

Form & Theory: The Performance and Poetics of Race and Gender, Spring 2014

English Writing 1294 & English Literature 1294

professor Eric Schwerer

Wednesdays 6:00-8:40pm, 251 Biddle Hall

Through both creative writing exercises and essay assignments, we will explore some of the techniques, forms, theories, and subjects at the heart of contemporary American poetry.

With an emphasis on diversity, we will discover how poetry delights, disturbs, liberates, performs, & represents our multicultural world.

Required Materials:

- *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry*, Gillan and Gillan
- an active @pitt.edu email account that can receive large (< 8,000KB) .pdf files
- ability to print over 200 pages of material
- a notebook to use as a creative space to draft poems as well as a reflective/scholarly space to process our readings as you prepare for discussion

Additional Materials:

- The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, 2012 (**full text online via PITTCat**)
- *Poetry Like Bread: Poets of The Political Imagination*, Marin Espada, editor (**on reserve in Owen**)
- *Heath Anthology of American Literature: Contemporary: 1945 to the Present* (**on reserve in Owen**)
- these websites and web sites that you discover and share with the class:
tedxtalks.ted.com, www.ubu.com, 1hood.org, etc, etc...

Grading:

Participation

Poems

Critical Essays

Memorization and Performance

Participation

If you do not keep up with the reading and writing assignments and do not come to class prepared to help lead discussion, then you will earn a “D” or “F” in participation. To earn a “C” in participation you will need to regularly contribute to discussion. If you convey to your peers and me a good or superior engagement of the required reading and assignments, then you will earn a “B” or an “A.”

When you miss a class, you miss an experience that cannot be replicated or made up. Nonetheless, if you do miss a class, then contact either me or a classmate to get any notes, handouts, or updates so that you come to the next class fully prepared. It is unlikely that you will earn an “A,” “B,” or “C” in participation if you do not make an effort in these regards or if you miss more than three (3) classes during the semester.

Finally, you will receive an “F” for the semester in the category of “participation” when you fail on more than three (3) occasions to turn in assignments on time. Upon missing a class, have your work here nonetheless—a fellow student can deliver it or you can email it to me prior to class as a .doc or .rtf attachment.

Poems

We will generate some guided poetry writing assignments, but I also hope you write poetry on your own, using the poets we read as inspiration. All successful poets have two things in common: 1) they experiment, they push beyond their comfort zone, they are willing to write fifty bad poems for every good one; and 2) they create space in their lives where they do nothing but sit and write. Throughout the semester, I will have you turn in new, typed poems. You will then have the opportunity to revise and resubmit them, working toward a final manuscript of poems. "A" portfolios will contain at least 6 poems that:

- move compellingly with an effective flow;
- use diction with precision and contain detailed descriptions and vivid imagery when needed;
- contain dramatic situations (plot, narrative) or lyric utterance which unfold with grace and force;
- contain no mechanical and grammatical errors or are otherwise committed to—and consistent in their use of—experimental innovation;
- demonstrate a dedication to revision.

Less than great poems often: contain too many moments of incoherence; are too short; feature a speaker that seems indifferent; lack detail; use diction, syntax, and punctuation in incorrect or confusing ways; and rely too heavily on clichéd language, thought, or feeling. Therefore, "B" portfolios mainly satisfy the above criteria with some shortcomings. "C" work is clearly deficient in one or more of the criteria. "D" and "F" are well below average in a majority of the criteria.

Critical Essays

We will read texts that interrogate poetry's formal techniques. We will also read texts that "trouble," challenge, or otherwise grapple with assumptions about poetry. As regards gender, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, and ethnicity, how do poets choose to present themselves or ignore others? And how does a sense of identity affect voice, form, or choice of subjects? How do contemporary poets rebel against, experiment with, or honor older traditional, forms, styles, and expressive modes? You will use these and other questions as inspiration for your own critical essays. You will not write research papers and you will not use the internet; instead, your critical essays should be places of discovery and synthesis in which you make exciting and insightful connections between theory and form, criticism and craft, art and society. "A" critical essays will:

- be of appropriate length and follow MLA standards;
- have strong theses, focused paragraphs, and no unnecessary fluff or repetition;
- employ specific definitions, key terms, and theories that we read and talk about throughout the semester to elucidate specific language and features of the poems you are examining;
- contain no errors in grammar, diction, or mechanics.

