

Teaching Feminist Avant-garde Poetics

JENNIFER FIRESTONE & MARCELLA DURAND

In the spring of October 2014, we created a course titled *Feminist Avant-garde Poetics* at Eugene Lang College, the liberal arts college at the New School University. We wanted to explore further this particular strain of poetics, in which feminist writers push the historical boundaries of “avant-garde” to include multigendered, multivoiced, multiperspectival work as deeply innovative in its authorship as its work on the page. We were excited about the possibility of teaching a class focused on how women, women-identified writers, and feminists help shape and push forward experimental poetics, digging into what “avant-garde” might actually come to mean in a non-hierarchical and radically inclusive structure that actively subverts the master structures of white supremacy and patriarchy. We were also interested to see how students

could be vitally engaged in such material—writing and responding in ways that would encourage them to truly experience it as a potential part of their own working and thinking lives. In other words, we were interested in exploring, and even developing, an idea of a feminist avant-garde poetics that would “play it forward.”

Firestone solicited Durand to collaborate on submitting a course proposal to teach *Feminist Avant-garde Poetics* as a “Civic Arts” course, a new umbrella of Eugene Lang courses funded by an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant. One of the requirements for the Mellon grant is that the Civic Arts course collaborates with an outside organization in order to illustrate the concept of civic arts and civic engagement beyond the constraints of the institution.

We proposed that the organization would be Belladonna* Collaborative, and Durand would be the course's Visiting Fellow. Durand, a poet who has published with Belladonna*, would link the content of the course with the actuality of the avant-garde feminist poet's life of writing while working with an arts organization devoted to activism, literature, and under-represented feminist writers.

The students spent the semester diving into a selection of feminist avant-garde texts (most of them published by Belladonna*) with an emphasis on cultivating a very active, open, and engaged approach that would resist the constraint of the classroom space. Students met firsthand with many of the authors whose work they had read and they studied "Influence Packets," which Firestone and Durand created in collaboration with the authors. Students visited the Belladonna* studio, meeting those who are part of the Collaborative. They also attended several readings of the authors, and they grappled with the poetics informing each text.

Through the class' analyses, some questions that arose were: How were these texts feminist? How were they avant-garde? What is the interrelationship between these two terms? These questions were then broken down even further: How are language and language structures gendered? How are reading practices, publication histories, our *entire* understanding of what a "poem" is or could be, gendered? Furthermore, at this time in our history, could avant-garde theories and procedures complicate, problematize, and transform a more familiar, conventional, and patriarchal approach to writing poetry and thinking? In essence, could avant-garde poetic techniques be a

tool to explore feminist ideas and to create innovative feminist texts? The relationship between the two discourses, "feminist" and "avant-garde," has been fraught, often with a history of patriarchy still operating behind who benefited the most from the title of "avant-garde" (such as Ezra Pound or, even more recently, primarily white poets included in anthologies, reading lists, and positions of power within the literary community). On the other hand, a student commented that, to her, "feminism and avant-garde are basically the same thing" in that both terms mean to question, subvert, and undermine existing structures while also searching for new ways to create and convey meaning. As part of our class work we encouraged our students to deconstruct and be suspicious of these terms and to find ways to re-think and re-evaluate them.

Worth bringing to attention is the unique group of students who attended this course. They were not solely poetry majors or even students who had been necessarily exposed to poetry, let alone avant-garde poetry. The students came from backgrounds as diverse as gender studies, fashion design, journalism, global studies, visual arts, theater, and science; we also had several who were undecided. We invited students for their final projects to intermingle their disciplines and personal interests with the material of the class. We wanted to focus on expansion of new and fresh insight into feminist avant-garde thought and theory instead of tidily canonizing it. We also noticed that students had a particular engagement with and dedication to the class: they almost always showed up prepared, having read the materials in depth, and ready to discuss them. We think some of this enthusiasm, beyond the nature of

the material we were reading, originated from the community that the class offered. Students were repeatedly asked to collaborate with each other in creative projects, collectively attend readings and events, and participate in planning our final class reading, and perhaps as a result, developed bonds with each other. The vision and energy of the class was clearly understood as one that would emanate beyond the confines of the institution and potentially materialize in spaces and places of the students' lives and elsewhere. We knew when someone in class was ill or tired or when someone had an art show or music performance. Students began asking us about ways they could begin their own collaborative or reading series or writing group. The sense of community fostered the rigor of the class. In fact, many of the students wrote in their evaluation of the course that the class had more reading and work than they were used to, but they ultimately found it very worth their while.

