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Poet, Playwright and Professor Brings Unique Perspective to Woods Hole Juneteenth Celebration June 18

Working in factories for fifteen years was an apprenticeship of sorts for Afaa Michael Weaver to write. What began at a young age has led to a long and diverse literary and teaching career for Weaver, who will read some of his poems June 18 as part of the Woods Hole Black History Month Committee's celebration of Juneteenth. A social event will follow to celebrate the day recognized internationally for commemorating the end of slavery in the United States.

The author of 11 books of poetry, numerous plays and more than 40 newspaper articles, Weaver was born in Baltimore in 1951 to working class parents. He attended public schools and graduated from Baltimore Polytechnic High School as a National Merit Finalist at the age of sixteen. He spent two years at the University of Maryland studying engineering and sociology before joining his father and uncles as a factory worker. During the next fifteen years he worked at Bethlehem Steel Company and Proctor & Gamble while briefly attending Morgan State University and serving in the U.S. Army Reserves.

Weaver began studying tai chi while working in the factory and used every spare minute to write: poetry, short fiction, and dozens of articles as a freelance journalist which have been published in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Boston Globe* and other newspapers. In 1979 he founded Seventh Son Press, serving as editor until 1995, and in 1980 the literary journal *Blind Alleys*.

Soon after signing the contract for his first book of poetry, *Water Song*, published in 1985, Weaver received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship for poetry. He left factory life for Brown University and a full university fellowship in the graduate creative writing program, completing a M.A. degree in 1987 focusing on theater and playwriting while also completing a B.A. degree in Literature in English in 1986 through Excelsior College (formerly Regents College).

In 1987 Weaver began a three-year tenure as Artist in Residence for the New Jersey State Arts Council while serving as adjunct lecturer at Essex Community College in Newark, New Jersey. Other part-time teaching positions followed at New York University, City University of New York and Seton Hall, where he was the writing consultant for Seton Hall's law school.

Weaver served as Associate Professor of English at Rutgers University from 1990 to 1997, when he spent the spring semester as Poet in Residence at Bucknell University's Stadler Poetry Center. He began his current position as the Alumnae Professor of English at Simmons College in Boston in 1997. That same year he founded, and serves as director of, the College's Zora Neale Hurston Literary Center, which provides a forum for poets, playwrights and writers who represent diverse cultural perspectives. In addition, he is Chairman of the Simmons International Chinese Poetry Conference.

Weaver's short fiction appears in *Children of the Night* edited by Gloria Naylor and published in 1995, and *Identity Lessons* edited by Maria and Jennifer Gillan and published in 1999. Two professional theater productions took the stage in 1993. Weaver's full-length play "Rosa" was produced at Philadelphia's Venture Theater, and "Elvira and the Lost Prince" was produced in Chicago's ETA Theater, where it won the Playwrights Discovery/Development Award.

From 1996 to 2001 Weaver served as editor of the literary journal *Obsidian III* based at North Carolina State University, and edited *These Hands I Know*, a collection of essays on black family life by many well-known contributors published in 2000.

He was named a Pew Fellow in poetry in 1998, and taught at National Taiwan University and at Taipei National University of the Arts in Taiwan as a Fulbright Visiting Scholar in 2002. He began studying Mandarin, and while on sabbatical leave in 2004-2005 spent eight months at the Taipei Language Institute. He speaks, reads and writes French and Chinese, and reads Spanish.

Weaver, formerly known as Michael S. Weaver, was given the Ibo name "Afaa" (meaning "oracle") in 1997 by the Nigerian playwright Tess Onwueme. He also has a Chinese name, Wei Yafeng, given to him by Perng Ching-hsi of National Taiwan University. "Wei" means flourishing or blossoming, and "Yafeng" is the title of a section of *Book of Songs*, the oldest anthology of Chinese poetry.

Weaver chaired the first Simmons International Conference on Chinese Poetry in 2004. A year later he was awarded a gold friendship medal from the Chinese Writers' Association while attending the National Poetry Festival at Beijing University.

His published works include *My Father's Geography* in 1992, *Stations in a Dream* in 1993, and *Talisman* in 1998. Three collections of poetry were published in 2000: *Multitudes: Poems Selected and New*, *Sandy Point*, and *The Ten Lights of God*. Weaver's latest book of poetry, *The Plum Flower Dance: Poems 1985 to 2005*, was published in 2007. He received a Pushcart Prize in 2008 for one of the collection's poems, "American Income." His 11th book, *Kama i'reeh (Like the Wind)* is a translation of his poems into Arabic and is in press. He is also the creator of a new poetic form called Bop, which brings jazz, blues and other musical genres into poetry.

His reading on June 18 is free and open to the public. It will begin at 3:00 p.m. in the Meigs Room of the Swope Center at the Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL) on MBL Street in Woods Hole, Mass. A barbeque will follow at 4:30 p.m. at the nearby NOAA Fisheries Service laboratory at 166 Water Street.

Often cited as African-American Independence Day, Juneteenth has been deemed a special day of recognition by many municipalities and states. The observances commemorate June 19, 1865, the day the Emancipation Proclamation was enforced in Texas, the last of the seceding states to be occupied by the federal army. At the time, an estimated 250,000 persons were still enslaved in Texas, despite the signing of the proclamation more than two years earlier.

The Black History Month Committee comprises members from scientific institutions in Woods Hole (Marine Biological Laboratory, NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service, Sea Education Association, USGS Science Center for Coastal and Marine Geology, and Woods Hole Research Center). The committee organizes special events during February for Black History Month and throughout the year to promote diversity in the scientific institutions and in the local community.

Related links:

Afaa Michael Weaver: <http://www.afaamweaver.com>

Simmons College faculty biography:

<http://www.simmons.edu/academics/undergraduate/english/faculty/weaver.php>

Academy of American Poets: <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/170>

Boston Globe article:

http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2007/12/11/a_poet_forged_in_heartbreak/?page=1

More background information: <http://www.answers.com/topic/afaamichaelweaver>

Woods Hole Black History Month Committee:

<http://woodshole.er.usgs.gov/outreach/WHBHC/index.htm>

Woods Hole Diversity Advisory Committee: <http://www.woodsholediversity.org/>