ENAM 0172A: Writing Gender and Sexuality

About the course

In this course I expect you to commit yourself deeply to working as artists and writers. This means that your relationship to language may be located as much in your arms and belly and mouth as in your brain. We will work with three literary genres that have long and complex traditions. These traditions are largely western-based, within and beyond which there are diverse models of resistance and innovation. We will focus on performances of gender and sexuality. What is sex and gender and sexuality? How do we perceive its norms and transgressions? What influences our reading of a text? In our acts of reading and writing, what kind of attention can we bring to topics of desire, control, conformity and fluidity? Can we bring a queer eye to our own production? What does that have to do with memory and art? In this class I expect you to work hard, take risks, and learn from feedback and mistakes. I also expect you to respect one another’s styles and journeys, challenge artifice and laziness where you sense it, and contribute to a positive, honest and humble class environment.

Expectations for the course:

Over the next twelve weeks you should produce between **25-40 pages of rough draft material** in three different genres and **revise a minimum of one piece per genre**, totaling **18-25 pages of polished poetry and prose**. Each unit of the course (each genre) will have its own set of guidelines/expectations. Flexibility and choices are built into these guidelines. **You are expected to keep track of expectations, guidelines and what is your choice.** (Re-read this handout between units!) At the end of the semester you will hand in two portfolios:

- a **Process Portfolio** that includes *everything you produced* during the course of the semester, including informal writing exercises and reflections on assigned readings and on your writing process (25-40 pages creative work plus exercises and reflections)

- a **Product Portfolio** that showcases your *best, revised, polished work* (18-25 pages).

You will be graded mostly on the **quality of your work**—its creativity, depth, and skill with language and form (85%). Of course that includes meeting all the page requirements as well.

I will also take into account your **writing process**—how you used your time, how you responded to feedback, whether or not you were ambitious and/or took risks and whether
or not you met personal writing goals. Your writing process along with class participation and commitment to workshop and conference expectations/schedules will account for the rest of your grade (15%).

I will give midterm grade estimates upon request only. Grades are not typically helpful in the creative process but I will certainly respect requests for grades given our academic context. I do give plenty of written and oral feedback/evaluations along the way. This feedback is much more complex than what I can articulate with a grade so please read/listen carefully to my comments.

**Required Course Texts (in bookstore):**

*The Situation and the Story*, by Vivian Gornick  
*Making Shapely Fiction*, Jerome Stern

**Eres**: lots of course readings there

**Circulation Desk Reserves**: additional (optional) readings

These are all anthologies (except for the workbook) that have a diversity of voices in them. Browse through and see what appeals to you. The gender workbook is available for skimming through or photocopying some pages in case you want to do some of the exercises. Please don’t write directly in the workbook.

*Genderqueer*: voices from beyond the sexual binary  
*First Person Queer*: Who we are (so far)  
*Nobody Passes*: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity  
*The Persistent Desire*: A Femme-Butch Reader  
my gender workbook
ENAM/WAGS 0172A: Writing Gender and Sexuality
Spring, 2012, TTh 1:30-2:45, Axinn 104
Catharine Wright, Assistant Director, Lecturer, Writing Program
Contact Info: cwwright@middlebury.edu; 443-2568
Office Hours: 12:00-1:00 Tues, Thurs, Fri, Carr Hall 207 (CCSRE)
E-Res password: 1202cw (there’s also a link on the course hub)

Syllabus

Part One: Creative Non-Fiction: Memory and Persona

Feb 14: Introduction to the course
Read: “Genders On My Mind,” Joan Nestle, and “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Audre Lorde (hand-outs)
Write: informal reflection on readings; what do these texts bring up for you as a writer and a person? (1.5-2 pages)

Th 16: Discuss readings and reflections
Read: Amy Tan’s “Mother Tongue,” George Orwell’s “Shooting An Elephant” & James Baldwin’s “Here Be Dragons” (all on E-Res)
Write: Draft of Creative Non-Fiction Piece (see assignments), 3-6 pp.

T 21: Discuss texts (and your own creative non-fiction writing experience)
Read: Vivian Gornick’s The Situation and the Story, pp. 3-26 (bookstore)

Th 23: Discuss Gornick; guided workshop thinking of situation/story/persona; sign up for individual conferences with Ms. Wright
Read: Alice Walker’s “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self,” Stacey Montgomery’s “Twenty Passings” (E-Res), Peggy Munson’s “Liminal” (hand-out) & Workshop Pieces for your group (email)
Write: Draft of second Creative Non-Fiction Piece, 3-6 pp.

T 28: Writing Workshop (small groups)
Write: Self-reflection on your writing and workshop experience thus far (1 page)
Th 1: Discuss Walker, Munson, Montgomery (above)
   Read: “Brothers and Sisters,” Alice Walker (hand-out) and “Survey Says,” David Findley (Eres) and Workshop pieces (email)
   Write: Draft new non-fiction piece and/or revise piece(s) one and/or two

T 6: Writing Workshop (small groups)
   Read: Ann Beattie’s “Snow” (hand-out)

Th 8: Discuss “Snow,” do in-class writing exercises (extended metaphors, etc)
   Read: Workshop drafts
   Revise: creative non-fiction

Part Two: Fiction: The Donnée and Invention

T 13: Writing Workshop (small groups—revised drafts of non-fiction)
   Read: Carol Bly’s “First Draft Work is like no other Work in the Story” (ERes) and leaf through Jerome Stern’s Making Shapely Fiction (bookstore)

