

# ENGL 250-01: Special Topics in English—Poetry and Performance

Fall 2010

Instructor: Dr. Susan B.A. Somers-Willett  
Class information: PA 216, MW 1-2:15pm  
Blackboard site: <https://bb9prod.montclair.edu>

E-mail: [somerswilles@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:somerswilles@mail.montclair.edu)  
Office: Dickson Hall 316  
Office hours: M 2:45-5:30 and by appt.

## COURSE POLICY STATEMENT

### Course Description

From the bards to the beatniks, performance has been an important part of how poets write, read, and are received by public audiences. However, the majority of literary criticism considers poetry as merely a textual entity. Is our experience of a poem ever *just* textual? How do our understandings of poetry expand when we consider orality and performance as important aspects of a poem? Can we distinguish a poetry “reading” from a “performance”? How are traditional notions of poetry transformed by current aesthetic movements and cultural practices such as hip-hop, spoken word, and poetry slams, and how is such verse informed by social and commercial interests?

In this course, we’ll consider the functions of textuality, orality, and performativity in the work of twentieth-century and contemporary American poets as well as the social and commercial functions of verse in performance. To facilitate our discussion of these issues, we will read essays and poetry by a wide variety of authors, focusing on late twentieth-century and contemporary American poets. Among the traditions we will consider are Beat and jazz poetry, the Black Arts movement, avant-garde performance art, hip-hop, slam poetry, and verse in alternative media (such as film, television, popular music, and the Internet). In exploring what poetry is and does, how poetry reflects and shapes political expression, and how performance and media enable poetry to reach a larger audience, this course ultimately asks students to consider the uses of art in society. Because our discussions will hinge upon a large volume of media to be played in class, regular attendance is mandatory.

### Required Texts (available at the MSU bookstore)

*Spoken Word Revolution*, Ed. Mark Eleveld

*Spoken Word Revolution Redux*, Ed. Mark Eleveld

Selected readings available on Blackboard which you must print, read, and bring to class

### Grading

25% Position statement (5-7 pages)

25% Final paper on an author’s performance poetics (5-7 pages)

25% Performance of a poem in class

10% Performance reflection (2-3 pages)

15% Participation and contributions to class

### Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty is defined by the university as “any attempt by a student to submit as his/her own work that which has not be completed by him/her or to give improper aid to another student in the completion of an assignment, i.e., plagiarism” (please view the entire policy at <http://www.montclair.edu/deanstudents/regulations1.html>). This can include “double-dipping,” or

using one piece of writing to satisfy the requirements of more than one course. Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this classroom, and students engaging in academic dishonesty will be reported to the Dean of Students and punished to the full extent of university policy. A common disciplinary action in such cases is failure of the entire course. Repeat offenders may be expelled from the university.

### **Decorum and Conduct**

As a college student, you are expected to undertake your education with decorum. Our classroom will be treated as a free-speech zone, which means that all intellectually-informed opinions may be expressed. Keep in mind, however, that you will be held accountable for your views by both the instructor and the other students in the class, and that a college learning environment is designed so that students investigate their beliefs and personal biases. You are expected to behave with maturity and respect for others. If you exhibit behavior that is threatening or that disrupts the learning experience, disciplinary action will be sought according to university policy.

### **Attendance and Participation**

Attendance and participation are required in this course, and both will affect your grade. Missing **more than two classes** constitutes missing a significant part of the course and will affect your final grade. Should you miss class, you are responsible for meeting all assignment deadlines, contacting a member of class in order to keep up with readings and assignments, and notifying the instructor in advance of your absence if possible.

### **Deadlines**

All assignments are due at class time on the date posted. Because assignment deadlines are posted with ample advance notice, **extensions for assignments will not granted. If you are absent on a day when an assignment is due, you are still responsible for meeting that deadline.** You can accomplish this by either having a classmate turn in your work for you, turning the assignment in on Blackboard, or by e-mailing the assignment to the instructor as a Microsoft Word attachment or PDF.

In the event that extenuating circumstances prevent you from meeting an assignment deadline, students will be penalized one letter grade per class period that the assignment is late. For example, if a paper is due on a Tuesday at class time, a paper turned in between class on Tuesday and class on Thursday would receive a deduction of one letter grade; a paper turned in between class on Thursday and class on Tuesday would receive a deduction of two letter grades. Exceptions to this policy would have to be made *in advance* of an assignment deadline, not after the deadline has passed.

