

Journal Assignment 1

Preparing for Service

After reading the assigned [CFL articles](#), reflect on the following questions in a journal entry of about 300-500 words. See [Writing Journal Reflections](#) for instructions.

1. What are your first impressions of this service-learning project? How do you feel about the project right now? Please be honest. You will have an opportunity to reflect on this again later in the semester. Why do you think you feel the way you do? What did you read that influenced your thinking? Give specific reasons. You may quote from the articles.

Connections for Life seems like an interesting program. I wonder how certain other students, perhaps coming from “bourgeois” backgrounds, will take to the project. I feel like I already have some understanding of the way our country’s socioeconomic system functions, possessing a working knowledge of repressed classes, the plights of minorities, and the tortuous, feedback relationship of poverty and crime, as well as race-class correlations. I anticipate, perhaps wrongly, that most students will be harrowed by the notion of actually having to interact with these “chandala,” these members from the untouchable caste, human-like creatures relegated to the margins of society.

However, my ideology might be overweening in this regard, and maybe there will not be such a wide chasm between my reaction and the reactions of other students at the outset. My intrepid naivety reminds me of Dostoevsky’s mistaken presumptions when he was waiting to be deported to the prison labor camps in Siberia: his romanticism made him believe that the criminals would all be honorable and noble men. It may not be prudent to hold such grandiose expectations of the people in CFL, but it is wise, I believe, to keep an open mind.

2. What other people or events have influenced your attitude toward poetry in general? Perhaps a former teacher helped you develop an appreciation for poetry, or maybe a teacher bored you to death with it. Can you recall any specific experience with poetry that you remember as particularly good or really bad?

Unfortunately, last semester I disliked most of the assigned modernist poetry I had to read in my American literature class. In general, I have distaste for poetry that is purposefully obfuscated by layers of allusions (as in T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," for example). I was averse to Wallace Stevens too, because I felt that meaning is not readily apparent in his poetry, even after repeated readings, and one is left with a moribund wall of text whose meaning can only be discerned in the dry autopsy-rooms of decrepit academics, who alone must safeguard the knowledge of the poems, transmitting it piecemeal to the ignorant students.

At the risk of being stigmatized as a philistine, my favorite poetry has always been the somewhat conventional, rhyming, highly-structured poetry, with readily apparent meaning, and aesthetics that can be appreciated by ordinary readers (like Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," Samuel Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and J.R.R. Tolkien's lyrical poems in "The Lord of the Rings" books).

3. Finally, what do you think about exploring poetry through service-learning? What might poetry (and specifically, [My Papa's Waltz](#)) have to do with community service? If you don't have any answers, what are your questions?

"My Papa's Waltz" seems to explore the tenuous balance of abuse and good-natured fun that a child has with his alcoholic father. One of the readings alluded to the poem being used in Jungian psychoanalysis to treat alcoholics. Since some of the best literature, I think, can be produced when it deals with content that is sordid and egregious, these negative experiences require a modicum of intrinsic humanity for us to interpret them. I am thinking of works such as Eli Wiesel's "Night," or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "The Gulag Archipelago." David Hume and other Enlightenment-period philosophers held that sympathy was at the core of human nature, so commiserating with other flawed human beings like ourselves, who have been disadvantaged and put through the legal wringer of our society, may have some innate poetic merit. The confluence of people from two distinct backgrounds, prison and college, is like an experiment in empathy.

[Journal Assignment 2: Differences in perspective](#)

As you prepare for service with Connections for Life, consider both Brooks' "Lovers of the Poor" and Axelrod's "Once in Awhile, a Protest Poem":

1. How would you describe the various characters in one or both of the poems? With which character(s) do you identify? BE HONEST. How would you characterize the speaker in the poem?

