

Selfies: Solo and Verbatim Performance

Theater, Dance, Media 179P

Spring 2020 | Thursdays, 9:00-11:45 | Farkas Hall 303

Professor Elizabeth Phillips [she/her/hers]

Office: Barker Center 014 (garden level)

Office hours: Tuesdays 1:00-3:00pm and by appointment



“Opening and interpreting lives is very different from opening and closing books.”

Dwight Conquergood, from “Performing as a Moral Act”

“... what I would call the essential promise of oral history performance: that the body remembering, the bodies remembered, and the bodies listening in order to remember (“you remember, I told you ...”) will be redeemed in some kind of change – the small changes that come with repetition in different moments with different listeners; the large changes that might result from entering the memories of a whole body politic[...]. In this sense, performance is a promissory act.”

Della Pollock, from *Remembering: Oral History Performance*

This course will explore performances of the self--both storytelling and the first personal monologue, and documentary theater and third person verbatim performances. Each seminar will be divided between theoretical and critical discussion of plays and performances--with particular attention to themes of gender and sexual identity, race, community building, and US politics--and a studio practicum in which students will perform their own stories and the stories of others. For the final assignment, students will create either a one-act length verbatim/documentary performance or a one-act length solo show.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The goals of this course:

- A) to study examples of solo performance, including storytelling, standup comedy, and autobiographical performance;**
- B) to study verbatim performance (theater which uses documents, interviews, and ethnographic techniques to depict people or events) and ethnographic methods of performance composition;**
- C) to generate an original piece of solo and/or verbatim theatre running approximately 25 minutes.**

Students will be introduced to the performance studies approaches to storytelling, personal narrative, oral history, and ethnography through readings, discussions, out-of-class fieldwork, and in-class performances. They will be challenged to explore the ways in which social worlds (of varying sizes, from families and friendships to nation states) are produced through embodied performances and to engage performance as a way of knowing and speaking across difference(s). The course is committed to a performance studies praxis that is not only a lens through which to view the world, but also an embodied and engaged way of participating in the world. Students will gain hands-on experience with the often aesthetically messy, politically charged, analytically complex, and ethically demanding spaces that are created, challenged, maintained, and shared through performances of narrative.

Some major questions we will explore in this course include:

- How are performances of narrative intrinsic to the creation and maintenance of identity and culture?
- How does one engage the stories of others in a practical, ethical, and compelling way?
- How is opening and interpreting lives different than opening and closing books?
- How do you perform part of other people's lives and worlds? How do others perform parts of your life and world?
- What constitutes a compelling, coherent, and meaningful articulation of self or community in performance?

REQUIRED TEXTS

The below texts may be purchased inexpensively online.

Eds. Bowe, Bowe, and Streeter, *Gig: Americans Talk About Their Jobs*
Moisés Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project, *The Laramie Project*
Anna Deavere Smith, *Notes from the Field*
Doug Wright, *I Am My Own Wife*

Comedy specials are available on streaming services. Videos, audiobooks/podcasts, and some of our author's recordings of plays will be linked and/or on reserve at Lamont throughout the semester. **All additional readings (Schreck, Sedaris, Monahan, Turkel, Terkel, etc.) will be made available on Canvas.** If obtaining the course texts presents financial or practical difficulty, please speak with me and we will find a solution.

We will rely on many sections from D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, and Performance*, 2nd Ed. It's about \$40 used if you want your own copy (not required).

ASSIGNMENTS

In this course, you will create a series of **performances** which will serve as scaffolding as you prepare to undertake the fieldwork, composition, editing, and performance of your own final piece. You will also complete a set of very brief **papers** which reflect your synthesis and understanding of our theoretical texts and their bearing on your composition and growth. The following is a breakdown by possible points. Extra credit may be available as announced.

Name performance	40
Family myth performance	80
Myth paper (3pp)	40
Gig performance	90
Interview performance	100
Ethnographic methods paper (4-5pp)	80
Participation (discussion) + attendance	130
Preparation and critique (practicum)	100
Final performance – draft	50
Final performance – script	120
Final performance – performance	140
Final performance – adjudication (3pp)	30

TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS: 1000. Grade distribution: A 930+, A- 900-929, B+ 870-899, B 830-869, B- 800-829, etc., points below 600 will result in a failing grade in the course.

