OISE, University of Toronto

Hosted by: Ashleigh A. Allen & Ben Gallagher

**Poetry and outer space**

**Workshop description:**

This 90-minute creative writing workshop explores the creative possibilities of reading and writing poems that explore the universe/ outer space. Recently, we’ve been feeling the desire for lightness, a little less gravity, and to travel somewhere if only to be elsewhere. This is also, perhaps, a desire to see the self and this place (our planet and our lives here) anew… This daydreaming brought about a desire to venture to outer space. Today we will read some contemporary poems where poets are thinking through our existence on this planet, how we interact with other planets and galaxies, and potentials for stories and lives there and here now and in the future. We use these poems to inspire our own time and space travel to explore what is or could be out there for us.

We look at a range of contemporary poets pushing against or harnessing these forms for their own purposes, to think about the possibilities they offer us for our own writing and thinking.

The purposes of this workshop are: to share in the reading of contemporary poetry, experience the act of writing poetry in community, and think about the possibilities for contemporary poetry in our lives and classrooms as writer educators. We aim to consider not only the content but also the sonic and structural choices poets make, as a way to consider the possibilities that a creative writing practice has to offer us as writers and educators.

We are grateful to be a part of a community that values engagement with writing and reading.

**Workshop outline:**

**(5 minutes)**

Welcome participants & introductions / check-ins

Names, pronouns, a word or two to describe how each person is feeling today

**(5 minutes)**

Share the purpose of this workshop

**(10-15 minutes)**

Participants volunteer to read through all the poems at least once (Quaker style)

**(40-45 minutes)**

**Participants write**

Using the prompts offered, participants mute their mics and write (for 45 minutes). Participants are encouraged to consider: What else do you see happening with language and imagery and topics/themes in these poems? Feel free to include or mimic other things you notice in these poems or anything else that inspires you today!

**POEMS:**

**Dan Vera, “Jose Dominguez, the first Latino in outer space"**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/143251/jose-dominguez-the-first-latino-in-outer-space>

* Put someone who hasn’t been (or you haven’t heard the narrative for) in outer space. Maybe they are on a familiar spaceship, real or fictional.
* Use the word for hit/ slap/ insult in another language (Vera uses *soplamoco*)

**Adrian Matejka, “Stardate 8809.22”**

<https://poets.org/poem/stardate-880922>

* Repeat the beginning of phrases (Matejka repeats “If there was…” and “Looking up …”
* If you’re familiar with Sun Ra (especially *Space is the place*) then reference him; if not, reference a fictional person, text, movie etc. that includes a journey to outer space or someone from outer space.

**Alison C Rollins, “Love in outer space”**

<https://poets.org/poem/love-outer-space>

* Write a poem where the beloved or desired is a galaxy and you’re an astronaut

**CAConrad, “Neptune.4”**

<https://poets.org/poem/neptune4>

* Include the line “\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ not \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ “(Conrad writes “Forest not fortune”)
* Include the phrase “ask your children…”

**Terrance Hayes, “Lightyears guide to the galaxy”**

<https://poets.org/poem/lightheads-guide-galaxy>

* Finish the phrase “I believe everything is a metaphor for\_\_\_\_\_\_”
* Include something that is not human (an animal, insect, plants, weather, etc.) that could be a commentary on life. Hayes writes, “The small dog barking at the darkness is…”

**Tracy K Smith, “The universe: original motion picture soundtrack”**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55517/the-universe-original-motion-picture-soundtrack>

* Include sounds that match with aspects of the universe… What’s the sound of that darkness? The planets? Stars? Stars exploding? Comets? Asteroids? Meteoroids? Galaxies? (You could do a longer soundtrack as Smith does, or you could just include a few sounds)
* Where do the things go that disappear in the universe? In life?

**Albert Goldbarth, “Laws of the universe”**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42778/laws-of-the-universe>

* Write using a series of linked colons (ie “doomed: because…resigned: because”)
* Include a moment where someone trips and falls (this could be comedic or tragic)

**Diane Wakoski, "In this galaxy"**

<https://voetica.com/voetica.php?collection=2&poet=683&poem=5964>

* What skill or ability do you desire in a lover?
* Gamble with something (ie love/science) – what do you win and lose?

**Brenda Shaughnessy, “I'm over the moon”**

<https://poets.org/poem/im-over-moon>

* Make a list of words that share the same internal vowel sound to use throughout your writing (ie: moon, spoon, swoon, noon)
* Use a cliche but write against its standard meaning (ie “over the moon” usually means thrilled, but here she’s tired and frustrated)

**Anne Porter, “Winter twilight”**

<https://poets.org/poem/winter-twilight>

* Turn a regular earth-bound object into a planet

**Kay Ryan, “Star block”**

<http://gravityandlight.blogspot.com/2008/08/star-block-by-kay-ryan-poet-laureate.html>

* Take a common product and invent its opposite (ie sun block/star block)
* Make a list of rhyming word pairs. Use one word from the pair to end a line, and use the other word to begin a different line (ie: block/locking, absence/substance)

**Robyn Sarah “Astronomy”**

* Put some portion of your writing in parentheses
* Use the phrase “you could almost call it \_\_\_\_\_”

**Sappho fragment 168B (Trans. Anne Carson)**

* Invoke a constellation or celestial body
* Describe a moment when you are alone

*(5 minutes)*

**Ideas for exit conversation. Participants invited to discuss and reflect on the experience:**

- What did you notice as you read and wrote? Were you surprised by anything in particular?

- Benefits/ uses of a workshop like this?

- Do you think you will incorporate any of these poems, themes of the poems, or this method of writing together in a virtual room in your own teaching? In what specific ways? If you would use these texts, you’d use them in conjunction with what other texts/ ideas/ questions?

- Are your students writing creatively together in virtual spaces? What does that look and feel like?