

ARTS AND LETTERS 100g
PERFORMING RACE
T/TH 12:30-1:50PM
WPH 205
Fall 2014

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Performance has become one of the most generative theoretical concepts of the last twenty years, and this course will offer an introduction to a range of its usages in philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, and theatre. The course highlights performances that transgress our contemporary, culturally specific notions of fixed categories, including race, gender, sexuality, culture, and aesthetic genre.

The objective of the course is to explore performance as a theoretical concept and as bodily practice, and to foster a critical perspective on cinematic, televisual and theatrical performance. You should gain a more informed eye toward how narrative operates, how effects of the real are manufactured and created, and how to read racial representation in cultural productions. Toward that end, we will: 1) read critical and theatrical texts; 2) view films; 3) watch new television shows that feature people of color in leading roles, and 4) attend theatrical performances. The latter are important as the readings. My hope is that you will come to learn more about power and racial formation in the U.S. as you come to appreciate performance, both as an experience and as a theoretical concept. The course is designed to give you the foundations of a critical apparatus for your participation in and viewing of performance, especially with regard to issues of race and racial performativity/ performance.

Cultural theorists, from feminist/queer theory and philosophy have expanded performance as a theoretical concept beyond the stage, to include the practice of everyday life. For example, works in feminist philosophy alert us to the ways we “perform” our genders according to particular cultural conventions. We will explore the concepts of performativity and performance, theoretical tools that have had a profound impact on the ways scholars think about gender, racial, sexual, and cultural identities. Recently, Carbado and Gulati, scholars in critical race theory, have addressed these notions of performing identity in legal studies. They propose a notion of “working identity,” in which all people—but especially those who are marked by race and/or gender—“work” their identities in the workplace and in everyday life.

We will read and view works that expand the boundaries of aesthetic genre and our notions of the real. Pioneering artists in so-called documentary theatre take center stage here: actress and playwright Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, and the Chicano-Latino trio Culture Clash and their site-specific documentary theater and what I would call “performative history” in their California plays. David Henry Hwang later takes the subversion of genre (the “well-made play”) in a seemingly autobiographical

direction—or is autobiography the term that best describes his creative strategies? Do we call *Yellow Face* a comic memoir? A mockumentary? These works cross lines of race, gender, age and sexuality, as they complicate our notions of “the real” and “the fictive,” of “documentary” and “well-made play.” Such performances raise foundational questions: what counts as a play? What are the boundaries among drama, journalism, and ethnography?

Aesthetic works such as these enact the fluidity of what we call race, gender, and sexuality, thus opening these forces up to the play of culture, power, and history. Are we entering a “post-racial” era? Simultaneously, these artists and scholars demonstrate the persistence and intractability of social forces such as racism. In short, these works both destabilize our conventions and demonstrate the persistence of power-laden categories. How fluid is identity? How do we think about the forces of history, power and culture in relation to individual agency?

In our explorations of performance and race, we will also draw upon the exciting cultural resources of Los Angeles. Our class will be taking a trip to see *Animals Out of Paper* by acclaimed playwright Rajiv Joseph, which is having its West Coast premiere at East West Players in Los Angeles, the oldest Asian American theater troupe in the country. I am trying to arrange a visit with a representative of East West Players, the director, or the actor(s), after we see the performance.

I hope the course will provide you with a critical, theoretical vocabulary and way of encountering racial representations on stage, screen, and new media. What familiar racial tropes are being recirculated—or contested? What is the role of comedy in eliciting consent to racial hegemonies—and/or as enabling subversive and creative strategies of racial representation? What theories of narrative, drama, and the individual / whole subject undergird these hegemonies? Is the very genre of realism in literature and drama suspect when it comes to the reproduction of power relations? What theoretical assumptions underlie our “commonsense” notions of reading/ viewing?

In order to mobilize our critical faculties, we will view and discuss several new shows that are appearing on network television this fall: *Cristela*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, and *Blackish*. To keep the programs more comparable, we are concentrating on sit coms, but to an unprecedented degree, this fall season is host to shows that feature people of color as protagonists on the small screen. Our discussions should be intellectually engaging, politically probing, and fun!

