

**ENGL0710X / Black Poetics**

MWF 11-11:50 / Sayles 306

Fall 2019

Office hours: TH 3-5 pm and by appointment

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We are interested here in poetic thinking. By that I mean, first: how a poem invites us to pay attention, and what kind of learning and knowing it offers. Also: how a poem's imagining can be appreciated as a manner of investigating *being*—what is being, and how to be, both of which are philosophical human questions. And: what does a poem's language, its use of repetition or line breaks or imagery or sound, what does its formal qualities mean to engaging its thinking?

It might seem unusual to refer to these questions under the rubric of poetic *thinking*, when poetry is a genre of feeling, but I don't mean "thinking" as a term that is in opposition to the embodied or the affective. I could say, instead, that we are interested in poetic intelligence or poetic knowing, where neither of these phrases imply a sense of mastery or prior knowledge.

We are interested in this course in *poetic study*.

In a prior description, I expressed the above in this way:

This course will think about black poetics through a study of works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Our attention will focus on formal dynamics—including genre conventions and innovation—as well as a range of thematic/conceptual idioms (including poetics as epistemology and ontology and phenomenology). As we study (mostly) chronologically, we will balance the close-reading of eight full collections with a gathering of single poems as well as brief critical essays about poetics.

That description is still true but I don't want its particular language to misstate the work I hope we will do. We will study with and through poems, which means that we will be of care to the work (to their complicated, beautiful, difficult, simple ideas; that we will dedicate time and seriousness to studying small things) as we will be of care to ourselves in studying, since care is an essential part of this undertaking.

You might notice, too, that I haven't yet said anything specific about blackness. Well, we are reading poems written by black authors, so the questions and dynamics in those poems are capacious of black arts as they are capacious of human doing. Everything in the first paragraph above is about black inhabitance, since questions of aesthetics and being and ethics, those questions belong to black subjects. We will study as if the varied particularity of black poems matter, and as if that mattering resides in the world of human particularity. Hard to do in a racialized and antiblack world, but we will keep this aim as our shared ethos.

Each poem is a black world, and in that world we get invited to be with the poem's shaping of what matters right then and right now. We will give over to that specificity as much as we can, different as our experiences with these poems might be.

**Course Goals**

The above constitutes our course goals. More specifically, students will be expected to show a range of critical thinking across poetic genres, and to integrate varying bodies of knowledge that

intersect with the poetic: literary (beyond poetry), philosophical, historical and sociological. Students will also be expected to present their ideas in writing and classroom discussion, and to come to class prepared and eager to engage the material vigorously and generously. I could say that I expect students to develop and enact an ethic of studying—that is, to be interested and of attention, to have a reflexive praxis in regard to learning as a slow humbling process, to be invested in class and in regard to the work that must happen outside of the classroom.

And that term *generosity* is keen not only to how we approach the material, but also how we approach each other in the learning community. The aim is to have an inclusive environment, one that supports and also challenges the learning of everyone in the room. (The responsibility for sustaining this is collective, though it is also centrally mine—please let me know if something is interfering with or discouraging your participation in the course.)

Over fifteen weeks, students will spend three hours per week in class (45 hours total). Required reading/viewing for the course is expected to take up approximately nine hours per week (135 hours). In addition, writing and researching the essays and the final paper is estimated at approximately 30 hours over the course of the term.

### **Accessibility**

Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students—to a learning environment that is universally accessible; this is a commitment which I share completely. Please inform me early in the term if you have a disability or other conditions that might require accommodations or modification of any of these course procedures. You may speak with me after class or during office hours. Please try not to feel unease about need, since every person requires care and consideration to live in the world. For more information, please contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services at 401-863-9588 or SEAS@brown.edu. Students in need of short-term academic advice or support can contact one of the deans in the Dean of the College office. These offices work with students confidentially and do not disclose disability-related information without their permission. [modified in part from Kairos.net]

Students might also be interested in other academic support services at Brown, found [here](#).

### **Course Material**

Books (available at the Brown University bookstore)

Rita Dove, *Thomas and Beulah*

Nikky Finney, *Head Off & Split*

Cameron Awkward-Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*

Terrance Hayes, *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*

Bettina Judd, *Patient*

These two works are available as e-books via Josiah:

Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca* (this collection is available as part of the e-book *Blacks*)

Lucille Clifton, *Quilting*

All other reading material will be posted on Canvas.

Expenses and Financial Concerns: Brown University undergraduates with concerns about the non-tuition cost(s) of a course at Brown, including this course, may apply to the Dean of the College Academic Emergency Fund to determine options for financing these costs, while

ensuring their privacy. The fund can be found in the Emergency Funds, Curricular & Co-curricular Gap (E-Gap) Funds in [UFunds](#). Information and procedures are available at [this link](#).

### **Assignments and Academic Integrity**

Each student will complete:

- an essay in response to an assigned question (750 words/three pages), due Friday October 4 [worth 30%]
- a close-reading essay (750 words/three pages), due Friday November 8 [worth 30%]
- a final essay (five pages), due by 10 am on December 16, 2019 [worth 40%]

(These assignments, which will require no outside research, will be explained in detail by the second week of classes.)

