

Performance Matters

Syllabus for Race, Performance, and Media Studies

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Volume 8, Number 2, 2023

The Syllabus is the Thing: Materialities of the Performance Studies Classroom

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099877ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1099877ar>

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Publisher(s)

Institute for Performance Studies, Simon Fraser University

ISSN

2369-2537 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Petty, M. & Chambers-Letson, J. (2023). Syllabus for Race, Performance, and Media Studies. *Performance Matters*, 8(2), 6–10.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1099877ar>

Article abstract

A reflection on the serious work and pressing exigencies of interdisciplinary teaching at the intersection of media studies, performance studies, and race and ethnic studies, this syllabus is both a portrait of pandemic pedagogy and a reflection of the work of friendship and mutual struggle.

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PEDAGOGICAL DUETS

Syllabus for Race, Performance, and Media Studies

Miriam J. Petty and Joshua Chambers-Letson

The two of us joined the faculty at Northwestern in 2011, and we have thought, worked, and struggled closely alongside each other since. We work from different interdisciplinary junctures: Miriam is a film historian and media studies scholar and Joshua is situated in performance studies. But our scholarly and pedagogical investments converge around a shared interest in the relationship between race and racial meaning, embodiment, and aesthetic form. We both spend a lot of time thinking about how Black and Asian folk, as well as Latinx and Indigenous people, have worked with performance, art, film, and media to rethink and reorganize the orders of (white) power to which minoritarian life is subject. That conversation has happened in coffee shops (as one of us wrote a history of Black stardom in classic Hollywood cinema and the other wrote a treatise on law and performance in Asian America), in parking lots (as we ran fugitive from the pressures of campus life to a McDonald's, inhaling fries and burgers in the car, debating Fanon, Tyler Perry, or Janet Jackson), in living rooms, Facetimes, late-night calls, and shared flights to conferences (where we might have been thinking through a passage from Hortense Spillers or we might have been watching *Magic Mike*). These conversations were playful, but they were also deadly serious. The storm of racial animus and ordering that has always, by design, shaped life within the sphere of US American empire was the environment in which these conversations unfolded. And as the gathering clouds seized the sky and increasingly stole the light in 2020, the questions grew saturated and heaving in their weight and import. In the winter of 2021, we translated our conversation into a doctoral level seminar on Race, Performance, and Media Studies.

In some ways, this syllabus is utterly raw and bare-boned. It has the feeling of a script or a performance score, offering a stripped impression of the idea for the event, while hardly capturing the complexity of what happened in the room or on the screen. More than this, given the ongoing conditions of the pandemic, there was no gathering in any room as the class was carried out entirely online. By January of 2021, everyone was past being burnt out. We were living in the wake of a hundred thousand upheavals including the swelling waves of death, sickness, and political/social/economic instability produced by the pandemic; the continued assaults on Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous life that characterize life in these United States; the uprisings in defence of Black life in the wake of George Floyd's and Breonna Taylor's murders (and many more besides); the police crackdowns that were to follow the uprisings; the racial terrorism that was the 2020 election; the political and psychological violence spanning the time from election day to January 6 and after; the uptick in violent, even murderous assaults on Asian people (and Asian femmes and elders in particular); the frontal assaults on trans life and livability; the continued regimes of exploiting, incarcerating, and deporting Black and Brown migrants; and the material and psychic effects of an order of overwork (at the university) that was grinding everyone to a pulp.

Miriam J. Petty is an associate professor of media studies at Northwestern University. She is the author of *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* (University of California Press, 2016), winner of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Best First Book Award for 2016-2017. **Joshua Chambers-Letson** is a professor of performance studies and Asian American studies at Northwestern University. His most recent book is *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York University Press, 2018), the 2019 winner of both the Association of Theatre in Higher Education's Outstanding Book Award and the American Society for Theatre Research's Eroll Hill Award.