COURSE POLICIES

Decorum, critique, and participation. Please arrive to class in appropriate attire, on time, prepared to work. If you are the subject of critique in practicum, you are expected to respond respectfully and generously. All critique should be constructive, decorous, and in service of the course goals, as mutually established. Performances should be memorized and polished. When others are performing, you should maintain postures of interest and curiosity. Attendance and scheduling are crucial and non-negotiable in a studio-based course. If you cannot perform due to illness or emergency, you must present a note from HUHS, a dean, or a proctor, and reschedule your performance immediately upon return.

Submitting assignments. Written assignments must be submitted via email, attached as .docx files, by 11:59pm the day that they are due. Late assignments will be docked one third of a letter grade per day, beginning the next day (so at 12:00AM after the deadline, an A- paper will become a B+ paper). Files that cannot be opened or are corrupted do not count as “on time,” so consider pasting the text of your paper into your email.

Absences and extensions. You are required to prepare for each class meeting by completing the readings, and required to attend and participate in each tablework discussion. Reading is not a substitute for discussing, and discussing is not a substitute for reading. Things happen: you will be allowed **one excused absence** throughout the semester. Further absences or late assignments will require a note from your dean, proctor, or HUHS. Unexcused, undeclared, undocumented absences, late assignments, or poor preparation will starkly be reflected in your grade.

Disability accommodation. Students with disabilities are encouraged to request accommodation, as soon as is convenient, through Harvard’s [Accessible Education Office](#): “Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term.”

Academic honesty and collaboration. Plagiarism is the use of another person’s ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failing grades on assignments to dismissal from the course or even more serious actions. Here’s [The Harvard College Honor Code](#):

Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity—that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.

If you have questions about what constitutes proper collaboration, or about how to cite lectures, sections, conversations with peers, and other fleeting inspiration, ask me.

SCHEDULE OF COURSE MEETINGS

Week 1: January 30th

Introduction to Course

Practicum: Interview exercise – Epiphanic moment (as audition for course)
Homework: Compose **Name performance**

Week 2: February 6th

Performing the Self: Identity and Childhood

Reading: Heidi Schreck, *What the Constitution Means to Me*
Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*
Practicum: **Name performances**

Week 3: February 13th.

Performing the Self: Turning Points and Family Myths; “We” and “Me”

Reading: Mike Birbiglia, *Sleepwalk with Me*
David Sedaris; “[Now We Are Five](#),” “[Repeat After Me](#)”
Excerpts from Elizabeth Stone, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us*
Homework: Compose **Family myth performance**

Week 4: February 20th

Performing Others: The American Workplace, Mannerisms, and Characters

Practicum: **Family myth performances**
Reading: *Gig* (ed. Bowe, Bowe, and Streeter)
Studds Terkel, from *Working*
Monday, 24th: **Myth papers due**

Week 5: February 27th

Performing Others: Extended and Historical Character Study

Practicum: **Gig performances**
Reading: Doug Wright, *I Am My Own Wife*
David Turkel, *Dishwater Blonde*

Week 6: March 5th

Performing Others: Responding to Contemporary Events, Political Verbatim

Reading: Watch NYU Verbatim Lab: “The Kavanaugh Files,” “Interview with Matt Lauer and Kellyanne Conway”

Practicum: **Workshop with Jay and EllaRose from The Civilians R&D**

Week 7: March 12th

Ethics of Ethnography Part I; Stakes of Oral Tradition, Producing and Including Yourself

Reading: Talene Monahan, *How to Load a Musket*

Practicum: **Workshop with Talene Monahan**

Week 8: March 19th

Spring Break

Week 9: March 26th

Ethics of Ethnography Part II; Theater for Social Justice

Reading: Anna Deavere Smith, *Notes from the Field*
Interview with Richard Schechner, “There’s a Lot of Work To Do”
Dwight Conquergood, “Performing as a Moral Act”

Practicum: Conducting ethical, structured interviews

Homework: **Compose Interview performance**

Week 10: April 2nd

Ethics of Ethnography Part III; Grounding and Setting Solo Performance

Reading: Moises Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project, *The Laramie Project*
Janelle Reinelt, “Towards a Poetics of Theatre and Public Events”

Practicum: Place tour

Homework: Begin final project

Monday, 6th: **Ethnographic methods paper due**

Week 11: April 9th

Practicum: **Interview Performances**

Homework: Continue work on final project

Week 12: April 16th

Practicum: **Rehearsal/critique of final solo/verbatim shows**

Friday, 17th: **First draft of final due**

Week 13: April 23rd

Practicum: **Rehearsal/critique of final solo/verbatim shows**

Friday, 24th: **Complete draft due**

May 5th and 6th – Dress and tech for final performances

May 7th and 8th – **FINAL PERFORMANCES**

May 11th – **Final script and adjudication due**