FALL 2013

Nonfiction
Instructor: Ander Monson

This course takes the collection as its subject. Or: this course takes collection as an act as its subject. The collection—of essays, of stories, and less so of poems—sometimes gets a raw deal and is ignored (certainly, this is often the case commercially) in favor of the memoir, the novel, the book-length essay or nonfiction project. Perhaps this is because in an era of disintegration, readers favor the artifice of seeming wholeness. However, a good collection isn’t just a random assembly of component parts, whatever you wrote over the course of five years chucked in a binding—it’s structured and patterned and woven (choose whatever metaphor you like), that is, if it’s a true collection and not just a haphazard yoking together of unlikes—in other words, a good collection offers the pleasures of wholeness that the other, more obviously commercial Big Projects often do. This semester we will study and venerate various sorts of collections, paying particular attention to the ways in which they are shapely, how the individual pieces echo or connect to each other and suggest structures to readers. We will look at roughly a dozen collections, mostly though not exclusively nonfiction, and mostly though not exclusively contemporary, and discuss how they work, how they’re organized, structured, shaped. We’ll get the chance to talk with a couple contemporary writers whose work we are reading, too, and query them about their collecting strategies.

We’ll discuss philosophies of shaping and collecting, and think about the act of collecting particularly as it relates to the book (in whatever shape the book might appear). I imagine this course as being useful across genre (and perhaps as a collection point for all three genres). Considerations of structure bridge and connect genres. We will draw inspiration from the ways that poets, fiction writers, and nonfiction writers collect and order a book, and use them to suggest ways of filling out our own nascent or in-progress books. Sometimes, we find that imposing or finding a structure or order in a book suggests essays or poems or what have you that have yet to be written. In this way, conceiving of a collection’s structure can lead to filling and finishing it.

Writing assignments will be either short and generative/creative, or longer and critical/craft-oriented, suggested by the work of the writers we’re reading. Writers will be asked to consider (or conceive of, or reconsider, or reconceive, as necessary) their own collection and connections within their own work. The expectation is that you will leave the class with a stronger structural plan or sense of the book project you’re working on in whichever genre
and a sense—however temporary—of direction for your project along with a method—
however bizarre or arbitrary—that will provide the structure necessary to push forward.

This course will also make use of the Hybrid Series readings in Fall 2013 (Maggie Nelson,
Jenny Boully, Thalia Field, Lia Purpura) cosponsored by the Prose Series and the Poetry
Center. We’ll be reading collections by all four writers, and they will join us each for a class
meeting.

Reading list:
Jenny Boully, *of the mismatched teacups, of the single-serving spoon: a book of failures*
Anne Carson, *Nox*
Lucy Corin, *One Hundred Apocalypses and Other Apocalypses*
Thalia Field, *Bird Lovers, Backyard*
Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*
Orhan Pamuk, *The Innocence of Objects*
Elena Passarello, *Let Me Clear My Throat*
Lia Purpura, *Rough Likeness*
Aurelie Sheehan, *Jewelry Box* (released in October)
Susan Steinberg, *Spectacle*
Chris Ware, *Building Stories*

Poetic Forms
Alison Hawthorne Deming

Baudelaire wrote, “It is evident that rhetorics and prosodies are not arbitrarily invented
tyannies, but a collection of rules demanded by the very organization of the spiritual being,
and never have prosodies and rhetorics kept originality from fully manifesting itself. The
contrary, that is to say, that they have aided the flowering of originality, would be infinitely
more true.”

Stravinsky wrote, “The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one’s self of the
chains that shackle the spirit.”

This craft seminar will focus on form in poetry with close scrutiny of the line, the sentence,
the stanza. We will read into the varieties and histories of poetic form: oral tradition, sonnet,
ode, elegy, villanelle, pantoum, sestina, syllabic verse, accentual-syllabic verse, blank verse,
blues stanza, haiku, tanka and renga. We’ll end with a consideration of the prose poem as a
locale where poetry meets the lyric essay. Texts will include: Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and
Form*; Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*; Annie Finch, *An Exaltation of Form*; Phyllis Levin, *The
Penguin Book of the Sonnet; excerpts from The Kalevala, excerpts from Michael Benedikt’s The Prose Poem: An International Anthology, etc. Students will write a short weekly response paper or poem and create a final project (such as an essay, poem cycle, or performance piece).

The Portrait of the Artist: The Writer as Center

Manuel Muñoz

The risk involved in placing a writer at the center of any novel is considerable, from accusations of self-absorption to the potential for narrative insularity. Yet the payoffs are equally substantial, as writers taking on writers as central figures often open the doors to ruthless self-examination and moral equivocation. We’ll study the narrative strategies of a few books that take advantage of such characterization, with an eye on creating a set of questions for our own creative investigations under the same constraints. Texts may include Knut Hamsun’s Hunger, Eileen Myles’s Inferno (A Poet’s Novel), and Ben Lerner’s Leaving the Atocha Station.