

Glenn Freeman
319-895-4224
gfreeman@cornellcollege.edu

Office: 207 South Hall
Office Hours: MW 11-12

ENG 361: Contemporary Poetry

Law Hall, 121
3/20 – 4/12/2017

The language of poetry is a language of inquiry. Poetry takes as its premise that language (all language) is a medium for experiencing experience. It provides us with the consciousness of consciousness.

~Lyn Hejinian

I write to break out into perfect primeval Consent. I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate.

~Susan Howe

- What is it that allows me to identify this as a poem, Wittgenstein to identify his work as technical philosophy, Brockman's Afterwords to be seen as Esalen-oriented metaphysics, and Kenner's piece on Zukofsky literary criticism?
- But is it a distortion of poetry to speak of it like this? How might I define poetry so as to be able to identify such distortions?
- This is not philosophy, it's poetry. And if I say so, then it becomes painting, music or sculpture, judged as such. If there are variables to consider, they are at least partly economic -- the question of distribution, etc. Also differing critical traditions. Could this be good poetry, yet bad music? But yet I do not believe I would, except in jest, posit this as dance or urban planning.

~Ron Silliman

This course is a celebration of the diversity of contemporary poetry. It is wide-ranging but not all-inclusive; rather than a survey of contemporary poets, we will use particular texts as a means to investigate the exciting range of poetic trends at the turning of the 21st century. Of course, this investigation begs the fundamental question of what poetry is in the first place. While answers to this question will most likely remain elusive, we will engage it throughout the block.

We will read both widely and closely in this course. Classes will be discussion-based, with some lecture. We will focus primarily on the materials and dynamics of American poetry, examining some of the major movements which currently shape it. Similarly, we will be attentive to the established forms of poetry and to the points where these forms break down and are remade as a result of entanglements with other languages, music, the visual arts, prose, media, and contemporary experience. We will proceed always by the selection of salient, exciting, but by no means definitive, examples.

Wallace Stevens once argued that poetry is inherently a form of theory. Responses to this idea have been varied and often heated. In these debates poets and critics alike have often constructed a (false?) division between “lyric” and “language” poetry, between “traditional”

and “experimental” work, between “academic” and “street” or “performance” poetry. The question of whether such a divide exists (or should) and the relationship between theory and poetics will serve as our starting point for this course.

Three primary “schools” of poetry and theoretical concerns will guide our explorations:

- “Confessional” poetry and the challenges of self-disclosure.
- “Language” poets and their rejection of “voice” and the lyric subject.
- The poetics of identity politics in which the poetic voice serves communal functions as well as “personal.”
- Performance poetry and its rejection of “academic” verse.

No writer will fit neatly into any category, but these traditions will offer ways to enter into dialogue with particular poets. We will read a range of poets as well as critical responses to their poetry to see how poets have approached the difficult questions of our times. Certain questions will guide these explorations: is there such a thing as a knowable, coherent self? Can language ever transparently reveal or express that self? Who has the right to represent whom?

Required Texts:

Matthew Dickman, *All-American Poem*
Juan Felipe Herrera, *Notes on the Assemblage*
Danez Smith, *[insert] boy*
Patricia Smith, *Teahouse of the Almighty*
Tracy Smith, *Life on Mars*
Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*
Dean Young, *Fall Higher*
Various essays posted on moodle

Overview:

There will be several types of assignments during this course:

- **Exam:** There will be a final exam at the end of this block. The exam will be a take-home essay exam. I will post questions after class on a given day and you will have through the next morning to write thoughtful responses.
- **Essay:** You will all write an essay that either develops an aesthetic statement (what do you value in poetry? Art?) or examines the intersection between aesthetics and political representation. You will use the poets we are reading to develop the argument for this essay.

- **Discussions:** You will all be assigned, sometimes individually and sometimes in pairs to sections of books that we read. On the day we read that section, you should have selected a poem or two to lead discussion. You should choose the selection based on its importance to the section. In other words, you will consider the themes and styles of the reading, and select poem(s) that you think highlight those aspects of the book.
- **Participation:** This is a discussion-based class! I expect you to read the assigned work and to come to class prepared for discussion. I urge people to keep a journal of reading so that you are prepared to start a discussion. At a minimum, you should always have at least an observation and a question about the reading that you would use to start a discussion if I call on you. While I will not grade participation per se, particularly good or lacking participation can sway a borderline grade.
- **Group Discussion:** Everyone will be assigned to a small reading group. Reading groups should meet in the morning for at least an hour to discuss the day's reading and to help any presenters in the group to develop their presentation. Someone different should be the leader every day and will be the person I can turn to for summaries and ideas from that discussion. Groups will also prepare a group performance of a poem we read over the block.
- **Blog:** We will maintain a class blog. I expect everyone to post to the blog at least twice a week (post throughout—waiting until the end of the week, or the end of the course, will affect evaluation) and should respond to others' posts at least twice a week. This is a minimum!

Grading:

The course will be graded according to the following percentages:

Essay:	25%
Exam:	25%
Discussions:	20%
Blog:	20%
Group Work:	10%

Policies and Procedures:

Attendance:

An essential aspect of this course is class discussion. Your input is critical for everyone else in the class. Because of this, you are expected to attend all class sessions, to come prepared, and to participate fully in all activities. Please arrive **on time** for class; late arrivals are disturbing to class and may be considered an absence from class. After two unexcused absences, each absence will affect your final grade. If you must miss class, you are still responsible for any information, assignments and deadlines.

Paper Policies:

Students are required to submit all assignments on the due date. **Late work will be penalized.** All papers should use a standard 12-point font, double-spaced with one inch margins. All other MLA guidelines should be followed, especially citation rules for in-text citations and works cited pages. The final draft should be submitted in the same format as you would submit a hard copy but as an **e-mail attachment in Word or RTF**. If you need help, must miss class, or have trouble with a deadline, contact me ASAP!

Plagiarism:

Academic honesty requires that all work presented in this class be the student's own work. Evidence of plagiarism (use of another's ideas, data, and statements without acknowledgement and/or extensive use of another's ideas, data and statements with only minimal acknowledgement) will result in serious penalties.

General Comments:

Please feel free to talk with me at any time if you have questions about the course, feedback you are receiving, or how you are doing in general. If you find you are having difficulties of any kind, please come to see me as soon as possible so that we can begin to solve any problems before they become insurmountable. The same is true with deadlines: if you have any kind of challenge, be sure to talk with me. I will always try to help, but I need to know the situation before I can do anything.

Course Schedule:

Class will meet every day, Monday through Friday, 9:30-10:30 and 12:30-3:00. The attached schedule is a guideline but is subject to change. I will try to send a more detailed schedule for each week. If you miss class, you will still be responsible for any assignments and information; be sure to check with me or one of your peers to find out what you missed. Readings are to be done **before** the class session listed.