

Prospectus for August Wilson & Beyond Fall 2023

Course ID and 7-digit Number:

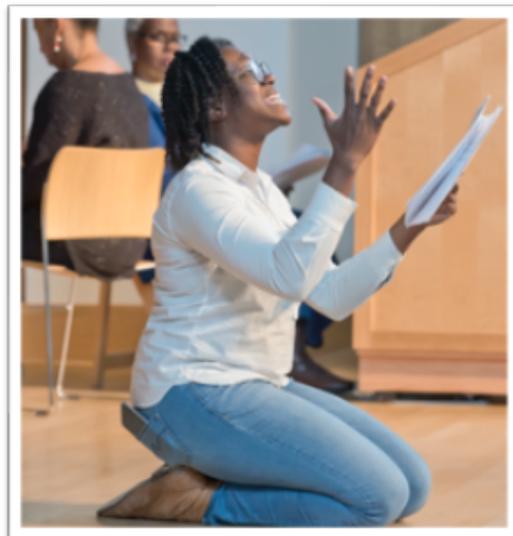
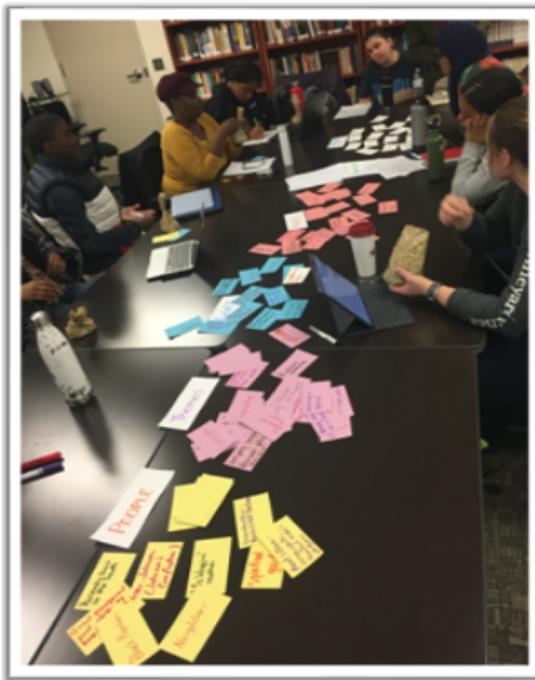
AFRC 2325.401 / ENGL 2222.401 / THAR 2325.401

Instructors:

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Suzana Berger, Director of Arts Partnerships, Netter Center for Community Partnerships

**The people need to know the story. See how they fit into it.
See what part they play.”
- August Wilson, *King Hedley II***



Course Description and Level

If you want to get to know community members from West Philadelphia, collaborate deeply with classmates, gain deeper and more nuanced understandings of African American history and culture, engage in a wide range of learning methods, and explore some of the most treasured plays in the American theatre, then this is the course for you. No previous experience required, just curiosity and willingness to engage.

In this intergenerational seminar, Penn students together with older community members read groundbreaking playwright August Wilson's American Century Cycle: ten plays that form an iconic picture of African American traditions, traumas, and triumphs through the decades, nearly all told through the lens of Pittsburgh's Hill District neighborhood. (Two of Wilson's plays are receiving fresh attention with recent acclaimed film versions: *Fences* with Denzel Washington and Viola Davis; *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* with Davis and Chadwick Boseman.) Class participants develop relationships with one other while exploring the history and culture that shaped these powerful plays.

As an Academically Based Community Service (ABCS) course, the class plans and hosts events for a multigenerational, West Philadelphia-focused audience with community partners West Philadelphia Cultural Alliance / Paul Robeson House & Museum, and Theatre in the X. Class members come to a deeper understanding of Black life in Philadelphia through stories community members share in oral history interviews. These stories form the basis for an original performance the class creates, presented at an end-of-semester gathering. Wilson's plays provide the bridge between class members from various generations and backgrounds. The group embodies collaborative service through the art and connection-building conversations it offers to the community.

