

# PART III

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## Performance of and Beyond Literature

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*Interpretation is an excellent way of studying literature because it demands that the student perceive. . . . The silent reader, skimming and skipping and scavenging often only for particular ideas or images, frequently does not really assimilate whole pieces of literature. . . . But the interpreter cannot so read. He must bring the whole poem close to himself. . . . The act of oral reading before an audience (though that audience may be a single listener—or, indeed, only the reader himself) is . . . a kind of final act of criticism. . . .*

—Wallace Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation* (1966, pp. 6, 8–9)

*When I choose texts, they're random in a way. I feel I could use any text. That was something that started very early with Spalding [Gray]. I could pick anything in this room. . . . I could take three props here: the printing on the back of that picture, this book, and whatever's in this pile of papers, and make something that would mean as much, no more nor less, than what I've constructed in the performance space downstairs. . . . Finally, it's not about that text. . . . I take [some] chance occurrence and say, that is the sine qua non, that is the beginning, that is the text. I cannot stray from that text. As someone else would use the lines of a playwright, I use that action as the baseline.*

—Elizabeth LeCompte (quoted in Savran, 1988, pp. 50–51)

**W**hy “literature”? In the monograph *Unstoried: Teaching Literature in the Age of Performance Studies* (1999) I briefly trace the rise and fall of “interpretation”: the

study that began in eighteenth century England as “elocution,” and flourished in late-nineteenth century America (during the heyday of oratorical culture) under names as quaint

sounding as “expression” and “speech arts.”<sup>1</sup> Employing a range of examples from parallel histories, I wrote *Unstoried* to suggest to an expanding field of “performance studies” scholars, arriving from many disciplines, how a number of literature professors once got involved.

Having begun my academic career in the now-vanished category of “interpretation teacher,” I suppose that I suffered “the misfortune of teaching literature,” as Jonathan Brody Kramnick (1998) terms it, “in a moment when its founding rationale has been called into radical doubt” (p. 244). English elocution came into existence alongside “the appearance of the category of ‘literature’ in the later eighteenth century” (Guillory, 1993, p. 213). The age that gave us the English-language “classic” gave us as well a use-value for literature, a form of “cultural capital” (Guillory, 1993): the rise of “literature” helped to shape the public sphere and its protocols of communication. So did the *performance* of literature, which for two centuries (under various names) capitalized on the trained performing body as a communication medium. From its beginnings, elocution’s market-driven goals were divided and sometimes self-contradictory. Did elocution belong in universities or in trade schools? One of its audiences sought enrichment from *belles lettres* through embodied performance, while another (sometimes overlapping) audience sought training in the persuasive delivery of *any* text, as a tool for activism or professional advancement. The manuals on elocutionary delivery that became popular in Georgian England contained training drills on shaping meaningful sounds and exhibiting through gesture the signs of deep feeling. “Passion for Dummies”: I find it hard to read these books and not compare them to present-day computer manuals, designed to help us with everything from simply turning on the “machine” to making us appear expressive for the widest possible audience. The oratorically extended body of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—whether

raving on hustings, imitating the “action” of eighteenth century stage star David Garrick from a pulpit or school podium, or standing at a table in a coffeehouse to read a newspaper out loud—was the laptop-extended or televisualized body of its day.

Elocutionary training attained its greatest respectability in American colleges and universities with the founding in 1914 of the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking—known since 1997 as the National Communication Association (NCA). Most of the association’s members, at the time of its first convention in 1915, were school teachers whose platform oratory embraced both public speaking and literary recitation. Yet as “academically oriented” performers (Rarig & Greaves, 1954, p. 499) they were eager to distance themselves from the “rubbish” of popular platform entertainment with which the label “elocution” had come to be associated during the late-nineteenth century (see Cohen, 1994; Edwards, 1999, pp. 3–4, 16–43, 63–78, 121; Weaver, 1989). As the association grew and diversified, its Interpretation Division became the national gathering place for teachers and scholars of performance-based literary study who worked outside the institutional boundaries of “English” and “theatre.” The interests of these educators were diverse enough to permit continual transformations of collective identity. In 1991, the group received approval to rename itself a Performance Studies Division, thereby cultivating what appears to be the first national association of “performance studies” scholars out of its deep roots in literary study, speech arts, and elocutionary training. By contrast, the organization Performance Studies international (PSi), which held its first conference in 1995, arose from the very different institutional identity of the graduate program in Performance Studies at New York University (NYU) and sought to promote interdisciplinary performance scholarship unburdened by association with a history of literary study.<sup>2</sup>

With the rise of performance studies associations from contrasting traditions, scholars like Richard Schechner (2002) have begun to speak of a two-brand model of performance studies pedagogy in American universities: *with* literature, as exemplified by the academic department at Northwestern University, and *without*, as exemplified by the NYU department (pp. 16–19; see also Carlson, 1996, pp. 19–25; Jackson, 2004, pp. 8–11; Jacobson, 1994, p. 20; Phelan, 1998, pp. 3–7). Such myths of institutional origin are unlikely to have any long-term influence on whether performance studies curricula, during the first decades of the twenty-first century, will succeed in inscribing their borders on the departmental terrain of colleges and universities. While commentators on the late-twentieth century scene of performance studies have had fun with the two-brand or two-school model (see, for example, McKenzie, 2001, pp. 46–47), Shannon Jackson (2004) helpfully reminds us that the “two institutional narratives” do not arise fancifully: each suggests a complicated genealogy. The spread of interpretation and later performance studies through the member institutions of the NCA (including Northwestern University) produces a very different “origin” story than the one associated with the founding of the Performance Studies Department at NYU, yet each story “obscures central figures and deliberative societies in other parts of the United States” than New York and Illinois (p. 10). My own sense of institutional histories filled with unstoried figures has grounded my research into the exclusionary, as well as selectively inclusionary, practices that drive the formation and self-definition of academic disciplines and scholarly associations.

“Institutional history,” Jackson (2001) observes, “suggests that there are several maps operating simultaneously” (p. 92). My own mapping of what I have called an “NCA tradition” (1999, p. 3) does not seek to demonstrate that performance studies derives from the pedagogy of academically oriented performers

of literature. It seeks, rather, to identify the academic study of interpretation as one of the many streams that flowed unpredictably into the current of performance studies, as it began to take shape in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Jackson (2001, 2004) has argued that a deconstruction of institutional blind spots requires a genealogical rather than narrowly ideological approach: a patient willingness to trace the often playful, all-too-human reaccentuations of ideas that eventually harden into the discourses of academic disciplines (2001, p. 85). This was my argument in *Unstoried*: a genealogical approach incalculably enriches the reading of archival materials when we try to make sense of unlikely parallel lives (elocutionists Thomas Sheridan and James Burgh in eighteenth century London), emulous candidacies for leadership (Genevieve Stebbins and S. S. Curry in American “expression” training), or negotiations of disciplinary direction in twentieth century “speech” education.

A question that remains is this. As interpretation vanished from American academic life, why did so many of its practitioners adopt performance studies (rather than a better-established discipline like theatre or English) as the appropriate setting to reinvent the pedagogical practices that first had drawn them to literary study? Within the present-day Performance Studies Division of the NCA (a unit of about 350 members within an association of over 7,000) are rich examples of “the historical entanglements of the already-was and thus still-kind-of-is” (Jackson, 2001, p. 92; see Jackson, 2004, p. 78).

What happened, then, to transform the study of interpretation into an “already-was” and “still-kind-of-is” phenomenon? Across the twentieth century, the market value of Victorian-era elocution’s two hottest properties—the performing body as communication technology, and the conceptualization of literacy based on and sustained by literature—would steadily drop. Long before Internet culture, the technologies of film, radio, and

television would change our concepts of not only *what* we read but *how* we read. Within the twentieth century university, the “rhetoric-and-oratory professor” and the literary “generalist” became figures of suspicion and even derision among a growing field of specialists; by mid-century, teachers of interpretation began to abandon oratory’s claims of relevance and use-value to the “professional-managerial class” (see Guillory, 1993, pp. x-xii; Jackson, 2004, pp. 53–54). When influential teachers began to talk about embodied performance as a mode of literary appreciation that could be practiced *in private*—as seen, for example, in the epigraph drawn from a well-known interpretation textbook by Wallace Bacon, first published in 1966—they were refusing to read aloud the writing that was on the wall of major research universities and trade schools alike.

Such a withdrawal from the public sphere consigns literary study to a deferred value: as James Anderson Winn (1998) expresses this, to the cultivation of “lifelong readers, intelligent appreciators of the arts, people capable of being thrilled by an idea” (p. 128). In *The Pale of Words*, Winn reflects hopefully upon the survival of his subject, English literature, in a university reshaped by a commitment to both interdisciplinarity and performance—and, more specifically, by the use of performance-based pedagogy in humanities classrooms traditionally not associated with performance. But Winn writes without a sense of how such pedagogy has been practiced in American higher education for over a century (even at the University of Michigan, where he directed the Institute for the Humanities at the time he published *The Pale of Words*). More skeptical cultural critics, maintaining that “the category of literature has come to seem institutionally dysfunctional” at the dawn of the twenty-first century (Guillory, 1993, p. x), might accuse Winn of defending the teaching of books and bookishness (with or without performance methods) “in the most banal sense of appreciation” (Kramnick, 1998, p. 244). And such

critics most likely would not be persuaded by the claims of many interpretation teachers, who argued the performing body’s radical potential to make the literature classroom a scene of advocacy and even activism. Jill Taft-Kaufman (1985) has summarized these claims, in her astute review of interpretation pedagogy at the very moment when it was fading from the scene of colleges and universities. As advanced by performance theorist Mary S. Strine (1992) such claims provoked a dubious response from Robert Scholes (1992). He found himself “less optimistic” than Strine that performed poetry could “forge ‘an effective social force’ to deal with immediate problems,” even though he remained generally optimistic about the value of poetry

to help keep human decency alive through periods of barbaric self-interest. . . . Auden, after a decade of lost political causes, wrote that “poetry makes nothing happen.” He was wrong. It just makes things happen more slowly than we short-lived and impatient beings could wish. (p. 77)

Far too many of my generation of teachers hungered to see their classroom work change the world at a greater speed. Part of the “pluralist euphoria” that Judith Hamera (1998) describes in the nascent performance studies movement—what she calls a “prison break” toward “anything but literature” (p. 273)—is a break toward the political, the desire of Scholes’s “impatient beings” for a more efficacious social praxis than the study of literature has ever seemed to produce.

In *Unstoried*, I had the unfortunate tendency to speak of performance “after” literature—by which I intended to signify the ebbing of literature as a shaping force in what John Guillory (1993) calls the “pedagogic imaginary.” But literature (even viewed tartly as a “dysfunctional” institutional category) is not going anywhere anytime soon. At Northwestern, across departments, the Shakespeare courses are more popular than ever. The Borders and Barnes and

Noble stores keeping late hours in so many urban and suburban neighborhoods are remarkable developments of postmodern simulation. On display nightly, from the WiFi hotspot in the Starbucks franchise (coffeehouse of the new public sphere) to the display racks of *Lord of the Rings* DVDs, is an excavation of the layered technologies of words, words, words as we have come to know them since Thomas Sheridan wrote his pronouncing dictionary in the age of Dr. Johnson. In many of these stores, we find the equivalent of what elocutionists once meant by “the platform”: spaces designated for public readings, which agents and publicists regularly supply with authors eager to both vocalize and inscribe their products. It has fallen to performance theory, perhaps, to read such institutions of “literacy beyond literature” as phenomena of interest outside merely the history of commerce.

The ludic, punning work of Jon McKenzie effectively charts how far we have traveled (even arriving at a modest frontier trading post like the neighborhood Borders) from the quasi-monastic image of a library where people sat quietly at carrels and read books from beginning to end. The student of interpretation performed the *unity* of a fictional world that could be contained within the covers of a book. But “what’s historically specific about the age of global performance is its flagrant anachronisms, its glaring mix of forms and traditions from past and present” (McKenzie, 2001, p. 249). The birth of performance spelled not the death of the book, but what we might call its disclosure or uncovering, its decentering and dispersal.

McKenzie’s *Perform or Else* (2001) bears a subtitle, *From Discipline to Performance*, that connects the dots between my two epigraphs. To Wallace Bacon, the preeminent American teacher of interpretation in the postwar decades, an embodied interpretation “demands” perception of “the whole poem.” Regular practice can cure “skimming and skipping and scavenging,” just as the

disciplinary systems advertised in the old elocution periodicals claimed to cure stammering. Although Bacon retired from Northwestern’s Interpretation Department in 1979, after serving as its chair for over three decades, he remained active in professional associations (notably the NCA) until close to the time of his death in 2001. He lived long enough, in other words, to see the kind of reading he once regarded as undergraduate hastiness, or curable disorder, elevated to respectability as a theoretical and philosophical stance, a mode of resistance and transgression.

Celebrated avant-garde director Elizabeth LeCompte, in the second epigraph, strikes me as emblematic of a later view when she positions herself against interpretation. In another interview with David Savran, she clarifies that her work with a Flaubert text (staged not long after Arthur Miller’s notorious attempt to prevent the Wooster Group’s use of his play *The Crucible*) is “not illustrative.”<sup>3</sup> It is closer to “paraphrasing” (a tactic also deployed in response to Miller’s attorneys) than to interpreting or even “stealing”: “that hooks up with my feelings about texts, about the objectness of the written word and its inherent lifelessness without the intervention of an interpretive or outside consciousness” (quoted in Savran, 1986, p. 40). Even in context, LeCompte sounds more than a little like Thomas Sheridan (1762/1798) in his famous elocutionary *Lectures*, seeking to restore life to the “dead letter” of the book (p. xvi). But LeCompte is no elocutionist. (Neither am I, for all my fascination with them.) LeCompte’s position is so much a measure of where performance has been for at least the past quarter-century, that it is “now a part of the grain” it once went against. So, at least, suggests Schechner about the state of the “avant-garde” in late-Clintonian America (quoted in Harding, 2000, p. 214).

Performance training transformed me, as a university student over three decades ago, from one of Bacon’s “skippers” and “scavengers”

into a dedicated close reader. I became one of Winn's "lifelong" reader-appreciators, thrilled by ideas and the words that expressed them. And I continue to bring literary texts into performance classrooms: not as examples of the "dysfunctional category" that Guillory critiques, but as "selected works" whose value I advocate to new readers. My heart's ease for the past several decades has been the excitement of my students as they adapt literature for stage performance. But the excitement of these students is not reverential. It arises in large part from the freedom to reinvent the classics they study, by questioning through the medium of their own bodies the very limits of textual authority. As I have come to realize, my students arrive in class ready to take performance *beyond* literature. My divided loyalties between the book and the performing body exemplify for me the "historical entanglements" of which Jackson speaks, as I continue to teach literature in the age of performance studies.

Other contributors to this section are similarly "entangled." They launched their careers as interpretation students in American schools, but later shifted the direction of their research and teaching. None has abandoned or rejected literature, even in moving away from it. Some have moved further than others. But each of us has reaccentuated the influence of literary study in performance classrooms. In the different ways described below, we are beyond literature in that sense. We all locate our work among the various topics and categories represented throughout the present volume: history, pedagogy, theory, politics, and ethnography, not merely literature.

Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson argue that, in the paradigm shift to "performance studies" at the beginning of the twenty-first century, personal narrative displaces literary study as a privileged site of performance. Viewed as a transgressive and *radically contextualized* practice, within an expanded and more inclusive pedagogical context,

personal narrative performance constructs and deconstructs both culture and the life of the subject in culture. The essay articulates a sophisticated theoretical framework for analyzing personal narrative performance in both everyday and formal artistic settings. Langellier and Peterson, who teach in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of Maine, Orono, are the authors of *Storytelling in Daily Life: Performing Narrative* (2004).

Lynn Miller and Jacqueline Taylor, editors (with M. Heather Carver) of *Voices Made Flesh: Performing Women's Autobiography* (2003), employ the examples of contemporary public performers to illustrate two modes or categories of autobiographical performance. Both push beyond traditional literary conceptions of the nonfiction genre: "auto/biographical" performances (in which performers stake their own bodies and life-stories in the self-reflexive act of staging historical figures) and "staged personal narratives" (which draw upon and construct the performer/creator's own life experience). Through a series of case studies, Miller and Taylor document the work of public performers whose very "platform" requires the dynamic of audience response; each performance they examine constructs its audience, and is constructed by its audience, in different ways. Miller teaches in the Department of Theatre at the University of Texas, and Taylor in the Department of Communication at DePaul University.

Bruce Henderson employs techniques of personal narrative in his rereading of an instructional tradition. He revisits a painful incident in his university training, when a teacher insensitively critiqued his choices in a literary performance as "autistic" (a term which, clearly, the teacher barely understood). In midcareer, Henderson has returned to graduate school, to pursue a second doctorate in Disability Studies. His recent study of autism encourages him to employ the term as metaphor: in reflecting upon the history of

performance pedagogy, he examines the uncommunicativeness of communication teachers concerning aspects of the work they do. Henderson, who teaches in Ithaca College's Department of Speech Communication, is coauthor (with Carol Simpson Stern) of *Performance: Texts and Contexts* (1993).

Ruth Laurion Bowman and Michael S. Bowman set off from the invitation they find in contemporary theory to "think irreverently," not only about performance but about the ways in which we write about performance. They employ techniques of "performative" or "performance" writing to address the challenge of documenting a rehearsed live event: Ruth Bowman's adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, as staged by her at Louisiana State University in November 2003. Exploring alternatives to the conventional production record, the authors attempt their own version of what Jean-Luc Godard (1972) has called "research in the form of a spectacle" (p. 181). With the abruptness of cuts in an experimental film, or the switching of television channels, the essay juxtaposes strips of text: passages from Ruth Bowman's script, quotations from historical research for the script (on topics ranging from mesmerism to labor conditions), narratives and syntheses of this research, and reflections (or better, one frequently interrupted reflection) on the history of the academic discipline in which the research took place. The scholarly "narrative" that emerges has been shaped as much by "electracy"—Gregory Ulmer's term for "cinematic/electronic thinking"—as by "literacy" (see Ulmer, 2003). But it also evokes the old-fashioned stitching of the Seamstress in Ruth Bowman's *Blithedale* script. (In saying even so much, I betray the authors' intention, inspired by the writings of Benjamin, "to communicate without initial conceptualizations.") Michael Bowman currently edits *Text and Performance Quarterly*. Ruth Bowman is the 2003 recipient of the NCA's Leslie Irene Coger Award for lifetime achievement in performance. Both teach

in the Speech Communication Department at Louisiana State University.

The view that performers cocreate or recreate the texts they bring before the public suggests a "paradoxical" approach to traditional performance training. My contribution to the section examines this paradox in the art of several practitioners of "adaptation," all of whom began or shifted their careers in a specific local context: the intersection of Northwestern University's performance training and the Chicago theatre community. The essay considers the work of such adapter/directors as David Schwimmer, Njoki McElroy, Mary Zimmerman, and Frank Galati.

#### NOTES

1. Earlier versions of several passages in the present essay appear in *Unstoried* (Edwards, 1999). I am grateful to *The Theatre Annual: A Journal of Performance Studies*, published by the College of William and Mary in Virginia, for permission to include a selection of unmarked quotations; and to Nathan Stucky, then the journal's editor, for generous, thoughtful encouragement to develop the monograph.

2. McKenzie (2001, p. 47) traces the origins of PSi to an NYU graduate-student association that began to meet in 1990; see also Phelan (1998, p. 3).

3. The Wooster Group's production of *L.S.D.* (. . . *Just the High Points* . . .) took shape over several years. A 1983 work in progress combined a 45-minute reduction of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* with the playing of a record album by Timothy Leary. In October 1984, Miller's attorneys issued a "cease and desist" order to the Wooster Group when it attempted to perform a more fully developed version of *L.S.D.* Miller feared that *L.S.D.* presented "a blatant parody" of his famous work: "I don't want my play produced," he declared, "except in total agreement with the way I wrote it" (quoted in Savran, 1988, p. 193). The ensuing confrontation between Miller and the Wooster Group and the subsequent revision of the production have been occasions for much commentary by theatre and performance scholars. A detailed account appears in Savran (1988, pp. 169–220).

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## 9

## Shifting Contexts in Personal Narrative Performance

KRISTIN M. LANGELLIER AND ERIC E. PETERSON<sup>1</sup>

I first learned about performing literature in grade school and high school speech contests, and then later in a graduate classroom, after three years of teaching high school English. As performer and audience, my sure, pure favorite was oral interpretation of prose in its incarnations as solo performance and as chamber theatre, the ensemble staging of short stories and novels. The kaleidoscopic variations of narrators, stories, and audience created an event that never failed to captivate me, although my tendencies to be swept away by the rhetoric of fiction were tempered as I learned about such nuances as unreliable narrators and how to flesh out analytically and onstage the strategic intricacies of telling stories. About the same time, I came to recognize storytellers all around me, creating stories about ordinary and extraordinary experience as their lives unfold. As I look back and tell part of my life story, I credit my father, now deceased, with piquing my curiosity about performing narrative in daily life as he recounted episodes, characters, and images from his childhood and ours; and as we listened and

joined him in storytelling during the bustle of supertime, over card games of euchre and 500, or after a humid summer evening's softball game as we passed pop and popcorn among hands slick with butter. Personal narrative is performed everywhere: in conversation, in print, on radio, television, and stage, and over the Internet. As an elemental, ubiquitous, and consequential part of daily life, its pleasures and power reach far and deeply into our lives.

This brief personal narrative about performing narrative recapitulates a larger disciplinary contingency: the shift from oral interpretation of literature to the more inclusive tradition now called performance studies. Performance studies names a shift from studying literature in performance to performing texts of culture, identity, and experience. Texts are sites where work gets done, where the exchange of pleasure and power becomes visible, where the structures that enable and constrain who we are, how we can act, and what we can think become palpable (Scholes, 1985). Michael Bowman (1998) puts the contextual

shift to performance studies in narrative terms: “Oral interpretation’s story was how performance will make you a better reader of literature, of texts. . . . Performance studies’ [story] is about what happens to us, individually and collectively, when culture is constructed or deconstructed, affirmed or challenged, reinforced or altered by means of performance” (p. 191). As part of that cultural activity, personal narrative has arguably become a privileged site of performance at the beginning of the twenty-first century, witnessed by its presence and placement in this volume. Performing personal narrative reclaims and proclaims both body and voice: the personal gives a body to narrative, and narrative gives voice to experience (Langellier, 1998, p. 207). The embodiment of personal narrative makes textual and performative power—to select or suppress certain aspects of human experiences, to prefer or downplay certain meanings, to give voice and body to certain identities—not only visible, audible, and palpable but also discussable.

The rise of personal narrative in performance studies reflects historical changes that are more broadly cultural as well as disciplinary (see Strine, 1998). In the efficacious words of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1996), we “get a life” by making, performing, and listening to personal narrative: “In post-modern American we are culturally obsessed with getting a life—and not just getting it, but sharing it with and advertising it to others. We are, as well, obsessed with consuming the lives of others” (p. 3). Performing personal narrative is fueled by several broader cultural contingencies burgeoning after World War II in the United States, among them the memoir/autobiography boom in writing; the new identity movements organized around civil rights, gender, sexuality, age, and ability; the therapeutic cultures of illness, trauma, and self-help; and the many self-performance practices of performance art, popular culture, and electronic media. The turn to technologies of performing the self contributes to what has been

called an “interview society” which solicits, consumes, and studies stories of personal experience (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997), a “recited society” which continually performs (cites and recites) stories (de Certeau, 1974/1984), and a “remission society” of storytelling about illness, trauma, and survival (Frank, 1995). A defining condition of postmodernity, personal narrative has also been suggested as a key site in the future of performance studies (Dailey, 1998).

If personal narrative is a means to get a life, and if performance studies is enjoying some new disciplinary life in part through this storytelling, scholars can ask, “What kind of a life are we getting?” This chapter discusses some responses to that question by drawing on insights from theories of performance and performativity. Our emphasis is on how the shift to comprehend personal narrative within the inclusiveness of performance studies raises questions, issues, and challenges different from those raised by the paradigm of studying oral interpretation of literature, which generated theory to comprehend narrative as a text performed in a classroom or on a stage. Briefly put, performing personal narrative is *radically contextualized*. By “radical” we intend its etymological sense of “to the roots.” By “contextualized” we refer to the ways text and context are inextricably coarticulated in performance. Performing personal narrative is radically contextualized: embodied in participants who tell personal stories of experience, situated in the interactional and material constraints of the performance event, and embedded within discursive forces that shape experience, narrative, and selves. The chapter develops this argument first by tracing a series of shifts or breakthroughs in defining personal narrative as/in performance. The next sections develop the senses of personal narrative performance as radically contextualized in bodies, situations, and discourse. The argument is illustrated by corresponding examples of family storytelling, staged performance, and illness narrative.

A final section discusses the politics of performing personal narrative: how its pleasures can both legitimate and critique relations of power. Understood as radically contextualized, personal narrative is a normative and transgressive practice in art and daily life, a performative struggle for agency that is always ambiguous and contingent.

### BREAKTHROUGHS INTO PERSONAL NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE

It was easier to study and perform literature when, before the contextual shifts broadly called postmodernity, we were more certain about what literature is and is not. The contesting of the literary canon is mirrored by challenges to what is or is not performed or performable. A fundamental tenet of performance studies asserts that no fixed canon defines or delimits performance. Performance studies is a moving focus within a horizon of practices, events, and behaviors arrayed in a broad spectrum variously called an umbrella, tent, caravan, or carnival. Aesthetics and daily life inhabit a shared realm of practices and politics. The term *performance studies* mediates between the inclination in literary and theatre studies for high-culture forms, and the preference in cultural studies for popular culture and media (Roach, 2002). The antidisciplinary impulse of performance studies is complemented by its proclivity for interdisciplinary borrowings (Schechner, 2002). The formulation of performance as an essentially contested concept (Carlson, 1996; Hopkins, Long, & Strine, 1990) gestures to the antiessentialism of poststructuralist theories. In similar fashion, personal narrative eludes definition, blurs genres, and bleeds across boundaries.

The attempt to fix disciplinary boundaries produces two consequences: a preoccupation with what is in and what is out, and a neglect of what falls in the cracks. Personal narrative has suffered both. In earlier work, I referred to personal narrative as a boundary phenomenon

(Langellier, 1989) and as liminal (Langellier, 1999), suspended as it is between art and life, fact and fiction, self and other, natural and stylized performance, the public and the private. Here we suggest how personal narrative morphs across disciplines, each of which has a stake in its study and performance—as autobiography in literary studies, as evidence in oral history, as verbal art in folklore, as life story in psychology, as accounts in sociology, as conversational storytelling in communication and linguistics, or as public moral argument in rhetoric—each of which uses liminality to guarantee personal narrative’s authenticity or to invite its dismissal as anecdote. Add to these all varieties of autoperformance—performance art, autoethnography, performative writing, mystory, “and whatever we will have called it tomorrow or the next day” (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2000, p. 376; see Bowman, 2000). One way to read this new context for personal narrative is as a series of breakthroughs into performance.

Sociolinguists William Labov and Joshua Waletzky are credited with the breakthrough into personal narrative in 1967. Their remarkably heuristic essay on “oral versions of personal experience” launched decades of research and performance. Its reprinting in the 1997 special issue of the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* (now *Narrative Inquiry*) is not simply a retrospective of the original essay but a demonstration that personal narrative continues to generate intense interest across numerous disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Oral versions of personal experience tell “what happened to me.” Labov and Waletzky define personal narrative in formal linguistic terms. Fixed referential clauses recapitulate “what happened” in temporal order and yield narrative as the enhancement of experience. Free evaluative clauses answer “so what?” to convey the personal, that is, the significance of the event “to me.” Evaluation modifies narrative as personal, and it distinguishes narrative or story from non-narrative,

or a report. Labov (1972) also offered a structural model of the fully formed narrative: an abstract (what, in a nutshell, is this story about?), an orientation (who, what, when, where?), complicating action (and then what happened?), evaluation (so what's the point?), resolution (what finally happened?), and coda, which returns from the past to the present and turns speaking over to others (Garrison Keillor's "That's the news from Lake Wobegon where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children above average").

In performance terms, the Labovian model textualizes experience in referential clauses that presume a real event prior to narration. Evaluative clauses feature narrative attitude, that is, a storyteller with a personal point of view. The Labovian model broke through to performance in everyday life along with all sorts of other self-presentational behaviors. Situated within the "narrative turn," personal narrative appealed to both social science and humanities scholars. Elliot Mishler's (1995) proposed typology of narrative analysis usefully maps three models of inquiry into personal narrative. A first model, prevalent among social scientists, takes *reference* as its central problem: "the told" and "the telling" as a correspondence between a sequence of actual events and their ordering in the text. Collected in interviews and ethnographies, personal narrative gives access to the range of lived experiences as a problem of representing experience (Riessman, 1993). Performance holds some place in issues about reference, but Labov from the outset and Anna Deavere Smith (2000) more recently recognized that interviews do not necessarily yield "good," that is, vividly enacted and performable stories. To Labov's "Have you ever come close to death?" question, Smith adds "Do you know the circumstances of your birth?" and "Have you ever been accused of something you did not do?" in order to evoke more dramatic performance in interviews.

A second model focuses less on reference and more on *textualization*, the narrative strategies through which texts achieve coherence and structure to make meaning. This model is more invested in the evaluative function of personal narrative, more interested in "the telling," and more hermeneutic—the project of literary scholars, linguists, and some historians. With only the text available for interpretation, temporal ordering of "the told" is but one among other strategies for ordering narrative. In performance studies, the interest in textualization is perhaps best represented by autobiographical performance and performative writing (e.g., Bowman & Bowman, 2002; Carver, Miller, & Taylor, 2003; Pollock, 1998b). Analytic attention to the strategies of telling and to the aestheticizing of experience evokes performance possibilities of textual poetics, the conventions of voice, form, style, subjectivity, and authority as variable aspects of making personal experience meaningful, coherent, and aesthetic. Poetic and aesthetic strategies appeal to performance interests about what is particularly memorable and performable.

A third model takes the *functions* of narrative—the "work" they do in the social world—as its central problem. This model crosses disciplines and is frequently drawn upon in performance studies where it may include therapeutic functions of narrative (e.g., Park-Fuller, 2000), ritual uses by cultural groups to enact self-definitions (e.g., Madison, 1993), storytelling in interactional and institutional contexts (e.g., Schely-Newman, 2002) and the performative power of personal narrative to tell unheard stories, resist domination, and rewrite history (e.g., Corey, 2003; Pollock, 1999). When the functions of personal narrative are emphasized, reference and textualization are subordinated to the dynamics and pragmatics of putting narrative into action. Storytelling performance as *doing* something and as *something done* in particular bodies, situations, and contexts assumes priority.

Hence, the breakthrough in personal narrative breaks through into performance (Hymes, 1996). Performance highlights the way in which communication is carried out “above and beyond its referential content” (Bauman, 1986, p. 3). The storyteller assumes responsibility for a display of communicative skill, and the audience assumes responsibility for evaluating its effectivity. From a focus on the referential aspects of a narrative text, special attention is directed to the expressive act of the storyteller within the performance event. What we can learn in no other way than through performance is that the “special nature of narrative is to be doubly anchored in human events” (Bauman, 1986, p. 2). In the oft-quoted words of Walter Benjamin, “The storyteller takes what he [sic] tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (1936/1969, p. 87). In Richard Bauman’s terms, the storyteller takes from experience—the narrated event—and makes it the experience of others—the narrative event. This double-anchor is not a linear sequence of moving an experience through space in the acts of “taking” and “making” but their radical interdependence in time within the situated event of performance in participation with others. The breakthrough into performing personal narrative is variable, ranging from prominent, public cultural events by accomplished performers to the fleeting, mobile, private storytelling of ordinary people.

Performance is distinguished by three qualities that specify text-context relations: it is framed, reflexive, and emergent. First, a breakthrough to performance is framed, that is, marked off from surrounding discourse and keyed by performance conventions of particular speech communities. The performance frame strikes a contract of mutual risk-taking and responsibility between performer and audience to “take this communication in a special way”: as a storytelling event. Second, performance is reflexive because the performer

is audience to her or his own experience and turns back to signify this lived world with and for an audience. The storyteller narrates turning points in re-turning to experience; performance is a doing and a re-doing that allows scrutiny of experience, self, and world. As Dwight Conquergood (1998) has noted, the verbal artistry of folkloric texts tends to be conservative, a re-presentation of forms and conventions that stabilize norms. However, and third, performance has the potential of emergence, that is, in re-doing something one may do it differently. Emergence may refer to new text structures, event structures, and social structures, that is, to new stories, new storytelling events, and new identities.

Conquergood conceptualizes emergence not as transcendence to a higher plane but as transgression: “that force which crashes and breaks through sedimented meanings and normative traditions and plunges us back into the vortices of political struggle” (p. 32). The special attention on antistructural emergence as transgressive cultural activity defines performance as a political act. Performance as a political act emphasizes performer creativity to ground possibilities for action, agency, and resistance in the liminality of performance as it suspends, questions, plays with, and transforms social and cultural norms. Personal narrative offers an especially promising candidate for emergence, embedded as it is in the uniqueness of the performer’s body narrating a personal experience to construct a self-text for audience evaluation in a particular performance event. The emergence of a self-text different in each body and each performance foments social change. Performance incorporates the feminist slogan that “the personal [narrative] is political” as a way to break through sedimented meanings, normative traditions, and master narratives.

Finally, personal narrative breaks through into performativity: the citing of self and experience as repetition, a re-doing. Granted there is no performativity without performance—until

someone's body materializes the norms of embodiment, until someone's experience embodies the conventions of narrative. Performativity, however, underscores the theoretical and methodological move to the *constitutive* nature of performance because a performative speech act does what it says, and it produces that to which it refers. Performativity conceptualizes nonessentialized identities. Hence, storytelling as a performative speech act constitutes self and experience: "I (performer) will tell you (audience) a story about what happened to me" (experience). Personal narrative produces experience and the "I" and the "you" in a symbiosis of performed story and the social relations in which identities are materially embedded: sex, class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, geography, and so on. Identities and experience are recited according to discourse practices "whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls" (Butler, 1993, p. 1). The breakthrough to performativity is a way to explicitly theorize relations of power and the normative ordering of events, context, experience, and identity beyond the stage and classroom. In this way, the breakthrough to performativity becomes the daily practice of doing what's done (Pollock, 1998a), of reciting identity and experience in performing personal narrative.

The everydayness of performing personal narrative, the seeming naturalness of "doing what's done," may mask it as a stylized act of repetition, as a re-doing and citation of norms and forms. At the same time, the embodied presence and immediacy of performing personal narrative where storyteller, narrator, character, and audience coincide—my experience, my story, my telling of it in this event—may conceal the thing done, that is, how experience and identity are constituted in discourse. For this reason, Jon McKenzie (1998) calls for retaining but troubling the theoretical distinction between performance and

performativity. He asks, has the valorization of transgressivity itself become normative in performance studies? The theoretical claim that embodied activity transgresses, challenges, and changes text, event, and social structures creates a liminal norm. Consider, for example, the claims that personal narrative performance politicizes the personal, gives voice to marginalized identities, and thwarts master narratives. McKenzie argues that in revisions of her earlier work, Judith Butler usefully theorizes both performative transgression and the normativity of performance. Butler's revisions invite us to bear in mind the citationality of performance and to correct the misreading of performativity as theatrical performance. She resignifies both performativity and performance: "performativity now refers to a *discursive* compulsion to repeat norms of gender, sexuality, and race, while performance refers to an *embodied* theatricality that conceals its citational aspect under a dissimulating presence" (McKenzie, 1998, p. 227).