I think the women from the “Ladies Betterment League” are uncannily familiar – women like Laura Bush, who donated money to help repair libraries post-Katrina, but likely only has sterilized, PR-staged interactions with the destitute. They are the bourgeois, like the East-Egg dwellers of Fitzgerald's “Great Gatsby,” who can assuage their collective guilt over society's inequality by making philanthropic restitution, albeit drops in the bucket. In this sense, they are a notch above the apathetic, middle-class TV watchers in Axelrod's “Once in Awhile, a Protest Poem.” Rather than being ineffectual and passive spectators, the urbane ladies are brimming with *noblesse oblige*. However, their revulsion for the people they avow to help is undiminished. The ladies despise the swarthy complexions of these indigents, and wish to avoid sullyng their dainty hands and hostess gowns in the squalor.

Unfortunately, I probably best identify with the ladies from the Betterment League: debonair, cultured, members of the intelligentsia, wishing to avoid the uncouth dangerous classes. I hope to ultimately vanquish this condescending attitude.

2. In what ways do you think the poem or poems might relate to your service-learning experience? What are your fears/concerns/anxieties as you begin the service-learning project? What are you looking forward to?

Like the benevolent matrons of the Ladies' Betterment Society, my good intentions may be marred by latent biases of privilege that disclose themselves unconsciously. For example, one might let slip a tactless remark carping about the bad wireless internet quality on campus for iPhones, only to realize the listening party is working for minimum wage, is alienated from her children, and is grateful merely to afford the rent at a small flat on Gardere. However, I doubt this worst-case scenario will happen. I look forward to working with the women in CFL on equal footing, conversing with them, and probing for common ground, rather than focusing on the glaring disparities.

3. Write your own poem or prose reflection from one of the following perspectives:

- Write from your own perspective expressing how you "see" people whom our culture has marginalized. OR
- Write from the perspective of a person who is overlooked in our culture.

The Somolian Child by Trevor Fanning

You fill your brain with bright images of glossy products and superlatives

Which corporate nexus will win the competition for your labor's recompense?

But I am famished and parched; I dream of cool running water and sacks of grain to abate my protracted misery

I wait for my anguish to desist with death by an easily-preventable disease

Meanwhile, across the globe, you bemoan your air-conditioned traffic jams

My papa's cows have all died in the drought, but

Irreplaceable fuels are burned to ferry you to your restaurant

You ordered the Raisin' Canes dish, chickens were de-beaked with hot irons without the anodizing effects of anesthesia

The abused fowl are slaughtered at your caprice,

to satiate your gluttonous impulses with a surfeit of saturated fats and cholesterol,

to expedite the clogging of your arteries – what beauty of choice in consumer society!

But I am bereft of such delicacies.

“Hungry” for you is a fleeting sensation to be quickly ameliorated; For me it painfully defines all sentience

I would gladly lap down like a dog the clean water you use to flush excrement from your commode

Brother mine! Remember me when you recount your tribulations' sum at dusk.

...

Journal Assignment 3

After reading the assigned poems and articles, consider one or more of the following quotes from each poet, and make your reading of this statement the topic of a thoughtful response. Consider not just whether you agree with the idea and why or why not, but also whether any poems that you have been

introduced to in class or in today's assignments can be used to illustrate or counter this idea. Think also about your Service-Learning project. How might your chosen quote(s) relate to your experience or the experience of the women served by Connections for Life?

:: [Carolyn Forché](#) ::

- "I think poetry is the voice of the soul, whispering, celebrating, singing even."
- ". . . unfortunately, they told the wrong person. They told a poet."
- "One of the things that happens when poets bear witness to historical events is that everyone they tell becomes a witness too, everyone they tell also becomes responsible for what they have heard and what they now know."

I like the idea Carolyn Forché espouses here: namely, the notion of "paying it forward." I think the Arab Awakening, partially spurred by the usage of social media amongst tech-savvy youths, was successfully executed in this way. Artistry was employed by revolutionaries to paint beautiful portraits of the young man Khlaed Said, who was brutally beaten to death by corrupt police in Egypt. The grisly post-mortem photos juxtaposed with a before-portrait of his smiling and handsome countenance became a symbol impelling the unrest and revolution. Here, the act of bearing witness to state crimes via photography and painting, the visual arts, serves as a parallel to the ripple-effect of poetry in inciting social movements.

