

Somatic Subjectivities:
Power and Politics in 21st Century American Poetry

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Hours: By appointment

“What I need, what I live for, what I write for, is this: that moment when the reader is holding an actual book in their hands and they can feel their skin differently. Their heart beating. Their torso, their face, the place where their very sex sits. An alive body inside language... Writing to bring the delicate dream to the tips of words, to kiss them, to rest your cheek on them, to open your mouth and breathe body to body—to resuscitate corporeal selves.”

~Lidia Yuknavitch

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Bodies are everywhere: moving, breathing, hurting, loving, desiring, living, dying. Bodies—our bodies, the bodies that surround us, the bodies that haunt us, the bodies that inspire us—are both banal and extraordinary, part of our everyday lives and part of spectacular events, instrumental and poetic. Bodies enable and limit action. Bodies carry weight. This course investigates the body as a site of political significance in contemporary poetry. **How to write bodies into being.** This is the nexus around which this course rotates.

To seek answers, we will read. A lot. We will both examine critical reflections on contemporary poetics and read poetry from a host of living writers whose work performs corporeal ways of being and surviving in our contemporary cultural landscape. We will pay attention to the various ways contemporary poets open lines of inquiry into the political realm. We will consider how and when this corporeal poetics succeeds (and fails) at capturing elusive and/or precarious subjectivities of race, sex, gender, grief, and violence.

To seek answers, we will also write. We will reflect on course readings and discussions, and on our own unique bodies, memories, perspectives, geographies, relationships, and imaginations. We will learn to attune to the somatic with an eye towards discovering how poetry can lay bare structures of power and precarity.

Course readings and discussions will animate the following questions, among others:

- What are the personal, rhetorical, and cultural limits and possibilities of poetry in 21st century America?
- How does language constitute bodies and bodies, language? How does poetry write bodies into being?
- How does/can poetry engender/reify/transgress/resist certain value systems and ideological trappings? What are the stakes of writing poetry in this political climate?
- In what ways does/can poetry haunt us, inspire us, repel us, or impel us to act?

REQUIRED TEXTS

All readings will be available on the Files tab of our Canvas page. When a book is listed on the syllabus, we will typically read ~3-10 poems from that collection. You are welcome to read this work digitally or print out hard copies, but please have access to the readings in class.

Method of Instruction

This course is designed as a discussion workshop. I will provide mini-lectures on salient course topics, but the majority of our daily meetings will be dedicated to discussions and examinations of course readings and student writing. The class will also include film clip viewings and in-class writing from creative writing experiments to critical reflections. Students will be expected to attend class 2x per week (7 hrs total) and devote ~5 hrs per class session for reading the assigned texts and completing written assignments.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students will have a toolkit of resources with which to identify and critically engage with corporeal poetics in contemporary American poetry. Students will also be offered and invent craft-focused experiments to hone their own poetic practice, both before writing begins, as it evolves, and in the re-writing process. The objective of this course, then, is to help students make use of contemporary poetry to bridge the gap between their own experiences as bodies moving through the world, and the varied somatic subjectivities of other politically precarious bodies.

Teaching Philosophy

I believe that the most generative classroom settings are those in which the instructor and the students recognize the collaborative nature of learning. I expect to learn as much from you as you will from me. This means that honest, open communication is integral. It is my hope that each of you will feel comfortable voicing your opinions, challenging each other (and me), and sharing insights from outside the classroom in order to enhance everyone's learning experience. This also means that I expect all of us to do our work. I will provide mini-lectures on salient course topics (though these lectures will *not* serve as a comprehensive overview of nor replacement for reading all of the assigned course materials), and I will design and facilitate discussions and writing activities. I expect you to come to class prepared by having read your assigned reading and completed your writing assignments so that we can have engaged and fruitful conversations. Teaching is a great passion of mine and I am always trying to improve as an instructor—to that end, I will be checking in with you during the session to discuss ways I can help to create a better learning space. I ask that you please come to me with any concerns or questions about my pedagogical practice.