"B" explications mainly satisfy the above criteria with some shortcomings. "C" work is clearly deficient in one or more of the criteria. "D" and "F" are well below average in a majority of the criteria.

Memorization and Performance

By asking you to memorize and recite poems—as well as read/perform them aloud in class—I am inviting you to explore how poems can live inside you and allow your mind and mouth and ears to feel their rhythm, flow, sound, tone, and sense. “A” memorizations, recitals, and performances will:

- demonstrate superior accuracy as regards diction, syntax, typography, and punctuation;
- be performed with excellence as regards articulation and intonation.

“B” performances mainly satisfy the above criteria with some shortcomings. “C” performances are clearly deficient in one or both of the criteria. “D” and “F” performances are well below average in both criteria.

Other Policies:

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, please contact the Office of Health & Wellness Services, G-10 Student Union, (814) 269-7119 to schedule an appointment. They will work with you to determine reasonable accommodations for this course and then encourage you to contact me if you so desire. I will be glad to discuss with you any concerns that seem to you beyond the scope of the accommodations that the Office of Health & Wellness Services can provide, but please make that office your starting point.

Turn off cell phones and other electronic equipment before class. Please do not send or receive texts, even if you are hiding your phone in your lap. The first time you text, tweet, update your facebook status—whatever—in our class, your final grade will be lowered by 20%. Should you violate this policy a second time, you will receive an “F” for the semester.

Plagiarism, or passing off someone else’s work as your own, is not acceptable in the academic community. Consequences will range from a failing grade in this course to expulsion from the University. (The following is an assignment randomly embedded into this document to reward you for reading the syllabus as required: for Wednesday January 15th, you are to come to class with responses to or experiences with ten of Peggy McIntosh’s list of fifty “Daily effects of white privilege” found at www.amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html.) If you have any questions about plagiarism, please let me help you.

Our Classroom as a Community

The University of Pittsburgh-Johnstown’s “Vision/Mission Statement” asserts that you and I are “in a supportive living-learning environment... that is responsive both to our... personal and professional needs and to our communities’ needs.” It claims that you and I—and your fellow students and my fellow teachers—“reflect the richness of our pluralistic society, including more historically underrepresented persons.” It encourages us to be proud of recent efforts which have made “a more inclusive community” that is “welcoming to all.” These efforts, we are told, have led to “broader levels of intercultural engagement” and to a “deeper respect for our common humanity” which have “taken us a step closer to fulfilling America’s promise.”

These are big claims. I want them to be true. I hope you will give me suggestions and help me to address situations or comments in which any of us feels discriminated due to our race, sexual orientation, gender, age, disability, religious beliefs, ethnicity, national origin, or status as a U.S. veteran. I hope you will help me to maintain a learning environment of open communication that takes even more steps—however small—closer toward liberty, justice, and inclusion.

Working with Me Outside of Class:

My office hours are Wednesdays 1:30pm to 5:30pm in Biddle 223a. If those hours don't work, we can easily find other times. Please send me an email (schwerer@pitt.edu) or talk to me after class to schedule a meeting, raise concerns, or ask questions. I want to help you work on your writing.

List of Due Dates for Assignments (subject to updates, additions, and changes):

WEEK ONE Wed 1/8

in class viewing/reading of “The Change: Poets Expand the Dialogue on Race” (poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/22148)

- "The Change," by Tony Hoagland, read by Nick Flynn
- Claudia Rankine's essay
- Tony Hoagland's response to Rankine's essay
- "We Heard Health Care," by Claudia Rankine

in class reading from Edward Hirsch's Poet's Choice...

