing as mentor texts in the past and found them to be incredibly generative; I think this poem will as well.
3. “New York Poem,” by Terrance Hayes
This poem offers a different picture of New York than the two poems in Section 1, but is equally compelling. In this piece, Hayes plays with language to highlight New York’s contradictions and multiple possibilities. It is an excellent model of a poem that “does what it says,” and will get students thinking about how to use language to create the experience of being in Philly the way Hayes does with New York.

Prompts:
1. If Philadelphia was a person, or a mythological being, what would it look like? How old would it be? What would it be wearing? What kinds of activities would it do? What powers would it have? Using Carl Sandburg as a guide, address Philadelphia directly as if it is a person or being, and describe it in enough detail so your readers can see Philly the same way. If you want, like Carl Sandburg, you can also address things people say about Philly, deciding whether or not they are true and how much they matter.
2. For Eve Ewing, fire was the perfect metaphor to describe Chicago. Write a list of things that Philly reminds you of, and then pick one to use as an extended metaphor. Explore lots of different sides of the thing you picked, and talk about different ways that thing resembles Philadelphia. Think about how to use language to create the experience of being in this city for your reader, the same way Hayes does in his poem.

Day 1: Collaborative close reading of “Chicago.” Introduce Prompt #1 and give students time to draft in class. Finish with some independent work time on revisions and artist statements.
Day 2: Collaborative close reading of “I come from the fire city,” followed by journal response: what common threads do you see in these two poets’ portraits of Chicago, even though they are separated by a number of decades? What insight can you get from this about how much a city’s character does or does not change over time? Introduce Prompt #2 and begin drafting.

Day 3: Collaborative close reading of "New York Poem," followed by journal response comparing it to Canto 8 of "Song of Myself." Workshop and revise poems, with a specific eye to using language to create the particular experience of being in Philly, the way Hayes does.

Unit Wrap-Up
Day 1-2: Additional time for workshopping and revising poems and artist statements, as needed.
Day 3: Final touches on portfolios and artist statements. Final share-out, debrief, and and written reflection.

Classroom Activities

Sample Lesson 1: Walt Whitman And Ariel Francisco. (Section 1, Day 1)

Objectives:
Students will be able to collaboratively analyze how the structure of Canto 8 of *Song of Myself* creates, for the reader, the experience of being in the middle of a busy city street.
Students will be able to compare the theme and style of Canto 8 of *Song of Myself* to Ariel Francisco's "Along the East River and in the Bronx Young Men Were Singing"
Finally, students will brainstorm images for their own poem, about a moment in a city where everything is happening all at once.

PA Core Standards Addressed:
Standard CC.1.2.9-10.B: *Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences and conclusions based on an author's explicit assumptions and beliefs about a subject.*
Standard - CC.1.3.9-10.E: *Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it and manipulate time create an effect.*
Standard - CC.1.3.9-10.F: *Analyze how words and phrases shape meaning and tone in texts.*

Materials:
Student journals
Copies of Canto 8 of Song of Myself and "Along the East River and In the Bronx Young Men Were Singing"
Projector/smartboard
Chart paper (optional)
Copies of writing prompt

Procedures:
Do Now: Project image of New York street scene by Will Eisner.

What do you think this street sounds like? If you were on this street, which person would you be?

Briefly share out from Do Now. Explain collaborative close reading process to students. Distribute copies of Canto 8. Arrange desks or chairs in a circle (or as close as you can get). Divide the poem up equally so that each student or pair of students is responsible for a few words or part of a line. (This will depend on the size of the group.) Read the poem out loud once all the way through, or have a student read it aloud. Then go around the circle and collaboratively close read the poem, talking about each little segment in turn. This will probably take at least a half-hour.

Then, distribute copies of "Along the East River and In the Bronx Young Men Were Singing." You may need to break up the circle and have students return to their seats. Ask students to read the poem in pairs and discuss it for 5-10 minutes. Then, ask them to respond in their journals: What do you notice about the way the poem is put together? How is this similar to Canto 8? How is the speaker's attitude toward all these sounds similar? Justify your response with evidence from the text. The response should be at least one robust paragraph long, which will take another 15 minutes or so.

Finally, using the smartboard or chart paper, ask students to brainstorm: Imagine a moment in time, in your neighborhood, in your city, where everybody is out. Maybe it's a Saturday afternoon in summer, or a spring day right after school lets out. What are the sounds? List as many as you can and push students to be as specific as possible in their description.

