

GESM 110g: Seminar in the Arts
T/TH 2:00-3:20 pm | DMC 209
Spring, 2024

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LIVES OF THE POETS

Poetry means taking control of the language of your life. Good poems can interdict a suicide, rescue a love affair, and build a revolution in which speaking and listening to somebody becomes the first and last purpose to every social encounter. — June Jordan

I didn't plan on becoming a poet. I was not easy with words. . . . But with poetry, doors would open inside even as I heard them slamming, outside. — Joy Harjo

I'm Nobody! Who are you? / Are you — Nobody — too? / Then there's a pair of us!
—Emily Dickinson

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The word *poem* comes from a Greek root, meaning “to make.” Of course, we might not all make poems, but, as Nobel laureate Toni Morrison notes, we all “do language.” In this class, we’ll keep company with some of the most daring, inventive, and far-reaching practitioners of language to ask: What arises from a life dedicated to making art out of the same alphabet we use to say, *Pass the salt?*

Via archival material, letters, journals, interviews, and memoirs, we’ll visit with poets classical to contemporary — linguistic innovators acutely attuned to an extraordinary range of frequencies, from the truth and beauty of English Romantic poet John Keats (broke and dying at age 23) to the visionary music of (still very much alive!) three-term U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo. Together, we’ll read poems of courage and sustenance — poems written in exile, on the bus, during lunch hour. Poems written after long days doctoring, lawyering, mothering. Poems written in the aftermath of war, at the bedside of a dying parent, during long nights of waiting, and in the surprise of morning. Along the way, we’ll explore how the most enduring poetry shapes language in ways that speak not only to a single lived experience, but to the most urgent questions of collective life.

Taking our cue from these innovative and resonant voices, we’ll try our hands at re-making language, writing into and through our usual patterns to arrive at new understandings, both of our own lives and of the times in which we live. Throughout, our approach will be generative, participatory, and collaborative, with readings, exercises, and experiments folded into alert engagement and considered discussion. We’ll bring good faith and generous spirit to our own risks, and to the risks of others. No experience in poetry is necessary, only a willingness to experience what it might mean to dwell, alongside Emily Dickinson’s “Nobody,” in a language —and life — of possibility.

REQUIRED READINGS | VIEWINGS | LISTENINGS

- Clifton, Lucille. *Generations: A Memoir*. Intro. Tracy K. Smith. New York: NYRB, 2021.
- Clifton, Lucille. *How to Carry Water: Selected Poems*. Rochester: BOA Editions, 2020.
- Harjo, Joy. *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2015.
- Harjo, Joy. *Crazy Brave: A Memoir*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012.
- Hillman, Brenda. *Extra Hidden Life, among the days*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 2018.
- Nezhukumatathil, Aimee. *Oceanic*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2018.
- Nezhukumatathil, Aimee. *World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2020.
- **Please note: You will also select one text from our course bibliography and attend at least one local arts event.** Brief additional readings, clips, and/or recordings will be provided.