Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction and Poetry
Fall 2020 || CRWRI-UA.815.021 || Tues/Thurs 2:00-3:15

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Office Hours by Appointment
Location TBD

Course Description:
How do we make meaning in fiction and poetry? Where do we choose to orient our reader? What do we choose to depict, to reveal, to witness? Over the course of this semester, we will engage with a variety of (primarily 21st century) works that span and straddle the artificial divide between fiction and poetry, looking to writers like Claudia Rankine, Danez Smith, Carmen Maria Machado, ZZ Packer, Layli Long Soldier, Ariel Gore (and more) to be our guides and teachers. We will interrogate the power dynamics present in all forms of writing, ask ourselves who and what gets withheld, rewritten, or left out of literary cannon, and explore the benefits and abilities of texts that are disobedient, rebellious, and contrary.

This course aims to build an understanding of genre as malleable and writing as diverse – able to be manipulated in service of theme and intent. To paraphrase Ocean Vuong, “[writing is] a space where tensions can be investigated even further.” In this way, this class urges you to uncover your own tensions, to find the style suited to investigating the questions at stake in your own work. While this will be a rigorous course, demanding an honest investment in thoughtful reading of assigned texts, thorough feedback on fellow students’ work, and an overall commitment to improving and exploring your craft, it is also a space in which you should feel empowered to take risks, voice your opinions, and engage in the ‘play’ that lies at the heart of writing.

Objectives:
Our goals in this class are to gather a collaborative definition of the elements of craft, to foster a supportive space for experimentation and revision, and to grow in our understandings of our writing practices. By the end of this course, we should all be on the road to uncovering how and why we write what we write. What histories, narratives, or dynamics you are writing against? Who are you writing for?

Assignments:
Workshop Submissions
Three times during this semester, you will pass around your writing and about twenty-five minutes of class-time will be dedicated to discussing it. Submissions are due by 2:00pm the class before you are scheduled to be workshopped, and should be emailed to a class group thread so your classmates (and myself) have time to print them out and read them. NOTE: If electronic submissions are coming in consistently late, they will be banned and students will then be responsible for bringing in 16 printed copies of their submissions to pass out to the class the meeting before their workshop date.

Workshop submissions can be prose, poetry, or a hybrid mixture of both. I strongly encourage you to try out both genres over the course of your three submissions – but ultimately, what you choose to submit is your choice, and should be something you would like an outside perspective on and are genuinely interested in revising. Workshop submissions should be between 5-20 pages (fiction submissions need to be double-spaced, 12pt. font). While the pieces you submit do not need to be highly polished – and should, in fact, be works in progress – keep in mind that your classmates can only workshop what has been put down on the page; if you have a piece that is missing large sections, hasn’t been proofread, etc., that will be reflected in some of the feedback you receive.
Critiques
You are responsible for writing a critique for each piece we workshop. We will be discussing proper critique form more in class, but generally, a critique is a 3-4 paragraph (at least 300 word) response to your classmate’s work, outlining your reaction and interpretation: what you think their piece is about, the way you think different aspects are working together, the places you feel confused or rebuffed by the text. It is not a space to highlight what you “liked” or “disliked,” but instead should reflect your thinking about what the piece is doing and areas to help it improve. Some questions to consider when writing critiques:

- What is this piece about? How is it communicating that?
- How is language being used?
- Where are the places I feel “pulled out” of the text, and why is that happening?
- What do characters want in each scene? Do their actions reveal those wants? Do their actions ever confuse me or seem contradictory?
- Can I tell who/what the speaker is? Is that reflected in the way things are being described or seen?

These questions are just possibilities – the more we engage with readings on a writerly level, the more we will gather a class vocabulary about the elements of a story, a poem (etc.) for you to draw on when thinking about you and your classmates’ work.

Critiques are due on the day of the student’s workshop. You should print out two copies – one for the student being workshoped, and one for me. Remember that your classmates have put a lot of effort into their creative writing, just like you – putting a similar amount of thoughtfulness into your critique of their work is a gesture of respect.

Assigned Readings
When we are not workshopping, we will be discussing assigned readings. You are expected to have read everything assigned to that class and to be prepared with thoughts about it – make a habit of marking specific passages or lines you want to refer back to or found notably “tricky”. Readings should be available for you to look at during the class period in either a physical or digital form. If you don’t bring in the readings, or don’t seem to have anything to say about them, I will be led to assume you didn’t read them, which will be reflected in your grade.

