

# Creative Nonfiction Workshop

Creative nonfiction can be a nebulous genre. As memoir/feature journalism, CNF can resemble the novel in its focus on scene, voice and storytelling, but it can also feel closer to the essay and poetry in its exploration of the first-person narrative, aphorism, and exposition. We will start out trying to just get you to feel freer and more generative as writers. Then we'll explore creative nonfiction in a more technical way, focusing on scene construction, narrative, and imagery. Given that you will be writing and reading in Paris, I encourage you to find inspiration in the feelings of possibility and alienation the city catalyzes. This will be as thrilling as you make it, so please be present, support each other, and devote yourself to your writing practice.

**Grading:** The bulk of your grade (60%) will be determined by participation, which means actively speaking several times a class and accomplishing the in-class writing exercises. The remaining 40% of your grade will be based on the two writing assignments. No plagiarism.

**Assignments:** You have two main writing assignments that will be workshopped.

- Memoir (1200-1800 words): A personal essay driven by voice and scene. **Due Mon., 7/4.**
- Essay (1500-2500 words): This essay can include you, but must also explore something other than you, whether something larger in the world or simply your own family, friends, or relationships. **Due Wed. 7/13.**
- Format: Stories must be double-spaced, paginated, and stapled. You must print out copies of your piece for you, me, and each student in class. Please take care of printing BEFORE class, so you are not late. The NYU program office can help with this.
- You must also email me your writing to [kchen@barnard.edu](mailto:kchen@barnard.edu).
- You must turn in your assignment on time so we can thoughtfully read your work!

**Workshop Discussion Guidelines:** Sharing a creative work is an act of vulnerability. At the same time, your goal is not simply praise, but to engage with the work in a serious but critical way. We want to foster an atmosphere not of competition or criticism, but of constructive encouragement. Your goal is to help your fellow student succeed. Don't obsess over what a story is doing wrong. Tell us what it was like to experience the text. How can it be more successful on its own terms?

We'll talk about 2-3 students' stories in a single class, spending 30-45 min. per story. You'll be in Group A or Group B—this will determine what day we do your story. I will be moderating the discussion along the following format. Please focus on neutral descriptions of your

experience reading the work. Resist value words (good, bad, working, boring, beautiful, etc.). Do not feel obliged to interpret as you would in an academic class.

- Descriptive: What does this piece seem to be about? What do you remember about it? What is the plot summary? Who are the characters?
- Analytical: This is an opportunity to describe the craft of the piece. What characters and conflicts do you want to know more about? Where is the voice most successful? How would you describe the construction of the plot? What questions do you have? What are favorite lines/moments and who do you think they work?
- Author response: At this point, the author can enter the conversation and talk about their work and say what questions they have and invite critique.
- Evaluative: Reading in terms of the author’s intentions, what are areas where you feel like the story best achieves these goals? If you feel like there are areas where the story seems less successful, do you have ideas or questions on how to get there?

**Reading:** Writers always emphasize reading because other people’s writing may provide the secret key for you to unlock your own project or simply solve more tactical problem you’re facing in your stories. We’ll be doing playful, exploratory prompts based on the texts.

| Week | Date        | What we’ll be doing (BTW, all of this is subject to change!)   |
|------|-------------|--|
| 1    | Mon<br>6/27 | <p><b>Read before this class: Focus on generation - Adrienne Kennedy, Etel Adnan, <i>Of Cities &amp; Women (Letters to Fawwaz)</i></b></p> <p>Introductions</p> <p>In-class exercise: Adnan letter prompt</p> <p>In-class exercise: Kennedy list exercise</p> <p>Imagining audience &amp; getting around your internal critic. Who can you imagine as the ideal reader of your work? Who is your work not for?</p> <p>Expressing yourself: What makes you emotional? Angry? Sad? What are your questions? What can you not say? Who are your complicated relationships?</p> <p>Reading: Scene, memoir &amp; fantasy - Vivian Gornick, Maxine Hong Kingston</p> |
|      | Wed<br>6/28 | <p>In-class writing: Gornick scene exercise, action v. interiority</p> <p>In-class writing: MHK lying exercise</p> <p>Scene-construction: What makes the MHK and Gornick scenes work? Forms of narration: Dialogue / Scene / Action / Description / Summary</p> <p>Read for next week: Hanif Abdurraqib, “On Seatbelts and Sunsets”</p> <p><b>Due for next class: Memoir</b></p>   |

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| 2 | Mon<br>7/4  | <b>BRING COPIES OF YOUR MEMOIR FOR EVERYONE</b><br>Story Structure: Character Focus / POV / Time Parameter / Point of Entry<br>In-class writing: Hanif exercise<br>Read for next week: Interior/Exterior, Carolyn Kay Steedman  |
|   | Wed<br>7/6  | Workshop Group A<br>In-class writing: Steedman public/private exercise<br>Read for next week: Variations on voice, Greg Tate, Sara Suleri   |
| 3 | Mon<br>7/11 | Workshop Group B<br>In-class exercise: Tate vernacular exercise<br>Read for next week: Speed of exposition, Benjamin Labatut, Hisham Matar<br><b>Due for next class: Essay</b>  |
|   | Wed<br>7/13 | <b>BRING COPIES OF YOUR ESSAY FOR EVERYONE</b><br>In-class exercise: Suleri density exercise<br>In-class exercise: Matar scene construction<br>In-class exercise: Labatut exposition exercise<br>How to turn information/images into actions, not objects. Is this form of this information best as summary or another form, like dialogue, scene, action, etc.? How present are you as the speaker?<br>Read for next week: Experiencing description, John Berger, Jamaica Kincaid. |
| 4 | Mon<br>7/18 | Workshop Group A<br>In-class writing: Description exercise<br>Read for next week: Nazim Hikmet, <i>Things I Didn't Know I Loved</i>   |
|   | Wed<br>7/20 | Workshop Group B<br>In-class writing: Hikmet list exercise  |

### Additional Course Policies

We're taking this class during an unusual moment. I hope together we can create a safe, generative space.

- No screens or phones. Writing is a practice of being present, so we will be conducting the class without laptops, tablets, or phones, unless a student has a disability-related request.
- Please wear an appropriately fitting mask during the class. No food or drink in class.
- Attendance: You get one absence. Each subsequent absence will lower your grade.