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The Unwieldy Otherwise: Rethinking the Roots of Performance Studies in and through the Black Freedom Struggle

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

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Article abstract

This project presents a syllabus that emerged out of an ongoing set of discussions between the two co-authors about how Black, Southern theatre and performance traditions—as well as embodied and transmitted genealogies of community engagement and activism—informed the intellectual, social, and political commitments that have suffused performance studies from its origins as an academic discipline. These discussions allowed us to generate a syllabus that provides the raw materials for an alternative and potentially radically destabilizing pedagogical approach to narrating the historical roots and development of performance studies over the past half-century. Specifically, we ask what shifts might occur in the performance studies classroom by narrating the field's origins through the Free Southern Theatre, founded as a multiracial artistic ensemble in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1964. Our syllabus incorporates the key strands woven into the Free Southern Theatre's aesthetic and political interventions, including Africanist cultural forms (such as the story circle); influences from the artistic and theatrical avant-garde; and populist theatre projects that developed in tandem with the revolutionary energies of the anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist struggles of the student movements of the 1960s. We ask how these largely hidden histories of resistance and dramaturgies of evasion reorient the way performance studies syllabi of the future tell the story of who and what matters, and in so doing materialize pedagogies of field formation that get frozen in place.

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The Unwieldy Otherwise: Rethinking the Roots of Performance Studies in and through the Black Freedom Struggle

Leon J. Hilton and Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie

Meaning doesn't come from oracles; you forge it on the anvil of your own experience with each other.

—John O'Neal, *Tulane Drama Review* (1965)¹

The genesis for this project and the impetus for creating the performance studies syllabus that follows came out of a brief exchange we had while developing a field list for a comprehensive doctoral examination. Initially, the topic we were working on concerned theories and histories of Black utopianism and related ideas about the “otherwise.” In the course of our reading together of texts by Robin D. G. Kelley, Tavia Nyong'o, Jayna Brown, Ashon Crawley, Saidiya Hartman, L. H. Stallings, and La Marr Jurelle Bruce (among many others) who have productively mobilized concepts of otherwiseness in proximity to the confluence of Black studies and performance studies, notions of what the otherwise is and where it took root began to widen and deepen. Undertaking this work together, we began to think about how Black, Southern theatre and performance traditions, as well as embodied and transmitted genealogies of community engagement and activism, inform the intellectual, social, and political commitments that have suffused performance studies from its origins as an academic discipline within universities with the establishment of academic programs, faculty lines, and courses of study at the graduate and undergraduate level.

At the outset, we wish to briefly indicate something about who we are and how our experiences and identities informed what we brought with us to this collaboration. Differences of race, gender, age, and status/position within institutionalized educational hierarchies are certainly relevant in mapping out the general fields of knowledge and power that initiated and conditioned our shared inquiry into the past and present of performance studies pedagogy. One of us, Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie, is a black woman, writer, performer, mother of three daughters, and PhD student from Queens, New York. The other, Leon J. Hilton, is white, Jewish, queer, an assistant professor, and a member of Mariahadessa's doctoral exam committee. To be sure, our distinctive personal histories, educational trajectories, and disciplinary training have determined the different lenses of critical consciousness that we bring to this project.

The Free Southern Theater (FST), which was founded as a multiracial artistic ensemble in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1964 before moving its base of operations to New Orleans, counted Richard Schechner—one of the figures most frequently linked with the establishment of performance studies in standard histories of the field—among its members; and much of the early work of the FST was first chronicled in the *Tulane Drama Review* (later renamed simply *TDR* and now a flagship performance studies journal). Yet what shifts might occur in the performance studies classroom, we

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Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie is a PhD student in theatre arts and performance studies at Brown University and the award-winning author of *Layla's Happiness* (Enchanted Lion Books), *Strut* (Agape Editions), *Dear Continuum: Letters to a Poet Crafting Liberation* (Grand Concourse Press), and *Karma's Footsteps* (Flipped Eye Publishing).

wondered, by approaching the task of narrating the field's origins through the framework of the FST and its three founding members, John O'Neal, Doris Derby, and Gilbert Moses, who first met as members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)?

Bringing attention to this largely unspoken genealogy of the field suggests a potentially transformational approach to teaching performance studies for a new generation, something that is even more important as the context and circumstances of the 1960s civil rights and Black power movements become more historically remote for today's students, and as new laws are being debated and passed across the United States that radically decimate the teaching of these aspects of American history from school curriculums under the guise of attacks on what its critics erroneously lump together under the banner of critical race theory.