The breakthroughs into performance and performativity theorize both the transgressive and normalizing potential of performing personal narrative. If both performance and performativity are a re-doing, repeated acts and stylized actions, then the question of how we know what's done in performance cannot rest on identifying—outside the layerings of context—any particular genre, for example, personal narrative, or any performer, for example, a black lesbian, or any event, for example, performance art, to guarantee a liberatory politics. Subversive genres such as personal narrative can be normative, and normative practices, such as the classroom performance of prose, can be subversive. Furthermore, performing personal narrative may entail a compulsory routine, a disciplinary ritual, or punitive consequences "if you don't perform your story right." And, finally, discerning the difference between normative and transgressive citational performances will always be deceptive, elusive, tricky. How does

one distinguish between personal narrative performance that reproduces social and aesthetic norms, and performance that produces new possibilities for identity, experience, and performance? As Della Pollock (1998a) writes, "performance is the trick" using a trick-text that turns inside out and against itself, multiplying duplicities and contradictions. Put another way, performing is always implicated in that which it opposes, and power turns against itself, turning itself inside out, over and over in time and space. The "conning" tricks of performance call for its con-textualizing, the "dynamic reconceptualization of [personal narrative] texts as inseparable from processes by which they are made, understood, and deployed" (p. 38). We consider some of these contextualizations of personal narrative performance next.

### EMBODYING PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Somebody performs personal narrative. Some *body* performs a story; somebody voices experience through the body. Embodiment makes all performance possible, but even more explicitly so for personal narrative when voice and body coincide in performance. Embodying personal narrative involves two different but related conceptions. One is captured by the term *identity's body* because the text emanates from a performer marked by experience and the discursive forces of sex, race, class, age, illness, and so on. A second sense highlights the *bodily participation* of hearing and voicing, gesturing, seeing and being seen, feeling and being touched, upon which any storytelling depends. Participation in a field of bodily and discursive activities begins in audiencing one's own and others' experience. To revisit Benjamin's storyteller, one "takes," or perceives, from experience and "makes," or expresses, it as a way of turning back on the world to resignify it, to move voices and bodies in space and time. Embodying personal narrative involves listening to others' stories of

experience and telling stories to others. Storytelling is an activity embodied by a performer(s), with others, and within other activities of daily life and ways of speaking.

In performance terms, personal narrative forms a system of relationships among storytellers, audiences, narrators, and characters. The speech act, "I will tell you a story about something that happened to me" situates the performer ("I will") in a relationship with a listener in a particular setting ("tell *you*") with a larger audience of potential listeners beyond the immediate context (the "us" implied by performer and listener and a more general or public "you"). Simultaneously, the speech act positions the narrator in relationship with him- or herself as a character ("something that happened to me") and with other characters in the story. Performing personal narrative is a site of interpersonal contact because it brings listeners together in such a way that stories emerge; and performing personal narrative is a site of intrapersonal contact because the storyteller narrates herself as a character. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1960/1964) writes, "this subject which experiences itself as constituted at the moment it functions as constituting is my body" (p. 94). The body that touches itself touching makes possible the representation of past experience by occasioning it for a particular audience in a present situation. Performing personal narrative depends upon bodily participation in the system of relations that shift fluidly among storyteller, audience, narrator, and character.

Family storytelling illustrates the embodied context of performing narrative. Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (2001) state that "active narrative involvement defines what it means to participate in mainstream American family" (p. 8). Bodily participation in family orders experience, past and present, to make family stories. Family storytelling arises among other bodily activities for doing family and may be told in more extended narrative events such as birthday parties, anniversaries, funerals,

reunions, or in fragmentary, fleeting acts around daily interactions and chores—when ever talk turns to family experience. What will become a family story emerges from the embodied participation in particular performance events. For example, a story about “sewing sandwiches” emerged in the kitchen of Gerald and his wife Madeline, with Gerald’s cousin Alain, all in their 70s, while I was present conducting research. Gerald was telling about the Monday night sewing circles of the family, but both Alain and Madeline chime in with details as relations among storytellers and listeners rapidly shift. All three have experience, their own and others’, of sewing circles, and so each performs as narrator and character, depending upon their angle of experience:

- Alain:       and of course all the kids we couldn’t  
                  wait until everybody left  
                  cause we got the leftovers  
                  and sewing sandwiches  
                  and in *my* family my immediate  
                  family my *kids*  
                  I started making those at home  
                  and my kids started calling them  
                  *daddy* sandwiches
- Madeline: ooh ooh
- Alain:       but there were the *sewing* circle’s  
                  sandwiches
- Madeline: his [Gerald’s] mother used to make  
                  lilies
- Gerald:     lilies
- Madeline: for dessert

This brief narrative segment shows that sewing sandwiches moved through three generations, from sewing circles as site of women’s activity in an extended family gathering to the “daddy sandwiches” of a father and his nuclear family two generations later.

In the generation between, Madeline prepared lunches as a member of the sewing circle. If Gerald and Madeline did not know about Alain’s daddy sandwiches, Gerald and Alain may not know about making “lilies.” The memory signaled by Madeline’s “ooh ooh” is developed as she leaves her work at the kitchen sink to join us and describe in sensual detail and with vivid, iconic gestures how her mother-in-law made this special sewing circle dessert. Her information suggests that the experience “taken” to narrate is not just generational but also gendered. She recalls the time and effort of making sewing circle lunches whereas Gerald and Alain recall the fun and food to eat.

Gerald, Alain, and Madeline are not reciting but *making* stories: remembering, innovating, sedimenting, changing “what happened.” The shared experience of sewing sandwiches is fleshed out and differentiated in the participation occasioned by my presence and each other’s contributions. Family stories are taken from experience and made possible by the bodily participation that embraces gesture and voice, and by the bodily capability to shift among performer, audience, narrator, and character. Family storytelling is a retrospective and an ongoing performance rather than a repository of stories. More a practice than a text or canon of stories, family storytelling both narrates the past and “narratizes” ongoing daily life (Allison, 1994; Park-Fuller, 1995).

The sense of embodiment as identity’s body can also be suggested through this brief example. Family is neither simply remembered from experience nor entirely invented from whole cloth but rather pieced together by participants from remnants, resources, genres, and genealogies. As Gerald, Alain, and Madeline perform from personal experience, they take and make not only stories but also their meanings and sensibilities for family. Storytelling about family gatherings, French language, and food orders their group identity as Franco American. Such meanings are neither only

personal nor only ethnic but also shaped by generation, gender, and other discursive resources and constraints. As performance, storytelling embodies family relations; and, as performativity, it produces family bodies. Identity's body is always re-cited and re-newed, both transmitted and transformed in performance.

Performing personal narrative is "doing what's done" in daily life with and through bodies as participants take and make stories. That some *body* performs narrative contains a significant ambiguity and multiplicity. The performing body may be one person who shifts among the relations of storyteller, audience-to-self, narrator, and character, for example, when one writes a personal story. Or it may be a few persons who shift among these relationships, for example, a family or group of friends telling stories about work around coffee or over drinks. Or it may be many people gathered in a public setting to hear and discuss someone's story, for example, a staged performance of an illness narrative. Or groups of people might collect to celebrate their culture, such as the *Retrouvailles* (reunion) in 1994 that brought Acadians from the world diaspora to Atlantic Canada. Situating personal narrative in its material conditions further explicates how it is radically contextualized in performance events.

#### SITUATING PERSONAL NARRATIVE

The embodied context confers the possibility to perform personal narrative, but only *some* of these possibilities are realized in any performance when someone's body materializes the norms of experience and narrative. Personal narrative is always situated, rooted in its setting and circumstances, always subject to ground rules of narrative and performance—in a word, constrained. The term *constraint* in its sense of a boundary defines the conditions of performance. To be constrained means both to be restricted and to be facilitated. An audience, for example, limits performance possibilities

because the storyteller depends on the quality of audience members' participation; and an audience facilitates storytelling because the storyteller can draw on and mobilize shared language, history, culture, and narrative resources in order to tell a story. Performing personal narrative depends upon but is not determined by its material conditions. The ground rules for performing personal narrative include constraints on who tells stories and who listens; typical kinds of stories to tell; conventional story openings, closings, and telling strategies; performance norms; habitual forms of interaction; and so on.

Forms of interaction differ across settings and situations such as the classroom, the coffee shop, the stage. Consider for example, staged performance of personal narrative as a form of habitual interaction practiced within performance studies. A ground rule of such staged performance is the compact between performer and audience by which the storyteller assumes responsibility for an expressive act which the audience evaluates. The compact involves mutual risk-taking and responsibility. It "promises the production of mutually anticipated effects, but the stipulations of the compact are often subject to negotiation, adjustment, and even transformation" (Roach, 1996, p. 219). Performer and audience roles may shift rapidly and fluidly as they do in family storytelling, but in staged performance they are conventionally distributed more unevenly as the performer takes a long speaking turn while the audience listens. The compact confers the storyteller's power and pleasure to "have the floor." The power and pleasure are contradictory and vulnerable, however, because of the audience's scrutiny and evaluation of the "so what?" of performing personal narrative. In terms of personal narrative, one could argue that the coincidence of performer and author, that is, the self-as-text, heightens the vulnerability of the performer and the responsibility of audience; and conversely, that the self-as-text heightens

the vulnerability of the audience and responsibility of the performer. Because performing personal narrative is situationally and materially enacted, we must examine its particularities to discuss these dynamics of power and pleasure. Two examples of monologues performed by white males in public settings can suggest variations in the performer-audience compact within the common context of staged performance they share.

The first example draws on Spalding Gray's performance art monologues and Michael Peterson's (1997) study of them. Gray was a widely known performer, and his long career developed the performance art form of autobiographical performance. Gray framed his life as art, filed on mental narrative note cards and performed in a lengthy series of works. He textualized himself and rendered this self as "other" in a speech act which says something like: "Look at me. I am one who sees himself seeing himself." This reflexive performance of his life/art entails specific audience relations because its liminality troubles boundaries between performer and audience as they participate in the self-text. Peterson suggests that the irony and presence of Gray created Gray-as-event, the "sensation of witnessing a present event rather than a simple oral representation of the past" (p. 95). The presence of Gray-as-event was charismatic, quirky, and confessional, indeed a "virtuoso imitation of the personal" (p. 56). Within Peterson's reading of Gray's performances, the personal is neither the disclosing risk of psychic formation nor an analysis of the material forces shaping a life but rather a stylized act of personal presence. The stylizing of "the personal" was situated in the dramatic frame of monologue by a performer whose status had grown to a celebrity, particularly after *Swimming to Cambodia*. The "look at me" became something like a command and a command performance by a celebrity with considerable cultural capital.

What, more specifically, is the audience's part and participation in this performance

compact? Peterson argues that a dynamics of identification operated. The audience received a "collective pat on the back" through a liberal humanist recognition of what "we" share with Gray. Gray's self-texts claimed a universality of experience, and his performances offered a seeming naturalness of gesture. The assumptions of universality and naturalness obscured differences between self and other into a "we" of identification and shared experience. Peterson argues that Gray accrued experience, his own and others, as he textualized the world. The eye/I of the liberal humanist subject, albeit an ironic and reflexive one, elides differences among experiences and bodies. In *Swimming to Cambodia*, for example, Gray *narrated* rather than embodied women characters, for example, his lover Renee and Thai prostitutes whom he placed in the imaginary space in front of him. In such strategies, Peterson suggests that Gray consumed the world and the other rather than warning of consumption's dangers. And, in turn, audience members were invited to consume him, accruing cultural capital through their recognition and viewing pleasure.

Audiences can and do, of course, produce other, oppositional, and subversive readings. Students in a graduate course who viewed *Swimming to Cambodia* with their fellow female graduate student from Thailand, for example, exposed rather than confirmed the politics of liberal humanist recognition. In this discussion we are less interested in evaluating the performance success of the storytellers or in an ethnography of audience responses than in thinking through the situatedness of performance and the performer-audience compact. A second autobiographic performance, this one by Craig Gingrich-Philbrook entitled "The First Time" (see Langellier & Peterson, 2004, and Peterson, 2000, for transcription, description, and extended analysis), can suggest a variation in the compact. Gingrich-Philbrook has characterized his work as "stand up theory" and autoperformance. In

this piece, Gingrich-Philbrook performs a personal narrative that “takes” from his experience of watching a public service announcement about AIDS and “makes” it a story for the audience who attended a benefit in Carbondale, Illinois. Reflexivity in this performance centers on how Gingrich-Philbrook watches a TV commercial about dancers as the audience watches him. Gingrich-Philbrook interrogates his own experience, that is, his first, easy identification with the heterosexualizing practices of representation found in the commercial. He does this by displaying the moves of the dancers in a character-based perspective that locates action on his body rather than in a narrative-based perspective in the imagined space in front of him. Like the waltz in the commercial, he embodies a woman wearing a dress and then a man spinning a woman. The distance between identity’s body and critical commentary results in audience laughter and increased identification between performer and audience, a politics of recognition in a “we.”

But as Gingrich-Philbrook challenges his own first, easy identification with the commercial, the performance challenges the audience’s first, easy identification with him by refusing their “in the knowness.” Gingrich-Philbrook does this by maintaining rather than resolving the ambiguity of “we” and recognition. His performance asks in so many words, “Are you part of the homogenous, heterosexual ‘we’ used by the commercial announcer, or are you part of ‘my people [gay men and lesbians],’ used by the narrator?” Performer-audience relations resist the universalizing and naturalizing of experience—his and the audience’s—by marking differences and by making explicit the parallels between his viewing of the commercial and the audience’s viewing the performance. He performs not only to express his outrage at the commercial but also to disrupt the often imperialist relations by which performers and audiences appropriate their own experiences and others’ experiences in

acts of recognition. As the performer-audience compact is called into view and renegotiated in performance, “The First Time” exposes and challenges the conventions of representation, in this instance encapsulated in the heteronarrative (Roof, 1996); and it subverts the ease by which identification with a self-text mutes critique.

Both Gray’s and Gingrich-Philbrook’s performances draw on the paradoxical position of the audience in monologue performance. That is, the direct address to an audience by the solo performer seems to include and empower that audience at the same time it reasserts its powerlessness. It seems to address the audience directly, and yet to respond would break the dramatic frame established by the performance compact. Audiences to both Gray and Gingrich-Philbrook enjoy the privileged and constrained status as confidante to the self-text performances. However, their performances differ not only in the performer-audience relations discussed above but also in additional aspects of the situation and materiality of performance: in a straight versus a gay body, by a celebrity with accumulated cultural capital versus a performer in educational settings, within performance venues marked by entertainment values versus benefit performances for fundraising and consciousness-raising, and others. Furthermore, although we have viewed both performances only on videotape, it is not immaterial that we know Gingrich-Philbrook personally and have seen several other of his performances live. The audience as well as the performer, in other words, draws on habitual forms of interaction, forms that vary across settings and situations, and forms that may be stabilized or altered within any particular performance event.

The variation of the performer-audience compact merits more attention within educational settings, too. These situations lie somewhere between the relatively fluid and shifting relations characteristic of family storytelling and the more stable frame of monologue in

staged performance of personal narrative. In the classroom or in similar dialogic settings, the compact is renegotiated to shift from the dramatic frame of monologue to the (inter)active frame of family storytelling. However, the transition is not always smooth, the renegotiation not always explicit, the shift to different ground rules not always successful. The challenges of how to conduct a critique of a personal narrative performance—the self-text in the narrated event and the performer-audience relations in the narrative event—engage several issues of situation and materiality (Park-Fuller, 2003; Warren, 2003).

#### ORDERING PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Some bodies tell their stories within their situated and material contexts. What are they doing in telling a particular story in a particular way? Performing personal narrative is known through the discursive regularities in which it participates. A storyteller is not free to narrate just anything in just any way at any place or time to any audience. Some stories can be performed and some stories or parts cannot be performed; some narrative forms can be easily circulated and others cannot be easily understood or credited; some people can speak and others must listen; some identities are acceptable to local norms, some are not. Why this personal narrative event, this story, this speaker and listener(s) and why not another performance event, storytelling performance, and performer? Regulatory principles order discourse and the conditions for performance. Discourse as context entails the formative contexts of personal narrative performance, and how performing personal narrative is formative of contexts because regulatory rules can be broken, breached, transgressed, disobeyed, disregarded, defied.

For purposes here, we follow Foucault (1971/1976) in the ordering of discourse according to four principles: external rules, internal rules, speaking positions, and conditions of possibility. First, external rules delimit

discourse, forming “just what discourse is.” Cultural history authorizes stories and narrative practices. Performing personal narrative is prohibited, for example, in income tax returns, surveys, medical histories, and most types of scholarly writing. External rules also establish divisions between what is meaningful and meaningless: for example, the dismissal of personal narrative as anecdote, mere entertainment, and self-indulgence, or its valorization as epistemological, artistic, and transgressive. Internal rules form discourse through classifications and gradations of sameness to locate series of narratives (e.g., genres, master plots, canonical stories), series of utterances belonging to speakers (e.g., autobiographical/self-oriented or ethnographic/other-oriented narrators) and characters of all types who lend coherence to action. Another kind of series is neither a textual repetition nor the action of an individual speaker but rather a more anonymous system of rules for generating discourse dispersed across locations and speakers called a “discipline,” such as “the arm of the law,” “the voice of medicine,” or “family values.” Discourse is also regularized by governing the conditions of speaking: who is qualified to speak on a specific subject and how are roles for speaking and listening distributed, appropriated, and interchangeable? Does one speak from the authority of experience, as an expert on others, or for others? Who can or has to listen? To what extent can audiences contribute to, interrupt, challenge what is told? Finally, discourse rules frame what can be said, understood, and done in storytelling not in an effort to find and fix meanings but to look at possible conditions of existence for what gives rise to and delimits personal narrative performance. How could this event, this story, this performance have been done differently?

We illustrate the ordering of personal narrative by external rules, internal rules, and conditions for speaking and performance through a particular example of illness narrative: breast cancer storytelling (see Langellier & Peterson, 2004, for extended transcriptions and analysis).

External rules of cultural history authorize the narrative performances of illness. In the latter half of the twentieth century, illness narrative emerged, proliferated, and evolved to a genre of storytelling in daily life, support groups, and memoirs; on stage and the Internet; and as an object of research. The wounded storyteller narrates a story of the body through the body, reclaiming the capacity to tell, to hold onto, her or his own story against the medical chart as the legitimate story of disease (Frank, 1995). The illness narrative orders, interprets, and creates meanings to bind body and spirit together within the biographical disruption of disease (Kleinman, 1988). As modern adventure stories constructed around recovery, illness narratives are “all variations on a long-standing heroic paradigm of the struggle of brave individuals confronting what appear to be insurmountable forces” (Hawkins, 1993, p. 2). Within a culture of illness stories, breast cancer storytelling is sufficiently widespread and widely distributed to compose a subgenre. Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) argues that there is, in fact, a culture of breast cancer constructed through websites, newsletters, support groups, national organizations, and races for the cure. Among rites and rituals of breast cancer culture is the “heavy traffic” in personal narrative.

Breast cancer stories are told by survivors, those who lived to tell their tale. Like other illness stories, they are retrospective narratives, told or written from a relatively secure vantage point of recovery or remission, where threat of recurrence is closed off, even if contingently. Their internal rules, cast in Labovian terms, include the referential function of storytelling to order the events of “what happened” as the medical plot of breast cancer regularly distributed in the same sequence in the narrative: discovery of a suspicious lump, diagnosis of cancer, assessment of treatment options, surgical treatment, adjuvant treatment, and recovery and resolution. G. Thomas Couser (1997) argues the self-reconstruction of the breast cancer narrative follows the comic

plot of a happy ending: “Although some of these women suffered recurrences, and some have died of their cancer, their narratives tend to end with recovery of some tentative assurance of health and vitality” (p. 39). Resolution through recovery, if not cure, constructs the narrator as a survivor who is better off not just physically but also in the moral dimensions of achieving normalcy and often self-realization and self-actualization. As to Labov’s evaluative function, the point of view of the survivor is positive, even cheerful. Ehrenreich (2001) writes that “the effect of this relentless brightsiding is to transform breast cancer into a rite of passage—not an injustice or tragedy to rail against, but a normal marker in the lifestyle, like menopause or graying hair” (p. 49). The commanding investment in recovery and “brightsiding” drives narrative closure. The comic closure of resolution and cheerfulness serves multiple and compelling interests not just for the performer but for others with and without (at least not yet) breast cancer. Breast cancer narratives end, even if provisionally, and they end “happily” to the mutual desire of performers and audiences.

External and internal rules for ordering breast cancer narratives—survival, comic closure, and cheerfulness—constrain their telling. Jane, for example, a 54-year-old woman with an aggressive and advanced breast cancer, both participates within and struggles against the normative ordering of the breast cancer narrative. Drawing on the authority of her illness experience and building authority for herself as a speaking subject by incorporating her reading, research, knowledge of others with breast cancer, and background in science education, Jane plots her story as a series of decisions she made and assaults she survived, interspersed with interludes of humor and strength. She does, in fact, competently perform the disciplinary “voice of medicine,” following internal rules of the medical plot to order her personal, somatic experience. About a woman from the Cancer Society who calls to tell Jane that “I had cancer eighteen years ago

and I'm doing so well and you've gotta be positive," Jane says, "I mean it's a nice story but the point is, I mean I know enough to know that every cancer's different."

That "nice story," with its emphasis on the comic plot and cheerfulness, suggests the operation of external rules that prohibit talk about an uncertain prognosis, a treatment's effectiveness, and especially death. Jane reserves her strongest critiques for the enforced cheerfulness—what she calls "that friggin' positive stuff"—enacted by acquaintances, colleagues, and the woman from the Cancer Society:

Jane: I mean this *positive* thing

I think is the *worst* thing that you can say to somebody

cause here you *are*

got this *terrible* news

you might *die*

and ah nobody I don't think

nobody knows what that means

Enforced cheerfulness makes it possible to avoid talking about what it means that "you might die," as Jane voices it. These prohibitions in breast cancer storytelling reposition death and dying as not true to experience. Jane opposes the false cheerfulness of greeting cards and those who say "be positive and pray hard and I know the Lord will be this" with her preference for the truth spoken by "the people that said 'this is shit,' you know, call it what it is." She rejects the acceptable model of illness identity, and she struggles to rework the comic closure of the illness narrative.

Finally, Jane questions the possible conditions of the breast cancer narrative by attempting to launch a counternarrative as "what I forgot to do": to put in "the hormone story." The hormone story works to refashion the implied causality of the linear medical plot where breast cancer "just happens" and a lump is discovered. The focus on the individual in

the master plot may incorporate genetics or lifestyle as possible causes for cancer and makes it difficult to speak about environmental factors. "The hormone story" reworks the beginning of Jane's narrative and raises a possible link between Jane's hormone replacement therapy and breast cancer.

In the genre of the illness story, illustrated by breast cancer storytelling, we can observe how the discursive context orders experience, stories, and models of identity. External and internal rules both prohibit and make possible particular narrative performances. Without such rules and speaking positions, performing narrative is not possible; but within them it is always risky and tricky, both for what it can do and what it cannot do. The ordering of experience and identity suggests that performing personal narrative is an ongoing struggle for agency and meaning. It remains to suggest the contours of contextualization in terms of the politics of performance.

#### POLITICIZING PERSONAL NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE

An analysis of discourse gives the rules and regularities that frame the storytelling event. These conditions of possibility emerge within the specific material situation and embodied context of a personal narrative performance. Performing personal narrative is also political because it does something; and in doing something in and with discourse that is neither uniform nor stable, performing may reinscribe or resist the bodily practices and material conditions in which they are embedded. Performing personal narrative can work to both legitimate and critique relations of power. For this reason we cannot decontextualize performing personal narrative and divide it between bodies with power and bodies which resist, or narratives of power and counternarratives. In the text-trick of doing what's done, of performance and performativity, power can turn on itself, oppose itself, turn inside out.

In order to illuminate the entwined operations of power, we emphasize performing narrative as strategic (Patterson, 2002) in a multileveled system (see Langellier & Peterson, 2004). Strategies concern the goals around which a system is organized, whereas tactics concern how a system goes about accomplishing its goals (Wilden, 1987). Under ordinary circumstances, a strategy envelops or constrains the tactics that carry it out; tactics depend upon strategy. However, tactical innovations may rupture or restructure strategies, but once restructured the hierarchy of strategy enveloping tactics returns. Pollock (1998a) comments, for example, on how performance agency pales next to discursive forces. To discuss some politics of performing personal narrative, we revisit the three performance practices above and ask how tactics carry out or subvert overall strategies: what are the consequences of performing this story in this way?

Family storytelling is an effective tactic for family formation and cultural survival. Participants make family stories as they work and rework information about what happened and what is meaningful to them. The story of the sewing sandwiches is a “good” story to tell because it both transmits information about family culture and reorders information: cultural transformation as the sandwiches move from the grandparents’ generation to a father and his nuclear family two generations later. The strategy of cultural survival is facilitated by the generality of the information diffused among multiple participants in the embodied practice of group memory. Generational changes and gendered details suggest the different and often conflicting involvements of multiple tellers. Storytelling tactics support the strategy of family cultural survival, making not only “good” stories but also producing “good” bodies: good fathers, mothers, children, and families.

Family storytelling tactics are constrained by strategies of normalization, for example, “ground rules” of family storytelling that put collective over individual interests; show family

in a favorable light; preserve family boundaries; foster institutions of heterosexual love, marriage, and procreation while marginalizing alternative arrangements and choices; reproduce gender roles; naturalize family events and family history as a coherent and linear sequence; and so on. “Good” families align with the environmental interests of social and cultural forces, such as patriarchy, heterosexuality, middle-class identity, and the mythic family. However, the narrative of sewing sandwiches also resists normative regularities, perhaps most strongly an assimilated “American” identity that subordinates race and the embodied differences of the North American French ethnic family.

When we turn to the staged performance, we can view autoperformance as a strategy of identity formation, a way to get a life that matters in a postmodern world. Both Gray and Gingrich-Philbrook perform the personal as an aesthetic and political intervention in social life, of empowering identity’s body in staged performance. Tactically, they differ in how they draw on the performer-audience compact in their situated and material performances. Gray carries out the strategy of identity formation through a stylization of the personal as an ironic presence, an I/eye that turns back on itself. His self-texts narrate but rarely embody others in a strategy that amasses experience—his own, that of other characters, and that of the audience—to a “we” of a liberal humanist subject position. In a variation of the performance compact, Gingrich-Philbrook challenges the audience to consider who “we” are and how “we” come to participate in framing the personal *as* personal. His performance marks rather than masks differences between himself and others and among others.

Tactically, Gray takes advantage of forms of interaction and identification that are conventional to staged performance. This decision to mobilize habitual forms of interaction allows him to innovate new texts, that is, self-texts for performance art, and new practices, that is, stylizing the personal as the liberal humanist

I/we. While offering innovation, such tactics may simultaneously firm up more than disturb normative strategies of identity performance and the politics of audience recognition. By contrast, Gingrich-Philbrook's performance keeps open the gap between the "I" and "you" of the commercial, the supposed uniform "we" of heterosexual privilege, by renegotiating performer, text, and audience relations. The "we" of gay men and lesbians, as performers and audiences viewing the commercial or attending the benefit for AIDS, ruptures the heteronormative "we." Such performer-audience relations may be more unsettling to the conventions of performance and more disturbing to the formation of subject positions. Both Gray and Gingrich-Philbrook, however, are constrained by the strategies of normalizing identity, performance texts, styles, and habitual forms of interaction with audience.

The embodied and lived narrative of illness transgresses the medical chart as the story of disease, but Jane's story is contextualized not only within medical discourse but also with the culture of breast cancer storytelling. Instead of the enforced cheerfulness and "that friggin positive stuff" Jane attempts to "call it what it is" and to authorize herself as a speaking subject. Instead of the conventional comic closure of survival and the heroic scenario of victory over cancer, Jane voices the uncertainties of living with breast cancer and the fear of its coming back. Her storytelling works as a tactic to counter the forms of closure on telling a breast cancer story. That Jane almost forgot but did not forget the hormone story points to the coercive power of a medical master plot but also her resistance to it. Her efforts to target pharmaceutical and environmental causes displace the conventional beginning of the breast cancer narrative.

However, power keeps turning back on itself. What is effective tactically may not be effective strategically. Smith and Watson (1996) remark on the ability of dominant discourses to recuperate transgressive efforts. In self-help groups, for example, "a person's

efforts to make a gesture of tactical resistance to a stereotypic communal notion of the unspeakable can be co-opted and re-ordered into the community's normative patterns of speakability" (p. 16). Jane's effort at a counterstory does, however, reveal the "narrative frame-up" by which medical discourse and the comic master plot hide their coercive force through naturalizing and normalizing the content of a breast cancer narrative. Jane's hormone story counters the presumption that breast cancer is inevitable or natural for certain women because of heredity or lifestyle choices. If hormone replacement therapy can affect the growth of cancer or the environment in which cancer grows, then it is reasonable to look to other environmental features as causal factors. Her storytelling likewise contests the normalizing of breast cancer as a rite of passage to survival in her rejection of the "nice story" of achieving a positive attitude and recovery. No amount of narrative repair or counterstorytelling can alter the uncertain trajectory that will eventually end in her death, however. Her storytelling remains complex, contradictory, and contingent.

The politics of personal narrative performance cannot be determined on a single level of tactic or strategy because power opposes itself, texts turn in on themselves, and performing bodies are fundamentally ambiguous. No one element—a canonical story or a counternarrative, a performer's intention or identity's body, a liberatory or ritualized setting—can anchor normativity or guarantee transgression outside the multiple and meshed workings of context. Performing personal narrative as a radically contextualized practice tells a different story from the performance of prose texts many of us first learned as students. This different story may be best told and heard within the evolving context of performance studies. The doing of personal narrative in its shifting contexts of bodies, situations, and discursive forces means that it cannot be "taken out of context" if we want to understand what it is, how it works, and what it does in the world.

So, what kind of a life are we getting by performing personal narrative? The answer is consequential—it matters—because in answering it we take from disciplinary experience and make it a story that will narrate the past and anticipate a future of who “we” are.

#### NOTE

1. In this essay, the “I” refers to Kristin Langellier, and the “we” refers to Langellier’s and Eric Peterson’s collaborative research and analysis.

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## The Constructed Self

### *Strategic and Aesthetic Choices in Autobiographical Performance*

LYNN C. MILLER AND JACQUELINE TAYLOR

The impulse toward narrative is a fundamentally human one. Telling stories about oneself, listening to and learning from the stories of others, helps us to make sense of our world. Stories mentor us and allow us to structure our awareness of the trajectory of our lives. “Though it may seem a strange way to put it,” as Jerome Bruner (1993) explains, “we may properly suspect that the shape of a life as experienced is as much dependent upon the narrative skills of the autobiographer as is the story he or she tells about it” (p. 41). While autobiography, in the form of letters, diaries, journals, and other first-person accounts, might be the oldest genre of literature, it has not always been the most respected. Its very subjectivity and particularity, which are what draw us to the form, have caused historians and literary critics to regard it with suspicion as inaccurate or limited by self-obsession and self-interest. In the 1970s feminist critics rescued many women’s

lives—and literary outputs—from the shallow grave of literary failure. The proliferation of talk shows, memoirs, story circles, life writing, and performance art in the past three decades attests to the continuing appeal of the individual story, and the direct relationship of a reader or spectator to the lyric voice. One legacy of deconstruction remains that while the master narrative—the universal hero’s journey, the edifice of the famous, successful life—may be viewed skeptically as too white, too male, too privileged, the particular individual struggle, especially of those on the margins, retains its fascination. The direct communication of the *personal* between the writer or performer and the reader/spectator characterizes the genre. The very lack of the pretense of objectivity conveys a sense of authenticity in a world where institutional authority is seen as questionable.

One-person performances originate in the oral culture of antiquity; in the more

recent history of interpretation or performance studies, they date to the lyceum circuits, platform performances, and tent Chautauquas of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Gentile, 1989, for a history of the one-person show). The rise of solo performance at that time is evidenced by, for example, the mesmerizing tours of Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde. Platform performance may be viewed as an early precursor of performance art. Not all performance art pieces are autobiographical (performance installations in art galleries, or fictional characters and situations enacted by Lily Tomlin or Eric Bogosian are not, for example), yet the raw personal experiences described in works like Holly Hughes's "World Without End" or Tim Miller's "My Queer Body" came, in the 1990s, to embody the edgy simplicity of the genre.

Autobiographical performance encompasses a variety of forms, from testimonials given in self-help groups or monologues in conversation (everyday life performance), to the documentation of an individual life as research (autoethnography), the first-person narrative onstage (personal narrative), and the intermingling of the writer/performer's life with that of an historical figure (auto/biography). In this essay, we consider the parameters and construction of two autobiographical performance structures, personal narrative and auto/biography.

In personal narrative, speakers stage crafted narratives of themselves, whereas in auto/biography, performers present the intersection of a contemporary life with an historical one. While both forms address an audience directly, and are shaped in narrative form, they differ in some marked ways. In the personal narrative, the writer is also the performer—the subject and object are the same as the performer attempts to express an aspect of the subjective self onstage. The personal narrative gains a measure of authenticity from its very subjectivity: writer/performers draw upon the particularity

of their own lives. While speakers may have political aims (to increase awareness or understanding, for example, of issues of sexuality or class or race), they do not pretend to universality; they appeal, rather, to the idiosyncrasy of personal experience. As we explore below, the personal narrative's testimonial character encourages audience members to respond by thinking about their own lives or those close to them. Leslie Marmon Silko (2000) points out this aspect of storytelling: "You have this sense that there's this ongoing story and your story has become part of it" (p. 32). The personal narrative encourages sharing and risk-taking in performer and audience alike. In "Performing Absence," Linda Park-Fuller (2000) speaks to this unique property: "The performer of autobiographical narrative risks exposure and vulnerability in the effort to breach rigid prohibitions that perpetuate silence" (p. 24).

By contrast, auto/biography displays a more embedded subjectivity: as the central focus falls on the historical figure, the writer/performer subsumes him- or herself within the performance. Clearly, when choosing a subject to feature in this kind of first-person recreation, the writer/performer is drawn to a particular figure's life for specific (often personal) reasons; the historical character can become a mentor figure, changing the trajectory of the writer/performer's own life (see for example Miller, 2001). As we will see in the following discussion of a script by Elyse Lamm Pineau, what the artist Pineau has chosen to perform intersects with her life in powerful and intimate ways.

Especially if audiences are familiar with the figure performed, the performer's ultimate test consists of a scholarly and intuitive grasp of why the person was important, an understanding of her historical time, and knowledge of her multiple facets. While the performer of historical figures may evade the charges of narcissism occasionally leveled at the performer of personal narrative, because she is not the central subject, she is held accountable by audience

members to present their private versions of what that figure represented—a nearly impossible task with a varied audience. These questions of the quality of research and presentation do not come into play with the personal narrative: we assume the speaker knows much more about herself than the audience does. If the personal narrative is published, however, and performed by others (as when Spalding Gray's monologues are used in speech competitions or acting auditions), these very issues become considerations. Past and present, fact and memory are in flux in the genre itself. As Heather Carver (2003) states: "Autobiographical Performance is inherently fraught with the complexities of the relationship between history and representation—between what happened and what is remembered and performed" (p. 15). In both forms of performed autobiography, audience members implicitly ask the question: Why is this relevant, here and now, to me? The narrative must evoke something of consequence to the spectator; the portrayal must spur some combination of reflection, challenge, and transformation.

The following details the characteristics of these two forms, delineating specific themes, strategies, and individual performances.

#### **AUTO/BIOGRAPHY: HISTORICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PERFORMANCE**

In our introduction to the volume *Voices Made Flesh* (2003), we address the particular components of auto/biography, where the writer/performer encounters an historical subject and produces a performance which documents the encounter of these two identities. Such a performance highlights the writing/performing self in the present as it encounters or struggles with a particular and complex subject of the past; the process of this auto/biographical intertwining shapes and foregrounds the performance. One major challenge of representing the historical figure in the autobiographical mode involves a careful

selection process as the writer/performer chooses which layers of a complex, multifaceted persona to weave into the narrative. We label this process auto/biography as this kind of historical presentation represents a negotiation between the autobiographical self of the writer/performer and the biographical record of the historical personage. (p. 7)

At times, the encounter with the historical persona represents a collision with the self of the writer/performer (as in Catherine Rogers's "Georgia O'Keeffe x Catherine Rogers"; see Rogers, 2003), while at others the selves merge, or take on characteristics of one another, resulting in a third person (as in Elyse Pineau's "My Life with Anais"; see Pineau, 2003). In some performances, writer/performers hide themselves behind the historical other in the interest of giving the audience the illusion of authenticity; a famous example is Hal Holbrook's widely toured performance of Mark Twain. In others, such as Carolyn Gage's "The Last Reading of Charlotte Cushman" (see Gage, 2003), the writer/performer updates the subject, placing her within the mores and values of contemporary culture. Choices inevitably must be made that limit the scope of the original life and focus the perspective of the audience from a particular point of view. Carol H. MacKay (2003) addresses this shaping of the performance: "Although these historical figures presumably take center stage, they in fact compete with their authorial personae, who frequently turn them into reflections of themselves in order to expand their territory beyond traditional boundaries of gender and sexuality" (p. 152).

