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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

This article describes an "Introduction to Performance Theory" course that the authors co-teach to MFA students at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. Through the semester, we track genealogies of performance studies, highlighting the ways in which our interdiscipline has been incorporated as an academic field while still remaining sensationally unsettled in its interventions, methods, and objects of analysis. The focus of this article is on the ways we have tailored a performance theory course to serve MFA students—artists and makers across genre and discipline. The article offers our syllabus and ten practice-based assignments to illustrate how we encourage the artists in our class to engage with critical theory and performance studies scholarship in an embodied way. Bringing the studio into the seminar, our MFA students stage performance experiments related to each week's readings. Our syllabus is accompanied by a reflection on co-teaching performance studies as a dynamic couple form that itself constitutes a performance of pedagogy, an enactment of sociality, and an embodiment of theory.

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The Studio in the Seminar: Performing Theory in an MFA Classroom

Karin Shankar and Julia Steinmetz

A Praxis-Based Approach to Performance Theory

This article describes an “Introduction to Performance Theory” course that the authors co-teach to MFA students at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. Through the semester, we track genealogies of performance studies, highlighting the ways in which our interdiscipline has been incorporated as an academic field while still remaining sensationally unsettled in its interventions, methods, and objects of analysis. The focus of this article is on the ways we have tailored a performance theory course to serve MFA students—artists and makers across genre and discipline. The article offers our syllabus and ten practice-based assignments to illustrate how we encourage the artists in our class to engage with critical theory and performance studies scholarship in an embodied way. Bringing the studio into the seminar, our MFA students stage performance experiments related to each week’s readings. Our syllabus is accompanied by a reflection on co-teaching performance studies as a dynamic couple form that itself constitutes a performance of pedagogy, an enactment of sociality, and an embodiment of theory.

Our praxis-based approach, as illustrated in the syllabus and weekly embodied exercises, centres performance and art practice as forms of theory-making and theory as a force that animates performance. This “seminar as studio” pedagogy also allows us to approach each week’s topic anew, as an experiment in which the outcome is not known in advance. Our context, as a (presumably) reading- and writing-intensive course within an arts school, led us to create this multidimensional approach to teaching an Introduction to Performance Theory class. We found that written assignments and discussions of texts became richer and more vital as soon as students brought the materiality of their practices (kinetics, textures, rhythms, colours) to rub up against theory. We, in turn, started to read theory with a freshly activated sensorium, only to remember that our favourite performance studies thinkers had been asking us to do this all along. We always learn from our students, and in the second and third iterations of the course we formalized this learning in the embodied prompts you see on the syllabus.

A praxis-based approach to teaching performance theory has allowed us to establish a framework in which reading, writing, and thinking are plaited together with doing, making and creating. We consider theory as always already intimately, socially, and politically grounded in the embodied articulations of each student’s art practice. This encourages students to bring something approaching their whole selves to bear on the theoretical, political, and aesthetic problems at hand.

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Notes on Co-Teaching

Perhaps the greatest joy of developing and teaching this course is that it has been a joint enterprise. Pratt Institute has a history of supporting co-teaching as a generative modality for creative pedagogy. As co-teachers, we alternate between listening and speaking, present contrasting interpretations of texts, offer complementary feedback on assignments, disagree, engage in playful sparring over ideas, attend to gaps and fissures in our expertise and experience, and model pathways for connecting across difference. Co-teaching in the field of performance studies is a dynamic couple form. Viewed as performance, our pedagogy takes on a dialogical quality in which knowledge is contested and difference is a radical resource that “sparks like a dialectic.”¹

Teaching together presents a constant challenge to the myth of the individual author and productively frustrates students’ demands for their professors to occupy the position of the “subject supposed to know” (Lacan, Miller, and Sheridan 1998). Teaching at its best is a kind of ecstatic exteriorization, and co-teaching pulls internal lines of thought not just into monologue but into dialogue, creating an opportunity for us to push one another beyond the limits of our own subjectivity. The classroom is a space of identification and disidentification, of transference and countertransference, of desire and frustration and deep satisfaction. Co-teaching makes these powerful dynamics legible in new ways, while still calling attention to the moments in which we find ourselves embodying, as a group, the rituals, social dramas, and complex choreographies we study. Most intimately, over hours of syllabus design, lesson planning, lecture composition, and practicing pedagogy, the authors have also grown a deep friendship. If the future of the political is the future of friends, then our experience co-teaching this class was one space in which this future appeared as a glimmer on the horizon.²

Syllabus: An Introduction to Performance Theory

As an introduction to the interdiscipline of performance studies, this course offers students a range of ways of conceptualizing, framing, analyzing, and making performance. Via key readings, performance viewings, experiments in performance practice, and critical writing, students will become acquainted with multiple genealogies of performance studies. These include its early intersections with anthropological and sociological literature; its critical borrowings from and elaborations of linguistics and speech act theory; its vital contemporary interventions in critical race theory, queer of colour critique, and trans studies; and its engagements with Global South performance praxis and politics. The format for most classes will be an introductory lecture by the professor(s) followed by class discussion on the week’s assigned readings. Performance experiments and embodied artistic investigations constitute an essential component of each class session. This course takes a praxis-based approach in which artistic impulses drive theory-making and we approach theory as aesthetic material.

