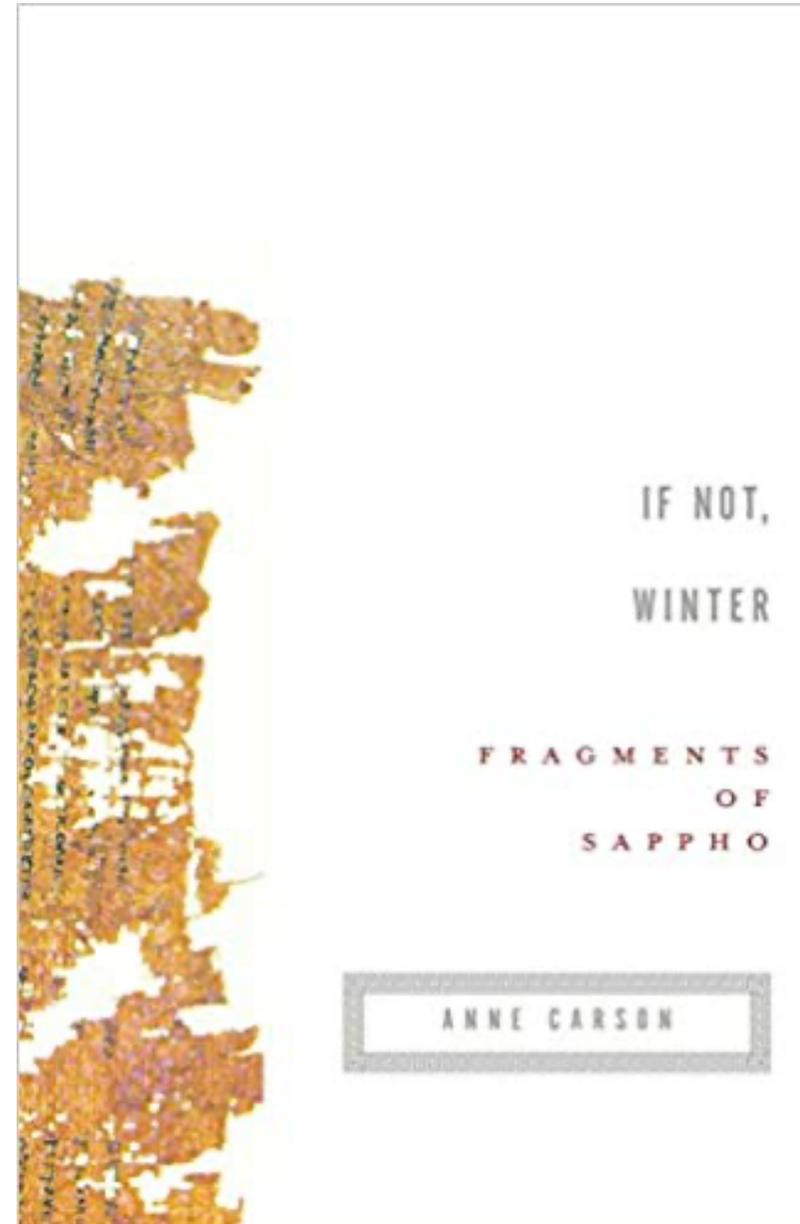
