

**CORE 101**  
**VULNERABILITY**  
**FALL 2023**  
**KAP 137**

Professor Dorinne Kondo

Office: KAP 448F

Office Hours: by appointment

Vulnerability is a constitutive contradiction of our existence as living beings. Our selves/ bodies open us to the world (Merleau-Ponty); our human capacity to affect and be affected by others (Deleuze, affect theory) represents a “primary vulnerability” (Butler) that enables our connections with others in relations of interdependence and mutual susceptibility.

Simultaneously, our primary vulnerability opens us to harm. Recent fundamental revisions of “Man” and “the Human” that ground the humanities reveal the ways conventional ideas of the Human can disavow interconnectedness to the world. Vulnerability provides a conceptual frame to theorize this disavowal and to provide alternatives.

We will explore vulnerability as:

- 1) **Openness to others**, to relationality, to care, to political “resistance,” including cross-racial alliances and tensions. Live performance enacts a kind of mutual susceptibility, as performers and audience influence and affect each other.
- 2) **Structural Inequality**, particularly racism, geopolitical, gender/ sexuality and class inequality and other forms of structured inequality as “vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore), including anti-BIPOC, anti-queer/trans violence, gendered violence.
- 3) **(Dis)ability/ illness** spotlights the performative dimension largely ignored in theoretical literatures on disability and debility as aspects of racial and colonial power (Bell, Chen, Kim, Puar). How are marginalized populations kept marginal through vulnerability to maiming, illness, slow attrition over time? Disability studies tends to presume a white subject, while critical race studies generally assumes an able-bodied subject. What historical and cultural assumptions shape what / whom we call “sick” or “disabled” ? Can disability/ illness provide alternative models that contests relentless capitalist productivity/ productivism/ ableism?

- 4) **Sexual and racial harassment;** USC is a prime site to explore this topic. We will focus primarily on the positionality of Asian/ American women, but this is an issue for all people (especially of the global majority) and of all genders/ sexualities.

By the end of the semester, students will have gained exposure to a range of fields, including: critical race studies, cultural theory, affect theory, Anthropology and ethnography, creative nonfiction, drama, literature, and performance studies/ theater. The professor is a performance studies scholar and playwright, and we will accordingly engage the mutual susceptibility of audiences and performers through attending theater and engaging in acting exercises. Among our theater visits will be a performance of Adam Rapp's *The Sound Inside* at Pasadena Playhouse, attendance at a Visions and Voices event, and a workshop production of Professor Kondo's play *Seamless* at Morgan-Wixson Theater in Santa Monica, part of their New Works Festival.

For extra credit, students may also attend another workshop production in the series of New Works, that include plays about Jewish/queer identities, BIPOC people who are in a position of economic precarity, compelling them to sell their blood to plasma banks. The work of playwright/ actress Anna Deavere Smith, a pioneer of verbatim/ documentary theater, will feature prominently, drawing upon Kondo's experience as a dramaturg for three world premieres of Smith's plays. This past spring, Kondo was a dramaturg and a character interviewed and performed in Smith's renowned work, produced in a 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary revival at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

