

ENGL 364-01: Contemporary American Poetry

Montclair State University, Spring 2011

Instructor: Dr. Susan B.A. Somers-Willett

Class information: DI 279, M 5:30-8

Blackboard site: [https:// blackboard.montclair.edu](https://blackboard.montclair.edu)

E-mail: somerswilles@mail.montclair.edu

Office: Dickson Hall 316

Office hours: M 3-5:30pm and by appointment

Course Policies

Course Description

In this course, we will discuss major movements and trends in contemporary poetry written in America. We will read several books of poetry published in the last twenty-five years, supplementing our reading with scholarly essays which engage current debates about poetics. Discussion topics include debates over poetry's place in the public sphere, new formalism, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, new lyricism, the dramatic monologue, and hip-hop/spoken word poetry. This course is designed to appeal to students of both literature and creative writing, as our conversations will entail discussions of form and craft in addition to poetics. Assignments include formal mid-term and final essays, written responses on our course blog, and student-led discussions. Satisfies areas: Other Literature (1c), Genre Study (Poetry) (3 Poetry), Minority Writers (4b), Women Writers (4c), Other American (TE 1d).

Required Texts (available at MSU bookstore)

Native Guard, Natasha Trethewey

My Life, Lyn Hejinian

Song, Brigit Pegeen Kelly

Blood Dazzler, Patricia Smith

The Dead Emcee Scrolls, Saul Williams

Critical essays available on Blackboard (which you must print and bring to class)

Grading

25% Mid-term paper

25% Final paper

20% Weekly blog responses

15% Student-led discussion about a contemporary poet's work

15% Participation and discussion

Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty is defined by the university as "any attempt by a student to submit as his/her own work that which has not be completed by him/her or to give improper aid to another student in the completion of an assignment, i.e., plagiarism." This can include "double-dipping," or using one piece of writing to satisfy the requirements of more than one course. Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this classroom, and students engaging in academic dishonesty will be reported to the Dean of Students and punished to the full extent of university policy. A common disciplinary action in such cases is failure of the entire course. Repeat offenders may be expelled from the university. Please view the entire university policy at: <http://www.montclair.edu/deanstudents/regulations1.html>.

Decorum and Conduct

As a college student, you are expected to undertake your education with decorum. Our classroom will be treated as a free-speech zone, which means that all intellectually-informed opinions may be expressed. Keep in mind, however, that you will be held accountable for your views by both the instructor and the other students in the class, and that a college learning environment is designed so that students investigate their beliefs and personal biases. 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.

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.

Deadlines

All assignments are due at class time on the date posted. **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 either having a classmate turn in your work for you or by e-mailing the assignment to the instructor as a Word doc or PDF. **In the event that extenuating circumstances prevent you from meeting an assignment deadline, students will be penalized one letter grade per class period that the assignment is late.** For example, if a paper is due on a Wednesday at class time, a paper turned in anytime between that Wednesday and the next Wednesday would receive a deduction of one letter grade. Exceptions to this policy would have to be made *in advance* of an assignment deadline.

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.

Weekly Blog Responses

Before we meet for class each week, you should write a 2-4 paragraph response to our readings via our class blog on Blackboard. The topic and shape of your response is up to you, but it should arise from a question, issue, or opinion brought on by your engagement with that week's texts. Occasionally I will post a question or two to get the juices flowing, although you should not feel obligated to answer those queries if some other topic piques your interest. **These responses should be completed BEFORE we meet for class; responses made after class time will not be given credit.**

These responses should not entirely be a summary or review of the text, but instead should reflect an aspect of the text(s) with which you engaged. Although they are brief, they should reflect serious academic thought. I'm looking for independent thinking that shows you can make connections between our texts and scholarly issues. Although you may choose to write about an aspect of the text we discussed in class, be mindful not to regurgitate our class discussions. You should feel free in your response to react to other people's responses in respectful, intelligent, ways (i.e., no flame wars, please). A good rule of thumb is to respond to a classmate as if he or she is sitting next to you in class.

The purposes of these weekly responses are A) to make sure you are keeping up with the reading and B) to serve as a bank of topics that you might pursue later in a longer paper. The responses will be evaluated on a three-point scale of above average (3), average (2), and below average (1). Collectively, these responses will represent 20% of your grade.

In order to post your response, simply click on the "Blog" command on the Blackboard menu, then click on "Course Blog: Contemporary American Poetry." Read that week's prompt and then click "comment" to post your response for the week (you may cut-and-paste from a word processing program if you wish). **Please note that you will not be able to delete or edit your response once you have submitted a comment. If you need to edit your response, simply post another comment, and the one with the most recent time stamp will be counted.**

Formatting Papers

Any paper you submit for this class should be typed, double-spaced, and set in a professional 12-point serif typeface such as Times New Roman or Garamond (please no Arial or Courier) with 1-inch margins. You are *always* encouraged to use the first person in your blogs, and in your formal essays where third person proves passive or otherwise awkward. You may, however, want to avoid the second person (i.e. "you") in your writing—it often strikes the wrong note in formal essays.

