

# PART VI

## Performance and Politics

### *Themes and Arguments*<sup>1</sup>

JUDITH HAMERA AND DWIGHT CONQUERGOOD

Politics and performance are intimately linked historically, conceptually, and pragmatically. This link is foundational; as Victor Turner (1982) explains, ritual elements of performance generate *communitas*, a sense of solidarity that has conservative or revolutionary consequences for the life of the *polis*. *Communitas* may be “spontaneous” and magical; “ideological,” that is, theoretical, enmeshed in language and culture which may or may not be utopian; or “normative,” which could be “ongoing, relatively repetitive,” “transformative,” or both (p. 49). In “Ion,” Plato (1998) presents his concern about the solo performer’s potential to create *communitas* in his audience. He charges the rhapsode Ion with spreading a contagious irrationality to his listeners, and the rhetorical overkill of his attack betrays a deeper anxiety about the social force of performance.

Richard Schechner (1985) defines performance as “restored behavior” (p. 33). Elin Diamond reminds us of the political implications of this:

terminology of “re” in discussions of performance, as in *reembody*, *reinscribe*,

*reconfigure*, *resignify*. “Re” acknowledges the preexisting discursive field, the repetition—and the desire to repeat—within the performative present, while “embody,” “configure,” “inscribe,” “signify,” assert the possibility of materializing something that exceeds our knowledge, that alters the shape of sites and imagines other as yet unsuspected modes of being.

Of course, what alters the shape of sites and imagines into existence other modes of being is anathema to those who would police social borders and identities. (p. 2)

May Joseph (1999) observes that “[t]he idea of citizenship” is itself “a performing sphere that transforms the abstraction ‘the people’ into individuated political subjects and participating citizens” (p. 15). Jon McKenzie (2003) adds: “From annual performance reviews to high-performance missile systems—and yes, even to ritual and theatre—performance now gathers together a vast array of [sociopolitical] phenomena” (p. 118).

McKenzie’s statement signals an important point: relations between performance and politics partake of the same multifaceted approaches to performance itself within the

field of performance studies. As Diana Taylor (2003) states in *The Archive and the Repertoire*:

“Performance,” on the one level, constitutes the object/process of analysis in performance studies, that is, the many practices and events—dance, theatre, ritual, political rallies, funerals—that involve theatrical, rehearsed, or conventional/event appropriate behaviors.

On another level, performance also constitutes the methodological lens that enables scholars to analyze events *as* performance. Civic obedience, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity, for example, are rehearsed and performed daily in the public sphere. (p. 3)

Both approaches to performance—as subject of, and method of, analysis—emerge in four overarching and interrelated themes taken up by scholarship about performance and politics, including the essays in this section. They are

- Performance in/as the production of history
- Performance in/as the deployment of institutional power
- Performance in/as the production of identity and
- Performance in/as technologies of resistance

It bears repeating that these themes are not mutually exclusive, and that they overlap and reinforce one another, as in the five essays to follow.

### PERFORMANCE IN/AS THE PRODUCTION OF HISTORY

Della Pollock (1998) gets to the heart of intersections between performance, politics, and history when she observes,

Boundaries that have for so long kept the “facts” in and the “fiction” out of history are now crossed over and traced through with such supra-disciplinary questions as: What does it mean to represent the past? How have politics shaped traditions of representation? (p. 3)

While these questions are fully engaged in the “Performance and History” section of this volume, the political dimensions of Pollock’s questions are also important here. Performance studies scholars have been instrumental in restoring excluded or marginalized histories to larger disciplinary conversations and, in so doing, they call for increased disciplinary self-reflexivity. In “Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and other Figures of Speech” (2000), Dwight Conquergood rewrites the history of elocution over against its excluded others: African American and working-class speakers whose bodies and voices became signifiers of the “coarse and uncouth features” to be “refined” (p. 327). Lisa Merrill’s (1999) critical examination of the life and work of actress Charlotte Cushman speaks back to the “invisibility” of women’s same-sex erotic relationships in history generally, and in the history of performance in particular. Tracy Davis (1991) addresses the sociopolitical and economic dimensions of acting as gendered labor. Shannon Jackson’s (2000) *Lines of Activity* reads Hull House “reformance” (p. 8) as the embodied consequences of Progressive Era social policy.

### PERFORMANCE IN/AS THE DEPLOYMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL POWER

The performative dimensions of institutional power emerge in historical and contemporary analyses by performance studies scholars. Dwight Conquergood (2002) has been particularly eloquent in identifying and challenging institutional, including academic, biases that favor the written and the textual. He argues,

Only middle-class academics could blithely assume that all the world is a text because reading and writing are central to their everyday lives and occupational security. For many people throughout the world, however, particularly subaltern groups, texts are often inaccessible, or threatening,

charged with the regulatory power of the state. . . .

The hegemony of textualism needs to be exposed and undermined. Transcription is not a transparent or politically innocent model for conceptualizing or engaging the world. (p. 147)

Likewise, Peggy Phelan poses an epistemological challenge to institutional regimes of visibility and reproduction. In *Unmarked* (1993), she challenges undertheorized testaments to the “power” of visibility as it is conventionally understood.

Currently, . . . there is a dismaying similarity in the beliefs generated about the political efficacy of visible representation. The dangerous complicity between progressives dedicated to visibility politics and conservatives patrolling the borders of museums, movie houses, and mainstream broadcasting is based on their mutual belief that representations can be treated as “real truths” and guarded or championed accordingly. Both sides believe that greater visibility of the hitherto under-represented leads to enhanced political power. . . . Insufficient understanding of the relationship between visibility, power, identity, and liberation has led both groups to mistake the relation between the real and the representational. (p. 2)

Moreover, performance offers unique and important alternatives to institutional understandings of visibility, the real, and representation.

Performance studies scholars use these conceptual descriptions of, and challenges to, institutional power to engage the macro and micro practices of power at the level of state and extra-state actors. For example, Jon McKenzie (2003) examines intersections of performance and politics in the technocratic micro practices of, in, and beyond the state as he explores possibilities for reinventing democracy. He writes,

One thing we know for sure: with government performance, we are witnessing the emergence of a global yet fragmented

network for testing and monitoring democracy’s performance. More directly than performance studies, performance management, or techno-performance, government performance channels sovereignty machines and juridical orders. Right now, this network contains national governments, trans- and supranational entities, nation states, NGOs, academic researchers, and most importantly, dissatisfied democrats: that is, disaffected people. To what use this network will be put, and by whom or what: that is the question. (p. 126; see also McKenzie, 2001)

The intimate workings of institutional power are also examined by performance studies scholars. Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson (2004) argue that families are performed into being, created and perpetuated by norms and genres of family stories. They argue:

Storytelling participates in family as institution and as agency. As an institutional practice, performing family stories is part of a frame-up which takes up, circulates, and renews models of acceptable identity in society according to local norms: good mothers and fathers, good children, good families. . . . Simultaneously, performing family stories engages a possibility for agency to build personal and communal identities that resist major narratives of the family. Resistance may take forms of struggle, refusal, repudiation, or contestation. (p. 113)

Langellier and Peterson’s discussion of performance as a tool that both perpetuates institutional formations and offers agency within or against them leads to the third theme in scholarship dealing with performance and politics.

#### PERFORMANCE IN/AS THE PRODUCTION OF IDENTITY

Here, it is useful to reexamine the link between performance and performativity. Elin Diamond (1996) characterizes performance as “a doing and a thing done” (p. 1). “Performativity” is a particular linguistic method of making and doing. The term finds its roots in J. L. Austin’s

(1975) *How to Do Things with Words*. A “performative” is a type of utterance that does something; its effect coincides with its use. Judith Butler (1993) extended the possibilities of performativity beyond the simply linguistic. For Butler, performativity is a way to explore the enunciation and apparent stability of identity categories, particularly sexuality and gender. Briefly put, a performative is both an agent of, and a product of, the social and political surround in which it circulates. Its effects are reinforced through repetition. Gender and sexuality were the identity categories initially theorized as performatives; they were engaged as “made” and not “natural” or inevitable, and therefore as available for intervention and un- or remaking. Butler and other critical scholars have also extended the notion of the performative to include race, class, and other dimensions of identity.

Performance studies scholars have applied the idea of the performative in a variety of compelling analyses. Two examples are illustrative of the political dimensions of identity construction and intervention. In *Disidentifications* (1999), José Esteban Muñoz gets to the heart of complex constructions of identity by minoritarian subjects.

Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self. This is not to say that majoritarian subjects have no recourse to disidentification or that their own formation as subjects is not structured through multiple and conflicting sites of identification . . . Yet, the story of identity formation predicated on “hybrid transformations” that this text is interested in telling concerns subjects whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny—cultural logics that I will suggest work to undergird state power. (p. 5)

Muñoz explores a variety of disidentificatory performances that “make and do” hybrid identities. Among them are pieces by Cuban

American lesbian performance artist Alina Troyano, aka Carmelita Tropicana. Troyano’s work exposes “the ambivalent, complicated, mixed up, and jumbled nature of the hybrid self” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 138) and, in so doing, refuses the stability of simple performative repetitions of majoritarian identity categories. E. Patrick Johnson also uses performativity to critique presumptions of simple, stable, discrete categories of identity. In his book *Appropriating Blackness* (2003), he identifies performativity at work in Marlon Riggs’s film *Black Is . . . Black Ain’t*. Johnson writes,

Riggs’s film implicitly employs performativity to suggest that we dismantle hierarchies that privilege particular black positionalities at the expense of others; that we recognize that darker hue does not give us any more cultural capital or claim to blackness than do a dashiki, braids, or a southern accent. Masculinity is no more a signifier of blackness than femininity; heterosexuality is no blacker than gayness; and poverty makes one no more authentically black than a house in the suburbs. (p. 40)

Though he explores the critical potential of both performance and performativity, Johnson is quick to point out that

although useful in deconstructing essentialist notions of selfhood, performance must also provide a space for meaningful resistance of oppressive systems. (p. 5)

While these two examples expose the play with, and critique of, identity formations as potentially liberatory, political intersections of performance and identity are not always so. Judith Hamera (2002) examines a family of Cambodian refugees whose attempts to reproduce “pure” Khmer classical dance seem to hold the promise of shoring up stable, productive identities in the face of trauma and dislocation. Instead, their efforts performatively reproduce their own deep social isolation and personal loss.

## PERFORMANCE IN/AS TECHNOLOGIES OF RESISTANCE

In *Durov's Pig* (1985), Joel Schechter offers a small but telling example of performance as a technology of resistance. In 1907 in Germany, the eponymous Durov, a Russian satirist and clown,

placed a German officer's cap, or "helm" as he called it, in the circus ring, and his trained pig ran to retrieve it. Using ventriloquism, Durov made the pig appear to be saying "Ich will helm," meaning "I want the helmet." But the phrase could also be translated "I am Wilhelm," thereby equating Germany's Emperor, Wilhelm II, with a trained pig. (p. 2)

The audience thought this was hilarious. The police and the Kaiser did not. Durov was arrested, charged with treason, and expelled from the country. Schechter explains,

"The stage is one of my arms of government," the Kaiser had told actors at the Royal Theatre in Berlin. Durov's democratization of power reduced the Emperor's authority over his arms of government, and his army, by sharing it with a pig. One small circus act could hardly overthrow a government, and yet it represented a freedom from state control which the Kaiser could not countenance. (p. 3)

Key elements of performance in/as a technology of resistance emerge from this small example. First, such performances are, in some sense, improvisatory and tactical. They "boldly juxtapose diverse elements in order to suddenly produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place and to strike the hearer" (de Certeau, 1974/1984, pp. 37–38). Second, they often redeploy techniques of the conventional theatre to their own ends: mimicry, *mise en scene*, humor, props. Third, speaking back to power through performance may be confrontational and overt, or subtle and covert, what Zora

Neale Hurston (1935/1990) called "feathered resistance":

The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song." (p. 3)

Performance in/as a technology of resistance emerges in now-canonical texts of theatre studies, like the writings and stagings of Bertolt Brecht (see Willetts, 1964). It appears in practices of everyday life, both public and private, and in challenges to conventional modes of scholarly representation. A complete survey of performance in/as technologies of resistance is as impossible as one of all the relationships between performance and politics, so I will focus on only three examples here.

In her discussion of the daily practices of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, Diana Taylor (2003) develops the formulation "the DNA of performance." From 1977 on, the Madres protested the disappearance, the literal erasure, of their children by Argentina's right wing military government during their Dirty War. When a democratic government returned to power in 1983, they protested the lack of official resolve to prosecute those responsible for the disappearances. The women used photos of their missing children as core components of their protests. They produced proof of their children's lives against their official erasure. Taylor states, "This representational practice of linking the scientific and performatic claim is what I call the DNA of performance" (p. 171). Here, performatic proof supplies the visibility and the social force that scientific proof alone cannot.

Augusto Boal also developed techniques to speak back, to perform back, to oppressive regimes. His *Theatre of the Oppressed* (see

Boal, 1979) and Forum Theatre are living, evolving approaches to performance for social change. Boal writes:

Our mandate's project is to bring into the centre of political action—the centre of decisions—by making theatre as politics rather than merely making political theatre. In the latter case, the theatre makes comments on politics; in the former, the theatre is, in itself, one of the ways in which political activity can be conducted. (1998, p. 20)

Boal's methods include confronting external oppression—"cops-on-the-streets," and the internalized workings of hegemony—"cops-in-the-head" (see Schutzman, 1994).

Finally, performance can resist sedimented conventions of scholarly representation by "braiding together disparate and stratified ways of knowing" (Conquergood, 2002, p. 152). For Dwight Conquergood, performance studies as radical research

should revitalize the connections between artistic accomplishment, analysis, and articulations with communities; between practical knowledge (knowing how), propositional knowledge (knowing that), and political savvy (knowing who, when, and where). This epistemological connection between creativity, critique, and civic engagement is mutually replenishing, and pedagogically powerful. (p. 153)

Conquergood looks for "text-performance entanglements" that capture what Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls "orature," the recognition and representation of the fact that "channels of communication constantly overlap, penetrate, and mutually produce one another" (p. 154) to radically change what appears on the stage and on the page.

The five essays that make up this section address relationships between performance and politics across these four themes. Jan Cohen-Cruz's essay, "The Problem Democracy is Supposed to Solve": The Politics of Community-based Performance," explores the

intersections of community-based and activist performance. It begins with an overview of important historical markers in both genres, explores the idea of cultural democracy, and details the social aesthetic principles that animate these modes of performance.

E. Patrick Johnson is also concerned with issues of community in "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures." Here he examines the subjugated knowledges intrinsic to black expressive culture, knowledges further subjugated by that culture's invisibility within the field of performance studies itself. He goes on to demonstrate that, despite misogyny and homophobia, black women's, gays' and lesbians' creative work has resisted marginalization and maintained blackness as an open signifier.

In his award-winning essay, "Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty," reprinted here, Dwight Conquergood reads the signifiers in this site of state-sanctioned killing as a fraught dramaturgy whose contradictions are never fully resolved. In so doing, he charts Americans' changing attitudes to the "magical realism" of capital punishment, and sets current practices in the context of responses to domestic and foreign terrorism.

Sandra Richards uses the form of a performance meditation to engage the complexities and contradictions in/of memory and trauma. In "Who is this Ancestor? Performing Memory in Ghana's Slave Castles," she enacts and interrogates her own attraction to, and revulsion of, eighteenth century Anglican priest Philip Quaque, whose religious practice facilitated European penetration of the coast of Ghana.

Finally, Jill Dolan concludes this section with a discussion of theatre and performance studies as laboratories for reimagining social relations. In "The Polemics and Potential of Theatre Studies and Performance," she offers an institutional history of these disciplines in the form of

a personal genealogy, and reinvigorates Turner's notion of *communitas* with her theorizing of the utopian performative.

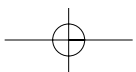
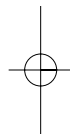
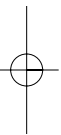
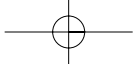
Conquergood (2002) insistently reminds us of the potential performance studies offers for politically engaged, productive, radical research that spans arbitrary divides between theory and artistic practice, and between academic and everyday knowledges. These five essays demonstrate this potential and point the way to new and generative connections between performance and politics.

#### NOTE

1. Judith Hamera and Dwight Conquergood were coeditors of this section of the *Handbook*. Unfortunately, Dwight did not live to complete this work. His spirit, and his work, inform and inspire this section and its introduction.

#### REFERENCES

- Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the oppressed*. New York: TCG.
- Boal, A. (1998). *Legislative theatre*. (A. Jackson, Trans.). London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. New York: Routledge.
- Conquergood, D. (2000). Rethinking elocution: The trope of the talking book and other figures of speech. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 20(4), 325–341.
- Conquergood, D. (2002). Performance studies: Interventions and radical research. *The Drama Review*, 46(2), 145–156.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life* (Vol. 1). (S. Rendall, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press. (Original work published 1974)
- Davis, T. (1991). *Actresses as working women*. London: Routledge.
- Diamond, E. (1996). Introduction. In E. Diamond (Ed.) *Performance and cultural politics* (pp. 1–12). New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Hamera, J. (2002). An answerability of memory: "Saving" Khmer classical dance. *The Drama Review*, 46(4), 65–85.
- Hurston, Z. N. (1990). *Mules and men*. New York: Harper. (Original work published 1935)
- Jackson, S. (2000). *Lines of activity: Performance, historiography, Hull-House domesticity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Johnson, E. P. (2003). *Appropriating blackness: Performance and the politics of authenticity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Joseph, M. (1999). *Nomadic identities: The performance of citizenship*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Langellier, K. M., & Peterson, E. E. (2004). *Storytelling in daily life: Performing narrative*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- McKenzie, J. (2001). *Perform or else: From discipline to performance*. London: Routledge.
- McKenzie, J. (2003). Democracy's performance. *The Drama Review*, 47(2), 117–128.
- Merrill, L. (1999). *When Romeo was a woman: Charlotte Cushman and her circle of female spectators*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Muñoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. New York: Routledge.
- Plato (1998). Ion. In D. H. Richter (Ed.), *The critical tradition: Classical texts and contemporary trends* (pp. 29–37). Boston: Bedford.
- Pollock, D. (1998). Introduction: Making history go. In D. Pollock (Ed.), *Exceptional spaces: Essays in performance & history* (pp. 1–45). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Riggs, M. (Director). (1995). *Black is . . . black ain't* [Film]. United States: Independent Television Service. (Available from California Newsreel, P.O. Box 2284, South Burlington, VT 05407)
- Schechner, R. (1985). *Between theatre and anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Schechter, J. (1985). *Durov's pig: Clowns, politics and theatre*. New York: TCG.
- Schutzman, M. (1994). Brechtian shamanism: The political therapy of Augusto Boal. In M. Schutzman & J. Cohen-Cruz (Eds.), *Playing Boal: Theatre, therapy, activism*. London: Routledge.
- Taylor, D. (2003). *The archive and the repertoire: Performing cultural memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Turner, V. (1982). *From ritual to theatre*. New York: PAJ.
- Willets, J. (Ed. & Trans.). (1964). *Brecht on theatre*. London: Methuen/Hill and Wang.