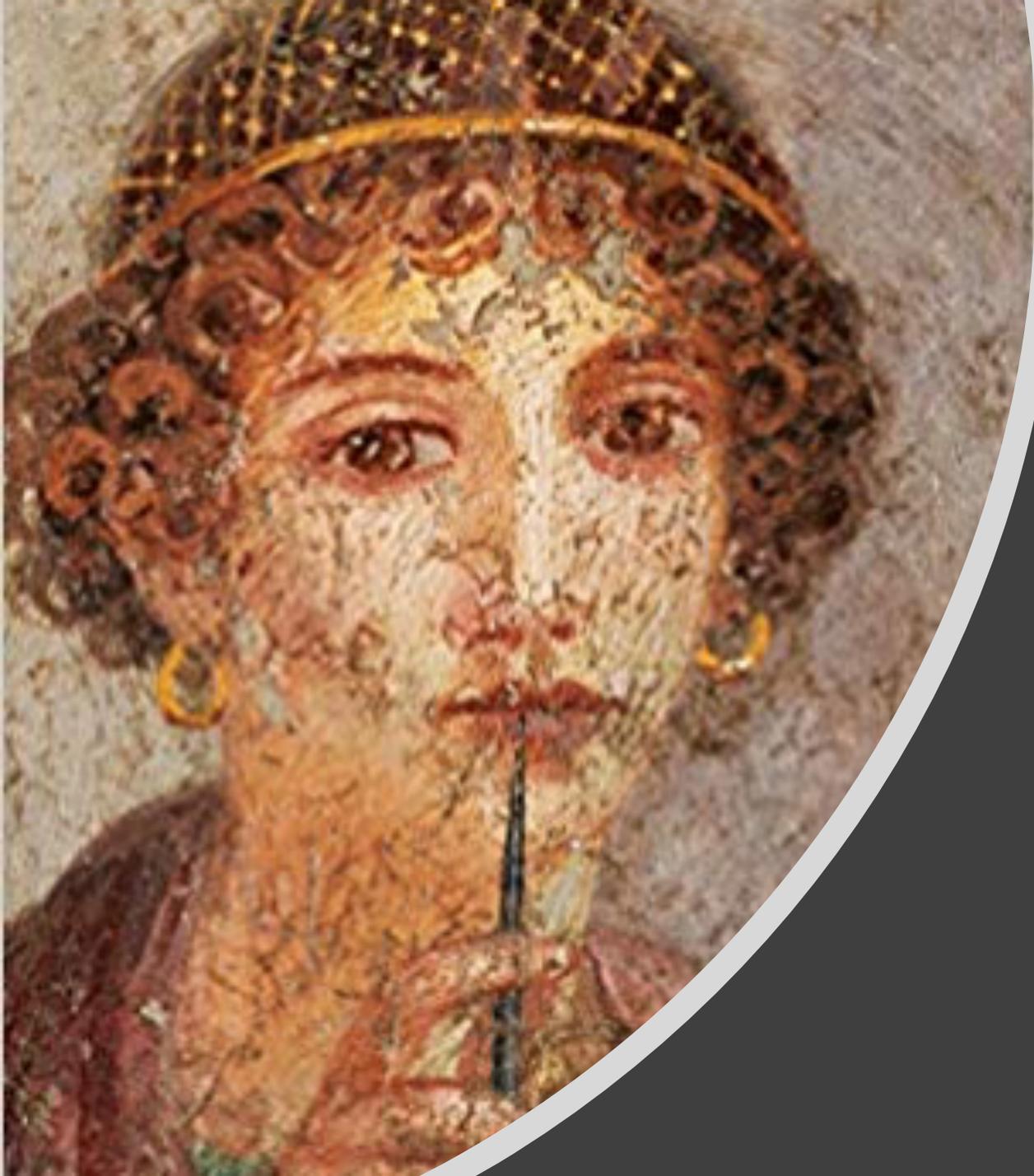