Distribute Prompt #1 for Section 1, give students 10-15 minutes to begin drafting the poem based on their notes.

Exit Ticket:
If Walt Whitman was writing Canto 8 under the el, what would he notice? What would his favorite sounds be?

Sample Lesson 2: Ross Gay (Section 2, Day 2)

Objectives:
Students will be able to recognize and mark patterns of imagery and language in order to explain how those elements in the poem create the poem's theme
Students will be able to identify, explain, and evaluate common thematic and stylistic elements of "To the Fig Tree at 9th and Christian" with one of two poems by William Carlos Williams, using textual evidence to support their claims

PA Core Standards Addressed:

Standard CC.1.2.9-10.B: *Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences and conclusions based on an author's explicit assumptions and beliefs about a subject.*
Standard - CC.1.3.9-10.E: *Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it and manipulate time create an effect.*
Standard - CC.1.3.9-10.F: *Analyze how words and phrases shape meaning and tone in texts.*

Materials:
Copies of "To The Fig Tree At 9th and Christian" and extra copies of "Between Walls" and "To a Poor Old Woman"
Colored pencils, enough for 5 different colors for each student
Projector/smartboard
Lined paper

Procedures:
Do Now: Can you think of a time where something happened as you were walking down the street that was so amazing you stopped and forgot all about where you were going for a moment? If you haven't experienced something like this, what would it take to make you stop in your tracks like this?

Share out from Do Now. Distribute copies of poem, and play video clip of Ross Gay reading it aloud for the first time through; students should just listen and follow along on the first read. For the second read through, tell students to mark unfamiliar vocabulary or terms as the teacher or a student volunteer reads the poem aloud. Give student-friendly definitions for unfamiliar terms, or use targeted questioning to help students figure out the definition from context. It may be helpful at this stage to project an image or two of a fig tree and of the ripe fruit if students are unfamiliar with it.

Ask students, "What are some things you see happening more than once in this poem?" Challenge them to come up with as many as possible, and keep a running list on the board as students offer suggestions. Once there are at least 10 to 15 items in the list, tell students to take 5 different color pencils and pick 5 of the elements on the list to color-mark in the poem. Remind students that if there are large sections of the poem that are not marked when they are done, they should see what's happening in those sections and pick a sixth color to mark another pattern.

As students finish marking the poem, arrange them in small groups. Try to mix students up so they are in a group with people who did not all choose the same things to annotate. Give them ten minutes, as a group, to prepare responses to the following questions:
1. What patterns did your group members choose to mark? Come to an agreement as to which are the 3 most important.

2. What did you find in the poem that didn't seem to fit with the other patterns, or seemed the most out of place?
3. What seemed to be working best in this poem? What lines or patterns did you like the most?
4. Based on everything you marked, what do you think this poem means?

Have groups share out and discuss responses. Distribute lined paper and project the following prompt:
Pick one of the two poems we read last time (Between Walls or To A Poor Old Woman). How is that poem similar to "To the Fig Tree at 9th and Christian," both in terms of its form and style (how it's written) as well as what it means? Your response should be at least two paragraphs. Use evidence in the text to back up your ideas.

If there is time remaining after students complete their responses, they can work independently to revise their poem drafts or continue composing artists statement.

Exit Ticket:
This poem was written while Ross Gay lived in Philadelphia, and it is about a real tree in South Philly. What version of Philadelphia does he give the reader in this poem? In your opinion, is this version of Philadelphia real? If it's not real, is it possible? Explain your thinking.

Sample Lesson 3: Missed Connections (Section 4, Day 3)

Objectives:
Students will be able to make connections between informational and literary text
Students will be able to identify and synthesize elements from mentor texts in order to write their own "missed connections" poems

PA Core Standards Addressed:
Standard - CC.1.2.9-10.A: *Determine a central idea of a text and analyze 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.*
Standard - CC.1.4.9-10.N: *Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple points of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters.*
Standard - CC.1.4.9-10.O: *Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, description, reflection, multiple plot lines, and pacing, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters; use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, settings, and/or characters.*

Materials Needed:
Student journals

Copies of Mariam Dembele article on Wawa Missed Connections; extra copies of poems from Section 4
Copies of prompt
Smartboard / projector / whiteboard
Lined paper for drafting

Procedures:

Do Now: What's the most Philly thing that has ever happened to you?

