Introduction to Fiction and Poetry
Provisional Syllabus

There are two ways to worry words. One is hoping for the greatest possible beauty in what is created. The other is to tell the truth.
—June Jordan

Instructor: Aria Aber
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Office hours: By appointment at the Writers House, 58 W. 10th Street
Mondays and Wednesdays 11:30AM – 12:45PM

Course Objective:
What does it mean to be an English language writer when the demographical and socio-political parameters of the Anglophone landscape are under rapid and ongoing change? Language is political—that historically some voices have been privileged over others is no big mystery. The syllabus is designed to question the canonical classics; we read in order to understand who came before us, who paved the road for those who write now and which language they work with. During this semester, we will explore our responsibility as writers in the world at large, while discussing themes as displacement, bilingualism, war trauma and identity politics. There will be a heavy focus on writers of all diasporas, marginalized voices and contemporary Writers of Color who deploy language on multifaceted levels. By the end of the course, you will have acquired the ability to critically and creatively approach a text, regardless of its form. However, the main objective is to hone and improve your writing skills and to learn how to apply certain techniques to your own work, while discovering whose voices and styles you are drawn to and why. Together, we will embark on a critical journey to understand what the creation of a text means to us.

Don’t take this class if you think this is going to be an easy A. This is serious business!

Text and Materials:
Everything will be uploaded to NYU classes, but you are responsible to print out material prior to class and bring in hard copies of all required reading and peer work with you.

Course Structure and Grading:
Each Monday, we will study the craft of writing through assigned reading material. We will watch readings and interviews with the writers during these sessions and have the occasional in-class writing exercise. We will discuss the techniques, approaches, voices, and structures that operate within the texts in order to learn how to utilize those methods. It is your responsibility to read / watch / the material to the extent that you can comfortably participate in the group discussion.

On Wednesdays, we will workshop in alternating groups of fiction and poetry. We’ll discuss 3 short stories and 5 poems per class. Creativity implies novelty and risk. You are encouraged to experiment, explore, and leave your comfort zone in order to expand your horizon and grow creatively within a safe space. This is an introductory workshop and nobody’s work is
expected to be perfect. Grading doesn’t depend on your expertise, but on your willingness to learn and improve towards your final portfolio.

Craft — 30%
- Reading Response 20%
Every Monday, you are required to submit a hard copy of a 1-page (double-spaced, 12 pt.) response to the assigned reading of the week. Your reading response is not an opinion piece, but proves your ability to critically engage with the work regardless of your personal preference. Regard this response in the light of technique, theme or style.

- Why I Write Assignments (5%)
There are two special assignments reflective of your personal growth and your purpose as a writer to be submitted during this semester. In the first class you submit your “Why I Write” essay (1-2 pages, 12 pt. Times News Roman, double-spaced). This is a piece on why you write and what you hope to gain from this class. The next one is due during the ultimate week. You are required to submit a 1-2 page (double-spaced, 12 pt. Times News Roman) creative non-fiction text inspired by Mary Ruefle and Ocean Vuong’s texts we discuss in the first week. You have the entire semester to think about this piece and submit it at the end of your course. Feel free to draw a personal or historical lineage. Questions to consider are about seeing, hearing and experiencing the world as a writer. We will discuss your special assignments during our office hours. These are not going to be work-shopped but can be shared with class if you wish.

- Observation Notebook (5%)
I am convinced that regardless of what you write, part of the craft is to be finely attuned to your environment. Thus I will ask you to keep a small notebook wherein you catalog five things you see or phrases you hear each day (in the news, in line at the coffee shop, etc.). One thing that has struck you as special will be shared in class. This is a chance to have fun, remember the world through a child’s eyes and “look at what you are not supposed to look at,” as well as tune into the creative possibilities of your environment. Observations like “the mirror with nothing reflected in it” or the “lone blue M&M on the subway floor” emerge this way—poets and fiction writers should look out for what sparks their eye/ear/heart/mind. This will be an eye-opening (and ear, and mind, and heart opening) exercise—You will learn how to read the world as a story or as a poem.

Workshops – 40%
- Submissions (20%):
You are required to submit one short story and two poems throughout the semester. You will email this work to me a week before you are to be work-shopped (schedule listed below). Workshops are held each Wednesday, meaning that creative work has to be emailed to me on the prior Wednesday by 11:59 PM the latest. I will then upload the work for everyone on NYU Classes to download and critique.
Poetry: Please submit 2 poems with no poem exceeding the length of 2 pages.
Fiction: Please submit 1 (2-5 pages) story.
- **Critique (20%)**: You have to print out the work of your classmates, read it, annotate it with your critique and write each a short response letter. The brief response letter is supposed to highlight at least two things you enjoyed and two things that you thought didn’t work or could be improved in their respective works. Please list your reasons and suggestions for improvement. You will be shown how to offer and phrase constructive criticism during your mock workshop. Two copies of your response letters have to be brought to workshops. One of them goes to the student, the other is for me.