GRADING

Final grades will be based on this percentage scale:

A = 100–94, A- = 93–90, B+ = 89–87, B = 86–84, B- = 83–80, C+ = 79–77, C = 76–74, C- = 73–70, D+ = 69–67, D = 66–64, D- = 60–63, F = 59 and below.

Assignment Overview:

Assignment	Point Value	Percentage of Grade
Participation	50	10%
Response Paragraphs (5 total; 10 points each)	50	10%
(Soma)tic Exercise	100	20%
Creative Experiment (100) and Revision (50)	150	30%
Final Critical Essay	150	30%
TOTAL POINTS	500	100%

ASSIGNMENT BREAKDOWN

Participation (50 points/10%): This includes turning in all assignments on time, coming to class prepared, and contributing to class discussions and workshop. Assignments are due as stated on the syllabus, unless otherwise noted. Class participation will be graded as follows:

- 45-50 points = Comes to class prepared by reading and thinking deeply about the texts. Contributes to class discussion and workshop in an insightful way every week. Exhibits exceptional participation.
- 40-45 points = Comes to class prepared having read the texts. Regularly contributes to class discussions. Exhibits good to satisfactory participation.
- 35-40 points = Sometimes comes to class prepared. Contributes to class discussion infrequently. Exhibits fair participation.
- 30-35 points = Rarely comes to class prepared. Contributes to class discussion infrequently, if ever. Exhibits insufficient participation.
- < 30 points = Never comes to class prepared. Does not contribute to class discussion. Exhibits insufficient preparation and participation.

A note on participation: Please understand that reading materials and class discussions will offer opportunities to explore topics which may be difficult or controversial for some of you. There may be times when class discussions become heated or impassioned, and I will encourage this. Part of the goal of this course is to help each of you to develop confidence in the oral articulation of your ideas and opinions. I believe that open, animated dialogues are an indication of a healthy classroom, so long as they remain courteous and participants are unified by a shared commitment to the attainment of greater knowledge and understanding. In this class, it is my hope that you will each learn to engage each other and your potentially divergent opinions as informed, respectful, thoughtful, critical thinkers and readers. That said, behavior and commentary that is intentionally rude, offensive, or insensitive will **not** be tolerated.

Response Paragraphs (50 points/10%): Five times over the session, you will submit a one-paragraph note (**strictly one paragraph only**) on the readings. Pick a phrase, a line, a paragraph, or a concept from any of that week's readings that intrigued you, write a couple of lines about what caught your attention, and formulate a couple of questions. You will use this in class during discussion.

(Soma)tic Exercise (100 points/20%): Using CAConrad's exercises as a jumping off point, you will write TWO somatic exercises of your own. Your exercises should offer specific instructions for the writer and must engage with the BODY (as biological process, as sensation-experiencer, as

medium, as ideological house, as deviant, as illusion, as dream, etc.) in some way. These will be posted on our Canvas site to serve as potential prompts for your peers' Creative Experiment.

Creative Experiment (100 points/20%) and Revision (50 points/10%):

Creative Experiment: Your creative experiment should be informed by class conversations, in-class writing prompts, and formal reflections on the readings. Your piece may take any form, but it must emerge in response to one of the somatic exercise prompts (either from CAConrad or your peers, whose prompts will be posted on our Canvas page). When you turn in your work, please indicate the exercise to which you are responding.

Revision: Consider my feedback and reflect on your own deepening understand of poetics and somatics to revise your Creative Experiment. You may want to apply the questions/directives from an additional somatic exercise as you revise. You will share your revision with the whole group during Week 4.

Final Critical Essay (150 points/30%): You will develop a critical essay of 1200-1500 words which explores somatic poetics in contemporary poetry. One-paragraph proposals are due to me by the end of Week 4. On the final day of class, you will offer an informal description of your essay's main themes/argument.