Share out from Do Nows. Students will have some funny stories to tell and this may take a little longer than usual. When the conversation seems to be wrapping up, transition into explaining the format of Craigslist "Missed Connections": they are anonymous messages, left by someone who was too shy or distracted to say something to the object of their interest in the moment; they usually include a description of the speaker, a description of the other person, and the location.

Distribute copies of Mariam Dembele article on Missed Connections in Wawa. Have them read in pairs, taking turns reading until the reader has a comment or a question. Once they finish reading, have them write a two-paragraph objective summary of the article in their journal. Give them about 15 minutes to write; students who do not finish in class should finish the summary for homework.

Distribute and introduce the writing prompt. As a model, collaboratively write a short "missed connection" stanza from the point of view of the speaker of one or two of the poems in Section 4. Remind students that the speakers of their "missed connection" poems can be themselves or an imaginary character, and that the three stanzas can have the same speaker or not. Encourage them to think about what would make each stanza as quintessentially Philly as possible. Build some time in for sharing out, either in small groups or as a class; offer to read a student's draft out loud if you think it is particularly good but the student is too shy to read it out loud themselves.

If there is time remaining, give students independent work time to draft their artist's statements for Section 4.

Exit Ticket: Of the poems that were read out loud, which did you like best and why? Which was the "most Philly" and why?

A Note On Formative and Summative Assessment

Much of the assessment in this unit is formative. It is difficult to put a score on a student's thoughtful participation in collaborative close reading. Looking at a student's annotations is another way to check for understanding. With in-class journal responses,

Do Nows, and exit tickets, I often circulate as students are writing and read over their shoulder, offering quick feedback and a stamp for completion; however, it would also be possible to collect journals for a grade, evaluating these responses with a rubric. In the unit outline, there are a number of places where students are asked to produce short, written responses to demonstrate their learning.

The summative assessment for the unit will be a portfolio of 5 poems; students should pick one poem they wrote for each section to revise and polish for the portfolio. Each poem is to be accompanied by an artist statement of at least 300 words, explaining, with textual evidence, how the student incorporated elements of the mentor text into their own work, and detailing how they refined the piece in subsequent drafts.

Grading the portfolio poses some potential conflicts for teachers. Koch and Farrell strongly urge against grading students' poetry. "Everything about student poetry writing suggests that it is best not to give grades for it…To write poetry, one has to trust one's most personal and private responses to words and feelings and also one's judgment of what is good writing. Without trusting oneself in this way, one can't hope to arrive at the very individual kinds of discoveries that make poetry so much worth reading and worth writing. Grading is an impediment to this kind of artistic self-trust and self-reliance" (294). I have found that poetry can be a strikingly effective way to get otherwise disengaged students seriously interested in writing; adding grades or scores to the picture runs the risk of discouraging these students yet again. In addition, I teach in an environment where many students have experienced serious trauma. Some students will want to use poetry as a way to process their trauma; other students may be wary of any personal writing because they do not wish to re-experience their trauma in the process of writing about it. In either case, whether they write about their trauma or avoid it, students may wonder if their choice will result in a bad grade. I never want to give my students the implicit message that the value of their writing is somehow tied to the degree to which it tackles personal trauma. If I do not give grades for creative work, I can avoid this possible pitfall. Finally, the reality is that every prompt is not going to generate a great poem for every student every time. This is one reason why I have included multiple poem prompts in many of the sections.

I have included the artist statement part of the assignment as a way around this issue. I recommend following Koch and Farrell's advice, and grading poems only on completion; the grade for the final assignment should rest solely on the artist statement, and shout reflect how thoughtfully and articulately the student explains the connections between their own work and the mentor text, as well as how persuasively they justify and explain their claims with evidence.

Resources

Works Cited

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Gallagher, Kelly. “Making the Most of Mentor Texts.” *ASCD,* 2014, http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr14/vol71/num07/Making-the-Most-of-Mentor-Texts.aspx

Percy, Jennifer. “Trapped By The ‘Walmart Of Heroin’”. *The New York Times*, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/10/magazine/kensington-heroin-opioid-philadelphia.html.

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Resources For Teachers

Barry, Lynda. *What It Is.* Drawn and Quarterly, 2008.

Part collage, part graphic memoir, part manual for jump-starting the creative mind, this book is a wonderful tool to help students tap into their creativity and bring images to life. By the time students get to high school, many of them are reluctant to try out any art form that they haven’t already proven they are “good” at. Barry’s exercises offer everyone a path back to the creative state all of us inhabited as children playing.

