



University of Pittsburgh

Introduction to Poetry | ENGWR 0530 Spring 2025

Instructor: Avery Robinson
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Schedule: Tuesday, 6:00 – 8:30 PM
302 Cathedral of Learning

Office Hours: Tuesday, 5 – 6:00 PM, Room 609M

COURSE OVERVIEW

Course Description

“Call my name and the whole woods
rise up inside me. I is a plural state
of being. Consider the multitude
before my footfall; how I’m able to crane my neck back
see only myself”

— Taylor Johnson, “Consider the Deer”

A poem begins with an inquiry—and like all good questions, not all of its mysteries and contours are meant to be understood. Of course, this is beautiful in theory, but how do any of us go about crafting a poem if our only instruction is “be curious?” In this course, we’ll center on a forever poem we revise with each breath: each moment of brushing against a stranger and sharing in their space; every time we reach toward language and instead, find something raw and evocative, something hard to articulate that is often slipping into the margins. Here, we’ll let these mysteries populate the poem and move toward the pulse of these unanswerable questions, the primary one being what makes the “i” at the center of the poem so vivid and raw in all its aliveness (or, its refusal to come alive). If this all sounds very woo woo, that’s OK too! As with the poem, we have to give ourselves over to not being (or trying to be) understood easily—it is in the worlds we weave of language, imagery, sound, and every contour and texture of the art we call poetry that we might move beyond only a space of “logic” and legibility and instead, start translating our interiors in the unique way only our voice can do.

Course Materials / Readings

Each of the individual poems will be provided by the instructor. Two collections, however, will be decided at the start of the semester, and I encourage students to purchase these collections by whatever means are most accessible—online, through one of our many great local bookstores (White Whale, Alphabet City, Big Idea...), or wherever the item can be purchased most affordably.

Collections / Collected poems:

Danez Smith, *Bluff*

Book on Archives (TBD)

+ Various poems from: Layli Long Soldier, Jake Skeets, Diana Khoi Nguyen, Safia Elhillo, Natalie Diaz, Tommy Pico, Donika Kelly, Patricia Smith, Ross Gay, Fady Joudah, Douglas Kearney, Tyehimba Jess, Taylor Johnson, torrin a greathouse, George Abraham, and others

Course Goals

- Engage meaningfully with the basic elements of poetry through the work of established, accomplished writers and work toward excavating the poetic “I” at the heart of your voice
- Learn to write during times of anger, grief, love, and other immense emotions brought on by the state of the world or other factors beyond your control
- Experiment with different modes of writing to create original work
- Revise your work by incorporating feedback generated by class discussion
- Learn to constantly observe, note take, and find inspiration in unlikely contexts (the best artists live many lives...)
- Build sustainable habits for reading and writing in daily life

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Portfolio Workshops

Expect this workshop to mostly be generative—that is, you will try to produce a poem a week (if not 2!) with more regard to nurturing the poem out into the world than it necessarily being “good.” After all, trying to write a “good” poem has doomed even the best of writers; try to write toward your loves, the hardest desire to put on the page, and treat the subjects of your art with tenderness and grit. During our “workshop”, a group of 5 poets will present 2-3 poems they’ve written over the semester, and rather than only critique or offer our ideas of how their work should be revised, we’ll instead offer a thorough, descriptive breakdown of what we’re noticing, what themes and motifs reoccur, and what all is coming together to form the poetics of our presenter. We will offer critiques in a smaller capacity still—however, that won’t be the focus of our reading, and we’ll instead treat the portfolio like a snapshot of a writer’s voice and style, and comment on what we’re noticing and where it might progress.

During each individual portfolio, one student will be appointed “Discussion Leader” and will serve to help direct the class in questions, comments, and observations. This person will be the expert in poetics of their respective portfolio: ideally, they’ll help facilitate conversation and are encouraged to turn in an annotated copy of the portfolio with their comments / feedback to the poet after (this, however, is not mandatory).