Th 15: Present observations from Stern’s book; writing exercises in class
   Read: Ana Castillo’s “Loverboys,” Collette’s “Cheri,” and Woodhouse’s “Five Houses of Gay Fiction, Revisited” (ERes)
   Write: 3-4 writing exercises; begin to draft a story

T 20: Discuss readings; sign up for individual conferences
   Read: Junot Diaz’s “Alma” (hand-out) & Grace Paley’s “Ruthy and Edie” (ERes)
   Write: Continue drafting or experimenting

Th 22: Discuss readings
   Read: Barbara Smith’s “Home” & John Updike’s “A&P” (ERes)
   Write: serious draft of a story

*** Spring Break ***

T 3: Discuss readings or Writing Workshop
   Read: Michael Cunningham’s “Ignorant Armies” (ERes) and workshop material
   Continue writing story/begin revising
   (Hand in revised draft of story sometime between April 9-17)

Th 5: Writing Workshop
   Read: “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (ERes) and Writing Workshop material
   Keep writing/revising
T 10: Writing Workshop
   Read: Workshop material
   Revise: short story or begin new story

Th 12: Writing Workshop
   Read: Workshop material
   continue writing/revising

T 17: Writing Workshop
   Read: poetry hand-outs
   Write: poetry exercises

**Part Three: Poetry: Playing with Sound**

Th 19: Discuss poems; poetry exercises; choose reading/workshop/presentation options
   Read: poetry hand-outs
   Write: poetry exercises

T 24: Discuss readings; sign up for conferences with Ms. Wright
   Read: poetry hand-outs
   Write: 2-4 lyric poems

Th 26: Discuss readings; poetry exercises
   Read: Workshop pieces

T 1: Writing Workshop and/or Readings and/or Presentations
   Read: poetry hand-outs
   Write: two more poems—one fixed form, one not; one that references or engages in conversation with another poem
   Read: Workshop pieces

Th 3: Writing Workshop and/or Readings and/or Presentations

T 8: Writing Workshop, Readings, Presentations

Th 10: Last Class: Workshop, Readings

**Fri 18: Final Portfolios Due by 4 pm** in box outside Ms. Wright’s office. Please read the portfolios expectations hand-out and follow the guidelines.
Creative Non-Fiction Writing Assignments

Within the first four weeks of the course, choose a minimum of one topic below and a maximum of three (you can supplement with topics of your own if you’d like) to produce a total of two to three pieces of creative non-fiction that collectively come to 9-15 pages of rough draft material. See me in conference weeks two - four to go over rough drafts. Choose one to two pieces to revise for 6-12 pages of revised creative non-fiction. Digital writing is an option for a creative non-fiction piece (digital story or blogging). Talk to me if you have an interest in that.

1. Drawing on material from your life/memory, write a piece that explores gender conformity. Hone in on the details, images. Let the setting, senses, do the talking, as well as dialogue, narration. What is at stake in the piece? What is the tone of the piece? What happens if you shift the tone? How much distance do you have in your narration? What is going on besides gender here?

2. Recall an incident (ordinary or otherwise) and write about it with a queer eye. In other words, hold a space in the story for the queer moment that slips from assigned roles, catch the moment(s) in your writer’s hands and see where the story goes. Does the narrator seem to ignore the moment and carry on straight? Does the narrator make the moment explicit? Does the moment appear to be intentional or unconscious on the part of the people involved? What else is going on in the story? What does queerness have to do with it? Remember to “show” and not tell.

3. Write a piece on which you have sufficient distance that evokes feelings of loyalty, betrayal, death, loss or love. Focus on the story, what is most relevant. After drafting, observe the role(s) of gender or sexuality in the piece. Let yourself play with what you see. What if you saw the story through the lens of three genders, or five? What if you saw paths of sexual desire that you don’t usually acknowledge? Try seeing things one way, then another. How does what you see change the story? What happens if you write into the story different ways of seeing? Remember that we are writing non-fiction at this point: consider meta-narrative here?

4. Tell a story that includes one or more sex scenes, or that revolves around sex scenes that never get written (or maybe even experienced). Let the sexual tension, or lack of it, determine the narration. What is the narrator’s relationship to sex? Is
it simple, complicated? How many instances of desire appear in the story? What provokes desire? What parts of the body does it involve? Where does it occur, and when? How many people, and/or narrators, are involved in this piece? Remember to use the senses in your piece, let it be gritty, physical. (If you’re exploring techno sex, cerebral sex, explore the interface.) Remember that we are writing non-fiction right now, so work from experience, but you can exaggerate and imagine as narrators, and you can try this assignment again when we write fiction if you want to go more wild.

5. Write a scene that explores the notion of self-control, or self-indulgence. What is the relationship of self to self? What does it have to do with the outside world? What roles do family, friends, institutions play in relation to self-control or not? Let the piece be tactile, not just an internal or external dialogue. How do sex and gender intersect with other aspects of self? Consider a possible few areas of focus: sex and food, sex and art, sex and exercise, sex and sit coms, sex and math, sex and violence, etc.

6. Write a piece that explores the spirituality of sex, the emotion of sex, in whatever ways are important or interesting to you. Alternatively, write about the spirituality of gender, or the emotion of gender. What would that mean? Where do your notions come from? Can you explore them in the story through people, settings, texts? What subtle memories, or big-scale dramatic events, want to be written about?

7. Write a piece that explores the idea of crossing or transitioning: crossing genders or sex, transitioning as a process of change, of becoming. How will your piece explore, through structure and/or style, the time and space of crossing and/or transitioning? What does it mean to cross? To transition? What details, stages, settings are involved? Who gets a voice, who is excluded, along the way? What are the emotions, resistances, the drives?