We set out to construct a class that would keep these conditions in mind. Units were typically designed to stimulate thought around a cluster of questions rather than to (re)produce an order of epistemological mastery. We tried to think as porously as possible, associatively, loosely knit, playfully, thoughtfully, but also critically and with the depth and dedication that the questions required of us. Rather than overload with reading, we streamlined to a few exquisite texts a week. We hoped that the focusing of assignments would allow the students the time and space to sit with the density and weight of the text, film, or documentation of a performance and to linger in its contours and corners. We asked interlocking questions: How has race been constructed and transformed through media and performance cultures? How do the histories of the live display of racialized and colonized peoples structure the performativity of race and racial performance in the contemporary moment? How do the industrial conditions of cinematic production frame and delimit our understandings of Black life, Black film and Black possibility? In what ways have artists of colour, from Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* to the films of Camille Billops, deployed the aesthetic to navigate the crushing orders of racism or open lines of flight toward otherwise ways of being in the world? Does the aesthetic help us to visualize and embody new and different ways of being-in-difference with each other, or does it keep us trapped in someone else's script? To help explore these questions, we invited three brilliant visitors—performance studies scholar Vivian Huang, film scholar Michael Gillespie, and artist Dorian Wood—to join us in study and community. The grace and generosity of their presence and intelligence enriched our discussions, refining and reshaping the questions and conversation.

Much of the syllabus is straightforward. Clusters of readings and/or a screening. Our grad seminars are typically three hours. Understanding the difficulty of remaining present on Zoom, we invited students to join us for a semi-structured seminar discussion for the first hour and a half of the session. At that point, we released the group, but remained online for the next hour and a half for anyone who wanted to stay and continue a looser, freeform discussion about the course or their work. And in those conversations and clusters of chat, in the midst of our shared isolation and fear, we tried to make the class into a forum for being and thinking with others. On the first day we watched the epic “Brand New Day” sequence from *The Wiz* and every session from there on out we thought seriously, but also lovingly, and carefully, about the role minoritarian performance and media can play in bringing such a day into the horizon of a new now.

SYLLABUS

Race, Performance, and Media Studies

Winter 2021

Profs. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Miriam J. Petty

Wednesday, 2:00–4:50 p.m. Central Standard Time

Course Description:

Frantz Fanon once wrote of the experience of racialization's revelation as occurring in a circuit of performance, film, and spectatorship. Recognizing that media and performance—medium and the body—play related but divergent role in the making and unmaking of race, this course draws two distinct disciplinary formations (media studies and performance studies) into conversation to engage and explore emergent and enduring texts relevant to issues of race, performance, and media in the US and beyond, from a variety of disciplines, eras, approaches, and schools of thought. Engaging with film, performance art, television, popular musical performance and the music video, as well as criticism and theory from Black studies, Asian American studies, and Latinx studies, with particular emphasis on Black feminisms and queer of colour critique, artists, works, and theorists studied may

include Tina Campt, Samantha Shephard, Coco Fusco, Adrian Piper, Camille Billops and Jim Hatch, Vivian Huang, Arthur Knight, Arthur Jaffa, Hortense Spillers, Midori Yoshimoto, Frantz Fanon, Yoko Ono, Nina Simone, Janet Jackson, Dorian Wood, Vivian L. Huang, Daphne Brooks, and Michael Gillespie.

1/13 – Introductions, Provocations, Welcomes

Read:

Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness”

Screen:

“[Brand New Day](#)” from *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978)

Terrell Grice - Reaction video to “[Tamela Mann / Change Me](#)” (YouTube)

1/20 – Mediated Sights and Sounds of Blackness

Read:

Miriam J. Petty, “Lincoln Perry’s Problematic Stardom” from *Stealing the Show*

Tina Campt, “The Visual Frequency of Black Life”

Jennifer Stoeber, “A Voice to Match All That” from *The Sonic Color Line*

Screen:

Love is the Message, the Message is Death (Arthur Jaffa, 2016, 7 min)

1/27 – Performance in the Flesh

Read:

Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”

Daphne Brooks, “Nina Simone’s Triple Play”

Joshua Chambers-Letson, “Nina Simone and the Work of Minoritarian Performance”

Screen:

Nina Simone Live in (England) ’68 (22 mins)

2/3 – Black Film as Genre?