But First: An Email Exchange

The otherwise is unwieldy Inbox x ✕ 🖨️ 📧

 **Tallie, Mariahadessa** Tue, May 18, 9:56 AM ☆ ↶ ⋮
to me ▾

Greetings Professor Hilton,

I hope you are well.


It was so sweet that my parents got to meet you via zoom.

As I am working on my blurb and thinking of the diaspora, I realize that I need to say something about Rastafarians and reggae. How can I talk about black utopia without looking into that movement/spiritual belief system? This book looks interesting: <https://nyupress.org/9781479882243/> and this one seems to be a classic: <https://www.amazon.com/Rastafarians-Twentieth-Anniversary-Leonard-Barrett/dp/0807010391>.

What do you think?

There is so much that people do to create otherwise spaces. Even freedom schools in the south could fall under this category. Oh my gosh.

One,
Mariahadessa

 **Hilton, Leon** <leon_hilton@brown.edu> Tue, May 18, 11:20 PM ☆ ↶ ⋮
to Mariahadessa ▾


unwieldy indeed!

those Rastafarian books both look really good...i would certainly support adding both to your list. it seems like there is maybe a religion/spirituality section developing within this list, that's great...

I also love your thought about the freedom schools. There is actually a direct connection from that and the "freedom theater" (in new orleans I think?) to the founding of performance studies. what would be some good texts for this? I think there may be a number of articles on this topic to be found in the journal TDR

I was also thinking about the black panthers...in particular Alondra Nelson's book *Body and Soul* which is about the BPP's health activism.. should we plan to meet again this Friday?

Leon

 **Tallie, Mariahadessa** Thu, May 20, 2:40 PM ☆ ↶ ⋮
to me ▾

Greetings,

I hope you are enjoying the sun.

Wow. Your response to the freedom schools led me into a swirl of research yesterday. All roads lead back home. Indeed there is a direct link between Performance Studies and freedom schools, more specifically between the Free Southern Theater in Mississippi and Performance Studies. Performance Studies has roots in the Black Arts Movement. This is radical. I can't wait to talk with you about it.

Meeting tomorrow sounds great. Can we make it somewhat late again? Like 3:30 or 4? Would that work for you?

Also, I have worked on the blurb. I have not addressed your comments on "beyond" but that is next.

Thank you!

One,
M

...

 **Hilton, Leon** <leon_hilton@brown.edu> Thu, May 20, 7:36 PM ☆ ↶ ⋮
to Mariahadessa ▾

OK great

Yes how about 4pm

eager to hear about your discoveries..

Leon

...

 **Tallie, Mariahadessa** Thu, May 20, 9:38 PM ☆ ↶ ⋮
to me ▾

4 is great!
Thank you.

Yay!

Have a great night.

...

What Does the South Have to Say? (Toward a New Performance Studies Syllabus)

To this day, in much of performance studies scholarship, there tends to be an East Coast bias and New York–centric lens, but as Andre 3000 once said, “the South got something to say.”² How might our pedagogical intervention reposition the South in terms of academic discourses in performance studies? What would a “Free Theatre” look like in the present? Who is doing the kind of Soul Work pioneered in the Free Southern Theater in theatre and performance *now*?

The syllabus we have created to answer these questions appears below. It provides the raw materials for an alternative and potentially radically destabilizing pedagogical approach to narrating the historical roots and development of performance studies over the past half-century. Developing this

syllabus has helped us push the boundaries of our pedagogical practices and methods, challenging conventional/sedimented ways of reading and teaching plays. It has also challenged us to contemplate how the FST's "Story Circle" method might be implemented as a foundational method in the performance studies classroom. In assembling the syllabus, we have also been attentive to how this new approach to teaching performance studies can be put to use to decipher more recent theatrical, artistic, and performative projects that respond to the urgencies of the contemporary moment. How might these largely hidden histories of resistance and dramaturgies of evasion reorient the way performance studies syllabi of the future tell the story of who and what *matters* and, in so doing, materialize pedagogies of field formation that get frozen in place?