I hope you will come to appreciate: 1) the excitement and power of performance and 2) new ways of thinking about race and identity, that disturb our common sense, that draw upon power-sensitive theories of analyzing social inequalities such as race, gender, and sexuality. The intersections of these issues will constitute our journey together this semester, exemplified in concepts of racial performance/ performativity.

BOOKS

The following books have been ordered from the USC bookstore:

- Catherine Belsey, **CRITICAL PRACTICE**
- Devon Carbado and Mitu Gulati, **ACTING WHITE? RETHINKING RACE IN POST-RACIAL AMERICA**
- Culture Clash (comedy troupe), **CULTURE CLASH IN AMERICA**
- David Henry Hwang, **YELLOW FACE**
- Rajiv Joseph, **ANIMALS OUT OF PAPER**
- Sarah Nilsen and Sarah E. Turner, eds. **THE COLOR-BLIND SCREEN: TELEVISION IN POST-RACIAL AMERICA**
- Anna Deavere Smith, **TWILIGHT – LOS ANGELES, 1992**

ARTICLES ON BLACKBOARD

- Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” **THEATRE JOURNAL**
- Devon Carbado and Mitu Gulati, selections from **ACTING WHITE? RETHINKING RACE IN POST-RACIAL AMERICA**
- Catherine Clément, “Dead Women” from **OPERA: OR THE UNDOING OF WOMEN**
- Dorinne Kondo, “(En)acting Theory” chapter from forthcoming book.
- Kondo, “The Drama Behind the Drama,” chapter from forthcoming book.
- Kondo, “(Re)visions of Race,” **THEATRE JOURNAL**
- Edward Said, Introduction, **ORIENTALISM**
- Said, Introduction, **COVERING ISLAM**

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Students must work independently on all individual assignments; collaborating on individual assignments is considered cheating and will be penalized accordingly. All USC students are responsible for reading and following the USC Student Conduct Code, which prohibits plagiarism. Some examples of behavior that is not allowed are: copying all or part of someone else’s work (by hand or by looking at others’ files, either secretly or if shown), and submitting it as your own; giving another student in the class a copy of your assignment solution; consulting with another student during an exam; and copying text from published literature without proper attribution. If you have questions about what is allowed, please discuss it with the instructor.

Students who violate University standards of academic integrity are subject to disciplinary sanctions, including failure in the course and suspension from the University. Since dishonesty in any form harms the individual, other students, and the University, policies on academic integrity will be strictly enforced.

REQUIREMENTS

READINGS

Each reading assignment should be completed before the designated day of the assignment. This is to ensure that we have a basis for discussion, and to provoke your thought on the readings BEFORE we encounter them in class. You will post on blackboard.usc.edu, on the discussion thread for the week.

For academic articles, think about the following questions:

- 1) What is the major point of the article? What is the author's argument?
- 2) Against whom does the author seem to be arguing?
- 3) If the rhetorical style is particularly interesting or remarkable, how does the author use rhetoric to accomplish his/ her ends?
- 4) What is your position vis-à-vis the author's argument?

For dramatic works, keep in mind the following:

- 1) What is the play "about?" What themes does the play engage?
- 2) Who are the major characters, and what are their "journeys?"
- 3) What is the structure of the play: e.g., classic Aristotelian drama, non-linear, etc.?
- 4) Make a note of the style of the play.
- 5) If you can, locate the play in a larger context of history: plays, too, can have "arguments," reacting to particular dramatic works or a history of dramatic work.

GRADING

▪ ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION 10%

You are allowed one EXCUSED absence during the semester. All other absences will count against the Attendance/ Participation portion of your grade. Coming to class late will also count against your grade. **Performances and film screenings are MANDATORY.** You are responsible for this material, which will feature in your paper topics and exams. I will also be calling on people randomly in class, and if you are unprepared, this will be taken into consideration in your grade.