Dembele, Mariam. "How Did Wawa Become One of the Top Spots for Missed Connections?" *Philadelphia Magazine,* 2016, https://www.phillymag.com/news/2016/05/23/wawa-missed-connections/

This piece is a charming examination of Philadelphia Craigslist, and the phenomenon of Craigslist Missed Connections more generally. I have included it in Section 4 to give students some useful context before working with a writing prompt that incorporates Missed Connections.

Eisner, Will. "The Big City." *Brainstomping,* 2019, https://i1.wp.com/brainstomping.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Will-Eisner-New-York-The-Big-City-comic-48.jpg?w=790&ssl=1

This comic panel is part of the Do Now for the first day in unit 1. It is a picture of a busy street scene, filled with people and noise, and will prime students to think about the busy scene in Canto 8 of Whitman's *Song of Myself.*

Gallagher, Kelly. *Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing Through Modeling and Mentor Texts.* Stenhouse, 2011.

This volume is a comprehensive introduction to the process of teaching students to "read like writers" and use mentor texts as they write and revise. It offers a number of concrete, practical examples for implementing this process in the secondary classroom. Most of the chapters focus on expository rather than creative writing, but the procedures and insights in this volume are still quite applicable to this unit, as well as to classroom practice more generally.

Filreis, Al, editor. *Modern and Contemporary U.S. Poetry ("ModPo").* University of Pennsylvania. https://www.coursera.org/learn/modpo/home/welcome

"ModPo" is the massively-open online version of the Teacher's Institute seminar that generated this unit. The course materials, all available online for free through Coursera, include a vast number of items that will be helpful to teachers of poetry. For teachers unsure of how to implement collaborative close reading in their classrooms, the site includes videos introducing the technique, as well as a plethora of videos of the collaborative close reading process in action. The site includes many audio recordings of poets reading their work aloud as well. Under the "Resources" tab, there is also a designated "teacher resource center" with a number of videos and linked articles specifically dealing with pedagogy, and aligned to the syllabus of the larger course.

Koch, Kenneth and Kate Farrell. *Sleeping On The Wing: An Anthology of Modern Poetry with Essays on Reading and Writing.* Random House, 1981.

This anthology is a wonderful resource for how to use poems as mentor texts. The anthology is arranged chronologically by the poets' dates of birth, beginning with Walt Whitman and ending with Amiri Baraka; there is significant overlap between the selection of poems in this book and the selection in the ModPo syllabus. Each poet's pieces are followed by a short essay about that poet's work as well as "writing suggestions," detailed prompts with questions to get students thinking. The volume is written for a high school audience, and I have found that the essays and the prompts hold up quite well in the context of my own classroom.

Oprah Winfrey Network. "The Beautiful Poem That Will Bring You To Tears." *YouTube,* reading by Ross Gay, 22 January 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aT0A28IW7E

This is a short clip of Ross Gay reading "To The Fig Tree At 9th and Christian" aloud, from his book *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude.* This video is part of the lesson on this poem in Section 2.

"Virtual Tour." *Philadelphia's Magic Gardens.* Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, https://www.phillymagicgardens.org/about-us/virtual-tour/

This is a 3-D virtual tour of Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, a monumental sculptural and architectural creation by mosaic artist Isaiah Zagar. This resource is included in Section 1 of the unit alongside the poem "Between Walls" to get students thinking about different ways to see fragments of broken glass. It is the next best thing to a field trip.

Wyeth, Sharon Dennis. *Something Beautiful.* Doubleday, 1998.

This beautifully illustrated children's book, about a little girl who is frustrated by the ugliness in her neighborhood and goes on a quest to find something beautiful, is included alongside the prompt in Section 2 to get students thinking about what ordinary things they find beautiful. Teachers may find that it sparks a broader conversation about how imagination and a different perspective can change how people experience the city.

Student Reading List

Ewing, Eve. "I come from the fire city." *Poets.org,* The Academy of American Poets, 2017. https://poets.org/poem/i-come-fire-city

Francisco, Ariel. "Along the East River and In The Bronx Young Men Were Singing." *The New Yorker,* 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/03/18/along-the-east-river-and-in-the-bronx-young-men-were-singing

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Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself (1892 version)." *Poetry Foundation,* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version

Williams, William Carlos. "Between Walls." *Poetry Foundation,* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49849/between-walls

Williams, William Carlos. "To A Poor Old Woman." *Poetry Foundation,* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51653/to-a-poor-old-woman

Wisher, Yolanda. "5 South 43rd St, Floor 2." *Poetry Foundation,* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57849/5-south-43rd-street-floor-2

Appendix A: Standards

Though the PA State Standards for ELA do not explicitly mention poetry, focusing instead on informational text and narrative fiction, there are a number of state standards

that we will be addressing through the course of this project. The process of close reading and analysis of the poems will be rigorous, and the process of writing in response to these poems as mentor text will be equally rigorous, since it will push students' thinking and imagination while also giving them a constraint to work within.