Each of you will lead a discussion about one of the assigned readings during the semester. When it is your turn to lead discussion, come to class with a list of questions about the work, as well as some research into the writer of the piece and the ideas they are tackling in the assigned work (particularly any historical or cultural context important to the reading). This research does not need to be extensive or written-up, but should help provide a framework for discussion.

Most works will be provided as handouts or pdfs, but physical copies of the following texts will need to be purchased:

Don’t Call Us Dead, Danez Smith
WHEREAS, Layli Long Soldier

Writing Exercises
In order to engage with the ideas and techniques used in these books, stories, and poems, you will respond to a number of creative writing exercises alongside your weekly readings. Each writing assignment relates the guiding theme of that week’s discussion (as listed in the schedule at the end of this document) as well as the styles/practices of the assigned reading. These exercises can be responded to
with either poetry or prose, and do not need to be brought to the level of “doneness” (or length) of your workshop submissions. Instead, these pieces should be thought of as sketches meant to stretch your creative muscles. Experimentation and creative interpretations are welcome! All writing exercises will be turned in to me by email by 2:00pm on the date we are discussing the reading. They should also be available to you in class so we can discuss, share, and work with them.

Final Portfolio
A final portfolio is due by email on our final class date - December 10th. We will discuss it further in the second half of the semester, but the broad-strokes requirements of that portfolio are as follows:

(1) You should include all of the writing exercises assigned during this semester
(2) You should include a substantial revision of at least two of your workshop submissions + all three first drafts
(3) At the front of your portfolio, you should include a reflection on your writing – this can be in any form you want (a poem you make in reaction to your portfolio, a short essay analyzing the semester…) but should be at least two double-spaced pages

Performance/Reading
As a culmination of our labors over this semester, our final meeting will involve a student reading of selections from your portfolios. Everyone will have approximately 3-5 minutes during which they will stand at the front of the class and read their work. These performances do not need to be memorized but should be practiced prior to the final class so your work can stand at its fullest.

Expectations:
Participation
In this course about writing, thinking, and experimenting, I want to hear your perspectives, feedback, opinions, disagreements, and voices as much as possible. But participation should always be respectful and empathetic in nature; no single one of us owns this space, and so we should conduct ourselves accordingly.

Punctuality
The time we have each class is limited and tardiness is disruptive – it is important you are here at 2:00pm. If you are more than 15 minutes late to class, you will be counted absent. A consistent pattern of lateness will negatively impact your grade.

Late Work
Because of our tight schedule, late workshop submissions will not be accepted. All assignments are due no later than 2:00pm on the dates listed in the schedule.

Electronics
Cellphones should be out of sight; if you need to take a call, excuse yourself from the classroom so you do not disturb the rest of the class. Laptops will be required for in-class writing assignments and access to some of our readings, but should remain out of sight unless specifically instructed otherwise.

One-on-One Meetings
You are required to meet with me at least once during this semester, midway through the course. During these meetings, we will discuss your experience in workshop, your thinking about writing, and any questions about revision you might have. All are welcome and encouraged to meet more than once over the semester to discuss their work or any issues that are coming up.
Grading:
Grades in this course depend on substantial and thoughtful participation in class and the submission of your writing. Failure to submit more than one of your workshop pieces will prevent you from passing this course. A more detailed breakdown of grading is the following:

- Submission of Weekly Writing Assignments/Workshop Pieces – 40%
- Participation in Class Discussions and Critiques – 35%
- Final Portfolio and Performance – 25%

Plagiarism:
There is a zero-tolerance policy around plagiarism in this class. Any incidences will be reported to the department, and will result in serious consequences, jeopardizing your grade and academic standing. Plagiarism is a serious blow to academic integrity and is never worth the consequences. If you are ever in a situation where you are considering plagiarizing because you do not believe you can reach a deadline, reach out to me immediately.

Attendance Policy:
Excepting for religious holidays per NYU policy, you have one unexcused absence. Each unexcused absence over that will result in the loss of a letter grade. If you know in advance you have to miss a class, let me know beforehand so I can plan accordingly. When you miss a class, it is your responsibility to reach out to your classmates in order to get a breakdown of what was discussed. All work due on the date you are absent is still to be turned in via email by the 2:00pm deadline.