Poetry Submissions:

- Each portfolio will consist of 2—3 poems from any point throughout the semester. You can consider how they exist in conversation with one another, or just compile poems that you feel demonstrate your poetics. Along with this, you’ll briefly explain what you’re thinking about throughout these poems, what has shifted for you since first writing them, what ideas and obsessions live across your work, and any other prefaces you’d like to offer along with guiding questions.
- You are encouraged to submit poems from the assignments, but feel free to submit different poems if you prefer, or if you have work you’d like feedback on from the past

weeks / outside of this class (though try to keep it in a recent timespan). If you miss your workshop day, note that it won't be replicable in either experience or grade – so do try to submit on time, regardless of whether you'll be present or not. Otherwise, you will receive a hit to your grade.

Feedback / Portfolio Discussion Leader

No writing is done in isolation. Offering thoughts, ideas, observations, or even simply what synapses and feelings were sparked by the reading, however inarticulate it may feel, are all acts of community. For each workshop submission by your peers, you will be graded on this generosity, i.e.: your participation, which, for everyone else, will just be actively offering commentary for the poet; for the discussion leader, you will be expected to prompt and pose questions during the duration of the portfolio poet's "workshop".

Active participation is essential to a functional writing workshop; that being said, please contact me if you feel uncomfortable speaking up in class for any reason, and we will work together to find a solution. You will be graded on the quality (thoughtfulness/care) of your contributions to discussion, not on how much you talk.

Canvas Assignments

There will be a few assignments to respond to, experiment, or play inside the container of certain forms with. These will be due by the following class: should there be a delay in the writing for any reason, let me know as soon as possible so we can work something out. These will be informal and won't be graded for anything other than completion.

Final Portfolio

In the Final Portfolio, you will submit either 1) two revised poems, and one new poem. With this submission, you will include a writer's statement explaining the changes or moves you made, and what craft elements from the term you incorporated. This will be due the week after our last class.

CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

Attendance and Participation

The work of the course depends on our collaboration as readers and writers over the term, and your work is central to class discussion. It is therefore important that you be prepared to participate in each class session, and that you turn in your assignments and come to class on time. Keep in mind we only meet once a week and will already miss 3 classes, barring any unexpected events on my end. You'll have two free absences overall regardless of whether they're excused or otherwise. Please let me know as soon as you think you'll be missing a class. You won't have to explain the reason for the absence—though if you miss more than two classes during the semester, I will likely check in with you to ensure that you're okay and that you're still engaged with the course. Assignments due on a day you miss class must be posted as scheduled unless I approve an extension. Frequent absences without a confirmed exception will impact your overall attendance grade: -1/2 letter grade (ie A to A-) for each class past the one free absence.

Come prepared to participate in each class as an active writer and reader. I will take attendance each class period, noting your presence so long as you are 1) contributing to discussions and small group work or 2) taking notes and seeming otherwise engaged in class activities. I will reach out to you via email if I sense various bouts of disengagement.

Statement on Class Decorum

I encourage an open classroom and the sharing of ideas in a safe, respectful environment. To facilitate this open exchange of ideas, as members of this class, we agree that we will not engage in derogatory language, writing, or expressions against race, ethnicity, religion, gender identification, sexuality, economic position, and political views. Any disagreement in class discussion with me or with your fellow students should be respectfully expressed so that there can be an equal exchange of thoughts.

While we will deconstruct ideas and texts, we will not dismiss identities, cultural norms unfamiliar to us, and any other aspects of an author's own personal life insofar as it is unrelated to the work. Any discourse that speculates on the relationship between an author's identity and their work; that rejects the existence of whatever minority the author may be a part of; or engages with another student in a series of ad hominem or language considered inappropriate will be immediately confronted and not tolerated.

In terms of the slurs and outdated language that will appear in our readings: my general rule is if you experience some degree of close proximity to the subject of the slur (i.e. you are a member of the community with which this term is often used), you are free to proceed as you feel comfortable—with the caveat that should it make another student uncomfortable, it will be discussed and subject to the class' scrutiny. I am subject to this rule as well: should my use of language that I consider natural in my own community make members of the class uncomfortable, dialogue around this is always welcome. Any act of reading out loud constitutes an utterance, and in this class, all utterances are an opportunity to engage with rhetoric and our relationship to language in a safe, open-minded environment.

