

American Minority-Women Poets (12-154)
Dr. Carmen Acevedo Butcher, Fulbright Lecturer, Sogang University
Spring 2005 Syllabus

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COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course explores the poetry of several remarkable American women who are African-American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian-American, and what they have to report doesn't make it onto CNN. Taking a hands-on approach, we focus closely on the poetry's vocabulary, sounds, forms, and important historical contexts. No prior knowledge of contemporary American poetry is necessary.

REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS:

Each student is required to read the entirety of the poetry anthology available for purchase. This will facilitate your learning and heighten your enjoyment of and success in this course. Although most of the following books are on reserve in Loyola Library, please note that all of the required reading assignments are located in the anthology that is available for purchase, and many are *only* located in this anthology. The exciting minority-women poets from America whom we will be studying this semester are as follows:

- Angelou, Maya. *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House, 1994.
- Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Selected Poems*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1999.
- Budy, Andrea Hollander. *House Without a Dreamer*. Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1993.
- Clifton, Lucille. *Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems 1988-2000*. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2000.
- . *The Book of Light*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1993.
- . *good woman: poems and a memoir 1969-1980*. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 1987.
- . *quilting: poems 1987-1990*. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 1991.
- . *the terrible stories*. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 1996.
- Cofer, Judith Ortiz. *the Latin Deli*. New York: Norton, 1993.
- Dove, Rita. See *No More Masks*.
- Giovanni, Nikki. *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni: 1968-1998*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.
- Hall, Thelma. *Release and Restoration*. Edited and with an introduction by Carmen Acevedo Butcher, Shorter College Press, April 2004.
- Harjo, Joy. *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems, 1975-2001*. New York: Norton: 2002.
- Howe, Florence, ed. *No More Masks! An Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Women Poets*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Sanchez, Sonia. *does your house have lions? and like the singing coming off drums and shake loose my skin and wounded in the house of a friend*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997, 1998, 1999, 1995.
- Yamada, Mitsuye. See *No More Masks*.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS: Read all materials assigned, take notes, look up unfamiliar diction, and come to class prepared to ask questions and discuss the material heartily.

American Minority-Women Poets (12-154)
Dr. Carmen Acevedo Butcher, Fulbright Lecturer, Sogang University
Fall 2004 Syllabus, Page 2

- Complete all written assignments. Especially focus on keeping a daily journal recording your reactions to the poets we read. It counts 25% of your entire grade. Starting today, you will keep this journal daily, five days a week. That gives you some latitude for rest two days a week. You may pick the two days a week you rest. You should write at least three pages a week, for a minimum of thirty pages over the entire course. If you write by hand, write without skipping lines, and write neatly in pen (easier for your professor to read). If you type your journals (and by all means you are encouraged to type them because it is so much easier for your professor to read typed work), please double-space each page. Your final journal will therefore be comprised of between thirty and fifty neatly-written single-spaced or neatly-typed double-spaced pages. When we do not have class, you are not required to write in your journals (that day/that week).

Write your best in these journals. Write in complete sentences, of course, and write as smoothly and as cogently as possible. Writing skill and excellence in content are inextricably related. The best writing is also the best content, and the best ideas are expressed in the most excellent writing. Your journal entries will show your engaging with the poetry in specific ways. You are encouraged to express your opinions in your journals. Wrestle with the course's reading material, or luxuriate in it, or do both. Agree or disagree with the poets. Argue with their poetry or applaud it and tell why. Draw parallels or describe contrasts that you find in your own particular background. How does your experience compare and/or contrast with the poet being read? Also, what images strike you as memorable? What images most hold your attention? Why? What images repel you? Why? What poetic forms most capture your interest? Why? Use poetic terms whenever possible when journaling.

- Sit a non-essay mid-term exam covering poetic terms, their definitions, and examples of these terms. The mid-term exam counts 25% of your entire grade.
- Complete an essay final exam. It also counts 25% of your entire grade.
- Complete any other written assignments, presentations, and/or pop quizzes as necessary or required.