Similarly, the civil rights movement was somewhat loosely but distinctly affiliated with the black arts movement in the US during the 1960s. Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used poetic language to inculcate his dream of a society marked by equality and merit rather than customary bigotry.

:: [Claribel Alegría](#) ::

- "Poetry is like bread--everybody shares it."
- "I wrote that poem [Documentary] a long time ago, and some people said it was a political poem. I laughed. To me it was a love poem for my country."
- "When there is so much horror around you, I think you have to look at it. You have to feel it and suffer with the others and make that suffering yours. With hope, always with hope."

- "I thought, 'Something is going to happen.' . . . some of these people may see a little bit of light.' That's my way of fighting for my country."

The horrors of Nicaragua and its internal strife resultant from the US-backed terror of the Contras during the 1980s is well-documented in human rights publications. More generally, as we know from Carolyn Forché's poem, "The Colonel," Central America was already an abattoir by the late 1970s. Rather than retreat into an ivory tower to cogitate beautiful thoughts, however, the poet Claribel Alegría wrote unabashedly about the appalling conditions that festered in her motherland. Perhaps most cryptic among her poetic sentiments is Alegría's contention that "Documentary" is not a political indictment, but rather a poem expressing her love for her country.

The women of CFL are like survivors of war-torn nations: their experience is both personal and political, an admixture which Carolyn Forché's detractors had branded as irresolvable. Their stories, though individual, coalesce like the myriad dots in a pointillist painting to provide us with a portrait of the problems inherent in our society. Each woman harbors a memory, doubtless, of the first night she spent in a cold prison cell bereft of quaint creature-comforts once taken as granted. By sharing testimony to us of how succumbed to drugs, theft, prostitution, or other ills, their poetry of spirit suffuses our consciousness and political conceptions. Each woman also cherishes their regained freedom and the hope of redemption and reintegration into society. As folk singer Kevn Kinney muses: "There's always a chance to get restarted / to a new world, new life / scarred but smarter."

Journal 4: Saying the Unsayable

In an [interview with Bill Moyers](#), poet Linda McCarriston made the following statements regarding her poems about domestic violence and sexual abuse:

"The material was hard to handle, but in some ways a more difficult problem was that many people actively tried to discourage me from writing these poems. They felt that if I were to write them, the poems would be shrill or I might be identifying myself as a feminist or a radical.

"I didn't know why I felt so compelled to write them, but when I finally found that I was beginning to write poems about these experiences that were standing on their own, that were good poems, I realized that I simply had to speak back to the culture that I saw as creating and sustaining the ideas that led to this violent situation in the first place.

"Those who argue that poetry says the unsayable generally mean the unsayably beautiful or the unsayably profound, but the unsayable can also mean what people simply don't want said, ever. That's why poetry is extremely radical—poetry allows the individual experience to strike like lightning through the collective institutional consciousness and to plumb the depths of actual communal experience so that what people don't want said in fact gets said, and in a way that is unignorable."

McCarriston's poems remain controversial today. Consider her statements and our discussion in class, and then reflect in your journal. Explain your responses thoroughly, and use specific quotes from her poems to support your ideas where applicable.

What are some of the reasons many people, including McCarriston's family members, object to her publishing these poems? Do you agree or disagree with her notion that our culture in some ways perpetuates this kind of abuse? When she says that "poetry is extremely radical," what does she mean? Compared to other forms of communication, is poetry a more or less effective medium for witness concerning such painful, sensitive subjects? How might poetry act as a vehicle for healing for the individual? for the community? for the culture?

I feel that McCarriston's family was so ashamed of the stigma of incest and child-molestation that they wished to deny any association with it. The reason for the father's denial is obvious, while the motivations of the victimized family members are hazier. Why tacitly defend the integrity of a man who rapes his own children? The thought sickens us, and we yearn for some explanation.