# 24

---

## The Problem Democracy Is Supposed to Solve

### *The Politics of Community-Based Performance*

JAN COHEN-CRUZ

*Getting communities involved in imagining their future is the problem that democracy is supposed to solve.*

—Law theorists Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres (2002, p. 219)

The subject of this essay is the politics of community-based performance, expressed both directly by way of efforts to impact the status quo—i.e., activist performance—and indirectly by the very inclusive and participatory nature of its form, whatever the content of particular projects. Let me begin by clarifying my terms.

Community-based performance is characterized by deep interaction between artists and constituents grounded in a shared aspect of identity or circumstances. Professional artists, informed in some way by community participants, explore collectively meaningful themes and then develop and stage a piece that is by, for, and about a larger group of which those participants are a part. The goals of these

partnerships include and exceed the creation of art. That is, community-based performance is hyphenated not just grammatically but also as a practice. Community-based art is situated between entertainment and efficacy, art for pleasure and art that concretely *does* something, be it in the realm of education, therapy, counter-historymaking, community-organizing, or social change.

Activist art is aesthetic production as part of a struggle for social change, such as seeking more rights for people who are being exploited, or resistance to changes that are deemed detrimental, e.g., fighting school budget cuts. Community-based activist art is as much about the process of involving local people in articulating their points-of-view as in

a finished art object itself. Whereas *activist* and *community-based* emphasize process and participation, *political* art refers to an aesthetic object that an artist or ensemble creates as a response to a controversial public issue or action or to challenge the status quo. Think of superb individual artists and great anti-war oeuvres like Picasso's *Guernica* or Brecht's *Mother Courage*, viewable in art institutions (museums, theatres) and extolled for their universality and artistic virtuosity as much as for their message. Political artists and ensembles may also value processes and collective, non-hierarchical practices but the public face of their work is the art object.

Not all community-based performance is activist. It is as likely to celebrate cultural traditions or provide a space for a community to reflect as to participate in local struggles. But whether activist or not, community-based performance is committed to collective, not strictly individual, representation. The centrality of open participation is particularly important in these scary times, characterized by national measures such as the Patriot Act that control participation. And whatever the typical content of their work, community-based artists live in the same environment as their constituents, and are thus likely to be personally affected by the same nuclear power plants, epidemics, and economic ups and downs. Thus can they build on an experiential connection should activism *become* a goal of a particular project.

An example of an activist community-based production is *Wild Card* (2002), written and directed by Michael Fields, managing artistic director of the Dell'Arte Players. Dell'Arte is a physical theatre that established itself in the small town of Blue Lake, California, in 1974. When local Native Americans decided to build a casino in town, ensemble members raised money for dialogue specialists to convene town meetings. People on all sides of the issue envisioned the future of their small hamlet in the face of the

possibility of the casino, likely to attract large, noisy crowds. Having lived in the community nearly 30 years, Dell'Arte members were sensitive to the complexity of issues represented by the casino, especially given the obscene treatment of Native Americans throughout U.S. history and limited economic opportunities in the present. Nevertheless, the majority of the community feared the effects of the casino for everyone. Fields wrote *Wild Card* to continue the dialogue, in the spirit of "What now?"

A flaw in the production, despite Fields's efforts, was the absence of Native Americans performing in *Wild Card*. Indeed, soon after the first production, Fields remounted the project as *Wild Card 1.5* with 50 percent new material, including a Native American in a central role in the cast. *Wild Card* ends on this note:

What makes a home? Is it comfort, time, a building, a landscape, a state of mind or all of the above? I think that home is character formed over years of use. . . . What worries me the most . . . [is that] where you arrive looks like just where you left. It's a sameness—as if everything is approved by the same universal building code. And I think it kills as surely as not. Blue Lake has always has its streak of difference; sometimes nasty, sometimes celebratory, sometimes conflictual, but so necessary . . . I don't like the spread of lights in the hills either. . . . But whatever the landscape be inscribed with—be it gold, timber, gambling or the next "new thing," we know that the river may very well sweep it all away tomorrow. Until it does it is in our keeping; but only if we make it so. There is such a thing as the "commons"—but to make it we all have to be there. (Fields, 2002)

The play can not unmake the casino but rather encourages local political involvement so that by the time an issue comes up, a more engaged community is ready to respond. A member of Dell'Arte, in fact, is running for city council as a result of the casino.

### SELECTED HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF U.S. ACTIVIST COMMUNITY-BASED PERFORMANCE

Community-based performance is a field with a genealogy rather than a cause-and-effect history. Although activist performance has frequently been associated with progressive causes, the power of heightened imagery and text, and broad participation, have been used to further agendas on all points of the political spectrum. The pageant is a case in point. Structured around a series of tableaux or moving pictures, early twentieth century pageants in the United States typically represented moments in the economic or social history of a town, using verse and prose embellished by choruses, songs, dances, and marches at a beautiful site, and cast with local citizens. According to historian David Glassberg, "civic officials sought to define local community identity, cohesion, and sense of common purpose through elaborate civic historical celebrations and commemorations" (1990, p. 282). Pageantry was radical for its time, an attempt to democratize performance by opening it to greater participation, broader audiences, and a more public role in civic life.

But at the same time, the pageant was an instrument to reenforce the status quo. While the American Pageant Association encouraged inclusion of diverse local groups, they also generally reinforced the distinctions between and social roles of each. People generally played roles similar to their actual occupations or statuses. People of the same background rehearsed their parts of the pageant separately from other groups, with a pageant master coordinating the whole. Pageants typically presented idealized versions of local social relations, free of class, ethnic, gender, and race conflict (Glassberg, 1990, p. 126). Blacks and Asians were rarely portrayed at all, and when they were, representations mirrored racist portrayals from the popular theatre of the day that "displayed an idealized view of

race relations in the Old South and blacks as comic buffoons" (p. 132).

New immigrants were similarly given short shrift. Some pageants intended to introduce newcomers to American history through the opportunity to enact it in a visual form not dependent on fluency in English. But typically, tableaux of immigrant masses in native costume performed native songs and dances in the first act, and reappeared in "American" garb by the end, singing the national anthem. Though rhetorically about "civic uplift," pageants, in historian Linda Nochlin's view, were grounded as much in an unspoken fear as a "wish to do good for the vast, unprecedented waves of immigrants arriving on our shores" (1985, p. 92). This was perhaps the first artistic expression in the United States of the notorious erasing effect of "melting pot" philosophy.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Paterson Strike Pageant of 1913 represented immigrant workers contributing much more than picturesque and disposable costumes and food traditions. Created in the aftermath of a strike for decent working conditions that resulted in numerous workers' deaths, this pageant represented the battle between labor and capitalism at the same time as it helped participants to ritually deal with grief over their slain comrades. Fifteen-hundred Paterson workers represented images of their original mass actions in juxtaposition with passionate speeches redelivered by the original speakers from the strike. Nochlin theorizes, "In participating in the pageant, they became conscious of their experience as a meaningful force in history and of themselves as self-determining members of a class that shaped history" (1985, p. 91). This pageant is an example of a highly democratic community-based performance providing people with a platform, a context for reflection, and a process for meaningful participation in public life.

Activist performance has often been rooted in collective identification. In the 1930s, the United States experienced its only grass-roots

amateur *movement* of workers creating theatre for workers, inspired by popular, participatory art events before and after the Russian Revolution of 1917<sup>1</sup> and catalyzed by the economic and political polarization of the Great Depression. The concept of class culture “presupposed that the conflicting economic and political interests between workers and their employers necessitated a different cultural expression by the conflicting classes” (Friedman, 1985, p. 112). Mass recitation, a popular aesthetic form, usually “pitted a chorus of workers against a capitalist or a representative of the capitalist class, such as a foreman or policeman” (p. 116). Plays were frequently in verse with choreography, archetypal characters, a presentational acting style, and a minimal, mobile set. This activist performance was one part agit-prop, riling up the audience and directing them towards a particular, propagandistic (i.e., one sided) agenda, another part communal ritual for the already converted, and a third piece education, such as representing activist strategies onstage that workers later tried in their lives.

The groundwork for the contemporary community-based performance field was laid in the 1950s, when despite U.S. prosperity, there was growing recognition that the American dream was not equally accessible to all Americans. The lid blew off in the tumultuous 1960s, when broad questioning of the status quo once again found expression in the arts. Much activist performance was organized around identity politics—under- or misrepresented groups bonded by ethnicity, class, sexual preference, or race. In 1968, Larry Neal published a virtual manifesto of one such project, the Black Arts Movement. Neal declared the existence of two Americas, one black, one white. He identified the black artist’s work as addressing the spiritual and cultural needs of black people and creating a black aesthetic. He stated that the focus of the work would be “to confront the contradictions arising out of Black people’s experience in the racist West” (p. 29). He acknowledged the leadership of

Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), in the 1964 creation of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School, spawning black arts groups all across the United States.

Similarly, El Teatro Campesino, created in the 1960s as an organizing tool to consolidate farmworkers politically, gave rise to a multitude of Chicano theatre groups. Like the nineteenth century Mexican *carpa* or tent show, El Teatro was an example of popular performance that favors the underdog to create a vehicle of expression by the powerless. Chicano union organizer Cesar Chavez was aware of the power of humor, as manifested in the *carpa*, to critique and mobilize. Not just company director Luis Valdez—despite the “great man” theory of artistic excellence—but all the Chicano actors in El Teatro knew those traditions, and thus contributed greatly to *la causa* of union organizing (Broyles-Gonzales, 1994).

There’s a saying that goes, “It’s not the size of the ship that makes the waves, it’s the motion of the ocean” (used by O’Neal, 1968, p. 70). In other words, political art relies on an agitated context for efficacy. Radicalness can not be willed—different historical moments offer different possibilities. In the mid-1970s, with a heightened consciousness to think globally but act locally, activist art practitioners looked to local contexts in which their work could play a role. For mass attention had shifted away from the national stage, and erstwhile national movements—against the war, for civil rights—had diminished. I date the beginning of the contemporary community arts movement to just this time.

## THEORIZING THE POLITICAL IN COMMUNITY-BASED PERFORMANCE

### Cultural Democracy

Law theorists Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres provide a starting point for theorizing the political in community-based performance by shifting the focus of democracy from the

individual to the collective. They assert that democracy is less about the “right of individuals to choose individual candidates” than “about the value of groups that form around common concerns and participate in an ongoing democratic conversation” (2002, p. 170). They explain that whereas in representational democracy, people vote every few years for a professional politician to “stand in” for them, in participatory democracy people are directly involved in discussions, at least, concerning policies that affect them.<sup>2</sup>

Guinier and Torres connect political and aesthetic notions of representation. They give the example of Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre as a rich terrain for participatory democracy, as spectators intervene in scenarios to act out their own ideas for solving them. Guinier and Torres’ understanding of participatory democracy is similar to policy consultants Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard’s notion of cultural democracy, which they define as “a philosophy or policy emphasizing pluralism, participation, and equity within and between cultures” (2001, p. 108). Community-based performance typically manifests values conducive to cultural democracy, involving whole communities around common concerns and defying the tendency to professionalize civic engagement. In a world of lobbyists and electoral politics, where we rely on representational, not participatory, democracy, such an art project is particularly useful.

I do not mean to suggest that a participatory democratic mode of performance is uncomplicated. For example, many community-based productions rely on collaborations with local institutions. Take *Steelbound*, instigated by local ensemble Touchstone Theater in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in collaboration with director Bill Rauch and playwright Alison Carey of Cornerstone Theater and some 63 local people, many of them former steel workers. The play was a response to the closing of Bethlehem Steel, which threw the town into economic and emotional turmoil. Yet that corporation supplied some of the

project’s funding as well the space in which they performed, a former iron foundry. Critic Sara Brady avows the production was thus compromised, unable to critique the powerful institution providing support (2000).

Brady was inaccurate in subtitled her essay “Non-Radicality in Community-Based Theater.” While Brady was right to raise the possibility of compromise as a result of collaboration with Bethlehem Steel, that company had already closed the majority of local plants; no stance vis-à-vis the corporation would bring the jobs back. *Steelbound* was radical in its degree of grass-roots participation, if not David-like and in this case futile in its taking on of the Beth Steel Goliath. The participants in *Steelbound* were focused on celebrating their material accomplishments (one refrain in the show is workers declaring, “We built America”); giving local people an opportunity to publicly express a range of feelings about working at “The Steel,” from comparing it to hell to extolling the sheer power of the steelmaking process; and creating a public ritual of closure, a funeral for a way of life in a town where nearly everyone had family or friends employed by the company and people literally planned shopping around the changes of shifts to avoid the inevitable traffic. These are worthwhile goals and not acquiescence to the power of the corporation. *Steelbound* did not undertake an activist agenda vis-à-vis workers’ rights. It is counterproductive to critique a production for something it was not trying to do.

Brady’s limited conception of “radical” is not unlike that of some activists with preconceptions of what partnering with a theatre “should” entail. Whereas some activists tend to privilege message and outcome, community-based artists equally value the exchange and communion between artists and those who participate as actors and audience. Longtime community-based art journalist Linda Burnham writes, “Activist art includes in its goals the process of getting people to

think and feel, to discover, empathize, or get angry. It's a partner to activism but their valorization of process is different" (personal communication, June 15, 2003).

At issue is how one measures political activity. Community-based performance offers its constituents the opportunity for participatory rather than representative cultural democracy. This is rarer than it may seem. Democracy as a political system rarely provides ways for people to come together and imagine their collective future. Very few communities hold town meetings that provide the basis for decision-making. Cultural processes that can funnel community points of view to representative decision-makers are crucial for a participatory democracy.

### Principles

By looking at four principles on which community-based performance relies—communal context, reciprocity, hyphenation, and active culture—we can further identify the nature of its politics. Community-based performance emerges from a *communal context*; the artists' craft and vision are at the service of a specific group desire. It may be to further the goals of the civil rights movement, as with the Free Southern Theater. Its goal may be to affirm an under- or misrepresented culture, as with Roadside Theater in Appalachia. Artists committed to collective meaning-making use their aesthetic tools in concert with a group of people with lived experience of the subject and with whom they work to shape a collective vision.

Theatre and dance are, of course, already collaborative forms. The difference is that the hierarchical structure of the profession gives the bulk of the power to the producer, playwright, choreographer, and director, whereas community-based performance asserts a model of power shared among the various artists and community partners. As in ritual, community-based artists are inspired to make

beautiful art because of the socially meaningful role it plays. Aesthetics do not matter *less* in a ritual context but they serve a collective purpose rather than primarily reflecting on the individual maker.

Communal context also refers to the audience's experience in the actual time, place, and circumstances of the performance. Composer and activist Bernice Johnson Reagon describes how, during a march, the sound of protestors' singing preceded them as they walked, "so that by the time they reached their destination their voices had already occupied the space in a way the police could not reclaim. It wasn't just the message of the music that was important, but its ability to give physical presence and visceral force, to the movement" (quoted in Peeps, 2000, p. 271). The significance of the performance space is itself a political issue, because the "where" determines "who" the audience will be. Community-based performance is frequently performed at churches and schools, in parks and neighborhood community centers, and in particular theatres; indeed, at any venue where the people that performance is addressing gather.

*Reciprocity* describes the desired relationship between community-based artists and community participants. Community members receive such satisfactions as imaging and imagining, that is, translating ideas into forms and dreaming about what life could be; deep reflection, a natural outgrowth of play-building; critical distance on their lives; and public visibility, strategically important for the activist wing of community-based performance but meaningful to nearly everyone. That is, the fact that such art gathers a public to its performances can serve a political agenda in broadcasting a point of view. But no matter what the subject matter, a frequent refrain from people who have participated in community-based performances is how appreciative they were to have a moment in the spotlight. Treated with respect by people interested in their viewpoints, participants learn how to talk about their future in a

collective setting, a skill that rarely comes without practice.

Artists are stretched by learning what people know and feel through the authority of their experience. Cornerstone Theater's Bill Rauch describes a sense of being groomed, as a young director at Harvard, to eventually become artistic director of a professional regional theatre (personal communication, 2003). Yet he was disappointed that most regional theatres were not, in fact, expressive of their particular place. He sensed there were stories out in the world that never got heard. Indeed, the structures of professional theatre rely on agents and script submissions, auditions and particular training methods not accessible to everyone. As an artist, Rauch believed he would grow by learning about what he didn't know, from people all across the United States who had different experiences than he did. He imagined a theatre that was as eclectic as the country itself, and set out to make such a troupe, with a handful of like-minded colleagues. Approaching people as partners in the creative process, the company Rauch et al. formed in 1986, Cornerstone, supplies the technique and people in a vast range of circumstances provide the content.