INSTRUCTOR'S APPROACH:

Reading the poetry of Lucille Clifton, Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Thelma Hall, and others provides a unique look at American life. Usually what these women have to say does NOT make it into headline news. You won't find their concerns or experiences on CNN or Fox News or any other popular American news broadcast. Dr. Butcher is also a published woman poet with a Cuban heritage. Her maiden surname, *Acevedo*, is (as you probably know) a Hispanic surname and is very popular especially in "little Havana," in Miami, Florida, where many of Dr. Butcher's Cuban relatives live to this day. This American minority-women's literature course provides a good background for further study in contemporary American poetry and serves as a springboard for good multi-cultural discussions.

ATTENDANCE REQUIREMENTS: Students are held accountable to attendance requirements specified in the current edition of the university catalog. Students are

American Minority-Women Poets (12-154)
Dr. Carmen Acevedo Butcher, Fulbright Lecturer, Sogang University
Fall 2004 Syllabus, Page 3

expected to be present and on time for each class. Professors are required to submit a weekly report on student attendance in writing: Three tardies (late by less than ten minutes) count as one absence, and students are allowed to be absent six times for a three-credit course. Students who exceed the absence limit are automatically withdrawn and receive an FA (Failure by Absence).

GRADING POLICY:

- Journal = 25% The teacher's expectations for the journals are explained above. If you have further questions, please ask them.
- Class Participation = 25% Class participation is extremely important. I already know you are highly intelligent because you are a student at Sogang University. Students are expected to come to class prepared each time, to ask perspicacious questions, and to answer the professor's questions intelligently. Your participation is expected to take our class beyond the topics already raised in the instructor's mind. If necessary, pop quizzes, presentations, and in-class essays will be introduced, scored, and included in this grade segment. Class absences and/or tardiness will obviously lower a class-participation grade for a student.
- Mid-term exam = 25% As discussed above, this non-essay exam covers essential poetic terms. It will be held on Wednesday.
- Final exam = 25% The final is an essay. The final essay topic will be discussed in-depth. A = 90-100%; B = 80-89%; C = 70-79%; D = 60-69%; F = 0-59%

LATE WORK: All work is due at the beginning of class on the day announced.

Also, all tests must be done at the beginning of the class period on the day announced. If a student is late to class and misses a test, he or she will NOT be allowed to make that test up. Therefore, a debilitating zero would be earned, and a single zero is devastating to a student's final grade. Late or unexcused make-up work will be penalized. All work must be turned in at the beginning of the class meeting, always. Ten points will be deducted for every ten minutes the work is late. Late and excused make-up work must be preceded or accompanied by a valid written excuse, and all make-up work must be initiated by the student within one week of the excused absence in order to be accepted. Please note that it is the student's responsibility to initiate make-up work and that make-up work for in-class assignments can only be made up when the student's absence is excused and when the make-up work is initiated within one week of the excused absence.

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE: Students will be treated with respect and kindness. They will be expected to conduct themselves as the adults they certainly are.

ACADEMIC HONESTY: Cheating is not tolerated and is punished according to the rules found in the current university *Student Handbook*. Dishonest work receives a Zero.

STUDENT OUTCOMES:

- Students will explore the history of the America through the eyes of these American minority-women poets. (Edu. Prin. I)
- Students will develop critical thinking skills and proficiency in scansion. (Edu. Prin. I)
- Students will learn to analyze and use poetic techniques. (Educational Principle I)
- Students will present a report of their findings on an assigned topic. (Educational Principle III)
- Students will learn to integrate their knowledge of American minority-women poets with their knowledge of other subject areas. (Educational Principle IV)

American Minority-Women Poets (12-154)
Dr. Carmen Acevedo Butcher, Fulbright Lecturer, Sogang University
Fall 2004 Syllabus, Page 4

ASSIGNMENTS:

WEEK ONE:

We will read the poets in alphabetical order so that you can follow our progression easily in the anthology. For purposes of class participation (25%) AND journal entries (25%), you are expected (as noted above) to read the entire anthology of poetry. These two components together comprise 50% of your total grade for this course; therefore, please be diligent in keeping up with reading assignments.

Read and be ready to discuss Maya Angelou's poetry. Her poems and those of the other poets mentioned below are handily located in the anthology available for purchase.

