

ANT 210 – Fall 2015

Tuesday, 10:00 am-1:00 pm
224 Young Hall

Greg Pierotti and Cristiana Giordano

I've long thought that teaching and learning anthropology should be more fun than they often are. Perhaps we should not merely read and comment on ethnographies, but actually perform them. [...] How, then, may this be done?

Victor Turner, *Ritual to Theater*, p. 89

My predominant concern about the creation of "Twilight" was that my own history [...] would make the work narrower than it should be. For this reason, I sought out dramaturges who had very developed careers and identities outside the theater profession [...] I am a strong critic of the insularity of people in the theater and of our inability to shake up our traditions.

Anna Deveare Smith, *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992*, pp. xxii-xxiii

Taking up Turner's and Smith's invitations, this seminar is an exploration of and a cross pollination between research and narrative practices in theater and anthropology. By creating a dialogue between these disciplines in a laboratory format, we hope to pose questions and engage techniques in ways that will enrich our engagement with anthropological questions and performative productions. We will explore how anthropologists can learn from theater a more playful posture towards research, and a more performative understanding of narrative that can translate into either new forms of writing (essays, plays, short stories, installations, etc.), or into a revitalized existing practice of academic writing. On the other hand, theater makers can learn from anthropology a more nuanced understanding of political and cultural contexts, how to approach the different discourse formations around events and social issues, and to pay attention to the complexities of worlds and their grammars.

This is not a seminar on the anthropology of theater nor an acting class, but rather a class where we will use theatrical techniques to engage ethnographic questions and material. In this context, theatrical devices will provide us with tools to analyze our findings through the body and the embodiment of narratives in space. By exploring our narratives through the elements of the stage (lights, sets, objects, sound, bodies etc.), theater can teach us to

engage with them more viscerally in our writing. On the other hand, anthropological listening to the intricacies of stories as they are embedded and woven within specific worlds can broaden and deepen the ways in which theater makers render narratives for the stage.

During the quarter we will:

1) Learn the practice of *Moment Work*. This theatrical devising technique is a practice for working with non-theatrical source material (interviews, archival documents, medical and legal reports, various media sources, etc.) to construct narratives for the stage. Tectonic Theater Project, the originator of *Moment Work*, has used this technique in the creation of such plays as *The Laramie Project*, *Laramie 10 Years Later*, and *The People's Temple*. All these plays were researched and developed for the stage by Greg Pierotti, who has taught devising through moment work for fifteen years. Moment Work's approach to non-theatrical source material (what anthropologists would call ethnographic material) has the potential to reveal new aspects of the data collected and analyzed by anthropologists or by theater makers. What can we as anthropologists learn when we "stage" our interviews and observations, as opposed to only write about them? How will our writing be affected by a performative understanding of our material?

2) Through practice in *Moment Work* and engagement with readings of ethnographies and our own ethnographic material, we will also challenge traditional approaches to creating narratives in both ethnography and theater by devising narratives *collaboratively* from shared research material. Students don't need to be at the post-fieldwork stage to benefit from this class. This seminar is aimed at learning how to anthropologically listen to, observe, and participate in social events and the stories produced by the people involved in them. At the same time, the laboratory part of this class provides tools to engage these events and stories theatrically as a way to analyze them (and later perform them in various forms of writing or performances). Using collaborative devising techniques, we will follow our intuitive hunches to re-think and re-envision narratives from our own body, and we will help others do the same. We will work both on small ethnographic projects (ongoing or new, depending on each student's stage in the program), and on some shared material that Greg has been collecting on issues of police violence and race in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray.

Readings will range from ethnographies and theater plays, to more theoretical essays on affect theory and performativity.