In any case, the construction of an auto/biography stretches the writer/performer to appreciate new levels of self-awareness: the historical subject becomes a kind of mentor (or possibly a cautionary tale). As with the "mystory," a pedagogical form using autobiographical materials employed by Ruth and Michael Bowman (2002), the resulting performance "becomes an occasion for inventing

new knowledge of the self, rather than merely reproducing what is already known" (p. 162).

### IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL PERFORMANCE

Frequently seen in the post-1970s neo-Chautauqua revival which features scholars presenting historical personages to general audiences (see Miller, 2003), the auto/biographical performance is a complex one in terms of identity construction. A writer/performer chooses a particular figure to research, script, and perform largely because of an intellectual interest in the figure's life or work, a desire to recreate the historical time period surrounding that contribution, an emotional resonance with the particular person's life, simple curiosity, or any number of factors. Frequently, historians who have taught the time period or literary critics who have excavated a writer's oeuvre are compelled toward this form of historical recreation.

As the scholar/performer speaks in the first person, she is, among other things, obligated to (1) uncover the distinct voice of the persona, through letters, diaries, and other writings as well as through analyzing recorded instances of speech or behavior; (2) provide an audience with insight into the multiplicity of roles the person occupied even while focusing more fully on certain key characteristics or events; (3) show the intersection of the figure with his or her time period; and (4) create a performance context which grounds the figure in a place, time, and exigency. This last contingency, the performance context, will be explored at length below. The context frames the performance in an important way, giving it consequence and point. In personal narrative performance, the subject of the performance and the performer are the same and the performer has the authority and volition to tell her life story publicly. However, if audience members are presented with a recreation of Thomas Jefferson, they in turn occupy a role

as listener. They might wonder a number of things. Why has Jefferson decided to address them? Who are they in the address? When is this interaction occurring? Who are they in relation to the former president?

In *Cast of One*, John Gentile (1989) addresses the role of context in talking about the related genre of the one-person biographical performance: "Very few one-person shows—whether biographical or not—close off the audience behind the fourth wall of stage realism; those that do work on the basis of some conceit" (p. 136). Typically, the audience is "cast" as a character to be addressed. For example, Emily Dickinson in *The Belle of Amherst* by William Luce (1976) confides to audience members as if they were guests invited for tea. Emlyn Williams as Charles Dickens presents Dickens onstage, and the audience performs the theatre-going public who flocked to his performances in Victorian times. In Ruth Draper's celebrated performances (now brilliantly re-created by Patricia Norcia in public performance), the audience is invited to imagine silent characters in a specific scene. Performer and director Frank Galati comments:

The hardest thing to establish is the conventional agreement between the audience and the performer about the nature of the experience they are about to share. The question that all solo performers must consider is "Why is this person speaking in this situation in front of this group or ignoring this group? Why should the audience listen to one person talk for an hour? What does this person have to say?" (quoted in Gentile, 1989, pp. 138–39)

Here Galati neatly summarizes the problem of motivation when the speaker addresses the audience.

We believe the component of context crucial in auto/biographical performance for reasons of character motivation as well as the imperatives of crafting a theatrical epic situation that locates both speaker and spectator.

In addition to aesthetic considerations, pragmatic considerations of audience familiarity and expectations arise. A portion of the audience often knows something about the history and contribution of the figure performed; often people attend a performance in order to see a favorite writer or politician portrayed. And, in neo-Chautauqua performance (Miller & Taylor, 2003, p. 8), where question-and-answer sessions, both in and out of character, are part of the performance event, audience members also relish the opportunity of addressing in the (fictive) flesh the person who has previously existed only in their imaginations. Yet an audience member who knows that Emily Dickinson lived a famously reclusive life might wonder why Julie Harris, in *The Belle of Amherst*, speaks so freely of her private feelings. If the context strains the credulity of the audience, the suspension of disbelief is shattered. Not only is the performer-audience connection less persuasive in such a situation, but, more importantly, an opportunity is lost for locating the historical figure in a milieu that informs the audience, allowing the spectators to contribute to the portrayal and to their own educations.

In her performance of "Gertrude Stein as Gertrude Stein," for example, Lynn C. Miller (2003) recreates the situation of Stein's actual lecture tour of America in 1934–35. The contemporary audience is constructed, during the first portion of the performance, as interested participants at one of Stein's mid-thirties lectures. Later, Miller steps out of the role of Stein and allows the audience to join her in the present as she entertains questions from the contemporary audience about Stein and Miller's re-creation of Stein. By contrast, Michael McCarthy's portrayal of F. Scott Fitzgerald (performed for the High Plains and Tulsa Chautauquas) illustrates a very private context where the audience is an onlooker, not a participant. Set in the evening before Scott's death, the author, speaking only to himself, reviews his career. Similarly, "The Excitable

Gift," Pam Christian's portrait of Anne Sexton (performed in various theatrical venues in Texas and Illinois), shows the poet contemplating her suicide. Alone, she composes a letter to her daughter Linda; her ruminations compose both an apologia and a deep excavation of the emotions that fuel her poetry. In these two performances, the audience is cast in the role of witness, as we have seen is often the case in the subgenre of personal narrative. The closed approach to the audience in the Fitzgerald and Sexton performances is appropriate: Fitzgerald in 1940 and Sexton in 1974 would not have discussed publicly their mental instabilities, as alcoholism and drug abuse were not subjects of public discourse. Casting the audience in the role of witness also adds depth to each of these performances, as the occasional discomfort of audience members in overhearing such private revelations encourages both introspection and sympathy. The intimacy of the situation creates familiarity, as well as a complex of feelings and reflections through which each spectator apprehends the life and work of these writers, both of whom relied heavily on autobiographical details in composing their literary works. In the case of Sexton, whom Kay Capo (1988) has called a pioneering performance artist, the performance by Christian showcases the poet's merging of personal and public selves. Elizabeth Lee-Brown (2004) writes: "Incorporating portions of Sexton's poems, excerpts from her correspondences with fans and family members and excerpts from interviews, Christian's performance examines the ways in which Sexton constructed herself as a public spectacle" (p. 123).

Even when the writer/performer has chosen to make the performance about the seams between herself and her subject, as we explore below in the discussion of Elyse Lamm Pineau's Anais Nin enactment, clear contextual decisions clarify and heighten the auto/biographical performance, locating the event in a unique space and time. Within a defined

context, the performer can more fully embody a persona who exists in the trappings of a specific world, freeing the performer to make similarly concrete decisions about embodiment and interaction with the audience.

### MERGING OF SELVES IN AUTO/BIOGRAPHY

We now turn to a more detailed discussion of an auto/biographical performance which highlights the encounter of selves that this kind of performance involves, "Intimate Partners: A Critical Autobiography of Performing Anais" by Elyse Lamm Pineau (2003). In our analysis, we focus on (1) the interweaving of self and other in the construction of the auto/biography, (2) the context created in the performance, and (3) the textual and performative strategies employed by the writer/performer.

#### Self and Other

Pineau comments on the script by talking about her longtime relationship with the American writer Anais Nin. The two never met, but Pineau's study of the author's work created more than a typical reader-writer bond:

I first met Anais in the *House of Incest*, seven years after her death. Through her legacy of diaries and novels, essays and public lectures, she drew me into intimate conversation, then heated disagreement, and eventually, the rich and layered complexity of longtime companionship. This essay, and the performance script which it contextualizes, use my relationship with Nin to explore the fecundity of autobiographical subjectivities as they are enacted on and off the stage. I want to track some of the shifting configurations that can mark and mar the intimacy between performer and autobiographical other, foregrounding the incorporeality between the lived body and the embodiment of a literary alter ego. (2003, p. 33)

Pineau delineates three histories she shares with Nin: the biographical, as their lives

intersected around Nin's art; the aesthetic, when Pineau spent days immersed in the Nin archives (feeling the presence of the departed writer); and the genealogical, the new life generated from the encounters with as Pineau (2003) terms it, a "storied self."

Pineau began her dance with Nin by adapting her work into a one-person show when she was a master's student at Northwestern. Dazzled by admiration for her subject, she found herself confronted with self-revelation at every step. The correspondence she felt with the writer during her preparation for the performance moves her to write: "If I could speak," I would say to myself at the end of a rehearsal, "that is what I would say." Years went by, during which her relationship with Nin deepened, until she began to imagine herself as a kind of special reader, one left a personal legacy by the writer: "My staged performances seeped into my everyday performativity such that, on or off the stage, my body could slip in and out of hers with such ease that I had difficulty marking the distinctions between myself and the Nin-in-me who had become a kind of alter ego" (2003, p. 35). Here Pineau alternates between narrating the present time and performing the past from the leather-bound journal on stage with her. Inevitably, time and close scrutiny wore away at this elegiac relationship until, at the end of Pineau's doctoral work, "the honeymoon" vanished altogether. She began to regard Nin with a critical eye as hypervigilant as, earlier, her regard was hyperindulgent. Rather than finding Nin an extension of herself, Pineau reveals: "If I could speak," I declared in each seminar where I invoked her, 'this is never what I would say.'" While Pineau's body still remained attuned to Nin's, her performance had a deconstructive edge, one where she signaled to her audience her critical detachment; eventually, she ceased to maintain the relationship. Then, ten years after she had first developed her solo performance at Northwestern, Pineau found herself entering a new

phase, one where she “entered the rehearsal hall prepared, perhaps for the first time, to listen to what she had to say about me, and particularly, about the ways in which I had been using and abusing her story over the years. And so it was that our partnership took the stage” (2003, p. 37).

At this point in the essay, the script/performance of Pineau/Nin (entitled “My Life with Anais”) unfolds as Pineau chronicles her desire to take possession of the now-deceased Nin’s tape recordings, never examined by scholars and held by Nin’s longtime companion, Rupert Pole. Pineau, overcome by desire to feel and hold the words of the woman she had studied for so long, proclaims,

I deserved them. After all these years of reading and writing and performing Nin, who else could understand what they were worth? Who else would know that, for Nin, these performances were “the real thing”! I had an obligation to the scholarly community to copy and preserve them. It was my privilege—it was my right to possess them! (2003, pp. 38–39)

She finds it simple to obtain access to Pole’s intimate memories. All she has to do is to perform Nin for him, and prove that she truly deserves access to the intimate circle of Pole and Nin’s shared life. Despite the fluidity with which she performs Nin’s turn of phrase and gestures, her voice, and even her peculiar pre-Raphaelite quality, Pineau by the end of her performance rejects Pole’s offer of Nin’s final, most private, diary. She realizes her imposture is in danger of morally and ethically overreaching. By dropping her impersonation of Nin, she allows Nin herself to once again occupy her rightful place between Pineau and Pole as “the real thing.”

In the final section of “Intimate Partners,” Pineau extends Bryant Alexander’s notion of “generative autobiography” (see below) into her own construction of “*generational* autobiography”: “I want to stretch the generative to

accommodate the intergenerational family of persons and tales that spin themselves out from encounters with the storied selves of their kin” (Pineau, 2003, p. 42). Specifically, her construction is an embodied one, as over the years her corporeal identity stretched to accommodate the body of Nin (both her works and her physical self in a metaphorical way): “This development of a Nin-in-me, which is the sine qua non of performing autobiographical texts, was formed by the contiguity of Nin’s body as present to me in her texts, and my body as present to hers through rehearsal” (2003, p. 43).

Pineau’s essay and performance script take the reader/audience member through the intricate steps of her performance with Nin, honed over years of interrelationship, “in terms of how my body constructed itself first *as*, then *against*, and finally *as witness to* Nin’s own” (2003, pp. 43–44). In transcribing this progression, Pineau articulates a line of succession from Nin to herself and back again, creating in the process a new persona, “the Nin-in-me.” For the spectator, Pineau’s performance presents a complex of significations, all of which influence each other; to name just a few, the performance becomes acts of research, of possession, of mentorship, and of sharing (as she invites the audience to enter into her intricate partnership). As in any adaptation, Pineau’s efforts reveal one reader’s process of apprehension and criticism of a work (in this case the author’s persona as well as her texts). Yet, more profoundly, the enactment lays bare how—through dialogue, through space, over time—one self invariably impacts and transforms another.

### Context in the Performance

Developed specifically for an audience at the National Communication Association (NCA) in 1994, “My Life with Anais” enlists the audience as fellow explorers in her continuing search for and journey with Anais Nin.

Making the assumption that her audience shares her interest in autobiographical performance, particularly in the pursuit of performance knowledge through adaptation and experimentation, Pineau addresses us as coconspirators. In other words, she acknowledges us as scholars and as audience when she states from down center, "I want to tell you a true story that never happened. A story of ten years in three days. A story of entering the looking-glass house and finding the real thing" (Pineau, 2003, p. 37). Her poetic phrasing both echoes Nin's lyric writing and is a signature style of Pineau's own writing, honed through many years of performative and scholarly works. In this case, her use of language is both a performative strategy and a contextual device, each powerfully underscoring the intimate partnership that is her overriding intention.

Heightening the contextual dimension, Pineau stages her piece in a fluid manner characteristic of auto/biographical performances where the actor must traverse multiple periods of time, as well as engage in both direct address with the offstage audience and dramatic address with absent characters. The performance takes place in three dimensions: (1) the present story time where Pineau engages the audience directly; (2) the past, symbolized by the diary and the single chair, where she conducted her research and felt for the first time the seduction of Nin's works in her hands; and (3) the encounter with Rupert Pole in the house he shared with Nin. Her movement among these three spaces is minimal, yet clear. Pineau, whether Nin or not-Nin, uses her body and voice as narrative glue and stage metaphor. The piece is, after all, about her life change, not Nin's. But such is Pineau's alchemy with her subject that we are able to witness the fusion and frisson of the two women in the performance. As in her title for the essay, Pineau allows her audience to look in on an intimate partnership. Because of the clarity of her context, we spectators are invited to be witnesses, researchers, and cocreators

in Pineau's self-enlightenment. As will be discussed further, in the section on personal narrative performance, the opportunity for audience transformation is a characteristic of auto/biographical performance.

Given her literary preoccupation and subject in this performance, Pineau's context allows her audience to function triply as readers, critics, and appreciators. Like her, we worship at Nin's shrine; like her, we critically apprehend Nin's self-dramatizing persona; and like her, we are drawn into the seductive dance of the author's life and work.

### Strategies in the Performance

"My Life with Anais," like many auto/biographical performances, displays simple staging and focuses on the direct relationship between performer and audience. A chair, a silk scarf, a leather-bound diary, and an audiotape are the only the physical props. Addressing the audience, Pineau sets up basic stage areas to delineate her confiding in the present about her actions in the past, and particularly, her encounter with Rupert Pole.

Pineau's pacing in front of the audience denotes her mental and emotional churning as she describes the sensuous charge of actually touching the "real" diaries during her research. She comes upon Nin's memory of childhood: "I feel my empathic body taken up, taken in. I taste words on her tongue. Together we wrap our arms around this child, *this child*, whose only wish was to create a world in which everybody loves her and no one ever leaves." What the script of the performance cannot capture is the slow becoming the audience witnesses as Pineau moves into and out of her constructed Nin persona. In her performance, there are three people: herself; Rupert Pole, the executor and former intimate; and the absent/always-present Nin herself. MacKay notes this triangulation which "confounds the reader" (2003, p. 160). The configuration also creates a psychodramatic enactment where

Pineau proves to Pole that she is worthy of his trust, his admiration, and his desire (for Pineau as a surrogate of Nin): in a sense, Nin and Pineau alternate as the object of desire in Pole's gaze. It is from this position, which she ultimately finds almost a violation, that Pineau withdraws when she refuses to accept the secret diary Pole offers.

Language in all its evocative and literary glory, ripe with multiple meanings, remains at the heart of this performance; this seems appropriate, since what initially drew Pineau to her subject were the author's words. Language is a signature throughout the piece that unites contextual and performative strategies. The words resonate inside and outside the body in this performance, but it is in the embodiment of Nin's poetry and Nin's persona that the auto/biographical transformation takes place.

#### THE STAGED PERSONAL NARRATIVE

We now want to consider the growing body of staged personal narratives that have been created by performance studies teachers and scholars over the past fifteen years. A number of the pieces analyzed here first came to our attention at communication and theatre conferences. During this time, autobiographical performances have come to occupy more and more program space and more and more critical attention. Several of these performances have toured the country, featured not only at colleges and universities but also at festivals, community centers, and professional theatres. The lively influence of performance art can be detected in some pieces; a good example is *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes* by Terry Galloway (1993) which, since its appearance at the 1992 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, continues to be performed on professional and campus stages (see Faires, 2000). But it is important to note that the works generated by scholars coming out of a performance-of-literature background are

marked by a strong narrative thread and a significant emphasis on language—including the foregrounding of numerous literary devices and theatrical techniques that derive, at least in part, from the creators' knowledge of chamber theatre techniques for the staging of narrative literature.

Equally noteworthy is the predominance, in this body of performances, of works that speak from the margins, seeking to position a life as connected to and as a distinctive instance of a particular identity. These pieces draw on a tradition of testimonial literature—bearing witness to experiences and perspectives rarely voiced in the culture's predominant narratives. Many of the creators directly address the absence of stories such as theirs; they desire to move from the position of misrepresented and passive subject to a more powerful position of creative agency, through the shaping of lived experience into performance. Such work regularly contests master narratives: those narratives that presume to represent universal human experience but, in fact, regularly ignore race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and much more. Instead, these performances position themselves as counternarratives—always keenly conscious of the master narrative as background for the rhetorical space they seek to foreground. These staged personal narratives draw on a variety of strategies to make space for the stories that their author-performers believe need telling.

Testimonial performances characteristically invite audience members to draw connections to their own personal experiences. Testimony calls forth testimony. The performer knows she has tapped into this aspect of personal narrative when audience members approach her after the performance and begin telling their own stories. Often, the performance functions as a frame within which audience members view their own experiences.

As personal narrative performances have gained ground in performance studies, a number of concerns have been raised about

these works. While these counternarratives are designed as sites of resistance to dominant narratives, it is important to look at the inevitable privilege that adheres to a staged autobiographical performance. By virtue of claiming one's life in public, the performer claims that his or her life is worthy of attention. This makes autobiographical performance both an ideal genre for redistributing power and a locus for continued struggles with the inequitable distribution of power. In other words, the performer makes space for a voice formerly excluded, but immediately has to deal with the assumption that she is now speaking not only for her particular experience, but for all those who share aspects of that experience. The performers cited here try valiantly to resist this universalizing impulse, but in truth there is no simple solution to the problem of speaking for others.

Nor is there an easy solution to the assumption of moral superiority that personal narrative performances may invoke. The very act of taking the stage to narrate one's life asserts, as we have said, the value of that life. The claim that it is *this* life to which we should attend, rather than some other, asserts that this life is in some way (at least in the telling) worthy of others' attention, and thus inherently more important than a "typical" life. Again, performers work to resist these troublesome power dynamics, but not always with unmitigated success.

In her autobiographical performance, "On Being an Exemplary Lesbian: My Life as a Role Model," Jacqueline Taylor (2003) sought to undermine this location of moral superiority by directing attention to and poking fun at the notion of the exemplar as the one from the margins who is allowed to take the stage. Yet the strategy was only partially successful. For whatever one might choose to say about the complications of speaking inside the spotlight, about the impossibility of speaking for others, the fact remains that the performer functions as an exemplar within the context of her performance, however much she might contest it.

Finally, autobiographical performances, by their very nature, are not objective. In some cases the life and the aesthetic object, the performance, seem to have leaky boundaries. Some critics have argued that it is difficult to critique such a performance without seeming to critique the life. Others have noted that such performances are sometimes unclear about their goals; for instance, does the performance seek to evoke an aesthetic, therapeutic, or political response, or something else altogether? If the desired response is therapeutic, whose therapy is sought—the performer's or the audience member's? And is the performance equipped in some way to deal with the responses it might evoke? Or should it be? We attempt to address these questions by examining four personal narrative performances.

#### "sista docta"

In "sista docta," Joni L. Jones (2003) provides a harrowing account of the demands placed on a young black female professor working toward tenure at a large research university. The solo performance, combining poetry, improvisation, everyday life performance, and audience participation, features drum accompaniment as Jones dances and performs her way through a multiplicity of roles and competing expectations. While Alli Aweusi drums, Jones opens the performance by handing cards to audience members that contain the lines she will have them speak in the "faculty party" section of her performance. Jones, dancing all the while, as she does throughout the performance, asks how many *sista doctas* are in the house, recognizes these women, and then begins with an adaptation of Mari Evans's poem, "Status Symbol" (Jones 2003, pp. 238–239) that includes details about Jones' experience and sets the theme of dealing with the inherent conflicts an African-American woman encounters as a high-status professional in a white and male-dominated setting. The poem is followed immediately by

a scene in which Jones performs her sisters and her daughter commenting on and questioning the work Joni does. The scene, based on a transcript of an actual conversation, evocatively explicates the tensions she faces between family and professional obligations and expectations. The daughter comments,

I like that Moma and I get to go to plays, and sometimes I go to her classes and I get to help her direct. What I don't like is that Moma travels a lot and I have to stay with babysitters and one time she was at a conference and she couldn't make my costume for Halloween. (quoted in Jones, 2003, p. 240)

One sister notes that "white folks are toxic and oppressive. They can't help it. It's in their genetic coding." Told by another sister that "Joni works with white folks," she replies, "I wouldn't be going to none of their parties and putting on pantyhose. I wouldn't be doing none of it." The dialogue identifies the ability to "hang with white folks" as one of the troublesome demands of the job (quoted in Jones, 2003, p. 240).

In "the faculty party," various audience members stand and deliver the lines Jones earlier distributed. The comments, ranging from encouraging and well intentioned but naïve to blatantly racist, accumulate as Jones transforms from a polite wine-sipping partygoer to a woman staggering, in a series of weighted dance movements, under the weight of her commentators' ignorance and racism. In another section, Jones performs a series of "stupid statements" while enacting self-defense postures. At the end of each statement, the audience is coached to respond in unison, "Be careful, your misunderstandings are dangerous." These strategies allow audience members to consider their complicity in the kinds of remarks quoted here, while recruiting them into the performance in ways that allow them to be part of a response to such racism and obliviousness. This practice of enlisting other voices into the performance

is a familiar strategy in staged personal narratives.

Other segments follow, including: a step routine performed by Jones for the *sista doctas*; her own poem, "never tell a woman to wear lipstick"; and "girltalk," a series of quotes from black women academics about the institutional racism of the academy. In one memorable scene, messages from her answering machine provide an accumulating series of professional demands on her life. As she dances and jogs her way through the recorded messages, the physical rigors of such a bombardment of expectations are made literal through her sweat and visible exhaustion.

The academic world Jones stages is indeed a chilly one for women and an outright arctic one for African American women. Elizabeth Bell (2003) notes that Jones's script, "almost line for line, parallels the research on African American mentoring: women of color are few and far between in senior positions in academia; feelings of isolation and tokenism abound; and the mentoring load, service responsibilities, and committee work for these women is monumental—often to the detriment of research and publication that would lead to their own advancement in rank and power" (p. 309). The audience literally enters into the world Jones creates by reading the lines she assigns them or joining her onstage for improvisational scenes that draw on the audience members' own related experiences. Through such participatory strategies, Jones performs her own story: solidly situated among the stories of others, hers resonates with them.

Jones's piece both is dedicated to and often directly addresses other *sista doctas*. For such women the performance offers a powerful jolt of recognition, a sense that often isolating experiences in the academy are in fact shared by a community of other black academic women. But just as powerfully, the performance addresses another audience, one without the direct personal experience of racism and sexism in the academy, but one willing to

learn from Jones's account and enter into a dialogue about the effects of race and gender in the university. Interestingly, Jones has placed some of the potential objections, concerns, or misunderstandings of white audience members into the text of her piece (for instance, as lines for the partygoers or in the series of "stupid statements"). In this way, she frames such perspectives quite clearly for her audience and increases the likelihood that even some of those who have not thought much about these issues will begin to share more of her framework and understanding. She performs for such audience members, or even lets them perform, lines that reveal what those attitudes sound like to her.

Clearly, Jones's performance exists as counternarrative to dominant narratives about the academic life. As we have demonstrated, that counternarrative addresses both an audience of insiders (other *sista doctas*) and an audience of outsiders (those who still don't get it, but with a little more help, just might). Especially interesting about the staging is the use of drumming and dance. The rhythm of the drums and the choreography of the dance become strong conduits for content about the pace and demands of the academic world with which *sista doctas* contend.

### "Refreshment"

"Refreshment" by Craig Gingrich-Philbrook (1997) is a deceptively simple piece. It begins with Gingrich-Philbrook seated in a chair, the performance's only set piece, and uses neither props, music, nor the juxtaposition of stylistically distinct scenes in its account of the author's experiences and thoughts as a spectator at the Gay Pride Parade in New York "a few years ago." Not in any sense a plot-driven narrative, Gingrich-Philbrook's story is worthy of the telling primarily because he tells it so well, with an eloquence and richness that reveal an elegant mind in action and a love of language play.

The piece, originally performed at an AIDS benefit in 1995, posits an audience familiar with Pride parades and gay culture. Yet, even as the piece assumes the intimacy of a conversation between familiars of this world, it inserts enough detail that newcomers can easily come along. For instance, when he describes the moment of silence at the Pride Parade in New York, he says: "I'm standing there and the minute of silence begins to flow up the parade route. You know how that sounds: You ever been there? At a specific time. . . ." (1997, p. 355). Such language invites both insiders and outsiders to share in his reminiscences and reflections.

In the opening moments of the performance, Gingrich-Philbrook recalls sitting in a café prior to the parade as friends describe their favorite Pride Parade moments. While one part of his mind is occupied with getting his own answer ready, he is most attuned to the "reverential tones" with which his friends speak about Pride. He conveys this through a series of similes that build in power through repetition:

[M]y new acquaintances spoke about Pride the way people sometimes do talking about birthdays—looking back on how far they've come over the past year, taking stock of their life. They spoke about Pride the way people sometimes talk about the future, making resolutions on New Year's Eve about how far they want to go in the coming year. They spoke about Pride the way we speak, on the Fourth of July, about freedom. And they spoke about Pride the way that people speak, on Memorial Day, remembering the price some have paid for that freedom, with a kind of nostalgia. (1997, p. 354)

Moments later, in what first appears to be an aside, but soon takes its place as a central element in this performance, Gingrich-Philbrook explains his inability to join his friends in marching and his consequent location as a spectator. He tells a story about high school bullies assaulting him while he was

in junior high, stomping on and breaking multiple bones in both his feet as they demanded that he admit that he was queer.

He remembers, as he reflects on his friends' reverence for Pride, the way his mother and stepfather would scoff at the notion of gay pride, saying, "What is there to be proud of for goodness sake? . . . We're not proud of being heterosexual." This memory is the springboard for a fanciful scene in which he imagines telling them, "You are too proud: You wear your heterosexuality on your chest just like it was a big blue ribbon from the state fair for best big hairdo or best menacing gesture made with a plate of vegetables toward a child." (Note how these images depict a heterosexuality that prides itself at the point of unappealing excesses.) He then imagines flying them over the Pride parade and forcing them to look down on what they see with an understanding that these people are "trying to make a community, just trying to refresh their identities." The scene juxtaposes the angry, argumentative style of a young child ("You are too proud") with his adult eloquence and poetic repetition: "And see how the city, stretching out on either side of them, pushes in behind them, closes in behind them, closes in behind them after they've gone, closes in behind them like they were never there" (1997, p. 355).

Eventually, searching for the "refreshment" of a raspberry sorbet, Gingrich-Philbrook passes a vendor hawking "Neuter Newt" buttons. This sight occasions a lengthy reverie on what besides alliteration could make this a good political slogan. In order to make real the slogan's implied violence, Gingrich-Philbrook describes in unbearable detail what "we" would have to do if we were to neuter Newt, and the scene that he depicts hauntingly echoes the violence of the school-yard bullies he told earlier.

Finally, he happens upon what he first takes to be melted raspberry sorbet spilled in the street but soon identifies as a pool of blood. Now, in yet another series of repetitions, he

refuses us the comfort of even identifying the victim, as he reminds us once again of our shared vulnerability:

And I thought,

Oh God. Here, here some gay man has been stabbed, here on this, the safest, the most holy day of the year.

And then I caught myself, and thought,

Here, here maybe some lesbian has been stabbed, here on this, the safest, the most holy day of the year.

Or, here, here maybe a bisexual person has been stabbed, here on this, the safest, the most holy day of the year.

Or, here, here maybe a transgendered person has been stabbed, here on this, the safest, the most holy day of the year.

Or, here, here maybe one of those "straight but not narrow" folks has been stabbed, here on this, the safest, the most holy day of the year

. . . where we are all still vulnerable. All of us. (1997, p. 359)

Gingrich-Philbrook simultaneously performs resistance to the master narrative (as in the scene where he imaginatively flies his mother and stepfather over the Pride Parade and forces them to see the scene through his eyes) and his commitment to reinscribing his own story as another master narrative. For what is he doing in the section quoted above with the "Or, here, here maybe" refrains, if not reminding us of the range of stories that might be told instead?

It is through these detailed and poetic musings that Gingrich-Philbrook asks us to attend more carefully to the world around us and the language with which we describe and sometimes attempt to simplify it. Moving deftly between humor and utter seriousness, he invites us into a world of what he has described as "performed theory," where the questions about language, location, and power that theory seeks to explicate are constantly investigated in the thoughts he shares with us. His is a meditation that seeks to complicate and unsettle our perception of the world, to

share not only his own location as a gay man but his own carefully inscribed resistance to universalizing that location or imposing it on others as a final site of authority.

#### “Skin Flint (or, The Garbage Man’s Kid)”

“Generative autobiography” is the term Bryant Keith Alexander employs to describe the performance that develops in response to and in dialogue with another performed autobiography. In a carefully reasoned essay, Alexander (2000) offers his own performance, “Skin Flint (or, The Garbage Man’s Kid),” as a case study to illustrate his thinking about generative autobiographical performances. Witnessing “Tattoo Stories,” the second of Tami Spry’s paired performances exploring her relationship with her now deceased mother (see Spry, 2003), Alexander finds himself considering his own autobiography and in particular his relationship with his father, but not, perhaps, for any of the reasons Spry, in the creation of her work, might have been inclined to expect. Spry describes, first in “Skins” and then in “Tattoo Stories,” a mother-daughter relationship that is at once extremely close and marked by contradiction and ambivalence. In the second of these pieces, she recreates a scene where she shares with her friends the joke her mother used to enjoy with her, a “joke” in which she insisted that Spry’s real father was actually the garbage man, who would return one day to retrieve her (like an almost-forgotten piece of trash, the jest implies but does not quite say). The mother would insist on the truth of this tale of paternity until the child Spry was in tears, then laughingly reveal the joke. It is not until the adult Spry shares this joke with her friends and they respond with unexpected sympathy that she begins to fathom the enormity of the injustice done to her childhood self.

For Alexander, however, this tale, something of an aside in the narrative Spry is weaving, becomes the trigger for his own “reflection

and self-exploration.” The joke, Alexander reminds us, is grounded in assumptions about race and class, about the incongruity of the divide between Spry’s location as a white privileged child and the location of “the garbage man’s own children” (p. 105). But Alexander is, in truth, the son of a garbage man, and so this performative moment not only foregrounds issues of race and class as they operate in both Spry’s performance and in Alexander’s life, but also becomes the catalyst for his own autobiographical exploration and performance, written, as he says “between the lines of her performance.”

Alexander’s performance describes witnessing Spry’s piece and uses the metaphor of the closet to portray the silence and denial which have surrounded his response to his father’s work:

Today I take the public opportunity to *out* myself:

[*As myself—in a confessional mode*]

“I am the son of a garbage man.”

I say that for first time after 34 years of subterfuge and euphemistic descriptions such as:

[*As myself—embarrassed, hesitantly grappling*] “My dad is a . . . My dad is a . . . My dad is a . . . a truck driver.”

“My dad works for . . . the . . . the city.”

[*With an increasing rate and frustration*]

“My dad is a san . . . ni . . . tational engineer.” (2000, p. 106)

Alexander returns twice more to segments where he struggles to find language for his father’s work. These repetitive sections function as a literary device that accumulates in power with each return and variation. He includes as well sections where he describes his experiences in scenes that enact his childhood exchanges with each of his hardworking and proud parents, struggling to instill their family values into their son in the face of a society that often diminished them. References to Spry’s narrative abound, not only through direct discussion of her performance, but also

stylistically. For instance, he tells his own bitter family joke:

“Did I ever tell you the Alexander family joke? No? Well it goes something like this: The Alexander kids never really went to the dentist. Most of us have relatively straight teeth. You know why? Because whereas some kids had their teeth controlled and directed by wires and braces—ours were controlled by slaps to the mouth. Isn’t that funny?” (2000, p. 107)

Later, and more directly, he confronts head-on the impact of the Spry family joke on him and his family:

*(As myself—eager, once again recreating the tone of Spry’s self-disclosive moment in Tattoo Stories)* “Did I ever tell you the story of the garbage man? I never told you that story? . . . Well! When I was growing up my dad was a garbage man—and even though other people found that funny—well, it was not one of *our* family jokes.” (2000, p. 109)

Alexander explains his inability to laugh at the Spry family garbage man joke (which in truth is not funny in Spry’s performance either, as it reveals a cruelly manipulative maneuver by mother against child):

I did not laugh at the garbage man joke . . . because the incomprehensible projection of self as other, which is the crux of the joke as she tells it, reflected my own otherness—reflected my own denial of being a garbage man’s kid. (2000, p. 109)

Alexander’s performance, in dialogue with Spry’s, moves through a journey of coming to terms with the shame society visited on Alexander and his family and a reworking of his understanding the past to finally proudly claim and honor the father who worked hard and honorably to care for his family. He closes with a powerful and empowering proclamation and tribute:

Her performance was a flint struck against the steel of my resistance, sparking my

reflection, my own self-critique. Today I out myself as a garbage man’s kid. In doing so I re-claim my identity. I proclaim an identity. I declaim my respect and unending gratitude to my dad. . . . Today I proudly profess that I will always be the garbage man’s kid . . . and that’s alright. The joke is not on me. (2000, pp. 109–110)

Alexander’s performance is a powerful and moving piece that works in its own right, even if one approaches it without previous knowledge of Spry’s performance. Indeed, Alexander is careful to describe Spry’s performance sufficiently for anyone who has not seen it to understand its significance as the catalyst for his own reflections. It is also, in a manner reminiscent of Gingrich-Philbrook’s notion of performed theory, a performance that enacts theories of generative autobiography and of analysis of classism and racism as embedded in the autobiographical narratives we spin about our lives. Yet one does not need a background in literary theory to understand the clear points Alexander is making about class and race. Look through my eyes, it tells us, and see what you might not have noticed in the performance that went before. Look through my eyes and see how my particularity connects to a web of social and cultural meanings that inscribe on my life and on all our lives notions of whose stories matter, notions that this performance takes the stage to contest.

Finally, it is a moving enactment of the testimonial impulse of personal narrative performance, as it both responds to the frame of Spry’s performance and simultaneously reframes that piece with another narrative. In doing so, it powerfully portrays the act of silencing that can inhere in a performance designed to break silence and counter a master narrative.