### **Formatting Papers**

Any piece of writing you do for this class should be typed, double-spaced, and set in a professional 12-point serif typeface such as Times New Roman (please no Arial or Courier) with 1-inch margins. You are *always* encouraged to use the first person in your writing for this class.

### **Information for Students with Disabilities**

Both the university and I are committed to keeping this classroom and course material accessible. If you have a learning or physical disability, please inform me at the beginning of the course either after class or in office hours. In the rare case where a class assignment is not accessible, an alternative assignment requiring the exercise of equal skill and knowledge can be arranged.

## Grading Policies

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The purpose of having a full range of grades (A through F) is to represent true levels of academic achievement. Although I'm sure everyone would like to make As or Bs on their class assignments, chances are that not everyone will receive them.

When receiving graded assignments, it may help to keep in mind these descriptions of different levels of student achievement:

- F – Represents failure (or no credit) and means that work was either completed at a level not worthy of credit, or not completed at all.
- D – Achievement worthy of credit, but which does not meet assignment/course requirements fully.
- C – Achievement that meets the assignment/course requirements in every respect and shows adequate understanding and application of the course material.
- B – Achievement *significantly above* the level necessary to meet assignment/course requirements. Such work demonstrates good application of instructional material and makes some successful and original connections beyond it.
- A – achievement that is *outstanding and unique* relative to the assignment/course requirements. Such work demonstrates clear and accurate independent thought and goes well beyond the application of instructional material to make new scholarly connections and understandings. The student's voice is polished and clearly original.

Please remember that a "C" is not a bad grade, merely an average one; that Bs represent good, above-average work; and As represent excellent work that achieves the very best in undergraduate or graduate thinking and writing. Also remember that in paper-writing assignments, length is independent of quality; a long paper does not necessarily indicate a good paper.

I will occasionally retain copies of student writing or exercises to serve as samples in the future. Please be assured that if I choose your paper as a sample, I will remove any identifying information from it and use it for instructional purposes only. If you prefer that your writing not be used for this purpose, simply let me know.

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**Abbreviation Key:** SWR=*Spoken Word Revolution* (listen to accompanying CD tracks)  
SWRR=*Spoken Word Revolution Redux* (listen to accompanying CD tracks)  
BB=Reading posted on Blackboard—PRINT AND BRING TO CLASS  
\*=In-class video/audio component

### SYLLABUS (subject to change)

You must bring texts to class on the days we discuss them.

#### WEEK 1: Intro

W 9/8 Class intro and discussion of policies  
Reading for next class handed out

#### WEEK 2: Readings or Performances?

M 9/13 Discuss handouts: Kennedy and Gioia, "What is Poetry?"; Far Side cartoon  
Lecture: Intro to popular verse in performance

W 9/15 SWR: Collins, "Poems on the Page"  
BB: Gioia, "Introduction to Tenth Anniversary Edition," "Preface," and "Can Poetry Matter?"

#### WEEK 3: Readings or Performances?

M 9/20 BB: Gioia, "Disappearing Ink"; Middleton, "The Contemporary Poetry Reading;"  
Wheeler, "Voice Identification"

W 9/22 **Position statement assigned**  
SWRR: Taylor, "Read by the Author"; Richards, "Parody's Hidden Agenda"  
BB: T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock;"\* Richards, "T.S. Eliot's Lost  
Hip Hop Poem;"\* Gibson, "Eulogy of Jimi Christ"\*

#### WEEK 4: Beat Poetry and Jazz Traditions

M 9/27 SWR: Beat Remnants—Introduction  
BB: Hudson "Poetics in Performance"; Ginsberg, "A Definition," "Six Gallery  
Reading," "Some Metamorphoses...," "Some Different Considerations...,"  
"Fourteen Steps for Revision," "Howl"\*

W 9/29 **Performance assigned**  
BB: Janssen, "Literary Kicks: Jazz;" Brooks, "We Real Cool"\* and "On Writing 'We  
Real Cool;'" Patchen, "Murder of Two Men..."  
Listen to jazz examples, Patchen, "Murder of Two Men..." and Jones/Baraka,  
"Bang Bang Outishly"\* and "Wailers"\* in class

**WEEK 5: Black Arts Poetry**

M 10/4 BB: Selections from “Black Arts Movement” website (Hiltz and Sell); Stewart, “Black Revolutionary Artist”; Karenga, “On Black Art”; Baraka, “SOS,” “Black Art,” “Dope”\*