I also encourage students to participate in class, though there is no manner to grade such a thing. I believe that engaging the discussion in class enhances one's learning, even as I acknowledge that participation can be challenging for those of us who are introverted or shy (or for other good reasons). What I suggest is this—each student should pick a day, just one day in the semester, to be a committed respondent. On that day, the student would expect themselves to be prepared, to have something meaningful to say about the material, and/or to engage questions posed by other students or the professor. Think of this as an invitation for which there is no reward or promise, just as a chance to commit to working.

Your work in this class is bound by the [Brown University Academic Code](#). Please be aware that cheating and plagiarism will result in a referral to Case Administrator of the Academic Code. All class assignments will provide clear reminders in regard to plagiarism; if you are having difficulty with writing or would like more information or assistance, you can speak to me and/or consult the [Writing Center](#), the Brown Library and/or the Academic Code. I will ask students to include and sign a statement which proclaims that work has been produced within the guidelines of the Academic Code. This statement is a required part of each assignment.

**No person is permitted to make an electronic recording of any portion of this class without explicit permission of the professor. Students are permitted to use electronic devices except cellphones for purposes of classwork.** (Please contact the professor if there are questions or concerns.)

Finally, it is worth saying that each assignment in this class is a chance for students to showcase their best work. This notion of “one's best work” does not mean excellence, necessarily, but simply means a fullness of effort and attention was given to the work.

### **SCHEDULE**

(Please note: We won't study closely all the poems listed here. I will direct you on where to put the closest attention.)

9/4: Black Poetics, Blackness as Poetics—To Love a Good Word (featuring Lucille Clifton and Beyoncé)

9/6:

Our first readings together, where we will think about ideation and force, will come from the following:

- Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"
- Lucille Clifton, "reply"
- Elizabeth Alexander, "Ars Poetic #100"
- Amiri Baraka, "We Own the Night"
- Robert Hayden, "VII: voice in the wilderness" (from "Words in Mourning Time")
- Carl Phillips, "The Case for Beauty" (optional)
- Jacques Derrida, "'A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text': Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," 181-183; 198-199; 205-206 (optional)

9/9 and 9/11 and 9/13

We will use some of the following poems to think about representation, voice, doubleness, and audience:

- Pat Parker, "for the white person who wants to know how to be my friend"
- Langston Hughes, "The Weary Blues"
- Tyehimba Jess, "Leadbelly vs Lomax at the Modern Language Association Conference 1934"
- Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask"
- Nikki Giovanni, "Nikki Rosa"
- June Jordan, "These Poems"
- Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me"
- Nikky Finney, "The Making of Paper"
- Claudia Rankine, from *Citizen* (69-79, section v)
- Dawn Lundy Martin, "A Black Poetics: Against Mastery"
- Evie Shockley, "All of the Above: Multiple Choice and African American Poetry" (optional)

9/16 and 9/18 and 9/20

- Rita Dove, *Thomas and Beulah*

9/23 and 9/25 and 9/30

We will use some of the following poems to think about epic poems and the matter of scale/world-imagining:

- Lucille Clifton, "brothers"
- Essex Hemphill, "Heavy Breathing"

- Tracy K. Smith, “The Speed of Belief,” “Life on Mars,” “They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected”
- Robert Hayden, “Middle Passage”
- Amiri Baraka, “Black Art”
- Toi Derricotte, “A Note on My Son’s Face”
- Dionne Brand, the first poem (“I”) of *Thirsty*
- Ross Gay, “Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude”
- Kevin Young, from “The Book of Hours”
- Aracelis Girmay, “On the Shape of the Sentence” and “Here”
- Danez Smith, “Genesissy”
- Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon”
- Safiya Sinclair, “Center of the World”
- Justin Phillip Reed, “Carolina Prayer”
- Patricia Smith, “When Black Men Drown Their Daughters”
- Evie Shockley, “Introduction: Renegade Poetics (Or, Would Black Aesthetics by An[y] Other Name Be More Innovative” (pages 1-16 of *Renegade Poetics*—optional)
- David Marriott, “Introduction: Black Experimental Poetics” (optional)

We will use some of the following poems to think about lyric poems, a different version of the matter of scale/world-imagining:

- Lucille Clifton, “poem in praise of menstruation”
- Camille Rankine, “Genealogy”
- Nikki Giovanni, “Ego Tripping”
- Tracy K. Smith, “An Old Story,” “Wade in the Water”
- Rita Dove, “Anti-Father”
- Toi Derricotte, “Passing”
- Rita Dove, “Foxtrot Fridays”
- Gwendolyn Brooks, “Boy Breaking Glass”
- Natasha Trethewey, “Incident,” “Enlightenment,” “Elegy”
- Reginald Shepherd, “You, Therefore,” “Kindertotenlieder,” “The Difficult Music,” “The New World,” “Crossing Cocytus,” “The Lucky One”
- Elizabeth Alexander, “At the Beach”
- Claude McKay, “If We Must Die”
- Countee Cullen, “Heritage,” “Incident” and “Tableau”
- Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”
- Carl Phillips, “The Hustler Speaks of Places”
- Carl Phillips, “Coin of the Realm” (essay and poem)
- Yusef Komunyakaa, “You and I Are Disappearing” and “Blue Dementia”
- John Murillo, “Mercy, Mercy, Me”
- Jericho Brown, “Nativity”
- Marilyn Nelson, “Minor Miracle”
- Mari Evans, “I am a Black Woman”
- Jonathan Culler, “Introduction” (from *Theory of the Lyric*; optional reading)
- Tracy K. Smith, “Poetry and Politics” (December 16, 2018, *The New York Times*, optional reading)