- Martin Espada (“The Prisoners of Saint Lawrence”)
- Young Asian American Women Poets (Quan Barry, Suji Kwock Kim)

in class viewing of Clint Smith' (cwardsmith.tumblr.com)...

- “My Friends Aren't Poets”
- “Place Matters”

please note: assignments appear under the dates by which you need to read and complete them!

WEEK TWO Wed 1/15

read syllabus

from *Unsettling America*, **read** “Introduction” as well as poets Shapiro (34), Dviakarini (53), Erdrich (pg 54), Henderson-Holmes (60), Algarin (65), Papaleo (88), Mora (119), Giovanni (206), Djanikian (215), Hamod (288) and Chrystos (305)

select, read, and bring to class three responses to Rankin's “Open Letter Call” found at www.newmediapoets.com/claudia_rankine/open/open.html

WEEK THREE Wed 1/22

read “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

read “The New Black,” Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

read “A Black Rainbow: Modern Afro-American Poetry,” Rita Dove (b. 1952) and Marilyn Nelson (b. 1946)

read “Free Verse,” Michelle Boisseau
from *Unsettling America*, **read** poets (to be announced)

WEEK FOUR Wed 1/29

read “Organic Form,” Hilda Morley

read “Fractal Amplifications,” Alice Fulton
from *Unsettling America*, **read** poets (to be announced)

WEEK FIVE Wed 2/5

read “Writing as a Woman,” Ann Stevenson (b. 1933)

read “‘When We Dead Awaken’: Writing as Re-Vision,” Adrienne Rich (1929-2012)
from *Unsettling America*, **read** poets (to be announced)

WEEK SIX Wed 2/12 NO CLASS

WEEK SEVEN Wed 2/19

read “Bilingual/Bilingue,” Rhina Espaillat (b. 1932)

read “So Much Depends,” Julia Alvarez (b. 1950)
from *Unsettling America*, **read** poets (to be announced)

due: essays? poems? performance? memorization?

WEEK EIGHT Wed 2/26

read selections from Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie (to be announced)

read “Performance Poetry,” Bob Holman

read “Hip-Hop Rhyme Formations: Open Your Ears,” Tracie Morris

read “How Ya Like Me Now: Does Rap’s Suspended Adolescence Keep It from Serious Consideration,” Adam Kirsch

read “Responsibilities of the Poet,” Robert Pinsky (b. 1940)

WEEK NINE Wed 3/5 SPECIAL CLASSES (PLACES and TIMES to be announced)

prepare for and attend master class with and public performance by poet Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie

WEEK TEN NO CLASS

from The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics **read** (to be announced)

WEEK ELEVEN Wed 3/19

read “The Scarlet Brewer and the Voice of the Colonized,” Shirley Geok-Lin Lim (b. 1944)

read “Beyond Found Poetry,” Keith Tuma

read “Procedural Poetry: The Intentions of Nonintention,” Jena Osman

read “Predetermined Avant-Garde Forms,” Mark Wallace

from Unsettling America, **read** poets (to be announced)

from The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics **read** (to be announced)

WEEK TWELVE Wed 3/26

read “The Political Economy of Poetry,” Ron Silliman (b. 1944)

from Unsettling America, **read** poets (to be announced)

from The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics **read** (to be announced)

WEEK THIRTEEN Wed 4/2

from Unsettling America, **read** poets (to be announced)

from The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics **read** (to be announced)

WEEK FOURTEEN Wed 4/9

from Unsettling America, **read** poets (to be announced)

from The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics **read** (to be announced)

due: essays? poems? performance? memorization?

WEEK FIFTEEN Wed 4/16

from Unsettling America, **read** poets (to be announced)

due: essays? poems? performance? memorization?

**Silence is all we dread.
There's Ransom in a Voice —
But Silence is Infinity.
Himself have not a face.**

-Emily Dickinson (1830-1866)