We tend to think of poetry and theatre as two very distinct genres; one built for page and one for stage. However, a quick look at the full range of work by Shakespeare, Homer, Derek Walcott, Ntozake Shange—and countless others—suggests an intimate tie between poet and playwright. As such, a study of the strong voices of powerful poet-figures in history invites many questions. Where do we see the persistence of storytelling and oral traditions in our rapidly changing, tech-driven culture? Can (and should) we value the rhetoric of ‘unreason’ or nonsense in some kinds of poetry? How do identity and national politics affect our reception of individual poets? In this course, students will be introduced to many poets of the 20th and 21st century whose live or recorded performances are particularly singular, moving and even culture-changing. Drawing on Ethnography, Linguistics, African-and African-American Studies and Performance Studies, we will study key figures from surrealism to slam. Along the way, we will also learn to close-read powerful oral and written texts, and to craft expressive poem-monologs of our own.

Each week, readings will be centered around a particular artist or group of artists. In class, we will read poems aloud, and listen to recordings of the the selected poets. Most classes will be composed of three parts:

1) discussion about the controversies and context surrounding a particular artist
2) analysis of the writing or performance of the actual poems
3) creative writing and dramatic exercises that will involve wordplay, mimicry, memorization, and experiments in the performance of poems.

MARA JEBSEN is a Senior Language Lecturer at NYU, where she specializes in teaching Tisch students. A poet, performer, and essayist, Mara has written for the arts and literatures column of the science and philosophy site 3quarksdaily. She has poems featured in the American Poetry Review, jubilat, Painted Bride Quarterly and Transition, Harvard's Afro-Diasporan journal. Her book “Alphabet,” a love-letter to the English language, came out in Spring 2016. A New York Foundation for the Arts fellow, Mara has also held feature performances at many universities along the east coast, is a veteran of New York's performance poetry scene, and sometime member of the interventionist arts group PUP (Pop Up Poets). She holds an MFA in poetry from New York University, and a BA in African and African American Studies from Duke University.
Expect some in-class writing at every class. In terms of informal writing, you will also make:

1. 4 ungraded but required creative pieces of poetry or monolog.
2. Notes. You should keep a Book of Ideas in which to record observations as you walk through the city and respond to class-prompts. In it you may also keep your notes on lectures, readings and films, and notes on poems and performances. I may not read all of this informal writing—you have the right to do a certain amount of writing that will not be evaluated.

Graded Writing & Presentations

- 2 graded response papers (3 pgs. each)
- 1 oral presentation
- 1 final research paper (7-9 pages)

Grades:

Your grade will be broken down as such:
- 20% for each of two 3-4 page response papers.
- 30% for a final 7-9 page research paper.
- 10% for a public speaking element.
- 10% participation in class discussion

(attendance is required and does not count as participation)
(you may revise one response paper for a higher grade)

The Assignments:

Response papers (due February 23rd, and March 30)

For each response paper, you will be given 2 or 3 prompts to help you organize your writing. Students are also always welcome to come up with their own prompts and ‘run them by me’ beforehand. The prompt will ask you to select one poem, analyze its construction and effect, (written and/or performed) and then put it into conversation with one or two of the more historical or conceptual texts from the class.

Final Paper: (due May 4)

Guided research:

Choose a poet who was a key figure in one of the modules we’ve covered, and research aspects of their artistic movement, and the time and place that helps us understand this figure. This final paper should not read like a book report—it will include literary analysis of a few of the poet’s works—and research into the competing ideas and debates of that poet’s time. Although poetry is not always overtly political, you will likely find that there are political inferences in the poems, and, as such, you can up making an argument about this artist’s impact, and why we might re-consider this artist’s voice in our current time. All research papers will be developed and brainstormed towards (with my help) before you each come up with a satisfying project.
Public Speaking  (on the week of April 27th)

Students have an option. You may either: memorize a long poem or dramatic monolog for performance, or develop a ‘pitch’ for your final paper, which should be presented only with brief reference to index cards. Each performance will be 3-5 minutes long, and should show some evidence of the student’s internalizing of many of studies of performances we will have completed by the end of the semester.

Reading

There will be 60-100 pages of reading due most weeks. In some weeks, the page count may be less, because the material (poetry, or essays by poets) will be quite dense, and will require slower, more analytical reading.

Reading Groups:

Twice a semester you will be part of a group whose job it is to communicate through e-mail (or in person) before class, in order to come up with discussions questions based on the readings. We will work on the art of posing a smart, reasonably provocative question that is based on observations of text.

