Course Description: This course, designed for advanced undergraduates and graduate students, focuses on anthropological approaches to genres of verbal art and cultural performance. The readings explore the uses of poetic language in narratives, folklore and oratory, and the social contexts of complex cultural events such as festivals, dramas, dances, and spectacles. Of special concern is the presence of oral discourse within the context of cultures with full or restricted literacy. We explore the methodological difficulty of reconstructing “original” performance contexts in cases where eyewitnesses or ethnographic evidence (recording, film) are lacking.

Course requirements: There are five graded requirements for the class: (1) regular attendance and informed participation in class discussion (20%); (2) 6-page midterm essay on an assigned question (20%); in-class presentations based on reading assignments (20%); 4-5 page book review; and a take-home final examination covering the readings, discussions, and issues of the course (20%).

Special Note: If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.

Required and Supplemental Readings: The readings for this course are available in PDFs, in books on reserve, and in e-journals.

Unit 1: Methodological Perspectives on the Performance and Verbal Art

Dell Hymes, “Breakthrough into Performance,” “In vain I tried to tell you”: Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics, pp. 79-141.

Unit 2: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Discourse Genres


Unit 3: Native American Verbal Art


Unit 4: Varieties of Verbal Art in Oceania


Unit 5: Orality and Performance in Ancient Greece

Homer, The Iliad, xxx.
Gregory Nagy, Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond, pp. 153-206.
Rosalind Thomas, “Poetry, Memory, and Performance,” Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece, pp. 113-127.

Unit 6: Oral Poetics in Medieval Culture

Beowulf, xxx.
John Miles Foley, Beowulf and the Old English Poetic Tradition,” Immanent Art, pp. 190-223.

Unit 7: Music, Theatre, and Dance

Michelle Kisliuk, Seize the Dance! BaAka Musical Life and the Ethnography of Performance.
Johannes Fabian, Power and Performance: Ethnographic Explorations through Proverbial Wisdom and Theatre in Shaba, Zaire, ch.

Unit 8: Festivals and Spectacles as Cultural Performances

David M. Guss, The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism as Cultural Performance, pp. 60-89.

Unit 9: Orality in the American Historical Context

Sandra M. Gustafson, Eloquence is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America, pp. 140-170.
Michael Silverstein, Talking Politics.

Unit 10: Advanced Methodological Issues

Richard Bauman, “‘Go, My Reciter, Recite My Words’: Mediation, Tradition, and Authority,” A World of Others’ Words: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Intertextuality, pp. 128-158.

Possible Books to Review


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