Reciprocity in community-based performance is rooted in an assets-based model of community-building which "insists on beginning with a clear commitment to discovering a community's capacities and assets" (Kretzman and McKnight, 1993, p. 1). In contrast to focusing on a community's deficiencies and problems, community-based artists as well as organizers need to also build on a community's strengths. This philosophy is manifested in the way the dancer/facilitators of the ensemble Urban Bush Women enter communities and co-create stories. They don't go in and say, "This is your story." Rather, inspired by Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (2003), they look at undertold stories. They call the story-gathering component of their work "When the lions tell history," which, as the

African proverb suggests, is very different from the hunter's version (J. W. J. Zollar, personal interview, September, 2003). In contrast to top-down experts who assume what will be of interest to people, this process draws on the skills of trained artist/facilitators to tease out what a range of people want to express and help them to do so.

Reciprocity is in distinct contrast to the all too familiar idea of "community service," bringing to mind a soup kitchen with the well-fed on one side, ladling out soup to the hungry who receive it on the other side. This one-directional model is not in the spirit of community-based performance, being neither dialogic nor reciprocal. Dialogue refers to "two or more parties with differing viewpoints working toward common understanding in an open-ended, face-to-face discussion" (Bacon, Yuen, & Korza, 1999, p. 12). Artists must be as sensitive to their differences from community participants as to the common ground they share. All involved must genuinely appreciate what the others bring to the collaboration, or why do it? Radical literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin refers to dialogism as the quintessential mode of knowing. Dialogism, to Bakhtin, means that everything must be understood as part of a greater whole. There is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning other meanings (1981, pp. 426–427). Bakhtin saw the goal of dialogue not as a specific solution but rather co-understanding.

Reciprocity is reflected in joint ownership of work created by the community whence it came *and* the artist/facilitator. That is, the contribution of both must be recognized or the result is either cooption of community material or underrepresentation of the artist. Just as community-based art fails to fulfill its potential when artists impose their own aesthetics and ideology, so is the work weakened by underinvolvement of the artist. Community-based performance artist Suzanne Lacy keeps a tight rein on the pageants that she creates

with hundreds of people. I see that as a methodological choice, not an imposition. Within Lacy's process, people have great opportunity to explore their issues, bond with others, and become more public. Artists can equally be seemingly noncommittal, which may result in work that contradicts their own political stand. The piece may represent everyone involved but the artist/facilitator, and risk falling into a one-directional, artist-helping-the-people model.

*Hyphenation* is another principle of this field. Artists frequently experience art in relation to something in addition to aesthetics. The desired experience may be the intersection of, or dialogue between, art and religion, or therapy, or education. Art may also be a site for the articulation and expression of a political point of view or vision. Community-based performance is even more intrinsically hyphenated. Poet Muriel Rukeyser expresses the difference between art that is about something and art that does something when she writes, "Because you have imagined love, you have not loved; merely because you have imagined brotherhood, you have not made brotherhood" (1974, pp. 23–24). For community-based artists, symbolic expression is not enough; they want their art to have some concrete social implication, and they want a life in art that interacts with other realms (therapy, community organizing, etc.). This field challenges the philosophy of art-for-art's-sake, whereby an art work is complete unto itself, without reference or relationship beyond its own boundaries. The concreteness that Rukeyser evokes positions community-based performance to serve efficacious goals even as it continues art's traditional engagement of the viewer's senses.

As a hyphenated field, community-based performance has been shaped by theories from disciplines in addition to theatre. For example, Paulo Freire's ideas about liberatory pedagogy have been highly influential. Freire contrasts "the banking method" of education with dialogic, or problem-solving education

(1987). The former looks at teachers as experts whose job is to deposit their information into the heads of passive students who are mere receptacles. Dialogic education involves students asking questions and teachers and students together seeking answers, in a partnership. The quest to solve real problems energizes the process of education. Community-based performance follows this model in foregrounding community participants in a dialogic relationship with artist/facilitators, not merely audience/receivers, but co-creators in one way or another.

The principle of *active culture* expresses the insight that people frequently get more out of making art than seeing the fruits of other people's labors. The experience of making art causes people to plumb their hearts and minds, experiences and conceptions. Having tried to make art oneself, one can better appreciate other art. A core axiom of community-based performance is that everyone has artistic potential. Finding the aesthetic strengths of each first-time actor is one of the major challenges for community-based artists. Bill Rauch is a master at casting people in parts that are enhanced by the actor's real experience. Seeing the chief of the Walker River Paiute Tribe play the king in *The House on Walker River*, adapted from Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, added a layer of real power in performance that more than compensated for the actor's lack of theatrical training. In other words, just as the field draws on multiple disciplines, so can it draw on people's multiple capacities and apply them in performance.

Unlike pageants, in which participants also portray characters similar to themselves, Cornerstone community plays advocate diversity as one of their four key principles. (The others are listening, respect, and flexibility.) Germane to Cornerstone's process, diverse people interact in workshops, rehearsals, and performances. In a report on the company's methodology, researcher Ferdinand Lewis writes,



Experience has shown that no community is so monolithic that it does not contain a great deal of diversity. . . . A collaboration's successful outcome will literally depend upon its including participants who represent not only a wide range of economic and social backgrounds, ages and ethnicities, but also the diversity of the larger community of which the local community is a part. . . . As a framework for creativity, the concept of diversity can free the imagination from monolithic ideas, and encourage unexpected collaborations. . . . Whenever possible, the production team should represent a diversity of experience with Cornerstone collaborations, including participants who may be doing their first such project alongside those who have previously collaborated with the company. (2003, p. 6)

For Cornerstone then, active culture, inclusion, and diversity are both aesthetic and political pillars of the work.

## METHODOLOGIES

Whereas the four principles explain *why* community-based performance can involve people in imagining their collective future, this section describes *how* it achieves this goal. The field's politics are a cultural manifestation of democracy that depends on particular ways of working: (1) It is an *elongated process*, not only a product, so there are multiple opportunities, over time, to participate. (2) Its *aesthetic forms*, especially storytelling (on which I elaborate in what follows), invite a broad cross section of participants. (3) It assumes an *expanded notion of art*. Specifically, community-based artists work at the overlap of art and other disciplines, both by stretching what they do as artists and through collaborations with nonartists, such as educators and activists, towards a common goal.

### Elongated Process

Like performance generally, community-based art is not just the show but all the

processes leading up to and following after it. Examination of these processes provides a way to unpack such work beyond the transaction between actors and spectators in the closed space and limited time of the show itself. The high value placed on preliminary and postperformance phases—the play, in and of itself, is *not* the (only) thing—corresponds to the structure of rites of passage, that category of ritual about change and transformation. Rites of passage provide a process for not just the person going through the change but for their community to recognize it and adapt accordingly as well. Given the proven success of rites of passage to dramatize and facilitate change for whole communities, it's instructive for activist community-based art makers to investigate how rites of passage accomplish this task.

According to anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, rites of passage have three-part structures: separation, liminality, and reintegration (1960). In the first stage, the persons going through the change are taken from their ordinary life to be specially prepared for the change. The middle phase is a period of "betwixt and between," no longer the old category but not yet the new. The third stage, often marked by a performance, is the moment of reincorporating the persons back into the community in the new status. An example of a rite of passage is marriage. The separation phase corresponds to the period of growing commitment during which the couple stops dating other people. Once engaged, the couple is betwixt and between—no longer single but not quite married. The wedding ceremony is the performance that marks the couple's new status in the community as married, not only for them but for their parents and friends, with the change in behavior they are expected to exhibit as well.

Influenced by anthropologist Victor Turner, performance theorist Richard Schechner identified seven phases of performance in a "pattern analogous to initiation rites" and harkening back to van Gennep (Schechner, 1985,

pp. 20–21). Schechner's first four phases—training, workshop, rehearsal, and warm-up—correspond to van Gennep's first ritual stage, separation. They are the processes the actors go through before contact with the audience, during which they prepare for the performance. The middle stage of a rite of passage, liminality, corresponds to Schechner's fifth phase, performance, during which the transformation is symbolically represented but has not yet been effectuated in everyday life. Van Gennep's notion of reintegration, the point at which the people who have gone through the rite of passage rejoin their society with new roles and responsibilities, corresponds to Schechner's final two stages, cool-down and aftermath.

Noticing what phases are emphasized is instructive concerning a hyphenated project's goals; for example, the performance itself is not the be-all and end-all and may not even be at the center. In what follows I explain how these phases facilitate community-based performance principles—communal context, reciprocity, hyphenation, and active culture—on which its participatory democratic nature rests. I contend that it is precisely in its participatory process rather than in its subject matter that the politics of this field are most manifest. The experience of community ownership and decision-making is at the heart of the work, no matter what the theme of a production.

As concerns *training*, given this field's interdisciplinary nature, learning multiple skills in addition to the artistic is necessary. This expectation prepares artists to facilitate participatory processes of imagining a community's future. Dudley Cocke, for example, emphasizes the need for grass-roots artists to learn community organizing (personal communication, June, 2002). Community-based writer Alice Lovelace believes artists working for social change need training in conflict resolution (Lovelace, 2002). Particular performance skills are also invaluable. Touchstone artistic director Mark McKenna reflects on

Dell'Arte's school, which teaches popular theatre techniques such as commedia, an inherently interactive mode: "Students come to understand the performer's responsibility to the audience" (2002b). The school's focus is on creating one's own work, a critical skill for community-based performers. Dell'Arte teaches a sense of the artist's ownership of their work; Steve Bisher, associate school director, says that before he did workshops with Michael Fields, he "didn't know that as an actor you could have your own thoughts" (quoted in McKenna, 2002a).

The next phase, *workshop*, is the period of building the performance and invariably incorporates communal input. Research is one means of generating material, typically through extensive interviewing of local people connected to the project's theme. Participating artists need to develop a sense of the collaborating community and uncover both oral and written source materials, leading to developing the script. Each Cornerstone community show involves an average of 20 meetings with local focus groups and leaders. The company begins by finding one local person "making the leap of faith and becoming an advocate for the project," helping find appropriate people for an advisory board (Bill Rauch, quoted in Lewis, 2002). Cornerstone tells the board how they build a project and the board advises the company how to do so there. In the development of the art work, integration of local stories is one way that different points of view are put into conversation with each other. Dell'Arte audience member Kit Zettler emphasizes the cross-pollination this accomplishes: "You are not necessarily going to get a logger who comes to see this play and walks away saying I'm never doing that again. But a logger comes to the play because their friend got interviewed or was talked to" (quoted in McKenna 2002a). He thus ends up hearing other points of view, so essential in a democracy. In other projects, the community has a united point of view and creates the play as a form of advocacy.

A variation on the workshop phase is what Suzanne Lacy calls *embedding*, for example, focusing on people and institutions outside of art contexts that the creators want to reach (personal communication, 2003). At an early stage in the process, Lacy trains participants to contextualize the work in community organizations and the media. For example, while creating *Code 33*, which focused on improving police relations with Oakland teenagers, Lacy sent teenage participants out to talk with reporters and politicians about community policing. Laying the ground work for *Code 33*'s public components paralleled work on its internal aesthetic development.

*Warm-up* is the process immediately preceding a show. In plays meant to maximize audience participation, spectators are often given a way to prepare, too, perhaps through actual warm-up exercises. The community potluck dinner is another popular format. Cocke recounts that "often the Roadside actors move directly from the social mixing to the stage and begin the performance" (personal communication, June, 2002).

Next, the **performance** itself offers various dynamic opportunities for actor-spectator exchange and illustrates the hyphenation of the field. Carpetbag Theatre, a Knoxville ensemble that brings underrepresented voices to public attention, based *Red Summer* on historical documentation of local activists from the civil-rights era. Director Linda Parris-Bailey saw it as a way to tell residents that their belief nothing could change was historically incorrect: "Maybe if we just remind you of what has been here before, you can see some possibility for the future. We talk about people who take control" (quoted in Watkins, 2002). Parris-Bailey also sees a fundamentally celebratory component in the company's historical pieces. It is satisfying for actors and spectators to return stories to the communities from whence they came. The text of Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD)'s *Agents and Assets* is a transcript of a congressional

hearing on CIA involvement in crack cocaine sales in California that indicts the War on Drugs. LAPD is composed largely of homeless people. There's an irony in hearing the words of educated, skilled politicians spoken by actors who at some point were casualties of the War on Drugs. Having an LAPD actor portray a politician creates a built-in critique. Teatro Pregones, a Puerto Rican ensemble based in the Bronx, used Boal's Forum Theatre with their production of *The Embrace* to engage audience dialogue on the spot. Forum invites spectators to replace a protagonist struggling with a social issue, in this case as a result of having AIDS. Spectators enact different possible ways of handling those struggles as part of the performance.

The **cool-down** phase immediately follows performance and may take the form of discussion. Though often very effective, post-show discussions also have their drawbacks. Sometimes spectators aren't ready to talk about a play so soon; sometimes artists bring in discussion leaders but audiences really only want to hear from artists. Pregones usually saves postshow discussion for new shows that they ask audiences to evaluate. Reflecting the field's emphasis on reciprocity, postshow panels may be as valuable for expert participants as for spectators and artists. At *Agents and Assets*, experts on the CIA reported being educated by their outspoken and eloquent LAPD copanelists from skid row. In *Steelbound*, cool-down took the form of postshow gatherings over dessert and drinks where spectators enjoyed unmediated conversation with each other. The artists of Alternate ROOTS often use the Critical Response Process<sup>3</sup> developed by choreographer Liz Lerman with her company, the Dance Exchange, after showing a work-in-progress. Lerman developed the process to put the artist herself in charge of the feedback session. Sometimes artists invite stories from the audience about the play's theme which in Cocke's experience have become a powerful

subtext for the actors' next performance (personal communication, June, 2002).

*Aftermath/ long term activities* not immediately following the artwork take the initiative further. Aftermath is the stage following the run of the performance during which local participants and spectators, possibly facilitated by the artists, might act on what they have imagined together. One of community-based art's mantras is sustainability: artists must leave something behind. After the project has ended, are there local people with the skills to facilitate ongoing work? Is there a support network, any kind of ongoing program for people whose appetites have been whetted? Have people with the power to make the changes an activist community-based production expresses been engaged in such a way as to implement desired policies? During the years that Cornerstone did residencies in towns across the United States, they donated money for each community to start a theatre. LAPD partners with SRO Housing, which has renovated 30 former slum hotels into single-room occupancy hotels. They share the overall mission of helping people get off the street. LAPD adds a creative dimension to SRO which in turn lends an infrastructure that nurtures LAPD. Sometimes seeing a community-based performance influences an individual's later decision to become actively involved in political/civic life.

### **Aesthetic Forms Inviting Broad Participation**

Whereas the aesthetics of community-based performance vary, some forms have proven especially conducive to activist goals. Such art is often a balance of "conventions and inventions" (John Cawelti, quoted in Berger, 1992, p. vii); that is, it combines elements familiar to particular communities with new and surprising aspects. The three most frequently used structures into which community material is integrated are collectively grounded popular forms, often-adapted literary texts, and

original compositions shaped by the core participating artist(s)' particular creative process(es). Space constraints only allow me to elaborate on one, the method using collectively grounded popular forms.

Roadside Theater members build on forms familiar to their intended community, including the native ballad tradition and other story-based forms. From the Appalachian region themselves, ensemble members grew up surrounded by these traditions. Dell'Arte and Pregones are grounded in traditional forms as well, respectively a great range of European and Latino popular theatre. Popular theatre has historically relied on techniques accessible to people no matter what their education, such as the physical, archetypal Italian commedia dell'arte and the Mexican carpa, or tent show. The popular is often linked with democratization of theatre, extending beyond class boundaries by virtue of content, form, and venue. The French tradition of the popular was articulated by Romain Rolland in his book, *Le theater du peuple* (1903), described by theatre historian Marvin Carlson as "a theater accessible to the workers without being condescending, and educative without being pompous or exclusive. [Rolland] proposed for it three basic concerns: to provide relaxation for its patrons after a day of labor, to give them energy for the day to come, and to stimulate their minds" (Carlson, 1993, p. 317).

The popular also bespeaks a sense of broad cultural ownership. Pregones member Jorge Merced describes a performance at a high school that began really badly but when the Latino music and poetry started, the whole event turned around (Lopez, 2002). Associate director Alvan Colon Lespier identifies as major influences the Latin American Popular Theatre and New Theatre trends whose origins can be traced to the late twenties when Latin American theatre artists begin experimenting with Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Piscator, and later Brecht (Lespier, personal communication, November, 2003). These

sources share popular theatre's emphasis on theatre as a communal event, participating in the celebratory, political, and effective life of the populace: "little or no fourth wall, travel to people rather than expecting them to come to you" (R. Rolon, personal communication, November, 2003). Not infrequently, Pregones' performances are part of larger events like street parties and festivals. On the other hand, the ensemble does not exhibit blind devotion to tradition. Says Rolon, "There are some traditions we don't value. But we rarely take up an issue without going back 100 years. Because we realize it was probably done already" (personal communication, November, 2003). Even when they think they are inventing something, they find a common thread in earlier Latino work. So they have made it a habit to know those sources.

### Storytelling

*All struggles against oppression in the modern world begin by redefining what had previously been considered private, non-public and non-political issues as matters of public concern, as issues of justice, and sites of power.*

—Seyla Benhabib (1992, p. 100)

While productions take a range of aesthetic forms, the most pervasive method of community-based performance building is story gathering. In what follows, I tease out the significance of this approach vis-à-vis "the problem democracy is supposed to solve." The central dynamic characterizing the political use of story is redefining the personal, as Benhabib writes, "as matters of public concern, as issues of justice, as sites of power" (1992, p. 100).