By partly effacing the memories of sexual abuse through active denial, the psychic pain can be partially extenuated. My knee-jerk reaction to hearing that McCarriston's family members wished to suppress her poems was one of outrage. I was irate that the family would be complicit in whitewashing the ignominy associated with this pederast through their terrible silence. However, I began to think that the psychological reasons they discouraged McCarriston from publishing the poems must have been powerful, if they were willing to fly in the face of justice and effectively help exculpate the perpetrator.

Being sexually abused by one's own parent must be a horrific event; those of us fortunate not to have experienced this hell can still imagine the torment. Awful as the act is, it can be repeated ad infinitum, in the replaying of the memory on loop in the child's mind, reliving the trauma indefinitely. Hence, the true curse of child abuse, I would submit, is not in the heinous nature of the act itself, but perpetuating the act on a highly-sentient and nascent being who will be haunted and demoralized by the memory for the rest of their life. Just as the old man "in the darkened theater of memory. Best old remembrance" can replay the scene, there is an analogous replay function in the mind of the abused.

A culture of quietude regarding sad events, instead hyping consumerism, glamor, and the promised happiness of new, varnished commodities, necessarily overlooks deplorable acts such as child abuse, deigning such material too dolorous for the limelight. The glittery advertising that dutifully encourages rampant consumption and fetishism of objects can only exploit positive emotions for its benefit: darker shades from the spectrum must be discarded (e.g., ennui, depression, anxiety, anger, frustration, guilt, shame). By negating the reality of our flawed world, we perpetuate the myth of total privilege, whereby those at the lowest rung of society are mired there by choice. Analysis of sociological factors contributing to poverty, drug addiction, violent crime, and domestic abuse is systematically excluded from this rosy and simplistic outlook.

Poetry is radical in the sense that a narrative about an elderly man masturbating to the time he raped his pubescent daughter is not exactly material ripe for the Top 40 Singles list. It is a medium which indeed allows for expression of "the unsayable." By nature of its brevity, poetry often furnishes us with the surplus time for rereading and rumination. This excess time for cogitation allows us to chew on the substance of the poem and hope to extract its essence. We can reflect on child-molestation more pensively, more abstractly, and from more of a creative perspective than if we had read the same story in a short, prosaic, and objective news article in the local daily.

McCarriston's words to her ailing mare could be alternatively interpreted as direct commentary aimed toward the reader: "As I soothe you I surprise wounds of my own this long time unmothered." Poetry holds the therapeutic power for both reader and writer. Our wounds of festering ignorance are assuaged, and the caustic memories of a childhood pockmarked with the sores of abuse are assuaged.

Journal 5: Emblematic Moments

Consider one or more of the following quotes from each poet, and make your reading of this statement the topic of a one-page response. Consider not just whether you agree with the idea and why or why not, but also whether any poems that you have been introduced to in class or in today's assignments can be used to illustrate or counter this idea. Think also about your Service-Learning project. How might your chosen quote(s) relate to your experience or the experience of the women served by Connections for Life?

Sekou Sundiata

"I think part of it [the resurgence and revitalization of poetry] has to do with the way in which people have really been beaten up and abused by language, to the point where they've become deeply distrustful. Much of language has gotten to the point where people don't feel they can trust it anymore I think the cumulative effect is that the language has been denatured in a way. In many cases it's become a manipulative tool. So I think people come to poetry now and expect at least to hear honest language."

I agree with Sundiata's notion that language has been diluted, bastardized, and perverted – chiefly by corporate advertising and the public relations industry in their service of deceitful political campaigns, I would opine. The denaturing of language percolates downward into our culture and language. "In *Blink Your Eyes*," Sundiata toys with a phrase of dual meaning "Put your hands in the air / You know the routine / Like you just don't care"— at once an imperative barked at the apprehended suspect by police as a matter of protocol, and also an incitement to dance and party in the lexicon of popular culture, especially rave and rap music. In a sense, the wry humor inherent in this observation tips us off that Sundiata is steeped in the irony that inheres in certain English discourse. We actually trust him because of his acuity, in highlighting the incongruous double-meanings of phrases.

