

## **The Clearing: The Multidimensional Legacy of Toni Morrison**

February 9, March 9, April 6, May 11 | 6:30–8:30 p.m.

Led by Trapeta B. Mayson & Yolanda Wisher

### **Course Description**

As a novelist, essayist, and author of children's books, Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison (1931-2019) unapologetically wrote the Black experience into a tradition of American letters that often rendered it invisible or caricatured. As a book editor and professor, she nurtured the careers and stories of other Black writers. Her eleven novels reconstruct and reimagine cultural memory in the face of slavery, violence, poverty, and migration. With lyrical beauty and cinematic vision, Morrison's work unearths and alchemizes the epic stories buried beneath personal and generational trauma. This course will take a multidimensional approach to Morrison's legacy, focusing on her pioneering literary work as well as her public advocacy for Black voices and stories through a variety of forms. Texts will include two novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, select essays from her collection *The Source of Self-Regard*, poems, and the documentary *The Pieces I Am*. Alongside spirited and weighty discussion of these texts, students will delve into their own narratives through creative writing.

### **Schedule**

#### **Wed. February 9**

Morrison the Advocate

Film due: *The Pieces I Am* (available for rental or via subscription on YouTube, Hulu, Amazon Prime Video, Google Play, Vudu, and Apple TV)

#### **Wed. March 9**

Morrison the Storyteller

Reading due: *The Bluest Eye*

#### **Wed. April 6**

Morrison the Time Traveler

Reading due: *Beloved*

#### **Wed. May 11**

Morrison the Activist

Reading due: *The Source of Self-Regard* (selected essays)

### **About the Instructors**

**Trapeta B. Mayson** was the 2020-2021 Philadelphia Poet Laureate. She is the founder of *Healing Verse Philly*, which includes the *Healing Verse Phone Line*, a hallmark project of her poet laureate tenure. Mayson is a Pew, Academy of American Poets, and Aspen Word Fellow.

She is also a Leeway Transformation, Leeway Art and Change, and Pennsylvania Council on the Arts awardee. She is the author of *She Was Once Herself* and *Mocha Melodies*. Mayson also released two music and poetry projects, *SCAT* and *This Is How We Get Through*, in collaboration with internationally acclaimed jazz guitarist, Monnette Sudler. Her other publications include submissions in *The American Poetry Review*, *Toho Journal*, *Epiphany Literary Journal*, *Aesthetica Magazine*, among others. Mayson's artistic practice is embedded in community work. Through her artistic residencies, she has created and led projects in partnership with several institutions. As an educator and teaching artist, she develops and facilitates workshops in educational, social services, and other community based settings for youth and adults. She is a native of Liberia and was raised in the North Philadelphia and Germantown neighborhoods of Philadelphia. She is a graduate of Temple University, Bryn Mawr Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research, and Villanova University School of Business. Currently working in the community mental health field, Mayson is a member of several local organizations where she uses the arts to help mobilize and build community.

Poet, singer, educator, and curator **Yolanda Wisher** is author of *Monk Eats an Afro* and co-editor of the anthology *Peace is a Haiku Song* with mentor Sonia Sanchez. Wisher was named inaugural Poet Laureate of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania in 1999 and third Poet Laureate of Philadelphia for 2016 and 2017. Her work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *Poem-a-Day* and has been commissioned by the Institute for Contemporary Art, HealthSpark, the Statue of Peace Plaza Committee, CBC Radio, and Philadelphia Jazz Project. A Pew and Cave Canem Fellow, Aspen Words and Hedgebrook Writer-in-Residence, Wisher received the Leeway Foundation's Transformation Award in 2019 for her commitment to art for social change. She taught high school English for a decade, co-founded the youth-led Germantown Poetry Festival, and served as Director of Art Education for Philadelphia Mural Arts. Wisher teaches poetry workshops for all ages in a variety of settings. She is the founder of the School of Guerrilla Poetics, a training ground for folks interested in nurturing and mobilizing communities through poetry. Wisher earned an M.A. in English/Poetry from Temple University and B.A. in English/Black Studies from Lafayette College, where she received an honorary doctorate in 2021. She has curated projects with the Rosenbach, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Free Library of Philadelphia, and U.S. Department of Arts & Culture. She was in the first cohort of artists with studios at Cherry Street Pier on the Delaware River Waterfront. As Curator of Spoken Word and Co-Director of Curatorial Programs at Philadelphia Contemporary, Wisher has produced programs like *Stellar Masses*, a series of poetry church services, and *Love Jawns: A Mixtape*, a collection of spoken word-infused soundscapes. She performs a blend of poetry and song with her band Yolanda Wisher & The Afroeaters. *Doublehanded Suite*, their debut album, sponsored by The Rosenbach, will be out in 2022.