I begin with *common green/common ground* (cg2), a 21-month play building and performance project I initiated about New York City community gardens—their

creation, flourishing, and then struggle to survive. Sabrina Peck, a founding member of Cornerstone Theater, coconceptualized, directed, and choreographed the project with 43 community gardeners and NYU Tisch School of the Arts students. Peggy Pettitt facilitated community storytelling and Michael Keck was musical director. We began cg2 by holding storycircles with people with community gardening experience. The format was very simple: we'd pose a question like, "What nourishes you most in the garden?" and people would respond with a story, one by one, as everyone else listened. There would be no general conversation until all the people in the circle had had a chance to tell their stories. The play we built together under Peck's direction was largely based on these stories.

Cg2's basis in story created a level playing field apparent to everyone from the first storycircle. People were going to be respected here not for their educational or economic level but for their relationship to gardening:

Rosa: I shared something I knew with the Brooklyn Botanic Garden here—they said it couldn't be done but it can. You take any plant that's dead or you figure can't grow. You take a grain of corn, put a hole in it, and put it in the ground where the ailing plant is planted. When the corn sprouts, the plant catches on and it grows. I have a rose bush that was looking like it was dead. Miss Oliver said to me, "You can't grow that. Leave it be." I put it in the ground with the corn and the other day she said, "Your rose bush look good." (Cohen-Cruz, 2000)

Because stories come out of everyone's experience, not only those designated exceptional, the events they recount feel like actions any of us could emulate. Here's Toby Sanchez:

Our garden started out as a dump just like all the others. There were suitcases in there and you didn't know if there were dead bodies or what. Our neighborhood association was always complaining, oh the lot it's so terrible, it's ruining property values, but

I have to say they mainly whined. So I went downtown and found out that Banco de Ponce owned the land and I wrote them a letter saying, "You're causing slums and blight. Why don't you give the lot to the association and we'll create a garden? I promise we'll take good care of it." Well, they threw that in the waste can. Then I called some friends who told me the correct language to use with banks and the right agencies to send copies to. I wrote the letter again on behalf of our neighborhood association and said, "Federal money has just been used to renovate two buildings next to this lot, and you are creating slums and blight" and I put c.c. to the right agency. That bank manager called up the very next day and said, "I'll do whatever you want." So the association agreed—the bank pays to clean up the lot and put up a fence and the neighbors will garden. (Cohen-Cruz, 2000)

In the same vein, stories promote solidarity. As cultural consultant Caron Atlas avows, "I especially like stories of resistance that help people speak out and feel less isolated."<sup>4</sup>

Story-based theatre is more generally accessible to audiences, too. According to South African theatre critic Zakes Mda,

Why should "art" as in "art theatre" be used to distinguish between theatre that is composed in the codes of national elites, and uses techniques that are appreciated only by them and are beyond the comprehension of the rest of the society, from theatre that has a broad appeal within the society and is rooted in the community? Popularity does not make a work inartistic. It merely means the artist has utilised codes that are shared by the whole of the community. (1993, p. 49)

African American storyteller Lorraine Coleman relies on stories because, "Minority communities only trust what comes from the heart."<sup>4</sup>

Suzanne Lacy is a community-based performance artist who integrated personal story into her work in the early 1970s, largely influenced by feminist consciousness-raising (CR)

groups. The CR group was a grass-roots strategy in the women's movement of that time whereby groups of 6–12 women met in each other's living spaces and told personal stories that bespoke structural inequalities in gender relationships. Lacy had studied with community organizer Saul Alinsky before entering the Feminist Studio Workshop directed by Judy Chicago. In the hands of Lacy and other feminist artists in the 1970s, the processes of CR groups became interviews with women about rape, about aging, about invisibility, that were woven into performance pieces.

Lacy has been equally influenced by aesthetic and conceptual tools she learned from Allan Kaprow, best known for the creation of happenings. She explains: "Although the visual matters, the shape of the concept is more important—emphasizing daily life, everyday actions such as brushing one's teeth as art, and the ideas of contingency, intentionality, and framing" (personal communication, 2003). So it is not surprising that Lacy finds limits to the value of story. In the tradition of the avant-garde, Lacy's interest in contingency shapes her desire for unscripted and unpredictable expressions of personal experience, rather than fixed narrative. While participants of Lacy's projects have extensive conversations among themselves, these conversations, and ultimately performance components, are as likely to be philosophical and idea-driven as they are to be personal and narrative. Lacy distrusts singular narrative, but is drawn toward multiple, simultaneous narratives improvisationally exercised by nontrained actors around a series of predetermined questions. Lacy speculates that part of her aversion to fixed story is that prioritizing individual narrative inevitably distorts the bigger picture:

Everyone operates within a personal narrative history and present that centralizes them within a very vast world. One of the problems with race relations today [Lacy has worked intensively in cross-racial contexts] is how white people centralize the narrative.

Like, "I hurt so much because you are oppressed." (personal communication, 2003)

John O'Neal, cofounder in 1963 of the Free Southern Theater, has also used personal story for political engagement. Rather than tell people what to do, the Free Southern Theater strived to create performances that stimulated postshow discussion, thus serving their goal of supporting the development of southern black communities. The exchange of stories proved to be a better way of having dialogue than argument because, explains O'Neal,

Adversarial debates reward people who are trained in their techniques. Those tend to be people who have the largest vocabularies and largest egos and most willingness to claim ground and hold it. Which merely affirms the problem you're starting with in the first place. So instead of standing on stage and answering questions, I moved off the stage and sat in the audience and said, "Why don't you tell me a story that the experience of the theatre evoked in you?" (personal communication, 2002)

Story circles frequently lead to other activities; O'Neal, now artistic director of Junebug Productions, is using story in his current project, *The Color Line*, to document civil rights history. He sees this as a step in the rebuilding of a movement for social justice. One artist, one educator, and one activist in each of several towns are bringing their communities' attention to the local legacy of civil rights. The artist is responsible for gathering personal stories on the subject. Stories must be used in some way thereafter, with the help of the educator and the activist.

Storytelling offers what Dudley Cocke calls a "counter-history" to that written by those with the power to articulate official histories (personal communication, June, 2002). Local stories, explains Cocke, often provide a viewpoint that is otherwise suppressed. Cocke and Don Baker's production with Roadside Theater of *Red Fox/Second Hangin'*

(1976/1994) opposed written versions of an Appalachian figure known as "Red Fox" with oral accounts. Officially a villain, Red Fox appears as a hero in local stories. Roadside took the oral stories up a notch by corroborating them with material evidence such as old newspaper articles and court records.

Stories are a valuable tool for building participation because of their contagious nature. Donna Porterfield of Roadside describes a play, *South of the Mountain*, written by company member Ron Short,

that was his family's personal story, in which real family members were portrayed using their real names. The story, however, was the same story experienced by many in the mountains, so it became archetypal. The play was immensely popular in the mountains, and in working class communities nationally. Audiences always wanted to stay after the show to tell their stories to the actors. (Porterfield, personal communication, June 17, 2003)

Indeed, stories evoke what people know they have in common and affirm the group. In the three plays in John O'Neal's Junebug series, O'Neal portrays a storyteller of that name. SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a civil rights organization) invented Junebug as a "title," i.e., not one character but representative of the wisdom of the common person. The stories themselves came from many African Americans during the civil rights movement. The stories serve multiple community goals, central among them a counter-history from the point of view of those without power who did not get to write the official history. They also celebrate African American wit, language, and spirit.

According to literary theorist Paul Copley, narrative helps maintain and recall identity; the memories embodied therein have served in the "formation and maintenance of the self-image of a people" (2000, p. 38). This may prove liberating when a group is under pressure to assimilate or simply deserves more

respect. Roadside Theater was founded in order to strengthen its Appalachian region. According to Cocke,

Roadside's home community had no experience creating or attending plays created from its local life. . . . Roadside has had an open field to invent itself, always ready to try something different based on what it originally identified as its core theatrical resources: storytelling, oral history, bluegrass and mountain music, and lively church services. (personal communication, June, 2002)

Narratives representing a people may also prove oppressive, depending on how "we" is defined. Take the case of *Swamp Gravy*, an annual theatre project conceived in Colquitt, Georgia (pop. 2,000) by a local woman who had met director Richard Owen Gere in a creativity workshop in the north. Wanting to bring a story-based playmaking experience to her small town, she invited Gere to Colquitt. For a half dozen years, in partnership with playwright Jo Carson, Gere made an annual play on local issues with local people. The project was unprecedented in bringing together people from both the black and white communities. But more recently, with a different director and writer, the show became so demanding of people's time that almost only white, more affluent people had time to participate. Consequently, who was represented in the annual, story-based was "Colquitt community" production?

Storytelling as a traditional form of education passes on values, practices, experience, and knowledge that affirm the collective identity of the group. Popular education also affirms collective identity but is based on rethinking received wisdom in a dialectic with lived experience. Brazilian theatre maker Augusto Boal's direct translation of Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed" into Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) evidences this dynamic. Boal moved from agit-prop, a form of theatre that *tells audiences* what they *should* do, to a

story-based approach that engages audiences in discussions about what *they want to or could* do. Boal and his middle-class actors from Sao Paulo were performing for peasants in the northeast of Brazil. Holding their prop rifles over their heads, they called for all peasants to mobilize against the landowners and take control of the means of production. The leader of the peasants rushed up to Boal after the show and said, "Yes! You are right! We have a stash of rifles back at our hideout. Let's all go have lunch and then fight the landowners and take the land!" Boal was ashamed. He and his troupes were actors, not fighters. He realized then the fallacy of telling a group of people a solution to a problem that he did not share and whose ramifications he would not experience. This led Boal to the creation of Forum Theatre (2001, pp. 194–195).

In Forum Theatre, several people who share a particular social oppression each tell a story that localizes how that oppression plays out in their lives. The stories all end badly; otherwise, they would not need to find solutions for the problem. Using the stories as building blocks, the group makes a scene in which they all feel represented and perform it for an audience called "spect-actors" who also identify with that problem. Because the one story stands for the many, after performing the scene, the liaison between actors and audience known as "the joker" can discuss the problem with those assembled and ask, "Can anyone imagine something the protagonist might do to ameliorate the situation?" If anyone has an idea—and I've never seen a Forum Theatre where no one did—the scene is replayed, stopping at whatever points spect-actors want to become the protagonist and try it out. Storytelling as critical pedagogy rather than a receptacle of unquestionable knowledge thus provides a way for people who identify with one another to imagine different behavioral choices leading to different outcomes.

As stories are told, paradoxically, they are no longer just one person's tale. That's



the basis of storytelling in community-based performance—each person's story is but the raw material from which the performance, which must be meaningful to and representative of the whole group, is created.

Boal, O'Neal, *cg2*, and Lacy all fulfill what Benhabib (1992) calls contextualizing the personal as a "struggle for justice" but they do so in different ways. Boal proposes a structured approach to illuminating the political realities embedded in personal stories. For in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the subject of the stories is always oppressions encountered, struggled with, but not overcome. Whether in workshops or Forum performances, spect-actors first warm up so as to be ready to participate. Although the structure of O'Neal's storycircles is looser than that of TO, at their best (from O'Neal's perspective) they are part of a movement for social justice whence their efficacious potential emanates. So did participants in *cg2* see themselves as part of a movement, to save community gardens, and thus the play was experienced at once as an aesthetic and an advocacy experience. And whereas Boal's Forum Theatre begins with people identifying an oppression and then bringing specifics of their lives to illustrate it, Lacy and consciousness-raising groups begin with personal stories to lead to political revelations. For example as long as rape was considered a private matter, it was beyond the ken of political regulation. The very act of speaking about it publicly helped move it into the domain of issues that could be politically regulated.

But neither personal stories manifesting political implications nor any other methodology necessarily leads to justice. Sometimes the heightened political consciousness of the times propels a performance into political efficacy; ACT UP's work in the late 1980s and 1990s is a case in point (see Solomon, 1998). Or a political link is necessary. Boal made such a connection when he became a city councilor of Rio de Janeiro and treated the revelations of Forum Theatre as a dossier pointing the way to

laws that needed to be passed. And indeed, thirteen laws were passed on that basis (see Boal, 1998). Lacy, too, has allied herself with institutions capable of making changes. A decade of work in Oakland, California, was closely coordinated with the police and eventually led to better police training especially in regard to male teens of color, who voiced bitter stories of their treatment at the hands of Oakland's finest. O'Neal originally allied Free Southern Theater with SNCC, and now regularly partners artists with activists and educators. All three of these artists situate story-based performance in relationship to institutions able to lessen the inequities that the stories make public, propelling me to my last point, the overlap of art and other disciplines.

### An Expanded Notion of Art

Washington, DC, Yom Kippur, October 2003. I am with choreographer Liz Lerman and some 400 congregants at Temple Micah, dancing our atonement on this, the most solemn day of the Jewish calendar. Ten days ago, on the Jewish New Year, Rabbi Danny Zemel invited worshippers to write down their sins of the past year so they could be used as part of today's danced prayer. Lerman has chosen the following sins that were inscribed most frequently: For the sin I sinned by losing my temper, by being impatient, for my smart mouth, my pride, and for not listening. Five congregants join her on the *bima* (stage) and each reads a sin. Lerman has choreographed a movement for each which she teaches all 400 of us now. The gestures are of the hands, face, arms, and fingers; we can do them standing in place. We all do each gesture as the five congregants each read the corresponding line. Then we join in speaking and embodying all five lines and gestures. Next we do the gestures as we sing a song with different words but the same spirit of praying for forgiveness for our sins. Then instrumental music is added. Each time, the totality of the words and gestures

take me to a deeper place. All of me is asking for forgiveness.

Through her work in the Washington Jewish community, Lerman is investigating bringing people of wealth and status into this field. If we really want to hear everyone's story we must include the rich and powerful; they could benefit from this kind of work even as do people on the other end of the economic spectrum. Indeed, all of us need to hear from people in different circumstances than our own. Lerman has taken the opportunity to get people to participate by chance—because her Yom Kippur dance is for the whole congregation and not just a subset interested in creative Jewish experiments, she hopes the power of art to open our hearts and minds will be experienced by the entire congregation. In the same spirit, Lerman worked with both military personnel and those against their use of nuclear weapons in the Portsmouth, New Hampshire, *Shipyards Project*, believing that people of different positions and opinions must be brought to the same table if we all are to move forward together.

Community-based performance is thus inherently educational, teaching participants *how to express themselves and listen to others* in a collective setting. For the main problem with Guinier and Torres' theory of participatory democracy is that most of us lack processes for envisioning our future together. It is idealistic to imagine the political establishment taking art so seriously, yet there is precedent (such as the aforementioned experiments of Augusto Boal as a city councilman).

Moreover, the educational potential of art is impeded by the breach between art makers and thinkers, an area that community-based practitioners must also take up to fulfill art's political promise. Just as the field suffers from lack of recognition of the artistic skills required, so does it undermine itself in not always accepting the other kinds of expertise that a project with multiple goals requires. Though economic constraints pose a challenge, so does habitual

thinking about who is needed to guide a performance project with not only aesthetic goals. As community-based performance fully translates its principles into practice, it will create ever broader participatory spaces for people to imagine their collective future. By providing an accessible process and leadership for thinking our situation through collectively and publicly expressing it, community-based performance could be a viable response to what Guinier and Torres call "the problem democracy is supposed to solve."

## NOTES

1. In the newly formed Soviet Union, festivals were a means to educate a large population and forge identification with the new state. Intertwining experimentation, politics, and popular entertainment enabled audiences to grasp ideology by rendering ideas visually and capturing the audience's attention.

2. Cultural democracy has a particular resonance given my focus here on the United States. There are often correlations between cultural and political systems. The Nazi Nuremberg rallies of the 1930s, for example, immortalized in Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* (1935/1993), is a terrifying example of totalitarianism in art reflecting totalitarianism in politics.

3. Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process<sup>SM</sup> and the Critical Response Process<sup>SM</sup> are service marks of the Dance Exchange, Inc. (Liz Lerman Dance Exchange). Use of and reference to Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process<sup>SM</sup> and the Critical Response Process<sup>SM</sup> requires prior permission of the Dance Exchange. For editorial purposes the service mark has been purposely omitted from the text of this publication.