BACKGROUND

In the early stages of developing this course we deliberated on the most apt title. In labeling the course as “feminist” and “avant-garde,” were we embracing what at times have been troubled histories for each, particularly in relation to each other? Cathy Park Hong in her essay *Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-garde* states:

To encounter the history of avant-garde poetry is to encounter a racist tradition. From its early 20th century inception to some of its current strains, American avant-garde poetry has been an overwhelmingly white

enterprise, ignoring major swaths of innovators—namely poets from past African American literary movements—whose prodigious writings have vitalized the margins, challenged institutions, and introduced radical languages and forms that avant-gardists have usurped without proper acknowledgement. Even today, its most vocal practitioners cling to moldering Eurocentric practices.

We did not want to perpetuate that same fallacious narrative, but instead we wanted to undermine it, subvert it, turn it on its side. We also knew we wouldn't immunize ourselves to this type of prejudice merely by focusing on “feminist avant-garde poetics,” as historically there has been a similar cycle of privileging white women. Yet at the same time, we admired much of the work and history of feminism, and we shared many of the philosophies and procedures of the avant-garde. We decided the course's title, *Feminist Avant-garde Poetics*, would act as the organizing principle of the course, but that we would clearly state to the students the problems with leaning on these terms, considering whom these terms might exclude and harm, and see our way to forcing open those terms instead. In fact, we seized the idea of “experiment” by leading with our own questions and uncertainties about the very context we were staging. Our intention was to raise questions, highlight inequities, and disrupt smooth historical narratives while simultaneously inviting students to participate in conversation and practice as they saw fit.

We stated the following at the very beginning of our syllabus:

By the end of the semester, students

will acquire a history, vocabulary, awareness, and critique of the multiplicities and complexities of feminist avant-garde poetics. Students will grapple with and study the possibilities of feminist avant-garde aesthetics or sensibilities without unnecessarily imposing limitations on them.

In addition, the Belladonna Collaborative* provided another means for us to frame our material. On the syllabus, we included the following excerpt from Belladonna's* website:

Belladonna's* mission is to promote the work of women writers who are adventurous, experimental, politically involved, multi-form, multicultural, multi-gendered, impossible to define, delicious to talk about, unpredictable and dangerous with language.

What intrigued us about Belladonna* was the fact that they are widely known for their long-standing work and commitment to the feminist avant-garde, inhabiting those terms in new ways as they devote themselves to radical diversity and material lives, acknowledging and exploring how context can impact content. However, given Belladonna* authors' non-archetypal relationships to feminism, categorizing Belladonna* authors aesthetically and, perhaps, even politically, could be a difficult task. Given our open-ended pedagogical approach and our insistence on not collapsing the feminist avant-garde into a tidy narrative, it was crucial to include Belladonna* as a main resource for the class.

MECHANICS

Readings & Discussion:

The class progressed as follows: We began with putting together a packet of work to set the stage for the students. We prefaced this by explaining that this packet was in no way comprehensive, but was instead intended to provide context for the more contemporary writers we would read. The packet included the biographies and writings of poets such as Emily Dickinson, H.D., Mina Loy, Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gertrude Stein, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Sonia Sanchez.

Students were understandably overwhelmed by this initial mass of work, particularly as many of them had never read some of the authors before, but it was a packet we would periodically refer to throughout the semester. In addition to this introductory packet, we provided excerpts of a few books and essays we had been using to prepare for the class: Kathleen Fraser's *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity*; Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*; Evie Shockley's *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*; Lynne Keller's *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women*; Erica Hunt's "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics"; Myung Mi Kim in the interview, "Generosity as Method"; Elisabeth A. Frost's *The Feminist Avant-garde in American Poetry*; and Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr's *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*.

Once the students had a bit of context about some of the various perspectives of the feminist avant-garde, we began to focus

on a select group of Belladonna* authors. We read the following: *Neighbor* by Rachel Levitsky (the founder of Belladonna*); *Four from Japan: Contemporary Poetry and Essays by Women* (translated by Sawako Nakayasu); *Proxy* by Erica Doyle; *TwERK* by LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs; *AREA* by Marcella Durand; *The Putterer's Notebook* by Akilah Oliver; *Time Slips Right Before Your Eyes* by Erica Hunt; *a diary of lies* by Kari Edwards; *A Swarm of Bees in High Court* by Tonya Foster; *Theory, A Sunday*, collectively authored by Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, France Théoret, Gail Scott, Louise Cotnoir, Louise Dupré, Lisa Robertson, and Rachel Levitsky; selections from *Open Box: Improvisations* by Carla Harryman; *Mauve Sea-Orchids* by Lila Zemborain; *Emptied of all Ships* and *Journal of Ugly Sites* by Stacy Szymaszek; and *All is Not Lost* by Betsy Fagin. These Belladonna* authors are emerging and established, older and younger, and come from many backgrounds, including bilingual, multilingual, international, African American, Hispanic and more. They are selected through an organically collective and nonhierarchical action and they become members of Belladonna* themselves through the process.

