

# UC Berkeley

## Student Prizes

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**THEA MATTHEWS**

*Collection of Poems*

Honorable Mention

May 2017

### **The American Cultures Student Prize Honorable Mention**

Awarded since 2008, the American Cultures Student Prize provides students with the opportunity to highlight work taken in an American Cultures course which promotes understanding of race, ethnicity, and culture. The prize also recognizes student's work as a standard of excellence in scholarship wrestling critically with the complexities of our diverse social conditions in illuminating ways.

For more information about this award, please visit: <http://americancultures.berkeley.edu/ac-student-prize>

#### **THEA MATTHEWS**

Collection of Poems, African American Studies 158A, "Poetry for the People", Instructor: Aya de Leon

"Lilacs," "Hydrangeas," "Crocus," "Lupine," "Standing Rock," and "On 24th St." -- all have a predominant theme of intersectionality between race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, while incorporating history and geographic significances when exploring the realms of surviving and transcending individual as well as collective trauma. They raise empathy for the impact of sociocultural trauma experienced by individuals and groups of people. The poems include parts of Thea's own autobiographical story and known history of her ancestral bloodlines; and with these anecdotes this project diversifies the American experience for emphasizing the significance of intersectionality as well as a triumph over trauma.

## The American Cultures Student Prize Statement

By Thea Matthews

My final portfolio for African American Studies (AFAM) 158A Poetry for the People (P4P): The Writing and Teaching of Poetry, taught by Aya de León in fall 2016, consisted of six finalized poems. The criteria for this portfolio required that all six poems be in accordance with the P4P guidelines designed by founder June Jordan, which include auditory perception of language, established purpose of the poem, concision, and organizational cohesion. Each poem must provide descriptive language, active verbs, vividness and singularity of diction, sensory details, and an authentic vertical rhythm associated with reading the poem aloud. The purpose of following these guidelines is to utilize poetry as an instrument for sociocultural transformation illustrating the notion that the personal *is* political. My final portfolio not only fulfilled the guidelines, but I began expanding the genre of confessional poetry—testimonial poetry—that involves trauma disclosures and the capacity to have poetry be the mechanism for which the reader/writer is witnessed and truth validated. Furthermore, as a Poet/ Spoken Word artist/ Scholar becoming a student-teacher-poet (STP) for P4P, my final portfolio for AFAM 158A amalgamates the virtues of P4P and the goals of American Cultures curriculum in that my poems diversify the American experience as well as the narrative of liberation from a healing approach and activist standpoint.

My submitted poems— “Lilacs,” “Hydrangeas,”<sup>1</sup> “Crocus,” “Lupine,” “Standing Rock,” and “On 24<sup>th</sup> St.” — all have a predominant theme of intersectionality between race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, while incorporating history and geographic significances when exploring the realms of surviving and transcending individual as well as collective trauma.

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<sup>1</sup> “Hydrangeas” was recently published by *Rag Queen Periodical* (March 2017) and *Soar in For Harriet*

Each of my submitted final portfolio poem was workshopped by fellow peers in the 158A cohort and revised at least twice. Peers suggesting revisions, providing what works and what are potential areas of opportunity to enhance the poem remind students that collaborative efforts are crucial for making any form of change, whether it be social, political, academic, and/or cultural. Moreover, through poetry and the mere infrastructure of P4P as an artistic (arts + activism) program that continues to cultivate and expand community for all, P4P bridges the university to a wider community necessary for sociocultural transformation.

Through poetry, the American experience includes both pain and relief, trauma and resiliency, the individual and collective. In “Lilacs,” I not only self-affirm myself for the resiliency I cultivated over time surviving incest, but I also employ poetry to disrupt the culture of denial and silence we live in to illuminate such a stigmatized societal epidemic. I disclose the multigenerational trauma of sexual violence in my Chicana ancestry, and the complexities of trauma where respected community members were also harm-doers. In “Hydrangeas,” I testify to the ancestral trauma of incest in my family; and I disband the cultural myth of “stranger danger,” for I knew the perpetrators in my life who sexually assaulted me. The prevalence of sexual violence, especially in communities of color, stem largely from a silence that is seemingly unbreakable. “Hydrangeas” breaks that silence; and the silence as to potentially why some people do not take the action to protect victims following their trauma disclosures.