W 10/6 **Final paper & proposal assigned**

BB: Brooks, “A Primer for Blacks;” \* “To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals;” Evans, “Status Symbol,” “I Am a Black Woman”; Giovanni, “For Saundra,” “Beautiful Black Men,” “Nikki-Rosa”\*; Al Young, “A Dance for Militant Dilettantes”\*  
View Sonya Sanchez DVD in class\*

10/7-10/10 **Dodge Poetry Festival, NJ Performing Arts Center, Newark**  
FYI <http://www.dodgepoetry.org/>

**WEEK 6: Performance Art and Performativity**

M 10/11 **Position Statement Due**

Lecture: Performance Art, Fluxus, Vaudeville/Cabaret  
In-class video clip: Laurie Anderson or *Paris is Burning*\*

W 10/13 BB: Diamond, “Introduction;” Dolan, “Def Poetry Jam”

Th 10/14 **Vona Groarke reading, Irish Poetry series**  
FYI Cohen Lounge, Dickson Hall, 1pm  
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**WEEK 7: Hip-Hop**

M 10/18 **Turn in copy of poem to perform**

SWRR: Gil Scott Heron, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”\*  
BB: Bradley, “Prologue and Rap Poetry 101;” Grandmaster Flash, “The Message”\*; Sugarhill Gang, “Rapper’s Delight”\*; Frankie Smith, “Double Dutch Bus”\*; Samuels, “The Rap on Rap”

W 10/20 SWRR: Coval, “Hip Hop Poetica;”  
SWR: Quickley, “Hip Hop Poetry;” Williams, “Amethyst Rocks”\*  
Listen in class to Saul Williams, “Ohm”\*; Greg Tate, “What is Hip-Hop?”\*; Celina Glenn, “Nail My Palms,”\* Poetree Chicago, “Spinning”\*; Lupe Fiasco, “Dumb it Down”\*

**WEEK 8: Slam**

M 10/25 BB: “Memorizing a Poem”  
View *Slamnation*

W 10/27 View & discuss *Slamnation*

Th 10/28 **Michael Langley reading, Irish Poetry series**  
FYI Cohen Lounge, Dickson Hall, 1pm

**WEEK 9: Slam, Identity, and the Dramatic Monologue**

- M 11/1      **Final Paper Proposal Due**  
 BB: Somers-Willett, "Slam and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity";  
 McDaniel, "Slam and the Academy"  
 SWR: Marc Smith, "About Slam Poetry," McCarthy, "Degrees of Difficulty," Mali,  
 "How to Write a Political Poem"\*; Bonair-Agard, "How Do We Spell Freedom"\*
- W 11/3      SWRR: Danley, "Funeral Like Nixon's,"\* Somers-Willett, "Ophelia"  
 BB: Howe, "Chapter 1: Overview," Browning, "My Last Duchess," Smith,  
 "Undertaker,"\* "Skinhead,"\* "Persona Poem," McDaniel, "Crash and Burn,"\* Sia,  
 "An Open Letter to the Entertainment Industry"\*

**WEEK 10: Conferences**

- M 11/8      Individual conferences to discuss research proposal, poetry recitation
- W 11/10      Individual conferences to discuss research proposal, poetry recitation

**WEEK 11: Global Poetry in Performance**

- M 11/15      Individual conferences to discuss research proposal, poetry recitation
- W 11/17      Discussion of poetry performance on the Global Stage  
 Selections from Papa Susso, "A Gathering of Elders," Shane Koyczan, "We Are  
 More"

**WEEK 12: Performance Workshop**

- M 11/22      **Revised paper proposals due**  
 BB: Kennedy and Gioia, "Reading and Hearing Poems Aloud"  
 In-class performance workshop  
 Techniques of verse in performance handout
- W 11/24      NO CLASS—rehearse poems & work on final paper

**11/25-11/28 Thanksgiving Break****WEEK 13: Rehearsals/Performances**

- M 11/29      In-class rehearsals
- W 12/1      Performances

**WEEK 14: Performances**

- M 12/6      Performances
- W 12/8      Performances

**WEEK 15: Course Wrap-Up**

- M 12/13      **Performance reflection and final paper due on Blackboard by 5 p.m.**

**There is no final exam for this course.**