Introduction to the subject and brief overview of historical background. What is poetry? Why study poetry at all? Are poets important? Why?

WEEK TWO:

Continue discussion of Angelou. Read and be ready to discuss Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry and that of Andrea Hollander Budy.

Introduction of the basic poetic terms every intelligent student should be fluent in.

WEEK THREE:

Begin reading Lucille Clifton. Be ready to discuss Clifton in class. Lucille Clifton is one of my favorite poets. I thankfully received permission to quote her poem, "light," in its entirety as the frontispiece for my book on medieval women mystics (Paraclete Press, spring 2005). I believe Clifton will win a Pulitzer Prize one day. Her poetry is timeless in its beauty, and its concerns are universal. What are her major themes? Does she share any concerns with Angelou and Brooks? If so, what? Are their approaches the same or different? Discuss these issues in class AND in your journal entries.

WEEK FOUR:

Continue reading Lucille Clifton. Continue discussing her poetry in class. We will watch two videos (*The Power of the Word: Where the Soul Lives*, with Bill Moyers, Princeton, NJ, 1994, and *Come Celebrate with Me*, with Bill Moyers, Newbridge Communications, 1995). These two videos present interviews with Lucille Clifton, and they also show her reading her own inimitable poetry.

WEEK FIVE:

Continue reading Lucille Clifton. Be ready to discuss Clifton in class.

WEEK SIX:

Read Judith Ortiz Cofer and be ready to discuss Cofer in class.

WEEK SEVEN:

Continue reading Judith Ortiz Cofer. Be ready to discuss Cofer in class.

WEEK EIGHT:

Review poetic terms, definitions, and examples of each.

Dr. Butcher will also read this week from a book she edited and wrote the introduction for, *Release and Restoration*, by the late Thelma Hall (Shorter College Press, 2004).

Mid-Term this week. Don't write in Journals (no class this week).

WEEK NINE:

Read Rita Dove and Nikki Giovanni. Be ready to discuss these two poets in class.

Introduce idea of final essay exam, and possible topics.

WEEK TEN:

Read Joy Harjo and be ready to discuss her work in class.

American Minority-Women Poets (12-154)
Dr. Carmen Acevedo Butcher, Fulbright Lecturer, Sogang University
Fall 2004 Syllabus, Page 5

WEEK ELEVEN:

Continue reading Joy Harjo. Be ready to discuss her work in class.

WEEK TWELVE:

Read Sonia Sanchez and be ready to discuss her work in class.

WEEK THIRTEEN:

Continue discussing Sonia Sanchez's work in class.

WEEK FOURTEEN:

Read Mitsuye Yamada and be ready to discuss her work in class.

Turn in entire journal for grading this week on the date announced, also (as usual), at the beginning of class (or points will be deducted at the rate of 10 points per 10 minutes late).

Please remember that the journal represents 25% of your total grade for the course. Put your heart and soul (and excellent writing and analytical prowess) into these journals, and you will be rewarded.

Discuss final-essay exam topics in-depth.

WEEK FIFTEEN:

Take final essay exam (TBA).

The purpose of this course is to stretch our boundaries and our appreciation of poetry. It is also meant to make us consider what voices in our own worlds are not being heard today. What would they say? How would they say it? America in these poets' oeuvres is not always "the land of the free and the home of the brave," as the American national anthem likes to proclaim at the beginning of every baseball, football, and basketball game. More often than not, the America that these poets knew intimately and present without makeup is the America of the "have-nots," those people who because of skin color or gender or other prejudice(s) live outside the acceptance of society, and suffer for it. Their poetry is more often than not the poetry of the outcast struggling to find herself. She struggles to gain self-esteem in a society that does not value her and that in fact puts her down and oppresses her for various prejudicial reasons. Some of these poets are angry, some are struggling, and all are eventually triumphant in their ability to make a home for themselves in America, even within a society that practices prejudice without batting an eye. What are they angry about specifically? How do they triumph? Where do they make their homes? Is poetry itself an energizing force carving for these women homes for their psyches? These and many other stimulating issues will be discussed during the course of a semester that, I hope, causes us all to grow in understanding.