▪ DISCUSSION BOARD REVIEWS 15%

You are responsible for contributing to an on-line discussion of the reading assignments for a given day. The online address for our course is the Blackboard site <http://blackboard.usc.edu>. You are allowed to abstain from two postings during the semester.

Your entry must:

- 1) Be at least 200 words.
- 2) Address all the readings for that day.
- 3) Ideally, respond to the entries already posted.
- 4) Include at least one question you have about the text. This should not be a yes or no question. Rather, you should articulate a concern or issue that you have about the text that could in turn spark discussion.
- 5) PLEASE POST BOTH IN THE DISCUSSION BOARD AND AS AN ATTACHMENT.

ENTRIES ARE DUE BY 1 P.M.OF THE DAY PRECEDING THE DAY WHEN READINGS ARE ASSIGNED. FOR EXAMPLE, FOR A TUESDAY CLASS, POST BY 1 P.M. MONDAY. LATE ENTRIES WILL NOT BE COUNTED.

BECAUSE THERE IS A NO-LAPTOP POLICY, PLEASE BE SURE YOU PRINT OUT YOUR RESPONSES IF YOUR MEMORY IS FAULTY. You may need to consult your questions and remarks for discussion purposes.

▪ **PAPERS: TWO FIVE-PAGE ESSAYS** **30%**

The first paper will be a review of theatre performances, given that the aim of the class is to sharpen your critical faculties so that you can more effectively analyze cultural productions. The second will be a review of the television shows and films we have seen. Please consult with me if you have questions. The papers are due on Blackboard at the beginning of class. Please remember: writing is rewriting! Aim for clarity and elegance! Consult the *MLA Style Guide*, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, and Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, for guidelines. The papers should adhere to the following specifications:

- 1) Five pages
- 2) Typewritten
- 3) 12-point font (Times or Times New Roman preferred)
- 4) Double-spaced
- 5) Your name and page number on each page.
- 6) All pages should be arranged in proper order and stapled together.
- 7) All quotations should have page references, and both the references and the bibliography should use a standard format (e.g., MLA, Chicago, APA).

▪ **GROUP PRESENTATION** **30 points** **10%**

The class will be divided into groups, and each group will be responsible for leading a discussion that analyzes the texts for a given series of assignments. The presentations should be at least 60 minutes long. We want to leave room for

feedback about the presentations/ performances and for questions after each session.

The presentation is meant to encourage participation and engagement in the readings. It should give you the opportunity to be creative, to express your ideas clearly, and to take responsibility for active learning. The best learning comes through taking responsibility for presenting the key issues raised by the readings. Feel free to consult with me as you conceptualize your presentation.

▪ **MIDTERM EXAM** **15%**

THE MIDTERM EXAM WILL BE A TAKE-HOME EXAM.

▪ **FINAL EXAM** **20%**

THE FINAL IS A TAKE-HOME EXAM. I WILL POST THE DUE DATE OF THE FINAL EXAM ONCE I HEAR FROM THE ARTS AND LETTERS OFFICE TO CONFIRM.

CONSULTATION WITH INSTRUCTOR

Each person is required by the General Education office to consult with me at least once during the semester. You may wish to discuss one of your papers, the presentation, or the readings. If you do not meet with me, the absence will count against your participation grade.

SCHEDULE FLEXIBILITY

The following schedule should be taken as a guideline. Please be prepared to be flexible to some degree, as the finalizing of our schedule is dependent on the vagaries of theater performances and the demands facing our guest speakers. If there are changes in the syllabus, I will distribute a new class schedule.

POLICY ON LAPTOPS, PHONES, AND OTHER DEVICES

This is a device-free class. I will happily confiscate any phones, laptops, ipads or other technology for the duration of the class. PLEASE PRINT OUT READINGS, YOUR QUESTIONS/ BLACKBOARD RESPONSES, if you need to refer to them during class.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week 1

Tuesday, 8/26

Introduction

Race and performativity: the post-racial?