This era of (ostensibly post-) COVID and of racial reckoning is a particularly auspicious time for us to engage the various meanings of vulnerability.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Analysis and discussion of theoretical texts in performance studies, critical race studies, queer theory and affect theory, around the issues of power, identity, vulnerability.
- Meta-learning: how to synthesize and present material and how to structure a good discussion. Students will:
  - Construct a useful discussion question that enables the class to guide discussion based on student interest.
  - Present the main ideas of the readings/ viewings to the class and synthesize/ organize discussion questions posted by classmates.
- Exploration and appraisal of the learning offered by “corporeal epistemologies”—that is, embodied knowledge based on experience. Students will:
  - Experience and draw analytic/ theoretical conclusions from interviewing, observing, and performing another person.
  - View theater performances and analyze them for theme, production values, the political economy of theater. What kinds of knowledge do we derive from viewing a theater performance that differs from / enhances the reading of a dramatic text?
  - Experiment with different forms of knowledge production, including the student's creative work.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- I. **PARTICIPATION** **25%**  
Attendance, demonstrable familiarity with the texts and performances, courtesy and interest in your colleagues' arguments, participation in discussion.
- II. **WEEKLY POSTINGS** **20%**  
**Post on the Discussion Board on Blackboard a SHORT paragraph and a DISCUSSION QUESTION** on each reading. The paragraph should summarize the main argument of the piece. I need to know that you have actually read it, so no AI please!  
The discussion question should not be simply informational, though feel free to post or to mention an informational question. We can discuss this in class. A question that remains at the level of the "personal" or that requires speculation for which we have no answer is not helpful. Consult Tompkins's article on how to write a good question. We will discuss a reasonable due date and time for the weekly postings during our first meeting. The presenters need to be able to incorporate your discussion questions into our presentations. I also need the time to read the postings and questions before class.
- III. **PRESENTATION** **10%**  
**Each person will present the readings for the week. Depending on how many are in the class, we may organize ourselves in groups.** The goal is to spark discussion, so do summarize the readings quickly, but collate the questions from your classmates and add your own. The presenters need not post during the week they present.
- IV. **PERFORMANCE** **10%**  
Interviewing and performing each other, based on Anna Deavere Smith's acting theory.
- V. **MIDTERM ESSAY** **15%**  
Analysis of workshop production of SEAMLESS. See Course Schedule for details. Due October 18.
- VI. **FINAL PROJECT** **20%**  
**Analytic, creative, or mixed-genre project;** my preference would be for you to explore your vulnerability and try something different! Feel free to experiment with genre, as the weekly postings should be indicative of your analytic strengths. The project should illustrate the theme of vulnerability and be inspired by/refer to at least 2 texts or activities from the course. A paper or written creative project should be no more than 7 pages; a performance or film no more than 5 minutes. Please include

some kind of writing in your final project: that is, a film or performance should be accompanied by text, whether lyrical or discursive.

**PLEASE REMEMBER THAT WRITING IS REWRITING. RARELY ARE HASTILY WRITTEN FIRST DRAFTS ADEQUATE. “Good writing” will enable you to do well in this course. DO NOT USE AI TO WRITE ANYTHING THAT IS PART OF A COURSE ASSIGNMENT.**

### **STATEMENT ON AI**

Since creating, analytical, and critical thinking skills are part of the learning outcomes of this course, all assignments should be prepared by the student working individually or in groups. Students may not have another person or entity complete any substantive portion of the assignment. Developing strong competencies in these areas will prepare you for a competitive workplace. Therefore, using AI-generated tools is prohibited in this course, will be identified as plagiarism, and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

### **READINGS**

#### **Articles on Blackboard from the following texts:**

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Butler, Judith, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay. *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, selections.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2006.

Chou, Elaine. “What White Men Say in Our Absence.” *The Cut*, 24 March 2022.

<https://www.thecut.com/2022/03/what-white-men-say-in-our-absence.html>

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Khieu Linh Carolyn Valverde, et. al. “The Killing Machine: Exposing the Health Threats to Asian American Women Scholars in Academia.” In Valverde and Dariotis. *Fight the Tower*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019.

Lin, Lana. *Freud’s Jaw and Other Lost Objects: Fractured Subjectivity in the Face of Cancer*.

New York: Fordham, 2017.

### **Books, Plays, Podcasts:**

Grise, Virginia. *Your Healing is Killing Me*. Pittsburgh: Plays InVerse Press, 2017.

Hersey, Tricia. *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*. New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2022.

Kondo, Dorinne. *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Arts of Racial Reckoning," Episode 1, with Anna Deavere Smith, Episode 3, with Elizabeth Alexander. <https://linktr.ee/dorinnekondo>

Lorde Audre. *The Cancer Journals*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2020.

Rapp, Adam. *The Sound Inside*. New York: Concord Theatricals, 2018.

Miller, Chanel. *Know My Name: A Memoir*. New York: Viking, 2019.

Smith, Anna Deavere. *Twilight: Los Angeles*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.

### **STATEMENT FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in GFS 120 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website for [DSP \(https://dsp.usc.edu/\)](https://dsp.usc.edu/) and contact information: (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) [dspfrontdesk@usc.edu](mailto:dspfrontdesk@usc.edu).

### **STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. SCampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the University Student Conduct Code (see University Governance, Section 11.00), while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A.

### **EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS/ COURSE CONTINUITY IN A CRISIS**

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership

will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies. See the university's site on [Campus Safety and Emergency Preparedness](#).

