

ENGL 010: Introduction to Creative Writing: Speculative Pasts and Futures

Tuesdays from 6:00 – 8:50 PM

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Office hours: Mondays 12:00 – 2:00 PM and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

José Esteban Muñoz argues that “queerness is always in the horizon”; Kara Keeling argues that “‘Black futures’ requires acting as if that other world were here now”; Bill McKibben argued in the late 1980s of climate change that “our reassuring sense of a timeless future, which is drawn from that apparently bottomless well of the past, is a delusion.” Speculation is key to fiction, poetry, memoir, and hybrid creative work that seeks to imagine other worlds, but also to consider other ways this world could be or might have been.

Speculating about what the future might hold has long been a strategy employed by marginalized people to imagine other ways of negotiating present dispossession. But speculation is also central to the work of climate scientists, investment bankers, and public health experts. Speculation is often used at cross-purposes. Some speculate to imagine a future that breaks with histories of violence, while others speculate to profit from existing inequalities.

Speculators variously want to know what the weather is going to be tomorrow, how fast a disease is going to spread, whether we will change our emissions practices or face mass extinction, what an anti-racist society would be like, which stock will be most profitable in six months, who a great-grandparent was and what their life was like, whether a family member with cancer has two years to live, or five, or ten. All of these forms of speculation require different forms of betting on the future, and different ways of using and working with the past.

This workshop-based course considers speculation as a primary strategy for both critical exploration and creative writing. We’ll read speculative fiction that imagines near-futures of our planet, including Annalee Newitz’s *Autonomous* and Claire Vaye Watkins’s *Gold, Fame, Citrus*. We’ll also read ecocritical essays, science writing, U.S. history and historiography, and hybrid works that speculate about the futures of climate change, and the pasts of chattel slavery as well as short critical excerpts from queer and trans theory, Black studies, urban studies, and economics, as we consider the various ends to which speculation is used.

In your own practice and in our workshops, you’ll be invited to write between and among forms and to draw from a wide range of disciplines and sources, including from your expertise from other areas of study. Writers working in all genres are welcome!

Required Texts:

*All readings are available on Canvas, with the exception of the four literary works required for this course. Folks at VanPelt are working on making e-books of all of these books except for Newitz’s *Autonomous* (which they can’t get) available on as electronic course reserves. All five books are also available via the Penn Bookstore. If you choose to purchase your books, I offer the recommendation that you purchase them either from one of the many independent bookstores in Philadelphia (like [Uncle Bobbie’s](#), [Harriet’s Bookshop](#), or [Big Blue Marble Bookstore](#)) or from another independent

bookstore that you care about. If you are not able to access the texts via VanPelt (or via Interlibrary Loan) and purchasing texts for this course is unavailable to you, (and you're not able to get them as e-books or print books from the Free Library of Philadelphia) please let me know and I can help!

Rebecca Makkai, *The Great Believers*. Penguin, 2018. ISBN: 073522353X (available as an ebook from Free Library of Philadelphia (2 copies))

Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*. Knopf, 2008. ISBN: 0307276767 (available online via VanPelt Library, and as an ebook from the Free Library of Philadelphia (2 copies))

Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Scribner, 2017. ISBN: 978-1501126079 (available as an ebook from the Free Library of Philadelphia (13 copies))

and either:

Annalee Newitz, *Autonomous*, Tor, 2017. ISBN: 0765392089 (print copy available at Free Library of Philadelphia (5 copies))

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Claire Vaye Watkins, *Gold, Fame, Citrus*. Penguin, 2015. ISBN: 1594634246 (available as an ebook from Free Library of Philadelphia (1 copy))

READING AND ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

TEACHING METHODS AND WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Most weeks, our course will meet synchronously as a whole group from 6:00 PM – 7:30 PM. (EST). Some weeks, we will use the other half of our allotted class time for small-group or partner workshop. On two occasions, we will have an all-class reading and discussion of your work. In other weeks, there will be an asynchronous activity that you can either complete during the rest of our class period or anytime over the subsequent 48 hours.

In a regular week for this course, you will follow this schedule:

Tuesday – submit that week's exercise by 2:00 PM on Canvas, and attend synchronous session beginning at 6:00 PM (EST) (duration and description posted on syllabus calendar). Work on asynchronous assignment if applicable for that week.

Wednesday and Thursday – work on asynchronous assignment if applicable (due Thursday by 6:00 PM EST), look for weekly email with checklist for the coming week on Thursday afternoons.