#### “A Clean Breast of It”

A number of personal narratives have explored illness and recovery through staged

performances. "A Clean Breast of It" by Linda Park-Fuller (2003) is one in a strongly testimonial style that recounts her breast cancer diagnosis, treatment, and recovery, and uses narrative to educate the audience about this disease. This is one woman's story, but it is quite consciously and carefully not just one woman's story. Instead, she employs a number of strategies to connect her story to the larger context of breast cancer experiences. She describes herself as inspired to create "A Clean Breast of It" in part by the AIDS narratives she witnessed at the 1993 Arizona State University conference, "HIV Education: Performing Personal Narratives" (see Corey, 1993). She has frequently performed her piece in educational and therapeutic settings, encouraging other cancer survivors and their loved ones to enter into postperformance dialogues.

Park-Fuller's performance is more of a straightforward personal narrative than any of the other pieces discussed here. She employs a largely chronological organizational structure as she narrates her experience from the moment she discovers a lump in her breast through diagnosis and treatment and the first few months of reorienting her life after cancer. She wants to make sure the audience understands the emotional and practical impacts of breast cancer. The communication teacher in her is apparent as she carefully explains, in clear and simple language, what she has learned about how cancer attacks the body with its own cells:

What fascinates me most is that cancer is all about communication—intercellular communication, about how the cells communicate (or fail to communicate) with one another. When you think about it, cancer is just one big misunderstanding! (2003, p. 228)

As she learns more about her disease, she also learns more about the need to take an active role in her own healing, questioning the medical establishment's inability to address the human side of this disease, or even to assist in recognizing the lifestyle changes that might promote healing.

So I was making all these resolutions to eat right, yes? And at the same time, I was eating hospital food! Which, as you may know, doesn't taste that great, but I don't think it's particularly good for you either. . . . The funniest thing occurred at lunch one day, when they served me a six-ounce can of diet Shasta soda pop. As I was pouring it into the glass, I noticed some printing on the side of the can. It said: "Warning: This product contains saccharine, which has been known to cause cancer in laboratory animals." Hah! Doesn't anyone talk to anyone else in this hospital? I mean, what am I in here for?

. . . So that's when I realized that if I thought behavioral changes were going to make a difference in preventing recurrence, . . . then I would have to initiate them myself. (2003, pp. 229–230)

This is a narrative account from a woman who is actively involved in reflecting on and learning about her disease and in shaping her own recovery. Thus, the audience stands to learn a great deal by following her journey.

In the early moments of her performance, Park-Fuller picks up an acoustic guitar and, with an untrained voice and the accompaniment of simple chord changes, she sings, "It'll Come to Me," a song that emphasizes the improvisational nature of much of life, which requires us to "make it up as [we] go along." This moment positions her as a kind of folk raconteur. There is nothing particularly polished or professional about this musical number, but it is pleasant and provides a thematic notion to which the performance will return. Three more times she punctuates the performance with her singing as she continues with additional verses of the opening song. The guitar playing, we learn in the performance, is something she had always wanted to learn to do, but only gave herself permission to pursue as she sought to balance her life after diagnosis and surgery. She explains that she needed to learn to do something amateurishly, simply because it brought her pleasure, and so the simplicity of the music becomes an integral manifestation of what she has learned about living from her cancer experience.

Park-Fuller's language is simple, too, intentionally vernacular, as she sprinkles the script with "you know," "oh," "oh boy," "oh man," and "you see."

Yet the hand of the seasoned director, literary scholar, and teacher is everywhere apparent in this simple narrative. Park-Fuller wants to resist any suggestion that she can stand and speak for all cancer survivors. In a piece like this, she inevitably does so, and yet, to do so is problematic, for no two breast cancer experiences are the same. To counter any suggestion that hers is a universal breast cancer story, Park-Fuller employs several devices. First, she opens the performance with a dedication:

This performance is for all those who have struggled with breast cancer—those who have survived and those who have not. They all have their own unique stories, and I do not claim to speak for them. But I dedicate this performance to them. (2003, p. 222)

At the outset she has called into the room all those who have experienced breast cancer and has stated clearly her inability to speak for them. Yet she makes it clear all the same that there is a sense in which she speaks on behalf of them.

A second strategy Park-Fuller employs is a timer, set to go off at thirteen-minute intervals, "symbolizing the death rate of breast cancer in the United States" (2003, p. 218). She sets the timer near the beginning of the performance, as she gives the audience statistics about the incidence and mortality rates of the disease. Each time the timer goes off, she stops wherever she is in the performance, the first time repeating, "And every thirteen minutes, someone else dies"; always she resets the timer. Park-Fuller writes about the way this timer comes to function in the piece:

In retrospect, I can now say that it serves three purposes. First, as a social-medical critique, it sharpens our comprehension of how many people die from the disease and how little progress has been made against it.

Second, aesthetically, it symbolizes the themes of life's interruptions and improvisation, since I as performer cannot predict exactly when the timer will go off. Like the cancer that occurred so unexpectedly, forcing me to stop, reevaluate and revise my life, so the sounding of the timer forces me to stop and revise my performance. And, third, ethically, the timer evokes awareness of others whose stories do not end as fortunately as mine. Over the course of the play, it comes to represent them. By interrupting my narrative (the *survivor's* narrative), it symbolically gives the power to contradict my story to those who cannot tell their own. Their stories are not heard within the frame of my performance, but drawing attention to their absence reminds audiences that *someone had a different story that will never be told*. In this way, the piece attempts to transcend the "merely personal" in personal narrative—to *stand with*, not to *stand in for*, others' stories. (2003, pp. 218–219)

The educational and therapeutic objectives have a primacy in Park-Fuller's piece that shapes several of these performance choices. She assumes no knowledge of breast cancer experience among her audience and makes that acceptable by emphasizing her own ignorance of the disease prior to diagnosis, while making sure to include substantive factual information to contextualize her individual tale. She speaks simply and humbly about her journey, in a way that sets her up, not as professor and expert, but as fellow traveler, using a simple colloquial language that invites the audience member to view her as a friend who has been there. Yet she manages to do a great deal of teaching along the way, as she consistently calls the audience to attend to the larger cultural context in which her individual story unfolds. It is interesting to compare the sophisticated and perceptive academic discourse Park-Fuller employs in writing about this performance to the everyday discourse of her performed narrative. In such a comparison, it becomes clear that Park-Fuller brings to the staged narrative a highly trained capacity for adapting her level of diction to target audience and rhetorical goals.

## CONCLUSION

As we see in even this limited selection of staged personal narratives, the performer draws from a wide array of compositional and staging strategies, from the simplest retelling of an experience while seated or standing before the audience on a bare set to a much more highly dramatized narrative or collection of narratives. Some scripts are compilations of poetry, song, everyday life performance, improvisation, and more. Almost invariably, performers of their own story draw into the narrative the words of others, whether the remembered words of friends or family, imaginary scenes, or the literary works of others. While the consciousness with which performers acknowledge their privileged location onstage varies, most of the performances we have considered work to expose and complicate that assumption of power—often by directly calling attention to voices not represented. Most powerfully perhaps, the autobiographical performance calls out to us with the claim that a particular life matters, and matters in ways that the master narrative might well have obscured. The staged claim that one's life is worth the audience's attention seems to call forth a mirroring response, one in which the audience members reflect in turn on the value of their own lives, responding in kind with yet another story, if not a full-fledged performance, about the meaning they have struggled to make of the lives they are living.

In personal narrative performance and in auto/biographical performance, the audience occupies a pivotal role as witness and participant. As we have discussed, the formulation of context, the intimacy—and the community created by the presence—of the shared life, call forth a unique performance situation. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook (2000) says that this situation demonstrates “solo performance's status as a situated accomplishment of existential collaboration” (p. viii). In locating the strategies and characteristics of this genre of performance, we find the fabric woven

between story and storyteller and performer and spectator to be direct descendents of the oral tradition and of the early literature in the performance history of the field of performance studies. Narrative remains paramount in performed autobiography, in all its complex permutations and inherent simplicity.

Auto/biography and personal narrative are flexible performance forms: they can be performed in spaces from theatres to classrooms to tents pitched out of doors (as in the original Chautauqua performances). Constructions of self, memory, and milieu constitute the central elements of autobiographical performance. A genre of great fluidity and possibility, autobiographical performance signifies through the act of natural conversation: to speak one's life in the presence of another is to claim a measure of consequence.

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## The Strange Case of the Body in the Performance of Literature Classroom

### *An Enduring Mystery*

BRUCE HENDERSON

#### **AUTISM AS METAPHOR: FOUR PRELUDES ON PERFORMANCE AND THE BODY'S PEDAGOGY**

Twenty years after receiving my first PhD in interpretation (now performance studies) from Northwestern University, I have returned to my home town (Oak Park, the western suburb of Chicago that produced such writers as Ernest Hemingway, Carol Shields, and my own high school classmate Jane Hamilton) to begin work as a graduate student again at one of Illinois' public universities, the University of Illinois at Chicago. Today I have entered an equally "blurry" field, disability studies. It is an exciting, if somewhat dizzying time to be a new student in this emergent field, one that has grown out of rehabilitation sciences into an area more concerned with cultural critiques of policies, practices, and representations of the disabled body, mind, and experience. My new

experience is not unlike entering performance studies when I did. I was part of the generation that saw the shift from "interpretation" or "oral interpretation" (with its fairly exclusive attention to the study of literature through performance) to "performance studies."

One of my fellow graduate students in the program is a woman trained in rehabilitation therapy, who is excited about performance studies and plans to make it one of her cognate areas. When I ask her whom she is reading and whom she has studied, she names Richard Schechner, whose recent textbook (2002) she has adopted as her founding text, and two scholars, Carrie Sandahl and Jim Ferris, whose work bridges disability studies and performance studies.

When I mention the rich tradition of performance studies at Northwestern, a 40-minute ride to the north, she seems only vaguely aware of it. Nor is she familiar with

the earlier work done by William Rickert with “group performance of literature” by students with disabilities at Wright State University, even though it is her alma mater. And coursework in the “performance of literature” has long been absent from the theatre and communication curricula at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I agree—partly out of missionary zeal, partly out of the selfishness of wanting someone with whom to talk about performance—to help her with an independent study she plans to do on disability and performance theory. But I wonder where to begin. And of what use will the “performance of literature” be to someone whose primary interest is in the autobiographical work of performance artists with disabilities?

At the same that I volunteer to work with my fellow graduate student (whose own excitement is infectious and who has welcomed me as an older returning student) I hunt for a novel to read. For the first time as a student, I am taking a full load of classes and have only one work of literature assigned for any of them. So, amidst the somewhat alien corn of Foucault, Goffman, Darwin, Stephen Jay Gould, Ian Hacking, and Althusser through which I am wandering, I feel a hunger (and the metaphor of consuming is apt—reading is an activity I associate with eating, both in positive and negative ways) for fictional story.

Somewhere I read of a new British novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon (2003), which is receiving enthusiastic reviews and which I can justify in my monastic reading existence because of its central premise. It is a novel told from the point of view of an autistic boy, a teenager who is a savant in math, but who can describe the world only through a perspective unencumbered by or disengaged from “normal” human processes of interpretation and from “normal” expressions of emotion. (I am learning to put “normal” in scare quotes, both in print and in

speech.) It begins, in almost Orwellian numerical fashion, with a chapter marked “2” (we learn later that the narrator will assign only prime numbers to the chapter headings):

It was 7 minutes after midnight. The dog was lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs. Shears’s house. Its eyes were closed. It looked as if it was running on its side, the way dogs run when they think they are chasing a cat in a dream. But the dog was not running or asleep. The dog was dead. There was a garden fork sticking out of the dog. The points of the fork must have gone all the way through the dog and into the ground because the fork had not fallen over. I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog and I do not think you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer, for example, or a road accident. But I could not be certain about this. (p. 1)

With some impatience, I put the book aside. Yes, I think to myself, I see what the novelist is doing, and I note from the back cover that he has worked with autistic children. But I do not think I can go on this journey with Christopher, the narrator, for some two hundred pages, for much the same reason that Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes mysteries always left me cold: it feels more like a logic problem than a story. (The novel, in fact, takes its title from a line in the Sherlock Holmes story “Silver Blaze”; see Doyle, 1890/1963, p. 27.) Raised on the modern novel of Freudian (and post-Freudian) exploration of consciousness and unconsciousness, I cannot imagine myself caring enough about listening to this boy figure who killed his neighbor’s dog to stay with him in this emotionless, distanced, utterly observational and unselfreflective voice. It is a gimmick, a writing-class exercise. I turn to something lighter and pulpier, a chatty novel of the gay world of NYC theatre.

Yet, a week or so later, I return to the autistic boy's story. I feel guilty—what kind of student of disability am I if I haven't the patience to sit with this individual? I have learned that it is "better" to view something like autism not as a deficit but as a difference—and to try to understand what an autistic may possess that may be viewed as strengths rather than weaknesses, presences rather than absences. And so I try again—perhaps it is because summer has turned to autumn, perhaps because the work load is such that I cannot bear the density of interior life my favorite novels provide, who knows? But this time I follow Christopher's journey to the solution of the mystery (and then some, as he takes the perilous journey to London to see his estranged mother). And I find myself experiencing both pain and overwhelming, sometimes tear-producing affection for him. It is not that at any point in the novel his own autistic style changes and he becomes an empathic, "cured" subject—this is not a novel of transformation in that sense. Nor do my tears come from a response based in pity or charity. I think I weep simply because I have learned more about what it means to be him and to have experienced the difficulty of his journey—just as I recall a teenaged self years ago weeping as Sam carried Frodo up Mount Doom to fulfill his destiny.

While Christopher's way of knowing the world is not my own, I believe I have successfully learned how he knows the world—a thing autistics must themselves learn (and consciously so) about the way the "others" do. In a sense, I wonder, is this not what all literature demands of us—to relearn the world each time we read someone else's words?

The word "autistic" both scares me and attracts me, and I think I can locate the beginning of its shameful fascination for me. Twenty-five years ago, as a first-semester graduate student in interpretation at Northwestern University, I am struggling in the beginning graduate seminar, Studies in Performance,

taught by Professor Lilla Heston (sister of the famous actor Charlton). Heston dominates the class. I find myself so nervous in front of her that I give some of the most tentative, most ineptly self-conscious performances I will ever give. I cannot get beyond her piercing stare. My choices of texts seem to alienate her and my intellectual explanations of performance choices are unpersuasive to her. Finally, during a class performance critique, she describes my gestures as "autistic." I am so shocked by the use of the word that I essentially shut down for the rest of the course. I have received a message (to this day I do not know if it is the one she intended or not). I am a pathological performer—there is a sickness to my work. I have to look up "autistic" in the dictionary, and see it is a disease (today we refer to it as a syndrome or spectrum) of, among other things, an inability to communicate. I understand now (and did then, I suspect) that what she referred to was a lack of connection between my physicalization (gestures, posture, movements) and the text I was performing. To my instructor, this lack of connection appeared to be unconscious rather than chosen.

I realize now, over 25 years later, that Heston was using the word "autistic" (if the word was chosen with any conscious intent) to shock me into being more self-aware as a performer. Her own performances, while always a joy to witness, were lessons in self-presentation. One felt that every moment had been planned and revised meticulously, like the prose of her beloved Henry James: the pleasure was in her ability to behave in a controlled manner and yet be "in the moment" at the same time. I think that, in an odd way, she was trying to encourage me to be both more disciplined and less self-absorbed as a performer.

The word "autistic" today carries a wider spectrum of potentialities, both positive and negative, than in 1978 when I took the course. I have often wondered whether the late Dr. Heston would remember this "curious

incident” and what she would have to say about the changing face of autism today. She was a gifted actress and reader, but my memories of her onstage are of her solitariness: as Mrs. Alving in the final moment of Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, alone with her son who is no longer capable of communicating with her, or as Bernarda Alba, isolated in her tyrannical reign over her house of women (her daughters) and able to make brief, genuine contact with an other only in her few exchanges with her servant. Were Heston’s performances, even in traditionally staged plays, variations on a kind of positive construction of the “selfness” of some kinds of autism—the sense of being isolated yet observant at the same time?

Having gathered my thoughts for this essay as an overview of one problem in the teaching of the performance of literature, I sit down to one last “read” for inspiration. I turn to a book I picked up earlier in the semester, Francis Spufford’s memoir, *The Child That Books Built* (2002), in which he traces his development from infancy to adulthood through his reading habits and choices. He begins with a description of what the experience of reading was for him:

“I can always tell when you’re reading somewhere in the house,” my mother used to say. “There’s a special silence, a *reading* silence.” I never heard it, this extra degree of hush that somehow traveled through walls and ceilings to announce that my seven-year-old self had become about as absent as a present person could be. The silence went both ways. As my concentration on the story in my hands took hold, all sounds faded away. (p. 1)

Spufford describes his reading behavior as “catatonic.” For Spufford, the experience of reading silently has the degree of engagement we might associate with a performer in public. Yet at the same time it is a private engagement. The text’s meaning is not unlike the meaning of the sounds the autistic makes when touched: we as a public witness something that can only

partially be made accessible to us. In his writing on performance, Wallace Bacon (1966, 1972) preferred the word “communion” to “communication”: for him, performance, like literature itself, could never be simply a “transfer” of meaning. The autistic can participate in acts of communion, though what he or she makes of them will probably be different from the perceptions of the “normal” subject.

It is not entirely accurate to say that the autistic does not experience his or her body. But it may be accurate to say that the autistic has a different kind of cognitive access to the ways in which his or her body is one of many other bodies that share experiences, emotions, responses. Many autistics (there is a wide range of ways of being and knowing covered by the spectrum) are deeply gifted in ways not usually associated with stereotypes the public has learned from such films as *Rain Man*. For example, while some autistics have difficulty maintaining attention in ways that appear normative to most people, they can become focused to an extreme degree on a pattern, or on a category, or on a phenomenon. Similarly, while difficulty in communicating interpersonally is one of the usual impairments associated with autism, many autistics can learn how to perform social scripts and to understand what lies underneath the protocols and conventions of interaction.

Such memory work need not simply be rote or robotic. It can achieve depth and authenticity, through a learning process different from simply participating in society in a natural way. In her recent memoir *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*, Dawn Prince-Hughes (2004), a writer and primatologist, movingly describes her own journey to self-discovery through observation of and interaction with gorillas. She writes about her success in working at a zoo, after an isolated childhood and a part of her adulthood spent homeless on the streets. She notes: “The fact that I excelled at certain tasks—keeping records, making keen observations, descriptively communicating information, and

memorizing events perfectly—not only saved me but deposited me exactly where I wanted to be” (pp. 103–104). Prince-Hughes now lives with a partner and has a son. She has learned how to perform in a way that provides her satisfaction and pleasure—through her autism, not in spite of it.

Autism is a condition I now study, in my second graduate career. It has also become a powerful metaphor for the body in performance, as I reflect upon the history of my field of study in my first graduate career. Is it worth asking whether part of what makes some performances valuable and worthwhile is a figuratively “autistic” element, which can be seen in the history of teaching and practicing the performance of literature? In saying this, I am thinking especially of the phenomenon of solo performance: the long tradition of the single reader, holding a book or standing at a lectern, who addresses a text to an audience.

In other words, do we have a history that both promotes and diminishes the connections between body-of-performer and body-of-text at different times, sometimes simultaneously? How does this always complex, overdetermined set of relations shift back and forth over time? What remains constant? And what does all this augur for the future of teaching the performance of literature?

#### BACK TO BEFORE: WHAT THE RHAPSODE “KNEW” (OR DIDN’T)

Textual evidence in the Homeric epics, along with comparatively recent research by Milman Parry (Parry, 1987) and Albert Lord (2000), suggests that there was a kind of performance that predated our contemporary notions of a fixed text: of a text that can be separated in a meaningful way from the moment of performance or from the body of the performer. The Homeric bard composed in performance, typically in a style that involved a musicality and rhythm perhaps not entirely unlike some of today’s rap artists. For such a bard, who was

synonymous with the concept of “poet,” the text was always fluid and protean: themes, motifs, and some formulaic (metrically regular) phrases were the anchors from one performance to another. Because written language did not yet exist (or, later, existed for very limited purposes, of which literary publication was not yet one) there was no sense in which verbatim repetition could be viewed as a mark of fidelity to a text. Thus, the art of performance was one in which the body (which included the voice and, by extension, all that the body could fill, including context, space, and even audience) was the medium for “publication.” There was freedom and, in the terms of Foucault (1961/1977), discipline in such a performance aesthetic. While it is likely that habit led to certain passages becoming more and more fixed, only with the introduction of writing as a dominant verbal mode could we imagine a notion of a text as something that could be separated from the body of its composer and then reperformed by another performer.

With such a transition, a new kind of performer emerged: the *rhapsode*, literally “stitcher of lines.” Eugene and Margaret Bahn (1970), who provided one of the earliest attempts to survey traditions in the performance of nondramatic literature, note the first reference to such performers in the sixth century BCE. A particular group of rhapsodes, devoted to the preservation and recitation of the Homeric epics, were known as the *Homeridai*. Such performers were itinerant, traveling to different festivals and competitions, but also often attaching themselves to particular courts and noble houses. One such rhapsode was Ion, who was transformed into a somewhat fictional character in Plato’s early dialogue that bears his name (trans. 2001b). This dialogue parallels another early dialogue, *Gorgias* (trans. 1998), which similarly interrogates the nature and office of the sophist, orator and teacher who claimed to be able to teach virtue through the teaching of rhetoric.

One of Plato's final dialogues, the *Phaedrus* (trans. 2001a), returns to the question of spoken versus written language, critiquing writing as the beginning of the loss of knowledge.

Plato's technique in each of the dialogues is similar. He has his version of Socrates (his own teacher) encounter a practitioner of one of the arts of spoken performance (or, in the case of *Phaedrus*, an audience member) and proceeds to question, as if from a naïve and uninformed position, the very definition and basis of the art. The performer always falls into the traps of logic and dialectic (which Plato believed to be the only true paths to knowledge). The opponents of Socrates inevitably concede the intellectual bankruptcy of their claims. Of course, Plato, true rhetorician that he is, never gives Socrates a worthy opponent: dialectic often seems more a veil for Socrates' own rhetorical demonstrations than a genuinely "dialogic" opportunity for investigation, in the sense pursued by Bakhtin (1981). Plato's *Ion* and *Gorgias* are always depicted as pleasant, entertaining, yet rather empty-headed men, proud of their public acclaim, but unable to defend an idea beyond a question or two.

In the *Ion*, Plato raises two important questions about the performance of literary texts that have recurred through history and remain relevant and open today for teachers and students. Plato (through Socrates) questions, first, what the rhapsode "knows" and, second, from what source the rhapsode derives his performance skills. He does this through a series of seemingly innocuous questions, each of which leads Ion down the primrose path to an admission of ignorance.

Concerning "knowledge," Socrates asks Ion questions designed to reveal the rhapsode's limits. On the subjects about which Homer speaks, the rhapsode possesses knowledge inferior to that of the actual practitioner of each activity. Ion must concede, finally, that diviners are better equipped to speak of divining, mathematicians of arithmetic,

and nutritionists of nutrition than is the rhapsode—even though the rhapsode, in his performance of Homeric epic, speaks of these fields through the words of Homer. Socrates gets Ion to concede even that he is ill-equipped as a critic of poetry, because he is able to speak only about Homer and not about all poets (a sobering thought in our own day of critical specialization). This series of reductions points out that the ability to perform poetry is not the same as possessing knowledge about the subjects it describes or narrates. Even Homer's "knowledge" as original composer of the poems is suspect, as Plato believes in a world of "ideals": original forms of which our own human knowledge and experience are a mere set of copies.

Ion's mistake, from a contemporary perspective, is his failure to challenge the terms of the debate itself: to ask whether he should "know" the "facts" of nutrition, divining, or arithmetic is to confuse the "mimetic" with the "original" (or "original copy," in Plato's sense). Ion is an expert on the art of "imitating," if you will—of using his body (including voice, intellect, and emotions) to (re)create the imagined world created in Homer's words. Similarly, Socrates and Ion conflate performance with criticism, "speaking Homer" with "speaking about Homer." It is possible to define performance as a form of literary criticism: this was the pedagogical mission of "interpretation" in twentieth century American schools. But Socrates and Ion (as imagined by Plato) do not describe performances. Rather, they discuss what would seem to be *lectures*, speeches given by the rhapsode on the texts he performs.

Socrates' second challenge to Ion, Plato's question of the source of "inspiration" (which we may make roughly synonymous with "ability," "accomplishment," or "talent," though none of these terms is a perfect fit) is inextricably tied to the first. The challenge Ion does not really make to Socrates is that performance is itself a field of knowledge. This

then would raise the troubling question of the degree to which performance is an “art”: an activity with rules and processes, which can be accessed through rational discourse, through analysis of its components, through the acquisition of skills, and through methodological steps and practices. Indeed, Socrates claims that performance is not such an art. (He makes the same claim about oratory, to which, it is often suggested, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* may be seen as a response; we have no such response from Aristotle about the performance of literature, as his *Poetics* is really about dramatic structure and theatrical production and not about solo performance.) In one of those characteristic speeches that combine flattery and insult, Socrates provides Ion with the following set of options:

If you’re really a master of your subject, and if, as I said earlier, you’re cheating me of the demonstration you promised about Homer, then you’re doing me wrong. But if you’re not a master of your subject, if you’re possessed by a divine gift from Homer, so that you make lovely speeches about the poet without knowing anything—as I said about you—then you’re not doing me wrong. So choose, how do you want us to think of you—as a man who does something wrong, or as someone *divine*. (2001b, p. 48)

Ion, who is probably not the first and certainly not the last performer to prefer praise as a divinity to critical and moral argument, accedes to the “lovelier way.” In doing so, he misses the opportunity to articulate for Socrates what goes into the training and education of a performer. Socrates’ flattery convinces him to keep mysterious the processes by which the rhapsode creates his performance.

Questions of what constitutes the education and/or training (the two words suggest very different pedagogical and philosophical outlooks) of the performer of literature persist to the present day. How does the performer learn to “perform”? Can performance be taught?

(The same question, of course, arises with such arts as acting, music, painting, dance, and writing.) Or is all such teaching merely critical response to and refinement of given talents? In the performance classroom, what attention should be given to theory as opposed to practice—and how should teachers combine the two? Should such classrooms be dominated by textual study, with delivery skills and techniques viewed as always emergent from the demands of texts? Or should performance classrooms stress attainment of skills and techniques of performance (“delivery”) and trust that students will learn about textual and critical analysis through courses in literature departments? Socrates’ seemingly innocent question (similar to questions posed not only in the *Gorgias*, about public speaking, but also by such famous teachers of oratory as Isocrates) continues to provide the subject for debate.

#### FROM ELOCUTION TO EXPRESSION TO INTERPRETATION: THE DEBATE OVER THE BODY’S PERFORMATIVE DISCIPLINE

The research of Bahn and Bahn (1970) suggests that the performances of the rhapsodes and the teaching of interpretation in twentieth century American schools are early and late chapters in the same history. At the beginning of the century in which I studied the performance of literature, teachers turned away, like Plato’s Ion, from the mission of explaining that performance is itself a field of knowledge. In acknowledging the mystery of performance, they preferred concepts like “suggestion” and later “communion” (which focused the student’s attention on the thing performed, a literary text) to examinations and discussions of the performing body itself.

The reasons for this relate to a growing distaste among educators for the study of elocution, as it had developed in England and America during the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. As taught in private studios and “schools,” and as practiced in settings ranging from private salons to the public platforms of the Lyceum and tent Chautauqua circuits, elocution had acquired a bad name. At the end of the nineteenth century, a generation of charismatic teacher-performers—among them, Charles Wesley Emerson, S. S. Curry, Genevieve Stebbins, Leland Powers, and Anna Morgan—worked hard to give academic respectability to training in “speech arts,” but largely failed to find a place for such training in colleges and universities. Curry (1896) advocated the name “expression” for what he saw as “The Advance Needed” beyond the “mechanical” and “imitative” practices of “histrionic art” on the elocutionary platform and the stage (pp. 121, 361–384). The teachers of expression emphasized the performer’s responsiveness to literature’s “suggestiveness,” and de-emphasized the cultivation of vocal and bodily techniques. “In the typical lesson” of a Curry textbook,

the performer should use the body to suggest a poetic speaker’s reactions to a phenomenon in nature—as the embodiment of a moment of situated “impression” or total perception—rather than trying to imitate through voice and gesture the thing perceived (rolling waves, crashing surf, squawking gulls, and so forth). Audience members complete the chain-reaction of “suggestiveness” by kinesthetically performing the text in their own bodies. (Edwards, 1999, p. 21)

Although the study of expression was a short-lived cultural phenomenon, it provided the transition from nineteenth century elocution to the academic study of interpretation in the twentieth century.

Any discussion of interpretation or oral interpretation in American higher education must consider the role played by the National Communication Association (NCA). Founded in 1914 as the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking, the organization discouraged the membership of

elocutionists and platform entertainers “who were not educationally oriented,” as early member Frank Rarig remembers (Rarig & Greaves, 1954, p. 499; Edwards, 1999, pp. 63–78). It is safe to say that, without the advocacy of the NCA (under its various names), the study of interpretation probably would have lacked the academic respectability to situate itself on a widespread basis in colleges and universities. As the study of interpretation receded in the decades following World War II, the NCA’s Interpretation Division reinvented itself: in 1991, it became a Performance Studies Division, and resituated literary interpretation as one study among many in a rapidly expanding field. Through the history of the NCA, scholars can trace important connections between nineteenth century “elocution” and twenty-first century “performance,” as theorized and practiced by generations of educators.

It is significant, therefore, that the elusive mystery of describing embodied performance should present itself at the NCA’s first annual meeting in 1915. A paper delivered by Maud May Babcock, later published in the fledgling *Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking*, provoked a response by Rollo Anson Tallcott, which provoked a further response by Babcock. The “impersonation” versus “interpretation” debate of 1916—the “great debate,” as David A. Williams (1975, p. 43) humorously dubs it—identified issues that remained alive for teachers of interpretation through most of the twentieth century.

The “great debate” centered around issues of both definition and appropriateness. Babcock, echoing the expression teachers, defined interpretation

as the presentation of any form of literary material . . . without the aid of dress, furniture, stage settings, or literal characterizations in voice, action, or make-up. Such presentation must be content with suggesting the real thing to the imagination of the audience. (1916/1940c, p. 85)

Impersonation, by contrast, seeks “literal characterization” in “realistic surroundings.” Readers interpret, whereas actors impersonate: “The reader is always himself, while the actor is always some one else” (1916/1940c, pp. 85–86). Babcock’s examples support the view that suggestive interpretation appeals to “the cultured and the learned.” She seeks “prophets and reformers who will raise the standards of entire communities by honest efforts at interpreting literature, for the sake of the message,” and will not “exploit themselves” like “vaudeville” performers (p. 93). Performers who focus on the techniques of embodied practice, rather than the “message” of the literature itself, risk the charge of exploitation.

The pioneering Babcock established the Speech Department at the University of Utah. She staged dramatic productions, and was considered the “first lady” of “physical education” at Utah (Engar, n.d.). While it is tempting to read a kind of latter-day Victorianism surrounding the body, in the writings of Babcock (1916/1940a, 1930/1940b, 1916/1940c) and those who were in sympathy with her position, the situation is not quite so simple. Babcock deplored “impersonation” (under which we might group practices as disparate as the comic character monologue and the monodrama) as a breach of the aesthetic of what she saw as the “finer art” of interpretation. But she clearly was invested in the culture and disciplining of the body: she believed in the values of physical education, and participated in what her university claims was the first dramatic production done by an institution of higher learning. Hers was not a simple, stereotypically maidenly reticence regarding the indecency of bad behavior—though the body has never been an untroubled site of cultural meaning and anxiety, whatever the era.

Rather, her view of “interpretation” seems a complex nexus of social attitudes towards the body and the cultural position of popular entertainment and high art, in which the body becomes the vessel of meaning; the

“symptom,” in Foucault’s sense, upon which a nation turned its gaze for expression of its own understanding of what certain language meant. While some vestiges of the antitheatrical bias that pervaded middle-class culture in the United States are surely part of Babcock’s moral aesthetic, her views also reflect the growth of the Chautauqua circuit and its competitors: in professional platform entertainment, what began as a spiritually ennobling project devolved eventually into something more akin to the world of the circus, with its sawdust tricks and freak-show exhibitions. How legible was the line between the exhibition of the “Venus Hottentot,” the African woman displayed because of her (to Caucasian eyes) outsized buttocks, and the young woman or man on an elocutionary platform, nearly a century later, doing birdcalls and childish imitations? In a sense, what was at stake in both was a loosening of the discipline of the body—hence, of the mind and spirit, which for many European and American followers of Delsarte in the late nineteenth century made performance a holy act (see, for example, Shaver, 1954).

While there was a place for theatrical “impersonation,” then, in fully staged productions—particularly of the canonical, “secular scripture” as Northrop Frye (1978) terms it, the literary culture exemplified by Shakespeare—Babcock argued both for a return to the nobler texts of the lyrical poem (along with fine examples of the relatively new genre of the novel) and for an aesthetic that would appropriately discipline the body to meet its requirements. Babcock’s call for “interpretation” over “impersonation” was a call for a return to the moral interpretation of literature. While the body itself has the capacity for elevation, when in harmony with the spiritual and the moral, it can be debased into mere sensation and easy pleasures of the flesh. So it is, Babcock argued, with literature: one must learn to discriminate between elevated and debased texts. Contemplation of literary

classics, rather than training in impersonative techniques, produces the most valuable disciplining of the body.

It is important to resist a kind of historical “presentness” in which we place ourselves at too far a distance from what may feel like a bluestocking primness in Babcock’s philosophy. Less than three decades ago, as a student of interpretation, I witnessed how questions of selection of material became sources of debate, even the grounds for some graduate students in my program being failed on their “recital” requirement. In some cases, the reason for failure was either the student’s poor taste in selecting material, or the student’s inability to observe the subtle nuances of language in favor of too robust (usually veiled as “shallow”) an *actio*.

Rollo Tallcott (1916/1940), a faculty member and dean at Ithaca College during Babcock’s years at Utah, responded to Babcock’s initial paper with an attempt to distinguish more finely a spectrum of performance aesthetics. Tallcott would be best known for his book *The Art of Acting and Public Reading* (1922); the title of that text suggests a philosophy that, while keeping the two “arts” separate, nonetheless sees them as related, as part of the same general educational and aesthetic endeavor. In the “great debate” of 1916, he argued for four “degrees” of literary performance, from “interpretative reading” (which apparently would correspond to a straightforward reading, done with intelligence and feeling, in which the personality and the presence of the reader as such are never disguised), to “impersonative reading” (with its greater degree of “suggestive” characterization), “straight personation,” and, finally, “acting” (1916/1940, p. 94). The line between “straight personation” and “acting” might best be seen in the difference between performing a one-person monologue (Julie Harris as Emily Dickinson alone onstage in *The Belle of Amherst*) and acting in a multi-character play (Julie Harris as Frankie

Addams, interacting with other characters, in *The Member of the Wedding*).

Tallcott makes a sensible-sounding argument: that the kind of literature being performed should dictate which of his four approaches should be selected. Yet he cannot discard the moral imperative of such aesthetic debates, and concedes the following:

If personation were something indecent, or positively harmful to education, there would be an excuse for staunchly refusing to adopt it; but, on the contrary, it is being shown every day to be not only harmless but a very powerful means for stimulation to the appreciation of interpretation. Taking it from a standpoint of true lyceum entertainment, it is a sort of preliminary course to work of higher cultural value. I believe it is just as noble to teach people to entertain well and cleanly as it is to teach literary interpretation, although, of course, the latter should always be the final goal; for who shall say that the primary teacher is doing any less noble work than the high-school teacher or the college professor? (1916/1940, p. 100)

This passage is fascinating in part because it turns back and forth on itself, sometimes within a single sentence. While Tallcott argues for the value of “personative” performance as “clean” entertainment (note the hygienic language that we find not only in other parts of speech pedagogy of the time, but also in other avenues of public education), he finally concedes that it has the same status, in a sense, as using nursery rhymes to introduce infants and young children to the notion of verse and poetry itself. There is a developmental and evolutionary rhetoric at work here.

