LIGHTBOX

This in-class activity was developed in conjunction with Lightbox interviews with Jericho Brown and Malachi Black. For more information, please see www.lightboxpoetry.com.

Invisible Listeners

In his interview, Malachi Black writes, "The purest manifestations of poetry and prayer both emerge from human need—consequential utterance always does—and attempt to manage or address the agitations that provoke them." He extends this comparison by discussing some modes of address that poems and prayers share: "Most lyric poems, like most prayers, are comprised of praise (ode) and/or lamentation (elegy)." In this activity, we'll explore what it means to address—that is, to speak to—something larger than ourselves.

Part I

Read selections from "Quarantine" by Malachi Black and/or "Prayer of the Backhanded" by Jericho Brown. As a class, discuss what you think is being addressed in the poems—who is meant to hear this poem? Then, think of the ways the poems address their subjects. As a class, deduce some of the modes of address these prayer-poems use. For example, where do the speakers command their listeners to do something? Where do they ask their listeners questions? What other ways of addressing can you find in the poems? Keep a list of these modes in your notebooks or on the board.

Part II

In small groups, generate a list of abstractions you might address. These might be emotions, such as happiness or sadness or guilt; states of mind, such as anxiety or euphoria; complicated concepts, such as the Theory of Relativity or Feng Shui; or deities from any system of spiritual thought.

Part III

Now, as a group, choose a few abstractions and practice "addressing" them, using the modes we deduced earlier. Command them. Interrogate them. Beg or beseech them. Praise them. Generate a few sentences for each of these modes of address. Share the most provocative and stimulating examples.

Part IV

Finally, as a class, reflect on the process of addressing an "invisible listener." How is it different from addressing a person directly in front of you? What modes of address seemed the most effective for speaking to your particular abstractions?