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

August 23

### **Introduction**

Vulnerability: Open to others, Open to Harm

Self-introductions and course logistics.

Please consult Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "We're Not Here to Learn What We Already Know," to learn how to frame a discussion question. It is available to you as a resource in the Content selection on Blackboard.

August 30

### **Vulnerability: Disability, Performance, Racial Relationality**

Read and Post on the following chapters from Kondo, *Worldmaking*.

Acknowledgments

Overture

The Drama Behind the Drama

Chapter 6, "Seamless"

Listen to and Post on Kondo Podcast, "The Arts of Racial Reckoning", Episode 1 with Anna Deavere Smith.

We will meet on Zoom.

September 6

### **Vulnerability and Susceptibility to Each Other**

Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight*

Kondo, "(En)acting Theory."

Smith, Excerpt from *Talk to Me*.

We will discuss the readings and view videos of Smith's work in class. During the second hour, you will interview each other. Bring recording equipment to class or arrange to meet your partner outside of class.

September 13

### **Performances**

Your performance should be verbatim, using Smith's techniques and acting theory as much as possible. Using a script would be useful; some people are able to listen to the audio recording simultaneously and perform, but unless you have rehearsed this technique extensively, it will probably be difficult. Many actors could not do this. Feel free to bring props, costume. What was your interviewee wearing? How did s/he/ they sit? Stand? Move? Gesture? Where did the voice change, alter rhythm, rise or fall in inflection and volume? How can you "walk in someone's words", to use one of Smith's characterizations of her work?

September 20

### **What is Power?**

Michel Foucault, excerpts from *The History of Sexuality*.

Part One (it's one chapter); Part Four (Chapter 1, "Objective" and Chapter 2, "Method", and Part Five (again, it's one chapter).

Judith Butler, "Preface" to *Gender Trouble*, 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.

September 27

### **Sexual and racial harassment**

Chanel Miller, *Know my Name: A Memoir*

Elaine Chou, "What White Men Say in Our Absence."

October 4

### **Performance:**

Adam Rapp, *The Sound Inside*, Pasadena Playhouse, 8 pm.

Post on the play (script). We will discuss from 4-5 pm, and begin our discussion on October 11 with a debriefing discussion.

October 11

### **Vulnerability: Slow Death, Vulnerability to Premature Death**

Berlant, from *Cruel Optimism*.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson, from *Golden Gulag*.

Valverde, et.al., “The Killing Machine,” from *Fight the Tower*.

Works on microaggression: Chester Pierce, David R. Williams.

October 14                   **Performance Date: Morgan-Wixson Theater New Works Festival**

4 PM: “Some Type of Ecstasy” by Khari Wyatt, extra credit.

**8 PM: “Seamless” by Dorinne Kondo, required.**

October 18                   **By class time, turn in an analysis of the workshop production of SEAMLESS: 3 pages exclusive of references, double-spaced, 12 point font, 1 inch margins. Analyze the themes of the work, the venue, audience, production value (lighting, sound, visuals), acting, casting. How did this performance compare with the script published in Kondo’s book? If you were directing, what would you have done differently?**

October 25                   **Performativity, precarity, reparative creativity**

Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” from *Precarious Life*.

Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay, “Introduction,” from *Vulnerability in Resistance*.

Kondo, “Theoretical Scaffolding”, Entr’actes, from *Worldmaking*.

November 1                   **Illness, Rage, the Reparative**

Lana Lin, film, “The Cancer Journals, Revisited”

\_\_\_\_\_, excerpts from *Freud’s Jaw*.

Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, excerpts.

November 8                   **Healing? Resilience?**

Virginia Grise, *Your Healing is Killing Me*

Sarah Bracke, “Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience,” in Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay, eds.



- November 15            **Upending Capitalism? Rest as Resistance**  
 Joanna Hedva, “Sick Woman Theory.”  
 Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*
- November 22            **Thanksgiving Recess**
- November 29            **Final presentations.** Final projects due.