4. From author's notes from Critical Perspectives Writers Gathering held in November 2002 in San Francisco, organized by Animating Democracy Initiative.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, D., & Goldbard, G. (2001). *Creative community: The art of cultural development*. New York: Rockefeller Foundation.
- Bacon, B. S., Yuen, C., & Korza, P. (1999). *Animating democracy: The artistic imagination as a*

- force in civic dialogue [Electronic version]. Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts.
- Baker, D., & Cocke, D. (1994). Red fox, second hangin'. In K. deNobriga & V. Anderson (Eds.), *Alternate ROOTS: Plays from the southern theater* (pp. 57–102). Portsmouth, NH: Heineman. (Work first produced 1976)
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Benhabib, S. (1992). *Situating the self: Gender, community and post-modernism in contemporary ethics*. New York: Routledge.
- Berger, A. A. (1992). *Popular culture genres*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Boal, A. (1998). *Legislative theatre, (A. Jackson, Trans.)*. London: Routledge.
- Boal, A. (2001). *Hamlet and the baker's son, (A. Jackson & C. Blaker, Trans.)*. London: Routledge.
- Brady, S. (2000). Welded to the ladle: Non-radicality in community-based theater. *The Drama Review*, 44(3), 51–74.
- Broyles-Gonzalez, Y. (1994). *El teatro campesino*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Carlson, M. (1993). *Theories of the theater*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Coble, P. (2000). *Narrative*. London: Routledge.
- Cohen-Cruz, J. (2000). Transcriptions of story circles for *common green/common ground*. Unpublished.
- Fields, M. (2002). *Wild card* [Unpublished dramatic text].
- Freire, P. (1987). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1968)
- Friedman, D. (1985). Workers theatre of the 1930s. In B. McConachie & D. Friedman (Eds.), *Theatre for working-class audiences: 1830–1980* (pp. 111–120). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Gennep, A. V. (1960). *The rites of passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Glassberg, D. (1990). *American historical pageantry*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Guinier, L. & Torres, G. (2002). *The miner's canary*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kretzman, J. & McKnight, J. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out*. Chicago: ACTA Publications.
- Lewis, F. (2002). Case study: Cornerstone Theater Company. In R. Leonard, A. Kilkelly, L. Burnham, & S. Durland (Eds.), *Performing communities*. <http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/perfcomm/cornerstone/index.php>
- Lewis, F. (Ed.). (2003). *Cornerstone community collaboration handbook*. Self-published draft.
- Lopez, A. (2002). Teatro Pregones. In R. Leonard, A. Kilkelly, L. Burnham, & S. Durland (Eds.), *Performing communities*. [www.communityarts.net](http://www.communityarts.net)
- Lovelace, A. (2002). Resolving conflict: A poet's residency in Tulsa. [www.communityarts.net](http://www.communityarts.net)
- McKenna, M. (2002a). Case study: The Dell'Arte Company. In R. Leonard, A. Kilkelly, L. Burnham, & S. Durland (Eds.), *Performing communities*. <http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/perfcomm/dellarte/index.php>
- McKenna, M. (2002b). Dell'Arte Players: Field Notes. In R. Leonard, A. Kilkelly, L. Burnham, & S. Durland (Eds.), *Performing communities*. <http://www.communityarts.net/~commarts/readingroom/archive/perfcomm/dellarte/dellarte-fieldnotes.php>
- Mda, Z. (1993). *When people play people*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Neal, L. (1968). The black arts movement. *The Drama Review*, 12(4), 29–39.
- Nochlin, L. (1985). The Paterson strike pageant of 1913. In B. McConachie & D. Friedman (Eds.), *Theatre for working class audiences in the U.S., 1830–1980* (pp. 87–96). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- O'Neal, J. (1968). Motion in the ocean. *The Drama Review*, 12(4), 70–77.
- Peeps, C. (2000). Conclusion: Getting in history's way. In M. Cieri & C. Peeps (Eds.), *Activists speak out* (pp. 269–272). New York: Palgrave.
- Riefenstahl, L. (1993). *Triumph des willens* [Triumph of the will] [Motion picture]. United States: Connoisseur/Meridian Films. (Work first produced 1935)
- Rukeyser, M. (1974). *The life of poetry*. New York: Morrow.
- Schechner, R. (1985). *Between theater & anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Solomon, A. (1998). AIDS crusaders ACT UP a storm. In J. Cohen-Cruz (Ed.), *Radical street performance*. New York: Routledge.
- Watkins, N. (2002). Carpetbag Theater. In R. Leonard, A. Kilkelly, L. Burnham, & S. Durland (Eds.), *Performing communities*. [www.communityarts.net](http://www.communityarts.net)
- Zinn, H. (2003). *A people's history of the United States, 1492–present*. New York: HarperCollins.

# 25

---

## Black Performance Studies

### *Genealogies, Politics, Futures*

E. PATRICK JOHNSON

Performance maps a space in which to theorize the radicalization of what we might call “black performance studies.” Undoubtedly, each of these terms signifies differently and within the specifics of its historicity. Wedded together in dialogic and dialectic tension, however, these terms are at the interstices of black life, politics, and cultural production. “Black” and “performance”: These two tropes complement one another in a dialectic that becomes an ontology of racialized cultural production. “Blackness,” for instance, is a simulacrum until it is practiced—i.e., performed. The epistemological moment of race manifests itself in and through performance in that performance facilitates self- and cultural reflexivity—a knowing made manifest by a “doing.” Far from undergirding an essentialist purview of blackness, performance, as a mode of representation, emphasizes that, “it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know

how we are constituted and who we are” (Hall, 1992, p. 30).

Blackness, however, is not only a pawn of and consequence of performance, but it is also an effacement of it. The implication of this construction of blackness in relation to performance is not that performance is, as suggested by its naysayers, “antiintellectual.” Rather, it suggests that performance may not fully account for the ontology of race.

Racial performativity informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning (Manning, 2001, p. 4). Yet, I must reemphasize that, following Rinaldo Walcott (1997), “to read blackness as merely ‘playful’ is to fall into a willful denial of what it means to live ‘black’” (p. iv). Indeed, blackness offers a way to rethink performance theory by forcing it to ground itself in praxis, especially within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic society. While useful in deconstructing essentialist notions of selfhood,

performance must also provide a space for meaningful resistance of oppressive systems. Taken together, then, these two terms are both degenerative in that to a degree, they represent a double bluff—their face value always promising more than they can provide. They are also generative forces, pressed into service to create and demarcate cultural meaning. Therefore, black performance has the potential of simultaneously forestalling and enabling social change.

The interanimation of blackness and performance necessitates the codification of this relationship through intellectual inquiry—thus “black performance *studies*.” While black performance has been a sustaining and galvanizing force of black culture and a contributor to world culture at large, it has not always been recognized as a site of theorization in the academy. Similarly marginalized as the black bodies with which it is associated, black performance, while always already embedded within institutionally sanctioned and privileged forms of performance, has often been neglected as a intellectual site of inquiry.

Accordingly, this essay seeks to (1) rehearse the history of black performance studies as endemic to the field of interpretation and performance studies; (2) discuss the ways in which blacks have used performance as epistemology and resistance; and (3) engage the various political struggles over what constitutes black performance within black culture by offering examples of the ways in which the signifier *black* within black performance studies has been expanded by the political interventions of black women’s and gay and lesbian’s artistic work.

### THE ERASURE OF BLACK PERFORMANCE

There has always been a black performative presence within the field of interpretation and performance studies, whether it has been

acknowledged as such or not. I am thinking here of Toni Morrison’s intervention in the construction of the literary canon. Morrison deploys the term “Africanism” to suggest the process through which black folk are interpellated in the white imaginary and how that interpellation gets represented in literature. “As a trope,” Morrison writes,

little restraint has been attached to its uses. As a disabling virus within literary discourse, Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability.

She continues,

through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette, American Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom. (1992, p. 7)

Morrison’s definition and deployment of “Africanism” rings true for the ways in which black performance has remained for years on the periphery of interpretation and now performance studies. That is, although always already a viable contributor to the field, disciplinary practices of exclusion—e.g., the exclusion of black-authored texts in interpretation or the marginalization of black performance scholars in performance studies and the willing omission of the ways that black oratory contributed to the elocutionary moment, an historical epoch many performance scholars locate as the founding moment of the field—have reified the field as a colorless enterprise.

Some might argue that this critique of the field is anachronistic—indeed, that within this historical context, racism was in vogue and should not be read back into the present as exemplary or typical of the field. Touché. But that does not explain the current excision of the role black performance has played in the development of interpretation and black performance in histories being written about the field.<sup>1</sup> Nor does it explain the current miniscule number of black scholars located within interpretation and performance studies programs and departments around the country. Or perhaps it does. The same racist practices of exclusion, omission, or derision in the past only provided a fertile ground for the perpetuation of those same practices today. Despite the lacuna in the recounting of the field's history and the marginalization of black scholarship on performance theory, however, black performance is imbricated in the codified markers of "whiteness."

Dwight Conquergood's essay, "Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech" (2000), revises this whitened history of the field by demonstrating how racial "others," whose designation as inarticulate and degenerate was reified by the very practice and discourse of elocution, redeployed bourgeois elocutionary practices by performing their own "black counterpublic readings" (p. 333). Similar to Morrison's critique of American literature and criticism, Conquergood's essay argues that while the elocutionary movement highlighted the "performativity of whiteness naturalized," there was another counter performance of race in dialectic tension with this movement that "brings into sharp focus the complex performative cultural politics of this speech tradition" (p. 325): the black oral tradition. Drawing on what A. Hampaté Bâ calls "the great school of life" (p. 168), enslaved and newly emancipated blacks signified on the elocutionary movement by redeploying its tenets toward their own liberation and humanity.

Conquergood's historical intervention notwithstanding, the refusal to acknowledge the coexistence of subaltern voices within the field's history coincides with the disavowal of black literature in interpretation's closely allied field of English. Indeed, performance studies' subjugation of black cultural production reeks of the same arrogant racism in the literary tradition that, according to Morrison,

holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uniformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence—which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture—has no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture's literature. (1990, p. 5)

And yet, as in the "Africanist" presence in the literary tradition, so too has there been a "black" presence in interpretation and performance studies. Quietly, yet radically transforming departments, black artist-scholars such as Njoki McElroy at Northwestern University and Wallace Ray Peppers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill insisted on foregrounding the literature, folklore, and performance traditions of black writers and scholars by cracking open the white canon that was reified as "Literature" over and above all "others." These black cultural workers not only demanded inclusion, but they also developed courses that were dedicated to the study and analysis of black literature, paving the way for scholars of color who would come after them—myself included. McElroy, Wallace and others were enacting what Conquergood calls an "emancipatory pedagogy and performative cultural politics" (2000, p. 336)—emancipatory in the sense that they no longer felt bound by the strictures of a curriculum that ignored or tokenized the literature, art, music, and artistic expression of their culture; and political in the sense that

their intervention occurred during a time when the material consequences of their insubordination could have threatened their employment and even their lives.

Because of the interventions of these foremothers and forefathers, younger black performance scholars continue to press the field and the academy in general to recognize the material, intellectual, and aesthetic matrix that is black performance.<sup>2</sup> But just as they appropriated “performance” in other disciplines, and similar to the ways in which some of those disciplines’ current deployment of performance ignores a whole body of work in interpretation and performance studies that preceded its own fetishization and exoticization of performance, interpretation and performance scholars are also guilty of ignoring a whole body of black performance theory that preceded the current proliferation of black performance theory by younger scholars. Nonetheless, at this critical juncture, there is no question that any genealogy of interpretation and performance studies within or outside the National Communication Association must consider the role of black performance and theory in the shaping and codification of interpretation and performance studies as a site of intellectual inquiry.

One might ask how such a rich and vital site of knowledge could have been excluded or gone unnoticed within a field that narrates its own history as one fraught with political debates with the academy about its own status as a legitimate discipline (see Lee, 1999; Thompson, 1983). Institutionalized racism is one culprit, but another one is the inability of academic institutions and individuals to read and value the discreet and nuanced performances and theorizing of African Americans. Outside the purview of what many scholars would hardly recognize as a legitimate object of inquiry, black expressive culture has, until recently, been illegible and unintelligible to the undiscerning eyes and ears, and perhaps minds, of some scholars. The subjugated knowledge embedded within black expressive

culture, therefore, is not always ameliorated by those who lack the cultural capital to read it or who are altogether disinterested in these forms. It is the research of the self-reflexive, self-conscious, and humble who may potentially read more than the writing of black people and provide a space, according to D. Soyini Madison, for subjugated knowledge to “enter to articulate—to translate and to unveil—extant philosophical systems to those who (without this knowledge) are unable to find, much less hear them” (1998, p. 321).

Beyond providing an explanation as to why black expressive culture is not always discernible to the researcher, Madison, in her theorization of subjugated knowledge, also implicitly suggests black performance as epistemology. That is, as other scholars have argued about performance in general, black performance provides a space for black culture to reveal itself to itself—to come to *know* itself, in the process of *doing*. Below, I cite a few examples of how black folks use performance as epistemology.

### BLACK PERFORMANCE AS EPISTEMOLOGY

Scholars of various African cultures have long since argued the primacy of ritual performance as a site of knowing (Drewal, 1991; Fabian, 1990; Turner, 1969, 1982, 1983, 1986). Consequently, ritual survived as a key component of diasporic black performance and expressive traditions. If, as Victor Turner has argued, cultural performances set in motion “a set of meta-languages whereby a group or community not merely expresses itself, but more actively, tries to understand itself in order to change itself” (1983, p. 383), then, arguably, ritual is the cornerstone of the performative process through which African Americans come to understand, reinforce, and reflexively critique who they are in the world.

One site of such ritual performance is the black church. Indeed, the processual nature of

the black church service—the simultaneous improvisational, yet internalized structure—is undergirded by rhythm and repetition, which sustains focus on a renewal of faith and commitment to serving God. From the more formalized roles and procedures of the preacher, choir, ushers, deacons and deaconesses, trustees, minister of music, and “nurses,”<sup>3</sup> to the improvisational call-and-response dynamic and shouts, the central galvanizing force is ritual performance accomplished through repetition and rhythm. As African poet and cultural critic Léopold Senghor argues:

Rhythm is the architecture of being, the inner dynamic that gives it form, the pure expression of the life force. Rhythm is the vibratory shock, the force which, through our sense, grips us at the root of our being. It is expressed through corporeal and sensual means; through lines, surfaces, colours, and volumes in architecture, sculpture or painting; through accents in poetry and music, through movements in the dance. But, doing this, rhythm turns all these concrete things towards the light of the spirit. In the degree to which rhythm is sensuously embodied, it illuminates the spirit. (quoted in Jahn, 1961, p. 164)

The “vibratory shock” of rhythm and repetition, of which Senghor speaks, appears in the “vamp” or the repetitive chorus of gospel music, which sustains the focus on and generates the spirit. The conjuring of the spirit through the force of rhythm and repetition reinforces the participants’ belief that it exists which, in the gestalt of performance, becomes the epistemological moment. The use of repetition to focus attention on a central idea within black American musical traditions encourages emotional engagement on the part of the audience as well as intensifies the emotional engagement of the performer. This active participation occurs through a call-and-response dynamic whereby the rhythm created by the repetitive force effects active participation on the part of the audience and, according to Paul Carter Harrison, “emotionally and cognitively

galvanizes the spirit toward a highly intuitive sense of creation” (1989, p. xxv).

Moreover, the expression of faith in gospel music is animated, culminating in stylized as well as personalized movement of the body. In her autobiography, Mahalia Jackson relives her early exposure to the performative nature of gospel music:

Those people had no choir and no organ. They used the drum, the cymbal, the tambourine, and the steel triangle. Everybody sang and they clapped and stomped their feet and sang with their whole bodies. They had a beat, a powerful beat, a rhythm we held on to from slavery days, and their music was so strong and expressive it used to bring the tears to my eyes. (1960, p. 72)

The rhythm, beat, and movement of gospel music culminate in joyful expression. Whether it be through a verbalization of “Amen,” “Hallelujah,” “Thank you Jesus,” or “Yes, Lord,” or through nonverbals such as waving the hand, stomping the feet, shouting, or crying, gospel faith is always expressed physically through embodied performance.

The same is true in the structure and delivery of the black folk sermon, which also sustains focus on a topic or issue vis-à-vis rhythm and repetition. When describing the effect of the folk preacher’s performance style, literary and cultural critic Hortense Spillers notes,

The thrust of the sermon is passionate, repeating essentially the rhythms of plot, complication, climax, resolution. The sermon is an oral poetry—not simply an exegetical, theological presentation, but a complete expression of a gamut of emotions whose central form is the narrative and whose end is cathartic release. In that regard the sermon is an instrument of a collective catharsis, binding once again the isolated members of community. (1974, p. 4)

The notion that the folk sermon is oral poetry, that it evokes catharsis and that it binds members of a community are reflected in



the Reverend Jesse Jackson's speech delivered at the 1988 National Democratic Convention. Throughout this speech Jackson draws upon the folk preacher tradition through his use of repetition, rhythm, and metaphor to bring the factions of the Democratic Party together. Transforming his grandmother's quilt into a metaphor for the Democratic Party, Jackson sermonizes,

Now, Democrats, we must build such a quilt. Farmers, you seek fair prices and you are right, but you cannot stand alone. Your patch is not big enough. Workers, you fight for fair wages. You are right, but your patch labor is not big enough. Women, you seek comparable worth and pay equity. You are right. But your patch is not big enough. Women, mothers, who seek Head Start, and day care and pre-natal care, on the front side of life, rather than jail care and welfare on the back side of life, you're right, but your patch is not big enough. Students, you seek scholarships. You're right, but your patch is not big enough.

. . . But don't despair; be as wise as my grandmamma. Pull the patches and the pieces together, bound by a common thread. When we form a great quilt of unity, and common ground, we'll have the power to bring health care and housing and jobs and education and hope to our nation. (quoted in Tannen, 1989, pp. 188–189)

The repetition of the phrase “you're right, but your patch is not big enough” and its variation creates a rhythmic force that draws in the listener by creating suspense about who he will refer to next. By including representatives from the Democratic Party's entire constituency, Jackson works toward “binding” those “isolated members of the community.” The collective catharsis comes at the end of this excerpt when Jackson summarizes all of the things the different factions cannot achieve alone—health care, housing, jobs, etc.—appealing to their sense of “common ground.” Thus rhythm established through repetition in Jackson's speech becomes a generative force,

which heightens emotions and serves as an “opportunity to revitalize a shared cosmogony through social and sacred rituals” (Harrison, 1989, p. xxvi).

Gerald L. Davis also argues that the use of repetition and rhythm in the black folk sermon affects organization and general language use. He writes,

In sermon performance, the African-American preacher is principally concerned with the organization and the language of his sermon. The notion of meter in the sense of a rhythmic, mnemonic environment for the logical, pragmatic development of ideas, is not subordinate to the language focus. Rather, it is concurrent with it. The generation of structures for language usage and the structuring of rhythmic environments for the preacher's message are complementary, concurrent processes in the performance of African-American sermons. (1985, p. 51)

To support his argument, Davis provides an excerpt from a sermon by Bishop Cleveland entitled, “He Wants Your Life: The Search for the Religion of Christ”:

God is studying your tongue

God is studying your aspirations

God ain't studying your manipulations

God ain't studying your demonstrations

God ain't studying your words and your wisdom

God don't want your delay

God wants your life

(Davis, 1985, pp. 51–52)

In this passage from Cleveland's sermon, we immediately recognize a generative formula (“God is studying”) and how that formula structures and organizes ideas, and how it serves as a mnemonic device. But we also see that the rhythm and meter is not sacrificed for structure. The two are concurrent.