Thinking about Belladonna* as a publisher that operates as a collaborative, we didn't want to follow a "top down" methodology, where we would frame each book for our students. Instead, we queried all the living authors that we were reading and asked what influenced their specific book. We encouraged the authors to think widely and include any film, art, or non-fiction in addition to poetic influences. The authors were genuinely excited to think about our questions and for us to introduce their work in this manner.

Each "Influences" packet designed was eclectic and informative, and ended up setting an essential context for each writer's work. For example, Erica Doyle's listed her influences on her book *Proxy* as such:

A Tour of the Calculus by David Berlinski; *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking; "Mickey Mouse Was a Scorpio" by Sapphire; "Love Poem," by Audre Lorde; "She had some horses" by Joy Harjo; *The PowerBook* by Jeanette Winterson; *In Her I Am and Fire Power* by Chrystos; *Living as a Lesbian* by Cheryl Clarke; *The Black Back-Ups* by Kate Rushin; "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics" by Erica Hunt; all Erica Hunt poetry pre-2007, especially *Arcade* and *Local History*; all Harryette Mullen poetry pre-2007, especially *Muse and Drudge* and *s*p*r*m**k*t*; all Claudia Rankine poetry pre-2007; all Dionne Brand poetry pre-2007, especially *No Language is Neutral* and *The Lesbian Sex Wars* <http://www.outhistory.org/exhibits/show/lesbians-20th-century/sex-wars>.

Her self-perceived selection illuminated and opened up her own work for the students, leading simultaneously backward to a previously unseen lineage and forward to possibilities for innovative writing.

Rachel Levitsky responded to our query in preparation to read *Neighbor* with:

Essays from *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative* including "The Life of the Unknown" by Pamela Lu; "The Person in the World" by Renee Gladman; "Soft Links" by Nicole Brossard; "Long and Social" by

Eileen Myles; in addition to work by Barbara Smith; *The Transformation* by Juliana Spahr; the work of Judy Grahn; and *The Wide Road* by Lyn Hejinian and Carla Harryman.

LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs, before we read *TwERK*, sent us these influences:

Sista Tongue by Lisa Linn Kanae; *History of the Voice* by Kamau Brathwaite; Vaughn Bode; *Fire and Ice*; *RuPaul's Drag Race* and “homeroicism in the Caribbean, colonial corruption of language, dance culture, and lots of anime cinema” as well as “trade relations and its impact on minority languages, Netflix binging, and *Animal Planet*.”

Diggs’s “Influences” packet in particular helped the students better understand the densely layered references within her book to multi-languages and cultures, dance and movies.

We structured our discussions as follows: First, we read the author’s “Influences” packet. After we discussed the “Influences” packets, we would read the author’s corresponding book, along with select interviews with the author, book reviews or other criticism, and in class we would typically listen to a reading by the author. In six cases, the author visited, allowing students to question and interact with a real, live, breathing writer, bringing all that they had been studying to life. Many students in follow-up interviews cited this as the most exciting part and opened the door to envisioning how they themselves might live as writers. Ultimately, the class began to understand how various feminist lineages might unfold to present an entire

alternative vision of a vibrant, current feminist avant-garde creative practice.

A portion of our class discussions was focused on how to “read” the material. We found that students had for the most part took a limited, one-track approach, (e.g. New Criticism) to reading. We introduced them to Juliana Spahr’s ideas on reading as a participatory experience between the author and reader, as outlined in her book *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity*. We spoke about developing an adaptable reading process that would shift depending on the kind of material we were reading. We questioned what it meant when work was dismissed as “difficult,” and in fact how that was often a mask for anxiety or an inflexible reading stance when facing work that diverged from traditional literary or societal norms. We began most class discussions sharing our reading approaches and learning to monitor our own registers of confusion and detachment that might prevent us from engaging with the work. We thought about Lyn Hejinian’s “Rejection of Closure” and explored the differences between “closed” and “open” texts. We discussed work that cohered formally or sonically, or work where the language was restless, disjointed, elliptical, process-oriented, polyphonic, messy, and we pondered how to enter each of these different types of texts.