Sundiata also showcases his mordant wit by providing doctored quotes from the police officer: "I watch the news, you always lose." The words are too raw and true to actually issue forth from the mouth of a police officer. Instead, Sundiata proffers us his guess at the officer's actual thoughts, while only a mundane traffic violation is cited as reason for pulling the African-American motorist over.

I'm uncertain, but I suspect the ladies from CFL would concur at least partially with the idea that fancy and antiquated Latin expressions like "*habeas corpus*" and "*affidavit*" are legal terms used by pretentious old white men who arbitrate over who must sleep in a cold prison cell at night. This esoteric jargon exists solely to exclude and bamboozle indigent people and establish a feint of superiority for the court. Polysyllabic, sterile phrases like "mandatory minimums" are just phrases in dusty pamphlets for legal

scholars, but strip individuals of their sovereign rights and liberty in practice. More painful truths of the racial injustices of the legal system abound in Sundiata's jaded declaration: "New York City, they got laws / Can't no brothers drive outdoors..." We can better understand the equivocal nature of politically correct language when we reflect that this truism among African Americans would never be written into New York's bylaws. It remains a hidden nugget of wisdom for those few who have gleaned the knowledge of the subjugated through firsthand experience. By the end of this single poem, people who have been mistreated under our justice system can at least trust this poet, Sekou Sundiata, for his people a bastion of truth.

::[Naomi Shihab Nye](#)::

"That was the *job* of poems, we decided. To give us a sense of others' lives close up. Poems could be a zoom lens in a world of wide-angle sweeps."

Naomi Nye tells us that for her, poems "gave insight into all the secret territories of the human spirit, our relationships with one another. Somehow, these glimpses felt comforting, like looking through the lit windows of other people's homes at dusk, before they closed the curtains." In "Blood," we are gifted with special images of Nye's upbringing that include her father's quaint sayings about "true Arabs" and recounting how he could catch flies in his hands. 30 second news clips and tailored sound bytes about the Israeli-Arab conflict fail to convey the culture that is being destroyed – these function only as the maligned "wide-angle sweeps" of the world.

Song lyrics as poetry

Choose a song you like and one that you consider especially significant to your own life experiences. Write a reflection in your journal defending your chosen song as good poetry.

Pink Floyd - Shine On You Crazy Diamond

1. First, you will have to specify your criteria for what is good poetry. Think about theme, figures of speech, rhythm, imagery, and any other elements of poetry we have discussed. Where do you find effective use of poetic elements in your song?

I think good poetry is highly ordered- well-arranged, significant in meaning, has a definite theme with minimal ambiguity in interpretation. Metaphors are essential, and this "gem" of Pink Floyd is overripe with allegories. The schizoid burnout Syd Barrett is characterized for his luminescent bursts of genius that came in radiant, intermittent blasts, but were quickly extinguished. "Now there's a look in your eyes like black holes in the sky." This is a cosmic analogy of the kind Saul Williamson might offer us.

2. Explain why the song speaks to your own life experience, and why you think it does a good job of this task. What does this song reflect about you? Use specific examples from the lyrics to support your opinions.

I had always worried as early as my late teens that I was gradually and imperceptibly losing all the great promise I had possessed in youth, when I was perceived as more of a prodigy. Eventually, expectations for me became more modest. I was seen for what I was - a slacker, a malcontent, a sardonic and witty lad but with a choleric pessimism that made me insufferable. I started to loathe my own sheepishness to life's resistance! I was so timid that I was paralyzed from any affirmative movement. This song became a lament to squandered talents, an ode to a prodigal failure, the very type of person I perceived myself to be. "And we'll bask in the shadow of yesterday's triumph..." Yes! This was the only triumph I was then fit to bask in - yesterday's. A recumbent and doleful existence punctuated by quiet moments of introspection and nostalgia for a past that seemed lively and brimming with hope. I could weep thinking about the intrinsic beauty in a song like this - full of reconciliation, conciliatory gestures for the prodigal son who never bothered returning...