Friday-Monday – do readings for following Tuesday and work on weekly exercise.

The teaching methods in this course will include in-class discussions, workshop and peer review, writing exercises, group work, individual and collaborative analysis of critical, literary, and cultural texts, one-on-one meetings, process writing, and other activities. A careful reading of the texts assigned for each session is necessary to an informed discussion in class. Our goal this semester is to experiment with a range of strategies for creative writing across genres, to consider how archival and secondary source research might shape our creative assignments, and to collaboratively revise and revisit our work.

UNIT 1: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY HISTORY

Week 1 / January 26th (synchronous meeting from 6:00 – 7:30 EST)

reading/watching: Dir. Sacha Jenkins, *Railroad Ties* (2019) (24 minutes)
 Saidiya Hartman, “Prologue: The Path of Strangers,” from *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, (2007), 3-18,
 Lee Edelman, “The Future Is Kid Stuff” from *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, (2004) 1-31

Week 2 / February 2nd (synchronous meeting from 6:00 – 7:30 EST)

reading: “[We Aren’t Who We Think We Are](#)” *Code Switch Podcast*, July 1st, 2020

due: Speculative family history

in class: visit by Dr. Mayelin Perez, Librarian for Literatures in English, Theatre Arts, and Comparative Literature

asynchronous activity: Read and comment on speculative family histories in your group by 2/4 at 6:00 PM (EST). Follow guidelines in discussion thread.

Week 3 / February 9th (synchronous meeting from 6:00 – 7:30 EST)

reading: Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017)
 Douglas Blackmon, “Introduction: The Bricks We Stand on” in *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (2009), 1-12

due: Notes and outline for archive story

asynchronous activity: Read and comment on notes and outline for archive story in your group by 2/11 at 6:00 PM (EST). Follow guidelines in discussion thread.

Week 4 / February 16th (synchronous meeting from 6:00 – 7:30 EST, meetings in workshop trios or quartets from 7:45 – 8:45 PM EST)

reading: Conor Tomás Reed and Makeba Lavan, “Introduction,” and Toni Cade Bambara “Dreaming of a Black University” in *Realizing the Dream of a Black University and Other Writings Part I* (2017), 1-26
 Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities” *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 79, No. 3, Fall 2009 - 409-428.

due: Archive story

no asynchronous activity – workshop in trios or quartets in second half of class

UNIT 2: PAST FUTURES

Week 5 / February 23rd (synchronous meeting from 6:00 – 7:30 EST; individual meetings from 7:30 – 9:00 PM EST)

reading: Rebecca Makkai, *The Great Believers* (2018)

due: Interview questions and introduction

asynchronous activity: Read and comment on interview questions and introduction in your group by 2/25 at 6:00 PM (EST)

Week 6 / March 2nd (synchronous meeting from 6:00 – 7:30 EST; individual meetings from 7:30 – 9:00 PM EST)

reading: Rebecca Makkai, *The Great Believers* (2018)

due: Interview creative response

asynchronous activity: Read and comment on interview creative response in your group by 3/4 at 6:00 PM (EST)

Week 7 / March 9th (synchronous meeting from 6:00 – 8:50 PM for reading and discussion of revisions—this is a very long time to be on Zoom, but we will take lots of breaks)

reading: Read your classmates' revisions for our class reading and discussion.

Optional readings on queer temporality: Elizabeth Freeman, “Deep Lez: Temporal Drag and the Specters of Feminism” in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), 59-94

Dagmawi Woubshet, “Introduction: Looking for the Dead — Disprized Mourners and the Work of Compounding Loss” in *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* (2015), 1-25

José Esteban Muñoz, “The Future is in the Present: Sexual Avant-Gardes and the Performance of Utopia” in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), 49-64

Note: I think these readings are important and exciting. We are not going to talk about them in class, but I recommend them highly, and I'm happy to talk about them in one-on-one meetings or in an optional group session if they're of interest to you.

due: Revision and expansion of interview creative response, archive story, or speculative family history. Note: this assignment is due by 12:00 PM EST on Sunday, March 7th.