That said, if you are sick, it is important you do not come to class – for both your health and your classmates. Acquire a doctor’s note and your absence will not count as unexcused.

Disability Disclosure Statement:
Academic accommodations are available to any student with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or who is deaf or hard of hearing. Students should please register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980

NYU’s Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities
726 Broadway, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10003-6675
Telephone: 212-998-4980
Voice/TTY Fax: 212-995-4114
Website: http://www.nyu.edu/csd

Content Warning:
Some of the work you will be reading this semester deals with racism, homophobia, trauma, and domestic violence. Likewise, some of your classmates’ writing may grapple with intense topics. I will do my best to provide context and give advance notice when we are discussing a piece that could be triggering, but please reach out to me if you ever feel that being a part of a discussion about a certain work will not be safe or healthy for you.

Student Wellness Policy:
Unless we see explicit evidence in workshop that the speaker of a work is the writer themselves, we assume the speaker is fictional. However, certain content relating to murder, depression, suicide, sexual assault, or severe mental distress, such as seems to be a possible cry for help, will likely prompt my attention. Please send an email putting this work into context before submitting work, especially for workshop, that may be interpreted as such. If you do feel you need someone to talk to at any point in the semester, please feel safe to reach out to me and I can guide you to the NYU Wellness Center.
WORKSHOP ETIQUETTE
The goal of any writing workshop is to support the writer being workshopsed in fulfilling their vision for their piece – not to attack anyone or tear apart their writing. Along these lines, it’s important to keep in mind the following guidelines around workshop (both in-class and in your critiques):

(1) **Always refer back to the text**
Whenever possible, you should reference specific areas of the text rather than general feelings (i.e., “The paragraph on the bottom of page 4 doesn’t have a clear description of the room, so I didn’t feel totally grounded in the scene”). Mark up a printed copy of your classmates’ piece with the questions/comments that come to you as you are reading their work – it will be helpful for you when writing critiques to remember what specifically drew your attention, and helpful for them to see your thinking on the page.

(2) **Ask questions; don’t dictate answers**
It’s not your job (or mine) to write anyone’s story for them. Your comments in workshop should never boil down to “I wouldn’t write this” or “You should write that.” Instead, try to meet each piece on its own terms. Offer up the questions that cross your mind as you are reading: Why did this character act in this manner? What’s the purpose of the scene in this different location? Is the rhythm of these lines working to the benefit of the poem? Raising these questions in class will foster a fuller discussion about the workshop piece, rather than create a checklist of things your classmates need to “fix” in a specific way.

(3) **Consider how parts work in the whole**
When considering how to approach a piece of writing, think about how the elements of the piece (language, setting, tone, character, speaker…) are working individually and collaboratively. For poems: How is the page being used? What effect does it create? Who is the speaker and how is their perspective reflected in the language? For stories: What do you feel is pulling the narrative forward? What’s the interplay between setting and conflict? How does each scene serve the plot?

(4) **Focus on the piece, not the writer**
Workshop is not a place to criticize your classmates or insult their ideas. In agreeing to be in this class, we have all agreed to support one another on our writing journeys. Focus your comments less on theorizing about the writer and more on what the text itself is doing.

Additionally, I think it is important for all of us to keep in mind that we all have very different life experiences, perspectives, and identities. Part of what makes writing so important is its ability to help us readers widen our own horizons and experience points of view distinct from our own. It is important to me that this space is one that fosters respect and inclusivity – and if you ever feel that that is not the case, especially when it comes to workshop, please do not hesitate to speak up or reach out to me privately so I can address your concerns.