3. After you complete your group analysis, reflect on the differences of opinion in your group about your chosen song. How do you account for these differences?

Our group's chosen song was Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone." Hannah interpreted the "mystery tramp" to be specifically a drug dealer, while I understood this character more generally as a shady character from the underworld of society, perhaps a loan shark or someone out to exploit helpless people. This was her first time hearing the song or reading its lyrics, whereas I nominated this song as one of my favorites for our group project. I attribute her inexperience with the music to what I call her "misinterpretation," which I feel is too narrow in focus.

Besides that, Haroon thought that the "jugglers and the clowns" referred back to the same people who'd "call, say 'Beware, doll, you're bound to fall.'" Again, my interpretation is more liberal, allowing for the injection of new but similar characters echoing a common motif, rather than the more stringent interpretation of rehashing of the same characters in new guises for every

verse. I think this is because Haroon is more analytical in his approach to dissecting poetry (e.g., poring over lines, labeling the appropriate literary devices), whereas I tend to honor a more fluid method of scrutiny whereby intuition and the song meaning's "gelling" with the peripheral details is paramount.

Journal assignment 7: SLAM

"SLAM portrays the experience of a young African American man caught in the Washington, DC correctional system. Set in a real prison, using real convicts as supporting cast, SLAM explores the institutional, cultural and internalized aspects of racism in a current urban African American community. SLAM also explores the use of poetry as a way towards liberation through consciousness and community building."

1. What is your impression of the movie's theme? What is the point?

Originally I found the film to be indecently pandering themes of "personal responsibility" in the face of overwhelming determinism - I agree with the prison worker who checks Ray in and rattles off statistics of black males' disproportionate incarceration: "do the math" - urban youths like Ray are pawns for the prison industrial complex. In a sense, the mechanisms of slavery have been reconstituted in this shameful Phoenix of racial injustice. This analogy is especially poignant in a place like the Deep South where the Louisiana State Penitentiary has earned the pastoral sobriquet "The Farm." It is a surviving atavism that recalls antebellum plantations.

Now I feel I understand better the message of upstanding behavior. Being a role model to the youngsters who look up to him, Ray must eschew criminality and broker "peace accords" between warring factions of the hood. "Enmity will not bring an end to enmity, only friendship will do this" - this is a lesson of the Buddha. Ray imparts this lesson to his blind friend who would seek vengeance for the shooting that robbed him of his sight and sent Ray to jail. I think the theme is one that has reverberations in Eastern religious thought: Taoism, for instance, advocates "action through inaction." Ray is shrewdly scheming to terminate the oppressive cycle of violence by ignoring the obvious stimulus for retaliation.

2. What implications does this movie have for us as the audience? Where are the places in this film in which people who want to make change have the most power to do so? You may want to consider the implications suggested in the poem [Proving You Are Someone](#) with reflection by performance poet Daphne Gottlieb.

As privileged college students we must acknowledge that society is structured in a way that keeps the strata inert by favoring the wealthy classes and furnishing indigent people with the barest of resources necessary for survival or less. This is the non-negotiable minimum for intellectual honesty. However, neither can we discount the importance of individual choice. Ray broods over the decision to atone for his venial, non-violent drug offense by serving a two-year prison sentence at the behest of his attorney and Lauren Bell. Ray is making a positive choice by offering society a penance for his deeds that perpetuated criminality in his neighborhood. Through his illicit actions, he was serving as the allegorical, unwitting “slavemaster” over victims like Lauren. In “Proving That You Are Someone,” Daphne Gottlieb observes that people like Ray can act as proxies for the slavedriver by never scrutinizing their behavior and unquestioningly obeying cultural norms that may have been conditioned to preserve inequality or the decay of a community. The parallel is fitting.

3. How can we go about using poetry "as a way towards liberation through consciousness and community building ? How would you go about doing this?

