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Social Justice Poetry: Listening to the Trees

by Rebecca Darugar

GRADES 8–12

TYPE
POETRY

COMMITMENT
4 SESSIONS; 45-60
MINUTES EACH

If you ask students to define poetry, chances are “political” won’t make it to the top of any list. And yet, paying attention to the world we live in and speaking your truth is, at its heart, a political action. This series of lessons introduces students to poetry as a means to resist and critique current social and political issues. Students learn what constitutes political poetry before lending their voices to social justice issues of particular importance.

SESSION 1: POETRY AS POLITICAL

In this session, students are introduced to political poetry and dive into a discussion about which contemporary socio-political issues are most pressing to them.

YOU WILL NEED

- Poetry as Political — Handout
- Social Justice Poetry — Slideshow
- Copies or projections of the following poems*
 - “Love Rejected” by Lucille Clifton
 - “not an elegy for Mike Brown” by Danez Smith
 -

“Sonnet for Police Officers Charged with Enforcing SB1070” by Karen S. Córdova

*You may find these poems, which were used in the original 826NYC workshop, online or find many other examples of political poetry to use as inspiration.

STEP 1 (10 MINUTES)

Do Now

Get students started by asking them to reflect and write about current events that are on their radar. What new stories are they talking about? What have they heard recently on the news, on social media, or in conversation that strikes them as important politically, socially, economically, or culturally? After a few minutes of writing, ask students to share in small groups. Then, poll the group to create a class list of important news stories or events, asking students to briefly call out why they believe each to be important.

STEP 2 (10 MINUTES)

“Love Rejected” by Lucille Clifton

Pass out copies of the poem “Love Rejected” by Lucille Clifton.

“Love Rejected” is a short, powerful poem that lends itself to multiple readings. You might try asking students to first read it on their own for understanding (no notes!), then perform a choral reading as a class, and finally ask students to read it once more, this time noting the poetic devices and structural choices Clifton made.

Next, share the following guiding questions for discussion with students. Ask them to discuss their responses in small groups or as a class.

- What is this poem about?
- Do you relate to the idea? How do you feel when you read this poem?
- Who is the speaker?
- To whom is the speaker talking? Who is the subject of the poem?
- Talk about the use of “Love.”

Either before or after this discussion, you may choose to provide a brief biography of Lucille Clifton, which can be found on <https://www.poets.org>, and share with students that this poem was written in response to the Black Power movement of the 1960s. How does this context alter their interpretation?

STEP 3 (15 MINUTES)

“not an elegy for Mike Brown” by Danez Smith

Next, pass out copies of “not an elegy for Mike Brown” by Danez Smith. Read this poem once as a class, then ask students to read it again independently. When they finish, students should take a few minutes to respond to the poem in their notebooks. Provide this prompt: How do you feel when you read this poem? What images does it conjure? What feelings and emotions does it bring up?

After students have had the opportunity to reflect, pose the following guiding questions for class discussion:

- What is this poem about? What difference do you think it makes that this is a poem and not an essay or article?
- How do you respond to the author’s question, “isn’t that what being black is about?”
- What message is the speaker sending by comparing the Trojan war (Greeks against the city of Troy) and the killing of a black boy?
- Who is the speaker? To whom is the speaker talking?
- What does the speaker demand? Why?

Before moving on to the final poem of resistance, ask students to compare the first two poems. Given that these pieces were written forty years apart, how are they similar?

STEP 4 (10 MINUTES)

“Sonnet for Police Officers Charged with Enforcing SB1070” by Karen S. Córdova

Introduce the final social justice poem to students: “Sonnet for Police Officers Charged with Enforcing SB1070” by Karen S. Córdova. Ask students to first read the poem independently, then read it together and discuss.

Guiding questions for discussion:

- How do you feel when you read this poem? What images does it conjure? What feelings, emotions does it bring up?
- Who is the speaker? To whom is the speaker talking?
- What is this poem about? What difference do you think it makes that this is a poem and not an essay or article?

If students haven’t already brought it up, ask them to notice figurative language Córdova uses and discuss the related images and meaning. Some examples to note: “Irish eyes are lawlessly smiling” and “Their toil seeded your freedom”.