With poems “Crocus” and “Lupine,” I explore the realms of intergenerational trauma as forms of systemic oppression that pertain to communities of color, specifically the prevalence of sexual violence in U.S. Slavery and the impact of sexual violence in U.S. Indian Boarding Schools. The American experience includes the rape of molestation of children as a tactic of colonialism, oppression, control, and the effects of such phenomena has and continues to

devastate communities of various races and ethnicities. My poems specifically focus on the Indigenous/ LatinX/ Chicana and the African American experience because it is my own. In P4P, I have learned that the only true story I can tell is my own and my ancestors who have been silenced. From these stories/memories I get to illustrate the pain *and* resiliency of a people. “Crocus” also includes experiences of my participation in the Indigenous-centered and led movement at Standing Rock fighting against the North Dakota Access Pipeline, as well as my involvement with the Black Lives Matter movement. To connect these two pivotal movements of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century in this poem and partially in “Lupine” in the way I did, I got to give insight to another perspective that is not necessarily part of the sociological cannon scholarship I am familiar with as a sociology major.

“Standing Rock” was a poem I wrote during my time at Standing Rock. I provided a narrative believed by Indigenous and activist cultural traditions. The American experience extends to the personification of Earth. This poem highlights how certain cultures hold deep reverence for the land. With “On 24<sup>th</sup> St.,” I uphold the significance of intersectionality when analyzing individual and collective trauma. The poem observes the street gang, lowrider LatinX<sup>2</sup> culture in the Mission district of San Francisco, CA, my hometown. I frequent 24<sup>th</sup> Street; and this poem specifically speaks to a hate-crime that took place vandalizing a mural of a well-known gallery because it honored the LGBTQ in traditional lowrider LatinX culture.

Thus, my final portfolio for AFAM 158A raises empathy for the impact of sociocultural trauma experienced by individuals and groups of people. I wrote parts of my own autobiographical story and known history of my ancestral bloodlines; and with these anecdotes this project diversifies the American experience for emphasizing the significance of intersectionality as well as a triumph over trauma.

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<sup>2</sup> *LatinX* is the gender-neutral word used to indicate a group or individual of Latin descent.

—Interpretative Essay—

*Untitled* (Rebloom Series)

by Thea Matthews

My final portfolio for African American Studies (AFAM) 158A Poetry for the People (P4P): The Writing and Teaching of Poetry, taught by Aya de León, consisted of six poems. Three poems were based on assigned P4P prompts: *self-affirmation*, *love as resistance*, and *soldier*. The other three poems were of my choosing that were written within the semester. I enrolled in and completed the class fall 2016. My submission for the American Cultures Student Prize contains the most recent drafts of each poem I presented for the final with minor revisions. These poems— “Lilacs,” “Hydrangeas,”<sup>1</sup> “Crocus,” “Lupine,” “Standing Rock,” and “On 24<sup>th</sup> St.” — all have a predominant theme of intersectionality between race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, while incorporating history as well as geographic significances when exploring the realms of transcending individual/ collective trauma.

“Lilacs” was my *self-affirmation* opus revealing my survival and transcendence from the intergenerational cycle of sexual violence found my Chicana ancestry; and the complexities of trauma where respected community members were also harm-doers. Also, the “self-affirmation,” is the declaration of freedom and reclaiming self-power from the power stolen by harm-doers. “Hydrangeas,” expands upon my testimony of surviving incest; and as an act of *love as resistance*, I wrote this poem to continue loving and forgiving my mother who did nothing after I told her that her father molested me. The prevalence of sexual violence, especially in communities of color, stem largely from a mist of silence that seemingly is unbreakable. “Hydrangeas” breaks that silence; and the silence as to potentially why some people do not take the action to protect victims following their trauma disclosures.