Thursday, 8/28

Film: *Twilight: Los Angeles*

Multiple perspectives on race and urban uprising/ riot/ civil unrest

Week 2

Readings:

Twilight: book

Kondo, "The Drama Behind the Drama."

Group One presentation

Thursday, 9/5

Films:

Anna Deavere Smith, HBO Master Class

Anna Deavere Smith, "Let Me Down Easy."

Week 3

Tuesday 9/9

Gender and Racial Performativity

Readings:

Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution."

Kondo, "(En)acting Theory."

Catherine Belsey, Introduction to *Critical Practice*

Thursday, 9/11

Interview each other

Week 4

Tuesday, 9/16

Performance I

Thursday, 9/18

Performance II

Week 5

Tuesday 9/23

Ayad Akhtar, "How to Read a Play."

Rajiv Joseph, *Animals Out of Paper*.

Group Two Presentation

Thursday 9/25

No Class; class will be attending the play at East West Players on Sunday, September 28.

WE WILL ATTEND THE 2 PM MATINEE PERFORMANCE OF *ANIMALS OUT OF PAPER*.

We will make arrangements in class on Tuesday.

Week 6

Tuesday 9/30

Visit with the creative team.

Thursday 10/2

Paper due; analysis of the play and the visit with the creative team.

Week 7

Tuesday 10/7

Performance and Performativity in Everyday Life

Readings:

Marcus and Moya, *Doing Race*

Acting White

Introduction

Group Three presentation

Thursday 10/9

Film: *Bamboozled*

Week 8

Tuesday 10/14

Finish *Bamboozled*

Acting White, selections.

Group Four presentation

Thursday 10/16

Midterm

Week 9

Tuesday 10/21

Bending race and genre

Readings:

Edward Said, Introduction to *Orientalism*

David Henry Hwang, *Yellow Face*

Group Five Presentation

Thursday 10/23

Television program:

Fresh off the Boat

Week 10

Tuesday 10/28

Documentary Theatre and Political Comedy

Readings: *Culture Clash in America*

Kondo, “(Re)visions of Race”

Group Six Presentation

Thursday 10/30

Film:

Culture Clash, excerpts from their television show

Culture Clash in America

Week 11

Tuesday 11/4

Protagonism and Narrative Structure

Catherine Clément, chapter from *Opera: or the Undoing of Women*

Sarah Turner, “BBFFs: Interracial Friendships in a Post-Racial World.”

Group Seven Presentation

Thursday 11/6

Paper due.

Week 12

Tuesday 11/11

Latina representations on the small screen

Reading:

Philip Kretsedemas, “Mainstreaming Latina Identity,” from *The Colorblind Screen*.

Television program:

Cristela

Thursday 11/13

Television Program:

Blackish

Week 13

Tuesday 11/18

Representations of Arabs and Muslims

Evelyn Alsultany, “Representations of Arabs and Muslims in Post-9/11 Television Dramas,” from *The Colorblind Screen*.

Dina Ibrahim, “Maybe Brown People Aren’t So Scary If They’re Funny: Audience Readings of Arabs and Muslims on Cable Television Comedies,” from *The Colorblind Screen*.

Edward Said, selection from *Covering Islam*.

Group Eight Presentation

Thursday 11/20

Films:

Tyrant or Homeland

Week 14

Tuesday: no class.

Thanksgiving Break 11/27

Week 15

Tuesday, 12/2

Recentring Whiteness, Rethinking Colorblindness

Readings:

Sarah Nilsen and Sarah Turner, eds. Introduction to *The Colorblind Screen*

Sarah Nilsen, "Some People Just Hide in Plain Sight: Historicizing Racism in Mad Men,"
in *The Colorblind Screen*.

Janice Peck, "Oprah Winfrey: Cultural Icon of Mainstream (White) America," in *The Colorblind Screen*.

Presentation: Group Nine

Thursday 12/4

Conclusion

Take-home exam handed out. Due date still in negotiation with the Arts and Letters Office.