Our syllabus first provides students with the opportunity to engage with the specific historical context for understanding the FST's emergence against the backdrop of the civil rights movement—in particular, the Freedom Summer of 1964, which focused the national student movement's actions on the struggle to register African Americans in the US South to vote. The syllabus then attempts to rescript the standard narrative of the establishment of performance studies by turning instead to the key strands woven into the FST's aesthetic and political interventions in the 1960s, including Africanist cultural forms (such as the story circle) that would go on to become central to the emerging Black Arts Movement; influences from the artistic and theatrical avant-garde (Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* became one of FST's signature touring productions); and populist theatre projects that developed in tandem with the revolutionary energies of the anti-imperialist, anticolonial, and anticapitalist struggles and student movements of the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, our syllabus places the Free Southern Theater at the centre of a wider historical efflorescence of new popular theatre movements, groups, and forms that took shape in response to the worldwide political turbulence of the 1950s and 1960s, forging novel tactics for emphasizing the role of performance in movements for social change, from the Theatre of the Oppressed of Augusto Boal in Brazil to the Living Theatre of Judith Malina and Julian Beck in New York. What might teaching the Free Southern Theater alongside these more familiar (and commonly taught) reveal to performance studies students?

The syllabus also incorporates visits by guest artists and scholars who were directly involved in or influenced by these traditions and would be invited to visit the class and share their expertise and experience. For a final assignment, students create a project asking them to think through the FST's methods, but also their motivations, as a resource, template and indeed inspiration for our students to grapple with the role of performance within contemporary social movements and political struggles.

But What Even *Is* a Syllabus?

L. H.

A syllabus is not one thing but many things. In some cases, it functions like a contract between teacher and student and serves other administrative/institutional purposes as well. But for the most part, when we write a syllabus, we are in some sense doing something like writing the recipe for a meal (and including a grocery shopping list), assembling a toolbox, drawing up the itinerary for a trip while also writing up the list of things that you need to pack; and yes, finally the syllabus is kind of like a stage manager's prompt book. The exercise of developing the syllabus was undertaken as an experiment with ways of transcending the normal protocols of syllabus planning for those of us working and teaching classes rooted in performance studies. Rather than attempting something like

“coverage” or wrestling with the various impulse to teach foundational texts alongside new scholarship, our syllabus is an attempt to rewrite and thus transform the intellectual, artistic, historical, and political itineraries of performance studies by focalizing our pedagogical approach through a particular strand of the field’s intellectual DNA that has, for the most part, been de-emphasized and overlooked.

M. T.

I think of a syllabus as a starting point. It’s a space through which we begin to get to know each other. It’s where we bend and reach toward one another. As an adjunct lecturer at two CUNY schools, I changed my syllabus all the time. I’d slow it down mostly because our intellectual meanderings would take us to powerful places where we needed to linger. I’d throw things off of it; I’d add things based on who was in the classroom and where our discussions led.

A syllabus is a spacious thing.

This is the new one, please throw the other one out.

The best thing that ever happened in my literature class with a syllabus was that late in the semester, I swapped one piece of fiction for another, and a student who hadn’t spoken all semester wrapped us in her voice for the rest of the year. Hers was a rich, wise, funny voice that we all needed.

The syllabus is the thing we dive from into the deep water of our learning community.

Course Schedule

Week One: Introductions

Read:

- Carole Boston Weatherford and Ekua Holmes, *Voice of Freedom Fannie Lou Hamer: The Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement* (Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2015).

Listen:

- Nina Simone, “Mississippi Goddamn.”

For this week, we want to give students historical context for the Free Southern Theater and what Mississippi was like during the early 1960s. We decided to do it through song and a picture book as a way to upend the normal hierarchies of a university classroom and the sort of sources that are valued in academic spaces. As performance studies scholars, we want to honour the embodiment of historical experience through song and show how visual art can transmit knowledge. The picture book opens space to have a conversation about the civil rights movement. Nina Simone becomes, in her performance, preserved on film, an archive of the movement.

Week Two: Freedom Summer and the Free Southern Theater

Watch:

- *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Movement* (PBS/American Experience), Season 1, episode 5: “Mississippi: Is This America? (1963–1964).”

Read:

- Julius B. Fleming Jr, “Transforming Geographies of Black Time: How the Free Southern Theater Used the Plantation for Civil Rights Activism,” *American Literature* 91, no. 3 (September 2019): 587–617.
- La Donna Forsgren, *Sistubs in the Struggle: An Oral History of Black Arts Movement Theater and Performance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), pp. 150–58.

This week our aim is to introduce the students to the work of the Free Southern Theater and continue to explore the landscape of Mississippi and various forms of resistance that took place there. We assign an interview with Doris Derby, one of the founders of the Free Southern Theater, which was established at Tougaloo College in Mississippi in 1963. The work of FST grew from an engagement with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; all of the FST’s founders—including Doris Derby, John O’Neal, and Gilbert Moses—were members of the group. The FST founding collective met while taking a cigarette break from their SNCC activities. Derby, realizing their shared interest in theatre, stopped and observed: “If theatre means anything anywhere, it should certainly mean something here! Why don’t we start a theatre?”

