BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY
Department of Anthropology

ANTH 114b
Verbal Art and Cultural Performance
Spring 2014
Tu Th 5:00-6:20

Richard J. Parmentier
Brown 221, 736-2220
rparmentier@brandeis.edu
Office Hours: Tu 3:00-4:00, Th 11-12, and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course, designed for advanced undergraduates and graduate students, focuses on anthropological approaches to the study of genres of verbal art and types of cultural performance. The course explores the use of poetic, expressive, or formulaic speech in folklore, ritual, and oratory; and examines complex cultural events such as festivals, dramas, processions, and spectacles. Of special concern are (1) the continued presence of oral discourse within the context of societies with full or restricted literacy and (2) the methodological difficulty of reconstructing “original” performance contexts in cases where eyewitnesses and ethnographic evidence (recording, film) are lacking. At the beginning of each class we will spend a few minutes listening to/watching short examples of verbal art (mainly from YouTube); please let me know if you have any interesting examples. On February 25 the class will be joined by Trio Da Kali, a group of Mende performers from Mali, and Professor Lucy Durán for a special afternoon of music making and storytelling.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND PROCEDURES: There are five graded requirements for the class: (1) regular, informed participation in class discussion (20%); (2) six-page midterm essay on an assigned question (20%); in-class presentation based on reading assignments (20%); four-page book review of an anthropological monograph related to the course material (20%); and a take-home final examination covering the readings, discussions, and issues of the course (20%). Written assignments must be submitted in hard copy. Unexcused lateness in turning in written assignments is penalized by the loss of one-third of a letter grade for that assignment. Extensions are automatically given for excused lateness (illness, family emergency, lost pet, transportation problem) equal to the number of academic work days lost. The use of laptops and other portable electronic devices during class period is restricted to class-related activities. Your registration in this course implies that you will follow the university’s policies for maintaining academic integrity, as outlined in Section 4 of the Rights and Responsibilities document.

REQUIRED READINGS: The readings for this course are available as PDFs on LATTE. There are no textbooks to purchase for this course. The assignments listed below represent a maximal set of readings for the semester; given the flow and interests of the class we may skip some items.

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.

Unit 1: Performance, Orality and the Poetic Function


**Unit 2: Verbal Art: Introductory Case Studies**


**Unit 3: Myth, Song, and Story in Native North and South America**


**Unit 4: Poetry and Political Oratory in the Austronesian World**


Unit 5: Oral Epic in Ancient Greece


Unit 6: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages

*Beowulf*, lines 2180-3182. Beowulf and the Dragon.

Unit 7: Performance Genres in African Verbal Art

Marloes Janson, “Praise Performances by Jalimusolu in the Gambia,” *Women’s Songs from West Africa*, 88-111.

Unit 8: Theater from Ritual to Dramas of Transgression

Euripides, *The Bacchai* [scenes to be assigned]

Alvin Kernan, “Blood Revenge in Elsinore and in Holyrood: Hamlet,” *Shakespeare, the King’s Playwright*, 14-40.
Alvin Kernan,”What the King Saw, What the Poet Wrote,” *Shakespeare, the King’s Playwright*, 188-201.

David M. Guss, “‘Indianness’ and the Construction of Ethnicity in the Day of the Monkey,” *The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism as Cultural Performance*, 60-89.

**Unit 9: Performing Power: Dominance or Flow**


Peter Burke, “The World of Carnival,” *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 178-204.

**Unit 10: Oratory in the American Political Tradition**

Sandra M. Gustafson, “The Oratorical Public Culture of Revolutionary America,” *Elocuence is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America*, 140-70.
Abraham Lincoln, “The Gettysburg Address.”

Martin Luther King, “I Have a Dream.”

**Unit 11: Advanced Perspectives on Verbal Art**


CLASS PRESENTATIONS: Each student will give informal presentations (8-10 minutes) based on the readings from the syllabus. Ideally, presentations would include (a) quick summary of the content of the reading (just to remind everyone), (b) identify new concepts or terminology, (c) suggest connection between the reading and others included in the unit, and (d) formulate at least two questions that you think will generate
some class discussion. You can email me with a first and a second choice, and I will try to accommodate your request on a first-come basis.

**MIDTERM ESSAY:** Key concepts in the opening units of the course include “performance,” “genre,” “[poetic] structure,” and “interpretation.” Write an essay on the **relationship** among these four concepts, as if you were communicating to a fellow-student who is not familiar with these concepts. You don’t need to come up with a single definition of any of these four concepts, but you should indicate the general range or field of meanings for each concept. For each concept you need to discuss one specific author from the syllabus whose contribution you think is particularly useful or insightful (i.e., you need to write about four different authors). Limit your essay to six double-spaced pages. If you want to include illustrative textual materials in your essay you can put them in an appendix (that won’t count for the page limit).

**BOOK REVIEW ASSIGNMENT:** Write a book review of a monograph (i.e., a book dealing with a single topic, not a collection of independent essays) dealing with the anthropology of verbal art or cultural performance. Your review should be approximately 1200 words long (about four double-spaced pages). In the review you should be sure to do at least the following: (1) clearly describe what the book is about; (2) explain the author’s major empirical and theoretical conclusions; and (3) offer thoughtful criticisms of the book from a student’s point of view. Part of my evaluation of your review will be based on how well you demonstrate the usefulness of what you have learned in this course in sharpening your critical skills in reading the book you have chosen. I list twenty or so books below that would be excellent choices for your book review; if you are aware of other anthropological works on verbal art or cultural performance that you would like to read, please email me the title before you start working. I have placed on LATTE a sample of book reviews I have written on the general topic of verbal art.

Examples of possible books to review:

Alessandro Duranti, *From Grammar to Politics: Linguistic Anthropology in a Western Samoan Village.*
David Guss, *The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism as Cultural Performance.*
David Guss, *To Weave and Sing: Art, Symbol, and Narrative in the South American Rain Forest.*
Nicholas Harkness, *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea.*
Jerome R. Mintz, *Carnival Song and Society.*
Anthony Seeger, *Why Suya Sing.*
Joel Sherzer, *The Poetics of Cuna Verbal Art.*
Barry Stephensen, *Performing the Reformation: Public Ritual in the City of Luther.*
Denis Tedlock, *Rabinal Archi: A Mayan Drama of War and Sacrifice.*
ANTH 114b Spring 2014 syllabus