Content Warning and Class Climate

Our course readings and discussions will at times focus on mature, difficult, and potentially challenging topics. Readings and discussions might trigger strong feelings—anger, discomfort, frustration, anxiety, confusion, excitement, humor and even boredom. Some of us may have emotional responses to readings; some of us may have emotional responses to our peers' understanding of the readings; all of us should feel responsible for creating a space that is both intellectually rigorous and respectful. Above all, be respectful (even when you strongly disagree) and be mindful of the ways that our identities position us in the classroom. I expect everyone to discuss the readings in a mature and respectful way.

GRADING

For each assignment that you submit to Canvas, you will receive percentage points toward a final letter grade for the course. Here is the breakdown of percent values per assignment toward that grade:

Submissions: 25%

Participation / Workshop + Feedback: 30%

Canvas Assignments: 20%

Final Portfolio: 25%

Here is how the University of Pittsburgh defines each grade:

A = superior attainment

B = meritorious attainment

C = adequate attainment

D = minimal attainment

F = failure

Note that “meritorious” means commendable or praiseworthy: a “B,” in other words, is earned for work that is above average.

COURSE SCHEDULE

The following schedule is tentative and subject to change. Detailed instructions for writing assignments will be provided in class and on Canvas. You will have opportunities to ask questions in class, and you are welcome to email me for further clarification or attend office hours.

WEEK 1

Readings and Assignments (due before class)	
Tues. 1/14	<i>Syllabus, Fundamentals of Poetry, and Welcome!</i> Read: ○ Packet of “I” poems ○ Consider what day you’d like to sign up for Portfolio Workshops (we’ll assign them next class)

WEEK 2

Readings and Assignment (due before class)	
Tues. 1/21	<i>Writing in All Forms of Witness: the I as in we as in you as in them as in...</i> Read: ○ Excerpts from <i>Whereas</i> by Layli Long Soldier & Jake Skeets Write: ○ Respond to the first batch of prompts

WEEK 3

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
Tues. 1/28	NO CLASS <i>Layli Long Soldier Reading (6—7:30 PM) – alumni hall</i> Read: ○ Form poems, Hades poem, Doug Kearney, Courtney Faye Write: ○ Enter conversation with <i>Whereas</i> through prompts and Canvas assignments

WEEK 4

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
Tues. 2/4	<i>Received Forms, Multimedia work, & the “After poem”</i> Read: ○ Performance in poetry – watch videos of slam and page poets (Patricia Smith, Franny Choi, Natalie Diaz, Nate Marshall, etc.) Write: ○ “After” poems

WEEK 5

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
Tues. 2/11	<i>Performance in Poems: How We Read / Musicality</i> Read: ○ Genre, style, & voice in poems (Diana, Ariana Benson, K Iver, Obit...) Write: ○ Poem attuned to performing / aloud audiences

WEEK 6

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
Tues. 2/18	<i>Genres, style, & voice: elegy, ekphrastic, ode, pastoral, ecopoetics / poetry of place, epistolary...</i> <i>Sign up for Midterm Conferences by the end of the week</i>

WEEK 7

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
Tues. 2/25	<i>No Class!</i> <i>Midterm Conferences / Layli Long Soldier Talk</i> Read: ○ Group #1's Portfolios, & be prepared to have substantive in-depth conversations on the overall trajectories of their work Write: ○ For Discussion Leader: come up with guiding questions and core themes, topics, etc.

WEEK 8: SPRING BREAK

WEEK 9

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
Tues. 3/11	<i>Portfolio Workshop: Group #1</i> Read: ○ Group #2's Portfolios, & be prepared to have substantive in-depth conversations on the overall trajectories of their work Write: ○ For Discussion Leader: come up with guiding questions and core themes, topics, etc.

WEEK 10

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
Tues. 3/18	<i>Portfolio Workshop: Group #2</i> Read: ○ <i>Bluff</i>, by Danez Smith

WEEK 11

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
Tues. 3/25	<i>Bluff</i>: Contemporary poetics, & poetry in times of anger, rage, and political turmoil Read: ○ Group #3's Portfolios, & be prepared to have substantive in-depth conversations on the overall trajectories of their work Write: ○ For Discussion Leader: come up with guiding questions and core themes, topics, etc.