These examples of black performance suggest that black expressive culture is not merely artifice nor without consideration of aesthetic criteria. Rather, there is an admixture of both as black performative practices, especially those which privilege ritual, sustain the epistemological frame in which black people and culture reflect, reshape, and revitalize.

### BLACK PERFORMANCE AS A SITE OF RESISTANCE

In her essay, "Performance Practice As a Site of Opposition," cultural critic and feminist scholar bell hooks suggests that there are two modes of black performance—one ritualistic as a part of culture building and one manipulative out of necessity for survival in a oppressive world (1995, p. 210). Hooks suggests that these two modes are not mutually exclusive but bound together in dialogic tension given the way the skills endemic to black expressive culture are both required and deployed for ritual play and for resistive action. For my purposes here, I focus on the latter to buttress my argument that black performance has always been and will always be a part of any liberationist struggle.

From the minute nonverbal expressions of the slave to the pensive sway of the weary domestic to the collective marches on Washington and throughout the South, black performance has been the galvanizing element of black folks' resistance to oppression. Indeed, in the early years of the antebellum South, black performance was a crucial component of the formation of a black public sphere, which Mark Anthony Neal argues was "invaluable to the transmission of communal values, traditions of resistance, and aesthetic sensibilities" (1999, pp. 1–2). According to bell hooks,

Performance was important because it created a cultural context where black people could transgress the boundaries of accepted speech, both in relationship to the dominant white culture, and to the decorum of African-American cultural mores. . . .

Performance practice was one of the places where the boundaries created by the emphasis on proving that the black race was not civilized could be disrupted. Radical ideas could be expressed in this arena. Indeed, the roots of black performative arts emerge from an early nineteenth century emphasis on oration and the recitation of poetry. In a number of narratives relating slave experience, African-Americans cite learning to read and recite as crucial to their development of a liberatory consciousness. (1995, p. 212)

Following this logic, we might concede that black performance is at the interstices of black political life and art, providing the lynchpin that sustains and galvanizes arts and acts of resistance.

Hooks offers her own personal narrative about the importance the "live arts" played in her child rearing. Like hooks, I, too, recall how members of my small black community in rural, western North Carolina staged black plays and encouraged us children to memorize and recite the poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes as a way to instill race pride and to counter the lack of exposure to black writers and artists in the public schools. This grass-roots organizing speaks to the employment of the only available resources to the community—orality. Without the political clout to demand a change in the curriculum, these community leaders drew upon their indigenous expressive forms to transgress the white, bourgeois culturally sanctioned protocols of reading, by making us memorize—and thereby corporeally experience—the literature privileged by black culture.

Some of the best examples of this use of performance are found in the African American oral tradition and literature—tenets of the field of interpretation and performance studies. Within the black oral tradition animal trickster tales in which the weaker animals—rabbit and monkey—outwits the stronger animals—fox and lion—serve as tropes for the master and slave. Given the physical and

psychological constraints of slave culture, the slaves' modes of resistance manifested in the form of tales of these anthropomorphic animals whose relationship parallels that of the slave and master. Creating and performing these tales provided temporary psychological relief from slave existence, but some forms of verbal double entendre afforded material results in the way of freedom. The coding of geographic locations such as "heaven," "the river," and "home" in spirituals sung on plantations, for example, served as directions for where to meet to plan a revolt or to escape to the North. This is not to say that slaves only relied on indirect discursive means of resistance. They also employed embodied performances of resistance as well. According to Lawrence Levine,

The tactics slaves resorted to in order to resist the compulsions of their situation would have been familiar enough to the creatures of their animal tales. The records left by nineteenth-century observers of slavery and by the masters themselves indicate that a significant number of slaves lied, cheated, stole, feigned illness, loafed, pretended to misunderstand the orders they were given, put rocks in the bottom of their cotton baskets in order to meet quota, broke their tools, burned their masters' property, mutilated themselves in order to escape work, took indifferent care of the crops they were cultivating, and mistreated the livestock placed in their care to the extent that masters often felt it necessary to use the less efficient mules rather than horses since the former could better withstand the brutal treatment of the slaves. (1977, p. 122)

These performances of resistance were sometimes met with punishment of the lash, dismemberment, starvation, and even death—many of which are chronicled in animal trickster tales in which Brer Rabbit is caught by Brer Fox, or the monkey in the "Signifying Monkey" tales slips from his tree and is trounced by the lion. Surely, the threat of such retaliation limited the number of such

subversive performances, but more times than not, the will to be treated as a human outweighed the potential threat.

After emancipation, these tales evolved into the "John and Old Master" cycle of tales. No longer under the threat of the master's lash, the emancipated black person could speak freely of the cruelty of former slaveholders and took pride in performing tales in which John, the slave, outsmarts his master. Similar to the function of the animal trickster tales, the function of this cycle of tales was both to indict whites for their inhuman treatment of slaves and to demonstrate the slaves' intellectual and physical acumen at resisting such treatment. As Daryl Dance argues, "By belittling and ridiculing whites and by picturing them as foolish victims, Blacks mitigate some of the frustrations of their daily lives and enhance their sense of dignity and pride" (1989, p. 180). Dance's statement suggests that it is not only the content of these tales but also the performance of them by the storyteller that provides a sense of agency to resist struggle. In Hurston's *Mules and Men*, for example, Black Baby, one of the tale-tellers of Eatonville, Florida, exemplifies both the power of the content of the slave-master folktale and the teller in the following story:

De first colored man that was ever brought to dis country was named John. He didn't know nothin' mo' than you told him and he never forgot nothin' you told him either. So he was sold to a white man.

Things he didn't know he would ask about. They went to a house and John never seen a house so he asked what it was. Ole Massa tole him it was his kingdom. So dey goes on into the house and dere was the fire-place. He asked what was that. Ole Massa told him it was flame 'vaperator. The cat was settin' dere. He asked what it was. Ole Massa told him it was his round head.

So dey went upstairs. When he got on the stair steps he asked what dey was. Ole Massa told him it was his Jacob ladder. So when they got up stairs he had a roller foot bed. John asked what was dat. Ole Massa

told him it was his flowery-bed-of-ease. So dey came down and went out to de lot. He had a barn. John asked what was dat. Ole Massa told him dat was his mound. So he had a Jack in the stable, too. John asked, "What in de world is dat?" Ole Massa said: "Dat's July, the God Damn."

So the next day Ole Massa was up stairs sleep and John was smokin.' It flamed the 'vaperator and de cat was settin' dere it got set afire. The cat goes to de barn where Ole Massa had lots of hay and fodder in de barn. So de cat set it on fire. John watched the Jack kicking up hay and fodder. He would see de hay and fodder go up and come down but he thought de Jack was eating the hay and fodder.

So he goes upstairs and called Ole Massa and told him to get up off'n his flowery-bed-of-ease and come down on his Jacob ladder. He said: "I done flamed the 'vaperator and it caught de round head and set him on fire. He's gone to de mound and set it on fire, and July the God Damn is eatin' up everything he kin git his mouf on."

Massa turned over in de bed and ast, "Whut dat you say, John?"

John tole 'im agin. Massa was still sleepy so he ast John again whut he say. John was gittin' tired so he say, "Aw, you better git out of dat bed and come on down stairs. Ah done set dat ole cat afire and he run out to de barn and set it afire and dat ole Jackass is eatin' up everything he git his mouf on." (Hurston, 1990a, pp. 79–80)

It is clear that the teller of this tale has to demonstrate a level of verbal dexterity to make the punch line effective. Not only must he keep the series of events clear in the mind of the listener, but he must also underscore, undoubtedly through vocal inflection, the irony of the slave's knowledge of standard English. Moreover, the content of the story reveals that the slave discerned all along the master's concealment, or the "appearance that approximates what, ideally, [he wants the slave] to see" (Scott, 1990, p. 50). Thus, the slave sheds his performance of deference and ignorance and provides a glimpse into what James C. Scott (1990) might call his

"hidden transcript" of insubordination and knowledge. This subversive performance is motivated by the slave's frustration with the master in a time of crisis (the cat and barn are on fire); instead of maintaining the ruse of ignorance, he deploys shock to get the master to react.

The slave's use of language here is also an example of "signifying," which refers to the use of indirection to comment negatively on something or someone. In this folktale, the slave's use of "proper" speech after feigning ignorance signifies on the master's own inability to discern that the slave has knowledge of the possessions the master calls by other highfalutin names, and this makes the master look foolish. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1987) argues that the black person's ultimate sign of difference is her "blackness of tongue" (p. 2). While Gates makes this claim to buttress his argument about the signification of black literature on the western literary canon, the same can be argued about signification as a site of resistance within black performance. As in the case of the folktale above, signifying functions as both a source of ritual insult and survivalist strategy or both depending on the context. When deployed in the dozens, a verbal art game of ritual insult, verbal dexterity for "play" may just as easily slip into a critical technology of self-assertion and resistance.

In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie, the protagonist, engages her husband in a dozens contest which results in her enacting her own agency as a woman and as an apt verbal dueler when she exposes her husband's sexual impotence. Trying to put her in her place, Jody, her husband, stands in the middle of their store in front of a crowd of customers and onlookers (dozens contests, to be effective, must always have an audience) and says to Janie, "Whut's de matter wid you, nohow? You ain't no young girl to be gettin' all insulted 'bout yo' looks. You ain't

no young courtin' gal. You'se uh old woman, nearly forty." Janie replies,

Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life. (1990b, p. 75)

Drawing on the signifying tradition Janie levels the playing field by countering her husband's ageist and sexist depiction of her as unattractive housewife. Her retort is deft not only because it is delivered with confidence, but also because its content cuts the quick of her husband's manhood, subverting his patriarchal gaze and control over her body.

Black folks employ performative modes of resistance such as signifying beyond interpersonal relationships to transgress institutionalized forms of oppression. This is particularly true for those who do not benefit from "trickle down" economics, urban gentrification, welfare reform, state surveillance, and other regressive policies that maintain the nation-state. A political economy in which governmental taxation laws benefit the top one percent of the population necessitates discreet, but strategic and effective performative modes of resistance or what Scott (1990) refers to as "discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders" (p. 4).

I refer again to my own upbringing as an example of a community of black folk who devised all kinds of guileful ruses and hidden scripts because their survival depended on it. Because I was raised in public housing the proximity of our neighbors was such that everyone knew the intricate details of families' personal lives. This situation was inconvenient to the extent that one never felt any semblance of privacy about what would be considered

"delicate" family matters. On the other hand, neighbors' knowledge of such intimate details could also work to one's advantage when it came to deploying subversive tactics against "the man." Most of our neighbors as well as my family had parents (usually single mothers) who worked jobs that did not provide health or life insurance. These women were domestics, factory workers, or cooks in low wage earning positions. Therefore, they acquired insurance from insurance salesmen who came door to door selling health and life insurance policies at exorbitant premiums and that actually paid very little if one were to be hospitalized or die. The insurance agents would also go door to door to collect these premiums weekly or monthly. As was to be expected, many families did not have the money to pay these fees yet they were in dire need of insurance in case of emergencies. The performances we devised to avoid payment or distract the salesmen were ingenious. When we children saw them coming, we would run into the house and warn our mothers, who would do one of three things: immediately pull the shades, close the door and pretend not to be home; hide in a closet or bathroom after rehearsing with us the lie to tell the insurance man; or invite the insurance man in and distract him with idle chit chat followed by an invitation to supper (which he sometimes accepted). While these tactics provided only a temporary reprieve from the payment due or overdue, they were performances deployed to stave off institutionalized forms of race and class oppression.

Terry McMillan's elderly black woman narrator in the short story "Ma' Dear," offers another example of subversive performances exemplary of those in which many black working-class and poor people engage to resist devolving further into poverty. Just as my community evaded the calls of insurance salesmen for premium payments, the narrator of McMillan's story pretends that she lives alone and receives no other income beyond her

social security payments, which are too low for her to make ends meet. She devises this performance for her social worker, an agent of the state employed to maintain the status quo. The narrator tells the reader:

That old case worker think she gonna get the truth out of me. She don't scare me. It ain't none of her business that I got money coming in here besides my social security check. How they 'spect a human being to live off \$369 a month in this day and age is what I wanna know. Every time I walk out of my front door it cost me at least two dollars. I bet she making thousands and got credit cards galore. Probably got a summer house on the Island and goes to Florida every January. If she found out how much I was getting from my roomers, the government would make me pay back a dollar for every two I made. I best to get my tail on upstairs and clear everything off their bureaus. I can hide all the nurses' stuff in the attic; they won't be back till next month. Juanita been living out of trunks since she got here, so if the woman ask what's in 'em, I'll tell her, old sheets and pillowcases and memories. (McMillan, 1990, p. 465)

This elderly woman's resistance to the state's surveillance succeeds because she alters the visual economy of her home such that "evidence" of upward mobility (i.e., her boarders' things) is hidden in plain sight of the case worker. She also employs the oral tradition as political resistance in her willful commitment to withholding the "truth" about her income. Rather than divulge the truth, she theorizes her situation to her advantage in the way that Zora Neale Hurston describes:

The white man is always trying to know into somebody's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song. (1990a, p. 3)

The "play toy" that McMillan's narrator puts in the case worker's hand is the lie of one

income, single occupancy, and below poverty existence. She astutely discerns that the case worker is an agent of the state and is visiting her home to impose its hegemony while, at the same time, the state buttresses the case worker's middle class lifestyle that affords her "credit cards galore," "summer homes," and trips to Florida in the winter. Attuned to the state's desire to "know her business" as its official hidden transcript, she develops her own "convincing performance," which requires "both the suppression or control of feelings that would spoil the performance and the simulation of emotions that are necessary to the performance" (Scott, 1990, pp. 28–29). In her encounter with the case worker then, the narrator performs deference and ingratiating behavior, disguises evidence of social mobility, thus allowing her to "say [her] say and sing [her] song."

Other subversive performances existed in my community that demonstrated its agency against hegemonic capitalism. There were women who took "orders" for clothing that they would then shoplift from popular department stores. Indeed, their skill at stealing clothes developed into such an art that they became known for their ability to lift clothes from mannequins in store windows. Their craft subsidized the low wages they earned from factory and domestic work and provided access to commodities they would not otherwise be able to afford. The price of the goods stolen was negotiated with buyers on an individual basis, but was usually no more than half of the ticketed price. Many of my siblings' and my Easter suits and Christmas presents were the result of these women's craft, allowing my mother, a single parent, to provide for her family.

When my grandmother worked as a domestic she also employed subversive performances to resist exploitation. Like so many domestics, in the presence of her employer, she adhered to the "public transcript" of subservience and deference by never raising her voice

when dissatisfied with her conditions. She contends that if she did not like something, she “neva did say nothin’,” for “saying something” might have cost her her job or caused unnecessary tension in the home. Instead, she was silent. She firmly held her mask in place until she had the opportunity to score a victory—however fleeting. But when asked to participate in one of her white charges’ marriage ceremony as “mammy,” by sitting next to the biological white mother, she refused by inventing a story about a sick brother whom she had to take care of. This story not only got her out of participating in the wedding, but it also provided her an opportunity to quit her job as she did not return to work for the family (Johnson, 2003, pp. 151–59). As James Scott reminds us: “The hidden transcript is not just behind-the-scenes griping and grumbling; it is enacted in a host of down-to-earth, low profile stratagems designed to minimize appropriation” (1990, p. 188). My grandmother’s “stratagem” was her silence, which minimized her appropriation of being put on public display as the domestic mammy and removed her from the oppressive space of her employer.

Black performance as a mode of resistance functions to suture the gap between the oppressor and the oppressed, the vocal and voiceless, the dominator and the dominated—indeed, to make the “bottom rail become the top riser” (Dance, 1978, p. 8). Many of these performances are necessary for survival in a white supremacist patriarchal society, while others are deployed for sheer play. Whatever their motivations, these resistive performances do not evolve in an ahistorical vacuum. They take shape according to the historical and sociopolitical context in which they exist. They are also not deployed unilaterally or toward the same aim as they are bound by geopolitical and social circumstances. Because no performance exists outside the politics of representation, ideology is embedded within them and thus thrusts black performance into

the center of identity politics as performers struggle over the most effective or “proper” performances to deploy against racism. Hooks suggests that

for performance to continue to be subversive, to engage cultural practice in ways that are disruptive and transformative, African-American artists must claim a space for ongoing critical vigilance, where we can dialogue about the impact of the live act and where performance can be interrogated to see what works as meaningful intervention. (1995, p. 220)

The dialogue that hooks insists must occur often becomes the site where the boundaries of black performance begin to emerge, depending on the political and social climate. Therefore the next section engages the policing of black performance.

## THE BOUNDARIES OF BLACK PERFORMANCE

Historically, the boundaries of black performance have been circumscribed by both the art produced by black folks and by the critics of that art. As early as 1926, W. E. B. DuBois, in a speech to the NAACP in Chicago entitled “Criteria of Negro Art,” argued that all art is and must be propagandistic. He writes,

All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. (DuBois, 1926, p. 22)

DuBois is speaking to the rhetoric of performance, the power of performance to persuade, move and cajole an audience to action or to maintain the status quo. In the racial terms of the early twentieth century,

this meant the limiting of particular kinds of representations of blackness. DuBois continues,

It is not the positive propaganda of people who believe white blood divine, infallible and holy to which I object. It is the denial of a similar right of propaganda to those who believe black blood human, lovable and inspired with new ideals for the world." (p. 22)

While arguing for a broader range of black artistic expression, one that would allow for black artists to depict black people as more than the image of themselves lodged in the white imaginary, DuBois' deployment of blackness here still signifies the black, heterosexual male, for black women and especially black homosexual artists were not born with the "veil" or gift of "second sight" of which DuBois writes in his 1903 *Souls of Black Folk*. I am actually not invested, as was DuBois, in an equal right to propagandistic art for black women, lesbians, transgendered individuals, and gays, but rather the expansion of blackness itself such that the artistic and cultural work of these dissident subjectivities might always already be included in what one might call black performance studies.