Poetry of the kind Sekou Sundiata and Saul Williams (Raymond Joshua in SLAM) produce is precious because it serves as a lighthouse of truth amidst a sea of nonsense and lies. An urban community is otherwise saturated with billboard advertisements for McDonald's, Kools cigarettes, Taaka vodka, and Coca-Cola, showing glamorous caricatures of human beings seemingly made happy by indulging in consumerism. Meanwhile, the reality of the streets plays out in manifold ways, none of them particularly sunny: gang-fights over turf, prostitution, drug-dealing, shootings. The triumph of poetry like Saul Williams's is that it synthesizes the great paradox of these dual worlds, showing the absurdity in both and analyzing how both worlds are part of an elaborate system concocted by those with power to keep certain human beings at the level of brutish subhumans. The way to fight back is to use the oppressor's own lexicon (mythological allusions, sophisticated vocabulary) tintured with elements belonging to one's own urban dialect, and produce truly profound works of art. This proves a potent formula for overcoming a system of oppression and indoctrination.

Journal assignment 8: Beat rEvolution

Read the poems, bios and background for each poet from the *Beat rEvolution*. Notice that for each poet, there is a link to biographical information and selected poems, followed by a question labeled "Food for Thought." Choose one of the "Food for Thought" questions and reflect on the significance of the statement.

Why is Whitman often referred to as "the first Beat"?

1. What is significant about the quote? What does it mean? What does it reflect about the poet's philosophy concerning the importance of poetry in our culture? How does the poet's work reflect the importance of the quote? Provide specific quoted lines from the poet's work to support your ideas.

- Make a claim in response to the above question.
- Provide an example from the poet's work as an example in the form of quoted lines or specific phrases.
- Explain how your example supports your claim about the poet.

Whitman, like the Beat poets, produced poetry that was repugnant to the tastes of refined literary culture of his time. Whitman's "Song of Myself" was unstinting in worshiping the body and irreverent in disdaining the religious experience of guilt. On his partisanship toward animals, Whitman writes to their credit: "They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins, They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God." Shirking the bite of conscience as an undesirable pest would have been anathema to the morally-upright Christian readership of his day. This brazen defiance of contemporary norms was repeated in the Beatnik poetry a century later. Not to be outdone by Whitman, Beat poet Allen Ginsberg writes: "the soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy! Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy!" This poetry was shocking and construed to be sacrilegious, probably even by people who were by now so callous as to shrug off Whitman's "Song of Myself" as mild-mannered. Using profanity and debasing the spiritual concept of "holiness" in a work of

purported highbrow literature was initially too much for the prevailing culture to stomach.

Whitman was equally dismissive of the vast literary canon that preceded him, addressing his readers: “You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on spectres in books... You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.”

2. What makes this poet's work "poetry of witness"? To what injustice or social situation is the poet bearing witness? What kind of response do you think the poet wants from the audience? Do you think the poet/poem is effective as a witness?

I think Whitman is bearing witness to the entrenched religious (Christian) practice of inwardly lacerating and tormenting oneself for perceived mistakes (sins) as a means of repentance and reconciliation with an austere God. Whitman is too irrepressibly gay to allow a “guilty conscience” to bog him down. He refuses to castigate himself for expressing his multifaceted nature, and envies the animals for their placid existence. (Non-human) animals are harried by no sanctimonious imperatives issuing from a “beyond,” are beleaguered by no moral idiosyncrasies, or allegedly “divine mandates.”

In the same stanza Whitman rails against the rampant materialism he sees as singular to our species. In the animal kingdom, “not one is demented with the mania of owning things.” The line is quite germane today; I think it would find resonance among the protesters of the Occupy Wall Street movements. Billionaires are so suffused with the acquisitive need to horde their wealth that they reap record-breaking corporate profits while real unemployment among average Americans is approximating Depression-era levels, and future prospects for the middle and working classes are the bleakest yet.

3. We have discussed this semester how an individual's background and experiences influences his or her perception of the "cultural reality" in which

each of us exists. What have you learned this semester about the importance of poetry and/or written language as a reflection of various "cultural realities"?