## DISCUSSION NORMS

### Respect

- Listen respectfully, without interrupting.
- Comments that you make (asking for clarification, sharing critiques, expanding on a point, etc.) should reflect that you have paid attention to the speaker’s comments.
- Listen carefully to what others are saying even when you disagree with what is being said.
- Always use a respectful tone.
- Avoid inflammatory language.
- Avoid put-downs (even humorous ones).
- No name-calling or other character attacks.
- No interrupting or yelling.
- Be aware of the fact that tone of voice and body language are powerful communicators. Some postures or facial expressions (e.g., crossed arms, eye rolls, loud sighs) can silence, provoke, intimidate, or hurt others. Others (e.g., facing and looking at the speaker, staying quiet, nodding) can show you are listening respectfully
- Refrain from responding to others’ statements by applause, groans, or other noise.
- Make eye contact with other students and refer to classmates by name.
- Trust that people are always doing the best they can.
- Be courteous. Don’t interrupt or engage in private conversations while others are speaking.
- Don't start side conversations parallel to the main discussion.
- Only make statements about an issue, person, or group if you are prepared to make the statement directly and respectfully to a person to whom the issue is important.
- Don't present objections as flat dismissals (leave open the possibility that there's a response).

### Constructiveness

- Criticize ideas, not individuals or groups.
- Focus on ideas, not personalities.

- Respect others' rights to hold opinions and beliefs that differ from your own.
- Build on one another's comments; work toward shared understanding.
- It's also always OK to be constructive, building on a speaker's statement or strengthening their position. Even objections can often be cast in a constructive way.
- Think before you speak.
- Support your statements. Use evidence and provide a rationale for your points.
- Ask questions when you do not understand; do not assume you know what others are thinking.
- Ask a question to explore areas of uncertainty or discomfort.
- Try to see the issue from the other person's perspective before stating your opinion.
- **Always have your book/readings in front of you.**
- Use "I" statements to state your views. For example, "I notice that when I'm with my friends we pay attention differently" is more constructive than "When you're with friends you pay attention differently."
- Respond to what is said in class, without attributing motivation to the speaker (this can be very challenging).

### Inclusivity

- Let other people speak. Once you are done speaking, let at least two other people talk before you speak again.
- Try not to let your question (or your answer) run on.
- Do not monopolize discussion.
- Know that it is okay to be emotional about issues and to name those emotions.
- It's OK to ask a question that you think may be unsophisticated or uninformed.
- Don't worry about impressing people.
- Try not to silence yourself out of concern for what others will think about what you say.
- Don't use unnecessarily offensive examples.
- If you are offended by anything said during discussion, acknowledge it immediately.
- If you are offended by something or think someone else might be, speak up and don't leave it for someone else to have to respond to it.
- Consider anything that is said in class strictly confidential. We want to create an atmosphere for open, honest exchange.
- Keep confidential any personal information that comes up in class.
- Take responsibility for the quality of the discussion.
- Recognize and/or remember that we have different backgrounds.
- Consider who gets left out, who is marginalized, under-represented, or erased by particular claims. So, for example, we could say, "That's an image of an ideal family," or we could say, "That may be an image of an ideal family for many middle-class white heterosexuals."
- Be careful about putting other students on the spot. Do not demand that others speak for a group that you perceive them to represent.

- Be aware of different communication styles--the ways we communicate differently based on our backgrounds and current contexts--and look for ways to expand your communication tool kits.
- Our primary commitment is to learn from each other. We will listen to each other and not talk at each other. We acknowledge differences amongst us in backgrounds, skills, interests, and values. We realize that it is these very differences that will increase our awareness and understanding through this process.

### Procedure

- Wait to be recognized by the instructor or discussion leader before speaking.
- Make a single point each time you speak, rather than making a series of statements at once.

### NETIQUETTE, WHEN CLASS MEETS VIA ZOOM

- Find a quiet place with good Wifi. The room assigned to our class should always be available.
- Keep your camera on. If there is a reason you cannot activate your camera, please let us know in advance. We are trying to reproduce the feeling of a seminar, so everyone should be visible.
- Mute your microphone when you are not speaking.
- Because the class goes till almost 7 pm, if you need to get a snack during our break you may eat something as long as you are still able to discuss without chewing as you talk!
- Raise your hand and use chat if you wish to speak. I will do my best to call on people in order, but please let me know, of course, if I have inadvertently overlooked someone.

Looking forward to a productive, generative, thought-provoking semester together! Let's have a 2023 that offers understanding, peace, solace, and insight into urgent issues that shape our everyday lives.