Guest Visitor: Michael Gillespie

Read:

Michael Gillespie, “Introduction” and “Black Maybe” from *Film Blackness*

Monica White Ndounou, “Breaking the Chains of History and Genre” from *Shaping the Future of African American Film*

Screen:

Medicine for Melancholy (Barry Jenkins, 2008, 88 min)

2/10 – An Other History of Live Performance

Read:

Coco Fusco, “The Other History of Intercultural Performance”

José Esteban Muñoz, “Latina Performance and Queer Worldmaking”

Jodi Byrd, “Introduction” and “This Island’s Mine” from *The Transit of Empire*

Screen:

Couple in a Cage (Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña, 1993, 32 min)

2/17 – Mediating Blackness, Gender, History, and “Respectability”

Read:

Valerie Smith, “Telling Family Secrets”

Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, “The Politics of Respectability” from *Righteous Discontent*

Screen:

Finding Christa (Camille Billops and James Hatch, 1991, 55 min) and
Suzanne, Suzanne (Camille Billops and James Hatch, 1982, 30 min)

2/24 – Loquacious and Inscrutable Objecthood

Read:

Adrian Piper, “Talking to Myself”
 Midori Yoshimoto, “The Message is the Medium” from *Into Performance*
 Vivian L. Huang, “Inscrutably, Actually”

Screen:

Cut Piece (Yoko Ono, 1965, 8 min)
Cornered (Adrian Piper, 1988, 16 min)

3/3 – Madea’s Baby, Tyler’s Maybe

Read:

Arthur Knight, “Star Dances”
 Samantha Sheppard, “She Ain’t Heavy, She’s Madea”

Screen:

Madea’s Family Reunion (Tyler Perry, 1992, 132 min)

3/10 – Love Will Never Do (Without You)

Guest Visitor: Dorian Wood (Wood’s [website](#).)

Read:

Lisa Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents”
 Anthony DeCurtis: “Janet Jackson: Free at Last” (*Rolling Stone*)

Screen:

Rhythm Nation 1814 (The Short Film) (Janet Jackson, 1989, 31 min)

Listen:

Dorian Wood, [Rhythm Nation 1814 \(Live at Human Resources LA, 1/17/19\)](#)

ASSIGNMENTS

Fuck Grading: don’t worry about grades. You get an A for being. There is an ocean of uncertainty in life rn. This class is not about being assessed by an external authority or checked by the institution. It is about finding a foothold in thinking, film, performance, art, and communion during a period of seismic shifts. Think of it as a “study session.” We are not compelling you to do anything, just inviting you. The assignments (reading and writing) are for your development. Do them as you are able. Keep up with the readings and assignments to the degree that you’re able to function. Be present to yourself and to the ideas in this class. And put them to work to the degree that it does some work for you. We’ll be happy that we make it through these ten weeks together and do some thinking that *matters* in the interim.

Final Proposal (due 2/10/21): Write up a 350–500 word abstract and bibliography proposing a final project for the course. The project may take a form of your design: a scholarly research paper is one option, but you may propose others. The abstract should define the form of the project and offer a rationale. The bibliography should include ten to twelve texts and sources that are informing the project design and does not count towards word total.

Final Project (due 3/17/21): In consultation with the professors, execute the project proposed on 10/20 and submit on 2/10/21 for engagement.

POLICIES

Policy is the death of us all, but here's some anyway:

Assignment Submission: Assignments should be submitted via Canvas. Document all citations with footnotes and include a bibliography of works cited. We don't care if you use Chicago style or MLA. Just be consistent. Note: The bibliography and footnotes do not count toward word count.

Late Work: Just ask for an extension. We will always grant it. For your own health of mind, ask for the extension before you start panicking that you don't have time, or even at that point, rather than putting it off. Since you know we'll say yes, what's the point in worrying?

Attendance Policy: Come, it'll be fun to learn together. This class is designed to keep your Zoom time at about an hour and a half a week. But you'll have the option to remain in conversation for longer/ing if you're into that.

All that said: Zoom/screen fatigue is a thing. The internet is a jerk. And the power keeps going out! Basically, here's what we ask: make the effort to be present as much as you can. If you can't do it, for whatever reason, we'd appreciate if you sent us an email to give us a heads up so we can make whatever adjustments might be needed for the session.

A NOTE ABOUT COURSE MEDIA AND THEIR CONTENT

The great majority of the works we watch for this class can be considered "adult," in the sense that they represent complex and difficult subject matter, with plots and visuals referencing murder, infidelity, rape, slavery, child abuse, racism, eating disorders, incarceration, homophobia, domestic violence, war, bullying, suicide, mental illness, hate crimes, and the like. If you are a particularly sensitive viewer, or know that you are consistently triggered by such topics, please familiarize yourself with the works on the syllabus in advance, and talk with one or both instructors about any concerns that you may have right away, so that we can support any needed accommodation. You should all be aware of the mental health and psychological counselling resources available to you on campus, including NU Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS), Wildchat (847) 467-5102, and the Northwestern Women's Center.