

## ENWR 412: Advanced Poetry Writing

Instructor: Dr. Susan B.A. Somers-Willett  
Class information: DI 432, Th 10-12:30  
Fall 2009

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Office: Dickson Hall 316  
Office hours: T 4-5:30, Th afternoon by appt.

### COURSE POLICY STATEMENT

#### Course Description

Through a workshop format, this course offers further experience in reading, writing, and revising poetry. Our primary focus will be on your own literary production—writing and critiquing individual poems, with occasional writing exercises as the class elects. We will also read and discuss books by contemporary poets from a writer's point of view, using our discussions to think beyond the single poem and envision how poems work together in collections. In this way, the workshop is ideal for advanced writers who are considering pursuing theses or other kinds of collections, or those who are interested in exploring issues in contemporary poetry.

Students will be expected to revise seven to eight poems to be included in a portfolio at the semester's end. Your writing throughout the semester, including all drafts, should be included in this final project. In addition, you will be responsible for developing responses to our assigned readings and engage in occasional writing exercises. Finally, you are required to attend and review a poetry reading during the semester and present to the class a literary journal that publishes poetry. Due to the timely nature of our class discussions, regular attendance and participation is mandatory.

#### Texts

Natasha Trethewey, *Bellocq's Ophelia*  
Lucille Clifton, *Book of Light*

#### Grading Policy

60% Portfolio of revised poems and statements of poetics  
25% Attendance, on-time weekly poems, and active contributions to the class (written and spoken)  
15% Writing assignments and a presentation on a literary journal

## Academic Integrity

Academic dishonesty as defined by the university as “any attempt by a student to submit as his/her own work that which has not been completed by him/her or to give improper aid to another student in the completion of an assignment, i.e., plagiarism” (please view the entire policy at <http://www.montclair.edu/deanstudents/regulations1.html>). This can include “double-dipping,” or using one piece of writing to satisfy the requirements of more than one course. Since our focus in this course is literary production, work you turn in for this class is to be new, original writing created specifically for this workshop (except in the case of revision exercises). Please ask if you have any questions about this policy.

## Workshop Etiquette

The purpose of our workshops is not to “fix” poems but rather to help the author discover his or her poem through process. In this regard, our comments in workshop should aim toward the neutral, descriptive, and interrogative—in the words of Janet Burroway, not *What I like* but *What this piece is like*. Only then can we critique whether or not the writing is successful in what it wants to achieve and offer constructive criticism to guide the poem in that direction.

As guides, our goal should be to find a balance in the tenor of our comments; too much praise can be just as poisonous as too much criticism. Finding this balance is the most difficult part of a workshop, but it also can be the most rewarding.

As authors, it is our responsibility to not just to listen to but to *hear* how our readers describe our writing in a non-defensive way. This openness is part of the process of the poem, and entertaining the suggestions of others—even as they may seem to counter our own senses—may be just the thing that gives the writing flight.

In order to encourage this openness, we will for the most part follow the gag rule in workshop: While a piece of writing is being discussed in class, the author should remain silent. There are exceptions to this rule, however, which we will inevitably discover together. Poems are birds, not birdcages, and if they have strong enough wings they deserve to stretch them.

Of course, in all things you are expected to behave with maturity and respect for others. If you exhibit behavior that is threatening or that disrupts the learning experience, disciplinary action will be sought according to university policy.

## Responding to Poems

Our workshop is a hard-copy environment, which means that on certain dates indicated on your syllabus, typed hard copy drafts of your writing are due for distribution to each member of the class. Before arriving to each workshop, you will write commentary on your peers’ hard copies and return your written commentary to them in workshop. It is expected that you will respond in writing to *each* poem *each* week, even as we may not discuss everyone’s poem in class that week. To do this, you will need to craft your written responses to each poem before each class meets (in the neighborhood of 2-5 sentences is appropriate).

## Deadlines and Distribution of Poems

These workshop drafts, as all assignments, **are due at class time on the date posted** (not that afternoon or evening). Because assignment deadlines are posted with ample advance notice, extensions for assignments will not be granted.

Please pay special attention to when poems are due, for you should not expect that your classmates (or instructor) can and will be available to pick up poems outside of class. If you miss a due date for a poem, you will receive no credit for your participation that week and you may, at the discretion of the instructor, miss your turn at workshop. **Please do not e-mail your poem to the instructor or the entire class after it is due.** This not only creates headaches for each of your class members, it is disrespectful and taxes your classmates' time and resources. Please also make sure you have made enough copies to distribute to everyone in class. Showing up with one copy of your work does not constitute meeting the deadline.

**If you are absent on a day when an assignment is due, you are still responsible for meeting that deadline.** You can accomplish this by having a classmate distribute copies of your poem for you. If non-workshop assignments are due (i.e., a paper or review) and you must be absent, you may e-mail it to the instructor. You are also responsible for picking up any handouts or poems that you missed before our next class meets. These will be available in a box outside my office located at Dickson Hall 316.

### **Attendance and Participation**

Attendance and participation are required in this course, and both will affect your grade. Missing **more than two classes** constitutes missing a significant part of the course and will affect your final grade. Should you miss class, you are responsible for meeting all assignment deadlines, contacting a member of class in order to keep up with readings and assignments, and notifying the instructor in advance of your absence if possible.