Before moving into the closing writing activity, ask the group what these three poems accomplish that a news story, newspaper article, essay, etc. could not. How are they successful (or not) in resisting a social or political injustice?

STEP 5 (10 MINUTES)

Writing Activity

Remind students that they started the lesson discussing current events that are top of mind. In the last ten minutes, they should reflect on the following question: what issues of injustice and justice are most important to you right now? Why?

SESSION 2: PERSONAL AS POLITICAL POETRY

In this session, students are introduced to poetry that explores intersectional identities and considers aspects of their identity that collide with each other and are reflected in current events.

YOU WILL NEED

- Personal as Political Poetry — Handout
- Social Justice Poetry — Slideshow
- Blank paper for written discussion responses
- Copies or projections of the following poems*
 - “Who Said It Was Simple?” by Audre Lorde
 - “Tonight, in Oakland” by Danez Smith

*You may find these poems, which were used in the original 826NYC workshop, online or find many other examples of political poetry to use as inspiration.

STEP 1 (10 MINUTES)**Do Now: Journaling**

To begin, students will respond to one of the following prompts on their handouts:

- Talk about one of the first moments you noticed human difference. Begin with this line: “I first noticed his/her/their ____.”
- Talk about a time when you noticed that something about you was different from those around you. Begin with this line: “I first noticed that I was ____ when ____.”
- Draw a line down the middle of a page. On the left side, make a list of your identities. On the right side, write about times when you are aware of being one of those identities more than another.
- Have you ever felt privileged or disadvantaged because of some unchangeable aspect of who you are?

STEP 2 (10 MINUTES)**“Who Said It Was Simple?” by Audre Lorde**

In the previous lesson, students read and discussed poetry as a means of political or social resistance. In this lesson, students will analyze two poems that move from political to deeply personal.

Begin by passing out copies of “Who Said It Was Simple?” by Audre Lorde. Ask students to read the poem once for understanding, then read the poem together, directing students to note details related to the speaker’s identity.

Afterward, have students independently answer the following question in their notebooks: What does this poem say to you? What is its overall argument?

Ask students to share their ideas in small groups, then come together as a class to discuss the overall “gist” and argument presented in the poem. Prompt students to notice the mood and tone set by the

dark imagery of the opening stanza: the metaphor and personification of the angry tree; a tree that is also fragile and can break young.

Next, ask students to describe how the speaker sounds throughout the poem, and any change in tone they might notice. Note the speaker's anger surrounding sexism and racism occurring as casual, cultural norm.

The speaker moves from making cultural observations to speaking about herself. Ask students why, and how, the speaker makes this shift. What connection(s) is made between the social/political and the personal?

If and when it feels pertinent in your group, introduce that Audre Lorde described herself as a "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet." How does this knowledge influence their understanding of the poem?

STEP 3 (10 MINUTES)

"Tonight, in Oakland" by Danez Smith

Next, pass out copies of "Tonight, in Oakland" by Danez Smith. Read this poem as a class, switching readers with every stanza, then ask students to read it once more on their own, marking details that suggest how the speaker identifies. You can find an audio version of this poem online, read by Smith, to play for this second reading as well.

Have students independently write or think about the following question: What does this poem say to you? What is its overall argument? After a few minutes, take ideas from the group.

Then, ask students to discuss the following guiding questions in small groups:

- What contrasting images do you notice between the first and second halves of this poem?
(Marigolds, plums, garden, rain, honey vs. blood, wound, mean mug, bullet, bury, shovels, prison)
How are these contrasting images mirrored in the last stanza?
- How does the speaker identify? What groups does he identify with (who is the “we” and “us”)?
- If and when it feels pertinent in your group, you can introduce this quote from Danez Smith: “I am very queer and I also very much love God. They’re kind of inseparable for me.”
- Discuss anything else that comes up, as well!

STEP 4 (10 MINUTES)

Personal as Political Writing Activity

These authors write through their own intersectional identities and the intersection of the personal and the political. Brainstorm some aspects of your own identity and personal history (or present) and how your story blends and bends with that of a larger, more expansive history (or present).

Time permitting, students can begin a poem!