Week 8 / March 16th (synchronous meeting from 6:00 – 7:30 EST)

reading: Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008)
Winnifred Brown-Glaude, “On Guns and Apples” in *The Toni Morrison Book*

Club, (2019) 129-143

due: Experiments with time

asynchronous activity: Read and comment on experiments with time in your (new!) group by 3/18 at 6:00 PM (EST)

Week 9 / March 23rd (synchronous meeting from 6:00 – 7:30 EST, meetings in workshop trios or quartets from 7:45 – 8:45 PM EST)

reading: Ainissa Ramirez, “Interact” and “Capture” from *The Alchemy of Us: How Humans and Matter Transformed One Another* (2020), 1-26, 87-120
Kara Keeling, “Black Futures and the Queer Times of Life: Finance, Flesh, and the Imagination,” in *Queer Times, Black Futures* (2019), 1-33

due: History of an object

no asynchronous activity – workshop in trios or quartets in second half of class

March 30th – No Class

UNIT 3: NEAR FUTURES

Week 10 / April 6th (synchronous meeting from 6:00 – 7:30 EST)

reading: Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Sixth Extinction” and “Welcome to the Anthropocene” from *The Sixth Extinction* (2014), 4-22 and 92-110
Dina Gilio-Whitaker, “Environmental Justice Theory and Its Limitations for Indigenous Peoples” and “Food is Medicine, Water is Life” in *As Long as the Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to Standing Rock* (2019), 15-34 and 73-90
Julian Talamantez Brolaski, *gowanus atropolis* (2011) (selections)

due: Open workshop letter

asynchronous activity: Read and respond to the workshop letter you received by 6:00 PM on 4/8.

Week 11 / April 13th (synchronous meeting for *Gold, Fame, Citrus*, 6:00 – 7:20 PM EST; synchronous meeting for *Autonomous*, 7:30 – 8:50 PM EST)

reading: Claire Vaye Watkins, *Gold, Fame, Citrus* (2015) or Annalee Newitz, *Autonomous* (2017)

due: speculative future, part 1

in class: small group book discussions

Week 12 / April 20th (synchronous meeting from 6:00 – 8:50 PM for reading and discussion of

speculative future, part 2—again, this is a super long time to be on Zoom, but we will take lots of breaks)

reading: Bill McKibben, “A Path of More Resistance” in *The End of Nature*, 183-238 (1989)

due: speculative future, part 2

Week 13 / April 27th (synchronous and asynchronous portions TBD – our class reading will either be during this session or April 29th at 6:00 PM EST)

reading: Workshop partner’s or group’s revision

due: Revision for portfolio – due to workshop partner or group by 4/25 at 12:00 PM

May 4th: Final Portfolio and Personal Reflection Essay due

GRADING AND ASSIGNMENTS

Class Participation (30 %)

Your class participation grade reflects your course attendance, your completion of in-class writing assignments and activities, and your presence and attention in synchronous and asynchronous class sessions. I am less concerned with how often you speak and more concerned with how attentive you are to our class discussions and the ideas of your classmates. Your class participation grade also reflects your readiness to discuss texts on the day for which they are assigned.

Works in Progress (20%): Due most Tuesdays by 2:00 PM

For each class session, you will complete a written response to a prompt or exercise in dialogue with that week’s reading. Some exercises will span two weeks. Some will ask you to do research, interviews, or archival work. Each assignment will be accompanied by specific instructions. These assignments are graded on completion. I will provide you with substantive and detailed comments over email that are oriented toward revision for your final portfolio.

Revision Assignment (5%): Due Sunday, March 7th, at 12:00 PM

This assignment asks you to expand and revise one exercise you submitted in the first half of the course. For this revision, try and choose something you expect that you will want to include in your portfolio. Your revision will focus on three major areas – expansion (making the piece longer), clarification (revising and rephrasing words and phrases), and organization (moving sentences and paragraphs). A short explanatory note describing the changes you made and your rationale for making those changes should accompany your revision.

Open Workshop Letter (5%): Due Tuesday, April 6th, at 2:00 PM

This assignment asks you to conduct a remote workshop with your classmates via open letter. Rather than meeting in small groups to discuss the work of your classmates, you will write a detailed open letter about one piece of student writing, which you will post on Canvas. You will also be asked to read the letters of others, and to respond to the letter about your own writing that you receive.

Final Portfolio and Personal Reflection Essay (40%): Due May 4th at 11:59 PM

This final portfolio for this course should contain at least 15 pages of assignments written and revised for class this semester. In addition to those 15 pages of writing, your portfolio should be accompanied by a short reflection essay that considers how your writing drew upon other academic and non-academic areas of interest, how your research practice informed your writing and revisions, how your writing shifted over the course of the semester, and how you made the formal and content decisions that structure your portfolio. Final portfolios are due on Canvas on May 4th at 11:59 PM.