WEEK 12

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
Tues. 4/1	<i>Portfolio Workshop: Group #3</i> Read: ○ Group #4's Portfolios, & be prepared to have substantive in-depth conversations on the overall trajectories of their work Write: ○ For Discussion Leader: come up with guiding questions and core themes, topics, etc.

WEEK 13

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
Tues. 4/8	<i>Portfolio Workshop: Group #4</i> Read: ○ Poems on revision, <i>Guernica</i> Back Draft series Write:

	○ Begin thinking about Final Portfolio
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WEEK 14

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
Tues. 4/15	<i>Endings, beginnings, and revisions</i> ○ Start working on Final Portfolio

WEEK 15

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
Tues. 4/22	<i>NO CLASS</i> <i>Work on your Final Portfolio + optional Conferences</i>

Final Portfolio due April 26, EOD – unfortunately, no exceptions!

COURSE POLICIES

Non-Discrimination Policy

The University of Pittsburgh, as an educational institution and as an employer, values equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial/ethnic and cultural diversity. Accordingly, the University prohibits and will not engage in discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, genetic information, disability, or status as a veteran. The University also prohibits and will not engage in retaliation against any person who makes a claim of discrimination or harassment or who provides information in such an investigation. Further, the University will continue to take affirmative steps to support and advance these values consistent with the University's mission. For more information: <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/notice-nondiscrimination-and-anti-harassment-policy-statement>.

Gender-Inclusive Language Guidelines

Aspiring to create a learning environment in which people of all identities are encouraged to contribute their perspectives to academic discourse, the University of Pittsburgh Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program provides guidelines and resources regarding gender-inclusive/non-sexist language (gsws.pitt.edu/node/1432). Following these guidelines fosters an inclusive and welcoming environment, strengthens academic writing, enriches discussion, and reflects best professional practices.

Language is gender-inclusive and non-sexist when we use words that affirm and respect how people describe, express, and experience their gender. Gender-inclusive/non-sexist language acknowledges people of any gender (e.g. first-year student versus freshman, chair versus chairman, humankind versus mankind). It also affirms non-binary gender identifications, and recognizes the

difference between biological sex and gender expression. Students may share their preferred pronouns and names, and these gender identities and gender expressions should be honored.

These guidelines fulfill the best intentions of the University of Pittsburgh's Non-Discrimination Policy: <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/notice-nondiscrimination-and-anti-harassment-policy-statement>

Sexual Misconduct, Required Reporting and Title IX

The University is committed to combatting sexual misconduct. As a result, University faculty and staff members are required to report any instances of sexual misconduct, including harassment and sexual violence, to the University's Title IX office so that the victim may be provided appropriate resources/support options. What this means is that as your instructor, I am required to report any incidents of sexual misconduct that are directly reported to me, or of which I am somehow made aware.

There are two important exceptions: a list of the designated University employees who, as counselors and medical professionals, do not have this reporting responsibility and can maintain confidentiality, can be found at <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/civil-rights-title-ix/resources-and-support-services/confidential-resources>. An important exemption to the reporting requirement exists for academic work. Disclosures about sexual misconduct that are shared as part of an academic project, classroom discussion, or course assignment are not required to be disclosed to the University's Title IX office. If you are the victim of sexual misconduct, Pitt encourages you to reach out to these resources: *Title IX Office: 412-648-7860 *SHARE @ the University Counseling Center: 412-648-7930 (8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. MF) and 412-648-7856 (after business hours). If you have a safety concern, please contact the University of Pittsburgh Police, 412-624-2121. Other reporting information is available at <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/civil-rights-title-ix/make-report>.

Academic Integrity Policy

Cheating/plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity, noted below, will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process as initiated by the instructor. A minimum sanction of a zero score for the quiz, exam or paper will be imposed. (For the full Academic Integrity policy, go to www.provost.pitt.edu/info/ai1.html.) See Additional Language about Academic Integrity below.

Additional Language about Academic Integrity

It is important that the work you submit is your own work, that you acknowledge your sources, whether quoted or paraphrased, and thank anyone who has helped you with your drafts. You will discuss in class responsible use of sources, and you should consult your handbook for guidelines on proper paraphrase, quotation, and citation. You can get additional help at the Writing Center.