SESSION 3: SPOKEN WORD, SHARED TRUTH

YOU WILL NEED

- Spoken Word & Topic — Handout
- Social Justice Poetry — Slideshow
- A recording or example performance of spoken word poetry*
 - “Brown Boy. White House” by Amir Safi (YouTube, Button Poetry “Classroom-Friendly Poems”)
 - Lee Mokobe: “A powerful poem about what it feels like to be transgender” (Ted Talks)
 - “Black Girl Magic” by Mahogany Browne (Youtube)

*You may find these recordings of poems, which were used in the original 826NYC workshop, online or find many other examples of spoken word poetry.

STEP 1 (8 MINUTES)

“Brown Boy. White House” by Amir Safi

Project or read the following quote from Audre Lord:

“...poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence.”

Ask students to reflect on this quote. Why is poetry a vital necessity? How is it both personal and political?

In this lesson, students will watch performances from three spoken word poets and begin their own social justice poem. As students watch and write poetry today, ask them to consider why these words are necessary, and how they serve as protest.

Begin by watching “Brown Boy. White House” by Amir Afi (found on Youtube).

Pose the following guiding questions for students to discuss, whether as a class or In small groups, students should discuss:

- What parts of the author’s identity are made clear?
- How was/is this identity brought to conflict with the outside world?
- What is the author’s purpose in sharing this poem?
- Do you think it is important that the author share this part of themselves? Why or why not?

STEP 2 (8 MINUTES)

Lee Mokobe Spoken Word

Next, watch Lee Mokobe’s Ted Talk “A powerful poem about what it feels like to be transgender” together and discuss.

Guiding questions for discussion:

- What is the main argument that Mokobe presents?
- How was/is this identity brought to conflict with the outside world?
- What is the author’s purpose in sharing this poem?
- Do you think it is important that the author share this part of themselves? Why or why not?

STEP 3 (8 MINUTES)

“Black Girl Magic” by Mahogany Browne

Finally, watch “Black Girl Magic” by Mahogany Browne (found on Youtube).

As a class, discuss:

- What parts of the author’s identity are made clear?
- How is/was this identity brought to conflict with the outside world?
- What do you think is the author’s purpose in sharing this poem?
- Do you think it is important that the author share this part of themselves? Why or why not?

STEP 4 (20 MINUTES)**Guiding Questions for Poetry Brainstorm**

Following along in the “Poetry Brainstorm” handout, students answer these questions as they begin brainstorming for their poems:

- What current social and political issues are most important? Why?
- What parts of your identity, if any, relate to that issue? How?
- What emotions do you have related to the issues at hand? How do they make you feel?

After about five minutes, ask students to share their responses and ideas in small groups. Next, and following along on the handout, students select the topic of their choice and, time permitting, begin planning the images, emotions, and narrative they want to include in their poems.

SESSION 4: POEM WORKSHOP AND REVISION

In this session, students workshop their poems with their peers and share feedback. They then revise their poems and wrap up their final drafts.

YOU WILL NEED

- Revision and Editing — Handout
- Social Justice Poetry — Slideshow
- Students’ drafts

STEP 1 (20 MINUTES)

Workshopping

Students should come to this lesson with a first draft in hand.

Begin by framing your expectations for the poetry workshop. It may be helpful to remind students that these poems are deeply personal and may evoke strong and surprising responses from readers. That is precisely the point, so it's important that no matter our reaction to the piece, our feedback is framed constructively.

Review the following guidelines with students:

Readers:

- Lead with something positive.
- Be specific. Not, "I liked it!"
- Talk it out, don't be shy. You're helping the author achieve their desired reaction.

Authors:

- Listen, ask questions, seek clarification. Do not get defensive!

Once workshop logistics are covered, pair students up for peer workshopping. At the conclusion of the workshop, you may ask for students to write down or volunteer key takeaways that they learned from their partner and have them create a goal for revising their poems.

STEP 2 (25 MINUTES)

Students will return to their poems to revise and write. Project the A.R.M.S. vs. C.U.P.S. graphic organizer for students to point out that they should focus on the content and meaning of their poems

first. To do so, they can:

- Add words and lines
- Remove words or phrases that you don't need
- Move/change a word or placement of words or phrases
- Substitute words or phrases for new ones

To close, ask students to come together and take volunteers to share their pieces. Social justice poetry is more powerful when shared, so consider ways for students to publish, post, or perform their revised poems with another audience—whether that's at school, within their community, or to a national audience.