UC SANTA BARBARA

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Finding Your Muse

Yusef Komunyakaa, an internationally renowned poet who won the Pulitzer Prize for “Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems," will spend two days at UC Santa Barbara as the 2017 Diana and Simon Raab Writer-in-Residence.

Known for his powerful imagery layered with the rhythmic influences of blues and jazz music, Komunyakaa is the author of 17 books of poetry, including: “Warhorses” (2008); “Taboo: The Wishbone Trilogy, Part 1” (2006); “Talking Dirty to the Gods” (2000); and “Thieves of Paradise” (1998) — a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

While at UC Santa Barbara, Komunyakaa — the state poet of New York — will give a reading at 7 p.m. Wednesday, March 1, at the MultiCultural Center Theater. Books will be available for signing after the talk. The event is free and open to the public.

Made possible by a gift from Diana and Simon Raab, the writer-in-residence series gives undergraduate writing and literature students a special opportunity to engage with masters of the craft. The series is co-presented by the university’s Interdisciplinary Humanities Center (IHC) and the UCSB Writing Program.

“More than 15 years ago, Yusef Komunyakaa was a guest speaker during my low-residency MFA (master of fine arts) program at Spalding University,” said Diana Raab, the award-winning author of nine books that include memoir, nonfiction, poetry and journalism. “I was a child of the ’60s with many veteran friends, so his war poetry really resonated with me.

“His book 'Neon Vernacular' is one I’ve read numerous times and gifted to special friends. This is the perfect time to honor Komunyakaa —someone who believes that a true revolutionary never plays the victim, and doesn’t see him or herself as invisible. Something none of us can afford to do right now.”

The writer-in-residence series invites creative writers, humanities scholars, journalists and filmmakers to UCSB to provide public lectures or readings for the Santa Barbara community. Writers also meet with UCSB students in a classroom setting to explore the craft of writing.

“Komunyakaa is one of the great American poetic voices of our time,” said Susan Derwin, director of the IHC. “His work is deeply informed by place and historical situation, whether he is writing about his childhood in Bogalusa, Louisiana, where because of racial segregation, he couldn’t even check out books from the public library, or about his service in the U.S. Army as a (Vietnam) war correspondent and later an editor of the military newspaper.”

She described his poetry as “thrilling” and filled with vitality, with rich cadences that convey a “powerfully-affirming life force.”

Komunyakaa's residence will continue Thursday when he meets with writing students to discuss his method of composition, Derwin said. He’s also invited students to bring in some of their work for review.

The writer-in-residence series, Derwin added, allows the community the “opportunity to engage with some of today’s most dynamic authors.”

Komunyakaa certainly fits that description, having risen from unknown to celebrated. He received a Bronze Star for his work as a correspondent and managing editor of the Southern Cross, a military newspaper covering the Vietnam War. Later, with financial help from the GI Bill, he earned a bachelor’s degree from the University of Colorado Springs, a master’s degree from Colorado State University and master of fine arts from UC Irvine.

In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, “Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems” won the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award. Komunyakaa’s other honors include: the Wallace Stevens Award; the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize; the William Faulkner Prize from the Université de Rennes; the Thomas Forcade Award; and the Hanes Poetry Prize. He’s also received fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Mass., the

Louisiana Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts. He currently is the Distinguished Senior Poet in the graduate creative writing program at New York University.

More information about the Diana and Simon Raab Writer-in-Residence series can be found at https://ihc.ucsb.edu/series/diana-and-simon-raab-series.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.