For an up-close look at the way this course operates, see this article featuring the year the class collaborated with Paul Robeson House and Sayre High School:

<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/bridging-gap-between-penn-students-and-west-philly-community>

For more information on the 2023 professors, visit

www.theatre.sas.upenn.edu/people/margit-edwards

www.suzanaberger.com

Course Structure for Fall 2023

- Class meets in person on Mondays & Wednesdays 1:45pm - 3:15pm.
- Class members include full-time Penn students and older community members affiliated with our partners Paul Robeson House and Theatre in the X.
- This fall, the class will read six out of the ten plays in Wilson's American Century Cycle, plus most of the book *I Ain't Sorry For Nothin' I Done: August Wilson's Process of Playwriting*, and several essays that contextualize the material. (The full list of Century Cycle plays is *Jitney*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, *King Hedley II*, *Gem of the Ocean*, *Radio Golf*.)

- **September - early November:** Class reads multiple August Wilson plays and related materials. Most class meetings include a mix of brief lectures, discussion among the whole group, and work in pairs or small groups to address discussion prompts or analyze a passage of text. Content is oriented toward giving students the critical tools necessary to
 - reach their own informed conclusions regarding Wilson’s plays and
 - use question formation and storytelling related to the plays as a means to connect with others. (Others meaning other class members as well as audience members who attend our events.)
- **September - early November:** select class sessions will be reserved for workshops related to Play Analysis and Play Creation. These may include a monologue analysis workshop, a “world of the play” dramaturgical workshop, a “what is Black language?” workshop and other topics that prepare the group to create a richly textured new theatrical piece.
- **Early October:** students will contribute to and participate in a weekend event with community members. At this event, Theatre in the X will present scenes from a selected Wilson play. Then the audience divides into small groups for discussion led by class members around the themes presented in the play.
 - *Event to be held Saturday, October 7 OR Sunday, October 8 2023
- **October through early November:** class generates questions to ask in oral history interviews. Class members meet up with audience members from their October event discussion groups to conduct those interviews.
- **Early November through end of semester:** through a guided ensemble creation process, the class members of all ages work together to create an original theatre piece. The piece takes the form of interconnected monologues, with all characters having some relationship to one another. We start by identifying themes and other elements that were prominent in the oral history interviews, then move to generating characters and a new story rooted in those elements. Each class member is responsible for writing one monologue, though there is much collaboration among class members and professors to revise and refine the writing. Some class members take on acting roles and we bring in professional actors to play other roles. Class members also contribute to directing, design, stage management, and publicity.
 - *Event to be held Saturday, December 9 OR Sunday, December 10 2023

Assignments

the list below reflects the 2022 syllabus and may be updated for 2023

Readings

We expect that you will read the assigned material and come to class prepared to ask questions about it, share observations, and do further close reading from an informed place. Reading is heavier from September through October, typically one play per week and a few other materials (book chapters, essays, etc.). November and December include very little reading in order to focus on play creation assignments.

Neighborhood Visit + Documentation

Due mid-September

This assignment asks students to simply spend time participating in and observing life in public places in a West Philadelphia neighborhood, similar to August Wilson's habit of frequenting Hill District diners, barber shops, and more. You will spend at least 90 minutes in one or more of the neighborhood spots on our class-generated list, respectfully note what you see, hear, and experience, and provide documentation of your visit.

Weighted value: 10% of final grade

Monologue Analysis Essay

Due late September

A close reading of a monologue of your choosing from one of the plays we've read up to this point that leads to conclusions about the changes the character experiences. You will utilize terminology and concepts from the in-class monologue analysis workshop, plus related readings and class discussions. Consult the Canvas assignment for more specific requirements.

5 to 7 pages double-spaced.

Weighted value: 10% of final grade

Oral History Interviews and Tape Log

Due early November

Students will schedule and conduct oral history interviews with the community members whom you meet during the October event. The class will work together to generate a brief set of shared questions / topics, other questions are your choice. After conducting your interviews, you will submit a Tape Log for each, which organizes the interview into topics and includes selected transcribed quotes and summary of content. (The required Tape Log format is posted on Canvas.)

Weighted value: 10% of final grade

Companion Assignments

These short writings are preparation for in-class activities. We will directly utilize them in class. Unlike longer assignments, these are graded complete or incomplete.

