Storied New York

Suketu Mehta
Room 655, 20 Cooper Square
Email: suketu@nyu.edu

“The true New Yorker secretly believes that people living anywhere else have to be, in some sense, kidding.”

- John Updike

New York is the most storied city in America and possibly the world; generations of writers have been entranced by it, and have produced masterpieces in tribute. We will look at the city as a character, in journalism, memoir, fiction, poetry, and film. What is the idea of New York in historical and contemporary imagination, and how different or similar are today's chroniclers of the city from their predecessors? What can we learn about urban reportage from the best practitioners of the genre? We will examine the texts for thematic concerns as well as those of craft. We will see how sentences and paragraphs are structured so that the text provides pleasure as well as information. And along the
way, we will discover the broader possibilities and limitations of nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and film.

**Required Books**

Here is New York - E. B. White

Writing New York, A Literary Anthology – edited by Philip Lopate

One out of Three: Immigrant New York in the Twenty-First Century – edited by Nancy Foner

The Snakehead: An Epic Tale of the Chinatown Underworld and the American Dream – Patrick Radden Keefe

Students will also read the New York-related stories in the New York Times every day.

We will also watch and discuss films in which New York is a central character. Guest speakers and field trips will add further insight to the readings.

**Grades**

Since this is a discussion seminar, active class participation is crucial. Each week, students will lead a
discussion of the texts. Your ten to fifteen minute presentation will do more than summarize the text; you are expected to research and present background material on the author, the time in New York’s history that the text is set in, and other details that would be of interest to the class. You should draw attention to specific passages that will provoke class discussion. You are also expected to email me your presentation before the class.

Other students will be individually called on for their responses. Each and every student is expected to contribute in each and every class. It is essential to keep up with the readings, in order to facilitate discussion.

Students are expected to attend every class punctually. Two or more missed classes will result in an automatic lowering of your grade. Late papers will not be accepted.

Grades will be based on the following:

Final Paper (2000 words): 35%
Midterm (1500 words): 35%
Presentations/Class Participation/Shorter assignments: 30%

The midterm and the final paper can be in a variety of genres. You can submit a magazine piece, an academic paper comparing themes in the texts that we read, a short
story, a play, etc. New York must be a central focus of your paper.

There will also be a couple of shorter written assignments.

Course Schedule

Week 1

The Poet as Journalist/Journalist as Poet

From ‘Writing New York’: Walt Whitman, ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’

You can also read the poem here: http://www.daypoems.net/plainpoems/1958.html

Weather permitting, we will go on the Staten Island Ferry and read the poem aloud.

Week 2

Welcome to New York

Ferry assignment due
E. B. White: ‘Here is New York’
Critique of ‘Here is New York’:
http://www.salon.com/books/feature/1999/09/02/white_nyc/

Week 3

Oddballs

In-class film screening: Bennett Miller, ‘The Cruise’

Interviews with Timothy ‘Speed’ Levitch:


From ‘Writing New York’: Melville, ‘Bartleby the Scrivener’

Week 4

Immigrants

‘One out of Three’: Chapters 1, 2, & 8

Ellen Barry’s NYT series on the Liberian community in Staten Island:
New York is among the most segregated cities in America:

http://danielkayhertz.com/2014/04/14/how-segregated-is-new-york-city/


Week 5

Field Trip to Jackson Heights

A history of Jackson Heights:
http://www.jhbg.org/history/history.html
An article about the area’s diversity:
Census Data about Jackson Heights and the surrounding areas:

A walk-and-talk with me through JH:
http://urbanomnibus.net/2011/02/a-walk-through-jackson-heights/

Week 6

**Immigrants**

Patrick Radden Keefe: ‘The Snakehead’

My talk with Patrick Keefe at the New York Public Library:
http://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/snakehead-patrick-keefe-and-suketu-mehta

‘One out of Three’ – Chapter 5

Week 7

**Immigrants: The Next Generation**

Philip Kasinitz, ‘One out of Three’, Chapter 11

My Time Magazine article
http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2163555-1,00.html

Week 8

Guest Lecturer

Jonathan Tarleton, Urban Omnibus
http://urbanomnibus.net

Midterm Paper due; please email it to me at suketu@nyu.edu

Week 9

Urban Planning

From ‘Writing New York’:

William Dean Howells: From ‘A Hazard of New Fortunes’

Gay Talese: ‘Panic in Brooklyn’

Jane Jacobs: ‘The Death and Life of Great American Cities’
Week 10

Love in the City

Gilbert Sorrentino, ‘The Moon in its Flight’


From ‘Writing New York’:

Tom Wolfe: ‘A Sunday Kind of Love’

Willa Cather: ‘Coming, Aphrodite!’

Week 11

Is New York the Unhappiest City?

http://www.nber.org/papers/w20291 (Enter your NYU email to download a pdf)

http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2014/07/calling_bullshit_on_that_study_calling_new_york_the_unhappiest_city.php

John Cheever, ‘The Enormous Radio’
http://urbanomnibus.net/2014/07/a-commons-of-unwanted-things/

Week 12

Crime and Punishment
Janet Malcolm, ‘Iphigenia in Forest Hills’
http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/05/03/iphigenia-in-forest-hills

http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6073/the-art-of-
Week 13

Farewells

From ‘Writing New York’:

John Cheever: ‘Moving Out’

F. Scott Fitzgerald: ‘My Lost City’

Joan Didion: ‘Goodbye to all that’

Week 14

Last Class

Final paper due

(This schedule is provisional and will be changed as texts, speakers or events are added)