Creative Writing Honors Project in Poetry

Overview

My project will center on ideas of celebrity iconography, nostalgia, pain and healing, and collective memory, as conveyed through a collection of poems depicting the lives and times of tragic women. Voice poems, written from the perspective of the female figures themselves, will play a large role in the realization of this body of work, but I am as equally interested in a modern, third person perspective and the ways in which it can reveal how disparate and anachronistic biographies become fused into a single human cultural identity. The poetry forms will vary as much as the lives I hope to capture, ranging from free verse and prose poetry, to more formal styles such as sestina or sonnet. I intend, also, to write several collage poems, which will incorporate quotations, song lyrics, news headlines, etc.

The series will include between 25 and 35 pieces organized into three sections, each section providing both a chronological and topical framework for their respective works. The first section will focus on mythological, biblical, and literary female characters that typify classic notions of the tragic heroine in examining the importance of myth in modern society. In the second section, I will explore problems of historical accuracy in conflict with remembered realties through portraits of past women. The final section will focus on female figures of the 20th and 21st centuries, highlighting in particular ideas of celebrity culture and the communal nature of nostalgia. The collection as a whole will be founded on the motifs of pain and healing, and of love and loss, as
each work will test the capability of poetic expression to at once exorcise pain and catalyze renewal.

Potential subjects include:

Billie Holiday, Edith Piaf, Echo, Marilyn Monroe, Nancy Spungen, Amelia Earhart, Camille Claudel, Jocasta, Emily Dickinson, Patsy Cline, Marie Antoinette, Sharon Tate, Persephone, Janis Joplin, Anna Nicole Smith, Frida Kahlo, Sylvia Plath, Lizzie Borden, Bonnie Parker, the women of the Salem Witch Trials, Joan of Arc, Eve

I find that I am most drawn to those whose lives have ended tragically or to those who have in some way aided in their own demise. And I have chosen to focus on female figures because I think the tragic experience is far more saturated for women. Because the female form is so naturally associated with birth and life and growth, instances of female dysfunction and destruction feel exceptionally unsettling. I do want to clarify that I plan to use “tragedy” as both a central character and understudy in these pieces. In other words, I am going to be writing as much about the lives of tragic women as I am the tragic lives of women. For example, I am interested in detailing the complete story of the nymph Echo, with the perspective of a modern reader. Conversely, for an icon such as Janis Joplin, whose tragic end often overshadows the rest of her timeline, poetry directed at the little-known of her life can give greater power to the mystery as a whole.

In addition to the portrait pieces, and as a common thread holding the project together, each section will also include autobiographical poems. These will be vignettes of my own life and my own perceived tragedies as a contemporary female, in juxtaposition with age-old accounts of women and misfortune. Even though I will be the only living and un-famous member of the collection, the intention is not for my
autobiographical works to stand out from their biographical neighbors, though it may be inevitable. Even so, and despite the breadth of time these works will cover, as well as the variety of forms I plan to use, I aim for the collection as a whole to feel stylistically modern and very clearly a product of the present day.

As a final and culminating part of the project, specifically in conjunction with the third section, I would like to incorporate a presentational aspect. The thing that intrigues me most about these women and their stories is the way their tragedies are so much a part of a shared public tragedy. I'd like to be able to explore that by presenting the poems in exposition. The poetry would be on display along with iconic images and videos, associated music, and other unique audio and visual elements that trigger certain pop-cultural connections. Thus, I want the poems to be read in a space that contributes to a sense of a shared nostalgia.

**Background and Sources**

In terms of my previous writing experience, I have been published in *Chanter*, have work-shopped with the *Thistle* literary magazine, and have taken Intro to Creative Writing, Crafts of Poetry, Crafts of Screenwriting, and Crafts of Nonfiction at Macalester. For these classes, I have already written pieces that will be revised and incorporated into this project, including works on Billie Holiday, Edith Piaf, Marilyn Monroe, and Amelia Earhart, in addition to works chronicling my own history. My Crafts of Nonfiction class with Wang Ping was particularly influential, as it centered on the processes of pain and healing and the relevance of writing in reconciling the two. I am also currently taking a poetry class at L’École Normale Supérieure in Paris, France,
where I have begun to write works in the French language. Many of the women I want to
profile are French, and I now feel better equipped to draw inspiration from French
cultural and historical backgrounds, as a supplement to biographical information.

I have consulted several general texts for the purpose of creating a foundation of
knowledge in the history of women. Irene Franck and David Brownstone’s *Women’s
World: A Timeline of Women in History* is an exemplary review of exemplary women,
providing an excellent jumping off point for the selection of subjects. Additionally, I find
broad chronologies such as this are as equally significant for the subjects they choose not
to include, as I explore the characteristics that distinguish the legendary from the
temporary. Another such general reference is Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser’s *A
History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, which gives an
exhaustive survey of women’s role in European history.

In conjunction with these historical texts, I would also like to gain a better
understanding of the role of gender and sexuality in the creation of such gendered
histories. What does it mean to distinguish a history specifically for women? To assist me
in this study, I have included in my reading list: Denise Riley’s "*Am I That Name?*":
*Feminism and the Category of "women" in History* ; Gerda Lerner’s *The Majority Finds
Its Past: Placing Women in History* ; and Sue Morgan’s *The Feminist History Reader*, as
each critiques and codifies this process of female historical encapsulation.