Week 1. Introduction: What Is Performance? What Is Performance Studies? Why Perform?

Keywords: performance, performativity, performance studies, embodiment

Session synopsis: *We read Audre Lorde’s essays aloud to acknowledge our lived realities as resources for embodied thinking, writing, and art making.*

- An in-class choral reading of Audre Lorde “Uses of the Erotic” and “The Master’s Tools”
- Diana Taylor, “[Framing] Performance,” in *Performance*
- [What is Performance Studies](https://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/wips/interviews-eng) interviews: <https://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/wips/interviews-eng>

Week 2. Performing History

Keywords: history, performance, archaeology, hauntings

Session synopsis: *We analyze Kara Walker's installation "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby" (2014) in conversation with excerpts from Saidiya Hartman's Scenes of Subjection in order to investigate the monumental forms and material traces of history-making.*

- Saidiya Hartman, "Redressing the Pained Body," in *Scenes of Subjection*
- Arlene R. Keizer, "Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory"
- Kara Walker, "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby"
- Creative Time [Dossier](https://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/) on Walker's artistic process and the project's curatorial statement: <https://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/>
- "Toppling Monuments and Performing History": <https://terremoto.mx/en/revista/derribo-de-monumentos-y-representacion-historica/>

Praxis I: Stage a one-minute embodied interaction with a public monument. Document your action and be prepared to share with the class.

Week 3. Rethinking Ritual

Keywords: liminality, ritual, communitas

Session Synopsis: *We understand ritual acts as "restored behaviours" that reveal the values of their social context. We explore how troubling a ritual or performing it differently might instantiate a new sociality and politics.*

- Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *Ritual Process*
- Richard Schechner, "Points of Contact," in *Between Theater and Anthropology*
- Maya Deren, *Ritual in Transfigured Time*
- Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, <https://youtu.be/ZuZympOIGC0>

Praxis II: Misrecognize, fail at, or otherwise perform an everyday ritual *differently* in a three-minute performance.³

Week 4. Performance of Self in Everyday Life

Keywords: fronts, the art of impression management, avatars

Session Synopsis: *We update Goffman's classic dramaturgical framing of the presentation of self in everyday life for the social media age.*

- Erving Goffman, "Introduction" and "Performances," in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*
- Jeff Orlowski, dir., *The Social Dilemma*
- Marcy J. Dinius, "The Long History of the 'Selfie'"
- Amelia Jones, "'The Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment."

Praxis III: Share an example of the performance of self in everyday life from social media, either your own account or that of someone you follow.

Week 5. Quotidian Choreographies

Keywords: everyday choreographies, techniques of the body, psychogeography, "bodies-cities"

Session Synopsis: *We practice modes of choreographing the everyday with tools from the works of Debord, de Certeau, Grosz, and Rivera-Servera. We frame the body's interactions with the city as a rhetorical form.*

- Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*
- Ramon Rivera-Servera, "Quotidian Utopias: Latina/o Queer Choreographies," in *Performing Queer Latinidad Dance*
- Guy Debord "Theory of the Dérive"

- Elizabeth Grosz, “Bodies-Cities”

Praxis IV: Perform a *dérive* inspired by the assigned texts. Document your experience in five hundred words.

Week 6. Play

Keywords: play, fantasy, illusion, transitional objects and phenomena, potential space

Session Synopsis: *We draw from psychoanalyst Winnicott to explore how play, an integral part of performance entails stitching together “a sample of dream potential” with “fragments of external reality.”*

- D. W. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena” and “Playing: A Theoretical Statement,” in *Playing and Reality*

Praxis V: Come to class prepared to lead us in a brief (two–five minute) play activity.

Week 7. Interlude: Performing Theory

Praxis V: Prepare a five-minute performance of theory. Your performance should offer evidence of how a critical idea that we have encountered in this course has influenced your thoughts about the making of performance. Therefore, your performance must include at least three sentences from the critical readings for the course to present an embodied form of scholarly engagement. Use the tools and vocabulary of your own performance practice as a medium to animate your chosen theoretical texts.⁴

Week 8. Performance Scores

Keywords: happenings, fluxus, performance scores, avant-garde performance, art/life

Session Synopsis: *We look back at performance experiments of the 1960s that trouble the division between art and life as inspiration for creating our own contemporary performance scores.*

- Allan Kaprow, “Untitled Guidelines for Happenings” (c. 1965)
- Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit*
- Natilee Harren, Natilee, selections from *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network*
- John Cage, “The Future of Music: Credo,” in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*

Praxis VI: Create a text-based performance score to be performed by your classmates.