We also understood “reading” to mean other than a silent activity. Borrowing a tactic from Spahr, we assigned poems from Stein’s *Tender Buttons* in small groups. We asked the students to read their poem collectively and understand how the poem engaged, or didn’t engage, them. We then asked them to create a performative reading of their poem. Some students

performed their poem in whispers, some as a chorus, some pinged words across various students in a group, some stood on desks when performing or occupied different parts of the classroom. Students suddenly *heard* the work: they absorbed the play and malleability of Stein's words, her humor, and the architecture of each piece.

Another "reading" tactic was assigning student pairs to read out loud France Theoret's "This is Not a Lake" (an essay from Krystal Languell's "Influences" packet). We asked one student to read Theoret while the other student wrote quickly what she was able to ascertain from the reading. Then they switched positions. It was interesting to note the awkwardness and excitement as the students' voices sounded throughout the room. Several students reported they were able to formulate an analytical response to the piece from approaching it this way. In addition, one day Durand suggested spreading a large array of Belladonna's* chaplets across the student's tables and asking the students to randomly read from them. At the end of class, we went around and students quickly read passages they landed upon and their responses. Generally, it was noted that transforming reading from a solely silent, individual space to a more active, playful, and collaborative one generated very positive results.

EXPERIMENTS

Another element of the class was weekly assigned "Experiments" that students wrote in response to the readings, practicing some of the ideas and formal qualities. Because many of the students were

relatively new to poetry, we intentionally called these assignments "experiments" rather than "poems" in order to put these students at ease. We also wanted them to focus on the risk and process of these instead of on the outcome. Some of the experiments we developed were the following: after reading Rachel Levitsky's *Neighbor*, we asked students to investigate their own neighborhood, focusing on ideas of public and private space. From a different angle, after reading Tonya Foster's *Swarm of Bees*, the students again investigated a neighborhood, but this time documented its particular sounds while thinking about Foster's own statement that "sounds of language produce meaning in unexpected ways." For Carla Harryman's *Open Box: Improvisations*, we asked them to gather their own boxes and to fill them each day with rhythmic phrases or sentences about things that interested or confounded them. They were told to think about the contents of their box as building materials for a future writing project. At the end of this experiment, students brought their decorated boxes to class and read from them. In reading *Four from Japan*, students were asked to form a relationship between different lexicons (technological, foreign, etc.). We assigned students to read Durand's *AREA* and write what we called a "Debris" experiment, where they collected and wrote about what they considered was leftover and/or wrecked.

The results were startling. Students wanted to share their writings in class. Usually there was loud applause and snaps after each person shared. There was a sense of forging into new poetic territory and risk-taking. Students remarked that they liked that the assignments were provocative but not prescriptive. Many times a

student would ask if she was doing an experiment “right,” and typically we would return the responsibility of reaction back to them. The experiment would prompt us to return to the original text and continue to consider what the author was doing on the page.

GUEST VISITS

We were fortunate to have a series of incredible guest speakers visit our course. We had Rachel Levitsky, r erica doyle, Stacy Szymaszek, and Tonya Foster visit the class. We also took the subway to the Belladonna* Studio and met with Krystal Languell, who showed us how things worked behind-the-scenes at Belladonna* and the decision-making that shapes each publication. In addition, students visited the Center for Book Arts for a tour with letterpress designer Richard O’Russa, where they were introduced to the feminist history of publication via hand-printed broadsides. Students also attended a Belladonna* reading with Patricia Spears Jones, Kimberly Lyons and Laynie Browne, and readings by Eileen Myles and Alice Notley.

The class included a paid fellowship for students who were particularly engaged with the material and could act as a mentor to the other students. One student Fellow remarked how important these guest visits were in our class. “These writers are alive, they came into the class and interacted with us and we interacted with them as people not on an object basis, a thing you put on a shelf.”

Another student Fellow for the class said, “I went from staying at home and reading

books to meeting the people that wrote them. We weren’t just reading dead poets, and we weren’t just reading poets over in England, we were reading people who are right here in Brooklyn.”

FINAL PROJECTS

For the final projects, students were given the option to develop a proposal to write their own feminist-avant-garde text (scholarly, creative, or both). The end results ranged from a manifesto about female Asian-American stereotypes, to a series of interviews with children asking them to define what is feminist, to a feminist comic strip detailing a student’s family in India. Students were told to submit their own “Influences” packet along with their final project so we could see how their project developed.