The English Department defines plagiarism by a student as:

when a student presents as his/her own, for academic evaluation, the ideas, representations, or works of another person or persons without customary and proper acknowledgement of sources.
when a student submits work of another person in a manner which represents the work to be his/her own.

Instances of plagiarism may result in a loss of credit for the assignment and a report to the dean. Severe cases may result in failure of Seminar in Composition.

For the Dietrich School's full policy on Academic Integrity and the adjudication process for infringements, including plagiarism, go to <https://www.as.pitt.edu/faculty/policies-and-procedures/academic-integrity-code>

Artificial Intelligence

The use of generative AI writing tools (such as ChatGPT, GrammarlyGO, GPT-3, GPT-4, BERT, or others) is prohibited in this class. Assignments for the course have been designed to help you develop as a writer without the use of these technologies. You will generate ideas, read, revise, and write on your own and/or in consultation with peers, me, or Writing Center tutors and you will not use AI at any stage of your writing process. You are the author of your work for the course and authorship means you take responsibility for your words and claims. Any use of AI technologies in your work will be considered an academic integrity violation and addressed accordingly: <https://www.as.pitt.edu/faculty/policies-and-procedures/academic-integrity-code>. Please see me if you have any questions about this policy.

E-mail Communication Policy

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the University for official communication with students. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to University communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows students to read their e-mail via other service providers (e.g., Hotmail, AOL, Yahoo). Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address. To forward e-mail sent to your University account, go to <http://accounts.pitt.edu>, log into your account, click on *Edit Forwarding Addresses*, and follow the instructions on the page. Be sure to log out of your account when you have finished. *(For the full E-mail Communication Policy, go to <https://www.as.pitt.edu/e-mail-communication-statement-syllabi>.)*

Late Work Policy

It helps our class run more smoothly when work is submitted on time. That being said, we all have busy schedules and disruptions do occur from time to time. As soon as you think you will need an extension on an assignment, please email me and let me know a reasonable alternative date for your submission. I'll do my best to honor that date. If you anticipate missing a substantial amount of work due to illness, bereavement, unavoidable travel, or any other reason, please email me as soon as possible so we can accommodate that. I will be grading assignments based on completion, so late work submitted without an approved extension may receive a lower grade. You also forgo the opportunity to receive timely feedback from your peers.

Recording

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use. (For teachers: this language comes from the Center for Teaching and Learning: <https://teaching.pitt.edu/resources/syllabus-checklist/#Statement-on-Classroom-Recording>)

Disability Resource Services

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890/412-383-7355 (TTY), or <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/disability-access/disability-resources-and-services> as early as possible in the term. Disability Resources and Services will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Pitt Community Resources and Assistance

Pitt Libraries have compiled a wonderful list of resources that may be helpful to you if you are experiencing food insecurity, financial issues, mental health concerns, need help buying books, etc. <https://pitt.libguides.com/assistanresources>.

Counseling Center

Pitt offers free counseling for students who are experiencing personal or emotional difficulties, The Counseling Center, located on the 2nd floor of Nordenberg Hall, offers Psychological Services and Sexual Assault Services (412-648-7930) offers drop in hours. Go to <https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/cc/> or call 412-648-7856 after 5 pm, Monday-Friday or on weekends). For after hours support: UCC Mental Health Crisis Response: 412-648-7930 x1. Or Re:solve Crisis Network: 1-888-796-8226. Sexual Assault Response: 412-648-7856.

Writing Center

The Writing Center, located at 317B O'Hara Student Center, is an excellent resource for working with an experienced consultant on your writing. Although you should not expect consultants to "correct" your submission for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, revise, and edit your work. Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis or throughout the term. In some cases, your teacher may require that you go to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can decide on your own to seek assistance. Their services are free. You can browse the services they offer or make an appointment by visiting www.writingcenter.pitt.edu.

Canvas Course Website

The syllabus, assignments and other course material as well as grades may be found on the canvas course website. Go to <https://canvas.pitt.edu/> or <http://my.pitt.edu/> and then select Canvas to locate our course website. **Canvas Support:** Tutorials are located in the Canvas "Help" menu. Call the 24/7 Canvas Support Hotline: (412) 314 1719. Or call the Pitt help desk at (412) 624-HELP.