### **E-mail and BlackBoard**

We will, on occasion, communicate via e-mail during the semester. For this reason, students are required to have a working e-mail address that they check regularly. For the most part, this communication will announce campus activities related to our course topic. However, in the event that last-minute changes to our class schedule have to be made, these changes will be communicated via e-mail. All class assignments, schedules, etc. will be posted on BlackBoard should you ever need another copy.

### **Final Portfolios**

**Please save all drafts of your writing** for this class (including reviews, drafts of poems, and statements of poetics). You will be asked to include them in your final portfolio.

### **Information for Students with Disabilities**

Both the university and I are committed to keeping this classroom and course material accessible. If you have a learning or physical disability, please inform me at the beginning of the course either after class or in office hours. In the rare case where a class assignment is not accessible, an alternative assignment requiring the exercise of equal skill and knowledge can be arranged.

## ASSIGNMENT: Review of a Poetry Reading

Due by Thurs. 12/3

Attend at least a poetry event during the semester and write a 2-3 page review of it. Think of this assignment as an analysis of a reader's poetry *and* his or her performance style. Please don't forget to include the date, event or reader, and the venue (location) of the reading single-spaced at the top of the document or on a cover sheet.

Some questions you **should** address when preparing your review:

- Describe the setting and the work performed. How does the performer use (or not use) the space and equipment available?
- How would you describe the audience, and what are their expectations for the event?
- What literary and performance techniques does the poet employ (such as volume, pitch, gesture, music, rhythm, rhyme, beat-boxing, etc.)?
- Are the performance techniques effective? Do they give new meaning/lend better sense to the poetry, and if so, how?

Some other questions you **may** address when preparing your analysis include:

- What type of poetry is being performed? Does an argument need to be made in order to consider this work poetry?
- Do you consider this work good or bad poetry? Why? Do you consider this a good or bad performance? Why?
- Does the poet address the audience members in a particular way because of their expectations?

Do not feel you have to answer each of these questions for this analysis. A good review will touch on some of these questions, and perhaps ask others. At the very least, you should include a brief overview of what the reading/performance entailed, and you should also make specific and clear connections between the language of the poetry, the way the work was performed, and the performance's effect upon the audience. Remember that your reader probably will not have the luxury of having attended the same event, so an appropriate amount of description of the event or the performers is necessary (but don't let your description stand in for analysis).

**A word of caution:** Avoid the pitfall of talking generally about how the performer conveyed "a lot of energy" and made you "feel the emotions of the work." Such statements are not only vague, but they tell your reader little about the poem or performance itself. Instead, try to make concrete connection between the way a poem is presented and its effect on the audience. Remember that poetry is about both message and craft. This means that you need to evaluate not only *what* was said in a given poem, but *how* it was read or performed.

Also, you are *strongly* encouraged to write your analysis within a few days of seeing any event so that your memory about the event is fresh and your ideas about the performance lucid. Please don't procrastinate until the week before a due date to find a poetry event to attend. In such a case, you may find yourself out of luck.

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### SYLLABUS (subject to change)

#### WEEK 1: Introduction

Th 9/3            Class intro and discussion of policies  
                 Prosody survey, Handouts: Self-Portraits  
                 Poetics statement assigned  
                 Poem 1 assigned (self-portrait)

#### WEEK 2: Natasha Trethewey

Th 9/10            Discuss Natasha Trethewey, *Bellocq's Ophelia* (read entire book for class)  
                 Lecture on photography and ekphrasis  
                 **Poem 1 due (self-portrait)**

#### WEEK 3

Th 9/17            **Poem 2 due (open), Poetics statement due**  
                 Workshop Poem 1 (self-portrait)

#### WEEK 4

Th 9/24            **Poem 3 due (Persona), Workshop Poem 2 (open)**

#### WEEK 5

Th 10/1            **Poem 4 due (open), Workshop Poem 3 (Persona)**  
                 Literary journal presentation assigned

#### WEEK 6: Lucille Clifton

Th 10/8            Bring to class two old poems or drafts of poems (one short and one longer)  
                 Discuss Lucille Clifton, *Book of Light* (read entire book for class)  
                 Handout: Stevens, "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"  
                 Lineation exercise: Lines and sectioning

#### WEEK 7

Th 10/15            **Poem 5 due (series/sectioned poem), Workshop Poem 4 (open)**

#### WEEK 8

Th 10/22            **Presentation of literary journals**  
                 **Poem 6 due (open), Workshop Poem 5 (series/sectioned poem)**

#### WEEK 9

Th 10/29            **Poem 7 due (prose poem), Workshop Poem 6 (open)**  
                 Revision portfolio assigned

<b>WEEK 10</b>	
Th 11/5	<b>NO CLASS—Work on revision portfolio</b>
<b>WEEK 11</b>	
Th 11/12	Individual Conferences—meet during your time slot <b>Revision portfolio due</b>
<b>WEEK 12</b>	
Th 11/19	<b>Poem 8 due (open),</b> Workshop Poem 7 (prose poem) Final portfolio and poetics statement assigned
<b>WEEK 13</b>	
Th 11/26	<b>NO CLASS—Thanksgiving Holiday</b>
<b>WEEK 14</b>	
Th 12/3	<b>Poetry Reading Review due by this date</b> Workshop Poem 8 (open)
<b>WEEK 15</b>	
Th 12/10	<b>Final Portfolios Due</b> Course evaluation and course wrap-up