Great Books: Teaching Sappho and Poetry

Alison Cimino, M.F.A.





Ψαπφοι—
Psappho, in
English...Sappho



About Sappho

- ❖ Born around 615 B.C
- ❖ Died sometime around 550 B.C.
- ❖ Lived on the island of Lesbos, in a town called Mytilene, just off the west coast of Turkey (before Socrates and Aristotle)
- ❖ Called by Plato the 10th Muse



Her poems were first collected into nine volumes around the third century B.C., but her work was lost almost entirely for many years.

Three centuries after her death the writers of the New Comedy parodied Sappho as both overly promiscuous and lesbian. This characterization held fast, so much so that the very term "lesbian" is derived from the name of her home island.

Her reputation for licentiousness would cause Pope Gregory to burn her work in 1073.

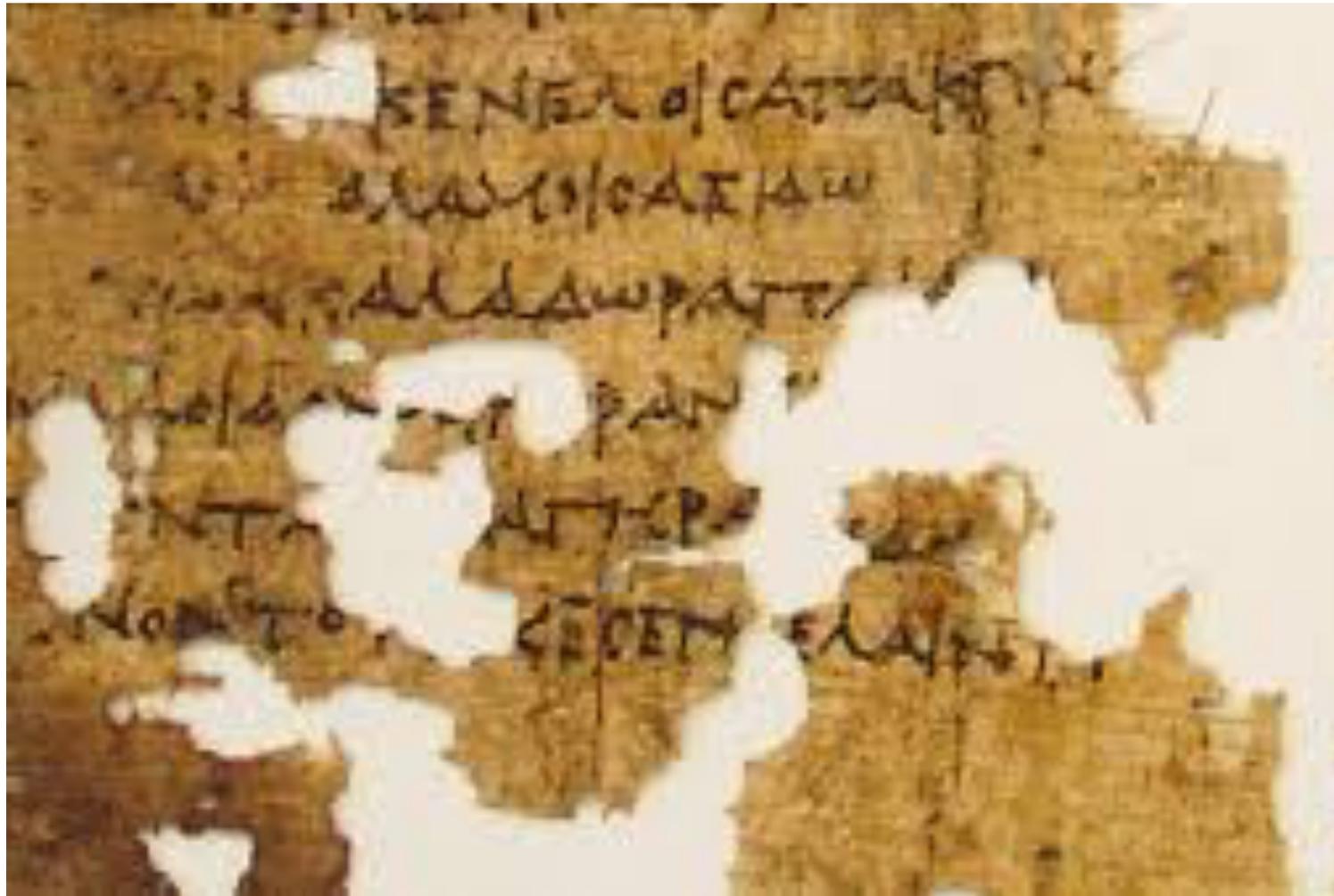


Photo of Sappho's poem written on papyrus, demonstrating the missing text and challenge of translating Sappho.

In the *If Not, Winter* introduction Carson writes:

“On papyrus roll the text is written in columns, without word division, punctuation or lineation. To read such a text is hard even when it comes to us in its entirety and most papyri don't. Of the nine books of lyrics that Sappho is said to have composed, one poem has survived complete. All the rest are fragments” (ix).

“Biographical sources mention a mother, a father, a daughter, a husband and three brothers of Sappho. She appears to have devoted her life to composing songs; scholars in Alexandria collected them in nine books, of which the first book alone had 1320 lines. Most of this is lost” (ix).

In John D'Agata's Review of Carson's book, "Stripped Down Sappho" he cites her introduction to discuss the use of brackets in her translation...

"I emphasize the distinction between brackets and no brackets because it will affect your reading experience, if you allow it. Brackets are exciting. Even though you are approaching Sappho in translation, that is no reason you should miss the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp—brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure."

Sappho's Original Poem, 147 and Translated

μνάσασθαι τινὰ φαίμι καὶ ἕτερον† ἀμμέων

I think men will remember us even hereafter.

(Cox)

(Also translated by Powell) Source: Dio Chrysostom, writing about A.D. 100.