Zora Neale Hurston was already intervening in DuBois' construction of the criteria for Negro art because of her gender, her art, and her politics. Indeed, Hurston's first play, *Color Struck*, written in the same year as DuBois's address to the NAACP, dislodges essentialist notions of blackness by deconstructing the binaries of middle-class vs. folk, black vs. white, male vs. female, etc., especially through what Sandra Richards calls the "absent potential" of performance. According to Richards (1995), this particular Hurston play, at first glance, falls within the category of the "race" or "propaganda" play which DuBois and others promote. In performance, however, the play moves beyond such limitations because of the contingencies of value placed on the bodies on stage by the viewing audience. Richards

writes: "Given this potential interlock in performance of competing energies, one has a text that again generically rejects the binarism of folk versus propaganda/race play and . . . hints at the possibility of some confounding third category" (1995, p. 79). An enigma herself in the context of the "black nigerati" as she referred to other artists of her era, Zora Neale Hurston the woman and her work defied a parochial view of blackness and black performance. But the material reality of being a black queer rebel in life as in art was such that she and her work would spiral out of existence only to be resurrected during the beginning of what would become a black feminist movement.

Curiously enough, the backdrop for the black feminist intervention in third wave feminist movement would be the Black Arts movement of the 1960s. What a paradox. The poetic and theatrical expressions of Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], Haki Madhubuti [Don L. Lee], Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and others again reflected the imbrication of aesthetics and politics, black performance with black people. These artists and performers saw their art as weapons against oppression as well as the vanguard of black creative expression of that era. Kimberly Benston argues that for these black artists of the '60s "writing, properly reconceived and directed as utterance and as act, was advanced as a signal instrument of cultural liberation" (2000, p. 2). Moreover, he suggests that performance was key to this liberationist struggle:

For this revolutionary alignment of voice and purpose to be achieved, the 'new breed' . . . of black artists would need to fashion a dynamic new poetics: expression would become pre-eminently theatrical . . . performance would become transitive and transformative . . . and, finally, the artist would herself become an exemplary performance. (p. 2)

Beyond employing performance as a site of resistance and toward "revolutionary"



aims, these artists' work circumscribed blackness in specific terms that disavowed black women (even black women were guilty of this disavowal), gays, lesbians, and transgendered people, and the black middle class.

In the poem "Black Art," for example, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones says that he desires

Black poems to smear on griddlemamma  
mulatto bitches  
whose brains are red jelly stuck  
between 'lizabeth taylor's toes. Stinking  
Whores! We want poems that kill.  
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot  
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys  
and take their weapons leaving them dead  
with tongues pulled out and sent to  
Ireland.

(1971, p. 223)

In this poem, "blackness" is an exemplary simulacrum until activated by the literary performance that is the poem or by the various performances of the poem by Baraka and others. Black poetry is action put into motion via performance. Once activated through performance, however, "blackness" is defined in relation to what it is not—namely "mulatto bitches," and "whores" as well as other irritants outside the purview of Baraka's definition. While the intention in the performance of this poem is to, as Manthia Diawara (1995) suggests, "redefine the tools of Americanness," as well as to install black creative expression with politicized agency against racism, it comes at the expense of the Other within—the subjectivity of those who would also like to claim a part of the category "black" that Baraka so strongly advocates and valorizes. I agree with Diawara on the one hand that "a performance must be based on a tradition that the audience can verify, and rate the performer against" (p. 209), but on the other, I have questions about the very tradition in which the performance is housed. What does it mean, for

example, to perpetuate a tradition that occludes segments of its constituency? What are the ethics of the tradition? Of our criticism? Of our performances?

In his 1968 treatise on the Black Arts Movement, Larry Neal argues that the "Black Arts Movement is an ethical Movement. Ethical, that is, from the viewpoint of the oppressed. And much of the oppression confronting the Third World and Black America is directly traceable to the Euro-American cultural sensibility" (1994, p. 186). I would suggest, however, that Neal's definition of ethics is based on the false assumption that the "oppressed" is a static category. Does it include, for instance, the "mulatto bitches" and "whores" of Baraka's poetry? The "faggots" in contemporary stand-up routines and theatre productions (what I call "church-on-stage" shows)?<sup>4</sup> Similar to the performances of resistance prior to this period, black arts poetry remained steeped in the quagmire of essentialized blackness, privileging race as the single most important identity marker. Moreover, these performances moved beyond race privileging to actually denigrating members of the black community who were also female, lesbian, gay, transgendered, or middle-class.

Suturing the gap across the river of essentialism were the gendered and sexualized "others" of the black community. Namely, black women and black LGBT artists' work expanded and continue to expand the boundaries of blackness by infusing it with their critical voices. For example, Ntozake Shange's now canonized *For Colored Girls* represented, according to Benston, "a vigorous rethinking of authenticity, authorship, and production that alters the landscape of Black Arts theatrical practice" (p. 83). Indeed, Shange's play set the stage ablaze because it pushed not only the form and content of traditional theatre practice, but it also stretched the black body politic by moving from margin to center the voice of the black woman. The impact has been an unprecedented number of riffs and spoofs

of Shange's titular performance, all of which, however, have been deployed to continue Shange's radical intervention: Keith Antar Mason's *for colored boys who have considered homicide when the streets were too much* and Marvin K. White's *for colored boyz who have considered the s-curl when the hot comb was too much*, to name two. Shange's work also paved the way for other black artists to challenge and extend the boundaries of black performance to reflect a messier more complex identity marker, namely, the now defunct black gay performance troupe Pomo Afro Homos (Freeman, Branner, and Gupton, 1996) who in *Fierce Love: Stories From Black Gay Life*, handled such topics as homophobia in black communities, internalized homophobia among black gay men, and racism in white gay communities. The actors of Pomo Afro Homo deftly critique heteronormative constructions of blackness such as those that circulate within Black Nationalist discourse by declaring their presence as black men who are constantly under surveillance and threat, but who nonetheless persevere because of the strength garnered from their ancestors. In the opening scene of the play, the actors perform the poem "We Are," which ends with the stanza:

We are  
 an endangered species  
 But our stories must be told  
 our lives  
 forever real  
 must be cherished  
 and our love  
 forever rising  
 must be  
 has got to be  
 no doubt about it  
 as strong as our ancestors'  
 and twice as fierce.

(1996, p. 259)

This poem frames the performance as it is reprised at the play's end, punctuating the

performers' insistence that they are indeed a part of the black community and that, in some regards, their love of black community is perhaps stronger than that of their heterosexual counterparts—indeed, "twice as fierce."

Pomo Afro Homo, as well as other performance artists and playwrights such as Rhodessa Jones, Shay Youngblood, George C. Wolfe, Suzan Lori Parks, and Craig Hicks, have continued to expand the concept of "black" in black performance studies by bringing to the fore questions of gender and sexuality. In this way, these artists have radicalized the roots of the black performance tradition by deploying a new ethics of the tradition—a critical praxis engaged not in occlusion, exclusion, and delusion, but rather in liberation.

Some might suggest that one way to emerge from this quagmire is to move away from any form of identity politics, for they ultimately lead to what Judith Butler (1990) has referred to as the "embarrassed, etc." (p. 143). Yet, the disavowal of any kind of identity politic in the realm of black performance does not provide for the cultural distinctiveness that this aesthetic produces and contributes to society. It also imbues black cultural production with an unrelenting relativism with which I am uncomfortable—one that black conservative critic of the Harlem Renaissance George Schuyler used to justify the nonexistence of "Negro Art." In 1926 Schuyler wrote, "Negro art 'made in America' is as nonexistent as the widely advertised profundity of Cal Coolidge, the 'seven years of progress' of Mayor Hylan, or the reported sophistication of New Yorkers" (Schuyler, 1926/1994, p. 51). Rather than attend to Schuyler's extreme polemics, I am more apt to believe, as Harry Elam, that while blackness is a fragile fiction, its experiential effects materialize in and through performance. Elam writes,

From the arrival of the first African slaves on American soil, the discourse on race, the

definitions and meanings of blackness, have been intricately linked to issues of theater and performance. Definitions of race, like the processes of theater, fundamentally depend on the relationship between the unseen and the seen, between the visibly marked and unmarked, between the 'real' and the illusionary. (2001, p. 4)

Other attendant subject positions around which race may pivot, such as gender and sexuality, then, may also come to the fore and be negotiated in relation, rather than subordination, to race in the process of performance. The recognition of this complicated process must not only evolve in the artistic work produced, but in the criticism of this work as well.

We, who currently do black performance studies under the auspices of theatre and performance studies, stand primed to transform the way black performance studies gets theorized. The work of those I have cited as well as that of Bryant K. Alexander, Jennifer Brody, Thomas DeFranz, Joni Jones, Jason King, David Román, José Muñoz, and many others has already begun to intervene and transform the field from within and without. Their work has been a bulwark against the hegemony of a well-meaning yet ill-informed white liberalism or, what Charles Nero (2001) calls "white tribalism," as well as the parochial and conservative discourse of those from within black intellectual circles.

Black performance, like the bodies of those associated with it, has, in the words of the national Negro anthem, "Lift Every Voice And Sing," "come over a way that with tears has been watered." Forever on the periphery of the white bourgeois elite intellectual traditions codified as "the academy," it has, nonetheless, functioned as a specter of "colored contradictions" to the discourse of whiteness—a palimpsestic documentation of an "Africanist" presence. The rhetorical, political, and aesthetic dimensions of black performance served its constituency well as a mode of resistance in those particularly challenging times—and still

do. But as with all representational discourses, black performance is not beyond the reaches of ideology and the power struggles that such battles ensue. We must conceive of black performance as Hortense Spillers suggests conceiving of black community—"as a layering of negotiable differences" (2003, p. 461). Indeed, if this tradition we call black performance studies continues to be generative as opposed to gravitating toward implosion, we must continue to ask, rather than attempt to answer, the question, "What is this "black" in black performance studies? How do we go about creating an ethics of such an endeavor without policing boundaries, silencing opposing or dissenting or dissident voices, while, at the same time, holding true to a politics of social change and transformation that moves us forward in the liberation of black peoples?

## NOTES

1. Marvin Carlson's book, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (1996), for example, provides scant coverage of the contributions of black performance scholars or black performance in general.

2. Since 1996, there has been an annual meeting of young black performance theory scholars. Since their first meeting at New York University, this group of black performance theorists has met annually to workshop performances, critique each other's written work, and generate new theoretical paradigms. The group has generated one book (see DeFranz, 2002) and they are at work on another.

3. In many black churches, a group of women who are not medically trained professionals, but who nonetheless attend to parishioners who become filled with the holy spirit and faint, hold the title of nurse and dress in nursing uniforms.

4. These particular shows are also referred to as the "chitlin' circuit." They are usually low budget gospel musicals that travel from city to city. They appeal to mass audiences perhaps because of their formulaic plots, which usually consist of a long-suffering black matriarch who has a wayward child who she prays will "find God" and come home. They also have stereotypical gay

characters, usually hairdressers, who function as comic relief in the play, but who have no real substance. For two different takes on these plays, see Gates (1997) and Burdine (1999).

## REFERENCES

- Bà, A. H. (1981). The living tradition. In J. Ki-Zerbo (Ed.), *Methodology and African prehistory* (pp. 166–205). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Baraka, A. (1971). Black art. In D. Randall (Ed.), *The black poets* (pp. 223–224). New York: Random House.
- Benston, K. (2000). *Performing blackness: Enactments of African-American modernism*. New York: Routledge.
- Burdine, W. B. (1999). The gospel musical and its place in the black American theatre. In A. Bean (Ed.), *A sourcebook of African-American performance: Plays, people, movements* (pp. 190–203). New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Carlson, M. (1996). *Performance: A critical introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Conquergood, D. (2000). Rethinking elocution: The trope of the talking book and other figures of speech. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 20(4), 325–341.
- Dance, D. (1978). *Shuckin' and jivin': Folklore from contemporary black Americans*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Davis, G. L. (1985). *I got the word in me and I can sing it, you know: A study of the performed African-American sermon*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- DeFrantz, T. F. (Ed.). (2002). *Dancing many drums: Excavations in African American dance*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Diawara, M. (1995). Cultural studies/Black studies. In M. Henderson (Ed.), *Borders, boundaries, and frames: Cultural criticism and cultural studies* (pp. 202–211). New York: Routledge.
- Drewal, M. T. (1991). *Yoruba ritual: Performers, play, agency*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- DuBois, W. E. B. (1994). Criteria of Negro art. In A. Mitchell (Ed.), *Within the circle: An anthology of African American literary criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the present* (pp. 60–69). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Elam, H. J. (2001). The device of race: An introduction. In H. J. Elam & D. Krasner (Eds.), *African American performance and theater history: A critical reader* (pp. 3–16). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Fabian, J. (1990). *Power and performance: Ethnographic explorations through proverbial wisdom and theatre in Shaba, Zaire*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Freeman, B., Branner, D., & Gupton, E. (1996). *Fierce love: Stories from black gay life*. In H. Elam & R. Alexander (Eds.), *Colored contradictions: An anthology of contemporary African-American plays* (pp. 255–285). New York: Plume.
- Gates, H. L. (1987). *The signifying monkey: A theory of Afro-American literary criticism*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Gates, H. L. (1997, February 3). The chitlin circuit. *New Yorker*, pp. 44–55.
- Hall, S. (1992). What is this “black” in black popular culture? In G. Dent (Ed.), *Black popular culture* (pp. 21–33). Seattle: Bay Press.
- Harrison, P. C. (1989). Black theatre in the African continuum: Word/song as method. In P. Harrison (Ed.), *Totem voices: Plays from the black world repertory* (pp. xi–lxiii). New York: Grove Press.
- hooks, b. (1995). Performance practice as a site of opposition. In C. Ugwu (Ed.), *Let's get it on: The politics of black performance* (pp. 210–221). Seattle: Bay Press.
- Hurston, Z. N. (1990a). *Mules and men*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hurston, Z. N. (1990b). *Their eyes were watching god*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Jackson, M. (1961). *Moving up*. New York: Hawthorne Books.
- Jahn, J. (1961). *Muntu: African culture and the western world*. New York: World Weidenfield.
- Johnson, E. P. (2003). *Appropriating blackness: Performance and the politics of authenticity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lee, J. (1999). Disciplining theater and drama in the English department: Some reflections on ‘performance’ and institutional history. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 19(2), 145–158.
- Levine, L. W. (1977). *Black culture and black consciousness: Afro-American folk thought from slavery to freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Madison, D. S. (1998). That was my occupation: Oral narrative, performance, and black feminist thought. In D. Pollock (Ed.), *Exceptional spaces: Essays in performance & history* (pp. 319–342). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

- Manning, S. (2001). Modern dance, negro dance, and Katherine Dunham. *Textual Practice*, 15(3), 487–506.
- McMillan, T. (1990). Ma'dear. In T. McMillan (Ed.), *Breaking ice: An anthology of contemporary African-American fiction* (pp. 457–465). New York: Penguin.
- Morrison, T. (1990). *Playing in the dark*. New York: Random House.
- Neal, L. (1994). The black arts movement. In A. Mitchell (Ed.), *Within the circle: An anthology of African American literary criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the present* (pp. 184–193). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Neal, M. A. (1999). *What the music said: Black popular music and black popular culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Neal, M. A. (2002). *Soul babies*. New York: Routledge.
- Nero, C. I. (2001). Black gay men and white gay men: A less than perfect union. In C. L. Dews & C. L. Law (Eds.), *Out in the south* (pp. 115–126). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Reed, J. & Wake, C. (Trans. & Eds.). (1976). *Sen-ghor: Prose and poetry*. London: Heinemann.
- Richards, S. (1995). Writing the absent potential: Drama, performance, and the canon of African-American. In A. Parker & E. Sedgwick (Eds.), *Performativity and performance* (pp. 64–88). New York: Routledge.
- Schuyler, G. S. (1994). The Negro-art hokum. In A. Mitchell (Ed.), *Within the circle: An anthology of African American literary criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the present* (pp. 51–54). Durham, NC: Duke University Press. (Original work published 1926)
- Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Spillers, H. (1974). *Fabrics of history: Essays on the black sermon*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.
- Spillers, H. (2003). *Black, white, and in color: Essays on American literature and culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tannen, D. (1989). *Talking voices: Repetition, dialogue, and imagery in conversational discourse*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, D. (Ed.). (1983). *The performance of literature in historical perspectives*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Turner, V. (1982). *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications.
- Turner, V. (1983). A review of “ethnopoetics.” In J. Rothenberg & D. Rothenberg (Eds.), *Symposium of the whole: A range of discourse toward an ethnopoetics* (pp. 338–342). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Turner, V. (1986). *The anthropology of performance*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publication.
- Walcott, R. (1997). *Black like who?* Toronto, ON: Insomniac.

# 26

---

## Lethal Theatre

### *Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty*

DWIGHT CONQUERGOOD

*I'm not going to struggle physically against any restraints. I'm not going to shout, use profanity or make idle threats. Understand though that I'm not only upset, but I'm saddened by what is happening here tonight. . . . If someone tried to dispose of everyone here for participating in this killing, I'd scream a resounding, "No." I'd tell them to give them all the gift that they would not give me, and that's to give them all a second chance. . . . There are a lot of men like me on death row—good men—who fell to the same misguided emotions, but may not have recovered as I have. Give those men a chance to do what's right. Give them a chance to undo their wrongs. A lot of them want to fix the mess they started, but don't know how. . . . No one wins tonight. No one gets closure.*

—Napoleon Beazley<sup>1</sup>

*There will be no lasting peace either in the heart of individuals or in social customs until death is outlawed.*

—Albert Camus<sup>2</sup>

---

Conquergood, Dwight. "Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty." *Theatre Journal* 54:3 (2002), 339–367. © The Johns Hopkins University Press. Reprinted with permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press.

