

Writing to Save Our Lives – and the World

Introduction to Creative Writing - Poetry and Prose (CRWRI-UA.815.023)

Spring 2024 | Tuesdays & Thursdays 9:30 - 10:45 am

181 Mercer St (Paulson Center) - Room 441

Instructor and Email: Kristian Davis Bailey - kdb7822@nyu.edu (he/they)

Office Hours: by appointment and enthusiastically encouraged!

*“What are the words you do not have yet? What do you need to say?
What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own,
until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?” – Audre Lorde*

*“This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for
self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language.
That is how civilizations heal.” – Toni Morrison*

*“The role of the artist is exactly the same as the role of the lover. If I love you, I have to make you
conscious of the things you don't see.” – James Baldwin*

One duty of writers across genres and across time is to guide others through the fierce examination of our worlds - internal and external, local and global. To name and note and address the silences, margins, and gaps between where the world is and where it should or could or needs to be. This introductory class to prose and poetry will focus on published writers that have offered compelling and varied models for speaking to the freedom struggles of their times while encouraging classroom writers to experiment with their own voices and style responding to the questions and struggles held within and around us today.

The readings for this class are primarily drawn from Black, Black feminist, and/or queer Black writers across mediums - with additional readings from queer, Indigenous, and other writers engaging with questions of power, oppression, injustice and survival.

The class will be braided with two components:

- **Craft** - reading and discussing published writing with an eye for the elements that make compelling art + understanding different forms and structures within genres to use as tools in your own writing. Craft will involve in-class and at-home writing exercises.
- **Workshop** - developing your own writing, reading the writing of your classmates, and giving spoken and written feedback during and outside of class.

The class will be structured the following:

Two Weeks: Introductions
Three Weeks: The Craft of Fiction and Nonfiction
Three Weeks: Fiction and Nonfiction Workshop
Three Weeks: The Craft of Poetry
Three Weeks: Poetry Workshop

Readings: I will assign and provide copies of specific at-home readings 1-2 weeks in advance. We will discuss 2-3 different writers in each craft class. For prose I will share copies of 1-3 pieces from each writer depending on length. For poetry, I will share copies of 3-5 poems from each writer. See the end of this provisional syllabus for a shortlist and longlist of potential texts.

Submitting to Workshop: Writers will have the **opportunity to workshop at least twice** - once in prose (8-12 pages; 3,000 words max; writers' choice of genre) and once in poetry (5 pages max). Please bring **13 printed copies** of your work to class the week before we discuss it.

At the end of each piece, writers **must submit a Writer's Note** in sentence or bullet point form guiding classmates to the feedback they would or would not like to receive, the questions their work is grappling with, and specific areas they'd like group input or insight on.

Responding to Workshop: You should read each of your classmates' work at least twice. On the first read, resist the urge to be a critic or take a pen to the page and just read the piece on its own terms. Feel free to bullet point your first impressions and questions after the first read. On your second read, please leave margin notes/comments, line-edits (if requested by the writer), and write a 300-500 word response letter based on the Writer's Note. Please bring two printed copies of the letter to class - one for the writer and one for me.

Writers will submit revised versions of each piece to me with a 300-500 word note on what you changed and why and a summary of which feedback you found most/least helpful and why.

Your **final portfolio** will consist of:

- your workshopped pieces and their revisions (including revision notes)
- one critical or artistic response to one full text from our syllabus (5-8 pages)

Our class container: And as an introductory class, I have no expectations that anyone has prior experience at writing or views writing as a personal strength. The only expectation I have is that you try your best to be daring, to listen to, trust, and give rein to your inner voice, and to create and experiment to the best of your abilities. This class will be intentional in offering guidance on a range of skills and approaches necessary in future creative writing workshops and practices.

Writers do not exist or write in a vacuum. I will encourage you - and do my best to create a space where you feel comfortable - being and bringing your whole selves to the room and to the page. I will bring in breathing, grounding, and somatic exercises from time to time and create space for us to name and address the social, emotional and political dynamics within and around us that enhance, influence, interfere with, or drive our work.

