

San José State University

Department of English and Comparative Literature
ENGLISH 242: MFA Graduate Nonfiction Workshop, Spring 2023

Our Unsilencing

“Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation. For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it.” –Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.”

Instructor: Prof. Jean Guerrero

Classroom: Virtual

Class Meeting: Tuesdays, 7 to 9:45 p.m.

Office Hours: Tuesdays 6-7 p.m. (Zoom)

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

The art of narrative nonfiction relies on two ancient powers: reincarnation and revelation. Writers revive the past in prose and reap answers from the ink. A decline in humanity’s command of those powers is contributing to the many global crises we face today.

In this class, we’ll strengthen our gifts as writers whose devotion to truth counters the mesmerism of demagogues and dominant cultures. We’ll study diverse virtuosos of the craft – in memoir, general nonfiction and blended styles – for their use of lyricism, investigative reporting and more. We’ll create original work that has as one of its main objectives the restoration of agency to ourselves and our readers, dismantling learned prejudices and preconceptions.

Additionally, we’ll discuss aspects of the writing profession, with visits from well-known writers to-be-announced. They’ll share insights about building literary community, finding an agent or publisher, self-promotion, safety in an era of hostility to journalists and more.

Students will workshop their writing as many as three times during the term (two required pieces of 2,000-5,000 words and an optional 600-word piece) and will be required to provide written feedback to their classmates when their peers are the focus of the workshop. The objectives of

this course are to study and work toward establishing our voice(s) as writers, to become fluent in reincarnation and revelation via writing and to develop our critical thinking about nonfiction.

Required Reading

“Why Fish Don’t Exist” by Lulu Miller

“A Silent Fury” by Yuri Herrera

Suggested Readings for Memoirists and Personal Essayists

“The Fire Next Time” by James Baldwin

“The Undying” by Ann Boyer

“Speak, Nabokov” by Vladimir Nabokov

“The Liar’s Club” by Mary Karr

“Sister Outsider” by Audre Lorde

“Body Work” by Melissa Febos

“Undocumented Americans” by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio

“The Man Who Could Move Clouds” by Ingrid Rojas Contreras

Suggested Readings for General Nonfiction Writers

“Caste” by Isabel Wilkerson

“The Devil’s Highway” by Luis Alberto Urrea

“Where Men Win Glory” by Jon Krakauer

“She Said” by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey

“In Cold Blood” by Truman Capote

“Sapiens” by Yuval Noah Harari

“Devil’s Bargain” by Joshua Green

Class Schedule (subject to change):

Week 1, Jan. 31: Embodied Writing

In-Class Exercises: “Transformation of Silence” and Introductions

Readings: Melissa Febos’ “[In Defense of Navel-Gazing](#)” and “[Call My Name](#)”

Assétou Xango’s “[Give Your Daughters Difficult Names](#)”

Take-Home Assignment: Find The Sensuality, Symbolism, and Story of Your Names(s)

Week 2, Feb. 7: Embodied Writing, Part 2

In-Class Exercise: “In Hindsight” and Discussion of Take-Home Assignment

Workshop: New work, 2,000-5,000 words, 3-4 student pieces per session

Readings: Kiese Laymon's "[Black churches taught us to forgive white people. We learned to shame ourselves.](#)"

Camonghne Felix's "[Aching for Abolition](#)"

Take-Home Assignment: Interrogate Our Idols

Week 3, Feb. 14: Writing About The Other

In-Class Exercise: "Revelatory Objects" and Discussion of Take-Home Assignment

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Readings: Elaina Plott's "[Inside Ivanka's Dreamworld](#)"

Jonathan Blitzer's "[The Woman Behind Latin America's Literary Boom](#)"

Listen to "Suave" Episode 1, "[The Sentence.](#)"

Take-Home Assignment: Sketch A Profile

Week 4, Feb. 21: Writing About The Other, Part 2

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Readings: Excerpt from James Baldwin's "[The Fire Next Time](#)"

Excerpt from Imani Perry's "[Breathe](#)"

Take-Home Assignment: Turn Your Profile Into A 50-Second "Broadcast"

Week 5, Feb. 28: Range and Levity

Guest visit: Wajahat Ali, author of "Go Back To Where You Came From"

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Reading: First 8 pages of Marcelo Hernandez Castillo's "Children of Land" (available online)

Readings: First 13 pages of Wajahat Ali's "Go Back To Where You Came From" (online)

Take-Home Assignment: TBD

Week 6, March 7: Interiority and Silence

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Readings: Chapter 1 of Ann Boyer's "The Undying" (online)

Joan Didion's "[Holy Water](#)"