**WORKSHOP GROUPS**
(keep in mind your other courses/responsibilities when choosing a submission group)

GROUP 1: Submissions due 9/15, 10/13, 11/12
GROUP 2: Submissions due 9/22, 10/20, 11/17
GROUP 3: Submissions due 9/29, 10/27, 11/19
GROUP 4: Submissions due 10/6, 11/3, 12/1
SCHEDULE

Week 1:

Thurs Sept 3
Introductions and housekeeping
Share our current experience with creative writing and take part introductory writing exercise
Read and discuss several essays about workshop, craft, and the writing classroom

Homework:
Read “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid and craft an imitation (fixated in your own perspective)
Create a slideshow of 10-15 images/objects that are significant or intriguing to you. Generate 10 seconds of language (approx. a sentence) you feel represents each image/object. Be prepared to read these sentences as you show your slideshow to the class

– Who and What –

Week 2: Subjectivity, Point of View & Voice

Tues Sept 8
Share homework and react to it further through guided exercises
Read, respond to, and imitate a number of fiction, poetry, and hybrid pieces

Homework:
Read the opening vignettes of We the Animals by Justin Torres
Exercise: Experiment with a plural voice, like Torres uses. Consider if/when the voice should split into singular. Think about why it needs to be plural

Thurs Sept 10
Discuss We the Animals. Breakdown the use of the plural voice: how does it inform our understanding of the characters in the text? How does the narrative POV shape the characters’ interactions with the world?

Homework:
Read selections from Citizen: An American Lyric by Claudia Rankine
Exercise: Imitate one of the registers of language that Rankine uses in Citizen. Address your piece to someone(s) in specific. How does this assumed audience influence your tone or focus?

Week 3: “Universality,” Lyricism & The Audience

Tues Sept 15
*GROUP 1 submits work*
Discuss Citizen. How is Rankine using the pronoun “you” in this piece? What overall effect does it create? How do you see the text transforming and expanding throughout the course of these different sections, and for what purpose? Who is she aiming to address?

Homework:
Read GROUP 1

Thurs Sept 17
Workshop GROUP 1

Homework:
Read the first section of We Were Witches by Ariel Gore
Exercise: Create a piece that is made of fragments. These can be fragments in time, place, voice, scene, or something else
Week 4: Perspective & Narrative Momentum

Tues Sept 22
*GROUP 2 submits work*
Discuss *We Were Witches*. How does Gore bring us into her narrator’s subjectivity? What are the current tensions of the novel? How are moments organized into relation with one another and what does this tell us about the narrator’s internal world? Where does the piece derive momentum from in lieu of a typical story-arc?

**Homework:**
Read GROUP 2

Thurs Sept 24
Workshop GROUP 2
**Homework:**
Read *Don’t Call Us Dead* by Danez Smith
Exercise: Write from within and without your body. How do you see your body? How do others see it? What does it have to endure/deal with?

Week 5: The Body-Object & Being Perceived

Tues Sept 29
*GROUP 3 submits work*
Discuss poems. Pay particular attention to the ways Smith renders their speaker’s body as both a subject and an object. How does Smith reflect a current cultural moment through their work? What is the internal experience of their speaker?

**Homework:**
Read GROUP 3

Thurs Oct 1
Workshop GROUP 3
**Homework:**
Read “Marie” (from *Lost in the City* by Edward P. Jones) and “Our Lady of Peace” (from *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* by ZZ Packer)
Exercise: Place two characters (or objects, or speakers) in the same space. In what ways do they each perceive the space? What do they say to one another when there? Build a composite sketch of the space through their gazes

— Where and When —

Week 6: Internal/External Spaces & Crafting Conflict

Tues Oct 6
*GROUP 4 submits work*
Discuss Jones’s and Packer’s stories. How does Jones create nested spaces for his characters to inhabit? What influence do those spaces have on character interactions? What do each of the characters in Packer’s story want? How are those wants revealed through scene? Dissect the lines of conflict in each of these pieces

**Homework:**
Read GROUP 4
Thurs Oct 8
Workshop GROUP 4
Reflect on our first cycle of workshop!

Homework:
Read selections from *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* by Bhanu Kapil Rider
Exercise: Answer Rider’s questions for yourself OR create your own list of questions (at least 5) and interview someone. Transcribe their answers from memory

Week 7: Objects, Rooms, & Gaze

Tues Oct 13
*GROUP 1 submits work*
Discuss *The Vertical Interrogation*. How does the piece use an embodied gaze to craft a specific atmosphere for the reader? Where does the eye of the speaker seem to focus in each of these sections – how are we grounded in place?