Here are some of the standards that will be addressed by the collaborative close reading, annotation, and discussion of the poems:

Standard CC.1.2.9-10.B: *Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences and conclusions based on an author's explicit assumptions and beliefs about a subject.*
Students will be working to this standard almost constantly throughout the unit, not only through the process of collaborative close reading but also in their written responses.

Standard - CC.1.3.9-10.E: *Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it and manipulate time create an effect.*
Part of collaborative close reading is examining how a poem "does what it says," arranging language in such a way as to create a specific experience for the reader. Any time students consider this question, they are working to this standard.

Standard - CC.1.3.9-10.F: *Analyze how words and phrases shape meaning and tone in texts.*
Close reading, by its very nature, demands that readers consider how word choice, or even punctuation, shapes meaning and tone. Students will be working to this standard every time they close read or annotate a poem.

Here are some of the standards that will be addressed through the process of writing poems after mentor texts, and reflecting on the stylistic choices made in this process:

Standard - CC.1.4.9-10.N: *Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple points of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters.*
Every time students consider how their speaker is situated in the poem, or explore an image in detail, they will be working to this standard.

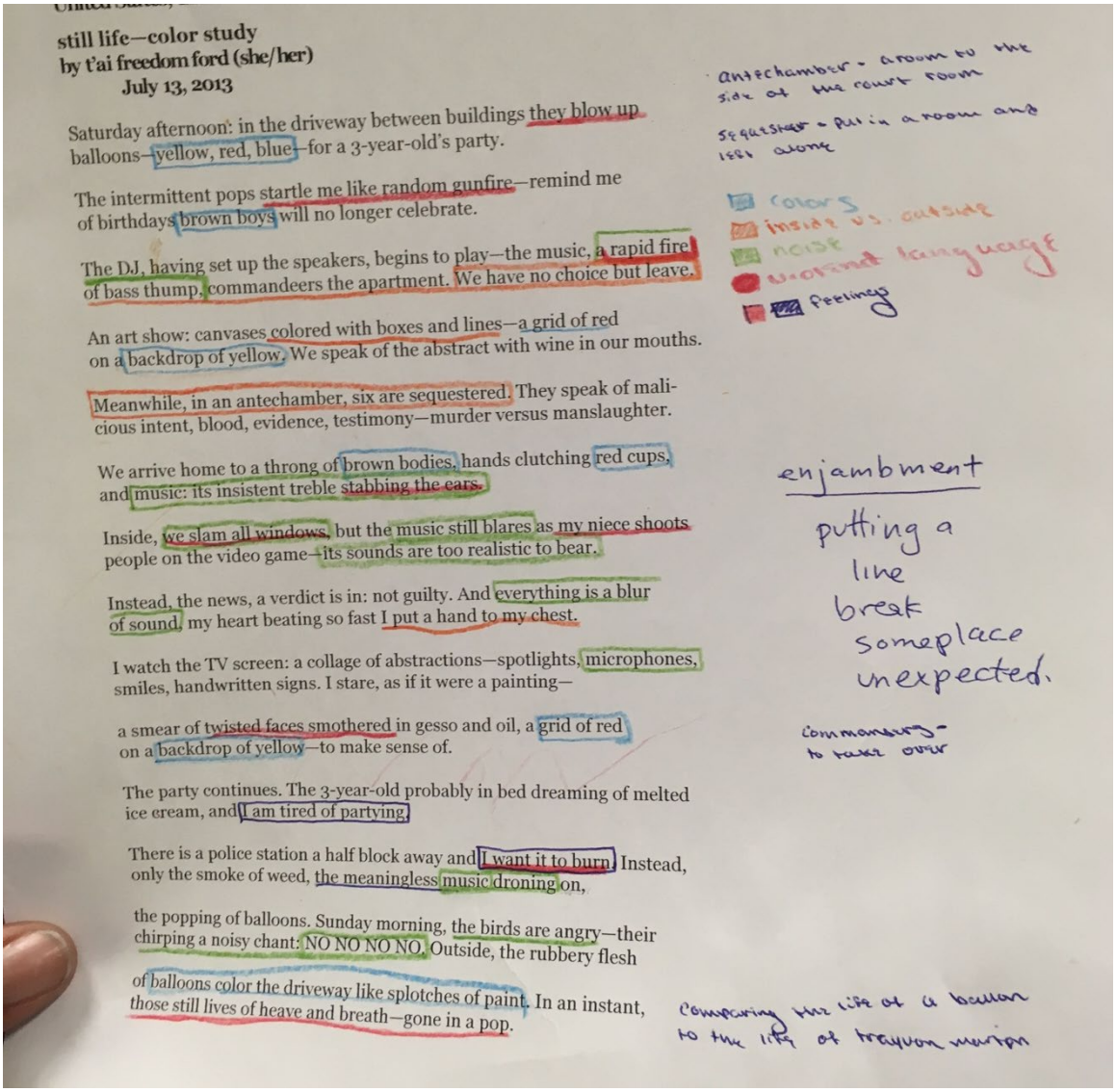
Standard - CC.1.4.9-10.O: *Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, description, reflection, multiple plot lines, and pacing, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters; use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, settings, and/or characters.*
Students will be using all of these techniques and more (thinking about things like punctuation and line breaks) as they draft and revise their poems.

