

The whole business of writing is the question of living [one's] contemporariness
. . . . The thing that is important is that nobody knows what the contemporariness is. In
other words, they don't know where they are going, but they are on their way.
Gertrude Stein, "How Writing is Written"

A Poetics of Difficulty

Fall 2020
Tuesdays, 3-5 PM

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Books available at the Coop and somehow through the library:

Cameron Awkward-Rich, *Dispatch* (New York: Persea Books, 2019)
Dan Beachy-Quick, *Arrows* (North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2020)
Caroline Bergvall, *Drift* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2014)
Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars* (New York: New Directions, 2020)
Jericho Brown, *The Tradition* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2019)
Victoria Chang, *Obit* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2020)
Susan Howe, *Concordance* (New York: New Directions, 2020)
Myung Mi Kim, *Civil Bound* (Oakland: Omnidawn, 2019)
Dawn Lundy Martin, *Good Stock Strange Blood* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017)
Laura Moriarty, *Personal Volcano* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2019)
Lisa Robertson, *R's Boat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010)
Prageeta Sharma, *Grief Sequence* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2019)
Brian Teare, *Doomstead Days* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2019)

Also worth getting a hold of in some form:

Kathleen Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1999)
Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985 [reissue in 2007 by New Directions])
Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003)
Juliana Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2001)

And some useful online sources:

National Poetry Foundation (NPF) <http://www.nationalpoetryfoundation.org>

Electronic Poetry Center (EPC) <http://www.epc.buffalo.edu/authors>
Modern American Poetry (MAP) <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/>
PENNsound <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/>
Poetry Foundation <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/>
UbuWeb: <http://www.ubu.com/>

Course requirements:

We are living in difficult times. Surprise.

This is a course on what gets called experimental or innovative or avant-garde writing – the last being the most problematic of the terms. I like experimental, but even more the idea of writing as inter-connective, writing as activity, a practice that is always unfinished and always, although only ever partially, completed by readers. Maybe better, it's writing that is taken up and moved forward in reading and writing, if they can be distinguished at all. It is also writing that takes up, although in very different ways, Stein's challenge that poetry be contemporary. Finally, it is writing that refuses, confuses, or resists the act of deciphering, the work perhaps most often associated with literary analysis. It is very often dismissed as just too hard. The question for the class, then, is "how do we read?"

My own stake in this work is that in the face of difficulty—existential, personal, political, environmental, you name it—reading difficult writing can be an affectively and intellectually powerful task—and pleasure. I want to think about different modalities of difficulty and how they are manifest in the poetry. What kinds of difficulty are there? Which are useful to think and sit with, to feel through—and which perhaps are not? And how does the difficulty of the contemporary world, in all of its particularity, *require* difficult writing—even as it might also require other things too?

Given the attention these poems need, I've perhaps assigned too much reading, but I like to read a lot and then go back to look at the bits and pieces. (I wanted to assign a lot more and am happy to point people to other material that didn't make this version of the syllabus.) Also, most of this material is purposively in book form, even as the pieces are fragmented and come apart on the page. Some of you might have other ways of reading and this is okay. I just ask that you come to discussions able to speak to the assignment in some way. I will also ask you to work in pairs together before larger group meetings, thinking together about the week's reading and ready to open our shared discussion with questions, interventions, information, whatever seems helpful to you in getting at the poems.

Again, one of the main goals of the class is to think about how to read contemporary poetry and how reading it can change our ways of approaching other kinds of writing. I also want you to be able to explore the variety of practices – not all in book form, not all written – that are associated with contemporary poetic practice. For this reason, the major assignment of the course will be up to each of you to determine. Do you want to write a critical essay, a response in academic form? In literary form? Do you want to break down that distinction? Or would you like to create some other kind of work that engages with the practices of writing we will be looking at in the course? Does anyone want to create some kind of virtual space in which our conversations and

experiments might be enacted? Working together on such projects is fine with me. I just need something – some artifact – from your work by the end of the semester. We can talk more about what kinds of things this might entail, but my guess is that you will have more creative ideas than anything I can come up with.

Requirements for the course:

1. Most important, of course, is reading and engaging with the material assigned and being read to discuss it when we meet together once a week.
2. Toward facilitating that end, in this online world, I want to try something new. I would like members of the class to meet together in pairs for a half hour to an hour *before* each class session to discuss the week's reading together. In order to facilitate you getting to know each other, I suggest that the pairings change each week. We will work out a schedule the first week of the class. The idea is twofold: 1) you will get a chance to talk to your classmates outside of official class space, about the book of the week and how to approach it, but also about each other, your interests, what draws you to the material, whatever. Use the time as you find best; 2) this will give you and your partner time to work toward a reading of a poem or part of a poem, however tentative that may be, to share with the class when we all meet together. You can use Canvas to post materials relevant to your reading or to your engagement with the text, although that is not an official requirement. (I don't want Canvas posts to stand in for, but instead to spark and be a resource for, class discussion.)
3. A final project to be discussed further in class.

Calendar:

September 8, 2020: Myung Mi Kim, *Civil Bound*

September 15, 2020: Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*

September 22, 2020: Prageeta Sharma, *Grief Sequence*

September 29, 2020: Victoria Chang, *Obit*

October 6, 2020: Lisa Robertson, *R's Boat*

October 13, 2020: Susan Howe, *Concordance*

October 20, 2020: Dan Beachy-Quick, *Arrows*

October 27, 2020: Dawn Lundy Martin, *Good Stock Strange Blood*

November 3, 2020: Cameron Awkward-Rich, *Dispatch*

November 10, 2020: Jericho Brown, *The Tradition*

November 17, 2020: Caroline Bergvall, *Drift*

November 24, 2020: Brian Teare, *Doomstead Days*

December 10, 2020: Laura Moriarty, *Personal Volcano*