We will use some of the following poems to think about the avant-garde:

- A. Van Jordan, "from"
- Evie Shockley, "Clare's Song," "at the musée de l'homme," "what's not to liken?," "poem for when his arms open so wide you fall through"
- Douglas Kearney, "Every Hard Rapper's Father Ever: Father of the Year," "I Wanna • Be Your Lover (1979)," "The Poet Writes The Poem That Will Certainly Make Him Famous"
- Natasha Trethewey, "Myth"
- Terrance Hayes, "Portrait of Etheridge Knight in the Style of a Crime Report," "The Golden Shovel," and "Sonnet"
- Tracie Morris, "Slave Sho to Video aka Black but Beautiful"
- Aracelis Girmay, "Ode to the Letter B"
- Thomas Sayers Ellis, "All Their Stanzas Look Alike"
- M. NourbeSe Philip, from *ZONG!*
- Cathy Park Hong, "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant Garde" (optional essay)

10/2 and 10/4 and 10/7

- Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*
- Elizabeth Alexander, "Praise Song for the Day"

10/9 and 10/11 and 10/16 [10/14—no class, Indigenous People's Day]

- Cameron Awkward Rich, *Sympathetic Little Monster*

[10/18—no class, professor out of town]

10/21

We will use some of the following poems to think about erotics:

- Toi Derricotte, "The Body Awakening"
- Ruth Ellen Kocher, "Domina"
- Jericho Brown, "Colosseum," "Like Father"
- Harryette Mullen
- Robin Coste Lewis, "Plantation"
- Derek Walcott, "Love after Love"
- Tracy K. Smith, "Political Poem"
- Gwendolyn Brooks, "when you have forgotten Sunday: the love story"
- Major Jackson, "Letter to Brooks: Spring Garden"
- Ross Gay, "Thank You"
- Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, "Traveler"

10/23 and 10/25

We will use some of the following poems to think about embodiment:

- Lucille Clifton, "homage to my hips"
- Nikky Finney, "The Greatest Show on Earth"
- Elizabeth Alexander, "The Venus Hottentot"
- Evie Shockley, "my life as china"
- Camille Rankine, "We"
- Jericho Brown, "Romans 12:1," and "Host"
- Tracie Morris, "Slave Sho to Video aka Black but Beautiful"
- Douglas Kearney, "Drop It Like It's Hottentot Venus."
- Sharan Strange, "The Body"
- Natasha Trethewey, "What Is Evidence"
- Cornelius Eady, "I Know (I'm Losing You)"

10/28 and 10/30 and 11/4 [11/1—no class, professor out of town]

- Nikky Finney, *Head Off & Split*

11/6 and 11/8 and 11/11

- Bettina Judd, *Patient*

11/13 and 11/15 and 11/18

- Terrance Hayes, *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*
- Wanda Coleman, "American Sonnets: 91", "American Sonnets: 10"
- Hayes, "American Sonnet for Wanda C."

11/20

We will use some of the following poems to think about sound/the sonic:

- Cornelius Eady, "Nina's Blues" and "The Gardenia"
- Michael S. Harper, "Dear John, Dear Coltrane"
- Tracie Morris, "Slave Sho to Video aka Black but Beautiful" and "Project Princess"
- Kevin Young, "Errata"
- John Murillo, "Ode to the Crossfader"
- Mahogany L. Browne, "This"

[11/22—no class, professor out of town]

11/25: catch-up day

*[11/27 and 11/29—no class, Thanksgiving holiday break]*

12/2 and 12/4 and 12/6

- Lucille Clifton, *Quilting*

12/9 and 12/11: Poetry as Prayer

- Amiri Baraka, "We Own the Night"
- Robert Hayden, "VII: voice in the wilderness" (from "Words in Mourning Time")
- Lucille Clifton, "the times," "blessing the boats" and "won't you celebrate with me"
- Ross Gay, "Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude"
- Ruth Ellen Kocher, "When the Moon Knows You're Wandering"
- Yusef Komunyakaa, "Safe Subjects"
- Derek Walcott, "Love after Love"
- Reginald Shepherd, "Hesitation Theory"
- Rita Dove, "Heart to Heart"
- Aracelis Girmay, "Ars Poetica"
- Nikki Giovanni, "Revolutionary Dreams"
- Marilyn Nelson, "Minor Miracle"