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ENGL 224-01, African American Poetry, Fall 2005

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Dr. Tina Barr
New Course # 224/old # 265, African-American Poetry
3:00-4:15pm Mondays and Wednesdays, Palmer Hall 210

My office is on the 3rd floor of Palmer Hall, number 307. My office phone is 843-3979 and my email is: TinaBarr@rhodes.edu. Office Hours for Fall 2005: Mondays 1-2:45pm, Tuesdays, 12:45-1:45pm and Thursdays, 9:30-10:30am.

Required Texts: *The Vintage Book of African-American Poetry*, edited by Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton. (New York: Random House, 2000), *Black Poets of the United States* by Jean Wagner (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1973) & book of poems by a young contemporary poet, Major Jackson

Structure of the Course: We will be using the *Vintage* anthology as our primary source for poems. You will also read accompanying background materials in the *Black Poets* text. The background materials will assist us in developing a greater understanding of cultural climate and biographical detail. I want this course to be **an experience and a forum for sharing experience.**

Course Requirements: **1. (30% of grade = class participation) Read all required texts carefully, *underlining important sections, writing in the margins, making notes and writing down questions you would like to address in class discussion.*** **2. (20% of grade) Complete oral report.** **3. (50% of grade) Complete 3 essays, of 3-5 pages each, one due early in the semester, one mid-semester, and one at the end of the semester.** These will be analyses or close readings of poems.

Oral Reports: The ability to give a good oral report is a real skill. You will work in teams, and you need to rehearse your part ahead of time, based on notes. **Limit your talk to no more than 15-20 minutes as a group, (5 minutes per person).** I am looking for succinct, well-organized, engaging reports. Do not take up class time with disorganized and lengthy reports. Students will work on presenting reports in relation to particular poems or poets, on African-American Religious affiliations, music, key historical events, etc.

While I always attempt to abide by the syllabus, it is a statement of course goals and we may, at times, run behind schedule.

Week 1: 8/29 & 8/31, paired interviews, orientation to syllabus, Video of Komunyakaa's poetry, as an introduction to your course, with close technical analysis of Komunyakaa poem.

Assignment for next week: Read the introduction to the *Vintage* anthology. Read poem on page 7 by Jupiter Hammon, "An Evening Thought: Salvation, etc." **Always read the biographical intro to each poet.** Read on page 14 "On Being Brought from Africa," by Phillis Wheatley, as well as "To S.M, etc." Read excerpt from *Black Poets*, pages 16—36, which provides information on Wheatley and more poems by her and by Hammon.

Read carefully, as I may quiz you on your reading.

Week 2: 9/7 **No class on Monday, MLK day**, class on 9/7. Discussion of Wheatley and Hammon.

Assignment for next week: Read Whitfield's "America," on page 39 in *Vintage*. Read Harper's "The Slave Mother," page 45, and "The Slave Auction," page 48.

Week 3: 9/12 & 9/14 **Oral report on spirituals**. Discuss Whitfield and Harper. Possible Quiz or Response to reading.

Assignment for next week: **Choose a poem for the short essay**, due on 9/21. Write a BRIEF (2 to 3 page) analysis on one aspect of how a particular technique is used in a poem of your choice from your anthology. First, find a poem you love, and that you understand. Then isolate the use of 1. verbs or 2. images or 3. **similes (like or as)** or **metaphors (something IS)** 4. rhyme, or 5. alliteration, consonance or assonance or 6. repetition or another element. Choose to discuss how **one of these techniques** is used, and how that leads or relates to the poem's meaning. You need support to the analysis through several examples, but it may not be necessary to include *every* example of this technique if the poem is of some length. I DO NOT want a summary of the poem. I want you to *complete a literary analysis*, to analyze, explicate, deconstruct the poem's meaning THROUGH your observation of how images, say, in a Lucille Clifton or an Etheridge Knight or a Yusef Komunyakaa poem are used. In Knight's "The Idea of Ancestry," for example, a major **metaphor (it is the salmon going upriver)** is used as a key to the meaning in the poem. In Komunyakaa's self-portrait, "Anodyne" a list of elements of the body are images that reveal something about him. Why, for example, is his birthmark shaped **"like a fighting cock?"**--- **That simile reveals a meaning about him.** You are looking, then, at reading of the subtext of the poem, through technique. If you have questions, you may see me during the office period on Monday. We have no class, but I will be in my office between 1 and 4:15 on Monday, should you have questions. **Also, read** about Dunbar in *Black Poets* pages 73-96 & 111-121. **Read** "When Malindy Sings," page 73 of the *Vintage* anthology, by Paul Laurence Dunbar, as well as "A Negro Love Song," (75) "We Wear the Mask," "Sympathy," and "Dawn." Note poems to Frederick Douglass.

Week 4: 9/19 & 9/21 **No class on 9/19**. **Dr. Barr will be in her office during class period** (and before, during her office hours) for optional consultation on questions regarding your essay, due on 9/21. You may come to me to discuss your outline, but I will not read drafts.

Discussion on 9/21 Paul Laurence Dunbar's poems. Bring your book to class, as well as your essay!!!!

Assignment for next week: Reread about Dunbar in *Black Poets* pages 73-96 & 111-121; if you didn't read this work thoroughly already, look again at "When Malindy Sings," page 73 of the *Vintage* anthology, by Paul Laurence Dunbar, as well as "A Negro Love

Song,” (75) “We Wear the Mask,” “Sympathy,” and “Dawn.” Note poems to Frederick Douglass.

Week 5: 9/26 & 9/28 Poet Gerald Stern (National Book Award winner) reads this Thursday at 7:30 pm in Blount auditorium, Buckman Hall, attendance required.