Homework:
Read GROUP 1

Thurs Oct 15
Workshop GROUP 1

Homework:
Read “We Love You Crispina” (from *Sour Heart* by Jenny Zhang) and “Mothers” (from *Her Body and Other Parties* by Carmen Maria Machado)
Exercise: Narrate your sensory experience of “home”
Schedule your one-on-one meeting for next week

Week 8: (Troubled) Agency & Notions of Home

Tues Oct 20
*GROUP 2 submits work*
Discuss Zhang’s and Machado’s stories. How do they move us through time and the course of different relationships? How does Zhang build a sense of her protagonist’s sensory experience in these different locations? What keeps you grounded in Machado’s metaphor?

Homework:
Read GROUP 2

Thurs Oct 22
Workshop GROUP 2

Homework:
Read excerpt from *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko
Exercise: Imitate Silko by alternating between memories in a piece. Try to replicate the way your mind acts when you have a “sense memory”

Week 9: Time, Memory & Unsettlement

Tues Oct 27
*GROUP 3 submits work*
Discuss *Ceremony*. Breakdown the way Silko weaves the past and present together. How does she allow the setting of the novel to pull the protagonist into different headspaces? In what ways does she upset our settlement into moments and memories?

**Homework:**
Read GROUP 3

**Thurs Oct 29**
Workshop GROUP 3

**Homework:**
Read “The Voyage of the Sable Venus” from *The Voyage of the Sable Venus* by Robin Coste Lewis
Exercise: Make two lists about yourself—one you choose and feel represents you, and one you glean from history and feel doesn’t

— *How and Why* —

**Week 10: Power, Framing & History**

**Tues Nov 3**
*GROUP 4 submits work*
Discuss poem. Analyze the rules and restrictions Lewis places on her piece. Why do you think she chooses these rules, and these intertextual objects, to form the poem? How does Lewis enact rebellion against the violent origins of the language in her text? In what ways does she utilize line breaks to create new meaning?

**Homework:**
Read GROUP 4

**Thurs Nov 5**
Workshop GROUP 4

**Homework:**
Look over your work thus far in the semester and find a piece (a writing exercise, workshop submission, or something you’ve written on the side) that didn’t come out the way you wanted, or frustrated you in some way. Radically revise it—change genre, make a collage piece out of it, cut all but the title and your favorite sentence… Come to class prepared to talk about the experience

**Week 11: Form, The Page & Building Meaning**

**Tues Nov 10**
Read and discuss craft essays about revision and engage in in-class writing exercises to help us think about our portfolio revision efforts

**Homework:**
Read selections from *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip and *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* by Ocean Vuong
Exercise: Create a piece (in the style of Philip or Vuong) that mourns something it can’t directly state

**Thurs Nov 12**
*GROUP 1 submits work*
Discuss Philip’s and Vuong’s poems. What do you see as the intentions of the poets in these pieces? What is the relationship between the form of these poems and the content? Are there places you feel the text resisting or stuttering, mourning or faltering?

**Homework:**
Read GROUP 1
Week 12:

**Tues Nov 17**
*GROUP 2 submits work*
Workshop GROUP 1
**Homework:**
Read GROUP 2

**Thurs Nov 19**
*GROUP 3 submits work*
Workshop GROUP 2
**Homework:**
Read GROUP 3

Week 13:

**Tues Nov 24**
Workshop GROUP 3
**Homework:**
Read *WHEREAS* by Layli Long Soldier
Exercise: Take a pre-existing piece of writing (could be a novel, poem, legal document, newspaper article, textbook, email...) and collage it into something new. Pick something you have a vested interest in undermining

**Thurs Nov 26**
No Class – Happy Thanksgiving!

Week 14: *Cultural Disobedience & Intertextuality*

**Tues Dec 1**
*GROUP 4 submits work*
Discuss *WHEREAS*. Consider the piece as both a collection of individual poems and a single document. How does the juxtaposition of different registers of language work in this book? What is this piece talking back to or attempting to reclaim?
**Homework:**
Read GROUP 4

**Thurs Dec 3**
Workshop GROUP 4
**Homework:**
Work on your portfolios

Week 15:

**Tues Dec 8**
Bring in your portfolios-in-progress to work with through a number of guided revision exercises. Share any places in your work that still feel undefined/confounding
Go over expectations for class reading; write Introductory Bios for the performance
Homework:
Work on your portfolios
Practice for performance

Thurs Dec 10
Class Performance and Celebration!
Final Portfolios due by midnight