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<sup>1</sup> “Hydrangeas” was recently published by *Rag Queen Periodical* (2017) and *Soar in For Harriet* (2017).

“Crocus,” serves as the *Soldier* poem inspired by Jordan’s memoir *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood*. Encouraged by Aya, I incorporated my experiences of visiting Standing Rock in North Dakota to join activists fighting the Dakota Access Pipeline. In “Crocus,” I incorporated my experience meeting Indigenous womxn<sup>2</sup> warriors at Standing Rock and my political involvement with the Black Lives Matter movement. “Lupine” explores the historical intergenerational trauma of sexual violence committed during U.S. slavery and colonialism. My father is African American and my paternal roots stem from the Carolinas which was part of the cotton picking “slave belt” South. I utilize poetry as a mechanism of healing while describing memories and activist duties for being humxn.<sup>3</sup>

“Standing Rock” was a poem I wrote during my time at Standing Rock. My aim was to provide much clarity with brevity while capturing the resilient nature of Earth in spite of the harm humxns have and continue to cause on this land. Lastly, “On 24<sup>th</sup> St.,” is a poem observing the prominent Latin American, street gang, lowrider culture in the Mission district of San Francisco, CA, my hometown. I frequent 24<sup>th</sup> Street; and this poem specifically speaks to a hate-crime that took place vandalizing a mural of a well-known gallery because it honored the LGBTQ in traditional lowrider LatinX<sup>4</sup> culture. I took an occurrence to briefly dive into personal memories of how my Chicana and African American families shamed those who were queer.

From these six submitted poems for AFAM 158A I highly illustrated how the personal is political, which is a preeminent theme found originally during the second wave of feminism and a is a crucial, foundational element for June Jordan’s P4P that Aya efficiently stressed when facilitating workshopped series with the students’ poetry.

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<sup>2</sup> *Womxn* is a spelling used to detach from the word “man/men” and is an act of resistance to patriarchy.

<sup>3</sup> *Humxn* is a spelling used to also detach from the word “man/men” and is an act of resistance to patriarchy.

<sup>4</sup> *LatinX* is the gender-neutral word used to indicate a group or individual of Latin descent.







## Hydrangeas

By Thea Matthews

Your father left me  
 for dead with soiled  
                                 pampers and  
                                 a scorching  
                                 Lavender Blue  
 larynx on his 1960s Green carpet.  
 I laid there limp  
 in the  
 living  
 room,  
 tears destined to preserve me, I cried for you; I  
 screamed *Mommy* until I passed out. Yearning  
 Your presence cradled me until I was 9.

Then at 12,  
 I spoke through an eroding esophagus,  
 a belly on fire from secrets,  
 a compressed throat,  
 a murmurous heart--  
                                 I told you what happened.

Silence  
                                 befell You.

You did what you could only do  
 as the frightened, helpless abused  
                                 little girl you are

trapped inside an inflated body of  
 comforting blubber and dark sagging skin.  
 You were so scared.

Your  
 lips  
 shivered/

You froze  
 for the next  
 10 years.

[

]

But you have such a loquacious tongue  
 when avoiding grief. You tested my  
 unwavering love with muteness.  
 You ripped me out, pulled me up,  
 I was once a dutiful daughter.

Now,  
 I am merely a bouquet of Hydrangeas  
 Slowly languishing in the Autumn wind  
 stranded, without water.

But still, I love you.

Even after you  
 continued to devour a  
 pyramid of marshmallow coated  
 roasted yams, mash potatoes,  
 cranberries, seasoned stuffing,  
 and slices of baked turkey  
 when seated sandwiched between  
 me                   and                   him.