Week Three: Dramaturgies of Resistance before Civil Rights and the Black Arts Movement

Readings:

- Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: Norton, 2019).
- August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (New York: Plume, 1990).

Spiralling momentarily backward in time from the course’s starting point of the 1964 Freedom Summer, this week’s class looks to retrospective reflections and dramaturgical representations of the pre-civil rights moment, asking how narratives and strategies of embodied resistance and evasion took shape in the face of political institutions and social scientific regimes that constituted the long afterlife of slavery (Hartman 1997) in the wake (Sharpe 2016) of its formal abolition. Hartman and Wilson both tell stories that are primarily set in the North; however, they’re both dealing with legacies of archives, gaps in evidence, and the ways that slavery’s history is embodied and can haunt spaces, sites, and even musical instruments. The South remains in bodies and objects no matter where they are located.

Week Four: Performances of Non/violent Resistance

Readings:

- Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Signet Classic, 1964), pp 64–84.
- Susan Leigh Foster, “Choreographies of Protest.” *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (October 2003): 395–412.
- Akinyele Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).

Watch:

- *We’re Here*. Season 2, episode 4: “Selma, Alabama.” HBO video. 60 min.
<https://play.hbomax.com/page/urn:hbo:page:GYVujwQctR4HDwwEAAAAE:type:episode>

How do social movements perform resistance, and how does resistance transform over time? What unspoken acts—what physical movements—make these performances of resistance possible? How do the body and its “obstinate recalcitrance” (Foster) enable forms of nonviolent resistance that are in turn studied as social choreographies? Alongside studying the civil rights movement’s defining statement in defence of civil disobedience, we thought it was important to answer these questions about embodiment by simultaneously examining a parallel narrative to the more popular story of nonviolence, attending to the overlooked histories of armed Black resistance in Mississippi. Finally, we assign an episode of the HBO television documentary *We’re Here*, filmed in Selma, Alabama, in 2020. Each episode of this program documents a weeklong process in which three drag performers—Shangela, Eureka, and Bob the Drag Queen—visit a city or town somewhere in the United States and team up with local residents to produce a drag show for the community. The Selma episode emphasizes the legacies of the civil rights movement in the community by focusing on the continuities between the Black freedom struggle of the 1960s and the circumstances of Black LGBT life in Selma today. “My freedom as a Black queer person in America,” Bob the Drag Queen states at the beginning of the episode, “is directly linked to Selma. Directly.”

Week Five: Histories and Aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement in the South

Readings:

- Kalamu Ya Salaam, *The Magic of Jujū: An Appreciation of the Black Arts Movement* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2016).
- James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement in the South: Behold the Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

In this class session, we want to give an overview of the Black Arts Movement. This week will ensure that students understand it as a creative arm of the Black Power movement, which is the basis of BAM aims. We will explore the various arts the BAM ethos was woven through, and we will also reassess the south as a critical hub of BAM development and activity, as much of the scholarship on the movement locates it in the North. One of our texts is written by an independent scholar who lived through and participated in BAM, and the other is by a scholar of the movement.

Week Six: Revisiting the Free Southern Theater

Watch:

- *Gone Are the Days!* (dir. Nicholas Webster, 1963)
- *Purlie* (dir. Rudi Goldman, 1981)

Readings:

- Ossie Davis, *Purlie Victorious: A Comedy in Three Acts* (New York: Samuel French, 1969).
- Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (Grove Press, 1954).
- Gilbert Moses, John O’Neal, Denise Nicholas, Murray Levy, and Richard Schechner, “Dialogue: The Free Southern Theatre.” *The Tulane Drama Review* 9, no. 4 (1965): 63–76.
- Christina Larocco, “‘COFO Is Not Godot’: The Free Southern Theater, the Black Freedom Movement, and the Search for a Usable Aesthetic.” *Cultural and Social History* 12, no. 4 (2015): 509–26.

This week highlights the voices of the founders of the FST in dialogue while also assigning students to read and watch the actual plays the company put on in its tours through the South in 1963 and

1964. How might a staple of the undergraduate drama curriculum like *Waiting for Godot* be radically reframed by being taught in this context? As Julius Fleming argues, “the theater’s repertoire creatively exposed and critiqued the violent operations of black patience” (2019, 590), returning us to Nina Simone’s sardonic observation in “Mississippi Goddamn”: “They keep on saying ‘Go slow!’ / But that’s just the trouble / ‘Do it slow’”!