Take-Home Assignment: TBD

Week 7, March 14: Symbolism

Author visit: TBD

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Reading: "Why Fish Don't Exist" by Lulu Miller

Take-Home Assignment: TBD

Week 8, March 21: Interviews and Investigation

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Readings: “Why Fish Don’t Exist” by Lulu Miller

Week 9, March 28: Interviews and Investigation, Part 2

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Readings: “Why Fish Don’t Exist” by Lulu Miller

Week 10, April 4: Structure

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 15 minutes)

Readings: A Silent Fury by Yuri Herrera

Week 11, April 11: Ethics

Workshop: New work (2,000-5,000 words)

Author visit: TBD

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 15 minutes)

Readings: A Silent Fury by Yuri Herrera

Week 12, April 18: Ethics, Part 2

Workshop: New work

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 15 minutes)

Week 13, April 25: Pitching

Author visit: TBD

Workshop: New work

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 15 minutes)

Week 14, May 2: Self-Promotion

Workshop: New work

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 15 minutes)

Week 15, May 9: On Literary Agents, Editors and Publishing

Workshop: New work

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 15 minutes)

Week 16, May 16: Mitigating Risks

Workshop: New work

Student-led discussions: On craft (any author, any text; 15 minutes)

Final Revision due

Classroom Decorum

In a workshop, writers must feel safe sharing their work with the group. Please keep your critiques confined to the work, not the author. Hostile, threatening, or ad hominem criticism will not be tolerated. If you feel threatened by a classmate, please bring the issue to my attention so I can address it promptly.

Workshop Étiquette

Workshop is a place for respectful and constructive criticism. It is also a place where students practice articulating what makes nonfiction writing distinctive, interesting, and fun to read. The author should take notes and remain silent as their work is discussed, except if answering their classmates' questions about their work; answering such questions can help authors clarify their thinking about their goals for their writing. Spoken and written commentary from peers must always be directed at the work, not the writer. For example, please avoid using the second person to refer to the narrator of a personal essay; instead, call them "the narrator" or "the protagonist."

Personal attacks and offensive or inappropriate language will not be tolerated. Students who cannot follow these guidelines will be dismissed from the course. If you receive any offensive comments on your work, please let me know as soon as possible so I can address the problem.

-Be courteous, respectful, and tactful.

-Adopt the attitude of an editor for a publishing house whose acquisitions editor has already bought the manuscript that is being discussed: You will be working with this writer for some time. It is up to you not only to critique the writer's work, but to form a constructive professional relationship with the writer.

-Comments should contribute to a meaningful discussion. Brief and constructive comments are helpful. Purely negative, mean-spirited and redundant comments are not. Once you've made your point, you do not need to revisit the issue.

-Comments should come from a place of discovery—not judgment. You should read the work on its own terms.

-Consider that it's easier to criticize a work than to articulate its potential or how it succeeds. Honest, positive feedback can be very helpful.

-Prioritize questions and descriptions over prescriptions. It will serve you to discern between your experience of a work and what the work does. It's always safer to describe your reading experience than to extrapolate a diagnosis from that experience.

-Look up words or references that aren't familiar to you. Don't take for granted that queer, BIPOC, or gender non-conforming writers; writers with disabilities; or writers from places other than the U.S. should always define or explain things in their work that you wouldn't expect a white, able, cis-gendered, heterosexual person from the U.S. to explain in their work. Do not assume you're everyone's ideal audience.

- Be careful with the words you choose. Consider how what you say and how you say it may be received by others. Do not derail the discussion with a poor word choice.
- If you have something particularly insightful to say, by all means, speak up. Speak up first.
- When the instructor is talking, you should be listening.
- When another student is talking in discussion, you should be listening.
- Students whose work is being workshopped should not assume a defensive or combative stance.
- You should be listening for patterns and/or a consensus in your classmates' interpretation of your work and for ways to improve your work.
- Students whose work is being workshopped need not heed the advice of every comment made in the class.
- If your peers are using untoward language, tenor, or tone, you should feel empowered to speak up. If you feel safe doing so, let the person who uses such language know that what they are saying is problematic and/or discourages meaningful discussion. If you do not feel safe and empowered to do so, talk to the instructor about the issue.
- The instructor's policy is to address directly (i.e., in private with the individual) any issue pertaining to a student before airing the matter to the class.
- The workshop will not be effective if you are careless/insulting in your comments (written and spoken), and/or otherwise defy workshop protocol.

Submission Guidelines

On Canvas, reply to your desired date under "Workshop Submissions Sign-Up Sheet."

No more than four people can be workshopped on any given date.

Submissions should be double-spaced, with page numbers, in Times New Roman.