Grading Policies

The purpose of having a full range of grades (A through F) is to represent true levels of academic achievement. Although I'm sure everyone would like to make As or Bs on their class assignments, chances are that not everyone

will receive them. When receiving graded assignments, it may help to keep in mind these descriptions of different levels of student achievement:

F – Represents failure (or no credit) and means that work was either completed at a level not worthy of credit, or not completed at all.

D – Achievement worthy of credit, but which does not meet assignment/course requirements fully.

C – Achievement that meets the assignment/course requirements in every respect and shows adequate understanding and application of the course material.

B – Achievement *significantly above* the level necessary to meet assignment/course requirements. Such work demonstrates good application of instructional material and makes some successful and original connections beyond it.

A – achievement that is *outstanding and unique* relative to the assignment/course requirements. Such work demonstrates clear and accurate independent thought and goes well beyond the application of instructional material to make new scholarly connections and understandings. The student's voice is polished and clearly original.

Please remember that a "C" is not a bad grade, merely an average one; that Bs represent good, above-average work; and As represent excellent work that achieves the very best in undergraduate or graduate thinking and writing. Also remember that in paper-writing assignments, length is independent of quality; a long paper does not necessarily indicate a good paper.

I will occasionally retain copies of student writing or exercises to serve as samples in the future. Please be assured that if I choose your paper as a sample, I will remove any identifying information from it and use it for instructional purposes only. If you prefer that your writing not be used for this purpose, simply let me know.

SYLLABUS (subject to change)

You must print out and bring texts to class on the days we discuss them.

WEEK 1: Introduction

Mon. 1/24 Review of class policies, syllabus, and weekly blog

WEEK 2: Poetry's Phoenix: The Last Twenty Years

Mon. 1/31 ***Weekly responses begin on Blackboard Blog***

Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?" (BB)

Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?" (BB)

Hall, "Death to the Death of Poetry" (BB)

Beach, Chapter 1: "Discussing the Death of Poetry to Death" (BB)

WEEK 3: Poetry in the Public Sphere: Poetry in Motion, Poetry Out Loud, and the Poetry Foundation

Mon. 2/7 **Mid-Term Paper Assigned**

Nadell, "Poetry in Motion" (BB)

Barr, Poetry Foundation Year in Review Letters, December 2006 and January 2010 (BB)

"The Poetic Appraisal," *Poets & Writers* Magazine (BB)

Barr, "American Poetry in the New Century" (BB)

Goodyear, "The Moneyed Muse" (BB)

WEEK 4: (New?) Formalism

Mon. 2/14 Trethewey, *Native Guard*

"A Brief Guide to New Formalism": <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5667>

Listen to Fresh Air interview with Trethewey (approx.. 40 mins.):

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12003278>

WEEK 5: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E PoetryMon. 2/21 **Presentations assigned**Hejinian, *My Life*

Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure" (BB); Spahr, "Resignifying Autobiography" (BB)

WEEK 6: New LyricismMon. 2/28 **Presentation sign-up**Kelly, *Song*

Williams, "The Necessity of Song" (BB)

WEEK 7: The Dramatic MonologueMon. 3/7 **Mid-Term Paper Due**Smith, *Blood Dazzler*

Howe, "Chapter 1: Overview," Browning, "My Last Duchess" (BB)

Tues 3/8 Patricia Smith Reading, Cohen Lounge, Dickson Hall, 1PM**3/14- 3/18 SPRING BREAK****WEEK 8: Spoken Word and Hip-Hop**Mon. 3/21 **Final Paper assigned**Williams, *The Dead Emcee Scrolls*; Williams, *Callaloo* Interview (BB); View performances in class**WEEK 9: Student-Led Discussion**

Mon. 3/28 Presenters: _____ & _____

_____ & _____

_____ & _____

WEEK 10: Student-Led Discussion

Mon. 4/4 Presenters: _____ & _____

_____ & _____

_____ & _____

WEEK 11: Student-Led Discussion

Mon. 4/11 Presenters: _____ & _____

_____ & _____

_____ & _____

WEEK 12: Student-Led Discussion

Mon. 4/18 Presenters: _____ & _____

_____ & _____

_____ & _____

WEEK 13: Student-Led Discussion

Mon. 4/25 Presenters: _____ & _____

_____ & _____

_____ & _____

WEEK 14: Student-Led Discussion

Mon. 5/2 Presenters: _____ & _____

& _____