Part of the disagreement between Babcock and Tallcott, as Williams points out, has to do with a lack of agreement about the meaning of the very terms themselves. How much of a performer’s attempt to give voice and body to character “counted” as “impersonation”? How much “suggestion” was permitted for the performer still to remain in the domain of

“interpretation”? What Babcock and Tallcott share is a belief in the superiority of suggestiveness to literalness as an aesthetic of performance, a philosophy passed down by Curry and the “expression” teachers. One can trace this view back to the ancients. In the *Ars Poetica*, Horace (trans. 2001) maintains that the representation of certain actions onstage should be discouraged both because such representations are unbelievable when literalized and because to perform them violates codes of decorum: an audience can visualize the blinding of Oedipus more vividly and profitably in the mind’s eye than through any enactment of it onstage.

The American teachers who made “suggestion” one of the hallmarks of interpretation’s aesthetics related the concept not only to issues of decorum and probability but to the comparatively new psychological approach to speech and communication advanced by such scholars as Charles Henry Woolbert. It was Woolbert’s mission, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, to transform “public speaking” into “speech science,” in professional settings like the forerunner organization of the present-day NCA. His “theory of delivery” drew upon “current academic psychology” rather than the training routines of nineteenth century elocutionists; the theory viewed suggestion as more psychologically “real,” valuable, and satisfying to the interior life of the performer and audience than pantomime or impersonation (Cohen, 1994, pp. 49–53; Gray, 1954, pp. 436–440). As Williams (1975, pp. 52–53) notes in his essay on the “great debate,” the aesthetic of suggestion continued to dominate the work of such major postwar teachers as Charlotte Lee. As revised by coauthor Tim Gura, the tenth edition of the well-known Lee textbook *Oral Interpretation* (2001) carries suggestion into the twenty-first century as one of the bedrocks of its aesthetic.

Careful and sympathetic readers of the textbook literature of interpretation, as this grew

during the mid-twentieth century, might view the pedagogical interest in suggestion and “non-impersonative” performance as anticipating the growth of reader-centered aesthetic and critical theories that emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The call by Babcock and others for performers to remain fully and recognizably “themselves” is consonant with a more recent interest in featuring the dialogue between reader and text. Performance theorist Dwight Conquergood (1985) describes the possibility for such dialogues, for example, in his Bakhtinian approach to the literary experience. This interest also finds its place in the growth of hybrid forms of personal narrative performance. In memorable performances by John Anderson of Emerson College, a literary text becomes a kind of intertextual opportunity for the juxtaposition of personal experience and the expressive values that literary texts may serve in our lives. One performance by Anderson—a *bricolage* of sections of Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, an audiotape recording of a past family dinner, and his own narrated memories of his mother’s death—extends and complicates some of the concerns Babcock and Tallcott articulate in their debate. Notably it presents a “reader” who “is always himself” (unlike Babcock’s “actor” who “is always some one else”)—but in ways that exceed what Babcock seems to have imagined.

In attempting to lead performers away from elocution’s mechanical rules of voice and body training, the influential Babcock rejected even Tallcott’s modest attempt to categorize and relate performance modes. The mystery of suggestive performance began and ended with contemplation of the literary text. Ironically, as the twentieth century progressed, the practical difficulty of cultivating a suggestive delivery led to a return of mechanical rules and regulations that often seem quite removed from either a clearly articulated rationale for their necessity or superiority over other rules, or the specific requirements of the text being performed. At

national and regional conferences of communication educators, many of whom judge competitions at the secondary school and college levels, a lively debate continues from year to year about judging standards (although this kind of debate tends to take place in hallways and over dinner tables rather than at formal sessions). In competitive performance, a set of rules for judging “oral interpretation” and “readers theatre” still obtains. A physical script (sedimented into small black notebooks which are *de rigueur*) must be present; offstage focus (even in such events as the duet performance of dramatic literature) must be maintained; movement must be limited; and contestants receive reminders that a given event falls in an “interpretation” category and not an “acting” one. As recently as the 1990s, when I was a judge for such contests at both the secondary and college levels, such criteria for “suggestiveness” were stated on ballots. Rule violations constituted grounds for lowered evaluations or even disqualification.

Tallcott’s approach to performance has the potential to be more open-ended and less rule-obsessed. A knowledgeable acting teacher should understand the need for different performance aesthetics for a chorus speech from a Greek tragedy and a character monologue from a play by Albee or Mamet. Such a teacher should be able to draw such distinctions among different kinds of literature, or at least between different specific texts: Eliot’s dramatic lyrics “act” differently from Browning’s “dramatic monologues,” for example. With the growth of presentational aesthetics in professional theatre, the need for the actor to understand the demands of narrative and lyric texts becomes an imperative for flexibility.

Yet Babcock’s championing of the suggestive delivery of quality literature, to appeal to the tastes of “the cultured and the learned,” appears to have had a more lasting influence on the pedagogy of interpretation during the twentieth century (see, for example, Johnson, 1940). It survives in the “art” of interpretation

described by Wallace Bacon, whose influential textbook went through three editions between 1966 and 1979. Bacon takes the important step of largely eliminating discussions of physical and vocal technique: the student’s preparation for performance consists chiefly of “communion” with a literary text. “Surely communication is important,” Bacon writes, but communication need not take place between a performer and an audience:

If it is true that the study of literature itself is valuable, and that literature gives forth its fullest secrets when it is articulately sounded, then the study of interpretation is valuable for the student because the literature which he sounds gives forth its secrets to *him*, whether or not others are listening. (1966, pp. 5–6)

For Bacon, interpretation is an art of the body, but the *performer’s* body requires no discussion. Bacon achieves a canny shifting of the “locus” and identity of the body at the center of the study: he takes as his concern the *poem’s* body, which the performer’s body must “match.” In later editions of the textbook, the concept of “matching” becomes the primary guide in the disciplining of the performer’s body:

It is perhaps not too much to suggest that there is a kind of love relationship between reader and poem, each reaching out to the other. The interpreter must not deny to the body of the poem its right to exist. (1972, p. 34)

Performance, like growth in nature, “is not a matter of information; it is in some final way a mystery to which we pay homage” (1972, p. 35). Like any mystery, there are things about performance that cannot be articulated in language.

It is misleading to speak only of Bacon’s singular achievement, for other educators in the postwar era continued to teach and practice oral interpretation in more

technique-oriented ways that favored public recital over literary study. (My example of secondary school contests suggests one place where the “platform art” has continued to thrive since the age of oratorical culture and the elocution studio.) But Bacon came to the teaching of interpretation at a time when training in technique was in decline. As Lynn Miller Rein (1981) has documented in her history of the Northwestern University School of Speech, the ebbing of support for technical training seems to have provoked the resignation of C. C. Cunningham as department chair of interpretation. During the nearly two-decade Cunningham era at Northwestern, two successive deans of Speech made deep cuts in the resources for Interpretation. Ralph Dennis had fired the “individual instruction” staff during the Great Depression; his successor James McBurney provoked Cunningham’s protests by failing, among other things, to provide adequate studio space for student practice. In the age of radio and sound film, McBurney clearly saw the “platform art” of oral interpretation, which Cunningham practiced impressively, as a vanishing academic discipline in the postwar years; it had vanished already, since the demise of Chautauqua circuits, as a popular entertainment form. McBurney’s choice for Cunningham’s replacement was Bacon, a PhD in English from the University of Michigan with no “interpretation” experience whatsoever. It was part of Bacon’s charge, as the new chair of Interpretation, to improve the academic respectability of a program that had clung too firmly to its roots in the “elocution and oratory” curriculum of the nineteenth century. Among Bacon’s achievements were the exponential growth of Interpretation’s PhD program and, within national and regional associations of speech educators, the increased visibility of Northwestern’s interpretation department as a center for literary study. In the decades preceding his retirement in 1979, Bacon became the pre-eminent figure in interpretation scholarship

within the NCA (see Edwards, 1999, pp. 16–33, 85–93; Rein, 1981, pp. 53, 77–82, 154–155).

But as Bacon’s career came to an end, the demise of interpretation as an academic study seemed not very far away. An important essay in the prestigious NCA journal *Communication Monographs* announced the need to reexamine the interpretation course, by challenging what might be considered a “text” available for, and legitimate for, study through performance. In “A New Look at Performance,” Elizabeth C. Fine and Jean Haskell Speer (1977) threw down the gauntlet by stating: “For the greater part of the academic history of oral interpretation, performance has been acknowledged as one of the most effective ways to understand literature and treated as a means to that end, but seldom has it been examined in its own right” (p. 389). Their article, drawing on the work of such current folklorists and ethnographers as Richard Bauman, Roger Abrahams, and Dell Hymes, called for performers, teachers, and scholars to expand both their methodologies (to include the burgeoning work being done by social scientists in such fields as anthropology, sociology, and psychology) and the objects of their study (beyond those traditionally considered “literature”). Fine and Speer’s article is best seen perhaps as an articulation of a shift of possibilities rather than as a prescription for (or proscription of) the performance of literature—an opening up of possibilities rather than yet another narrowing of the locus of study.

In the wake of the Fine and Speer essay, a growing number of interpretation teachers affiliated with the NCA saw the need to decenter literary study within the discipline. Ronald Pelias (1985) argued that “interpretation thought and performance criticism” can be divided into four schools, which intersect with each other and are often coexistent in the classroom. Performance is (1) performing art; (2) communicative act; (3) self-discovery; and (4) literary study. While acknowledging the

dominance of literary study throughout the twentieth century, Pelias resituated it in a wider field of concerns. So did Jill Taft-Kaufman (1985) in her review of twentieth century theory and practice by scholars and teachers associated with the NCA's Interpretation Division: a wideranging interest in performance research had replaced the mid-century dominance of text-centered literary studies. As noted above, a Performance Studies Division emerged from the NCA's Interpretation Division a mere six years later.

The postwar era in American speech education, in short, witnessed a series of resituatings of the body within different conceptions of "text" and the different disciplines of embodiment they suggested. Contrasting disciplines were required by the literary study advocated by Bacon, and by the questioning of the very assumptions of such study called for by Fine and Speer—the kind of questioning that cleared the way for the paradigm shift from the study of textual interpretation to the study of performance in its own right.

At the beginning of the essay, I invoked autism as a powerful metaphor for the body in performance, and related this term to pedagogical approaches: the methods used to educate, train, or discipline that body. It seems to me that some important parts of the history of interpretation pedagogy have been characterized by teachers who, for a variety of reasons, were uncommunicative about their work to anyone but their own colleagues and students. Taft-Kaufman perceptively assessed the "dearth of published research" as a pragmatic concern for professional growth, and a contributing factor to "disciplinary isolation" (1985, pp. 179–181); at the heart of her concern, nearly twenty years ago, was a scholarly discipline of teacher-practitioners who borrowed their theory from other disciplines (notably literary studies) and "published" their applications of that theory in the constantly vanishing records of classroom performances and productions on campus stages.

Conquergood (1986) sounded a similar warning to members of the NCA's Interpretation Division:

We cannot claim proprietary rights to "performance" simply because we have husbanded it as a well-kept secret for so long. Nor can we expect other disciplines to take seriously our claims about performance if we are not willing to have them tested in the public arena of disciplinary exchange. (p. 30)

Autism becomes a valuable metaphor for a phenomenon that my former teacher Lilla Heston never considered: the collective inability of "interpreters" to explain themselves to those not afflicted with their condition. The mystification and undertheorizing of performance by an Ion anticipates the unwillingness of interpretation teachers in the twentieth century to investigate and explain how the performing body *performs*. From Babcock's promotion of suggestive interpretation, before the first meeting of the future NCA, to Bacon's advocacy of audience-less "communion" with the poem, the pedagogy of interpretation has emphasized the mystery of its processes rather than the possibility of their explication.

I certainly do not wish to suggest that the history I have recounted is merely a pathological or self-defeating one. In a sense, this is the reason I invoke Mark Haddon's novel, with its autistic narrator/hero, in one of the preludes to this essay. The novel teaches us to live inside the autistic's experience—to value it for what it offers, and to understand how what it does *not* offer alters significantly what its narrator can and cannot know and tell us (and himself). The autistic's way of knowing the world can offer him or her strengths that other people do not possess, and can lead to certain kinds of discoveries and ways of knowing that add immeasurably to the world. Consider, for example, Temple Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures* (1996). Here the autistic professor of animal sciences eloquently articulates what it means to live inside her body and mind. Her

condition has enabled her to help make the way she works with farm animals such as cattle more “humane,” more centered on the experiences of animals, than it would have been without her autism; her work has guided nonautistic members of her profession. Like Ion’s “autism,” the metaphorical autism Babcock or Bacon—in needing to keep interpretation something somehow private, not contaminated by appeals to the masses—is a necessary and valuable, if troublesome, part of our history as teachers and students. Or so it seems, after the study of “interpretation” has vanished into the study of “performance.”

#### THE ART OF LOSING—OR NOT?

As we continue to become more varied as teachers, students, and performers, there may be, for many, an inevitable sense of loss. Yet there is no reason to lose a sense of a shared culture and history. New performers and performances will continue to take on cultural and even canonical status. They may expand our sense of text to include such performances that cross borders, such as John Anderson’s *As I Lay Dying* collage, which will remain etched in my memory and in my *body* as long as I breathe. They may be the folkloric storytelling performances of John Gentile and Penninah Schramm. They may be the performative writings performed by Amy Burt and Scott Dillard, to name just two individuals whose autobiographical work seems to me indistinguishable from any category of literature I know.

I struggle to emerge from my own literary-centered autism. A few years ago my department hired a new faculty member, whose teaching assignment would center around storytelling and other courses in performance studies, including the beginning course in the analysis and performance of literature. In conversation, I said to my colleague, “Well, as Elizabeth Bishop says, ‘The art of losing isn’t hard to master,’” to which my young colleague replied “Elizabeth Bishop? Where does

she teach?” After a moment of stunned silence (how could someone who teaches performance not know who Elizabeth Bishop is?), and after I explained, with a somewhat edgy tone to my voice, that she happened to be one of the five greatest postwar poets, she replied, with no defensiveness, “Well, I don’t really know literature that well. My majors were communication and history.”

And, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I needed to rethink my own response. My colleague took her undergraduate degree at a small liberal arts college where there were no courses in the performance of literature, her masters in a general communication program, and her doctorate from a highly regarded program where performance studies is much more situated in ethnography, communication theory, and folkloric studies. There is absolutely no reason why I should have had the right to expect that she would know Bishop and this particular poem (1978)—though my own generation of students probably could have recited much of the poem by heart.

My colleague, however, is steeped in ethnographic theory and method and has a far more sophisticated understanding of what is at stake in such performance traditions than I have. Her work on the life stories of Holocaust survivors is every bit as detailed, specific, and textually sophisticated and insightful as my own might be on Bishop’s texts. I also know, on the basis of three years of teaching with this colleague, that her study of the texts produced by people in interviews and everyday conversations has taught her what she needs to know in order to lead her students into a world of performing poetry, short stories, diaries, letters, plays, and other kinds of texts: a careful way of listening to and responding to the voices and bodies of others (not unlike the positive qualities associated with some forms of autism, as can be seen in the autobiographical writings of Prince-Hughes and Grandin). When I have her students in my advanced classes in the performance of literature, I have

confidence that they know how to approach a text in performance. It no longer seems so important whether she brings them to that knowledge through Bishop's compressed lyrics, or through a dense description of one of her participants speaking of liberation from Auschwitz. The words of a poem, the words of an interview: they speak to each other, not in separate, isolated, "autistic" realms, but in a shared knowledge of loss. There is art in both, there is loss—but there is no loss of art.

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## On the Bias

### *From Performance of Literature to Performance Composition\**

RUTH LAURION BOWMAN AND MICHAEL S. BOWMAN

*Every pattern piece bears markings that together constitute a “sign language,” indispensable to . . . every stage [of the process]. . . Note all symbols carefully. . . Some pertain to alteration.*

—Reader’s Digest Complete Guide to Sewing (1976, p. 57)

#### PREFACE: SEAM-STRESSES

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[Blinds, a platform with stairs, and a bathtub. A seamstress is sewing as the audience enters. Lights fade to black. Lights rise on the seamstress and then the full stage as seven women enter from upstage with pieces of fabric. One woman, Girl Friday, has paper. The women position themselves across the stage, Girl Friday in the tub. In various rhythms, the women rip, tear, rend the fabric . . . and the paper. The women gather the torn remnants, place them in the tub and exit. Lights isolate the Seamstress and Girl Friday who, in the tub,

tosses her paper bits into the air . . . like snow. A light rises on the “Veiled Lady,” upstage behind blinds. X-fade of lights from Girl Friday and the Seamstress to Coverdale and Mrs. Moodie as they enter into isolated spots.

Possible inclusion: As the last few women place their remnants in the tub and exit and Girl Friday begins to make snow, a short excerpt from *Rear Window* is projected on a pair of half-opened blinds. In the excerpt, Lisa Fremont stares out of Jeffries’ rear window and then says to him, “Tell me everything you saw. And what you think it means.”] (R. Bowman, 2003, p. 1)

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On June 29, 1854, the *Boston New Era* published an account concerning a woman who had “imparted energy to a machine” (Brandon, 1983, p. 8). “Through the instrumentality of J. M. Spear,” a Universalist clergyman, philanthropist and, in all likelihood, the author of the reported incident,

a request came . . . that on a certain day [Mrs. \_\_\_] would visit the tower at High Rock . . . . When there . . . she began to experience the peculiar and agonizing sensations of parturition, differing somewhat from the ordinary experience, in as much as the throes were *internal*, and of the *spirit* rather than of the physical nature, but nevertheless quite as uncontrollable, and not less severe than those pertaining to the latter. This extraordinary physical phenomenon continued for about the space of two hours . . . the most interior and refined elements of her spiritual being were imparted to, and absorbed by, the appropriate portions of the mechanism [which, by means of “superior direction” had appeared on High Rock]. . . .

The result of this phenomenon was, that indications of life or pulsations became apparent in the mechanism; first to her own keenly sensitive touch, and soon after to the eyes of all beholders. These pulsations continued for some weeks, precisely analogous to that of nursing (for which preparation had previously been made in her own organization) until at times a very marked and surprising motion resulted. . . .

Neither Mrs. \_\_\_ nor myself can profess to have, as yet, any definite conception as to what this “new born child,” the so-called “Electrical Motor” is to be. . . . But the incalculable benefits which have already accrued to us in the unfoldings of the interior principles of physical and human science have overwhelmingly compensated us for all that it has cost us, whether in means or reputation. (quoted in Brandon, 1983, pp. 9–10; emphasis in original)

When ambling through the rooms of my mind-on-mesmerism, I always find this account firmly ensconced on the sofa in the living room, the weight of a large lap cat, smiling smugly,

obliquely, so (confound it) at ease in its ability to rise from the sofa and take its leave of me. I’m not ready for that to happen. I am in love. I am in love with my electric light bulb Eureka moment on mesmerism. It turns me on.

It turns me on, out the door, and into the street where the vendors of mesmerism display their varied goods. As I pick through the bits and pieces, the nubby wools and slick satins, I realize that I am not in love with mesmerism itself; I am in love with its remnants. I am in love with what people have made out of the always already leftovers of mesmerism and what I can make with them now. I want to make something, too. Actually, I want to make something that becomes a remnant. Disposable. Reusable—perhaps. For me, a memory that hangs out with my Eureka moment on the sofa at home.

I collect to make a remnant. It is a model, a pose, a figure—of a woman who gave birth to an electric babe.

## TWO CLASSROOMS

**warp** *n*: 1 **a** (1): a series of yarns extended lengthwise in a loom and crossed by the woof  
**b**: FOUNDATION, BASE <the – of the economic structure is agriculture . . . 3 **a**: a twist or curve that has developed in something orig. flat or straight . . . **b**: a mental twist or aberration. (*Webster’s*, 1975, p. 1320)

Let us imagine two performance classrooms. Although they may be located in the same building, they are separated by a great distance. In the first classroom, by means of constant vigilance, conducted with great effort, a distinction between text and performance is maintained. In this classroom, if a student appears, one who specializes in that particular kind of performance that relies too heavily on improvisation, personality, or technique, he will be led to the classroom door and sent down the hall or across campus to some other place. In this classroom, the law holds that only the text may be performed. The teacher’s

business is to judge, first of all, whether the text was indeed performed but, more importantly, whether certain performances have crossed an invisible line and, by leaving out too much or by putting too much in, have left the protected zone of the text for the contraband zone beyond the text. Attempting to eliminate the need for this continual ad hoc adjudication, the teacher tries to draft rules from examples that would clearly distinguish, in principle, between the allowed and the forbidden, a performance of the text and a performance that goes beyond the text. When drafted, these rules allow teachers and students to detect improper performances, ones characterized by too much improvisation or imagination or invention. The teacher calls these rules “Interpretation.”

**weft** *n*: 1 **a**: WOOF **b**: yarn used for the woof . . . 1 **woof** *n*: 1 **a**: a filling thread or yarn in weaving . . . 2 **woof** *n*: 1: a low gruff sound typically produced by a dog . . . 3 **woof** *vi*: to make the sound of a woof. (*Webster’s*, 1975, pp. 1328, 1350)

In the second classroom, the opposition between text and performance has been abandoned. Here, the students and teacher attend only to the consequences resulting from what happens onstage. The air seems less clear in here, almost impossibly dense, as if the sounds and images were accumulating somehow, condensing, no longer cleansed by the freshening breeze of the text. It is difficult to get one’s bearings in here, to locate any fixed, solid point by which to navigate. Yet, an odd liveliness has appeared in the classroom, a charge of sensations curiously different from those who were in the first classroom.

Because the warp has very little give or stretch, most garments are cut to fall vertically on the warp or lengthwise grain. In turn, the more giving weft or crosswise grain of the fabric runs horizontally across the garment, around the bulk of the body.

These two classrooms do not really exist, although they have names. The first one has

most recently been called “Oral Interpretation” or “Performance of Literature.” Wallace Bacon, who was chair for many years of the Department of Interpretation at Northwestern University, wrote about the difficulty of life in the first classroom. He argued that the art of interpretation consisted in sailing between the “dangerous shores” of text and performance without steering too closely to either. But, at the end of the day, those of us who were trained in Interpretation knew from which shore the interpreter’s craft had departed and to which shore it was to return. Oral interpretation was about the art of reading literature aloud—a special kind of literary appreciation, to be sure, but literary appreciation nonetheless. Its very identity as a practice hinged on the conviction that “[1]iterary appreciation for the silent reader and literary appreciation for the oral performer are in some respects vitally distinct” (Bacon, 1960/1975, p. 4).

Variations in the weave of fabrics arise from how the warp and weft are patterned to intersect. For instance, a common plain weave typically recites, “No give Woof No give Woof No give Woof No give Woof,” while a jaunty twill riffs, “Woof Woof No give No give Woof Woof No give No give Woof No give No give Woof Woof.”

Proof of that conviction came when a reader was able to demonstrate his or her understanding of the text in the performance itself. Reading aloud helps us participate in the life of the text—not just the lexical meanings of the words, but also its tensions, motives, ambiguities, ironies, and other complexities—in a way that silent reading often does not. Such participation enhances our knowledge of the text and what it is attempting to do or say. With such knowledge, we can begin to participate even more fully in the life of the text through ever more “lively” performances. Over time, this process of discovery and refinement should progress to a point where the inner life of the text and the inner life of the reader begin to coalesce or “match.” And

when that point comes, the liveliness of the reader's performance should be congruent with that of the text. If the performance displays too little life, the reader has misunderstood the lesson performance was meant to teach him or her; if the performance displays too much life, has become too showy or spectacular, then he or she has answered the siren's call of another sort of error, a kind of egotism, forgetting that the text is the interpreter's whole excuse for being (Bacon, 1960/1975, p. 5; Bacon, 1979, pp. 5–10, 35–40, 70–74).

**1 bias *n*:** a line diagonal to the grain of a fabric . . . **2 a:** an inclination of temperament or outlook . . . : PREJUDICE <a—in favor of jolly fat men> **b:** BENT TENDENCY . . . **3 a:** a peculiarity in the shape of a bowl that causes it to swerve when rolled on the green . . . **syn** see PREDILECTION—on the bias: ASKEW, OBLIQUELY

**2 bias *adj*:** DIAGONAL, SLANTING—used chiefly of fabrics and their cut . . .

**4 bias *vt*:** **1:** to give a settled and often prejudiced outlook . . . **2:** to apply a slight negative or positive voltage. (*Webster's*, 1975, p. 106)

We were trained primarily in classrooms resembling the first one, and we still venture into them on occasion. But we now spend most of our time trying to imagine the second. The second classroom seems newer to us than the first one, perhaps because the names we give it, “Performance Art” or “Performance Composition,” are relatively new. It is tempting to say that the second classroom is evolving from the first in a process akin to natural selection or adaptation, but the more time we spend there, the less convinced we are of the accuracy of that kind of narrative. So let us tell another story.

When the warp and weft meet at a crooked intersection, they are off their grain and on the grain of the bias. They have become jolly fat men. They have become jolly fat men who swerve obliquely when rolled on a green. Perhaps this is why at least two people should

work together to realign crooked intersections. On the other hand, rolling with the distortion may well be worth the experience.

### WHAT WAS ORAL INTERPRETATION?

[Audience talk erupts forth. Seamstress continues to plant weeds upstage left.]

**AUD A:** By common consent, the whole nation has gone mad on the gaseous fumes of mesmerism!

**AUD B:** And why not! For once there is a serious, scientific explanation of nature, her forces, and in turn those that govern society and politics.

**AUD C:** It also proves the existence of a soul in mankind!

**AUD A:** How convenient for you . . . that the fundamental truth, the power behind all things, is an invisible fluid that no one can see!

**AUD C:** But you assume that sight is the arbiter of truth.

**AUD A:** No, I'm saying the almighty buck is . . . and that's the *only* thing mesmerism proves. Why anyone who has a penny for a “do-it-yourself” guide to mesmerism has opened a shop, enlisted their daughters as mediums and paraded the product in connection with ads for seegars, pills, hair oil, and cough candies.

**AUD C:** But your very argument is grounded in material matters whereas mesmerism not only addresses physical maladies but moral and spiritual ones too.

- AUD A:** Entire families, little magnetized troupes, strutting their stuff on the stage alongside striped pigs and laughing gas.
- AUD D:** It's the work of the devil!
- AUD C:** No, it's the one true religion: god's universal sunshine pouring its beams into the dungeon we've *made* of religion.
- AUD A:** What?!
- AUD B:** In scientific terms, mesmerism accounts for all the unexplained events that the miracle mongers of virtually every religion have used to shackle mankind to them.
- AUD C:** Yes, that's it! With mesmerism, anyone can contact god and enter heaven on their own accord without some select priesthood standing in the way. Mesmerism Democratizes Religion!
- AUD A:** Hogwash! It simply replaces one intermediary for another; the magnetizer for the priest.
- AUD B:** Initially, perhaps, but once we learn more each of us will be able to draw on the universal fluid as we will.
- AUD C:** A will derived from the will of God!
- AUD A:** . . . which will lead to the same old chaos. Your faith in some universal moral "Will" we each use as we "Will" is ludicrous. You've only to look around to see the perversions: Here we are having paid our buck to watch one man seduce another! There's universal morality for you!
- AUD D:** Black magic is what it is: Satan's way of claiming innocent souls!
- AUD B:** But it's been proven that subjects won't perform acts contrary to their normal behavior.
- AUD A:** And we all know what's "normal," right? We've all read "Confessions of a Magnetizer," correct? First hand testimony that mesmerism exploits our sexual drives.
- AUD D:** It's rape and debauchery is what it is! A villainous art where profligate men of depraved appetites take a disgusting delight in seducing half-witted girls whose parents have prostituted them to this wicked trade.
- AUD B:** Rehash! Rehash of the sensationalist press! You've bought their quackery hook, line and sinker!
- AUD D:** No, I've seen it. Zombies stretched beamlike between chairs! Fluid darting from the eye of the operator to penetrate the brain of the bewitched! A cloudy haze streaming from the mesmerist's fingers! Insects electrified in magnetized water! It's witchcraft, plain and simple.
- AUD B:** You've been brainwashed by the press!
- AUD A:** Exactly! And just as she's been brainwashed by the press, so too but to a far greater extent mesmerism can be used to induce the public body to mass hysteria, such as led to the witch-burnings in the old countries and in our own.
- AUD B:** But it also can be used to perfect mankind. Would you have us revert back to the brute

force of muscle? Cast aside the discoveries of steam, and electricity, and now mankind's own telegraphic force of nature? Why it may allow us to perform surgeries without an anesthetic, address the vagaries of the nervous system, improve the concentration of industrial workers . . .

**AUD C:** Convert pagans to Christianity!

**AUD B:** In sum, it reveals the power of the mind over matter and thereby all discord can be cured and eliminated.

**AUD A:** Whose mind!? Whose matter!? Your simple equation ignores the very real horrors of urbanization, industrialization, slavery . . .

**AUD B:** Oh god, an abolitionist too!

**AUD A:** It's the hocus-pocus of utopian cant in the hocus-pocus of the side-show, which proves nothing at all!

**GIRL FRIDAY:** [To Coverdale.] . . . more or less than the extraordinary power of the imagination: a shift from common sense, as we know it anyway, to a willingness to imagine a situation and play within it.

**COVERDALE:** Which may well reveal the appalling emptiness

**GIRL FRIDAY:** or possibilities

**COVERDALE:** of the self.

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(R. Bowman, 2003, pp. 68–71; see Brandon, 1983, p. 39; Coale, 1998, p. 4; Collyer, 1838, pp. 19, 25; Du Potet de Sennevoy, 1838, p. 341; Ewer, 1855; Fuller, 1982, pp. 29, 32; Hawthorne, 1852/1986, p. 198; Kaplan, 1975, p. 35; Marks, 1947, pp. 5, 53, 203–205; Poe, 1837/1928, pp. 46–47)

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In the United States, the heyday of mesmerism ran from around 1835 through the

1840s, after which it ceded popular strength and its more sensational phenomena, such as table-turning and clairvoyance, to its big sister, spiritualism. Touted as a universal cure, mesmerism captivated the public because it cut across the predominant intellectual currents of the day, binding enlightened rationalism (soon to become pragmatism), transcendental romanticism, and burgeoning capitalism in the common cause and Victorian vision of progress. Moreover, its physiological, psychological, spiritual, social, and theatrical facets “could be embraced selectively. One could pick and choose what one wanted and needed” (Kaplan, 1975, p. 7). What John Priestley said of electricity could also be said of mesmerism: “As the agent is invisible, every philosopher is at liberty to make it whatever he pleases” (quoted in Darnton, 1968, p. 16).

We were fortunate enough to begin our careers at a moment when the discipline we trained for disappeared. We entered a graduate degree program in oral interpretation at Northwestern University in the early 1980s, and we spent the next few years studying the histories, theories, and practices of oral interpretation, with the aim of entering a profession where we could teach others how to read and perform literature. But by the time we finished graduate school, the degrees they gave us were in something else: performance studies. There are only a handful of us who hold master's degrees in interpretation and PhDs in performance studies. The disciplinary tensions and turmoil of the 1980s may not be written on our bodies, exactly, but they are always written there at the top of our CVs.

In all electrical phenomena we observe currents coming and going. (Mesmer, 1785/1958, p. 29)

We are many in the city  
Who the weary needles ply;  
None to aid and few to pity  
Tho' we sicken down and die;  
But 'tis work, work away

By night and by day  
 Oh, 'tis work, work away  
 We've no time to pray.

(Judson, 1849, p. 26)

The irony of our graduate education was in the way it prepared us to teach something that was about to disappear. On one level, training in oral interpretation was an intensive craft—a method, a *technē*, an art to some—designed to enhance one's understanding of and appreciation for texts, literary texts most especially. When anyone asked, "What is oral interpretation?" we recited the mantra of the day: The study of literature through performance, and the study of performance through literature. The first part of that formula made sense to us, because that is what we did nearly every day in our classes. No one really understood the second part of the statement, but none of us dared admit that, and so it always passed without elaboration or comment. But on another level—and this is the dark and dirty secret of interpretation, the thing that most outsiders never really appreciated—interpretation taught us to think irreverently about our subject matter, both literature and performance. Our professors in the English and theatre departments sensed this, judging by their schizophrenic reactions to us when we ventured into their classes—by turns horrified or bemused at how we read literature or how we thought about and practiced performance.

One reinforces the action of Magnetism by multiplying the currents upon the patient. . . . [T]o touch a patient with force, gather together as many people as possible in his apartment. Establish a chain of people which leads from the patient and ends at the magnetizer. One person leaning against the magnetizer, or with his hand upon his shoulder, increases his action. There is an infinity of additional ways I might relate, such as using sound, music, light, mirrors, etc. . . . In order to magnetize a tree . . . a bottle . . . a flower. . . . (Mesmer, 1785/1958, pp. 63, 66–68)

For the Vienna-trained physician, Franz Anton Mesmer, the principal benefit of mesmerism or, as he termed it, "animal magnetism" was physiological, although his discourse regarding it swerves obliquely toward the metaphysical. In his doctoral thesis of 1766, Mesmer drew on the scientific, philosophical and folk archives of the past to articulate the presence of an "extremely subtle 'universal fluid'" that surrounds and permeates all things. Influenced by the planets, this universal fluid, a fluidium, ebbs and flows in the human body as it does in tidal waters in a two-part magnetic manner. When the two flows are in magnetic disharmony, maladies result and, Mesmer theorized, if you "control the tidal waves entering the physiology from outside the body . . . you control the illnesses" (quoted in Buranelli, 1975, p. 114). To balance errant flows, Mesmer's treatments progressed from his fixing magnetic plates or "tractors" to the patient, to his administering repetitive downward "passes" of his hands a few inches away from the victim's body, to, in France, the mode of operation for which he became most famous, or infamous: the communal *baquet*.

Mesmer moved to Paris from Vienna in 1778. There, he applied to the Academy of Sciences and the Royal Society of Medicine for funding, but both institutions snubbed his efforts, leveling charges of "quackery" and immorality at Mesmer (*Report*, 1833, p. 77). However, aided by the popular press, Mesmer gained support among radical intellectuals, amateur scientist-philosophers, and the commercial upper class. One in particular, Nicolas Bergasse, a lawyer from a wealthy bourgeois family in Lyons, met Mesmer's financial needs by establishing the Société de l'Harmonie Universelle with an initiation fee of 100 louis-d'or. The society was a smashing success not only among the aristocrats and upper-class intellectuals who could afford the fee but also among the populace who learned of Mesmer's treatments through the letters, pamphlets, pictures, and "counterfeit tubs that were hawked on the streets" (Darnton, 1968, p. 52). While

Mesmer contrived to keep the key points of his theory a secret, the treatments, being communal and often administered before “the presence of a crowd of witnesses” (*Report*, 1833, p. 115), became a spectator sport (Miller, 1995, pp. 5–6).

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**GIRL FRIDAY** (as tour guide): Bonjour and good day. As you are having paid your fee, I welcome you to “l’Harmonie,” first established in 1778. We all knowing our history of la France and les Etats-Unis, oui? Bon. My name is Monique and if you are having a question, please be telling me.

First, we are entering the lovely drawing room of Franz Anton Mesmer’s spacious home in Paris. As you see, the patients are sitting around a *baquet* or, how do you say . . . a . . . a vessel? A wooden vessel . . . which it is filled with water that has been mesmerizing with iron bits or shavings. The iron rods, or often we are using a rope, issue from the vessel and the patients, they apply the rod to the afflicted parts of their body. Many times they are holding hands and pressing their knee, their knees, together to make a mesmeric chain . . . like a . . . uh . . . circuit . . . a circuit magnetique. Oui? You understand? From the ante-chamber, soft musique is hearing, made by a pianoforte and, sometimes, we are having we . . . have a glass harmonica or an opera singer. The musique sending reinforcing waves of the fluid universal into the patient’s body. We have many assistants who are young and strong so they can be pouring the magnetic water over the patients and applying also various techniques therapeutic.

