

“Ballad in O”: Sound, Sense, Play, and Place

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Grade Level: University

Time Frame: 70 minutes

Objective: Students will use assonance to reinvigorate and reexamine their relationship with a familiar place.

Prior Knowledge and Skills: None required, although some prior discussion of received forms, the effects of formal constraints in poetry, and rhyme can be helpful.

Required Materials: Recording of Cathy Park Hong’s poem “Ballad in O”; computer with Internet access and audio/video playback capability. Recording is available on [voca](#), the Poetry Center’s online audio/video library.

Sequence of Activities

Introduction: 10 minutes

Give students a quick introduction to **voca**, the Poetry Center’s online audio/video library. Ask students why listening to poems (in addition to encountering poems on the page) might be useful. Would they prefer to hear a poem, read a poem, or both? Why?

Discussion: 20 minutes

Introduce the concept of “univocalic” poetry (a type of lipogram with an extreme constraint: the poet may use only one vowel throughout the piece). Play Cathy Park Hong’s performance of “Ballad in O” (recording on [voca](#)). (Recommended: play recording at least twice.)

Discuss the poem and its formal elements with students. Ask students: how did you react to the experience of hearing a poem, instead of reading it on the page? Was it difficult to understand? Why or why not? Which words or images stood out to you? Is the tone playful or serious? How does the univocalic constraint affect that tone? What words or sounds are repeated, and what effect do those repetitions have? How do you interpret the poem’s closing command, “vow to do good?”

Writing Activity: 30 minutes

As a class, move somewhere outside the classroom (if possible, move to the outdoors); moving to a setting outside the classroom helps students to think about the rhetoric and atmosphere of the space they inhabit.

Ask students to choose a vowel that seems to them to suit Tucson (or your current location).

Students will then generate text in response to a series of prompts based on the Cathy Park Hong poem:

- List 10 words that conform to the univocalic constraint for your chosen vowel.
- List 5 plants found in Tucson that incorporate your chosen vowel.
- List 3 weather words that describe Tucson and that incorporate your chosen vowel.
- List 3 foods you have eaten in Tucson that incorporate your chosen vowel.
- List 3 of the first things you saw in Tucson (or remember about Tucson).
- List 3 things you want to believe about Tucson.
- Free writing (3 minutes): What do you vow to do?

Ask students to use the language they have generated to create a poem; the poem can take any form they wish. Encourage students to use their chosen vowels to create musical assonance wherever possible.

Conclusion: 10 minutes

Ask for volunteers to share their writing with the class.