Weighted value: these assignments combined = 20% of final grade

- October event discussion questions early October
- Oral history interview questions mid-October
- Play Creation materials early November
- Free Write + Character Page early November
- Character Questions mid-November

Community Performance

Due dates for individual components mid-November through early December

Students will write multiple drafts of material for the community performance the class will host on December 9 or 10. This project includes writing assignments done outside of class sessions, workshopping during class, one rehearsal outside of class with director and actors, and other event-related jobs. Monologue drafts are graded as a package.

Weighted value: 20% of final grade

Intergenerational Partnership Reflection Essay

Due after classes end

5 to 7 pages double-spaced.

Weighted value: 10% of final grade

Expectations

Dialogue

This class is based on the principles of theatrical exploration, community partnership, intellectual rigor, and open dialogue. This means we are committed to engaging one another in dialogue in order to learn from the experiences of each individual. This requires a level of openness, commitment and candor. While we may disagree, we must all commit to respecting the experience and feelings of those sharing. We are a learning community and accountable to each other, as well as to our community partners. We recognize that members of the class come from a variety of undergraduate majors and schools, as well as a range of educational backgrounds among our community class members. So class dialogue requires that we learn one another's respective idioms and frames of reference. We consider our differences to be one of the strengths we will build on over the course of the semester.

October and December Events

As a class, we will host one event the weekend of October 7 and 8 and one the weekend of December 9 and 10. Exact dates for 2023 will be finalized before the start of the fall semester. Past event venues include Painted Bride Art Center (52nd & Market) and The Rotunda (41st & Walnut). You the class members are the co-hosts of both events and the driving force for the December event. Your presence and contributions are essential throughout the planning process and at the events themselves. If you have a schedule conflict for either of these events, please discuss it with the professors immediately to determine an appropriate solution.

Communication

All class members must utilize these modes of communication about coursework:

- Course Canvas site
- Google drive class shared folder
- Class member GroupMe

Participation

We rank participation as 20% of your grade because contributions from every class member are essential to building a learning community that can then create events that truly represent both the class and the interviewed community members.

Raising and responding to questions vocally during sessions is important in our course. We will also consider your participation in other ways: work sessions outside class time with other class members in person or by phone, zoom, etc.; on the class discussion board through posting and responding to others; and engaging with the additional related content available on Canvas that is not part of the required materials. We expect class members to rely on one another for information sharing and resources, rather than to direct all questions to the professors.

The Teaching Assistant will hold individual meetings with each student two times during the semester to check in about your participation. They will strategize with you if you are not meeting expectations to receive a high participation grade. The professors are committed to flexibility in grading participation, with each student choosing the combination of methods that works with their learning styles while also challenging them. What we expect from students is commitment to mutual support of class members, along with thorough engagement with the course content and one another.

Classroom Protocol & Norms

“What’s said here stays here. What’s learned here leaves here.” H/t Chris Rogers, Paul Robeson House Program Director.

As a result of the materials we will be reading, our conversations will often (though not always) take turns into territory that land at the intersection of the personal and the academic. As a learning community that is designed to thrive on mutual respect and trust, the professors want to encourage everyone to protect their classmates’s privacy. The confidentiality of class members should be something cherished and guarded by all. The Teaching Assistant will be developing – with input from class members – what form(s) our online presence should assume.

The class will be divided into Home Groups during the second class session, with new groups assigned once or twice later in the semester. Your Home Group members are your go-to people for questions about the class material, assignments, processing your thoughts about challenging discussion, and checking in about your overall well being.

Grading Breakdown

the list below reflects the 2022 syllabus and may be updated for 2023

Community Performance (multiple monologue drafts and event work)	20%
Participation	20%
Total of Companion Assignments	20%
Neighborhood Visit + documentation	10%
Monologue Analysis Essay	10%
Oral History Interview + Tape Log	10%
Final Paper	10%

If you have questions or concerns about your grade throughout the semester, or about any other aspects of the class, we expect you to be proactive about discussing them with the Teaching Assistant and Professors.