Week 9. Performativity

Keywords: performativity, speech acts, how to do things with words, felicitous and infelicitous performatives, illocutionary acts, queer failure

Session Synopsis: *We consider Austin’s foundational lectures on performative speech acts and their translations in the Twittersphere.*

- Diana Taylor, “Performative and Performativity,” in *Performance*
- J. L. Austin, “Lecture II,” in *How to Do Things with Words*
- Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages.*

Praxis VII: Compose and post a performative tweet in 280 characters or less.

Week 10. Performance Documents

Keywords: the archive and the repertoire, ephemera, traces, liveness, the performance document

Session Synopsis: *We ask what remains once a performance has ended, how critical acts are transferred, and the relationship of a performance to its documents.*

- Diana Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” in *The Archive and the Repertoire*
- Jose Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts”

- Martin F. Manalansan, IV, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives”
- Peggy Phelan “The Ontology of Performance,” in *Umarked*

Praxis VIII: Show and tell from *your* performance archive. Bring an artifact from your practice area to class and deliver a three-minute presentation on why that artifact is important to understanding your practice. The artifact may be a prop, a costume, a gesture or movement phrase, an image, a site, a fragment of text, a sound, etc.

Week 11. Performativity of Race and Gender I

Keywords: drag, appropriation, queer kinship, interpellation, Vogueing, the Harlem ballroom scene

Session Synopsis: *We introduce the relationship of performativity to the construction and contestation of race and gender.*

- José Esteban Muñoz, “Introduction,” in *Disidentifications*
- Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning*
- Murphy, Ryan, dir., *Pose*, season 1, episode 1
- Judith Butler, “Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” in *Bodies that Matter*
- bell hooks, “Is Paris Burning,” in *Black Looks*

Week 12. Performativity of Race and Gender II

Keywords: visibility/hypervisibility, racialization, disidentification, excess, embodied writing, transitioning

Session Synopsis: *We deepen our consideration of performativity in relation to the materiality of the racialized and gendered body.*

- Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” in *Black Skin, White Masks*
- Nicole Fleetwood, “Excess Flesh,” in *Troubling Vision*
- Dora Silva Santana, “Transitionings and Returnings: Experiments with the Poetics of Transatlantic Water”
- Narcissister, *Narcissister Organ Player*

Week 13. In Your Feelings: Affect and Performance

Keywords: affect, feelings, difficulty, abject performance, the periperformative

Session Synopsis: *We approach the work of racialized affect, the labour of sitting with difficult artworks, and the exhaustion of performance.*

- Ivan Ramos, “Spic(y) Appropriations: The Gustatory Aesthetics of Xandra Ibarra (aka La Chica Boom)”
- Xandra Ibarra, <http://www.xandraibarra.com/about/>
- Jennifer Doyle, “Introducing Difficulty,” in *Hold It Against Me*
- Eve Sedgwick, “Introduction,” in *Touching Feeling*

Praxis IX: Choose a “difficult” piece of performance work to share with the class. Offer up a generative pathway for sitting with that difficulty.

Week 14. Decoloniality and Performance Studies

Keywords: Indigeneity, decoloniality, extraction, settler colonialism, land as pedagogy, intergenerational exchange

Session Synopsis: *Considering settler colonialism as “a structure not an event,” we explore the decolonial aesthetics of contemporary Indigenous artists and performers (Wolfe 2006).*

- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Ransformation,” in *As We Have Always Done*

- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, https://youtu.be/IiFIgF_OHIM and <https://youtu.be/dp5oGZ1r60g>
- Kent Monkman, <https://www.kentmonkman.com/> and <https://creativetime.org/summit/2017/10/18/kent-monkman/>
- Wendy Red Star, <https://www.wendyredstar.com/>
- Kim Tall Bear, “Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sexualities,” <https://youtu.be/zfdo2ujRUv8>
- Tom Boellstorff et al., “Decolonizing Transgender: A Roundtable Discussion”

Week 15. FINAL PRESENTATIONS

Praxis X: Build on any one (or a combination of) your Praxis offerings this semester to create a five–ten minute performance piece. Write an eight–ten page (double-spaced) extended artist statement positioning your performance within the field of performance studies.

Notes

1. This generative image comes from Lorde (1984).
2. Here we draw from both Jacques Derrida (2005) and José Esteban Muñoz (1996) in thinking about friendship and utopia in the space of the classroom.
3. This exercise is inspired by the syllabus for Joshua Chambers-Letson’s Northwestern University course Introduction to Performance Studies.
4. We adapted this exercise from Professor Brandi Catanese’s Introduction to Performance Studies undergraduate syllabus, a course that she has taught for several years in UC Berkeley’s Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies.

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