If Not, Winter by
Sappho tr. Anne Carson

147

Someone will remember us

I say

even in another time

In his review, “Stripped Down Sappho,” D’Agata writes:

Should the fragments be reconstructed? Or should the fragments be left alone? Compare Carson’s uncommonly faithful translation of the four spare words comprising Sappho’s fragment 145—

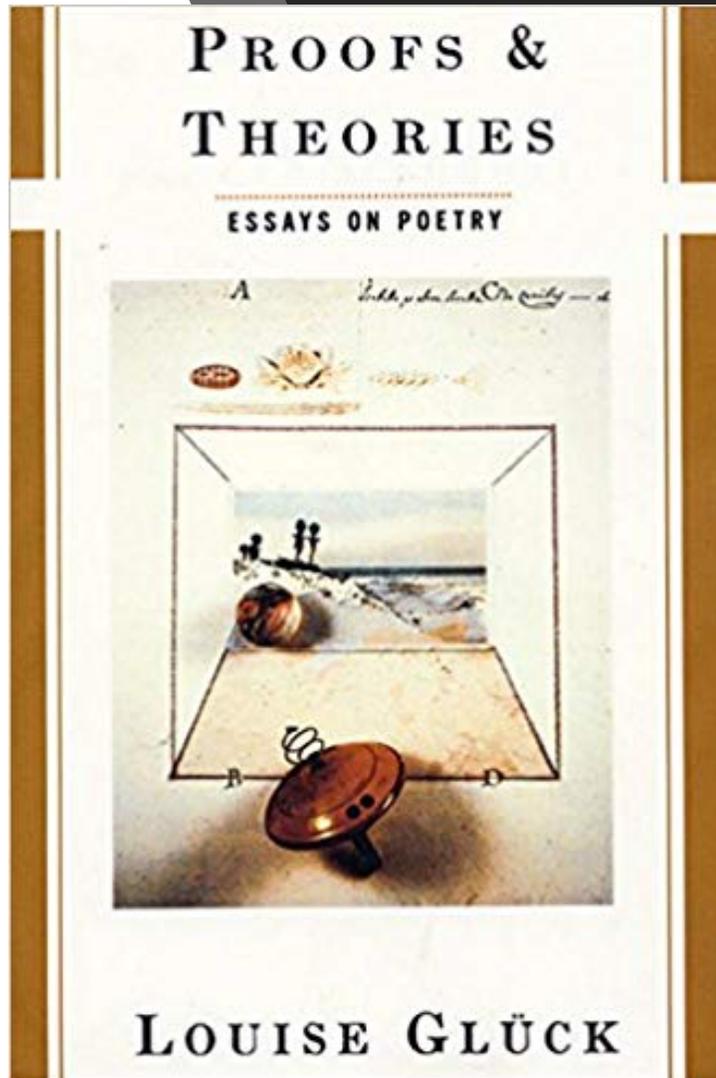
do not move stones

—with the poet Mary Barnard’s version of the same four words in her 1958 best-selling collection entitled *Sappho: A New Translation*:

**if you are squeamish don’t prod the
beach rubble**

“Disruption, Hesitation, Silence,” from *Proofs and Theories*, by Louise Glück

“What wholeness gives up is the dynamic: the mind need not rush in to fill a void...In the broken thing, moreover, human agency is oddly implied: breakage, whatever its cause, is the dark complement to the act of making; the one implies the other. The thing that is broken has particular authority over the act of change” (75).



Lyric Poetry Exercises

- 1) Bring in a small object that fits in the palm of your hand. A pebble or shell works well with the exercise, but so do buttons, paperclips, or item you have in your belongings. (The exercise can also be done with your own non-writing hand.)
- 2) Take a few moments to hold the object and look at it, as if looking at it for the first time.
- 3) Take notes on the “object”
- 4) Write a poem about the object—follow the thread from your notes to the poem
- 5) For Lyric variation, choose an emotion and describe the object with that emotion in mind. Use the concrete object to represent the abstract emotion (like love, sadness, fear, or joy)