Following the family's Thanksgiving prayer,  
 bite after bite, I lost appetite  
                                   I began to purge.

Your taciturnity devalued me.  
 Your swollen  
 tongue nearly  
 broke my dignity.

                                  But still, I love you.

You tried to protect me--  
 A woman shielding her daughter  
 from catcalls and whistles.  
 A woman cursing grown men  
 on street corners for staring too long,  
 yearning to comb her daughter's 12-year-old curves.

But woman,  
 Your silence made you a bystander  
 after I said your father molested me.

I must help you,  
                                   never stop loving you.

You easily feel unheard,  
 you hyperventilate.  
 Your lungs tighten  
 Your voice drops.

                                  You talk in circles.  
                                   I remind you to breathe.

And although I wish I could wrest  
 Your karma,  
                                   I can't.

Your hair thins in loneliness and your  
                                   blood clots in worries.

                                  I see you.  
                                   I forgive you.

I hold my Truth  
                                   regardless if you  
                                   hold mine too.

## Crocus

By Thea Matthews

I am Spring's  
Amethyst crocus  
Voice for the voiceless  
I speak with multiple  
Tongues at once.

An alchemist/ warrior  
Goddess in One--  
My mouth bleeds  
from unstitching  
children's  
lips sewn shut,

unleashing  
memories of  
bruises  
broken  
limbs  
slobbering kisses  
swollen/ infected  
genitalia, neglect

Souls deeply  
scarred/  
Wounds  
only seen when  
eyes shut.

When everyone  
sleeps, I hear  
children's cries  
and hurt children  
trapped inside  
adult bodies desperately  
needing to weep  
lost years.

Following directions  
as a conduit from  
Spirit and Light  
I release their screams  
into the night.

I open  
my mouth.

I refuse

silence.

I break their silence.

No man can ever  
tell me *Sssh...sssh....*  
Again!

I open the drapes--  
    I rise.  
I levitate/ I glide in  
the air of a chemtrailed  
sky where helicopters  
and drones swarm  
over my head.

Womxn warriors  
remind me *all* womxn  
and children must  
be safe regardless of  
skin tone, class, and  
creed. I protect, while

Water canyons  
try to disperse  
Prayers. I duck  
from tear gas  
and rubber bullets.  
I smash cycles  
of abuse.

I wave flares  
over bridges  
across intersections  
throughout long  
marches

Proclaiming  
    Our Lives  
    Our Bodies  
    Our Health  
        Matters.

With pen to paper,  
I redefine justice/ I  
refuse to exist or die  
by fear. And through  
Speaking, I face myself  
as we face each other  
and together

    We heal.

## Lupine

By Thea Matthews

Frizzy black curls twist  
 and swirl a wide halo  
 from tangled knots in  
 the Deep South/ They rise  
 in a magenta spiral on  
 malachite stems tapering off  
 at the tips/ with enough heat  
 and pressure, stubborn  
 mountains become  
 scarred valleys/           Thin  
 tributaries lead to clandestine  
 basins/ Veins meander like  
 railroad tracks built  
 by old Black hands.

Your Ancestors  
                   conjured You

through their howling  
 laments, keloid backs,  
 and bloody-stained rags  
 they slept, ate, and picked  
 cotton in. Mahogany skin/  
 Burnt sienna rooted in  
 plantations built on Red soil.  
 But you/ a breathing meadow  
 of Lupine radiating boundless  
 Light/ interweave warriors' blood,  
 oppressed blood with colonizers'  
 cracking- the-whip blood,  
 who manipulated the Bible,  
 got off at night when  
 their chattel would holler,  
 as the bodies they  
 bought and sold laid  
 limp while their cum leaked  
 on the right side of Black legs.  
                   Enslaved.  
 Swollen tongues/ Swollen clits.

Trauma lives in your body  
in your blood.  
You see even when tumid  
Eyes clamp shut.