**Participation and Attendance—30%**

- Workshops and craft classes are forms of discourse. Thus they are dependent on your participation. Some people are more extroverted than others, and they will tend to lead the group. This is beneficial for igniting discussions, but after a certain point won’t help anyone and results in little to zero riveting conversations. You know this and they are aware of it too. You are required to do your best to verbally engage with the work and tell us what you think, what you have difficulties with, what inspires you and so on. Still waters run deep and shy people often have the most interesting insights. Please do your best to contribute. The workshop and craft classes are both safe spaces and you should feel comfortable around each other. Should you for any reason feel uncomfortable to participate in the discussions, please meet with me in my office hours to illuminate the issue.

- You are allowed two absences during the semester, reserved in cases of illness, emergencies and religious holidays. Every additional absence will result in your grade being lowered one degree (A to A-, and so on), unless you provide medical proof and an email from your advisor.

**Final Portfolio:**
On the last day of the semester, you are supposed to submit your final portfolio including your special writing assignments, all original drafts and your revised and polished workshop pieces, as well as a final 1-3 page artist statement. The latter should list the key points you learned about revising, editing, writing, reading, seeing and experiencing the world as a writer.

**Policies:**
- **Timeliness:** If you are more than 10 minutes late, you will be considered absent, regardless of whether you show up or not. In emergencies, you can email me prior to class.
- **Formatting:** Work must be submitted in Times or Times News Roman, 12 pt. font. All prose must be double-spaced. Your name should be put on every page header and submissions exceeding one page need to be paginated.
- **Technology:** Sorry guys—this is an old school workshop. No laptops, phones, tablets, iPads, iPods, or any other electronics are allowed unless otherwise instructed. You will survive without checking your email for an hour and a bit.
- **Late Submissions:** In absolute emergencies (about which you have to email me at least one day prior to class), you are allowed to submit late, within 48 hours after class. However, ideally you should submit your work BEFORE class if you know that you will miss it. In all other cases, late
reading responses or workshop submissions are not accepted and will be marked towards your final grade.

- **Workshop Etiquette**: All good art comes from a place of vulnerability and openness. Often, we will perform soul-stripteases in front of each other while analyzing them in terms of technicality and style. While we will not discuss our personal problems, the workshop environment still has to be understood as a safe space for everyone. You are allowed to be honest to your classmates but at the same time are expected to be empathetic and use your common sense whenever you offer **constructive criticism**.

- **Food**: Snacks and drinks are allowed, as long as they’re not distracting. Please don’t eat while people discuss sensitive subjects.

- **Plagiarism**: Embarrassing. You’ll get into massive trouble and fail your class-

- **Office hours**: You will have to come see me at least twice during the semester, but you are more than welcome to meet me more often.

- **Missing your own workshop** is extremely disrespectful to everyone involved, and a waste of everybody’s time, including your own. Again, in case of emergencies you have to email me at least 24 hours in advance. In all other cases, this will be marked towards your grade.

### Tentative Schedule:

**Why I Write** “*Why I write*” Assignment due  
Monday, January 23rd: Mary Ruefle, Eileen Myles & Ocean Vuong essays  
Wednesday, January 25th: Workshop Introduction and Etiquette

**The Concept of Americana**  
Monday, January 30th: Claudia Rankine, Natalie Diaz  
Wednesday, February 1st: Workshop Group A

**A Writer’s Responsibility**  
Monday, February 6th: June Jordan, Muriel Rukeyser, Solmaz Sharif  
Wednesday, February 8th: Workshop Group B

**Writing from a liminal space**  
Monday, February 13th: Franz Kafka, Paul Celan, Primo Levi, Mahmoud Darwish  
Wednesday, February 15th: Workshop Group C

**Modernism and Irony**  
Monday, February 20th: President’s Day – watch assigned interviews  
Wednesday, February 22nd: Workshop Group A

**The Short Story**  
Monday, February 27th: Jhumpa Lahiri  
Wednesday, March 1st: Workshop Group B

**Form and Experiment**  
Monday, March 6th: Langston Hughes, Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka  
Wednesday, March 8th: Workshop Group C
Spring Break

Writing the Post-Colonial Body
Monday, March 22nd: Arundhati Roy, Zadie Smith, Edward Said
Wednesday, March 8th: Workshop Group A

Reclaiming Language
Monday, March 27th: Anna Akhmatova, Federico Garcia Lorca, Safiya Sinclair
Wednesday, March 29th: Workshop Group B

Trauma, fractured Psyche and Syntax
Monday, April 3rd: Jean Rhys, Natalie Eilbert & others
Wednesday, April 5th: Workshop Group C

The Muslim Body
Monday, April 10th: Tarfia Faizullah, Warsan Shire, Kazim Ali, Phillip Metres
Wednesday, April 12th: Workshop Group A

Contemporary Landscapes and Racism
Monday, April 17th: Ta-Nehisi Coates & others
Wednesday, April 19th: Workshop Group B

Inhabiting our imagination
Monday, April 24th: Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Kaveh Akbar, Aziza Barnes, Virginia Woolf
Wednesday, April 26th: Workshop Group C

Revision and Editing * "I remember" assignment due
Monday, May 1st: Interviews with various writers
Wednesday, May 3rd: Discussion about Editors, Comparisons of Observation Notebooks

Final week
Monday, May 8th: Final class party and reading
Wednesday, May 10th: Submission of Final Portfolio, by 5 PM at the Lillian Vernon Creative Writing House.