

Writing a New New York **Mei Bock, 2024**

This summer, I embarked on a project to write short stories about New York. As a lifelong New Yorker, I wanted to explore what I could add to the canon of New York literature with my background growing up here as a woman, in Chinese and Jewish communities, and from a variety of my other experiences.

I read the following short story collections: first, “Gods of Want” by K-Ming Chang, exploring themes of Chinese identity, gender, sexuality, and climate. Then I read “Enormous Changes at the Last Minute,” a collection by Grace Paley, which took place in New York and explored various tensions of gender, class, Judaism, and race within that. The third short story collection I read was “I Want to Show You More” by Jamie Quatro, focusing heavily on female sexuality. I also read various other short stories by authors including Phillip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates, Bernard Malamud, Raymond Carver and John Updike.

With each collection I read, I wrote a report describing what I liked, didn’t like, and learned from reading these authors. This practice allowed me to better understand what I responded to as a writer, how to construct a story, and how to implement what I learned in my writing.

For the writing itself, I wrote four short stories at approximately 15 pages each. Professor Clarke would engage with my reports and stories and helped me workshop areas for revision.

I found myself writing about the ways that I have felt New York changing and becoming more difficult to live in in my time growing up here, while also writing of the closeness and human connection that draws people to cities. In a world where New York has flooded, a woman in Sunset Park tries to reach her boyfriend across the waters in Manhattan via unordinary means. In an overcrowded New York, a pair of commuters find a strange closeness in the subway. A man watches his daughter form an unusual relationship with a neighbor on their front stoop. A group of girls go on a trip to escape the city, over which an inhospitable fog has set.

What I most loved about this fellowship was how strongly it allowed me to tap into my imaginative impulses. Even though I set out to write stories that reflected my own experiences and perceptions of what it means to be from New York, to live in New York, I found that what I wrote had very little to do with my specific experiences. I would write settings, dynamics, feelings that were familiar, sure—Chinatown, a Jewish parent, a lover a borough away, making eyes at someone on the train—but the stories themselves built from a place that I can only describe as imagination, as play. By being able to sit down and write for hours, with no other worries or commitments, I was able to fully occupy the world I was creating. I wrote not from a place of “what would happen next if this was happening to me?” but rather “what happens next in this world that I am making?” The answer—whatever I want.

Faculty Mentor: Brock Clarke

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