Enough is Enough!  
Seethe with tears. Scream.  
Cry. Growl. Shake your body.  
Stretch your spine.  
Dangle your arms while  
you sway your hips.  
Raise your left fist while  
You trudge the Red Road.  
March with the People.

Remember—  
Only you can remedy  
Your own body and soul.  
Your blood contains  
Elders, abusers, victims,  
Survivors  
in one.

Let Spirit lead.  
Heal Now!

Remember—  
Protect the Water.  
Protect the Land.  
Protect *All*  
Womxn  
and Children.



# Standing Rock

By Thea Matthews

capitalism  
a  
cancer.  
Mother  
Earth  
has  
cancer.

The ground  
We walk on,

The trees  
We see,  
Animals  
that live,  
even the  
Oxygen

We  
breathe  
is a host  
seemingly  
waiting to die.

She  
agrees to be  
With us  
until the end.

She  
Existed  
before us,

She  
will witness  
Our death.

She  
will see  
Our chains  
unravel in

Her  
melting mantle.

She  
will see entire  
corporations  
die from  
combustion.

She  
Knows...

Capitalism  
is a serial rapist,  
whose insatiable  
hunger for power  
& sex makes  
the walls of

Her  
crevice  
bleed.

—who robs

Her  
at gun point,  
rips

Her  
clothes  
from

Her  
body, and  
tells

Her,  
*I love you,*  
while making

Her  
body  
scream.

Mother  
Earth  
Reminds me of  
Who I am.

She  
knows  
I AM.

She  
is stronger  
than the dollar signs  
eroding her crust.

Remember—

She

was here  
before us.

She  
will  
exist after.

She  
knows who loves  
Her.

She  
knows who cherishes  
Her.

She  
knows who hurts  
Her.

She  
Stands still in  
Her core.

## On 24<sup>th</sup> St.

By Thea Matthews

They ignite fires when  
They walk the streets.  
They climb mountains  
and swim across rivers.

They thrive in deserts  
Sipping on water through  
Red cacti. Machismo lurks  
across Corners, Red bandanas  
wave from back pockets.

Wind cradles their  
feral hearts. Red lips  
coagulate, black eyeliner  
and mascara stream down  
My face.

Love without tolerance is  
an ocean without waves.  
No one can swim in an  
empty basin, only climb in  
its Corners.

The wall still bleeds  
as low riders drive by  
with Oldies combing the  
Streets. Young Blood holding  
40s, blunts behind ears.

We still can smell  
Galería de la Raza's blazed  
Mural once vibrantly painted

2 groomed Goatees embrace  
each other from behind,  
2 Cholas lean in to lock lips,  
A trans stoic Vato centered with  
A banner scripted "Por Vida"  
— *For Life*—

The mural was graffitied twice  
before ignition.

There was no respect  
for existence.  
Maybe *they*  
were scared? Maybe their  
hate stemmed from molestation?  
Maybe they internalized the hatred

fermented by colonization?  
 Either way:  
 Hurt people hurt.

Reminds me  
 of when my Grandmother  
 A devout Catholic  
 tormented as a little Mexican girl  
 renounced my niece/ her other  
 granddaughter, her *first* grand-  
 daughter, for coming out dyke.

Reminds me  
 of when I saw my brother's  
 Uncle decay from AIDS in a  
 hidden bedroom of a Baptist  
 address. He was Gay & Black.

Reminds me of a magic where  
 colonized homes of swollen  
 tongues somehow breed an  
 Unapologetic Liberation  
 strolling the streets

On 24<sup>th</sup> St.—  
*Us*  
 Queers  
 cascade  
 from a blistering pain  
 of constant death and rebirth.  
 We transcend fires  
 Smudging the glaring canvas.  
 Flames engulf us.

We remain calm. We cry.  
 Heal. We exhale

Our love for Life.  
 No one lives alone.  
 No one dies.