ATTENDANCE

Because the work we do in this class is participatory, you are expected to attend every class, be on time, and contribute to class discussions by doing the assigned reading. I will pass an attendance sheet around the class each day; it is your responsibility to make sure this sheet is circulated and returned to me. Late arrivals are noted if you are more than 10 minutes late. When you are absent, it is your responsibility to inquire what you missed, to pick up homework, etc.

First absence	= free
Second unexcused absence	= lowers your final grade one letter (e.g., from B to C)
Third unexcused absence	= results in failure of the course
Late	= two late arrivals or early departures equals one absence

CLASSROOM DECORUM

- All cell phones should be turned off. No texting/phone calls during class.
- Computers may be used for taking notes or in-class writing only. No surfing the web or checking email during class.
- If possible, please refrain from leaving the classroom during class discussions and lectures.

ACCOMMODATIONS

If you have any needs that require special accommodations, please come and speak with me so that we can make adequate arrangements to create the optimal learning environment for you.

DAILY SCHEDULE (subject to change):**Week 1 Somatic Subjectivities**

- T Discuss in Class:
- Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”
 - Lidia Yuknavitch, “Why Do You Write It All Weird?”
 - CAConrad’s (Soma)tic poetry exercises (finish reading for homework)

- R Discuss Readings:
- Alexandra Alter, “American Poets, Refusing to Go Gentle, Rage Against the Right,” *The New York Times*, 21 Apr. 2017.
 - Duriel E. Harris, “As Sound Creates Forms in Water” (TFOWP)
 - Duriel E. Harris, *No Dictionary of a Living Tongue* (2017)
 - **Screen *Moonlight* in class**

DUE: Optional Response Paragraph**Week 2 Poetics of Color**

- T Discuss Readings:
- Khadijah Queen, “Navigating the Boy, Revealing the Audience: On Sonic Integrity, Contrast, Movement, and Endurance” (TFOWP)
 - from Morgan Parker, *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyonce* (2017)
 - from Danez Smith, *Don’t Call Us Dead: Poems* (2017)
 - from Terrance Hayes, *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018)

DUE: Optional Response Paragraph

- R Discuss Readings:
- Ronaldo V. Wilson, “Living Being: After the Avant Garde” (TFOWP)
 - Denise Benavides, *Split* (2016)
 - Erika L. Sanchez, *Lessons on Expulsion* (2017)

DUE: Optional Response Paragraph**DUE: Soma(tic) Exercise****Week 3 Poetics of Indigeneity**

- T Discuss Readings:
- LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs, “No Te Entiendo” (TFOWP)
 - from Natalie Diaz, *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (2012)
 - from Joan Naviyuk Kane, *Milk Black Carbon* (2017)

DUE: Optional Response Paragraph

R

Discuss Readings:

- Craig Santos Perez, “from *Unincorporated Poetic Territories*” (TFOWP)
- from Craig Santos Perez, *from Unincorporated Territory* (2012)
- from Layli Long Soldier, *Whereas* (2017)

DUE: Optional Response Paragraph**DUE: Creative Experiment****Week 4 Poetics of Violence**

T

Discuss Readings:

- Julie Carr, “The Body and the Avant-Garde” (TFOWP)
- Justin Karcher, “Trying To Write Poetry In The Age Of Trump: A Manifesto For The Stubborn Optimist,” *Thought Catalog*, 23 Apr. 2017.
- from Julie Carr, *100 Notes on Violence* (2010)
- from Solmaz Sharif, *Look: Poems* (2016)
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DUE: Optional Response Paragraph

R

Read Megan Garber, “Still, Poetry Will Rise,” *The Atlantic*, 10 Nov. 2016.

*In-Class: Sharing of Creative Experiment Revisions!

DUE: Creative Experiment Revision**DUE: Final Critical Essay Proposal Paragraph****Week 5 Poetics of Grief**

T

Discuss Readings:

- from Kristin Prevallet, *I, Afterlife: Essay in Mourning Time* (2007)
- from Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (2009)
- from Ada Limón, *Bright Dead Things* (2015)
- Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016)

DUE: Optional Response Paragraph

R

Project Sharing

Final Critical Essay due the following Tuesday