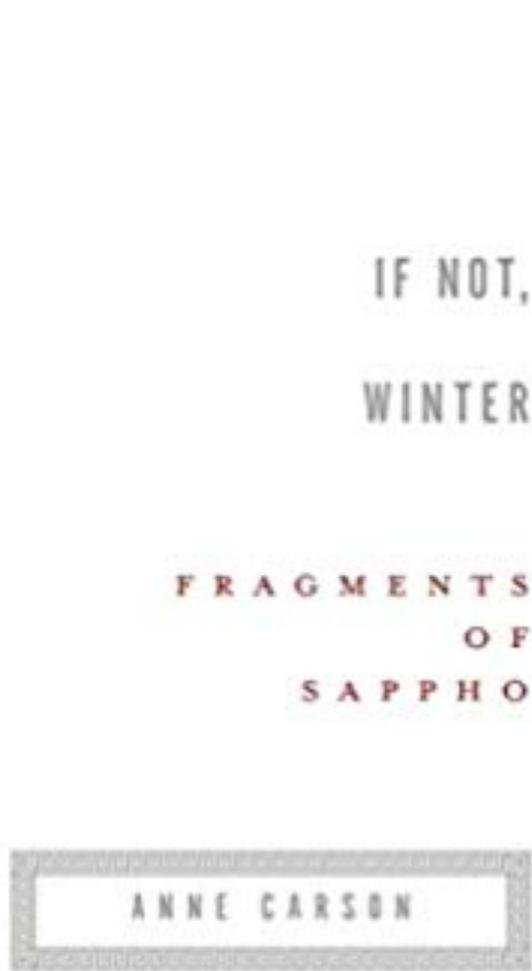
Fragment exercise with Space and Silence

1) Cut two or three lines from your object exercise poem.

2) Do one of the following:

- ❖ Reorder the poem without these lines **OR**
- ❖ Pull these three lines and start a new poem.

Additional Poetry Exercise to use with Carson's Sappho



Pull a line or a poem from *If Not, Winter* and use it as the starting line for your own poem. Write a poem from there.

Choose one of Sappho's poems with fragments and "fill in the blanks" or spaces. Then, try to sustain the image or extend the metaphor.

If you are stuck, you may flip through the book and pull five additional words to add to your own poem.

Fragment 31

#31(translated by Anne Carson: *If Not, Winter*)

He seems to me equal to the gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing — oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

#31 (translated by Willis Barnstone, 1988)

To me he seems like a god
as he sits facing you and
hears you near as you speak
softly and laugh

in a sweet echo that jolts
the heart in my ribs. For now
as I look at you my voice
is empty and

can say nothing as my tongue
cracks and slender fire is quick
under my skin. My eyes are dead
to light, my ears

pound, and sweat pours over me.
I convulse, greener than grass,
and feel my mind slip as I
go close to death,

yet, being poor, must suffer
everything.

Directions for the essay assignment: comparing translations

Directions: Read the two translations of fragment #31 by Sappho. In an essay of at least five paragraphs, compare and contrast these two versions. How do they each support the themes of jealousy and / or love?

What imagery, metaphor, simile, and other literary devices support the theme? Which form best supports the theme as well?

How do the lines appear on the page? Are the lines enjambed or end stopped?

As you compare the two versions of this poem, consider one to two other poems from *If Not, Winter*. How would you describe Sappho's style?

Finally discuss which version (Carson or Barnstone) seems best.