The class culminated with an event of music, poetry, and film highlighting poet-activist Akilah Oliver. The students helped organize and promote the event, and many performed by reading from Akilah Oliver’s Belladonna* book, *The Putterer’s Notebook*, or their own creative work that they had written in class in response to Akilah Oliver’s poetry. Also we had reading and performances by Anne Waldman, Erica Hunt, Rachel Levitsky, Saretta Morgan, and Julie Patton—all important figures in the avant-garde who had been published or associated with Belladonna* over the years.

AFTERMATH

As we noted from the beginning, we were aware of the pitfalls of teaching *Feminist Avant-garde Poetics*. We thought of Steve Evans' introductory note in "After Patriarchal Poetry: Feminism and the Contemporary Avant-garde":

We know very well, for instance, that discussions of avant-garde poetry can carry on for entire generations without ever seriously confronting the question of gender... ; and we know as well how the feminist poetry that has been institutionalized within women's studies programs and teaching anthologies can be restrictively organized around a normative concept of "experience" that renders all but the most tentative formal innovations by women inadmissible....

We tried to acknowledge and face these questions and issues head on—discussing them in class, digging into them, and thinking of ways to go forward in creating a more equitable and activist way to look at avant-garde feminism. At one point, we remember walking by a very quiet student sitting by herself at the college's cafe. We asked her about how the class was going for her and she responded, "My brain is being rearranged." We were excited by her response and the palpable energy in the air we felt throughout the semester.

As students began to think through their own prescribed aesthetics and values, they uncovered new avenues with their work and their thinking. Students told us it was the first time they had encountered most, if not all, of these writers and this material. In fact, a few students had recently

taken a postmodern poetry course and said there were very few women writers taught and even fewer women of color. As a result, they found it difficult to connect to the work being taught and how it was taught to their own creative practices and lives. Multiple students articulated how they were inspired and relieved that they could talk about identity and do so in a way that reflected the complexity of their identities, which included fragmented or discursive writing. One freshman, who ended up claiming her major as Poetry after taking this course, told us that her poetry teachers in high school had asked her to not write about herself. Ironically, she was the same student we had pulled aside at the beginning of the semester because of a biographical experiment she submitted to our class that included such smart and compelling insight into class and gender that we asked her to consider writing a whole series based on this work.

Once the *Feminist Avant-garde Poetics* course was complete, we were awarded another Mellon grant toward faculty development. This grant allowed us to spend an additional semester reflecting on our pedagogy and research in the course, and to interview many of the students to collect data regarding their experiences. We were extremely pleased by the feedback. In the interviews, students had again emphasized the importance of this course to their creative practices and their thinking on how their lives were going to take shape after graduation. Many of them told us the course had remained on their minds and they had retained their "Influences" packets to refer to in the future. One of the Fellows remarked how outraged he was that, as a graduating senior, he was learning about the work of Mina Loy for

the very first time. The Fellow continued saying, “It [the course] has completely overhauled my approach to writing. I just wake up and think Feminist Avant-garde.” A first-year student, who also declared Poetry as her major as a result of taking this course, stated, “I have a very strong training towards radical justice and social justice so this seemed like the best way to dip my toes in the water. It really impacted me in the way that I feel about how I write now and even in things beyond poetry.” Another student reported, “I feel like this class has given me the tools to actively utilize my poetry as a feminist project, not just because I am a woman who is writing, and not because my poetry is injected with overt feminist poetics, but because I have a newfound agency and excitement to create work as a feminist poet.”

We know that there is much more work and research to do within the Feminist Avant-garde. We were dismayed to discover how few books and articles exist on this topic. We also know that much of the scholarship that does exist marginalizes writers of color. In addition, we were surprised by how little an articulated context there was for the writing of these authors—how much the original “Influences” packets situated the work we were reading. And how, once we created ways to engage with, discuss, and think about this work, how accessible and activating it became after all. Most of all, we were struck by the impact on the students—that many decided to continue writing, to work in publishing, to intern with literary organizations, and to actively engage with the poetry and activism worlds. This indicated to us the substantial real-world impact of such a class. We hope to continue with our research and encourage others to do so. It is

clear from our experiences that there are generative intersections between feminism and avant-garde poetics and that there are many students who are eager to learn.

SUGGESTED TEXTS

Kathleen Fraser's *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity*

Rachel Blau Duplessis' *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*

Evie Shockley's *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*

Lynne Keller's *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women*

Erica Hunt's "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics"

Myung Mi Kim's "Generosity as Method"

Cathy Park Hong's "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-garde"

Elizabeth A. Frost's *The Feminist Avant-garde in American Poetry*

Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr's *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*