As another general text, I have decided to also consult *The Oxford Dictionary of
Allusions*. This will be useful as a reference for the mythological and literary figures to be
depicted in the first section. Moreover, I believe the idea of the “allusion,” as an *implicit*
reference based in common knowledge, is intrinsic to the development of this project.
The evocation of these different female identities must rely on subtlety, as each piece finds power in the bombardment of the subconscious and the unveiling of the collective self.

As is probably evident, this project demands a substantial amount of biographical research. I have already sought out and have begun consulting different biographies for a few of my planned subjects. In terms of choosing biographies, I find I am more interested in autobiographies and texts that draw from a variety of sources, especially interviews. And though not particularly scholarly, I will not shy away from using Internet sources, fan-sites, blogs, etc., as points of reference for better defining these women’s lives. An important part of this project is a consideration of the value of memory and personal interpretation as its own, no less real, reality. Giving into the myths and the maybes is crucial to understanding the collision point of dead woman and living legend.

In addition to biographical references, I have also begun accumulating scholarly texts that speak to the underlying themes of my project. In considering the role of nostalgia in culture, I have looked to: the works of Jean Starobinski, considered one of the first “historians of nostalgia,” as he details the etymology of the word and the history of emotions it has encompassed; Edward S. Casey’s *The world of nostalgia*, which interrogates the temporality of nostalgia in addition to the nature of its objects; and Fred Davis’ *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, a general analysis that attempts to distinguish the feeling of nostalgia distinctly from other sentiments.

I have also included works meant to expand my scope of knowledge in the fields of celebrity culture. Fred Inglis’ *A Short History of Celebrity* provides a record of fame and the way it has changed over time and Graeme Turner’s *Understanding Celebrity*
discusses the cultural function of celebrity. Also in the reading list is Nicole Loraux’s *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, which details in full how women die in Greek tragedy, which will be useful in understanding classic ideas of the tragic heroine. I also hope to find modern parallels in these ancient accounts.

In terms of inspiration, aesthetic influences include Richard Brautigan, Lyn Hijynian, and Joe Brainard, whose works are notable, in part, for the ways in which their poetry venerates the sinking seduction of simplicity and the power of observation. As a perfect study in voice, I also added Studs Terkel to my bibliography because of his artful handling of interview and transcription. Tyehimba Jess’ *Leadbelly* and Carol Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* have not only inspired my creative approach, but will also serve as exemplary models for the process of organizing an entire body of poetry around specific historical figures. I also added Carolyn Forché’s poetry anthology, *Against Forgetting*, which forces readers to measure the distance between fact and emotional truth and decide which, in fact, is most important.

In continuing my examination of celebrity culture, and as aesthetic inspiration, the reading list also includes, *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure*. The brevity of the entries illuminates the choice inherent in memory. By spelling out our memories, we put our lives into a state of things. We have the ability to synthesize a complete human experience into a single flash of remembrance. But the nature of the “celebrity” turns this idea of pain production inside out. Just as memories make things out of existence, celebrity turns identity into a state of things. As spectators of this amplified humanity, we deny the agency of the individual, by removing the individual’s subjectivity towards his or her own pain. Through idealization,
sensationalism, and idolization, we construct pain in another person, by forcing recognition and repetition of certain memories. In the same way, because of the pervasiveness of celebrity culture, celebrity pain can become the pain of collective.

I have also sought out several books on the craft of writing both poetry and nonfiction works: William Packard’s *The Poet’s Dictionary: A Handbook of Prosody and Poetic Devices*, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, and Michael J Bugeja’s *The Art and Craft of Poetry*. I hope to be able to better understand and broaden my writing style, as well as refine my approach, and I think these texts will certainly aid in the realization of this poetic endeavor.

In terms of the presentational aspect of the project, I was inspired by an exhibit I saw at the Museum of Modern Art in Oslo, Norway: Ilya Kabakov’s “The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away.” Constructed to look like a cluttered home, the installation reveals a meticulous and emotional character, who has collected and catalogued (with matter-of-fact, poetically-minded labels) years worth of garbage and kitsch, hung on the walls with thumb-tacks. This translates perfectly to the human scale, for we are a society of collectors: of memories, of idols, of things. I want my project to acknowledge this hoarding, at the same time that it considers its inherent poetry. Also, Ken Burns’ “Jazz” stands out to me as another model of this emotionally riveting amalgamation of medias to present a series of historical and factual happenings.

**Motivation**

My writing has always been about hoarding, collecting, remembering; like I can’t let anything go and poetry’s where I’ll keep it. That’s why I often write about myself, because the words are already there, in hippocampus slideshows. Through this project,
however, I want to apply my fascination with archiving observation to lives I never saw, lives I only hear about, but lives that have nonetheless affected the way I live mine. What is it about these women? Why do they mean something to me? I am obsessed by this ambiguity of attachment. And what better way to explore it than through poetry, which relies on this same sort of inexplicable attraction.

In theory this project is all non-fictional (or at least based on established fiction), but the likelihood is, I’ll get it wrong. These are portraits of lives beyond me, and yet they still manage to shape both my cultural and feminine identity. How will my autobiographical works reflect this societal handprint? And how will my interpretations of these elsewhere lives reflect the insignias of my own existence? It is this inadvertent fusion of identities that I hope to both explore and exploit in my poetry.

Reading List:


Kabakov, Ilya, Margarita Tupitsyn, and Victor Tupitsyn. "Conversation - About


