Introduction to Creative Writing: Poetry and Fiction

Fall 2019  
MW: 12:30pm - 1:45pm  
Bernard Ferguson  
bfi220@nyu.edu  
Office Hours: TBA

“This is a subtle truth. Whatever you love, you are.”  
-Rumi

Course Description

In this course, we'll be looking at works of creative writing through the lens of pop culture (or, as I'd like to think, pop literature). We'll mine the troves of our favorite stories (novels, movies, comics, legends and any other kind of fiction) and songs (music, melodies, and all manners of poems). We'll use this survey as an introduction to the craft and critique of both poetry and fiction, as well as an opportunity to find what might lay in between and in proximity of the two.

A few questions that we'll be using as guides to our studies are:

- What is it that makes a particular character, like Thanos, deeply compelling?

- What are some of the textures of nostalgia? And how does the poet Aubrey Graham utilize these textures in his music?

- What is it about our favorite art that compels us to feel?

We'll be close reading, slowing down videos, replaying tracks, freezing the supercuts, and discussing the course material as a means to get closer to the art we love; closer to what pop philosopher Hayley Kiyoko would describe as “the feeling.”

Course Requirements
Materials: All required texts (including songs, videos, movies, websites) will be provided via photocopies or links. Some of the work we might look at includes (but is not limited to):

the poetry of
  ● Terrance Hayes
  ● Patricia Smith
  ● Emily Dickinson
  ● Hanif Abdurraqib
  ● Julian Randall
  ● Natalie Diaz

the stories of
  ● Carmen Maria Machado (perhaps *Her Body And Other Parties*)
  ● Kristen Roupenian
  ● The Avengers Movies (and possibly other movies in the Marvel franchise)

the music of
  ● Drake
  ● Ariana Grande
  ● YEBBA
  ● Hans Zimmer
  ● Khalid
  ● The Hamilton Soundtrack

as well as a few materials we'll choose, as a class, to add to our list. In a few instances, our materials may not be online or not easily available, but we'll find our ways to them when the time comes.

Presentations: At the beginning of every class, one (or possibly two) people will bring in and present on a piece of pop art/culture/literature that stands out as significant to them. Presentations are low stakes and should be a total of 5 minutes, with a hard max of 8 minutes. I'll be providing a presentation rubric to follow with just a few (very few!) points that each presentation should incorporate. Presentations will be graded as P (pass) or F (fail) depending on whether the presentation was completed and whether or not they followed the rubric. The rubric will be rather loose, and so creativity will be encouraged. The main idea of the presentations, and the class overall, is to get at the feelings that rumble beneath the art we love. However it proves best for you to accomplish this will be acceptable.

Responses: Once a week, we'll be writing brief, 100-300 word responses to one piece of material that we consumed that week or to the material(s) presented by a fellow classmate. You'll either write these responses for homework, or during class, depending on that particular class that day. The idea here is to train our eyes and our language to intentionally respond (and possibly, also praise or
critique with care) the literature that builds the interior of our lives. These, too, will be graded P (pass) or F (fail) based on whether you completed the response, as well as if you're pushing your responses further, based on feedback, as the course progresses.

**Original Material:** In this course, you'll be expected write and turn in original material that you created yourself. You'll be expected to turn appropriate works of poetry or fiction in time for your scheduled workshop.

**Course Structure**

On **Mondays**, we'll spend the first 5-10 minutes spending time with materials that a fellow student brought in, and then we'll spend the rest of the class discussing, in depth, the materials assigned for that day. All students are expected to contribute something to the conversation. We'll be asking questions like: *What makes this story or character compelling?* and *What is it about this song or poem that makes us want to sing along?* If you are not, of your own volition, participating in the conversation, you will be called upon. I’m hoping to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable to contribute at least a word or two on their own terms. I hope to work with all of you to figure out and negotiate how to best make that happen.

On **Wednesdays**, again, we'll spend the first 5-10 with a piece of pop culture writing that a fellow student brought in, and for the rest of the class, we'll be workshopping our work.

**Workshop Structure**

We'll be focused on alternative methods of workshop. Sometime before the very first class, you'll receive documentation on the different types of workshop structures we'll be open to exploring. When sending a piece of writing to your classmates, you'll indicate what kind of workshop structure you want, so your fellow classmates can respond to your work in the way that is most helpful for you.

Some of the workshop models we'll be looking at are:

- The Traditional Model (the writer remains silent while the class discusses their work)
- “The Hallelujah” (singing only praise of the writing and what's working really well)
- “The Quickfire” (fellow students only get a minute to comment on the work)
- “The Family Reunion” (students offer tough-love and blunt critique to each other's poems)
as well as quite a few others.

**Grading Structure**
30% - Participation and contributions to discussions (of assigned materials and fellow classmates work)
20% - Workshop submissions
20% - Final portfolio
20% - Weekly responses
10% - Presentations

**Lateness and Absences**
As this class is heavily based on discussion, every student is expected to attend every class. I will excuse no absences without a suitable reason provided (like traveling for professional reasons; you are ill and miserable, or contagious; or you pinned beneath the weight of some grief). Please contact me as soon as possible if you anticipate you will be absent. Each unexcused absence will decrease your grade by half a letter, so please be timely and communicative around your required/anticipated absences.

Lateness will also not be tolerated. I know New York has a mind of its own, with its subways and busses and traffic and weather, so arriving on time might be tricky some days. It'll be best to arrive to class early. I will excuse a late arrival (i.e. walking into class after someone begins presenting) only twice for the semester. After two, for every time you're late, your grade will drop by half a letter. If you end up with a schedule that might make you regularly late to class, please email me as soon as you know, and I'll work with you.