Standard - CC.1.4.9-10.S: *Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research, applying grade-level reading standards for literature and literary nonfiction.*
Students will be working to this standard in their artist statements, the unit's culminating assessment, as well as in numerous shorter responses where they are asked to justify their analysis with evidence.

Standard - CC.1.4.9-10.T: *Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.*
Workshopping and revision is a significant element of this unit; students will be working to this standard every time they consider their choices carefully when planning, executing, or revising a draft.

Appendix B: Examples of Color-Marking

These two images are of the same poem, color-marked by two different students. In addition to marking up of the poem, they have added a legend on the side so they can remember what each color represents, and have also jotted questions and definitions of unfamiliar vocabulary around the margins. (This particular poem comes from a poetry unit I teach that is structured around the Bill of Rights, which is why the text of Amendment VII appears at the top of the second image.) I have consistently found that this annotation technique can help students get a handle on even very difficult poems.



Color - Drugs -
Art -
Sound -
Violence -

Amendment VII: In suits at common law, where the value in controversy shall exceed twenty dollars, the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact tried by a jury, shall be otherwise reexamined in any court of the United States, than according to the rules of the common law.

What does twenty dollars have to do with anything

still life—color study
by TAI FREEDOM FORD
July 13, 2013 ?

Saturday afternoon: in the driveway between buildings they blow up balloons—yellow, red, blue—for a 3-year-old's party.

The intermittent pops startle me like random gunfire—remind me of birthdays brown boys will no longer celebrate.

The DJ, having set up the speakers, begins to play—the music, a rapid fire of bass thump, commandeers the apartment. We have no choice but leave.

An art show: canvases colored with boxes and lines—a grid of red on a backdrop of yellow. We speak of the abstract with wine in our mouths.

Meanwhile, in an antechamber, six are sequestered. They speak of malicious intent, blood, evidence, testimony—murder versus manslaughter.

We arrive home to a throng of brown bodies, hands clutching red cups, and music: its insistent treble stabbing the ears.

Inside, we slam all windows, but the music still blares as my niece shoots people on the video game—its sounds are too realistic to bear.

Instead, the news, a verdict is in: not guilty. And everything is a blur of sound, my heart beating so fast I put a hand to my chest.

I watch the TV screen: a collage of abstractions—spotlights, microphones, smiles, handwritten signs. I stare, as if it were a painting—

a smear of twisted faces smothered in gesso and oil, a grid of red on a backdrop of yellow—to make sense of.

Why are they smoking weed at a 3 yo's party

The party continues. The 3-year-old probably in bed dreaming of melted ice cream, and I am tired of partying.

There is a police station a half block away and I want it to burn. Instead, only the smoke of weed, the meaningless music droning on,

the popping of balloons. Sunday morning, the birds are angry—their chirping a noisy chant: NO NO NO NO. Outside, the rubbery flesh

of balloons color the driveway like splotches of paint. In an instant, those still lives of heave and breath—gone in a pop.

Intermittent - every so often

Malicious intent - intentionally trying to harm someone

Sequestered - isolated when your in a jury

Antechamber - Room on the side of a courtroom