Topics By Week

Jan 26th

Week One: In-class introduction to Contemporary Performing Poets:
Primary Reading: Select poems/youtube performances by:
Ross Gay, Patrick Rosal, Tracy Morris, Taylor Mali, Patricia Smith

Conceptual Reading:
Topic: Response to Thiong’o—

Feb. 2nd
Week Two: Surrealism & Automatic Writing
Focus on Jarry’s Play: Ubu Roi and Poems by Federico Garcia Lorca
Conceptual Reading: “Duende”—Lorca, “Pataphysics”—Alfred Jarry
“Manifestos of Surrealism”—Andre Breton
In-class Creative Writing: exquisite corpse
Topic: The uses of “non”sense and the subconscious: A kind of wisdom?

Feb. 9th and February 16th
Week Three and Four: Traditional Forms
Reading: poems by Edna Saint Vincent Millay
“An Invitation to Poetry” (137-181)
“Feeling and Precision”—Marianne Moore (332-339)
“Semiotics of Sex”—Jeanette Winterson (12-19)
Creative Writing: memorize or write: a sonnet
Topic: The role of tradition, the place of the intimacy in poetry

Feb. 23rd
Week Four: Negritude
Poets of Focus: Aimee Cesaire, Leopold Senghor (15 pages of poetry)
Conceptual Reading: “Discourse on Colonialism” + “Poetry and Knowledge” (pgs 200-243)
Creative Writing: a political poem
Topic: The Poet as Representative of Nation

March 2nd
Week Five: Select poets of Harlem Renaissance
Poems by: Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay
Creative Writing: A place-poem about where you are from.

March 9th
Week Six: “Confessional” Poems:
Selected Berryman Dream Songs and Recordings:
Conceptual Readings: “How to Do things With Words” (page 1-67)—J.L. Austin
Topic: Poem as Incantation, Curse and Law

March 23rd
Week Seven: Ginsberg & the Beat Generation
Readings: poems by Ginsberg, Kerouac (10 poems)
Conceptual reading: “Why We Curse” Steven Pinker (1-17) Parini “An Invitation to Poetry (200-240)
Topic: “Obscenity” and Poetry
March 30
Week Eight: Rebels
   Gill Scott Heron, Eileen Myles,
Readings TBA (60-90 pgs)
Select a volume of poetry by someone you admire.
Find performances by that artist.

April 6th
Week Nine: More Contemporary Poets (& Comics!)
and Devising a Research Question

April 13th
Week Ten: Attending Live Performances:
and Crafting your Own Expressive Monolog/Response Poem
Readings: Guided research/responses in Book of Ideas

April 20th
Week Eleven: Research Paper Workshop (Bring Laptops)
Readings:

April 27th
Week Twelve: Readings: (Pitches and Monologs)
Readings TBA (readings on public speaking)
(More contemporary poets: Aracelis Girmay, Saeed Jones,
Ocean Vuong)

May 4th
May Week Thirteen: Final Class: Celebration & voluntary readings
Policies:

Conferences and Workshops
You and I will schedule one required, and one optional conference during the semester. I will encourage you to visit my office hours and the writing center for additional feedback. I would really like to meet with each student one-on-one at least once this semester.

We will workshop one of your response papers before it is turned in—and will workshop the final research papers as well.

You are entitled to rewrite your first or second response paper before the end of the term. You are strongly encouraged to visit the Writing Center for a consultation. The Writing Center is an extremely useful tool—for students who are struggling, and for students who are doing well, but whose writing would benefit from another smart reader (which is to say, everyone). Appointments can be made at: 212-998-8866 or online, or at the Writing Center itself, 411 Lafayette, 4th Floor.

Standards:

All final papers must:

• Have a thoughtful beginning, middle, and end.
• Be grammatically correct and include proper citations.
• Reach and not exceed the page limits set forth in the assignment.
• Include the required number and kind of sources
• Explore and develop an original idea (of yours) in a coherent, interesting way.

Revisions:

Academic Integrity
Each student in this course is expected to abide by New York University’s Academic Integrity policies. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will not be tolerated. All students are encouraged to read carefully
the Statement of Academic Integrity posted at
http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ewp/html/policies_procedures.html. If you have questions as to how to cite
sources, see me.

A Note On Content:
Please be aware that everything you turn in as a homework assignment, draft, or final paper becomes a
public document. I will occasionally encourage you to be personal in your writing, but be prepared to
share whatever you write with your classmates.