

# On the Dignity of Gestures

## Taylor Johnson

Education level: Junior High, High School

Genre: Poetry

Time frame: One sixty-minute class period (with possibly one more class period for time to revise or finish drafts).

Objective: To explore a variety of poetry prompts as jumping off points for writing about the theme of personal and/or cultural dignity in a time of social, political, and interpersonal conflict.

Prior knowledge and skills: None

Required materials: A slideshow linked in the sequence of activities that includes videos and the text of the poem will help you guide the lesson. Paper and pencil, or computers and writing software of choice.

Literary model: “On the Dignity of Gestures” by Kimberly Blaeser

### Sequence of Activities:

1. Begin the [slideshow resource](#) provided. Title slide provides an image of Kim Blaeser and the title of her poem, which is also the title of the lesson.
2. The second slide invites students to consider the question, “What does dignity mean to you?” Allow students the opportunity to share their own definitions. Ask them to elaborate on their understanding, and tell short anecdotes as needed to help them elaborate on their explanations. Provide 5-10 min (or more time) for the class to listen to one another and discuss as their interest allows; try to include as many students as possible to share a wide range of reflections and insights.
3. The third slide offers brief background information on Kimberly Blaeser herself. Read the slide aloud, or better yet, invite a student to read it aloud. Blaeser is an Anishinaabe poet.
4. The fourth slide offers a clip from a live reading that Kim Blaeser gave on January 30 at the UA Poetry Center for the Spring 2025 Reading Series. In the clip, Blaeser discusses the concept of her book’s title, *Ancient Light*. Give students an opportunity to discuss what Blaeser might mean about the impact of colonization on Indigenous people, non-Indigenous people, and the natural world, and feel free to offer your own elaborations to help support students making connections here, as needed. (If students are not familiar with the concept of colonization, you may need to provide some definitions and examples. This [brief video](#) gives a quick, useful definition.)
5. The fifth slide provides the text of the poem “On the Dignity of Gestures.” You can also [read it here online](#). Consider passing out printed copies if you want to make them available to students.

6. The sixth slide provides an excerpted clip of Blaeser reading her poem at the January 30<sup>th</sup> UA Poetry Center reading. (You can also play it from [Voca](#) if you prefer.) Give students an opportunity to listen to the poem more than once if needed.
7. The seventh slide has several poem writing prompts that can help lead into conversations to discuss the poem's meanings with the class as a whole, as well as to give students choice about what direction to take their explorations of similar themes in their own writing.
8. Provide students time to write their own poems in response to Blaeser's themes and the prompts as provocations. 10-15 minutes should be sufficient to create a rough draft.
9. Allow students the opportunity to read their drafts aloud.
10. Provide praise in the form of observations about your favorite lines within what students share, and affirm their efforts.
11. If you want to provide additional time in a follow-up class period to allow students to type handwritten drafts or add more lines or details to a partly finished effort, that may be appropriate, depending on the needs of your group of writers.
12. Additional Notes/Options:

Research and discuss Nathan Phillips' news story for more background information, which Blaeser also discusses herself right after the first excerpted clip of her reading provided in the slideshow. This [video interview by Democracy Now!](#) allows him to speak about his own perspective on the events he was involved in at the nation's capitol in 2019. Be advised that the context for the story does delve into politically controversial territory.

Alternatively, invite students to research the Anishinaabe or Ojibwe heritage and language to learn more about the cultural context of the author. Consider this online [Ojibwe People's Dictionary](#) with multimedia components as a starting point for your investigations.