Poetry Is Dead, Long Live the Lyric!

Poetry in the Americas under Neoliberalism (1973-2019)

“Nobody reads poetry anymore,” we hear time and time again in literary circles. Indeed, as compared to prose fiction, the market share of poetry is minuscule. However, this is only true of “poetry” if we define it as a specifically written genre subject to no compositional rules other than lineation, and as a cultural commodity with an audience both exclusive and marginal. Unlike the poetry of the past, which was customarily bound to its musical origins, contemporary “poetry” is usually unrhymed and predominantly composed in free verse: a form associated less with the acquisition of a shared craft than with the expression of a unique individual subjectivity. But for the past few decades, with the spectacular growth of the music industry, a new old form of poetry—the poetry of song, inevitably metered and rhymed—is consumed and memorized by millions of people. It has even been inducted into the “official” literary realm with the awarding of the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature to Bob Dylan.

This course—which spans from 1973 to the present, from the Southern Cone to New York to Mexico—aims to expand the contemporary notion of the lyric under neoliberal rule in the Americas by studying written poetry alongside song lyrics. Today, contrary to the common idea that poetry is an endangered species in the aesthetic realm, it is deeply rooted in people’s imagination and memories through songs. While it may be true that nobody reads poetry, it certainly seems like everyone listens to it. At the same time, written poetry, which had been steadily and vocally detaching from its musical origins, has recently started to make amends—to the point of reverting to traditional rhythmic techniques and borrowing some of their forms of circulation and socialization. As we learn about the history of neoliberalism—which we will frame not only as an economic ideology, but more specifically as a device for the production of subjectivity—we will study lyric forms (written, sung and/or performed) that challenge the neoliberal status quo, focusing on both radical anachronisms and conceptual experimentation.

As the final project of this course, students will produce a podcast series, working with poets from the United States and Latin America and translators from English into Spanish and vice versa.

Week 1: The Lyric and the Return of the (Oral) Repressed
Week 2: What Is Neoliberalism?
Week 3: Southern Cone Dictatorships as a Test Site for Neoliberalism
Week 4: Dinosaurs and Cadavers: Rock and Poetry under the Argentine Dictadura
Week 5: The New York Fiscal Crisis as the Cornerstone of Trump City
Week 6: The Bronx as a Zone of Exception and the Birth of Hip-Hop
Week 7: The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Nuyorican Poets
Week 8: No Future: Punk Rock and the New York Poetry Scene
Week 9: A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry and the Politics of Poetic Form
Week 10: The ‘90s in Argentina: rock, poetry, and political demobilization
Week 11: NAFTA and the Poetics of Privatization in Mexico
Week 12: The War on Drugs: A War Against the People
Week 13: Narcocorridos: Old Border Ballads for a New Terror
Week 14: Haters and Algorithms: Uncreative Writing in the Age of Trolls
Reading and Listening
(Whole books listed; selections will be provided)

Theory: The Birth of Biopolitics (Michel Foucault); The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society (Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval); Neoliberalism as Exception (Aihwa Ong); Gore Capitalism (Sayak Valencia), Drug War Capitalism (Dawn-Marie Paley); Debt: The First 5000 Years (David Graeber); The Making of the Indebted Man (Maurizio Lazzarato).


History: A Brief History of Neoliberalism (David Harvey); The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York (Robert Caro); Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II (Joshua B. Freedman; Fear City: New York’s Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics (Kim Phillips-Fein); Rock y dictadura (Sergio Pujol); A Lexicon of Torture: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture (Margarita Feitlowitz); Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation (Jeff Chang); In Visible Movement (Urayoán Noel); Mitología del narcotraficante en México (Luis Astorga); Narcocorrido (Elijah Wald); The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis (Maria Herrera-Sobek); Cantar a los narcos: Voces y versos del narcotráfico (Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta).

Poetry: “Cadáveres” (Néstor Perlongher); Invitación al polvo (Manuel Ramos Otero); “Puerto Rican Obituary,” “Spanglish National Anthem” (Pedro Pietri); Punctum (Martín Gambarotta); The Anti-Humboldt: A Reading of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Hugo García Manríquez); Estilo (Dolores Dorantes); “Sobre la luz” (Óscar de Pablo); Antígona González (Sara Uribe); Los diarios del odio (Roberto Jacoby and Syd Krochmalny); American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin (Terrance Hayes).

Soundtrack: “Canción de Alicia en el País” (Serú Girán); “Los dinosaurios” (Charly García); “Demolicion” (Los Saicos); Horses (Patti Smith); “Rapper’s Delight” (Sugarhill Gang); “The Message” (Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five); Oktubre (Los Redonditos de Ricota); Los Tigres del Norte; Chalino Sánchez; DAMN. (Kendrick Lamar); This Is America (Childish Gambino).