

THOMAS JEFFERSON TEACHING AWARD

Joanne M. Braxton

Assistant Professor
of English

COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

Joanne Braxton is a fine scholar and an excellent teacher. She received the B.A. degree from Sarah Lawrence College and the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in American studies from Yale University, where she was a Danforth Fellow in Afro-American literature. She joined the faculty of William and Mary as an instructor in English in 1980 and was promoted to the rank of assistant professor in 1984. She has just been awarded tenure by the Board of Visitors.

The Thomas Jefferson Teaching Award honors those qualities of mind and character in a teacher which deeply affect the lives of others, and Joanne Braxton excels in those qualities. Her students comment that not only is she an inspiring and demanding teacher, but that her courses in "Black American Literature" and "American Voices in Autobiography" are life-changing experiences. These courses become rites of passage for her students into a profound understanding of themselves and of ethnic culture. She brings to her classroom the example of her life. As a colleague has said of her, "she conveys the essence of the black experience . . . not only through her knowledge . . . but also through her sense of humor, her forays into the vernacular, and her convictions about the worth of black culture in America as a counterpoint and counter-offering to the essentially white experience." She stretches the minds and enriches the hearts of her students, proving the timeless relevance of literature as an intellectual discipline, as a humanizing art.

In addition, she has published important scholarship on women's autobiography and has developed a national reputation as a consultant for the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. She has assisted universities in integrating gender-balanced materials into traditional liberal arts curricula.

At William and Mary, she shares her knowledge and experience generously, serving on an extensive array of student and College committees. She shows, to an admirable degree, how the best teaching and scholarship can go beyond the classroom to benefit an institution and to improve the quality of life of its students.

In one of her poems, for she is also a published poet, she writes:

place my head next to earth
and listen deep for voices
recognition/memory
song

close my eyes to see the patchwork quilt
of time and impossibility
that covers me like *kente* cloth

and i close my eyes to see

Joanne, it is in the spirit of your vision of human potential linked to a proud past that the College honors you today as the recipient of the Thomas Jefferson Teaching Award.



The Thomas Jefferson Award recipients, Joanne Braxton, assistant professor of English, and Thaddeus W. Tate, professor of history and director of the Institute of Early American History and Culture, display their honors.