This class will focus both on nurturing your individual growth as a writer, while encouraging us to see and experience writing as a social, communal, political, and community process around and beyond the individual "writer." This will include opportunities for collaborative note taking on lessons learned, rotating facilitation for class members to introduce and respond to different readings and writers, and multiple opportunities to finetune our class via feedback.

Grading and Writer/Community Accountability: We all are adults and we all constantly hold a lot in our individual lives. The grading rubric is meant to help protect the class as: a site where you and your peers receive the attention, care, feedback and support we all deserve; and a space in which you as a writer grow to your fullest potential. No grades are based on talent or ability.

Your final grade will be divided into four main sections:

- ❖ **25% - Participation/Attendance** (including visiting me for office hours at least once)
- ❖ **25% - Workshop Submissions** (one essay or short story + one set of poems and their revisions)
- ❖ **25% - Homework** (at-home writing assignments, introduction of one writer/text during each of the prose/poetry craft sections, submitting all workshop response letters to your classmates)
- ❖ **25% - Final Portfolio** (based on criteria above)

Unexcused absences/lateness: We only meet for an hour and 15 minutes twice a week and have a lot to cover. Please do your best to attend all classes and arrive on time - especially once we are in workshop mode. Each new voice and perspective on someone's work matters and our classroom community is impacted when we miss you.

Emergencies happen all the time, and sometimes we just need a break. Make sure you email me at the very least the night before your absence. Three unexcused absences will result in -10% of your final grade. If you are going to be late, please let me know. Lateness counts as arriving 10 minutes after the start of class. Three unexcused tardies will count as an absence.

Please listen to your body (and respect the health of the class) if you are feeling ill.

Extra Credit: will be available and listed in the final draft of the syllabus in January.

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:

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

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, that seems to be a possible cry for help, will likely prompt the instructor's attention. Please send an email putting this work in context before submitting work that may be interpreted as such, especially for workshop. 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.

Plagiarism and Harassment: Please respect yourselves, your work, your classmates and our community by not plagiarizing the work or words of other people ([NYU policies here](#)). Please do not include members of our class as characters in your workshop submissions. Please reach out to me if the behavior of any of your classmates violates [NYU's harassment policies](#).

ChatGPT/AI tools: Please disclose if and when you use ChatGPT/AI tools as part of your own creative brainstorming process. Please do not use ChatGPT/AI to proofread or revise your own work, to read our craft assignments, or to read and respond to your classmates' work.

In Class Electronics: Workshop will be conducted with paper copies only. Workshopped students have the option to take notes by computer. For craft we will have moments

Class Structure

Part A - Building Our Container and Craft

Who We Are, How & Why We Read & Write (Weeks 1-2)

The Craft of Fiction and Nonfiction (Weeks 3-5) | The Craft of Poetry (Weeks 9-11)

The beginning of our class will focus on setting goals, intentions, guidelines and frameworks for “building the container” that is our class. We will focus on introducing ourselves as individuals, writers and artists - understanding why we - and the writers we’ll engage in our readings - write, determine individual interests to see if there are themes or threads we can dive more intentionally to later in the semester.

This part of the class will focus on at-home and in-class readings and discussions, in-class and at-home writing exercises that allow us to practice different forms and wake up the mind/ideas and feelings stirring inside that we want to bring to the page.

Writers will be given at-home activities to ensure that everyone is generating content for their first workshop submissions in the second part of the class. Each student will be asked to “introduce” one author or set of readings during each craft cycle.

At the conclusion of this period, the class will be invited to give public and private feedback to finetune the craft-component of the class for the rest of the semester.

At the end of the poetry craft cycle, I will invite you all to pick 1-2 texts from our reading list to spend the rest of the semester reading or re-reading those texts in full in preparation for your final portfolio. Read what you need to to inspire your writing.