Since la tête always is receiving universal fluid from the stars and the feet, they always receiving fluid from la terre, the assistants (it makes good sense) they concentrate on the midi, on the . . . ah . . . the middle, the equator of the body. They gently rub the patients’ backs, or sides or, oui . . . upon the breasts. This makes the patients having convulsions or crises or, what do you call it? It is like a play, like in a play, a climax, I think it is called.

Sometimes, though, the patients, they just falling asleep. For violent convulsives, there are chambers with lovely pads or mattresses on the wall. Sometimes, Monsieur Mesmer he comes too, in a long robe of lilac silk embroidered with gold flowers and wearing a white magnetic wand or . . . rod that he is using to trace artistic figures on the body to make it calming.

In addition to what I showing you today, outdoor treatments are available, too. Here, Monsieur Mesmer usually magnetizing trees and attaching patients to the tree with a rope. We also providing, in the back room, tubs for the poor and, for a small fee, portable tubs for mesmeric baths at home in your privacy. I hope you enjoying the tour. Merci and thank you. And having . . . have you any questions? (R. Bowman, 2003, pp. 3–4; see Binet & Féré, 1901, p. 11; Darnton, 1968, pp. 6–8; Mackay, 1869, p. 279; Wagstaff, 1981, pp. 2–3)

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It was an odd double-game we learned to play. On the one hand, oral interpretation did teach us to read well, and because most of what we read was literature from the western canon, we developed a healthy knowledge of and respect for it. On the other hand, we all knew that part of our delight in *performing* literature lay in what we could make the literature do that it could or would not do on its own. There is always something of a *tour de force* element at work in performance, after all, and the plain and simple truth of the matter is that for many of us performing literature was an irreverent, aggressively playful, and often erotic act, not the hand-holding tryst in the parlor between platonic lovers that most scholarship in our field made it out to be. Something unusual always happened when we added the voice and body to the text, adapting or translating materials from one medium to another, and though various disciplinary measures occasionally were used to try to make us behave, things regularly went awry.

Whether using plates, passes, or portable tubs, Mesmer's aim was to effect a convulsive or crisis state in the subject that would shock the magnetic fluid back into a harmonious pattern, to put him or her back on-grain, so to speak. Over the next sixty years or so, experiments by Mesmer's devotees and other physicians (largely in France, England, and Germany) yielded alternative theories and treatments. In 1784, the lucid state of sleep or "artificial somnambulism" was chanced upon by the Marquis de Puysegur. This hypnotic practice became known as "mesmerism," and thereafter practitioners advanced it as a more effective treatment than the crisis state Mesmer himself sought to induce. Magnetized objects were virtually discarded, replaced by the understanding that the somnambulistic state could be incited by the superior magnetic force or "will" of the skilled physician via his administering repetitive passes, commands, or a concentrated stare. As Poe speculated in 1837, mesmerists "possess an unusual abundance of the magnetic fluid; or else, owing to their peculiar constitutional temperament they distribute it more readily than others; or, which is perhaps more probable, they have the faculty of CONFINING THEIR WILL TO THE OBJECT OF THEIR ATTENTION WITHOUT DISTRACTION, and at the same time making it act with great power" (1837/1928, pp. 50–51; emphasis in original). Further experimentation in the medical community and elsewhere yielded the more spectacular or, as some might have it, "hocus-pocus" phenomena associated with mesmerism (Marks, 1947, p. 5), such as table-turning, catalepsy, unrestrained or "improper" behavior, clairvoyance, self- and other diagnosis, and amnesia.

Others who have told pieces of this story—what Northwestern's interpretation department was like "back in the day" (e.g., Edwards, 1999; Hamera, 1998; Henderson, 1998)—have let the cat out of the bag already: how we learned about double-voiced

discourse and the carnivalesque pleasures of "awryness" not so much from Bakhtin—although he helped us articulate it—but from watching and listening to the professoriate in that department at work. The Department of Interpretation did not teach us to do what we do now. We learned to do other things there that we no longer do very often. Yet, the experience of moving through that difficult, eccentric, "interdisciplinary" program—the manner in which we did things there—has played an enduring role in whatever it is that we have become. As Hamera (1998) suggested, the performance studies of today is heir to the conversations and improvisations we learned in those classrooms, which on the surface were about something else. To forget that is a form of amnesia (p. 274).

#### THE KILLER BS

*[The Seamstress sews in the shadows.]*

—R. Bowman, 2003, p. 36

*The only thing of interest in a refuted system is the personal element. It alone is what is forever irrefutable.*

—Nietzsche, quoted in Ray, 1995, p. 76

While physicians concentrated on the physiological effects of the great fluidium and religious folks the metaphysical, social reformers drew on the conceptual premises of mesmerism to support antiestablishment and utopian philosophies, communities, and, in France, a revolution. In *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*, Darnton (1968) traces how mesmerism was used by radical intellectuals in pre- and postrevolutionary France, its fluid character able to adapt to and appear on the stages of both reason and romanticism.

Another important character in our story, of course, is theory. Edwards (1999) has called attention to the indebtedness of performance studies to a canon of theory, rather than the canon of literature that interpretation was meant to serve, and there is no question that he is right about that. Everyone was reading theory in the early 1980s, and its influence was everywhere in the criticism we were reading and in the performance art that seemed to have become all the rage. Yet, while theory seemed to be telling most everyone else at the time that they could think irreverently about literature, performance had already taught us to do that. For us, theory let us think irreverently about performance.

Prior to the revolution, scientific discoveries and marvels captured the imagination of the reading public and prevailed in its popular literature. Science was fashionable. And while the onslaught of popular scientific writings about invisible agencies and their corresponding cosmologies was confusing—e.g., what had been a primary element, water, became a “compound of inflammable and dephlogisticated air” (Darnton, 1968, p. 17)—the public was enthralled rather than discouraged.

As channeled through the popular press, the apolitical discourse of science was reader-friendly, as accessible to the common man as were the frequent demonstrations of scientific marvels. Both gave rise to fad commodities which the public could participate in or purchase for itself, as was the case with mesmeric tubs, lightning rods, and balloon rides, hats, and sweets. Of course, embedded within the “apolitical” discourse was a subversive ideology that, through reason, all men could understand and command the laws of nature. In the last two lines of a poem praising an early balloon flight in Lyons, such sentiments ring clear: “The eagle of Jupiter has lost his empire,/And the feeble mortal can approach the gods” (quoted in Darnton, 1968, p. 20). As Darnton summarizes, while few of the reading public had ever read Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, they knew all about Mesmer’s

universal flow, its “mysteries, scandals, and passionate polemics.” Little wonder then that the radical elite should use “the popular and apolitical vogue of science,” its discourse and modes of address, to disseminate their revolutionary ideas (Darnton, 1968, pp. 161–162).

As it happened, most of the theorists whose writing we gravitated toward had last names that began with the letter “B.” Brecht and Burke were already somewhat known to us, but as time passed, more “Bs” kept showing up: Bakhtin, Barthes, Baudrillard, Benjamin, Berger, Boal. One day, one of us jokingly referred to them as “the Killer Bs,” and the term has always stuck with us. Although no one used the term “performative writing” in those days, what was appealing about theory as it was practiced by the Killer Bs was its spectacular quality. It was dizzying, breathtaking, and often vastly entertaining. It seemed to fulfill Aristotle’s definition of good theatre, and its relationship to literature was precisely the sort of relationship that performance held for us: irreverent, playful, aggressive, erotic. It helped us imagine the kinds of performances we desired to give, something that could break down or break away from the old text-vs.-performance dualism in which we felt trapped—and in which the discipline of performance studies is still largely trapped—in order to create some “third” kind of writing/performance.

The surplus of movement excited by the friction of an elastic body which happens to be exposed to another body, so as to effect a discharge, forms *artificial electricity*. (Mesmer, 1785/1958, p. 29; emphasis in original)

Mesmerism was particularly appealing to radicals because its immense popularity during the 1780s was coupled with controversy. The controversy centered on the condemnation of Mesmer by the aristocratic academy. Mesmer’s battle and battle tactics became a model or pose through which the radical intelligentsia expressed their own discontent with *les gens en place* (men in power) and their

dogmatic conservation of aristocratic privilege. In short, “Mesmer’s fight was their fight” (Darnton, 1968, p. 90).

Through much of the decade, the radical elite inundated the public with reader-friendly pamphlets that described and defended mesmerism as a science. In this way, mesmerism served as a rhetorical hook, appealing to the public’s fascination with science and thereby implying every citizen’s right to access it. Simultaneously, the social politics of mesmerism as a revolutionary praxis took shape in the letters, novels, memoirs, lectures, and textbooks that the proponents of mesmerism shared with each other and, by the decade’s end, with the reading public.

Although we didn’t stumble across it until later, Jean-Luc Godard’s well-known characterization of his aims as a filmmaker captures perfectly the sense of what we wanted to accomplish and what we found modeled for us in the work of the Killer Bs: “research in the form of a spectacle” (Godard, 1968/1972, p. 181).

The “most energetic” and prolific advocate of mesmerism was Nicolas Bergasse who, “by injecting a Rousseauist bias into a mesmerist analysis of the . . . relations among men,” envisioned “a way to revolutionize France” (Darnton, 1968, pp. 108, 124). Bergasse drew on two popular notions of the day—physical-moral causality and the aim of natural law—to argue that animal magnetism was the conservative agency of nature and hence was charged with maintaining “a constant and durable harmony” within and among all entities (quoted in Darnton, 1968, p. 114). When man was in flow with nature, à la Rousseau’s primitive state, the fluid was enabled to produce healthy bodies, just minds and social relations. When man was out of flow, the reverse occurred. It was Bergasse’s claim that in modern-day France, those least connected with the law of flow in nature were the aristocratic *gens en place* whose depraved lifestyle had affected their governance of French institutions which, in turn, had effected physical

and moral malaise throughout the state and its people. Like Rousseau, Bergasse advocated a return to a more primitive or natural and therefore more harmonious society, a like reformation of the arts, and a concentration on educating children so as to stem the top-down tide of corruptive (i.e., artificial) influences or, in the vernacular of the day, “sensations” or, in the vernacular of our day, “interpellations.” Unlike Rousseau, Bergasse grounded the cause and cure of social malaise in scientific fact. In sum, the “more robust constitution” of the natural mesmerized man “would make us remember independence. When, with such a constitution, we necessarily would develop new morals, how could we possibly put up with the yoke of the institutions that govern us today?” (quoted in Darnton, 1968, p. 124).

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[Coverdale dons a winter coat as two Blithedale members enter, also dressed in winter duds. The trio piles into the tub and sets off to Blithedale. As they deliver their little manifesto, Girl Friday performs “the snow” which becomes increasingly heavy. By the climax, the trio in the tub is spot lit as is the Seamstress who may help Girl Friday create the veil of snow falling on (occasionally pelted at) the folks in the tub.]

**COVERDALE:** There were three of us,

**BL MEMBER A:** Blithedale communitarians,

**BL MEMBER B:** Agrarian socialists,

**COVERDALE:** who rode together through the storm.

**BL MEMBER B:** Our destination was Blithedale,

**BL MEMBER A:** a rented tract of farmland

**COVERDALE:** with a house (thank god),

**BL MEMBER A:** that lay on the Charles River nine miles outside the city of Boston.

- COVERDALE:** As we threaded our way through the narrow streets of the city,
- BL MEMBER B:** the buildings on either side seemed to press too closely in upon us
- BL MEMBER A:** and the snowfall, too, looked inexpressibly dreary,
- COVERDALE:** (I would almost call it dingy),
- BL MEMBER A:** coming down through the city smoke and alighting on the sidewalk only to be molded into the impress of somebody's patched boot or overshoe.
- BL MEMBER B:** Thus, the track of old conventions was visible on what was freshest from the sky.
- COVERDALE:** But, when we left the pavements of the city and the muffled hoof of the team beat upon the country road, then there was better air to breathe.
- BL MEMBER A:** Air that had Not been Breathed Once and Again,
- BL MEMBER B:** Air that had Not heard Words of Falsehood and Formality,
- BL A & B:** like all the Air of the Dusky City!
- BL MEMBER A:** If ever Mankind might give Utterance to their Wildest Dreams,
- BL A & B:** yes,
- BL MEMBER A:** and Speak of Earthly Happiness as an Object to be Attained,
- BL A & B:** YES, We Were Those Men and Women!
- BL MEMBER B:** It was Our Purpose
- COVERDALE:** (generous and absurd as it was)
- BL MEMBER B:** to Cast Aside our Meager Materiality and Live a Life of Cooperation rather than Competition.
- ALL:** YES.
- BL MEMBER B:** To Refuse the Paltry Principles on which Societies have all along been Based.
- ALL:** YES.
- BL MEMBER B:** To Step Off the Tired Treadmill of the Established System!
- BL MEMBER A:** To Vacate the Rusty Relic of Society!
- BL MEMBER B:** To Shut Up the Ledger!
- COVERDALE:** Fling aside the Pen!
- BL MEMBER A:** Retire from the Pulpit!
- COVERDALE:** Abandon the Sweet Indolence of Life . . .
- BL MEMBER B:** To Lessen the Laborers' Great Burthen of Toil
- ALL:** By Performing our Due Share!  
YES! We had Left the Struggling Self Seeking World To Form an Equal Brotherhood and Sisterhood Of Earnest Toil and Shared Beneficence!  
[Freeze beat.]
- COVERDALE:** With such unflagging spirits, we made good companionship with the tempest and, at our journey's end, professed ourselves reluctant to bid the rude blusterer good-bye. To own the truth, however, I was little better than an icicle and began to be suspicious that I had caught a fearful cold.

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(R. Bowman, 2003, pp. 8–10; see Hawthorne, 1852/1986, pp. 11, 19)

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## PERFORMING THEORY

In 1845, the *New York Daily Tribune* estimated that there were probably about twice as many women seeking work as seamstresses “as would find employment at fair wages.” These 10,000 workers, the *Tribune* concluded, constituted an oversupply of workers who could not possibly earn enough to keep themselves alive. “One and a half to two dollars per week,” it declared, “is represented as the average recompense of good work-women engaged at plain sewing, and there are very many who cannot, by faith and diligence, earn more than a dollar a week.” (Kessler-Harris, 1982, p. 65)

*To convince is to conquer without conception.*

—Benjamin, 1928/1996, p. 446

Many of us who helped invent performance studies but whose training was in oral interpretation worried about the status of literature in the emerging discipline, its possible disappearance into the abyss of textuality. Elsewhere, we have argued that the “semiotic misrule” seemingly authorized by theories of textuality does not mean abandoning literature, but instead developing a more “writerly” or “producerly” orientation to solo and group performances of literature (Bowman 1995, 1996; Bowman & Bowman, 2002; Bowman & Kistenberg, 1992). But that isn’t what we want to talk about here. This is another story.

“We the undersigned, peaceable, industrious and hardworking men and women of Lowell [mills in Massachusetts], confined in unhealthy apartments, exposed to the poisonous contagion of air, vegetable, animal and mineral properties, debarred from proper Physical Exercise, Mental discipline, and Mastication cruelly limited, and thereby hastening us on through pain, disease and privation, down to a premature grave, pray the legislature to institute a ten-hour working day in all the factories of the

state.” . . . signed by 2,000 mostly female operatives. (*Voice of Industry*, 1845, quoted in Kessler-Harris, 1982, p. 62)

Are women to be born for this, to toil, shrivel, die and rot? . . . My very soul is roused with indignation. The women of France once rose in rebellion. Their cry was “bread for our babes”; will the women of our country ever utter this cry as they gather in crowds from the attics, cellars, by lanes, and dark dens of filth and squalor? Alas! Yes, if no change comes for the better, they too will thirst for the purple cup of revolution. (*Stray Leaves from a Seamstress’s Journal*, 1853–54, quoted in Reynolds, 1989, p. 356)

In *Heuristics: The Logic of Invention*, Greg Ulmer (1995) argues that creative work is more systematic than popular mythology might have us believe, that it proceeds as much from imitation or emulation as it does from inspiration or imagination or genius or specialization. In reviewing a number of discourses on method, ranging from Plato’s *Phaedrus* to Breton’s surrealist manifesto, Ulmer found a common set of elements. Those elements, Ulmer suggests, can be mnemonically summarized by means of the acronym *CATTt*, representing the following operations:

C = Contrast

A = Analogy

T = Theory

T = Target

t = tale (or form in which the work will appear)

Performance studies, like all intellectual and artistic formations, developed by extrapolation in this same manner. Performance studies is heavily invested in the mythology of the “antidiscipline” and flaunts its eccentricities as if flaunting eccentricity were something peculiar, but if we take as performance studies’ “manifesto” any of the representative

texts by Schechner (1985, 1988, 1992) or Conquergood (1985, 1991, 1995) that are commonly cited as charting the direction of the field, we can detect the pattern of invention identified by Ulmer.

### *Contrast*

For Schechner and Conquergood performance studies is imagined in contrast to the conservatory and professional training models of most academic theatre and performance programs; by extension, performance studies is projected as intervening in the entertainment and showbiz apparatus, as well as in the textualist paradigm of knowledge that relegates performance to an ancillary role of illustrating or disseminating whatever knowledge or truth is thought to be contained in texts.

Published in 1852, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* is in part based on the author's experiences at Brook Farm in the spring through autumn months of 1841. Like many reform communities of the period, The Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education was envisioned by its founders as "a society of liberal, intelligent and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressures of our competitive institutions" (quoted in Delano, 2004, p. 34). Such sentiments were directly informed by the utopian socialism of Charles Fourier, whose ideas were popularized in the United States through Albert Brisbane's *The Social Destiny of Man; or Association and Reorganization of Industry* (1840).

### *Analogy*

Schechner and Conquergood both rely on the analogy and example of the anthropologist/ethnographer, someone whose business is to observe and interpret culture, rather than to engage in the elaborate form of gossip known as theatre or performance criticism

within the institutional framework of the western literary/theatrical tradition. "Participant-observation" is the investigative method of the anthropologist/ethnographer, where that method itself is refigured as a special kind of performance activity.

A postrevolutionary French mystic and outspoken opponent of capitalism, Fourier had a plan for a future utopia that was ruled by "his" discovery of the principle of Universal Harmony. While Fourier claimed the idea as his own, in substance and rhetoric, the influence of Mesmer and, particularly, Bergasse is "evident in many of his works" (Darnton, 1968, p. 143). Like Bergasse, Fourier believed in physical-moral causality as a law of nature and urged a return to more a primitive, natural society. Thereby the "SUDDEN TRANSITION FROM SOCIAL CHAOS" as wrought by civilization "TO UNIVERSAL HARMONY" would be enabled (quoted in Darnton, 1968, p. 143; emphasis in original). Specific to Fourier's plan was the reorganization of society into discrete communities or "phalanxes," where each member would engage in an industry of his or her choice and also be allowed to express his or her natural impulses, including sexual ones.

### *Theory*

Schechner and Conquergood also rely on the metaphor of the trickster—a traditional anthropological subject—to imagine how performance studies might function within the institutional space of the academy, and the performance studies scholar is projected as a boundary-crossing inter-/antidisciplinarian. Thus, performance studies might borrow or "poach" its theory from anywhere as it tries to "make do" within the confines of academe (de Certeau, 1974/1984). Even so, anthropology/ethnography may be identified as one major source of theoretical and methodological borrowing, while another might be that amalgam of poststructuralist theories known at one time

as critical theory but now more commonly called cultural studies.

In later documents, Fourier does lend some credit to mesmerism, claiming that “if it had been abused in ‘civilization,’ it would be ‘in great fashion, of great utility, in the state of harmony,’” for somnambulists or mesmerists would be able to contact the other world and thereby further enable the flow of harmonic fluid between the material and spiritual worlds (quoted in Darnton, 1968, p. 144).

### Target

The immediate targets of performance studies are the professional discourses of communication and theatre studies, but the wider target is the human sciences generally. The performance studies scholar might be found anywhere within a college of arts and sciences, for the field’s “specialization,” as Edwards (1999) notes, “is the general field of human experience, studied *as* and *by* performance” (p. 83).

While Fourier was never mesmerized himself, he apparently “communicated mesmerically with his disciples” after his death, as recounted in the following 1853 transcription from a Fourierist table-turning session:

[MEDIUM] . . . Ask the table, that is, the spirit that is inside it; it will tell you that I have above my head an enormous pipe of fluid, which rises from my hair up to the stars. It’s an aromatic pipe by which the voice of spirits on Saturn reaches my ear . . . THE TABLE (thumping strongly with its foot)—Yes, yes, yes. Aromatic pipe. Conduit. Aromatic pipe. Conduit. Conduit. Conduit. Conduit. Yes. (quoted in Darnton, 1968, pp. 144–145)

### tale

In the early years of its formation (roughly, the 1980s), one of the missing pieces in performance studies’ invention of itself was the CATT’s “tale.” The major dilemma was whether the form in which performance

studies should appear would be a scholarly essay or a theatrical performance of some kind. Conquergood repeatedly advocated performance as a means of scholarly representation, although his own work always appeared as a conventional scholarly essay. Indeed, most of the influential work that passed for performance studies has taken the conventional essayistic form of the disciplines from which it has borrowed. More innovative forms of scholarly representation began to appear in the early 1990s as personal narrative, autobiography, and post-/autoethnography took hold, and scholars often used venues other than academic books and journals for presenting these experiments with media, genres, and styles. It wasn’t until the mid-1990s that things began to crystallize around the terms “performative writing” or “performance writing” (Allsopp, 1999; Phelan, 1992; Pollock, 1998).

Of the fifty or so Fourierist communities attempted in the United States between 1840 and 1860, Brook Farm and the North American Phalanx in Red Bank, New Jersey, are, in popular and historical accounts, the most frequently mentioned. Although the Brook Farm group waited until 1844 to replicate Fourier’s practical scheme, a journal dedicated to his ideas was published at the farm, and in writing *The Blithedale Romance* Hawthorne entertained two or three volumes of Fourier’s works. For the most part, Brook Farm and cooperatives like it stressed Fourier’s concepts of industrial reorganization, also known as Associationism in the United States. Hawthorne, on the other hand, directed his sights toward the more prurient and explicit connections between (Fourierist) social reform and mesmerism, as he saw them practiced in New England at the time.

As noted earlier, mesmerism flourished in the United States from the mid-1830s through the 1840s. Marketed to the U.S. public as a universal cure for physical, spiritual, and social ills, mesmerism becomes a multivalent metaphor in Hawthorne’s hands to critique

social reform practices of his day, the various ploys of the Blithedale characters, the narrator Miles Coverdale's voyeuristic inclinations, and Hawthorne's own craft of writing fiction. In large part, Hawthorne's view is negative, his distrust of mesmerism palpable.

In sum, performance studies invented itself by combining anthropology and critical theory/cultural studies whose lessons and strategies it translated onto another domain—literary theatre and oral interpretation. There, literature was translated most often into “verbal art” or “cultural performance” or “textuality,” while critical theory/cultural studies' concern with the politics of textuality reappeared as the politics of performativity.

#### THE BODY ELECTRIC

*“You can see them in those shops,” said seamstress Aurora Phelps, “seated in long rows, crowded together in a hot close atmosphere, working at piece-work, 30, 40, 60, or 100 girls crowded together, working at 20 and 25 cents a day.”*

—Kessler-Harris, 1982, p. 78

*“The especial genius of Woman, I believe to be electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency.” It is this electrical, magnetic nature, [Margaret] Fuller argues, that makes women especially useful as mesmeric mediums.*

—Reynolds, 1989, p. 378

*Everything now, in its own way, wants to be television.*

—Ulmer, 1989, p. 11

As embedded in the reform discourse that influenced the making of Brook-Blithedale

Farm, mesmerism is used by Hawthorne to question the moral-physical (thought-enactment) ambiguities of the period generally and its reform movements in particular. One glaring irony that encapsulates both concerns the economic history of the times. In 1837, a financial panic brought on an economic depression that lasted well into the 1840s. Credit was tight and, as a result, many smaller farms in New England were abandoned or sold off. The rural dispossessed gravitated to the cities where they found they had to compete with European immigrants for industry jobs. The inflated and embattled labor base drove down wages and put a temporary end to trade union activity and the advancements gained in the 1830s. Insufferable working conditions, overcrowded tenements, and staggering increases in poverty and crime testified that living in the city as one of the “exploited ‘lower million’” was a tough row to hoe. Meanwhile, the wealthy “‘upper ten’” (Reynolds, 1989, p. 126)—the “industrialists from Boston and New York”—snapped up the cheap rural acreage and converted it into summer resorts for leisure and profit (Kolodny, 1986, p. xi). The travesty escalates when “social reformers” such as Hawthorne and his fellow social democrats vacated the cities in a romantic huff of antiindustrial protest and invested in the promise of Brook Farm for 500 bucks a share. Hawthorne apparently bought two shares, one for himself and another for his fiancée, Sophia Peabody, but a year later turned tail and sued the cooperative in an effort to reclaim his investment. Eleven years later, Hawthorne published *The Blithedale Romance*.

It is not, I apprehend, a healthy kind of mental occupation, to devote ourselves too exclusively to the study of individual men and women. If the person under examination be one's self, the result is pretty certain to be diseased action of the heart, almost before we can snatch a second glance. Or, if we take the freedom to put a friend under our microscope, we thereby insulate him from many of his true relations, magnify his

peculiarities, inevitably tear him into parts, and, of course, patch him very clumsily together again. What wonder, then, should we be frightened by the aspect of a monster, which, after all . . . may be said to have been created mainly by ourselves!

. . . But I could not help it. (Hawthorne, 1852/1986, p. 69)

One of the most important courses in our graduate program at Northwestern, at least in terms of how it shaped our thinking, was the history seminar we were all required to take. And perhaps the most important part of that seminar was being introduced to orality-literacy theory through the work of scholars like Albert Lord, Eric Havelock, Jack Goody, Walter Ong, and Marshall McLuhan. The central idea of orality-literacy theory, of course, is that the technology by which we communicate affects the way we think. While we are the inventors of our media, as McLuhan was fond of saying, eventually our media turn around and reinvent us. The invention of the phonetic alphabet brought about a seismic shift in the way people thought by making possible for the first time practices of analysis, logic, and reason as we know and practice them today. In Ong's (1982) neat formulation, "writing restructures consciousness" (p. 78).

Orality-literacy theory was influential in shaping how the field of oral interpretation imagined itself. In the beginning—that is, in the old, preliterate days of Homer—the performer of literature was the Big Man of whatever tribe or community to which he belonged. Without writing to serve as an artificial memory system, a culture's history and, indeed, its very identity and existence depended on the living memory of those charged with keeping and reciting knowledge, which was always cast in the memorable forms of story, song, and dance. Literature did not exist in the strict sense of that term. Whatever verbal arts the culture produced were so intimately linked to performers and performances that their domains were identical: no performance, no poetry; no poetry, no culture.

The sewing machine, introduced in the 1850s, far from lightening the seamstresses' load, increased pressure to produce more. The machine encouraged centralization into small shops where work could be routinized and efficiently distributed. Seamstresses faced continual unemployment: cycles of harsh overwork followed by idleness. (Kessler-Harris, 1982, p. 66)

New York City Physician Claims Itinerant Mesmerists Bilking The Public Of Their Hard Earned Dollar.

Factory Girl Mediums Would Rather Sleep Than Do An Honest Day's Work. (R. Bowman, 2003, p. 25; see Fuller, 1982, p. 32)

With the invention of literacy, the relations between literature and performance changed. No longer was it necessary to trust the knowledge and stories of culture to the memory and display skills of the performer. Once knowledge became separable from performance, it also changed—and when knowledge changed, we changed as well. The history of performance that we studied was a story of the shifting fortunes of the performer as chirography and then typography altered the regimes of knowledge, information, and communication.

While an "equal brotherhood and sisterhood" is the stated aim of the reformers who assemble at Blithedale, each proves to be transfixed by his or her own reform agendas, such as women's rights, penal reform, and, in the case of Coverdale, enacting the "calm observer" so as to "distil . . . the whole morality of the performance" (Hawthorne, 1852/1986, p. 97). As the characters each pursue what they see as their "natural impulses," conflicts arise and, in an effort to survive, they reconfigure their reform desires in terms of sexual conquest and monetary gain. The key tactic for success is to discover and then disclose to others the intimate secrets of one's competitor or object of desire.

In one instance, the wealthy and exotic feminist, Zenobia, and the penniless city seamstress, Priscilla, are vying for the affections

of the prophet of penal reform, Hollingsworth. When Zenobia discovers that Priscilla is also the renowned “Veiled Lady” of the mesmerist stage, Zenobia attempts to discredit her by performing the “legend” of “The Silvery Veil” at a Blithedale parlor theatrical (Hawthorne, 1852/1986, p. 108). Veiled itself as fantasy, Zenobia’s tale of deception recounts how the “famous . . . creature” vanished from the public eye only to reappear “amid a knot of visionary people” (Hawthorne, 1852/1986, pp. 108, 114). There, she attaches herself to a particular “lady” (i.e., Zenobia), who learns from a “Magician” (i.e., Priscilla’s former mesmerist-operator) that the girl “is doomed to fling a blight over [the lady’s] prospects.” To thwart her efforts, the lady must take the Magician’s veil, throw it over her foe, stamp her foot, and call for the Magician, and he will come and seize her (Hawthorne, 1852/1986, p. 115). In both the tale and the telling, the lady and Zenobia do just as the Magician-mesmerist bids. They fling a veil over Priscilla’s head and thereby unveil her. In the next chapter, Coverdale enacts a similar performance when he “attempt[s] to come within [Priscilla’s] maidenly mystery” by taking “just one peep beneath her folded petals” (Hawthorne, 1852/1986, p. 125).

Because such performances are commonplace among the Blithedale set, it takes but little time to realize that the great fluidium is greatly askew at Blithedale. The main reason for the errant flows, it appears, is that “social harmony” is being attempted by individuals who also embody the Jacksonian ethos of competitive individualism. The romance then is not about socialistic reform; it is about capitalism and the distortions (e.g., of social reform) that arise from its enactment. In the lurid parlance of the penny-press, a befitting byline of the period might report: *Sensationalist Reformers Wallow In The Very Sewers They Attempt To Scour Clean* (Bowman, 2003, p. 32)

Of course, by means of the narrative he uses to recount his Blithedale experiences, Coverdale

wallows in these same sewers—and so does Hawthorne.

The implications of orality-literacy theory were especially fascinating to us, for if McLuhan, Ong and the others were correct in suggesting that communication technologies restructure consciousness, then the development of mechanical and electronic audiovisual media, beginning with photography and telegraphy in the early nineteenth century, marked the beginning of another shift in how humans would communicate, invent, and think. We were entering a postliterate age, the consequences of which we were only beginning to imagine.

In a crisis one should observe three stages: perturbation, coction [literally “a cooking, or coming to the boiling point”], and evacuation. (Mesmer, 1785/1958, p. 43)

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**GIRL FRIDAY:** In etymological terms, hysteria means “wandering womb.” In Mesmer’s time and thereafter, the prescribed treatments for female hysterics, or “wandering wombs,” were bleeding, blistering, religious salvation, or marriage. The latter was based on the understanding that a woman’s excessive behavior was due to her lack of sexual relations. As Hollingsworth might have it, the woman was a “petticoated monstrosity” because she had “missed out on woman’s particular happiness.” Of course, Mesmer’s cure was to induce that very state of “happiness”—an orgasmic crisis or climax—while those mesmerists who followed quieted the wandering wombs by hypnosis or, as the wary press implied, by means of their penetrating will power. Since then, electric shock therapies and the clinical manipulation of the clitoris have been used in severe to middling cases, while those who suffer from mild displays of excess are becalmed by the flow of the great fluidium through a score of household appliances, exercise gizmos, sexual gadgets, and beauty parlor treatments. (R. Bowman, 2003, p. 81)

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In the first flush of excitement over the possible implications of orality-literacy theory, as well as the energy surrounding the invention of performance studies, there was some understandable though misplaced euphoria. Ong's belief that the postliterate age would be characterized by a "secondary orality" seemed to augur a world where we would move "beyond" the text to a place where performance would achieve greater recognition and prominence. In the contemporary postliterate or postmodern age, some critics believed, performance would be where it's at (Benamou & Caramello, 1977). This sentiment has been echoed in a number of ways in various publications over the last 25 years, and widespread dispersal of "performance" as a metaphor and critical tool for a variety of "studies" in virtually every discipline of the arts, humanities, and social and "hard" sciences is touted as further evidence that we have left the age of reason and discipline and entered the age of performance (McKenzie, 2001).

But if Ong and the others are correct in suggesting that alphabetic thinking is now giving way to cinematic/electronic thinking—that literacy is yielding to "electracy" (Ulmer, 2003)—then neither text nor performance will be quite what it was in the conditions of either literacy or orality. If we want to know what this new age of "electrate" performance will be, instead of looking back at what the old oral or preliterate world was like, we need to figure out what "cinematic/electronic thinking" might be. But to put the question in that way is to make it damnably difficult to answer. Perhaps, then, as Ulmer (1989, 1995) and others have argued (see Ray, 1995, 2001), the better approach would be to locate some examples of it—to assume that some of the newer forms of communication/"writing"/"performance" are instances of it—and then try to gain some experience of it by emulating or simulating those forms.

Like other literati of the period, Hawthorne was fully aware that in writing fiction he was not unlike a mesmerist in so far as both make

use of the suggestive force of language to construct identities, disclose internal thoughts and feelings, and create imaginary worlds that persuade the reader or audience of their literal or figurative truth. In his construction of Coverdale's narrative, Hawthorne explores this aspect of mesmerism to such an extent that, in the end, the romance is about—as it always has been—Coverdale, and his self-entranced perspective. In the final chapter, appropriately titled "Miles Coverdale's Confession," Coverdale offers a brief critique of his narrative state before proceeding, in the remaining pages, to prove its truth. He asks, "What, after all, have I to tell?" In response he answers, "Nothing, nothing, nothing!" (Hawthorne, 1852/1986) p. 245). If centered on Coverdale's narrative, the verdict of the novel is nihilistic and devastating. However, on the refracted level of the narrative, the "nothing" of language is countered by its ability to recall of what it consists—of what came before—and thereby it always interrupts the not-so-natural flow of itself, forward.

In teaching over the last few years, we have become increasingly aware that ideas, works, and issues that are difficult to discuss and understand abstractly can be approached through simulation exercises—mimicry, imitation—based on more or less concrete instructions. Extrapolating from Benjamin, we might say that for us to teach is to communicate without initial conceptualizations. So that, for example, if we want our students to understand something about texts and performances, asking them to think about abstract aesthetic or theoretical categories seems less effective than giving them instructions about how to practice different kinds of textual and performance activity. We can tell them, for instance, that different textual practices develop by extrapolating from models found in some other field or discipline or practice—about how a modern writer like Faulkner borrowed from philosophers like Bergson, as well as from the cinema, to help him conduct his narrative experiments; about

how surrealism, which was an aesthetic/political movement, borrowed from Freudian psychoanalysis, a medical practice. We can give them things like N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* or Laurie Anderson's *Nerve Bible* and tell them to use it as their model for producing a performance, letting them know that *imitation* is as important as *imagination* in both learning and the creative process. We can introduce them to Roland Barthes's ideas about the "writerly" text simply by telling them that Barthes believed that every text contains a set of "instructions" for producing another, similar composition. Finding the "instructions" implicit in the model is the key, of course, and that is where our reading and discussion are focused. We usually tend to do this with the class, primarily to check our tendency to produce an instruction like "write in such a way as to imbricate your authorial Self in a collective order, intertextually articulated in myth, history, and personal experience," an instruction that we could not give to an undergraduate class with a straight face. So, as a group, we come up with homelier things, such as: "write in very short anecdotes, none longer than a paragraph" or "use a story told to you by your parents or grandparents" or "include pictures from a family photo album."

In that spirit and in the spirit of our essay, we offer a simple do-it-yourself guide for sewing your own performance composition, for those moments when you cannot help but create something, however clumsy the result:

1. Select the kind of costume you would like to wear—e.g., social reformer, historian, mesmerist, cultural critic, cynic, performance theorist, seamstress, or all of them rolled into one, perhaps.

2. Collect lots of different fabrics, patterns, and notions associated with the costume

you have chosen. Remnants are fine, as are nontextiles, such as an old bathtub or snow or plants or that odd piece of sheet metal you find out back. If the materials don't seem to go together, that's okay—collect them anyway.

