

**OCTAVIA**

**POETRY FROM  
THE PERSONAL**

MOBILE FRIENDLY VERSION

**CRACKS IN THE  
CURRICULUM**

**RESOURCE 2**

*Cracks in the Curriculum* is a workshop series and publishing platform, which aims to bring artists and educators together to think about how to address pressing social issues in the classroom. The series explores key questions and themes that run through the Serpentine Education, Exhibition and Live programmes. The second edition, *Poetry from the Personal*, leads out of current discourse around migration, movement and identity, exploring the potential of poetry to address diverse personal histories. The content emerged from a workshop with Octavia Poetry Collective, educators and Serpentine Education at the Serpentine Gallery.

The resource features a series of questions for critical discussion, creative writing exercises and an alternative reading list of poetry by women of colour. These sections fold down to A4 so they can be photocopied and used for lesson planning. Towards the end of the resource is a collective poem produced by Octavia, alongside a photograph by Amaal Said, a member of Octavia.

*Poetry from the Personal* is an invitation for English teachers at primary, secondary and beyond to re-think conventional understandings of poetry and build strategies for identifying all of our selves in literature.

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- How can we encourage our students to write from the personal to create art that includes and reflects them; art which allows them to delve into themselves and find validation from and within their truths?
- What can we do as educators to live by the tenet that every story and person is valid, and how we can make space for this within the classroom?
- What are the benefits of a group/class/ gathering of minds and ideas?
- How can writing from personal experience help students find their own place within existing curriculum poems?
- If English is not a first language, how can we promote a 'third tongue' within creative writing?
- How can we make sure that we are not invalidating or exoticising stories?
- How can we present contemporary and/or diverse parallels to the poems on the curriculum in order to enable students to more easily identify with and understand the set texts?

Octavia is a poetry collective for women of colour led by Rachel Long and housed at Southbank Centre. Octavia was created so that women of colour could come together to read beyond the canon, write without fear of condemnation or exoticisation, share openly without censorship and support each other. There are seventeen members of Octavia, they are poets as well as educators, dancers and astrophysicists, making their collective voice zoetic and nuanced. Octavia have performed at Southbank Centre's Women of the World and London Literature Festivals. They've been featured in the Guardian and on the BBC World Service's Cultural Frontline show. Octavia have run workshops at Oxford University and for Africa Writes.

Octavia are: Amaal Said, Sunayana Bhargava, Amina Jama, Belinda Zhawi, Zahrah Sheikh, Anjali Barot, Ankita Saxena, Josette Joseph, Rachel Long, Raheela Suleman, Rhonda Rhiannon, Tania Nwachukwu, Theresa Lola, Victoria-Anne Bulley, Sarah Lasoye, Virginia Joseph, Hibaq Osman and Anita Barton-Williams.

The catalyst for setting up Octavia came about whilst I was at university studying an MA in literature. I'd look at my reading list each new term and wonder where all the great women were, where all the great Black and Asian writers were. I'd turn my reading list over in the hope that it was continued overleaf but no, we'd been excluded – again. I realised then that although I loved it, although I wanted to be part of it, literature systematically marginalised women and people of colour.

Around that same time, I'd begun meeting a number of brilliant women on the London poetry scene at various readings and events. Afterwards, in the bar or making our way home, we'd share heartbreakingly similar anecdotes about how difficult it was for us to be listened to, recognised and untokenised in our respective academic spaces or traditional literature institutions/ organisations.

## C O N T E X T

I decided that we needed somewhere we could come together to read the books and poems that we were in, where we could write our true selves and where we could share openly in the hope that it would yield some respite, some healing, some new understanding of self, other and the world. I badly needed that space and now I knew all these other women who needed that too.

I begin every workshop I run with a free write, specifically a guided free write. It is an excellent exercise for opening the muscles needed for writing – the hands and the creative mind. Another term for free writing is automatic writing or instant writing (but I prefer the term free writing because I feel it best gets to its essence – its departure from all other kinds of prescribed or set-purpose writing, and for all the possibilities it can yield).

I frame the exercise by declaring there are no rules – except one: to keep writing, to write continuously, to not pause to think of the ‘right’ word, or for crossing out or for consideration of spelling, grammar and punctuation. In fact, SPAG has little to no relevance here. I encourage participants to write the words however they spill out, invent spellings if they have to. In ‘traditional’ free writing, the writer writes continuously for a set amount of time, usually from a prompt point or word, for example ‘Home’, and then off they go.

The thought of writing continuously for five minutes from one prompt can be difficult for some people, especially students who have been told since the beginning of their writing education to consider all the things that this exercise is the opposite of. Those who struggle with not feeling in control or who enjoy doing things ‘right’ can also find this difficult as one does have to relinquish some control over what might be written next and surrender to automatic responses, to their creative gut. There is no ‘right’ way of doing a free write. Some people will respond in full sentences, others one-word responses.

All are welcome, all are ‘correct’. I prefer conducting guided free writes where ‘random’ prompts or words are injected at intervals so that participants have continuous springboards to bounce their response off from. No one knows what the next prompt will be and so it becomes almost impossible to control the direction of the writing or to create a linear narrative. The writing therefore becomes truly responsive to each word. It becomes exciting, full of unexpected twists and turns, and packed full of images and feelings one might never have written down if they’d been told to describe something in any of the usual ways.



Free writing allows participants to leave everything they may have heard or felt previously about writing at the door. This is their time to write whatever they like. Reiterate this. They can write whatever they like in response to the prompts. The results are always wonderful, surprising, they can throw up a lot of the subconscious and offer some stunning images, 'the gold dust' to carry into or to be used in a following or further writing challenge.