I was struck by how language can stake out a cultural post, and how exclusive these cultural posts can be. I remember Sekou Sundiata saying that his first experiences with poetry in high school were totally uninspiring because they all came from old European men with archaic vocabulary. He felt indifferent or even hostile to classical poetry because it bore no relation whatsoever to his life in the Bronx ghetto. To hear a poet talk this way was shocking. No viable poet, I thought, could afford to reject the entire literary canon of Anglo-American poetry and replace it with just inner-city slang and pilfered lyrics from James Brown songs.

Poetry evidently makes or breaks our fluency in understanding another culture or subculture. A white person reading Sundiata's poetry sounds silly. I don't have the inborn fluency in the black vernacular, the words sound uncouth coming off my tongue.

Journal assignment 9

Now that we have come to the end of the semester, it is a good time to reflect on your learning in this course. Consider the following questions:

1. What specific poem(s) and/or poet(s) had the biggest impact on you, and why? What effect did this work have on your point of view? Explain how your thinking changed (even if only slightly).

Sekou Sundiata's "Blink Your Eyes" had the greatest impact on me. The poem was radical because it made me recognize and place a value judgment on the optic of an upstanding Anglo-American through which I view the world. Sundiata remarks with colloquial wit and jest: "New York City, they got laws / Can't no brothers drive outdoors." This deadpan line best attests to the racial profiling that is at the heart of the poem. Gaining epiphanies by reading poetry, I think, is a process of noticing and peeling off filters that distort our window to the world in different ways. Sundiata puts a floodlight on the two opposing perspectives, the cop and the suspect, a black man: "Why did you stop me? / Somebody had to stop you. / I watch the news, you always lose." Here we see the subterranean undercurrent of racism coursing through the supposedly impartial bedrock of justice. As a reader, I was privy to the crass disparity in motives between police officer and driver, and could empathize with the driver's plight.

2. Have your feelings about poetry been altered this semester? Why or why not? Did the service-learning experience have any effect on your experience of poetry and other forms of written expression?

Like Sundiata, I feel that I am surprisingly interested in poetry. I realize poetry is not restricted to the musings of 18th century European academics with archaic vocabulary, periwigs, and quill pens. Sundiata experienced a revelation after reading Harlem Renaissance poetry, such as the work of Amiri Baraka, and began to think, "Wait a minute, there's poetry in the language I speak." Because

of this, I am more scrupulous about appreciating the lyrical content of local Baton Rouge rap artists such as Lil' Boosie and Webbie.

The service learning component of the course, I feel, was steeped in the complex interplay of social behavior among working class African Americans and more affluent, middle to upper class whites, similar to myself. Working with Ms. Karen Stagg and a young black man, Derick, (who was not enrolled in LSU, and may have been mandated to do service work by the court), was an eye-opening experience. Going on a run through Baton Rouge in a large CFL moving van, Ms. Stagg jabbed at the uncomfortable silence with contrived talk that made little headway in breaking the glacial ice. I now feel that I have a greater reckoning for the task of bridging the gulf between cultures that occupy different tiers in our social stratification.

3. It is sometimes difficult for students to imagine how the study of literature will affect them in the future. How do you think you might use what you learned in this course in the long term? Consider not only the emotional impact of specific poems; think also about how you might use your analytical skills. (If you need some [inspiration](#) here, you might re-read "[Giving Washington a Lesson in Meter and Verse](#)", which was assigned at the beginning of the semester.)

Far from sapping the lifeblood out of beloved music, I found that the task of analyzing my favorite songs for poetic criteria proved imminently enjoyable, yielding rich returns. For instance, in examining Pink Floyd's "Shine On You Crazy Diamond," I realized I identify with burnt-out star, Syd Barrett, the subject of the eulogy. I sought a nihilistic repose in being lauded for past triumphs, even if the future promised nothing (fortunately, I have since conquered this existential gloom). Hence, analytical techniques were useful in showing me *why* I had intuitively liked my most cherished songs from the outset.