Finish discussion of Dunbar on Monday. Wednesday: Oral reports on Frederick Douglass and on “What You Don’t Know About (hair, skin color, religion, etc. you pick) in Black Culture.”

Assignment for next week: Read chapter 5 from *Black Poets*, 149-177 on the Harlem Renaissance. Read poems by Claude McKay, “If We Must Die,” (99) “The Harlem Dancer,” “Tropics in NY.” Also read pages 197-204, 225-230, 243-247 on Claude McKay’s poetry. Decide on a poem in the *Vintage*, by any poet, that we have not yet discussed in class that will become the subject of your 2nd essay, due on October 26th. This also is a technical essay, slightly longer and more developed, 3 to 5 pages. Choose ONE technique upon which you focus, unless the poem, (again, one we have not discussed in class) is very brief. You have the weekend after Fall Break to work on it, if you don’t begin beforehand.

Week 6: 10/3 & 10/5 Discussion of McKay. Oral report on a specific aspect (music, dance, art) of the Harlem Renaissance and another “What You Don’t Know” Report.

Assignment for next week. Read poems by Anne Spencer, “Letter to My Sister,” “White Things,” Lines to a Nasturtium,” “Neighbors,” (92) and Georgia Douglas Johnson, “The Heart of a Woman,” (96) and “Old Black Men.” Also read Gwendolyn Bennett’s “To a Dark Girl” on page 140.

Week 7: 10/10 & 10/12 Discussion of poems by women; Small Groups Discussion of Spencer, Johnson & Bennett.

No assignment over Fall break

Week 8: 10/19 Oral reports on Cotton Farming History, (in relation to Toomer’s poems, see below), and Blues Music (in relation to Sterling Brown & Langston Hughes’s work, see below).

Assignment for next week: Read page 259-281 in *Black Poets* on Toomer. Read as well, in *Black Poets* pages 283-293, 307, 312-313 and 293-294 on Countee Cullen’s work. Read poems by Jean Toomer, in the *Vintage*, (102) “Cotton Song,” “Evening Song,” “Georgia Dusk,” “Harvest Song,” “November Cotton Flower,” and “Reapers.” Also on page 154 read poems by Countee Cullen: “A Brown Girl Dead,” “Yet Do I Marvel,” “Uncle Jim,” “Incident,” & “Saturday’s Child.” Work on 2nd essay, due next week. This also is a technical essay, 3 to 5 pages. Choose ONE technique upon which you focus, unless the poem, (again, one we have not discussed in class) is very brief.

Week 9: 10/24 & 10/26 Discussion of poems by Toomer and Cullen. **Turn in essay on 10/26**

Assignment for next week: Read in *Black Poets* pages 475-482, 486, 489, 493, 499-503 on Sterling Brown and his work. Read in the anthology, beginning on page 116, the following poems: “Frankie and Johnny,” “Ma Rainey,” “Old Lem,” “Slim Greer,” “Slim in Atlanta,” and “Slim in Hell.”

Week 10: 10/31 & 11/2 Continue Discussion. Discussion of Sterling Brown’s work.

Assignment for next week: Read in *Black Poets* material on Langston Hughes, pages 385-395, 452-455. Read poems in anthology, beginning on page 143, “Cross,” “Dream Variations,” “Harlem Sweeties,” “Madam and the Rent Man,” “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “Theme for English B” and “Tower.” Read in the anthology the poems of Robert Hayden, (166) “Ice Storm,” “Those Winter Sundays,” “A Plague of Starlings,” “October,” and note “A Letter from Phillis Wheatley.”

Week 11: 11/7 & 11/9 **Oral report on jazz.** Discussion of Hughes and Hayden.

Assignment for next week: Read Margaret Walker’s poem “October Journey,” (180) Gwendolyn Brooks’ “The Bean Eaters,” (184) “Sadie and Maud,” “Of De Witt Williams,” “We Real Cool,” “The Mother,” “To Be in Love,” and the remaining poems in the *Vintage*. Read Raymond Patterson’s “Twenty-six Ways of Looking at a Blackman,” page 206.

Week 12: 11/14 & 11/16 Finish Hayden and Hughes discussion. Discussion of Walker, Brooks and Patterson’s work.

Assignment for next week: Read poems by Lucille Clifton on page 244, “miss rosie,” “the lost baby poem,” “white lady,” “slaveship.” Read Toi Derricotte’s poem on page 296 “On the Turning Up, etc.,” and Marilyn Nelson’s “Tuskegee Airfield,” (322). Begin thinking about **a topic** you would like to write about, for **essay due 12/5**, the last day of class. This 3-5 page essay can be on a topic of your own. However, if you were unsuccessful in doing well on a technical analysis, I would suggest you complete a third one.

Week 13: 11/21 **Oral report on Tuskegee airmen.** Discussion of work by Clifton, Derricotte & Nelson.

No Assignment over Thanksgiving, but bring your anthology to class on Monday. Remember your **essay, due 12/5**, the last day of class. This 3-5 page essay can be on a topic of your own. However, if you were unsuccessful in doing well on a technical analysis, I would suggest you complete a third one.

Week 14: 11/28 & 11/30 Bring your anthology to class! **CD** of Michael Harper reading. **Video** of Knight. Knight was an influence on Major Jackson, whose poems you will read for Thursday.

11/30 Discussion of poems by Major Jackson.

Assignment for next week: **Work on final paper due on 12/5 last class.**

Week 15: 12/5 Last Class. Turn in essay. Evaluations. **Oral Report on Food! Please bring in African-American/Southern food!**