Part B - Writing/Workshop Intensive
Prose Workshop (Weeks 6-8) | Poetry Workshop (Weeks 12-14)

Everyone will workshop one prose piece (short story or essay) and one series of poems. The class will be in “workshop mode” - meaning the only at-home reading assignments will be to engage with and give feedback to each other’s work. Writers will have the opportunity to give feedback on what types of feedback and edits they want or find helpful vs not helpful.

At the end of each workshop cycle, the class will have the opportunity to give feedback on what works well, what elements they want to improve or eliminate from future rounds of workshoping, and raise their own creative suggestions for workshop facilitation.

Tentative Reading & Assignment List for Week One

1/30 - We will begin our first class with Audre Lorde:

- [Poetry is Not a Luxury](#) (1985)
- [The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action](#) (1978)
- [Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power](#) (1978)

2/1 - Our second class will feature various writers on the question of “Why I Write,” including:

- George Orwell: “Why I Write” (1953)
- Joan Didion: “Why I Write” (1978)
- Toni Morrison: “The Site of Memory” (1995)
- Sarah Viren: “It’s Not Personal: Sarah Viren on Essayistic Visions of the Self” (2023)

Writing Assignment: Crafting a Statement of Purpose

I will narrow and specify readings and assignments for the rest of the semester by January. The only book(s) you may need to purchase are the ones you pick for your final project.

Nonfiction Longlist (bold names/titles are on the shortlist)

- Akwaeke Emezi: *Dear Senthuran* (2021)
- Alexander Chee: *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* (2018)
- Annie Ernaux: *Happening* (2001)
- Audre Lorde: *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982)
- **Bassey Ikpi: *I’m Telling the Truth, But I’m Lying* (2019)**
- **David Wojnarowicz: *Close to the Knives* (1991)**
- **Hanif Abdurraqib: *A Little Devil in America* (2021)**
- **James Baldwin: *The Price of the Ticket : Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985***
- **Robin Wall Kimmerer: *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013)**
- **Saeed Jones: *How We Fight For Our Lives* (2019)**
- **Saidiya Hartman: *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019)**
- Samuel Delaney: *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999)

Fiction Longlist (bold names/titles are on the shortlist)

- Akwaeke Emezi: *Freshwater* (2018)
- Alison Mills Newman: *Francisco* (2023)
- Amiri Baraka: *The Fiction of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (2000)
- Betty Smith: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1942)
- **Ghassan Kanafani**: *Men in the Sun* (1962) or *Return to Haifa* (1969)
- **James Baldwin**: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *Another Country* (1962), or *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974)
- Kiese Laymon: *Long Division* (2013)
- **Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah**: *Friday Black* (2018)
- **Octavia Butler**: TBD
- **Toni Cade Bambara**: *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and *Gorilla, My Love* (1972)
- **Toni Morrison**: *Beloved* (1987)

Poetry Shortlist (Assume most of the poets listed here are incorporated into the syllabus)

- Aja-Monet: *My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter* (2017)
- Alan Pelaez Lopez: *Intergalactic Travels: poems from a fugitive alien* (2020)
- Amira Baraka: TBD
- Ariana Benson: *Black Pastoral* (2023)
- Audre Lorde: *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (2000)
- Charif Shanahan: *Trace Evidence* (2023)
- Erica Hunt and Dawn Lundy: *Letters to the Future: Black Women/Radical Writing* (2018)
- Fred Moten: TBD
- June Jordan: *Passion* (2021) and *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan* (2007)
- Kamelya Omayma Youssef: *A book with a hole in it* (2022)
- Lucille Clifton: *Good Woman* (1987)
- M. NourbeSe Philip: *Zong!* (2008)
- Ocean Vuong: TBD
- Mohammed El-Kurd: *RIFQA* (2021)
- Nathaniel Mackey: TBD
- Nicole Sealey: *The Ferguson Report: An Erasure* (2023)
- Pat Parker: *The Complete Works of Pat Parker* (2016)