



This in-class activity was developed in conjunction with Lightbox interviews with [Tarfia Faizullah](#) and [Phillip B. Williams](#). For more information, please see [www.lightboxpoetry.com](http://www.lightboxpoetry.com).

## Public and Private Memory

In his interview, Phillip B. Williams speaks about his poetic engagement with news documentation of the unsolved murder of Rashawn Brazell. In writing his long poem, “Witness,” he sought to “at least try to be the witness that Brazell never had as there were no witnesses to his death. The sections in the poem subtitled “witness” are all false, my hope that someone (and in one case *something*) somewhere saw what happened.” In this activity, we’d like you to respond and incorporate news and media documentation of an event that impacted your own life.

### Part I

As a class, read and discuss Phillip B. Williams’ poem “Witness” from his book *Thief in the Interior*. Together, make some observations about how the news articles Williams mentions in his interview make their way into the poems. How are the poems changed by the news articles? Do the news articles change in light of the poems? What strategies do you notice Williams employing to bring these two kinds of texts together successfully?

### Part II

Choose a news event that has impacted your life, or the life of your family, in ways that feel important to you. This could be a formative experience your parents (or an ancestor) had, or something that happened in the world during your own lifetime. Using a laptop, library computer, or your cell phone, do some research into the news and media coverage surrounding this event. Can you find articles, photo essays, interviews, or books that might count as public responses documenting this event in some way?

Spend some time reading and choosing sections of these documents that feel personally interesting or relevant to your interest in this event. Type up some quotations that might be useful to you as you meditate on your event.

### Part III

Now, do some in-class writing that calls upon your own memory, identity, and family history to respond to this event. How was this event personal for you and the people who are important to you? What textures and details from your own life might breathe life into this experience for others? Try to write as many sensory details as possible related to how this event unfolded as part of your life.



#### **Part IV**

In the last few minutes of class, reflect on how you might incorporate, respond to, or argue with some of the news media documentation of this event that you researched in class. How might these two documents of the same event rub up against each other, create interesting conversations or frictions? Consider how you could create a formal draft of a poem that brings together these two texts when you get home.