COURSE POLICIES:

COMMUNITY STATEMENT *

A classroom is a space into which each of us enters to expand our perspectives, learn new things, and challenge our assumptions. Our classroom, in particular, may engage critically with material depicting violence, racism, anti-Blackness, sexism, misogyny, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and other topics that may elicit intense emotional responses, debate, and disagreement. Throughout the course we will have frank and challenging conversations about social justice, and about personal and institutional responsibility.

While safe spaces are important, it is impossible to guarantee them in a classroom in which we are respectfully challenging ourselves and one another. What I can guarantee, as your instructor, is that I will work to facilitate conversations that are respectful of every student and that are attentive to the sociohistorical conditions that produce uneven degrees of safety in the classroom and other spaces.

I ask each of us to validate each person's insights, perspectives, and needs as we create a "brave space" in our classroom, and open ourselves to our work in class as a collaborative project for which we need the participation and support of one another in order to succeed.

*Adapted, with gratitude, from the Community Statement of ENGL 410: Death in the Digital, taught by Dr. Amanda Phillips, Georgetown University.

STATEMENT ON NAMES AND PRONOUNS

In our classroom, it is important that we refer to everyone by the name and pronouns that they prefer. Pronouns can be a way to affirm someone's gender identity, but they can also be unrelated to a person's identity. They are simply a public way in which people are referred to in place of their name (e.g. "he" or "she" or "they" or "ze" or many others). In this classroom, you are invited but not required to share the pronouns you use, and I ask us all to commit to being attentive to and using each other's preferred pronouns. That being said, if you accidentally misgender someone or use an incorrect pronoun for them, please simply correct to a pronoun that they prefer. If during the course you would like me to change the pronoun or name I am using for you, please let me know.

STUDENT RESOURCES

[Office of Student Disability Services:](#) Provides services for students who self-identify as having a disability, including academic accommodations and accommodations for housing.

[International Student and Scholar Services:](#) Provides immigration expertise and services to the Penn community, runs programming and outreach partnerships within the university and with agencies like Social Security and Customs and Border Protection.

Counseling and Psychological Services: Provides confidential and free professional mental health services to Penn students, and helps students adjust to university life, manage personal challenges, situational crises and academic stress.

Penn Violence Prevention: Engages the Penn community in the prevention of sexual violence, relationship violence, and stalking (a collaborative program of the Penn Women's Center).

ACCESSIBILITY AND CARE STATEMENT

If you have a medical, physical, psychological or learning disability for which you wish to request accommodation, you may complete an accommodation request [here](#). All services are confidential. Students with disabilities of any kind are encouraged to approach me as soon as possible, and we can work together to shape course assignments and activities to meet your needs.

Additionally, if there are circumstances that may affect your performance in class, or if those circumstances appear over the course of the semester, whether physical, emotional or organizational, please contact me as soon as you can and we will work together to make sure you are accommodated.

In our third semester of remote university classes, it is likely the case that many of us are beginning this course with a greater sense of exhaustion, and with increased care and domestic labor obligations. If you need to take a break from our course materials to take care of yourself or anyone else, please let me know and we can figure out a plan that allows our course material to reshape itself around your care obligations or just general need for a break. For further information on disabilities services at Penn, see <http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/lrc/> and <https://www.vpul.upenn.edu/lrc/sds/>

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

All students are responsible for following the policies (in particular those regarding academic integrity, plagiarism, and original work) contained in the Penn Student Handbook. For further info, see: <http://www.upenn.edu/academicintegrity/>.

LATE WORK

If you encounter circumstances that impede your ability to submit an assignment on time, please contact me at least 24 hours in advance of the assignment deadline. I am generally willing to grant an extension, as long as we have a conversation and agree on an alternate timeline for you to submit your assignment. Except in the event of a last-minute emergency, no written work will be accepted late without prior permission, but any written work will be accepted late with prior permission. If you would find more time on an assignment helpful for any reason, ask me and we can figure out a plan.

ATTENDANCE

More than two absences – excused or unexcused – will be reflected in your final grade in the course. If you must miss class for any reason, please let me know ahead of time so that we can work together to make sure you have access to course material and assignments. After your first two absences, each subsequent absence will lower your final grade for the course by one third of a letter. That being said, if circumstances arise that prevent you from attending several weeks of class (including, but not limited to care for yourself or others, mental and/or physical health needs, etc.) we can renegotiate this policy on a case by case basis.