Include a cover sheet (no longer than one page) that offers a brief introduction to the work and specifies some questions or challenges that you are facing with the piece, and any areas where you'd especially appreciate feedback.

Submissions should be uploaded to Canvas no later than Sunday at 11:59 p.m. prior to workshop

Everyone posts their feedback papers on Canvas by the Thursday after the workshop. You must also share these with the writer separately via email or the discussion thread under the "Workshop Submissions Sign-Up Sheet."

Student code of conduct (SJSU and classroom policies)

Students are responsible for maintaining a respectful environment in the classroom. San Jose State is committed to maintaining a safe education and working environment free of discrimination, harassment and sexual violence. Policies are available online

at: <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/policies/> and http://notalone.sjsu.edu/policy_information/index.html

Per Title 5, the university prohibits “[activities] that substantially and materially disrupts the normal operations of the University” and “conduct that threatens or endangers the health or safety of any person within or related to the University community, including physical abuse, threats, intimidation, harassment, or sexual misconduct.” Please keep this in mind as you submit work for this course. The work you create in this class should aspire to resemble in quality the work we read. The work should be literary and character driven (this class is not the place for cat poems, romances, fan-fiction, fantasy, horror, crime, and the like.) I will not tolerate any work that is gratuitously violent, pornographic. If you aren’t sure about your work, see me before distributing it to your classmates.

Academic Integrity

Your commitment, as a student, to learning is evidenced by your enrollment at San Jose State University. The University Academic Integrity Policy S07-2 at <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S07-2.pdf> requires you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty members are required to report all infractions to the office of Student Conduct and Ethical Development. The Student Conduct and Ethical Development website is available at <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/>.

Attendance at Literary Readings

You are required to attend two readings by poets or prose writers presented online, on the SJSU campus, or elsewhere. The Bay Area is one of the world's great literary regions, where seven days a week one can attend a reading by a renowned writer at a bookstore, college, community center, or library. Readings are listed in the Sunday editions of the *San Jose Mercury News* and *San Francisco Chronicle*. After attending each reading, you will write a brief response paper (2 or more pages). The writing may be free form as long as you respond in some detail to any aspect of the reading, for example the speaker, the venue, the material performed, or the Q&A with the audience.

Final Examination/Evaluation

In lieu of a final exam, you will turn in a substantial revision of one of your workshop submissions no later than the last day of class. Examples of changes that might be included in a

substantial revision include adding or deleting a character, changing the point of view, inserting a new scene, and altering the ending of the story. It is not enough simply to correct the spelling and grammatical errors of the first draft. To earn a high grade on the revision, you must alter the piece in some significant way. The revision is due the last day of class but can be submitted earlier if the student wishes to workshop the piece and can find space in the schedule for that.

Late Assignment Policy

It is important that you turn in your stories when you say you're going to. This is your most important responsibility. Late or emailed pieces will not be accepted. If you need to change your workshop date, it is your responsibility to find someone willing to trade dates with you, and to tell me that you've switched prior to the date when your work was scheduled to be workshopped.

University Policies

Per University Policy S16-9, university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, etc. will be available on Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Programs' Syllabus Information web page.

Determination of Grades

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined by the SJSU Catalog (Grades-Letter Grading). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A+/A/A-= excellent; B+/B/B-= above average; C+/C/C-= average; D+/D/D-= below average; F= failure. Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g. B+/B/B-), the assignment of a + or - grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.

A+/A/A-: Satisfactory participation in 3 or more workshops as the writer; provided feedback to all writers being workshopped; literary event response papers completed; revision completed

B+/B/B-: Satisfactory participation in 3 or more workshops as the writer; provided feedback to most writers being workshopped; literary event response papers completed; revision paper completed

C+/C/C-: Satisfactory participation in 2 workshops as the writer; provided sporadic feedback to writers being workshopped; revision completed

D+/D/D-: Incomplete: Satisfactory participation in 1 workshop as the writer; some class exercises completed

F: Almost no work completed

Final grades will be the product of the following factors:

Your nonfiction (2-3 new pieces and a revision) 60%

Peer commentaries 20%

Response papers on two literary readings 10%

Student-led discussion and participation in workshop exercises 10%

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>A+</i>	<i>96 to 100%</i>
<i>A</i>	<i>93 to 95%</i>
<i>A-</i>	<i>90 to 92%</i>
<i>B+</i>	<i>86 to 89 %</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>83 to 85%</i>
<i>B-</i>	<i>80 to 82%</i>
<i>C+</i>	<i>76 to 79%</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>73 to 75%</i>
<i>C-</i>	<i>70 to 72%</i>
<i>D+</i>	<i>66 to 69%</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>63 to 65%</i>
<i>D-</i>	<i>60 to 62%</i>