3. Create your own fabrics and notions, too, by imitating or transforming some of those you've collected. For example, weave yourself into the threads of a Girl Friday and detail with detachable trims, such as Tour Guide or Media Theorist or Snow Illusionist or Graduate Student.

4. Stand back (or move in close) and take a look at your collection. Select a piece, notion, or remnant you particularly like. For you, at this time and this place, it is the metonym, the model, the pose, or the figure that best represents the costume you desire and also, perhaps, fear.

5. Use the figure to guide how you pattern your costume. Ask yourself what bits from your collection you desire to cut and stitch together to serve as the warp or foundation of your costume. Ask yourself whether the filler bits should woof loudly or softly through contrast or analogy. Ask yourself what bias bits you will inevitably have to include in the costume and how far askew you want to go.

6. After you are satisfied with the initial layout of what you have designed, assume that it is wrong and try again. Another option is to add in more bias bits that are just not "you," that you don't look or feel good in. Like a jolly fat man or woman, roll with the seeming distortions.

7. Put your costume together, realizing that the various media of assemblage (everything from safety pins to heavy, high-tech industrial machinery) will affect the pattern and, hence, the figure in the costume that you have made.

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**COVERDALE:** And, so, after all is said and done, what have I to tell you?

[Lights fade to black. In silence/the sound of the seamstress planting her weeds, which now cover the stage, at Coverdale's feet.] (R. Bowman, 2003, p. 82)

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## NOTE

\*Section editor's note: the essay employs techniques of "performative" or "performance" writing to address the challenge of documenting a theatrical production. Ruth Laurion Bowman staged her adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1852 novel *The Blithedale Romance* in the HopKins Black Box Theatre, Louisiana State University; public performances took place on November 12–16, 2003. The essay juxtaposes strips of text: passages from Ruth Laurion Bowman's script, quotations from historical research for the script, narratives and syntheses of this research, and reflections on the history of the academic discipline in which the research took place. In the section introduction, above, I discuss in more detail the strategies that inform the essay's unconventional form.

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## Staging Paradox

### *The Local Art of Adaptation*

PAUL EDWARDS

Over the past half-century, Chicago's diverse theatrical scene has provided a uniquely receptive setting for the work of directors who stage original adaptations of narrative texts, or develop extreme "rewritings" (Dessen, 2002) of conventional dramas. Even the Joseph Jefferson Awards and Citations—Chicago's honors for Equity and non-Equity productions—have recognized the category "New Adaptation" alongside the older classification "New Work."<sup>1</sup> Contributing to Chicago's reputation as a center of theatrical "adaptation" is the tradition of staging "chamber theatre," begun in 1947 by Robert S. Breen in Northwestern's Interpretation (now Performance Studies) Department. Although no one working professionally in Chicago continues to stage chamber theatre before public audiences, many have learned techniques and approaches—styles of creatively addressing a source text—from contact with Breen and his students.

No artist, group, or community can lay claim to having invented adaptation as an art

form. It is hard to imagine any play that has not adapted *something*, some kind of "pre-text" (as I explore this term below). But comments by some of Chicago's most celebrated adapter/directors suggest that the art of adaptation in the local context of a city's theatre scene has reaccentuated (often in very indirect, even accidental ways) important features of Breen's paradoxical experiments.

The first section of this essay, "Method and Margin," establishes the terms for my discussion of a triangulated relationship in a unique academic setting: at Northwestern, a wideranging sense of practice enjoys a complicated relationship not only to theory but to method. Here, practice cannot be discussed apart from its extension into the professional theatre community. I consider the case of the Lookingglass Theatre, which has devoted much of its creative energy over its decade and a half of existence to the development of original works and adaptations of nondramatic literature. The company began when David Schwimmer, prior to his successful television career, brought

together a talented group of fellow Northwestern graduates; it has grown with the infusion of other Northwestern-trained artists like the Tony-Award-winning adapter and director Mary Zimmerman. The educational roots of this group lead me to examine the beginning of adaptation coursework at Northwestern: the next section, "Chamber Theatre," explores the career of Breen and the staging form he invented. In the following section, "Adapting Adaptation," I employ interview materials to discuss the accomplishments of three students who subsequently became teachers of adaptation in Northwestern's Department of Performance Studies: Zimmerman, Njoki McElroy, and Frank Galati.<sup>2</sup> The essay concludes with reflections on how the theory and practice of stage adaptation have changed at Northwestern, and in Chicago theatre, since Breen first experimented with staging short stories in the late 1940s.

#### METHOD AND MARGIN

Within the context of interpretation, the teaching of theatrical forms adopted several names in the second half of the twentieth century. "Interpreters theatre" and "group performance" were common labels for a pedagogical interest that embraced forms like "readers theatre" and "chamber theatre." The more familiar form, readers theatre, had deep roots in the verse-speaking choirs of oratorical culture (see Kleinau & McHughes, 1980, pp. 45–67; Williams, 1975) as well as the theatrical tradition of the staged reading. Coger and White (1967) somewhat fancifully trace readers theatre to the beginnings of western drama in ancient Greece, and annotate a list of well-known productions by professional actors in the postwar era that employed the form's techniques and conventions (pp. 10–15). But attempts like this to locate readers theatre in some kind of theatrical mainstream fail to convince. In its heyday, readers theatre was a teaching technique. It enjoyed its greatest

public visibility in campus playhouses, civic and church assemblies, and school competitions. Performers typically held manuscripts, faced the audience, and sat on chairs or high stools (hence the scatological epithet "stool theatre" employed by theatre professors who took a dismissive view of oral interpretation). Characters addressed each other in the convention of "offstage focus": actors seated side-by-side would see each other "out front," thereby diminishing the audience's expectation that the actors would fully embody the physical business suggested by the text (see Coger & White, 1967, pp. 46–58; Maclay, 1971, pp. 16–44). The aesthetic effect was that of an incomplete stage picture: a suggestive stimulus to the audience's imagination, rather like an elocutionary platform reading with the added variety of many actors' voices.

The goal of such performance was to deemphasize physical spectacle and direct the attention of actors and audience toward the experience of the text. During the period of interpretation's greatest influence, the teaching of readers theatre fully aligned itself with the desire to "cause" performers and viewers alike "to experience literature": readers theatre "differs from a conventional play in that it demands stricter attention to the aural elements of the literature" and "requires" its audience to "generate its own visualization of the scenery, the costumes, the action, the make-up, and the physical appearance of the characters" (Coger & White, 1967, pp. 8–9). As articulated by Robert Breen and elaborated by his student Joanna Hawkins Maclay (1971), the goal of readers theatre is to "feature the text" rather than the spectacle of actors' bodies in motion or the machinery of theatrical illusion (pp. 3–6).<sup>3</sup> Even in Breen's own writing about chamber theatre (the more fully theatricalized form that I discuss below) the "proposition" to which student performers should dedicate themselves is "the service of literature" (1978, p. 6).

The characterization of illusionistic spectacle as somehow antagonistic to the *appreciation*

and *study* of literature (even dramatic literature) is a backward-reaching view: it relates such staging forms to the idealistic theories of suggestion advanced in the late-nineteenth century by “expression” teachers like S. S. Curry (1891, 1896). The virtue of “suggested” scenery and costuming recurs in Maclay’s advice to designers (1971, pp. 46–59). The performing body should be similarly suggestive: actors’ gestures and vocal inflections are significant merely as continuations and amplifications of literary figures and images (1971, p. 68). In language reminiscent of Curry nearly a century earlier, Maclay expresses the view that the “presentational” simplicity of readers theatre “tends to universalize” for an audience the experience of a literary text, whereas the “representational manner” of conventional theatre “tends to particularize the experience” in reductive ways (1971, p. 20). In the textbook literature that appeared from the 1960s to the 1980s, the methodizers of interpreters theatre often contrast the representational aesthetic of a putative “conventional” theatre with a presentational aesthetic that more fully engages audience members’ imaginations. Kleinau and McHughes (1980) go so far as to associate representational forms with “pictorial space,” and presentational forms (those friendly to the projection of literary texts) with “acoustic space” (pp. 5–14).<sup>4</sup>

If I tend to speak of readers theatre and chamber theatre in the past tense, I do so because both forms failed to find a receptive setting in either academic or professional theatre. Their narrowed focus on embodied performance in “the service of literature” consigned them to the same fate as the art of interpretation itself. The photographs of student productions that illustrate some of the textbooks—guides to script-in-hand, presentational staging, in a bare-stage world of “stools, benches, and ladders” (Maclay, 1971, p. 53)—seem as quaint, and almost as distant in time, as the ghostly reproductions of group “poses plastiques” and “tableaux mouvants” that

filled the pages of *Werner’s Magazine* during the Delsarte craze of the late-nineteenth century. This is not to suggest that the textbook literature is theoretically unsophisticated. *Theatres for Literature* by Kleinau and McHughes (1980) begins, for example, with a functional distinction between “work,” words on the page, and “text,” the constant remaking of the “work” by performers (p. 2), that is largely consistent with the famous distinction by Roland Barthes (1971/1986). Maclay’s *Readers Theatre* (1971) sets off from a similar prying-open of “text” beyond the concept of printed “words” (p. 4). Even the conservative *Handbook* by Coger and White (1967) demonstrates a nuanced understanding of modernist theatre after Brecht and Piscator. Breen’s belatedly published *Chamber Theatre* (1978), written in the 1960s, is remarkable for its interdisciplinary grasp of critical thought, from perception studies to film theory. Maclay (1971) is no less adept than her mentor Breen at perceiving theatrical space and time through the lenses of aestheticians and phenomenologists, from Rudolph Arnheim to Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

“The choreographer who reads Merleau-Ponty,” however—as Shannon Jackson (2004) reminds us—“is not a ‘professional’ to the theory professor” (p. 28). While teachers of interpreters theatre borrowed elaborately from theory and criticism, they failed to gain respect for the activity of stage performance itself as an embodied form of theoretical or critical inquiry. They failed to gain respect as well from a different kind of professional across the campus of many colleges and universities: the theatre professor who trained students for stage, television, and film careers, and mocked the theatrical pretensions of “stool theatre.” Jackson is correct, it seems to me, in her assessment of marginalization by literary theorists of those who “professed performance.” Not only did dramatic literature often find itself “outside the literary canon” in this or that scholar’s estimation, but the teaching of

interpretation never succeeded in becoming more than a “marginal cultural expression”: despite its alignment “with the dominant” and “canonical” in literary studies, it struggled unsuccessfully to find acceptance by literary “professionals” (2004, p. 24). In Jackson’s narrative, which critiques the opposition of theory and practice in institutional settings across the twentieth century, theatre and interpretation find themselves equally outside the embrace of theory. Yet I would complicate this narrative by locating interpretation pedagogy outside the embrace of theatrical practice. Bound to both literary theory and theatrical practice, the group performance of literature found itself marginalized by both. The double bind of high-modernist interpretation studies produced a double rejection. If it is true that every academician functions “as the amateur to someone else’s professional” (Jackson, 2004, p. 28) then the pedagogy of interpreters theatre was stigmatized as doubly amateurish.

Yet the twentieth century narrative is more complicated still, at least as it developed at Northwestern University. My interest in departmental and faculty “genealogy” at Northwestern (see Edwards, 1999) has led me to view with great suspicion any notion of inevitability or grand design in the growth of academic institutions. The grand design of Robert McLean Cumnock in the late-nineteenth century was to establish on Northwestern’s young Evanston campus a course of study, and later a school, of elocution and oratory. While the twenty-first century School of Communication continues to celebrate Cumnock as its founder, almost nothing in that school looks back to Cumnock’s design or pedagogical mission. That the school should have theatre professionals on the faculties of *two* departments—Theatre and Performance Studies—is the product of accident and unpredictable growth. No one, a century ago, would have planned such seeming redundancy—just as no one would have planned the seeming

redundancy of drama coursework in multiple locations across campus, both inside and outside the school.

The string of accidents that brought two highly visible, award-winning theatre professionals to a department of performance studies, rather than theatre, is the focus of the section “Adapting Adaptation” below. My focus here is the complicated relationship of those two professional artists to the interpreters theatre pedagogy that figured so significantly in the history of the department in which they now teach. Both Frank Galati and Mary Zimmerman studied with Robert Breen. Both teach courses descended from the readers theatre and chamber theatre courses developed by Breen, and both promote the value of textual study in the training of theatre artists. Yet in their professional work, as adapter/directors, both move far beyond “the service of literature” or “featuring the text.” Creative artistry is not the product of pedagogical method, and cannot be constrained by it. Galati’s adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1991) and Zimmerman’s adaptation of *Metamorphoses* (2002) are not the products of studying group performance textbooks, however strong the influence of a messy, unmethodical tradition that produced such textbooks. And what they teach in a present-day “presentational aesthetics” classroom is creative artistry, not textbook method. Their distance from textbook method is complicated by their movement through, and beyond, a certain tradition—one that was never embraced at Northwestern, in the increasingly professional postwar decades, by either the critical theorist in English or the practicing artist in theatre.

Groups of talented students similarly have moved through and beyond this tradition, on their way to forming theatre companies that regularly stage original adaptations. Founders of such critically acclaimed companies as Arden in Philadelphia, and Lookingglass, Redmoon, Lifeline, and About Face in Chicago, took coursework in the Theatre and

Performance Studies Departments after Galati had joined the faculty, and during the years in which Zimmerman made the transition from student to professor.<sup>5</sup> Lookingglass presents a unique success story. In June 2003, the 15-year-old company opened an eight-million-dollar theatre in a Chicago landmark, the Water Tower Water Works building on Michigan Avenue. Formerly “a proud member of the itinerant theatre community, renting space where it could” (Houlihan, 2003), Lookingglass now invites comparisons to the venerable Goodman Theatre and more recent arrivals such as Steppenwolf and the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre—landed gentry in Chicago’s theatre and entertainment districts. To launch the new space, founding members David Schwimmer and Joy Gregory adapted *Race*, the oral history of “the American obsession” by Chicagoan Studs Terkel (1992). The choice acknowledges several Lookingglass trademarks: the staging of original adaptations, the centrality of storytelling in theatrical forms, the potential of live theatre for activism and advocacy, and the company’s identification with and commitment to a specific community.<sup>6</sup>

As Northwestern students drawn to the vision and, as they call it, “chutzpah” of Schwimmer, the founders staged avant-garde “classics” (the term seems apt) like the Andre Gregory-Manhattan Project *Alice in Wonderland* (Gregory, 1972, 1973) and new plays like Steven Berkoff’s *West* (1985). Schwimmer and company, producing their work in student groups outside the Theatre Department, featured what company members described to me in 1994 as “a poor theatre aesthetic,” in which “the body was *everything*.” This approach had almost no place in orthodox Theatre Department coursework at the time. The company officially launched itself in 1988 with its own improvisational adaptation of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*: “very physical and very raw,” remembers founding member Larry Distasi, “and very much driven

by us in the moment of performing it.” What distinguished the early Lookingglass work, as I remember it, from the example of Grotowski (which several company members invoke) was the sheer audience-directed exuberance, the circus acrobat’s joy of being “in the moment of performing” before others.

Lookingglass members describe the company’s founding as oppositional to, but not dismissive of, aspects of institutional structure and practice. Their collective origin myth exemplifies Derrida’s “dangerous” supplement (1967/1976, p. 145) or, differently, the quality of “outsideness”—the “surplus of vision” that only an outside presence can supply, as a condition for “creative understanding” and true dialogue—that Bakhtin explored in various ways throughout his career (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 1–7; Morson & Emerson, 1990, pp. 52–56). But the conceptual language I find most helpful, in tracking their story, is a spinning of the term *paradox* that I remember first encountering in my study with translator Richard Howard of certain Barthes texts (see 1971/1986, p. 58). It is conventional to contrast the terms *orthodox* (straight or right in opinion, doctrine, or *doxa*) and *heterodox* (of another opinion, not in accordance with *doxa*). An early meaning of paradox (“beyond” *doxa*) reflects the sense of heterodox expression—a “statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief”—but with the stronger suggestion of something “marvelous or incredible,” “absurd or fantastic” (OED, 2005). If I contrast orthodox and paradoxical positions, this relates to the “marvelous” and “fantastic” ways in which theatre innovators often position themselves against or beyond the *doxa* of an academic discipline or what Brecht called the “apparatus” of a theatre community (Brecht, 1964, pp. 34–35).

Early in the professional life of Lookingglass, Mary Zimmerman arrived from a different corner of the Northwestern campus: the graduate program in Performance Studies. Her first collaboration with Lookingglass was the

acclaimed 1990 production of *The Odyssey*. Zimmerman introduced a number of paradoxes into an already oppositional framework. Influenced by Zimmerman's work with performance art, the company shifted from a body-is-everything aesthetic to a focus on visual spectacle. With Zimmerman, Cox recalls, began the company's search for "the stunningly beautiful image" in show after show.<sup>7</sup>

Another innovation was Zimmerman's interest in the stage adaptation of fiction, which she had studied for over a decade at Northwestern with teachers like Galati. Zimmerman recalls that with Galati's Tony-Award-winning 1989 production of his script for Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (Galati, 1991), adaptation "was just sort of in the air, I think," not just at Northwestern but in Chicago generally—and perhaps nationally, since the Broadway decade that ended with *The Grapes of Wrath* had begun with the tour of the Royal Shakespeare Company *Nicholas Nickleby* (Edgar, 1982/1992). Although the Lookingglass founders had participated in the culture of adaptation as Northwestern students—"they had their mind open to that," observes Zimmerman, through "the experience of having taking courses" with Performance Studies faculty—it was Zimmerman's arrival at Lookingglass that moved the company decisively toward a trademark interest in producing original adaptations. The production history on the company's current website features eighteen adaptations of narrative fiction and nonfiction, including six by Zimmerman (Homer's *Odyssey*, *The Arabian Nights*, the Sade fantasia *S/M*, the Grimm-inspired *Secret in the Wings*, *Metamorphoses*, and *Eleven Rooms of Proust*), two by Schwimmer (*Race and Sinclair's The Jungle*), and adaptations by other company members of narrative fiction by Hawthorne, Bulgakov, Dostoyevsky, Calvino, and Dickens. When augmented by about a dozen Lookingglass "original plays," the list of "world premieres" greatly overshadows the

handful of established playscripts produced by the company. Lookingglass "has *no interest* in the play that was hot in New York now," Zimmerman tells me in the late fall of 2003. "Even Steppenwolf and the Goodman do the play that won the Pulitzer. . . . They vie for who's gonna get to do the already done play that everyone already likes. I mean, Lookingglass is *phe-nom-e-nal-ly*" (she draw this out in the manner of Dickens's Mr. Tite Barnacle, giving it the air of a word of about five-and-twenty syllables) "risk-taking, because almost everything it does is new work." Zimmerman praises the company for a courage she helped to inspire.

The "adaptation" trademark had been firmly impressed upon Lookingglass by the critical wing of the Chicago apparatus (see for example Christiansen, 1990) when I interviewed ensemble members in 1994. Why has the group focused so heavily upon adaptations of narrative works? The question provokes a torrent of responses from the table. "There are *less rules*," says Hara, with a book than with a play. One has the freedom to "*create* theatre," instead of merely "*doing* theatre." Cox describes the sheer thrill, the sense of challenge, in seeking a theatrical way to make an audience see the visions he saw while reading a novel. Staging a book "immediately asks the question, *How?* And the answer to that question is . . ." Hara interrupts him: "is what we," as a company, "are about, almost." Distasi adds, with a laugh, "And we got away with it." Laura Eason insists, moreover, that adaptation "allows us to *write*, too." It has become important for the company "to feel like we're creating not just physically with our bodies, but also that we're *contributing* to the text." Company adaptations are "loose" enough to accommodate expressive and rhetorical functions beyond "just *choosing*" and arranging "words from the pre-existing text."

This impassioned response leads me to ask a potentially tedious question. If not to the

letter of the text, then to *what*, exactly, does the Lookingglass adapter remain faithful? It is not the author's intent, they agree. "The idea is to tell the same story," Hara suggests, "the way it *affected* you. I mean, the things about the novel or the story that resonate, that are still, like, banging off the walls of your ribcage" when you finish reading a novel or compelling work of nonfiction. "We want to be faithful to *that*." In translating a book to "the medium of theatre" one cannot "choose all the scenes. But we want to tell the same story."

The director/adaptor/auteur as *storyteller*: this draws me back to the group's description of how it chooses projects. The ensemble listens annually to director proposals. Persuasiveness in this forum relates to passion. "Somebody who's on fire comes in with a project and puts it on the table," says Cox, "and then the rest of us go, Yeah, that's what I want, that *fire* is what I want. And then we vote and decide." Hara agrees: "Without the passion of the director for the project, there's nothing. . . . Why do you want to tell this story? Why now?" Zimmerman, nearly a decade later, calls Lookingglass "a company of directors," not of actors. The number of ensemble members, by her estimate, who have not yet "directed a play" constitutes a distinct, and shrinking, minority.

As I listen to this, I recall what I first discovered when studying with Robert Breen: that adaptation is not a timeless theory or set of techniques, but a succession of diverse embodied practices, driven by desire and even desperate neediness. The book I have just read—this book whose scenes have banged off the walls of my ribcage—*must* be told again to my world, in my age. I would tell the story myself, but my lone body is not adequate to supply the visions that the book has projected on my mindscreen. I must extend myself through ten, twelve, fifteen bodies. This, I confess, is my fantasy of "Shakespeare reading" (Froissart, Holinshed, Montaigne, Plutarch,

Cinthio, Lyly, Plautus, Seneca's *Thyestes*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lodge's *Rosalynde*, Harsnett's *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, plus whatever the Renaissance equivalent was for the magazine lying open in the dentist's office). The Shakespeare we have begun to reimagine, as a "highly collaborative" artist rather than early modernism's solitary genius (Masten, 1997, p. 4), might have been at home in a setting like Lookingglass: as a "good thief" bringing his passion for stories to the table with project after project, and unrestrained by a pedantic fidelity to how the story was told before. The "true apprentice knows how to steal," Jerzy Grotowski insisted, to *continue* someone else's earlier discoveries and "*not just repeat*" them (quoted in Richards, 1995, pp. 3, 105).

The good thieves who inaugurated the eight-million-dollar complex on Michigan Avenue were Schwimmer, who wanted to do a production of *Race*, according to Zimmerman, "basically since the day the book came out"; and Zimmerman herself, who revised *Secret in the Wings* for the new space's second production. The two productions suggest to her the *extremes* of the company's director/adaptor/auteur sensibility. *Race*, based on personal narratives collected by Terkel, is "almost a hundred percent . . . a *real* person naturalistically speaking to the audience. . . . It's incredibly specific and direct." Whereas "*Secret in the Wings* is like, What the hell is going on? . . . It never, *ever* speaks what it is always saying." The content is "never in the language," but rather in the "structure, and gesture, and music, and the staging." What unites the two as Lookingglass productions, Zimmerman suggests, is the fact that they are both "very much ensemble pieces." But the ensemble members I interviewed identify a different connection: each was proposed by a *storyteller*, *on fire* with a project, who made the entire ensemble feel, *That fire* is what I want. (Why do you want to tell this story? Why now?)

A genealogical task I face is the tracing of a connection, from Breen through Galati to Zimmerman and the Lookingglass founders. The most readily available statements by Breen, the interpretation teacher and textbook author, admonish students to “feature” and “serve” the letter of the text. By the time the practice of adaptation reaches Lookingglass, the service of literature has given way to the service of storytelling, in one’s own time and place, and the remaking of text. To pursue Jackson’s amateur/professional distinction: does such a shift constitute a rejection of method by professional practice, located (in figures like Zimmerman and Galati) both inside and outside the university? Or does the professional adaptation of “adaptation” itself constitute a fresh telling of Breen’s story, in new language?

### CHAMBER THEATRE

“He was the *artist* of the department when I was there,” remembers Katharine Loesch, emerita professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who completed her PhD in Interpretation at Northwestern in 1961. “He was *the* artist.” Frank Galati, who began undergraduate study at Northwestern just as Loesch was departing, has similar memories of Robert Breen. Actors in Breen’s campus productions and students in his staging classes were

learning from the novel, and learning from narrative art, what the *stage* was—not just what the *novel* was, but what the *stage* is—when the assignment is to *let that story live*, and to give voice to every syllable of its musical score. . . . I think we found out more about how plastic and pliable and psychological *physical space* is, by virtue of Breen’s assignments, than we did by trying to understand that Shakespeare’s stage had just as much *plasticity*, and was just as much a psychological space.

What Galati calls the “plasticity” of the Shakespearean stage was very much a

twentieth century rediscovery, arising from such innovations as William Poel’s revolt against the grand manner of Victorian production and E. K. Chambers’s pioneering research on *The Elizabethan Stage* (1923). Peter Brook speaks of having once been “gripped by living theatre” when a postwar Hamburg company performed *Crime and Punishment* in the only available space, a garret; the sheer freedom of “the convention of a novel” in an empty space leads Brook to celebrate our fresh awareness

that the absence of scenery in the Elizabethan theatre was one of its greatest freedoms. . . . The Elizabethan stage. . . just a place with some doors. . . enabled the dramatist effortlessly to whip the spectator through an unlimited succession of illusions. . . . So it is that in the second half of the twentieth century. . . we are faced with the infuriating fact that Shakespeare is still our model. (1968, pp. 72–73, 78, 87)

But Galati’s point is that two decades of Breen students—encountering Brook’s comments in 1968 or racing to see his brilliant demonstration of “plasticity” in the celebrated Royal Shakespeare Company *Midsummer Night’s Dream* that toured Chicago in 1971—already had grasped a powerful working sense of all this. The professional achievements of Galati and Zimmerman, or in a more modest way the campus stagings of narrative by teachers like Njoki McElroy and myself, “have all been, in these very profound, almost mystical ways, informed by” Breen’s achievements, Galati insists, and his “marvelous way of being in the world.”

What I have called a culture of adaptation at Northwestern—Zimmerman’s sense of adaptation being “in the air” when the Lookingglass founders passed through—can be traced to Breen, but perhaps through lines of influence more “mystical” (as Galati suggests) than direct. Zimmerman remembers taking only one course from Breen, called out

of retirement, and gaining little from the “eccentric and sort of quiet” emeritus professor. His very presence at a midwestern university—inventing his “art form,” as his obituaries styled it, in his theatrical laboratory—remains a puzzle. Zimmerman jokes with me, “Where *did* Bob Breen come from?”

When Breen (b. 1909) first studied theatre at Northwestern, the program was one of six areas of instruction in the School of Speech that Dean Ralph Dennis had reshaped from the old “elocution and oratory” curriculum. The others were public speaking and persuasion, interpretation (the “fine art”), voice and interpretation (personal studio instruction in platform skills), correction (the forerunner of the present-day Communication Sciences and Disorders Department), and physical education; a degree program in radio would not arrive for another decade. (The lines were more porous than they would be in the “departmental” decades after World War II: the local legend Alvina Krause, hired after the arrival of C. C. Cunningham as a voice and interpretation instructor, would transform herself over a long career from a teacher of the oral interpretation of drama to the school’s best-known teacher of acting.) After graduating in 1933, Breen stayed on as an “assistant in dramatic production” while pursuing his MA degree (awarded in 1937); he also taught at another Illinois college before heading to New York in 1938. Breen enjoyed some success as a professional actor and dancer, before resuming a teaching career and then joining the infantry in the war. He received the Purple Heart for a wound that ended his dancing career (although dance would continue to shape his sense, as a director, of dynamic stage movement) and seems to have taken yet more steam out of his professional ambitions. (There were other Robert Breens in show business: he is not to be confused with the Broadway director who helped reshape ANTA in the late 1940s, or with Hollywood child star Bobby Breen.)

After his return to Chicago in the postwar years, Breen’s involvement with the entertainment industry was sporadic. Galati, who is seven years older than I, remembers seeing Breen during his years as a popular panelist on the DuMont Network quiz show *Down You Go*, before it moved to New York: Northwestern’s star faculty member Bergen Evans was the “pompous” moderator, who “would say, ‘Now, Professor Breen, um, in the Oxford English Dictionary, the word . . .,’” in response to which Breen performed “the fuddy-duddy professor, who was very funny and would make jokes.” Galati describes as well the wry persona that Breen often brought into the classroom: the flip side of his other persona, a virtuoso actor-demonstrator who remains my model for what I understand to be the quotational style of Brecht’s “Street Scene” (1964, pp. 121–129). Breen’s other television outing, an NBC summer replacement in 1951 called *Short Story Playhouse*, began to good reviews but faded after two months. Breen blamed the producers for abandoning literature of “quality”—Tolstoy and Sinclair Lewis—in favor of “popular magazine stories” with no narrative interest, which “were frankly junk.” After the mid-1950s, Breen restricted his creative life largely to another quarter-century of work with his brainchild chamber theatre on Northwestern’s campus, and to occasional roles in campus plays directed by his colleagues.

So what did this brainchild look like?<sup>8</sup> Call to mind the image of someone performing a passage of narrative fiction. It does not matter if your image is an old-fashioned platform elocutionist, a parent reading a story to a child, Simon Callow or Anton Lesser imitating a Dickens public reading, Charlton Heston performing the Bible on cable television, or Toni Morrison reading a chapter from one of her novels to a class at Princeton. To stay with the last example: Mavis sits in a strange kitchen and begins to make contact with the presence of her two dead children.

Left alone Mavis expected the big kitchen to lose its comfort. It didn't. In fact she had an outer-rim sensation that the kitchen was crowded with children—laughing? singing?—two of whom were Merle and Pearl. Squeezing her eyes shut to dissipate the impression only strengthened it. When she opened her eyes, Connie was there, dragging a thirty-two-quart basket over the floor. "Come on," she said. "Make yourself useful." (Morrison, 1998, p. 41)

The reader performs all the voices, narrator and characters. She projects a kind of unity, that of the social storyteller: the confident image of full speech, emerging from a voice and body that seem to "match," in Wallace Bacon's specialized sense (1972, pp. 34, 133–137), the narrative omniscience.

Harder to imagine, for most readers, would be a chamber theatre scene using the same text, which begins with an act of subject-splitting. This approach does not dramatize the passage, in the manner of either realism (viewed through the conventionally invisible fourth wall) or epic drama. It does something much stranger, which many viewers in the past half-century have found intolerable; "untheatrical" is the dismissive adjective that I have heard most often. Chamber theatre puts onstage a narrator no longer in complete control of the story. The narrator's omniscient reports now seem mere suggestions that the characters must complete. Familiar devices like narrated interior monologue become interior "dialogue." The narrator often describes redundantly, highlighting gestures that characters also "act." And the characters also describe themselves, straying into the space of narrative perspective and third-person language.

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NARRATOR: Left alone Mavis expected the big kitchen to lose its comfort.

MAVIS: [Aside to NARRATOR.] It didn't.

NARRATOR: In fact she had an outer-rim sensation that the kitchen was crowded with children

MAVIS: laughing? singing?

NARRATOR: two of whom were Merle and Pearl. Squeezing her eyes shut to dissipate the impression

MAVIS: only strengthened it.

NARRATOR: When she opened her eyes,

CONNIE: [Entering; to MAVIS.] Connie was there,

NARRATOR: [Indicating to MAVIS.] dragging a thirty-two-quart basket over the floor.

CONNIE: "Come on," she said. "Make yourself useful."

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When Breen rejoined the Northwestern faculty after World War II, he began to experiment with this technique in the interpretation classroom. He had many students who would read passages of fiction formally similar to Morrison's first paragraph, and detect only a long block of narrative report, spoken by a single voice. To encourage them to hear multiple voices encoded in passages of free indirect discourse, or to respond to literary language as gesture and symbolic action, Breen would have students script and stage chamber theatre.<sup>9</sup> He would regard the script I offer above as only one possibility for bringing out the dialogues inhabiting language—even language that formally resembles monologue. Galati agrees that Breen as a teacher "in his heyday" was far more improvisatory and playful, more committed to the exploration of multiple options, than the rather inflexible persona who narrates his textbook *Chamber Theatre* (1978).

Breen remembers the first experiments with the form taking place "in the spring of 1947, in a little theatre belonging to the French department at Northwestern" (Forrest & Loesch, 1976, p. 3). He credits his student Gerald Freedman, who would go on to a distinguished career on Broadway and at the Great Lakes Theatre Festival, with adapting and directing the first full-length production in 1949.

Another Northwestern arrival in 1947 was Wallace Bacon (b. 1914), the new chair of the Interpretation Department where Breen was an instructor. With the phasing-out of the voice and interpretation staff and the threatened departure of a disgruntled C. C. Cunningham, School of Speech Dean James McBurney faced a tough choice: either eliminate the etiolated interpretation coursework (which had the closest ties to the school's mission at its founding) or find a leader who could elevate its academic respectability. Bacon, a PhD in English from the University of Michigan, inherited a program that had hovered uneasily during Cunningham's stewardship between a genteel "fine arts" emphasis and an undergraduate "teaching of skills" curriculum. Bacon succeeded in creating, among other things, a credible graduate program: where Cunningham had directed only two doctoral dissertations, he would direct over fifty, and his colleagues twenty more, before his retirement in 1979. The second dissertation he directed was Breen's (1950).

Here began a friendship that would result in a coauthored book, *Literature as Experience* (Bacon & Breen, 1959), and a cooperative but carefully negotiated pedagogical philosophy. Bacon's respectful, even devotional approach to textual study through performed "communion" (see Edwards, 1999, pp. 85–93) provided the department's *doxa* for three decades, and everyone on the teaching staff made orthodox pronouncements. "Chamber theatre is a *technique*, not an art," we read at the beginning of Breen's textbook on staging. There follows the language about "the service of literature": chamber theatre "makes manifest for an audience the structure, the theme, and the tone of literature" (1978, p. 6). The book wraps up with a long "list of 'don't's':

*don't* rewrite unless you absolutely have to . . . ; *don't* cut the descriptions just because they are descriptions; *don't* change the indirect discourse to direct discourse; *don't* alter the diction in the interest of

"clarifying," "modernizing," or "dramatizing" the style.

Breen concludes this "admonition" with the image of adapters "drunk with power," beginning "to think of the work of fiction as theirs rather than the author's" (1978, pp. 85–86).

At odds with such pronouncements was Breen's own practice. Over the years, I reviewed with Breen a number of his scripts—ingenious two-hour reductions of thousand-page novels—and sometimes asked him how his method squared with the advice in his book. My favorite answer (in response to a question about his script for *Anna Karenina*): "Well, the first cut is the hardest. After that it gets easy." In fairness, the textbook told student adapters that if "their conscience will accept the aesthetic responsibility for the results," they "are free to do what they please" (1978, p. 86). Yet to our last conversations, he defended his position about the self-effacement of the performing body "in the service of literature."

Breen's artistic practice, in my view, created a long-running disturbance within the mission of Bacon's academic department. Despite his admonitions about "service" and textual fidelity, Breen handed the audience a paradox every time he adapted a book, or invited his students to stage a short story. Narratologist Seymour Chatman speaks of the "anthropomorphic trap" of imagining the narrating agencies in works of fiction (not merely their "implied authors" but even their narrative voices) as representations of human characters: he complains about critics who view *any* fictional narrator as a talking body, having "literally . . . crossed the line from discourse to story . . . to go strolling with the characters" (1990, pp. 88, 120). Yet the practice of chamber theatre on Breen's terms requires falling into such a trap every time out. Revisit my Toni Morrison example: when an omniscient, undramatized narrator, in the time-and-space "scene" of discourse, *literally* steps into the "scene" of story to mirror and prompt the

thoughts of the character Mavis, this defies our commonsense experience of reading printed fictions. Mavis was *then*, the storyteller (or storytelling, as Chatman might insist) is *now*. With a chamber theatre scene, however, two time-space relationships contaminate one another, in a weave or dance of actors' bodies. "Well, you ought to encourage the narrator to enter into the dialogue with the characters," Breen explains to interviewers in 1975, "even though it seems that the narrator is a disembodied figure who can not be seen by the characters" (Forrest & Loesch, 1976, p. 5).

