

Politics and Poems: Writing Verse in DC (2019)

This course is a space for writing and discussing poems in the nation's capitol. The course title takes as inspiration the name of the renowned independent bookstore (Politics and Prose) in Washington, D.C. Accordingly, the texts we will focus on as our models will be by poets for whom politics and social engagement are a crucial strand of their poetics. Most of them live in the DC area. Some will be guests in our class to discuss this aspect of their work. This course is *as much* about reading poems *as* writing (and revising) them. Students will attend at least one live literary event to experience poetry as live performance, as well as visit a museum or gallery to use the visual or plastic arts as a springboard for some of their poems, as well. Finally, students will practice and hone vocabulary in order to offer constructive feedback on one another's work.

Instructor:

Francisco Aragón

<http://www.franciscoaragon.net/>

Course meets on Thursday evenings from 6:30 – 9:30 PM at the UC Washington Center

Required Texts

Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths (YesYes Books) by Elizabeth Acevedo

Toys Made of Rock (Bilingual Press) by José B. González

Killing Summer (Sibling Rivalry Press) by Sarah Browning

Speaking Wiri Wiri (Red Hen Press) by Dan Vera

There will also be readings from, *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry* (W.W. Norton & Company) edited by Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux.

We will also be reading and discussing select essays on the subject of poetry and politics—written by contemporary poets. I will hand these out in class.

Poets

Elizabeth Acevedo is the author of *Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths* (YesYes Books). Her poems have appeared in *Puerto Del Sol*, *Callaloo*, *Poet Lore*, *The Notre Dame Review*, and other literary journals. She holds a BA in Performing Arts from The George Washington University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maryland. She has performed nationally and internationally including venues such as Madison Square Garden, the Kennedy Center of the Performing Arts, and South Africa's State Theatre. Some of her poetry videos have gone viral and been picked up by PBS, Latina Magazine, and Cosmopolitan. Acevedo is a National Slam Champion and the 2016 Women of the World Poetry Slam representative for Washington, D.C., where she lives and works. One strand of her work strives to raise awareness on issues to do with sexual assault and violence against women.

Sarah Browning is the author of *Killing Summer* (Sibling Rivalry, 2017) and *Whiskey in the Garden of Eden* (The Word Works, 2007). She is co-founder and Executive Director of Split This Rock, a DC-based organization that cultivates, teaches, and celebrates poetry that bears witness to injustice and provokes change. She is also an Associate Fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies, the nation's oldest multi-issue progressive think tank, frequently writing opinion pieces for their national op ed service, Other Words. She is the recipient of fellowships from the DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and the Adirondack Center for Writing. She has been guest editor or co-edited *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *The Delaware Poetry Review*, and three issues of *POETRY* magazine. Browning co-hosts the Sunday Kind of Love poetry series at Busboys and Poets in Washington, DC. Previously she worked developing creative writing workshops for low-income women and youth at Amherst Writers & Artists, as a community organizer in Boston public housing, and as an advocate for a wide variety of political and social justice issues.

José B. González is the author of two collections of poetry, *Toys Made of Rock* and *When Love Was Reels*, and is the co-editor of *Latino Boom: An Anthology of U.S. Latino Literature*. His works examine the roles of war and conflict on the lives of voiceless individuals, particularly immigrant children. He is a professor of English at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, where he teaches literature and creative writing courses in the Government Major. He has been a contributor to National Public Radio and has been a featured speaker at colleges and institutions throughout the U.S., delivering talks on numerous topics related to Latinx cultures and the politicization of terms used to describe Latinx populations. He was also a Fulbright Scholar in Barcelona, Spain.

Dan Vera is an award-winning author of two poetry collections *Speaking Wiri Wiri* (Red Hen Press) and *The Space Between Our Danger and Delight* (Beothuk Books) and most recently the co-editor of the anthology, *Imaniman: Poets Writing In The Anzaldúan Borderlands* (Aunt Lute, 2016). His poetry, which mediates the familial, historical, and political realities of ethnicity and gender, appears in various publications including *Truth to Power: Writers Respond to the Rhetoric of Hate and Fear*, and *Foreign Policy In Focus*. The longtime board chair of the national social justice poetry festival, Split This Rock, he's been a featured poet at various universities and cultural institutions including the Dodge Poetry Festival, the Poetry Foundation, and Poets House. A CantoMundo and Macondo fellow, he's been awarded the Oscar Wilde Award for LGBT Poetry, the Letras Latinas/Red Hen Poetry Prize, and fellowships from the Ragdale Foundation and the Jane Geuting Camp Fellowship from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. For more visit <http://www.danvera.com>

Course Requirements

- 1) Write and submit 9 poems*, as indicated on the class schedule.
- 2) Revise each of these 9 poems and submit them, as indicated on the class schedule.
- 3) Submit a final portfolio of between 7-9 poems that has been deliberately ordered, including final revisions. (One of the poems must be an ekphrastic poem.)
- 4) Contribute regularly to the class blog

- 5) Attend one live poetry event in Washington, D.C. and write a 1 – 2 page reflection paper on the experience, to be included in your final portfolio.
- 6) Visit a museum or gallery in Washington, D.C. to write your ekphrastic poem and write a 1 – 2 page reflection paper on the experience, to be included in your final portfolio.
- 7) Select one poem from the four single-author volumes we will be reading this semester and present it to the class (I'll say more about this).
- 8) Take part in the class reading and later attend a featured reading at the Split This Rock Poetry Festival

*for this workshop, each poem must not exceed one page in length, and be a *minimum* of 12 lines

Course Policies

- 1) Hand held devices, such as mobile phones must be off or silent during class.
- 2) All writing assignments must be word processed
- 3) All writing assignments are to be uploaded to the web as a WORD document the day they are due, unless you've made prior arrangements with me. I'll say more about this in class.
- 4) Any assignment turned in late will automatically have points taken away, unless you've spoken to me beforehand about a particular circumstance.
- 5) Behavior and speech that disrupts the collegial learning environment goes against the atmosphere we want to create in the workshop, and will be noted and considered when calculating your participation grade.

Class Participation

Factors that will be taken into consideration when evaluating class participation (in addition to punctual attendance) are: frequency and quality of your contributions when we are discussing the class readings (the four single-author volumes of poetry and the essays on poetry and politics) both in class discussion and on the class blog; the frequency and thoughtfulness of the verbal feedback you offer your classmates when we are “workshopping” poems; presenting the poem you have chosen to share with the class.

Attendance & Punctuality

Our aim is to create a space for engaged learning. Key to this goal is mutual respect for one another and our time—valuable time we spend preparing for class. Not coming to class, or arriving to class late...works *against* this goal. So, unless you have a valid excuse, more than one unexcused absence and/or more than one instance of arriving to class late will be noted and impact your final grade.

Academic Code of Honor

The poems you submit to the workshop must be written by you and you alone.

Course evaluation break down

Final Portfolio	40%
9 poems	20%
9 revisions	20%
Class Participation	20%