**Step 1 – Use the following prompts to guide your students through the free write:**

- **Write the very first thing that comes to mind when the teacher or facilitator offers the prompts.**
- **Try not to be critical or to edit your thoughts. Editing is a separate process that occurs later – you cannot use both the creative and editorial sides of your brain at once.**
- **If you run out of words, write I don't know, I don't know, I don't know OR repeat the last word you wrote down until something else comes. Ideas are bird-like, one will fly into your head, don't worry if it has 'no relevance' to the last thing you wrote, just write it down.**

**Step 2 – Read out the following list of prompts at approximately 30-second intervals, to guide the free write:**

- Your favourite colour
- I am...
- Name of the street you grew up on
- What did that street taste like?
- Give me directions from that street to here
- Where is home?
- Where are you trying to get back to?
- How do you escape from your own body?
- How does your language feel on your tongue?
- What is the heaviest thing you've ever carried?
- What is the most common advice your mother gives you?
- Describe how you breathe
- The most precious thing you own
- A line from your favourite song
- What does the mirror say most often to you?
- What colour would you make the sky if you could?
- What do you look like on the inside?
- What do you say most often to the mirror?

**How does it feel to free write?**

**Reflect with the group.**

## EXERCISE 2

### COLLECTIVE WRITING

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- Invite each person to mark a few phrases or sentences (at least one but no more than ten) from their free write.
- Now ask them to select the one that speaks to them most. In turn read out one line each.
- Create a record of your group poem and read it back. The lines often work very well together and hold a strange coherency that might be unexpected considering their beginnings and the random way it has been put together. Even if some lines don't 'work' together, it's ok. Embrace this. It is a collective creative experiment.

## EXERCISE 3

### ROLL WRITING

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- Invite a student to write down one line from their free write (perhaps one that was not shared for the collective writing exercise) at the top of a blank page.
- Once written, they have to pass it on to the person next to them. That person responds to the previous sentence in any way they like, they pass it on and so on. It is sometimes quite exciting to have two or three roll writes being passed around the classroom at the same time.
- Once each page has come back to the person who first set it off, call them back in and share the results. This is a good exercise for making writing fun, and for getting the class to think about subjectivity and discuss differences in tone and purpose as each line might differ quite considerably.

## EXERCISE 4

### PARALLEL POEMS

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- Choose a poem from the curriculum e.g. Wilfred Owen, 'Exposure'.
- Take it turns to read it out loud together.
- Each person should pick out one word or phrase from the poem that resonates with them. It could be as simple as 'awake' or a phrase such as 'some other war'.
- Take 10 minutes to write a response to your chosen word/phrase/line.
- Does the exercise help you to find yourself in the existing poem?

**AN UNCUT WOMAN  
IS THE BUILD UP  
TO A BEAT DROP  
THE GRACE BEFORE  
THE FEAST,  
THE BEGINNING  
OF SOMETHING  
BEAUTIFUL I THINK  
THE SCAR  
HEALED WRONG.**

I HEARD SKIN HAS  
A MEMORY OF ITS PAST-  
LIFE, THE COUNCIL FLAT  
YOU WERE A GIRL INSIDE  
HAS HAD ITS DOORS  
FIXED, NOW—FEARS OF  
SOMEONE CLIMBING IN  
WHILE YOU WERE TRYING  
TO DREAM—MAYBE YOURS  
CRACKED LIKE LOGS ON  
AN INDIAN FIRE.



REDISCOVER THE CLOTHES  
YOU TIED UP IN A REFUSE  
BAG SEVEN YEARS AGO,  
THE BATTERIES ALL  
DASHED FROM THE CLOCK  
AND THE BLINDS CLOSED  
TIGHT. CAN'T HIDE  
UNDER THE BED IF YOU'RE  
TOP BUNK, ELDEST,  
LAY CLOSEST TO HEAVEN,  
THE DOCTOR NEEDS  
TO OPEN YOU UP.

THEY WONDER HOW  
YOU MADE SOMETHING  
OF YOURSELF DEEP UNDER  
THE CONCRETE.  
WITHOUT WINCING,  
YOU TOLD THEM OF  
THE PATHS YOU TRAVELLED  
ON SUNDAY EVENINGS,  
YOUR BODY BURSTING  
AT THE SEAMS—

BETWEEN YOUR ARMPITS,  
ALONG YOUR EYELIDS,  
TAKE ME BACK WRITTEN  
ACROSS YOUR FOREHEAD.  
YOU HAVE TWO HOMES  
NOW, THEY BOTH  
STAY UP LATE, UNDER  
THE BED WHISPERING  
THINGS LIKE MAYBE YOU  
ARE THE MONSTER.

LATELY, IN YOUR MOUTH,  
THE WORD: HA-HA.  
IT FEELS AWKWARD  
TO USE YOUR FULL NAME,  
DOESN'T IT EXTINGUISH  
BLOOD AND GLITTER?

*Factory setting of the body, A cento or collective poem by several members of Octavia, in response to the word displacement, This poem was first published in Hotdog Feminist Magazine (issue 2).*



CONTEMPORARY POETRY  
BY WOMEN OF COLOUR

- Natalie Diaz, *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (2012)
- Safia Elhillo, *The January Children* (2017)
- Morgan Parker, *Other People's Comfort Keeps Me Up At Night* (2015)
- Warsan Shire, *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011)
- Patricia Smith, *Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah* (2012)

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