However illogical this stage image might seem, there are real-life models for it. The image is familiar to anyone who has ever sat in an acting class with an engaged teacher. Two students labor to stay "in the moment" as Hamlet and Ophelia, or Elena and Astrov, while this talkative body hovers around their intimate scene and side-coaches. Such scene-work typically takes place before an audience. The acting coach inhabits the audience's time and place—a discourse "scene"—and in fact so do the two actors. But the actors strive to maintain the representation of their characters in another time and place—a "scene" of story—even while the acting coach buzzes instructions, over their shoulders or in their faces, on how to push and tweak their work-in-progress.<sup>10</sup> Far from being recondite or obscure, such an example is commonplace for the acting students in my classes. I introduce these students to the chamber theatre narrator by asking them to think about the paradoxical behavior of their acting teachers.

But Breen was interested in materializing more abstract psychological relationships. A favorite example was the experience of doubling and psychological mirroring at the heart of such dead metaphors as "talking to" oneself or "being beside" oneself. "Why not let the narrator," a nonidentical physical mirror, "stand in the locus of the self who is addressed?" Whether an utterance emerges from the lips of the character or her mirroring

narrator "doesn't really make a great deal of difference as long as we set up a dialogue relationship" within a private moment of self-awareness (Forrest & Loesch, 1976, p. 5). Does so far-fetched an embodiment of metaphor (even dead metaphor) have any verisimilar equivalents? When I interviewed Breen in 1989, we had not spoken for a while. In an attempt to frame my first question, I rehearsed a long list of concerns: the works of theory I had been reading, the staging problems my students had encountered. When my preamble reached fifteen minutes (I was there to tape-record *him*, after all) I caught myself and apologized. "No, no, no, no, no," he reassured me, "it's important for you to be listening to yourself." Breen "in his heyday" was loved and feared for withering his students with a deadpan sarcasm, usually apparent to everyone in the room except the witheree. Had the wearer of this patient face, mirroring my confusions, decided to leave me with one last demonstration? Or was this a demonstration of a different sort—the nonidentical face of the other, the narrator of a larger discourse, who stares back when we talk to ourselves?

The great disturbance to interpretation's orthodoxy was chamber theatre's splitting of the human subject. Elsewhere I have argued that the odd, mirror-filled *mise-en-scène* of chamber theatre, inspired by Breen's interest in the *I/me* dialogues of William James, bears striking resemblances to the revision of Freudian *Ichspaltung* that Jacques Lacan elaborated in the 1940s and early 1950s, and mapped out in schematic form in his 1954–55 seminar (see Edwards, 1999, pp. 95–98, 127). But a simpler image will serve. The image of the elocutionary platform reader, which Bacon's interpretation pedagogy updated and even rarified, was drawn and quartered by Breen's technique for staging literature. Solo performance of literature, as it was known, declined in coursework settings as the study of interpretation faded at Northwestern. Far more common today are courses that Breen

inspired, featuring adaptation: the transformation of interpretation's literary text into a group performance text. Chamber theatre was the hybrid product, as Bacon (1972, p. 416) called it, of an insistently cross-disciplinary imagination. Bacon (1975) expressed a growing concern about the "widespread interest" in phenomena like chamber theatre that had moved the academic discipline toward "an increased emphasis upon performance" (one of the "dangerous shores" that the student of literature must navigate) and a "loosening of bonds" to the text (p. 223). And for good reason, as it turns out: chamber theatre helped to open the pedagogical space for a range of courses, from narrative stagings to image-based time-art and performance art. As seen in my Morrison script, chamber theatre transformed the storytelling subject from a unified body image into many bodies, exploded into relations of irreducible difference. Without intending to, perhaps, Breen uncorked the bottle. Michael Bowman (1995) aptly describes the genie that escaped: moving beyond Breen, we have begun to explore literary adaptation as a site of resistance, disobedience, performative authorship, "misrule," and reading "against the grain" (pp. 14–17). We have begun to celebrate the irresponsible reading, and we do it in groups, like the Lookingglass Theatre Company.

Bowman's critique suggested my own need for a performance vocabulary different than Breen's, to describe the *impact* of his staging method beyond his own prescriptions. "Bob hated to write," Bacon told me on several occasions: he struggled to find the simplest, most flexible terms possible to describe his own staging experiments. But even seemingly transparent terms are slippery. The etymology of "text" leads us to "woven thing," a composition that is closed and finished. After Barthes (1971/1986), of course, we must pause to clarify that we *mean* composition, "weave" of words, and *not* the sense obtained by spinning the term into the opposite of "work" (the finished

product, the book on a shelf). "Text," so reversed, becomes a readerly process, a "methodological field," a "*network*"; "the Text attempts to locate itself very specifically *behind* the limit of the *doxa* . . . ; taking the word literally, we might say that the Text is always *paradoxical*" (pp. 57–61). The literary text of the old Interpretation Department at Northwestern was the book on the shelf—but paradoxically the book that existed only when "matched" by a performer's living act. Breen pushed this paradox even farther.

In recent decades, perhaps no conceptualization of text has come under such assault as the view that a literary text (published or unpublished) precedes, and authorizes, all subsequent performances: every theatrical production, every reading at a lectern, will be an "instance" (version, variation, adaptation) of a text that will remain finished, stable, and in most cases available for future study. "One of the ways both literary and performance studies have misconceived dramatic performance," argues W. B. Worthen (1998), "is by taking it merely as a reiteration of texts, a citation that imports literary or textual authority into performance." What is needed is an expansion of the "sophisticated approach to performance" that considers "the interplay between the scripted drama and the (actual, implied, or imagined) practices of stage performance," as employed for example in "Shakespeare studies—one corner of literary study where performance has had an effect" (pp. 1094, 1098).

While taking exception to Worthen's broad-brush portrait of the antitextual bias in performance studies departments (I happen to teach in one) I appreciate both the need he perceives and some of the examples he employs to illustrate it. My own illustration of the interplay between literary text and dramatic performance is the one I first learned, if rather indirectly, from Breen. Moving beyond Bacon's paradox of text-as-body, Breen created a "performance text" that—however

much it claimed to “serve” or repeat a literary work—could not be pushed back into that work once released. Rather than describing the performance as an instance of a literary text, I found it necessary to begin working interactively (if not entirely in reverse): my analytical description must set out from the performance text, which validates the search for “pretexts” including (but not limited to) the identified literary source.

Some readers will bristle at my reaccentuation of “performance text.” I now use the term to describe the orchestrated, “woven” ensemble of materials and effects that an audience “reads” (see Edwards, 2003, pp. 43–44). In the case of a scripted play (as opposed to, say, long-form improvisation) these materials and effects *include* the “literary text,” the words rehearsed and spoken by actors. But they include as well the distinctive qualities of the actors’ voices and bodies, the live or recorded music underscoring the action, the style and condition of the furniture onstage, the paint treatment on the walls of the set—even the smell of the burning incense wafting from the stage to the house, or the taste of the wine or coffee that the actors invite the audience to share. The performance text is not static, but plastic and temporal. Its dialogue with an audience, as Patrice Pavis has suggested, reveals a certain openness and “play in the structure” (1982, pp. 138–139).

Richard Schechner has argued that performances are textual only in the narrowest and most restricted cases. “Simply put, the text is there,” he declares in a 1997 interview,

but performance is not. Or maybe one or two performances are—you take a class to the theatre, you look at a videotape. But these are only instances. . . . In performance studies, the text would be a performance everyone has seen together or a videotape of a particular performance. . . . But what is most interesting to me is to point out the variables possible. . . . (quoted in Harding, 2000, p. 206)

Yet what interests Joseph Roach (1985) in *The Player’s Passion* is the history of an actor’s art, as influenced by science’s shifting conceptions of how the body works: the art consists not of the variables, but of the successful repetitions. Even concepts so seemingly familiar as “spontaneity” have been construed variously: to mean either “free improvisation” or its opposite, “habituated, automatic response.” The paradox of acting, for Roach, relates to the interaction of these two meanings: “the actor’s spontaneous vitality seems to depend on the extent to which . . . actions and thoughts have been automatized, made second nature.” Although “every night the actor’s experience . . . is somewhat different,” nevertheless “the words, gestures, and movements that the actor embodies are so nearly the same as to be indistinguishable from those of the night before.” Ballet dancers provide some of the most striking examples of this (pp. 15–18).

I suppose that my use of performance text most successfully addresses *this* kind of repetition—as well as the more mundane kinds of repetition, such as the set pieces or lighting cues that remain insensibly the same from performance to performance (except when altered by accidents or mistakes). In using the term, I tend to focus on the elements of a production that strike me as repeatable—or, more than this, as *designed* to be repeatable. Christopher Innes (2000) provides a striking example, from the wildly improvisational *Dionysus in 69* that Schechner developed with the Performance Group: “even if the colloquial tone” of the actors’ line-delivery “gave a spontaneous effect, all the variants were fixed.” So dependent was “the Performance Group on the script” that during one performance, when a female spectator “bonded with the actor playing Pentheus, . . . they left the performance space. The rest of the group were unable to continue, since no alternative had been rehearsed” (p. 71). Or to cast this in my own terms: the interesting variables caused so

great a disruption that the performance text (in this case, a text with enormous play in the structure) could not repeat. Schechner's own anecdotes, such as an audience's "kidnaping" of Pentheus, suggest that the show could go on under extraordinary circumstances. But even Schechner (1973) admits that the company "began to resent participation especially when it broke the rhythms of what had been carefully rehearsed." By the time the production closed, "most of the performers had had it with participation" (pp. 40–46).

Innes (2000) traces a specialized use of "pre-text" or "pre-text" to Artaud—"any preestablished dramatic 'situations are only a pretext' for performance"—and later Schechner, who would identify this or that literary text as merely "a source of 'scenarios' for improvisation" and appropriation (pp. 70–71). Susan Letzler Cole (1992) employs "pretexts" to describe the hodgepodge of sources, appropriations, and paraphrases in the work of Elizabeth LeCompte.<sup>11</sup> The term has led me to reverse some tenets of my former teachers. The stage—a "memory machine," as Marvin Carlson (2003) has recently suggested—is not merely "the sensory illustration of a text already written, thought, or lived outside the stage" (Derrida, 1966/1978, p. 237). What it remembers and repeats, however imperfectly, are its pretexts. Woven tightly or loosely (with more or less play) these pretexts are as various as identified literary sources, random quotations, recorded songs, and even actors' bodies that bear traces of our memories of them in other roles. Pretexts include as well our memories of social behavior: in my most faithful chamber theatre staging of a short story, the reverentially handled source text shares the stage with the "pretext" memory of an Alvina Krause side-coaching student actors, or myself in conversation with Breen.

Interpretation's stable object of study was the poem on the page. Its enduring paradox, the performance text, is harder to describe as a fixed work or product. "I find that the

greatest satisfaction in Chamber Theatre comes from process rather than product," Breen confessed. "I would rather do a series of scenes in different ways, trying this and trying that, than be concerned with some definitive or final way that must be fixed for the sake of performance" (quoted in Forrest & Loesch, 1976, p. 6). A few years before his retirement, Breen (1975) gave a melancholy assessment of his strange invention's failure to establish an identity in professional theatre, alongside better-known Chicago exports like Paul Sills's "story theatre."<sup>12</sup> Chamber theatre must "settle for its value" in the classroom: the form "may be and often is 'entertaining' and 'theatrically exciting,' but these are fringe benefits. If they are too directly pursued, the critical function of Chamber Theatre may lose its centrality and suffer the fate of most novelties" (p. 207). While the liberating potential of his experiments fired the imaginations of students, and students of students, Breen himself continued to tinker with the *rigorous* practice of his method before small audiences at Northwestern. Galati, in February 2003, remembered the theatrical excitement. He reeled off the names of Breen productions—"Look at his *As I Lay Dying*, look at his. . ."—before I interrupted him. "Well, nobody *did*, that was the problem." Galati laughed, a little ruefully. "That doesn't make it less great," he reminded me.

#### ADAPTING ADAPTATION

How do the careers of Galati, Zimmerman, and Njoki McElroy exemplify a movement beyond Breen and the "service of literature"? It is important to stress movement, because each first wandered into Bacon's Interpretation Department by accident. In the late 1960s, McElroy (b. 1925) was a public school teacher working with emotionally disturbed children. She had founded the Cultural Workshop of North Chicago, which involved teenagers in public performances designed to teach them (as the public schools, she felt, failed to do) about

African American history and culture. Richard Willis of Northwestern's Theatre faculty saw the group, encouraged McElroy to study directing with him, and later urged her to pursue a master's degree—but not in Theatre, McElroy remembers with a laugh. Her ambition to investigate performance as a community-based teaching tool “would be *accepted* better” in Interpretation. “The Theatre Department was *done*,” McElroy remembers—in words that recall Augusto Boal's sense of the bourgeois theatre as “the finished theatre,” reflecting the desired image of a “complete, finished world” (Boal 1974/1985, p. 142) rather than a world in process. “You came into that structure,” she remarks, “you *fit* into that structure.” She began her graduate work across the street, therefore, in an academic structure with more play in it. Here she would complete a doctoral dissertation, under Bacon's direction, and in 1970 inaugurate the pathbreaking Performance of Black Literature course that she would teach until 2003.<sup>13</sup>

One of McElroy's curricular innovations was an annual group performance, staged by her students in free-admission open classroom settings. Initially she used preexisting plays. But her self-styled “adventurous” work with teachers (later colleagues) Breen and Leland Roloff—experimenting with “new media” and avant-garde performance—inspired her to stage adaptations and original material.<sup>14</sup> McElroy would freely adapt texts of fiction and nonfiction—and then hand a script to groups in class, studying the source texts, with the invitation to shape and adapt the script even further. One goal was a lesson in empowerment: students who typically “didn't have authority in *any* situation” became directors, writers, and designers of a public event. During her last 15 years with the course, scripts included career retrospectives of major African American artists (Josephine Baker, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks) and portraits of literary and cultural movements like the Harlem Renaissance.

As McElroy describes her desire to make students aware of their *own* voices, engaged in the public sounding-forth of another (literary) voice, I am reminded of the Lookingglass's desire in selecting *storytellers* as directors. Why tell this story? Why now? In her decades of teaching, McElroy appreciated “text” as Barthes reaccentuates the term: she wanted to show performers that a published book or finished script “is *plastic*, you know, it's plastic, and you can work with it. . . . In adapting, you have an opportunity to use your own creativity.” Students can apply such creativity not only to literature but to the “adaptation of life.” McElroy demonstrated this in 2000 with the compelling *Everyday People*: an imaginary journey inspired by the storytelling she heard among passengers on a bus trip through southern Indiana, and reset in the standstill of a terminal.<sup>15</sup> The production begins with the invocation of Sankofa, “an Akan word from Ghana, which literally means, Return and pick it up.” The performance text “picks up” many pretexts, ranging from *a cappella* relyrics of popular songs, to borrowings and rehandlings of material from Pearl Cleage, James Baldwin, and filmmaker Haile Gerima.<sup>16</sup> It picks up as well the techniques of chamber theatre, employed loosely to stage a given storyteller's relationship to a scene of memory.

The progression of narrators is not casual or random—the kind of “any actor can narrate” strategy seen throughout a stage adaptation like *Nicholas Nickleby*. McElroy insists that we live in a world saturated with stories, of which only a few break through into our everyday communication. It takes a hothouse atmosphere like a bus station, from which the stranded cannot escape, for some storytellers to grab and hold our attention. (Actors do this more aggressively at the beginning of the performance; gradually we relax and accept being grabbed.) Travelers who might prefer to shrug off the passing stranger's story, and move away, are *compelled* to listen—just as we in the audience (extending that crowded room)

are compelled by the conventions of theatre to sit and listen to the homeless man, the prisoner's sister, the sullen runaway. Like the spirit Sankofa, we do not fly off: we "return and pick up" the story that, in other circumstances, we might ignore.

More than this: *no one*, we learn, has the *whole* story. We encounter character B in character A's recollection—but character B's story *exceeds* its narrowed life there, and continues for our ears, outside character A's earshot. None of the characters, McElroy insists, is one-dimensional: "you think that you've got this character all checked out, and that character comes up with something that says, No, I'm too complex for you to figure me out in that way, it's not that simple." So it is that character A discovers she does not truly know *her own* story, until it acquires the "outsideness" of an attentive stranger, or the "talking book" that the stranger reads aloud. The text of this performance is not a work, as Barthes suggests, but a network. It not only unfolds, but folds back. It is a weave of pretexts. It is very much a production, moreover, of the polymorphous culture of adaptation that Breen set in motion.

Frank Galati (b. 1943) discovered this culture when he transferred to Northwestern's Theatre Department from Western Illinois University. Alvina Krause took notice of his talent, and he began "to sit in on her class every now and then." But the faculty "rivalry and competition" in the Theatre Department which trickled down to student "camps" and a "kind of guruism," drove the literature-loving actor to seek another major. "I never took an acting course, and I never took a directing course," remembers the award-winning actor and director. Preparing to transfer into English, he ran into an Interpretation student who knew he was an actor. "You know, Dr. Breen is having auditions for *Anna Karenina*, why don't you go over there? . . . The next thing I knew, I was Levin in *Anna Karenina*," and a major in Bacon's department. Camps of students in

Theatre, as Galati observes, thought themselves "cool kids" for aligning with this or that teacher. The presence of a small department—*supplementary* in Derrida's sense, practicing performance *outside* Theatre—created a fully credentialized space for a whole new camp of "cool kids," bookish acting students "getting hip to" phenomena like "chamber theatre" and "media performance." Zimmerman remembers that the "tag line" for the undergraduate Interpretation student, twenty years later, "was the Theatre major with a briefcase." The perception of "cool" is relative, of course; by the early 1960s, in any case, a small academic department had developed its own theory of theatrical relativity.

Galati credits this in large part to Bacon's openness to faculty innovation. "I think one of the things that we all learned from him, directly, or indirectly, was his advice to all of us as teachers to *be ourselves*, you know, to teach to our strengths": not every teacher's "genius," or "ability to ignite and inspire," is "right for every student." McElroy praises Bacon for the same qualities. The "unintimidated" chairman "made me feel that I could really go without being all bound up in tradition"—even when some "way-out," "break-the-boundaries" activity went against the grain of Interpretation Department doxa. The paradox of Bacon's leadership is that, despite his commitment to the rigorous discipline he elaborated in the several editions of his performance textbook, he recruited teachers and students who would test the very limits he seemed to impose. This made the old department an exciting place to study, if not always a harmonious one.

These stories remind me of Sofiya Gubaidulina's anecdote about the encouragement of Dmitri Shostakovich, in a far more charged political context. Having taught himself to be creative during decades of "correction" by Stalin's cultural ministers, the composer would praise his most original students with irony: "Don't be afraid of being

yourself. My wish for you is that you should continue on your own, *incorrect* way." Continue, with my blessing, down your own wrong path: "I am infinitely grateful to Shostakovich for those words. I . . . felt fortified by them to such an extent that I feared nothing, any failure or criticism just ran off my back" (quoted in Wilson, 1994, p. 306).

The wrong path of chamber theatre, then—brushing one of Bacon's "dangerous shores"—led Galati to direct his first department-sponsored production in 1970, an adaptation of Joyce's *Dubliners* story "The Dead." Acting in that production gave me my own first taste of chamber theatre. "I was a purist," Galati recalls,

back when we did "The Dead," you know, I absolutely refused to cut a single word. And I maintained that discipline even in some of the longer works that I cut, with regard to internal sections that it seemed to me needed to be preserved as they were crafted by the writer.

Attempts to employ a Breen-like rigor came to an end with an adaptation of Anne Tyler's *Earthly Possessions* staged at Steppenwolf Theatre in 1991. Galati's last return to "the 'old way' . . . split the 'first person' between two actresses, and it just didn't work. . . . There wasn't the sort of zest of simplicity, you know?" By that point, Galati had learned a different kind of simplicity in abundantly complicated projects like *The Grapes of Wrath*. In reducing the four-hour running time of Steppenwolf's original production, Galati made a "watershed" discovery about his "job" as adapter-director. He had to steer a middle way between the temptation to dramatize—to "find the play" in a novel by "winding it up more tightly"—and "Breen's invitation to let the novel *play*, to let it wander on its own way and let us follow after it." What he faced, while reshaping the production for its long journey to Broadway, was the need to find the *theatre's* story:

I knew I had to get the Joads to California before the intermission. And that's not *Steinbeck's* job. And that's not the Joads' job. They're struggling. . . . They're doing *their* job. My job was to somehow cross that distance from the very opening to . . . "It's California."

If the *study* of adaptation had sharpened Galati's "perception of story," the *job* of adaptation required him to unlearn the rigor of his teacher, who insisted on repeating all the devices of novelistic narrative.

Mary Zimmerman (b. 1960) speaks similarly about the evolution of storytelling devices in her original adaptations. As a Theatre student at Northwestern, she took many Interpretation classes (although she was never a major until her graduate study) and learned the chamber theatre method by acting in numerous faculty-directed productions. She remembers being "very chamber-theatre-y and very preserve-all-the-narrative" when starting out as a director. But both creative growth and considerations of audience have led her to a style that features "less frequent and lengthy appearances" of onstage narrators. "I found other ways to *hide the narrative in there?*" she says to me in a faux-nervous rising inflection—as if her bad faith had summoned the ghost of Robert Breen, doom'd for a certain term to walk the night.

Our conversations in 2003 cover the various ways in which she has reaccentuated the practice of Breen and his students. Like Galati, Zimmerman claims to have grasped a clearer sense of *story* in the theatre through her practice of adaptation. In shaping texts far "larger than can be done . . . in an evening," Zimmerman seeks those episodes and elements that will interact productively with other pretexts: "what my actors are going to be really good at, and what the space is going to accommodate, and what the set suggests." In much of her work she gravitates toward "ancient literature . . . because I think performance is *embedded* in it—they were *oral* texts, they

were *performed* texts.” Stories from oral cultures “may be codified into an accepted print text,” but “old things that survive have proved their vitality and their immediacy and their relevance by the fact of their survival.” More than this, the contemporary artist feels “the security of joining a big chorus instead of feeling, *I’m* the maker of this.” The old story that might have received its first performances by a singer of tales must now speak in the hybrid language of a technologically sophisticated theatre. Zimmerman speaks of how she first came to appreciate this in adaptation classes, even though she might have moved beyond most of the *specific* techniques advanced there: “When the assignment is to take a work of art that was not constructed for space and time, you find out what ‘the theatrical’ is. Because that is the ingredient you’re adding, or coaxing out of it, you know?” The experience is “*everything* about performance,” because the source text “wasn’t written with a *convenience*, the *accommodations*, of the way a play accommodates its venue.” Her words recall Galati’s appreciation of learning in Breen’s classroom exercises about the stage’s *plasticity*.

If not to the *letter* of the text, then to *what*, exactly, does the adapter remain faithful? The question I posed to Lookingglass artists, in 1994, receives a revealing answer from Zimmerman in November 2003. She rehearses fidelity in a series of ratios. In her 2003 staging of Seneca’s *Trojan Women* at the Goodman Theatre, the only writerly signature she added to David Slavitt’s translation (1992) was the lyric to a song composed for the production by her friend Philip Glass. In a very different way, the arrangement of quotations in *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* (in various productions from 1989 to 2003)—“no matter how kind of crazy my staging is”—presents “one hundred percent Leonardo’s language, zero percent my own.” By contrast, the script of the celebrated *Metamorphoses* production (Zimmerman, 2002) is “fifty-fifty in terms of

my text and David Slavitt’s” translation of Ovid (1994). And the much-revised *Secret in the Wings*, inspired by a list of Grimm tales and Italo Calvino’s retelling of “The Three Blind Queens” (1980),

really shouldn’t even say “adapted by.” It should say “written by,” because . . . there’s not a word of deliberately copied language from any particular text. It’s my own *memory*, and a jumbling-together of stories from childhood.

Of Zimmerman’s two Chicago productions in 2003, then, which was the more personal?

That’s a really good question. . . . *Trojan Women* was personal to me in terms of my political convictions at the time, and I felt that the language of Seneca and David Slavitt . . . was much stronger than anything I could ever write.

Daniel Ostling’s set for the modern-dress production cruelly invoked the ruins of the World Trade Center towers; staring almost straight down from the theatre’s highest gallery, I experienced some of the vertigo and sheer faintness described by my friend Kameron Steele, who watched unbelievably and helplessly from a nearby building in Manhattan as the jumpers on 9/11 hit the street. And although the actors, faithfully speaking the Seneca translation, said nothing about America’s current adventure in Iraq, one could not ignore such details as the white noise of helicopters, or Zimmerman’s casting choice of Fredric Stone—a ringer for Dick Cheney—in the role of Agamemnon. The *adaptation* of multiple pretexts produced a personal statement by Zimmerman that not all the performing bodies onstage necessarily needed to share. In more direct ways, *Secret in the Wings* is “the most personal of my plays,” Zimmerman concedes, “because the language is most my own.”

Then perhaps the better way to ask the question is this: which of the two very personal

adaptations is more faithful? Zimmerman returns several times to the image of student painters,

those people that you see making those exact copies in the Louvre. There's something about that practice of your hand literally going through that motion that teaches you something *general* about representation or painting. . . . I think that's how you learn to write, just like the painter in the Louvre, or whatever. By having to, you know . . .

She starts to say "memorize," but reconsiders. "By, you know, just *dealing, dealing, dealing* with the body of the text." She invokes her experience in "jillions" of undergraduate Interpretation Department classes, where the rigors of a typical assignment required the student to memorize and embody a literary text in ways that were "not against-the-grain or not fractured or not interwoven with other texts" (three moves that characterize much of Zimmerman's most distinctive work). Such precise engagement with "great literature" (Zimmerman trills her voice like an elocutionary lady, on her way to making a serious point) "imprints in you internally a kind of deep structure of narrative and of storytelling" that prepares you to take your own path. Galati agrees, when I mention this a few days later: "We paid our dues." Such "disciplines of the text," as Worthen (1995) expressed the matter, were not the dead end of oratorical culture at Northwestern: they were the springboard for two artists who have moved compellingly *beyond* literature in their best-known public work.

In taking their own "incorrect" ways—in moving beyond literature, interpretation, chamber theatre—Galati and Zimmerman have helped shape the "local" art of adaptation in Chicago, and have taken it to international stages. For their work as adapter/directors, both have won multiple Joseph Jefferson Awards, as well as Tony Awards. Notable among Zimmerman's many achievements is the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship,

which she received in 1998. At the top of Galati's equally impressive list of honors is his election, in 2001, to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. McElroy, spinning the culture of adaptation toward community activism, has been recognized for performance-based work in education going back to the 1960s; the honor she mentions with greatest pride is an NAACP Living Legend Award in 2001.

### WITHOUT THE WORDS

The double movement within a local context that I have tried to describe—from textbook method to professional practice, and from featuring to fissuring a text—can be seen in the ambitious *Chekhov Cycle* by Redmoon Theatre's Jim Lasko. The first installment, *Nina*, which inspired my admiring report in another essay (see Edwards, 2003, pp. 38–40, 52–53), reinvented Chekhov's *The Seagull* as an almost wordless clownscape in a Chicago public park during the summer of 2002. The following spring, Lasko took many of the same artists indoors at the Steppenwolf Studio to develop and stage *Seagull*, a second "rewriting" of the play. While installment two restored free translations of much of Chekhov's text, the most memorable "language" was visual and gestural.

The *Cycle*'s Kostya, like Lasko himself, is a puppeteer as well as a "theatre-maker." Much of *Seagull*'s surprising spectacle, therefore, invokes contrasts of scale. Human actors often behave like large-scale versions of Kostya's puppets. The physical environment provides many of them with boxes to inhabit, when they are "put away" after a scene, and elements of the set permit transformation into *mise-en-abîme* structures that echo the larger dramatic world. Like the earlier *Nina*, *Seagull* expands the role of Masha. The production's final image dramatizes her yearning, beyond the moment of Kostya's death, by transforming her box into a life-size doll house: as she

addresses the empty chair (presumably the one in which the Kostya “doll” would sit) she bursts into tears. The production’s most moving images, as well as its most comic ones (Medvedenko accompanying his tuba recital on a toy piano, which he plays with his free hand), are not in Chekhov’s play. In many cases they develop further possibilities of images from the *Nina* production. *Nina*, like Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, is a pretext for installment two. The text as network or methodological field: Lasko’s *Chekhov Cycle* presents its various texts, from literary source text to performance text, as constantly in motion and capable of transformation. Installment three promises to reinvent everything once more, beyond the plot, in a nontheatrical site.<sup>17</sup>

As a PhD student in Northwestern’s Theatre and Drama Program, Lasko found the most gratifying coursework at two institutional extremes: the performance studies adaptation classes and the undergraduate acting courses in theatre. This gifted artist, who left his academic program to devote his full energies to creative work, shares these thoughts: “The culture at Northwestern promoted the belief that you can adapt anything to the stage and, from there, that almost anything, literary or other, can be made to feel alive and present” in performance. He remembers the “fearless” risk-taking of students, and the ability of teachers “at their best” to encourage this fearlessness. “The work I make now,” he says, owes much to “a permissive and critical culture” that encouraged “exploration”:

I’ve moved toward objects, toward an intensely physical style. Neither physical performance nor object work was being much explored at Northwestern when I was there. Most of the work was heavily text-based.

But his current “success with this image-based style” has deep roots in the “intelligence” promoted by close textual study. “It is as though

I’m doing the adaptations we were trained to do” at Northwestern, “but without the words.”

The same work “but without the words”: this expresses the paradox of my title. The dues-paying student of text traces the hand of a master like Chekhov before embarking on three panels of abstract expressionism. Toward the end of the session I conducted in 1994 with Lookingglass ensemble members, Christine Dunford offered her own views about books and actors’ bodies—competing pretexts—on stage:

One of the things that I’ve observed in watching adaptations . . . is that they seem to get *stripped down* from the book. The *richness* of the book seems to get stripped down. But then when I see actors bring that stripped-down version to life, all the blood washes back into it. And it might not be the *same* blood . . . as the book had, but it’s now a full experience again.

One kind of “richness,” or “blood,” is literary language. Another is the theatre’s array of material languages, including actors’ expressive bodies. If the storytellers of Lookingglass are correct, the retelling of a book in one’s own medium, in one’s own time and place, is a kind of aesthetic transfusion: the “blood” is new, but it courses through the same narrative veins.

## NOTES

1. For information about Chicago’s “Jeff” Awards, see <http://www.jeffawards.org/>.

2. The essay cites transcripts of several personal interviews: with Frank Galati on February 10, 2003, and November 25, 2003 (both conducted in Evanston, Illinois); with Njoki McElroy on July 17, 2003 (conducted in Evanston); with Mary Zimmerman on February 10, 2003, August 20, 2003, and November 19, 2003 (all conducted in Evanston); and with six members of the Lookingglass Theatre Company, Tom Cox, Larry Distasi, Andy White, Doug Hara, Laura Eason, and Christine Dunford, on October 4, 1994 (conducted in Chicago). When useful, I have distinguished between transcripts of two interviews with Robert Breen: one conducted by David Wohl

on June 6, 1973 (in Evanston), and another by me on October 16, 1989 (in Evanston). Additionally, I have cited personal communications by e-mail or telephone from Jim Lasko on December 4, 2003; Katharine Loesch on February 3, 2004; Kameron Steele on September 11, 2001; and Mary Zimmerman on December 15, 2003. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from these individuals are drawn from this list of unpublished sources.

3. The theme of Breen's course in readers theatre at Northwestern, as it developed during the 1960s, was "featuring the text." As part of curricular revisions in the mid-1980s, the readers theatre and chamber theatre courses once taught by Breen became a two-part course in "presentational aesthetics," taught most frequently during the past two decades by Galati and Zimmerman.

4. Other representative textbooks include Haas (1976), Long, Hudson, and Jeffrey (1977), and Pickering (1975). Although the popular *Handbook* by Coger and White (1967) went through two subsequent editions (in 1973 and 1982) the approach of the textbook's first edition (which I cite) remained substantially unchanged. Among the various bibliographies of books and essays, the most helpful is Peterson (1985).

5. For information about these theatres, see the following websites: Arden Theatre, <http://www.ardentheatre.org/>; Lookingglass Theatre, <http://www.lookingglasstheatre.org/>; Redmoon Theater, <http://www.redmoon.org/>; Lifeline Theatre, <http://www.lifelinetheatre.com/>; and About Face Theatre, <http://www.aboutfacetheatre.com/>.

6. Few Chicago companies have taken more seriously their responsibility as members of a larger community, composed of theatregoers and nontheatregoers alike. Throughout the company's history, the multifaceted Lookingglass outreach program has been one of Chicago's most distinguished, and has inspired the full-time commitment of several ensemble members. For information, see the education page on the company's website.

7. Zimmerman provides a valuable contrasting perspective on her early work with Lookingglass in her doctoral dissertation (1994).

8. An earlier version of several paragraphs describing chamber theatre appeared in *Unstoried* (Edwards, 1999). I am grateful to the editors of *Theatre Annual: A Journal of Performance Studies*, published by the College of William and Mary in Virginia, for permission to include a selection of unmarked quotations.

9. For Breen's clearest description of how he began to demonstrate to his students the critical

usefulness of chamber theatre, see Forrest and Loesch (1976, pp. 2-3).

10. For many years now, in my staging classes, I have discussed how the narratologist's "story" and "discourse" might be understood as *scenes* when applied to the work of adapters. I have not seen this usage elsewhere.

11. "Pretext" appears in Cole's complicated account of the Wooster Group's *Frank Dell's The Temptation of Saint Antony*, directed (and to a large extent devised and composed) by LeCompte. Cole borrowed the term, as she explains, from David Savran (1986, p. 40), the author of a book-length study of the Wooster Group's early productions (1988). Her use of it often seems interchangeable with "source text."

12. Sills comments that the "narrative technique developed by Robert Breen" was "very similar to story theater where the actor could speak about his character in the third person. Except they used a narrator. So I just cut out the narrator twenty years later and that was story theater" (quoted in Sweet, 1996, p. 15). Breen remembers that Sills became aware of chamber theatre after seeing episodes of *Short Story Playhouse*; later, during his years at Second City, he met Breen when he came to Northwestern to lecture. "Story Theater is a theatrical tour de force," Breen observed to Wohl in 1973, "and is very successful, but it's got nothing to do with the critical analysis of literature. . . . My entertainment of audiences," by contrast, "is kind of a secondary thing."

13. See McElroy (1975). Following McElroy's departure from Northwestern, the black literature course continues to be taught by associate professor E. Patrick Johnson.

14. McElroy cites the example of George C. Wolfe's 1989 adaptation "Spunk: Three Tales by Zora Neale Hurston" (Wolfe, 1991) as a liberating experience in her growth as both writer and adapter.

15. In May, 2000, the black literature class produced two scripts, for which two student directors made different selections from McElroy's *Everyday People* stories. I have chosen to discuss the performance text (preserved on my own videotape record) directed by Jean Garrison, as performed in Northwestern's Theatre and Interpretation Center on May 20, 2000.

16. Songs range from the 1969 Sly and the Family Stone hit that suggests the play's title, and "Big Brother" from Stevie Wonder's 1972 album *Talking Book*, to Dionne Farris's 1995 "Don't Ever Touch Me (again)." The content of one scene echoes Gerima's film *Sankofa* (1993); a racist

father's tirade paraphrases moments from the horrific lynching scene in Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" (1965/1995); and a character educates another about "the brothers" with an extended quotation from Pearl Cleage's *Deals with the Devil* (1993, pp. 44–49).

17. The program for *Seagull*, which opened at the Steppenwolf Studio on March 20, 2003, announces "another outdoor production, a site-specific work, that activates a public space with the life of Chekhov's characters"; in installment three, the characters will "leave Chekhov's story behind" (Lasko, 2003, p. 12). Other Redmoon productions have intervened. As of June 29, 2004, installment three of *The Chekhov Cycle* has not been announced for production. In "Drift" (Edwards, 2003, p. 39) I incorrectly identify the actress playing Masha as Vanessa Stalling, who played Nina in Lasko's productions of *Nina* and *Seagull*; in both productions, Sharon Lanza played Masha.

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