

The Harvard Crimson Magazine

Glenda R. Carpio

Published On 4/28/2009 11:49:17 PM

By **STEPHANIE M. WOO**
Contributing Writer

It's 3:07 p.m. on a Thursday afternoon, and Sever 106 is filled with the lively chatter of students in English 192p: "Postmodern Literature." Glenda R. Carpio, associate professor of African and African American Studies and of English, is dressed in a fitted black suit with red embroidery, her dark curls swept into a ponytail. She begins to speak, but her words are devoured by the noise. Seconds later, she picks up her pace and volume, and silence falls over the room—it's clear that she is the master of the classroom with her spunk and congeniality.

Upon her graduation from Vassar in 1991, Carpio began teaching fourth and eighth grades through Teach for America, an endeavor that, she admits, was challenging. "But I realized that if you put your soul into it, it's really enriching," Carpio explains. After holding teaching positions at various universities, Carpio came to Harvard in 2002 and immediately impressed students with her passion for literature.

"Professor Carpio is fantastic," says Monica W. Zhou '12, who was so taken by Carpio's charisma during shopping period that she enrolled in English 192p without any previous knowledge of postmodernism. Carpio's popularity is known amongst students and faculty alike. "She must rank as a 'cult professor' with a big following," says Werner Sollors, a professor in both the English and African and African American Studies departments. "She should patent her method."

And her popularity doesn't stem from teaching easy material—hers is Harvard's only course that teaches Thomas Pynchon's notoriously daunting novel "Gravity's Rainbow" to freshmen. "I absolutely respect Professor Carpio for attacking such a difficult book. Making challenging texts accessible really speaks to her teaching ability," says Sabrina A. Sadique, a teaching fellow for English 192p.

Carpio's teaching prowess is undeniable. She was the recipient of Harvard University's Abramson Award for Excellence and Sensitivity in Undergraduate Teaching in 2007. "She is extremely vivacious and she makes you feel comfortable in the class," says Sadique. With her impressive CUE ratings—none of which fall below 4.0—Carpio is a standout member of the Harvard faculty.

"You get a sense that she's in love with the texts, which you don't find with most professors," explains Jasper N. Henderson '12.

Carpio, who was born in Guatemala but immigrated to New York as a child, is involved with student life beyond the classroom as a faculty advisor for Fuerza Latina, a campus organization dedicated to providing emotional and academic support for Harvard's Latino community. "It's a kind of connection with students where they can come talk about profiling Latino culture at Harvard," she notes.

It's no surprise that for Carpio, a self-professed "hodgepodge" of ethnicities, understanding race and culture are a crucial part of academic work as well. In 2008, Oxford University Press published her book, "Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery."

"Humor is such an under-theorized field, but it's also such a significant aspect of our human experience," says Carpio. "I hope [my book] helps people think through what America's racial and sexual stereotypes are and how they operate in culture." She is currently working on a book on black narrative and poetry of Latin America.

Talent and intellect aside, Carpio also possesses a physical beauty that is difficult to ignore. "She's a really attractive woman with a fantastic fashion sense," Henderson says. "She has a distinctive style that I think is part of her being a rising star. She's very hip and knows what's going on." This professor just might be cooler than her own students.

<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=527986>