Week Seven: Black Arts Poetry and Drama

Watch:

- Leroi Jones, *Dutchman*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VRoOAmtHsQ>.

Read:

- Amiri Baraka, “Bopera Theory,” in *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
- La Donna Forsgren, *In Search of Our Warrior Mothers: Women Dramatists of the Black Arts Movement*, pp. 67–106.
- Sonia Sanchez, “Sister Son/Ji,” in *I’m Black When I’m Singing and Blue When I Ain’t: Plays* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

We next jump to some major texts of the Black Arts Movement and explore the theoretical work of Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez. It’s important to break down the idea that artists don’t imbue their work with theory. We want to highlight the scholarship inherent in literature, art, and performance.

Week Eight: Performance Studies, between Black Arts and Broad Spectrum

Readings:

- Nina Angela Mercer, “At the Corner of Chaos and Divine: Black Ritual Theater, Performance, and Politics,” in *Are You Entertained? Black Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), pp. 207–28.
- La Donna Forsgren, *In Search of Our Warrior Mothers: Women Dramatists of the Black Arts Movement*, pp. 17–36.
- James Harding and Cindy Rosenthal, “Introduction,” in Harding & Rosenthal, eds., *The Rise of Performance Studies: Rethinking Richard Schechner’s Broad Spectrum* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1–10.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, “Notes Towards a Performance Theory of Orature.” *Performance Research* 12, no. 3 (2007): 4–7.

Guest Speaker:

- Prof. Elmo Terry-Morgan (Artistic Director, Rites and Reason Theatre)

Here, we look at the importance of ritual theatre during the Black Arts Movement and what it means to contemporary theatre makers alongside the experiences that enabled scholars and practitioners like Richard Schechner, Victor Turner, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o to theorize about performance in ways that shaped what we now know as performance studies. Why has ritual been such a key concept for performance studies, the Black Arts Movement, and Black theatre? What is the relationship of ritual to orature?

Week Nine: Still in the Wilderness?

Reading:

- Alice Childress, *Wine in the Wilderness* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1969).
- “We See You White American Theater” (2020). <https://www.weseeyouwat.com/statement>

We read Alice Childress’s 1955 backstage drama, which belatedly received its Broadway premiere only in 2021, alongside the powerful statement “We See You White American Theater.” Considering the realities of Childress’ work being censored and changed during its time, we ask what the play’s biting social satire exposes about American theatre’s racial contradictions. We also ask: What has changed? And what has not?

Week Ten: Radical Possibilities of Space

Readings:

- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, “Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space.” *TDR* 41, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 11–30.
- Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1993).

Guest speakers:

- Haus of Glitter, discussing *The Historical Fantasy of Esek Hopkins*

What is the space of performance, what political possibilities does the space of “performance” offer, and how might our conceptions of history and power be remade in and through the spaces that performance takes up? In this week’s readings, the FST’s reconfiguration of Southern US space through the transformational potential of performance is contextualized within a larger history of radical theatrical practices that encompasses Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Augusto Boal. Haus of Glitter, a collective of queer of colour artists in Providence, has reanimated this tradition through their recent performance project, developed during an artist’s residency at the historical home of colonial Rhode Island sea captain and slave trader Esek Hopkins. Their original work, *The Historical Fantasy of Esek Hopkins*, weaves theatre, autoethnography, song, dance, and activism to reimagine the narrative of Esek Hopkins, the future of our community, the future of public space, and the future we will leave behind to our children’s children.

Week Eleven

Readings:

- Christopher Lindsay, *Songs of a Caged Bird* (unpublished script).
- Regina N. Bradley, *An Outkast Reader* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2021).

We end our readings and discussions on a current note with new performances and meditations on Southern aesthetics. Indeed, “The South got something to say,” and we hope by this point in our syllabus, the class understands it always has and going forward . . . will. From here on, the class will engage their collective creativity and share their art with all of us.

Week Twelve

Work on final project

Share final projects/performances

Week Thirteen

Share final projects/performances

Notes

1. Quoted in a dialogue on the Free Southern Theatre with Gilbert Moses, Denise Nicholas, Murray Levy, and Richard Schechner (1965, 67).
2. Spoken at the 1995 Source Awards. See Bradley (2021).

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