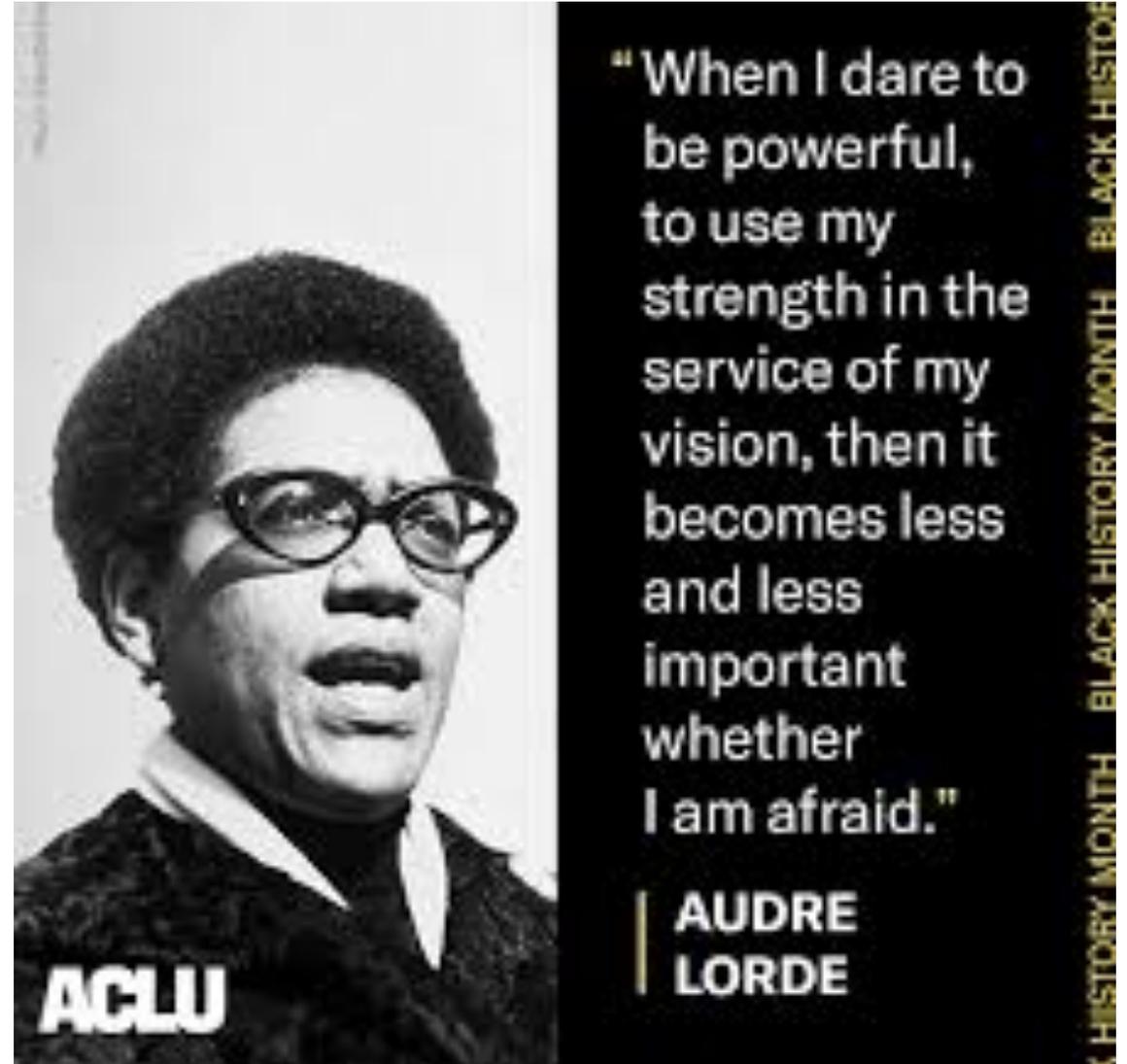
Remember to give your essay a title. Be sure to use quotation marks around the words or lines of the poem when you refer to them. **You may use a dictionary, *If Not, Winter*, poems, and notes for this essay. Please do not use the internet or outside sources for the discussion. This is a "readers response" essay.**

Midterm Checklist:

- Compare and contrast the two translations of Sappho's poem
- Write at least 5 paragraphs
- Discuss the themes of jealousy and / or love
- Discuss imagery and other literary devices and how they support the theme
- Give your essay a title!
- It should have a **thesis** which includes a topic and comment and discuss the **significance** of the thesis.
- It should have **topic sentences**.
- It should refer to the voice in the poem as the speaker.
- When writing out the quotes of the poem, remember to use a / (slash) to show the line break.
- When you have completed your essay, please upload it to **Turn It In**.

Other Poets and Poems We Read...

- “Coal” by Audre Lorde
- “at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation” by Lucille Clifton
- “History Lesson” by Natasha Trethewey
- “Crow Law,” Linda Hogan
- “Prayer to the Pacific” Leslie Marmon Silko
- “She Had Some Horses” Joy Harjo
- “Postcards to Columbus” by Sherman Alexie





Creative Writing Assignment

About the Assignment:

Throughout the semester we have read numerous types of poems from multiple voices and poets. We read political poems and poems that documented the intersection of the personal and the historical. All of the poems we read for our poetry unit bear witness to experience and the life of the mind. Now it is time to try writing your own poem. Consider the work of Emily Dickinson, Audre Lorde, Walt Whitman, Sappho, Linda Hogan, Sherman Alexie, and other and the visual art exhibit, *Survivance and Sovereignty on Turtle Island*. For the **Creative Writing Poetry Assignment**, write a poem that bears witness to your own life and/or an event you see unfolding in current events. You may even want to use visual art that you find online as inspiration.