*Like it or not, you are putting on a show.*

—John Whitley<sup>3</sup>

*Show, spectacle, theatre, these representational media are central to the rituals of state killing.*

—Austin Sarat<sup>4</sup>

In 1975 Michel Foucault published *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, a landmark book that opened with two astonishing chapters, “The Body of the Condemned” and “The Spectacle of the Scaffold,” harrowing accounts in gruesome detail of the performance of capital punishment in the premodern era.<sup>5</sup> These chapters served as points of departure for charting the historical shift from the dramatic infliction of corporal and capital punishment to modernity’s more subtle and insidious infiltrations of power through mechanisms of discipline linked with knowledge. Punishment transformed, Foucault argued, from a theatre of violence and repression to a medical model of rehabilitation metonymically connected to other normalizing mechanisms and internalized techniques of coercion, compliance, and surveillance. According to Foucault, the performance of power in modern society has changed radically from spectacular capital punishments—that point at which the violence of the state is most nakedly displayed—to undercover capillary penetrations, insinuations, secretions, and circulations of power that are difficult to flesh out. He closed the book with the confident claim that “we are now far away from the country of tortures,” the spectacle of the scaffold, because contemporary legal punishment “appears to be free of all excess and all violence.”<sup>6</sup>

I reread *Discipline and Punish* in the summer of 2001, during the same time that I

traveled twice in eight days to Terre Haute, Indiana, to march and stand in vigil outside the prison death chamber to protest the serial executions of Timothy McVeigh and Juan Raul Garza, the first federal prisoners put to death since 1963. I found Foucault’s opening chapters on executions more resonant and familiar than later chapters titled “The Gentle Way of Punishment.” Emotionally drained from attending the June 11 and June 19 executions, I kept writing “not in June, 2001” in the margins of passages about how modern judicial punishment had advanced well beyond the deployment of raw, physical force. I drew an incredulous exclamation point across from this passage in the conclusion: “There is nothing in it now that recalls the former excess of sovereign power when it revenged its authority” on the body of the condemned.<sup>7</sup>

To be fair, Foucault wrote *Discipline and Punish* in 1975, at a time when the medical model of rehabilitation was in the ascendancy in penological thought and practice. The death penalty was rarely deployed, and France, along with the rest of Europe, was on the verge of abolishing capital punishment for good. Although it is amazing to think of it now, the United States was in step with and even ahead of the international community on the issue of the death penalty. In 1975, there were no executions in the US, not even in Texas. In 1972 the Supreme Court in *Furman vs. Georgia* had declared capital punishment—“as then practiced,” which proved to be a fatal loophole

phrase—"cruel and unusual punishment" and therefore unconstitutional. Many assumed that the death penalty had been abolished for good, instead of temporarily suspended. After World War II and the shock of Holocaust atrocities, executions had declined steadily. In 1965, the same year that Britain abolished the death penalty, there were seven executions, compared to the peak decade of the depression-ravaged 1930s when there were 167 executions a year on average. Then in the next year, 1966, there were two, and the following year, 1967, only one. No executions were performed in the five years leading up to the Supreme Court's formal ruling against the death penalty in 1972, and in particular the Federal government had not executed anyone since 1963. From the vantage point of May, 2002 (the time of the final draft of this article), when we have already put 31 people to death in the first five months of this year, it is astounding to think that from 1968 through 1976 there was not a single execution in America.<sup>8</sup>

How have we come so far from the social sensibility that Foucault indexed in *Discipline and Punish*? Since 1975 there has been a major shift of societal attitudes toward punishment. Current support for the death penalty hovers between 70 and 75 percent, having peaked at 80 percent in 1994, the year of the conservative Republican takeover of congress. As of April 1, 2002, there are 3,701 men and women—including 83 juvenile offenders—awaiting execution on Death Row compared to 334 in 1972 when the Supreme Court struck down the death penalty.<sup>9</sup> So deep is the revanchist enthusiasm for spectacles of the scaffold that when Senator Dianne Feinstein, the former mayor of San Francisco, ran for governor of California in 1990 she displayed images of the San Quentin gas chamber in her television campaign commercials. She came from behind to win the Democratic primary by nineteen percent after campaigning on the slogan, "the only Democrat who supports the death penalty."<sup>10</sup> Especially with the resurgent

popularity of capital punishment, it is important to remember that the history of the death penalty in the United States has been one of challenge and contention.<sup>11</sup> Almost from the beginning, capital punishment has been a fraught and contested performance practice. The performance genealogy of executions periodically requires fresh blood to keep this macabre tradition alive. Contemporary defenders of capital punishment shore up its shaky premises, not by logic or rational argument, but by invoking scapegoats, poster boys for the death penalty: Timothy McVeigh, John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer, Richard Speck—and now Osama bin Laden and his henchmen. With each exemplary monster executed, capital punishment is legitimated and revitalized. Thus it is no surprise that George W. Bush, who has presided over 156 executions during his relatively short time in public life, issued executive orders very soon after September 11, 2001, to create military tribunals designed to expedite executions with an efficiency and speed that would exceed that of Texas.<sup>12</sup> Theatre and performance studies have an ethical as well as intellectual obligation to examine this resurgent theatre of death that anchors conservative politics in the United States. The very word "execute" means to accomplish, to carry out, and to perform, to do. "Execution" also means "a mode or style of performance."<sup>13</sup> The death penalty cannot be understood simply as a matter of public policy debate or an aspect of criminology, apart from what it is pre-eminently: performance.

#### PERFORMANCE RITUALS OF STATE KILLING

Executions are awesome rituals of human sacrifice through which the state dramatizes its absolute power and monopoly on violence. We know from the anthropological record that a key to the efficacy of rituals is their capacity to embrace paradox, to gloss contradictions, to mediate profound oppositions, tensions,



ambivalences, anxieties. The ritual frame is elastic enough to encompass conflict and chaos, yet sufficiently sturdy to channel volatile forces and disruptive tensions into an aesthetic shape, a repeatable pattern. Rituals draw their drama, dynamism, and intensity from the crises they redress. A host of important anthropologists, notably Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, Roy Rappaport, and others, have noted that ritual performance proliferates along social faultlines, pressure points, cracks in the system, the jagged edge of belief.<sup>14</sup> Rituals carry their weight and earn their cultural keep by restoring, replenishing, repairing, and re-making belief, transforming vague ideas, mixed feelings, and shaky commitments into dramatic clarity and alignment. As embodied performances, rituals incarnate and make visible abstract principles and inchoate concepts—such as “Justice.” What is Justice? Justice is an abstraction, a spirit that commands tremendous faith, power, and huge investments both economic and emotional. Like religion and other powerful abstractions, Justice—to paraphrase Victor Turner—lives only in performance, “only in so far as its rituals are ‘going concerns’”; Justice can be seen only when it is acted out.<sup>15</sup> All the interlocking rituals of criminal punishment—arrest, detention, interrogation, trial, conviction, incarceration, execution—are performed so that citizens can see “justice done”: “All of justice is a stage; it is the appearance—the ritual—that is the meaningful thing.”<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, rituals are neither static nor discrete. They draw their meaning, structure, style, and affective resonance from the traditions they reenact. But they never simply repeat a given form, but, like all “restored behavior,” they reverberate within the traditions they simultaneously reinvent and re-deploy for historically situated needs and purposes.<sup>17</sup> The ritual replaying of traditional form always plays with, and plays off and against, the performance genealogy that it recites.<sup>18</sup> Rituals of execution in the United States are part of a

dynamic performance genealogy that has undergone profound shifts in feeling, form, and dramaturgy. The seismic shift has been from the public, open-air, communal, hortatory rituals of redemption in colonial and revolutionary era America to the privatized, elite, class-stratified rituals of retribution and exclusion that were created in the early nineteenth century to accommodate an emergent middle-class ethos of restraint, propriety, gentility and new standards of bourgeois taste and refinement. Beginning in the 1830s, execution rituals moved from the public square where they drew diverse audiences numbering in the thousands to inside prison walls where, withdrawn from public view, they became private performances for a small, homosocial, invitation-only audience of elites. Historian Louis Masur summarizes the wider social significance of this change in the *mise-en-scène* of execution rituals:

The creation of private executions [during the 1830s] . . . was an act charged with multiple meanings: it marked the triumph of a certain code of conduct and set of social attitudes among the middle and upper classes; it symbolized a broader trend toward privatization and class segmentation; it turned the execution of criminals into an elite event centered around class and gender exclusion.<sup>19</sup>

The withdrawal and relocation of executions from the public green to censored enclosures signaled a major shift in structures of feeling about criminals and capital punishment.

To understand better this profoundly meaningful change in dramaturgy, let us examine the execution rituals characteristic of early America. Public hangings in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England were mass spectacles that drew the largest audiences ever assembled for any occasion. Especially in Puritan New England, with no maypoles, carnivals, staged theatre, or even Christmas celebrations, a public hanging was an avidly attended “Tragical Spectacle.”<sup>20</sup> For the 1686 execution of John Morgan, crowds began

gathering in Boston a week before the hanging. According to John Dunston, a bookseller from London visiting Boston at the time, some “have come 50 miles to see it.”<sup>21</sup> On the morning of March 11, more than 5,000 people jammed into Boston’s Second Old North Church to see the condemned prisoner prominently seated in front of the pulpit to hear Cotton Mather preach his execution sermon, a key part of the dramaturgy of hanging day rituals. When the floor and walls of the church gallery began to crack and buckle under the tremendous weight and pressure of the crowd, Mather interrupted his sermon to move the audience to Samuel Willard’s Third Old South Church, which had a larger gallery.<sup>22</sup> And the outdoor staging of the gallows accommodated multitudes who could not squeeze into the church or were inclined to skip the sermon. One scholar estimated that executions in colonial New England attracted as many as 12,000 spectators.<sup>23</sup> In terms of sheer audience size, executions were the most popular performance genre in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America: “Well into the nineteenth century, execution crowds still outnumbered crowds gathered for any other purpose.”<sup>24</sup>

Puritan executions were elaborately staged and exquisitely paced ritual dramas seething with suspense, tension, ambivalence, crisis, reversals, revelations, and breath-taking spectacle. The hanging day ritual included the public procession from the jail to the church, where the prisoner was displayed as a “sorrowful spectacle” and embodied “example,” a focal point and prop for the minister’s fiery execution sermon.<sup>25</sup> The celebrated ministers appointed to preside at these high profile events rose to their greatest oratorical heights, knowing that they were addressing the largest audiences of their careers, and given the magnitude of an execution, the sermons were often published and sold, thus circulating in print to an ever widening audience.<sup>26</sup>

After the sermon, there was the doleful parade to the gallows, which often took one or

more hours. The prisoner typically was carried slowly through the crowd elevated on a cart, sometimes with a rope around his or her neck, and with the coffin conspicuously alongside. At the gallows, there were more speeches and audible prayers, and often hymns were sung communally to pitch the emotions of the audience. Then the sheriff read the death warrant aloud. All of the dramaturgy at the foot of the gallows was designed to anticipate, draw out, and heighten the spellbinding moment when the prisoner climbed the ladder and, precariously perched, delivered a speech to the rapt audience thronged below. This long-awaited speech from the prisoner—who, more often than not, was a young servant or slave, a person of little or no education and low social standing—could eclipse the rhetorical grandeur of the elite, Harvard-trained minister-orators. The “last Dying Words”<sup>27</sup> of the condemned gathered compelling presencing powers precisely because they were uttered from a space of death and disappearance that impressed on the audience the urgency of their vanishing: “I am upon the brink of Eternity.”<sup>28</sup> Then the hood was lowered and the noose tightened around the neck. To clinch the climactic force of the condemned’s dying speech, the hangman kicked the ladder out from under the prisoner’s feet, and, as one historian put it, “then came a riot of motion.”<sup>29</sup>

The suspense that excited and transfixed execution audiences was not about the temporal plot or unfolding physical action—the hanging day scenario was well known and predictably choreographed. All the suspense hovered over the fate of the prisoner’s immortal soul. What riveted audience attention was whether or not the condemned had truly repented, and, even if so, would her or his faith hold fast under the tremendous distress and horror of “the present circumstances for Terrification”?<sup>30</sup> Executions, like every other temporal aspect of life in Puritan New England, were inserted within a cosmic spiritual drama of sin and salvation. The real

suspense was not about anything so mundane as whether the condemned would get a last-minute reprieve, but would the condemned confess convincingly, manifest true repentance, and be able to deliver an affecting dying speech that would serve as warning to sinners and inspiration to the sanctified? If that happened—no easy feat, by any measure—then the worst malefactor could hope for eternal life. Puritan audiences scrutinized the body and speech of the condemned for “Signals of Divine Grace,” and when they recognized true penitence then they could interpretively reframe the hideous torture of a hanging into a catalyst for salvation: “This Serves only to draw the Curtain, that thou mayst behold a Tragick Scene, strangely changed into a Theater of Mercy.”<sup>31</sup>

To appreciate better the complex theatricality of executions in early America, let us look more closely at one particular case. On July 31, 1701, Esther Rodgers, a twenty-one-year-old indentured servant convicted of infanticide, was hanged outside the town of Ipswich before a crowd estimated between four and five thousand.<sup>32</sup> She had confessed to fornication, “Carnal Pollution with the Negro” with whom she worked in the same household, and to killing the “bastard” newborn “begotten in Whoredom.”<sup>33</sup> After arraignment and imprisonment for this heinous crime, she confessed to another, earlier murder: when she was seventeen she had fallen into “that foul Sin of Uncleanness, suffering my self to be defiled by a Negro Lad” and she had killed that mixed-race baby as well. In between the two pregnancies, she had lived in a tavern, “giving my self up to other wicked Company and ways of Evil.”<sup>34</sup> A vast multitude of spectators assembled at the gallows, the largest audience “as was scarcely ever heard of or seen upon any occasion in any part of New England.”<sup>35</sup> They had come “to behold the Tragical End” of this young but “very great Criminal.”<sup>36</sup> In addition to the notoriety and sexual-racial sensationalism of her crimes, part of the draw could have been the

circulating reports of her “marvelous change” from the pastors and pious townspeople who had visited and ministered to her during her eight months in prison awaiting execution.<sup>37</sup> As one of the ministers attested: “a poor Wretch, entering into Prison a Bloody Malefactor, her Conscience laden with Sins of a Scarlet Die . . . she came forth, Sprinkled, Cleansed, Comforted, a Candidate of Heaven.”<sup>38</sup>

For all its “antitheatrical prejudice,” Puritan life was saturated with a performance consciousness that delighted in transformations, metamorphoses, reversals, astonishing wonders, and the language of theatrical representation: “tragical spectacle,” “tragick scene,” “tragick end,” “theater of mercy.”<sup>39</sup> Everyday people and events could become spectacles, displays, signs, examples, monuments. Esther was depicted as “a Pillar of Salt Transformed into a Monument of Free Grace.”<sup>40</sup> But Puritan ways of seeing increased the dramatic tension because any “monument of grace” was unstable and fallible, always in danger of falling, of debasing itself, of shape-shifting into “a Monument of shame and Ignominy.”<sup>41</sup> The drama of the fall and the relentless conflict with evil suffused the workaday world where everyday action, gesture, and speech suddenly could shimmer with spiritual significance to the discerning eye. The execution sermon provided a figural proscenium arch, the theological frame, through which a Puritan audience viewed a public hanging. Puritan ministers endeavored, at great discursive length, to turn the earthly scene of capital punishment into a stunning morality play, a vivid acting out of the allegory of divine wrath and judgment, and, if the ritual succeeded, “an Instance of Converting Grace and Mercy.”<sup>42</sup> They uplifted the physical action of the state “Business of Death” onto a sacred plane of performative metaphors, images, and symbols.<sup>43</sup> Thus when describing the vast multitude of thousands gathered to watch Esther Rodgers hang, one minister commented, “Which could not but put all serious and

thoughtful Spirits in mind of the Great and General Assembly that will appear at the Great Day to receive their final Sentence.”<sup>44</sup>

Puritan theology underpinned robust “interpretive communities” of active spectators for whom, in a very deep sense, all the world was a stage, a place for seeing.<sup>45</sup> They inculcated “watchfulness”—of themselves and their neighbors—as part of the habitus of daily life.<sup>46</sup> According to their Calvinist outlook, everyone was innately depraved, and conversion, never final, was an arduous and incessant struggle. For several weeks prior to her execution, Esther Rodgers consistently enacted the role of an exemplary sinner, showing all the signs of repentance and conversion. Nonetheless, she emerged from prison on the morning of her execution as a “*Candidate of Heaven*,” her salvation by no means yet assured.<sup>47</sup> She still had to face the greatest and most severe test and trial of her new found faith. The sabbath before her hanging she had dictated a written message to be read aloud in church enlisting the support and prayers of the congregation, “that the Lord would Strengthen and Uphold her, and carry her through that hard and difficult Work when called thereunto, that she may not be dismayed at the Sight and Fear of Death.”<sup>48</sup> These same congregants formed part of the vigilant and expectant circle of spectators around the gallows who scrutinized every move she made. Everyone wondered: what was the state of her mind, heart, and soul as she looked death in the face? Had she accomplished the laborious work of conversion sufficiently?

And if these questions were not already in many spectators’ minds, they certainly would have been stirred up by the attending clergy who continuously questioned her conversion as they cross-examined her throughout the grim proceedings. Toward the end of this execution morning sermon, the Reverend Rogers challenged her:

But what preparation hast thy Soul made to appear at Gods Tribunal before this Day be ended? . . . Hast thou desired and laboured for Holiness to Sanctify thee, as well as Righteousness to justify thee? What means hast thou used to get thy Soul purged as well as sin pardoned . . . ? Hast thou waited and prayed with David, Psal[m] 51. *Wash me thoroughly from my sins, purge me with Hyssop . . .* or hast thou thought a few Tears sufficient for this?<sup>49</sup>

And as she walked the long “dolorous way” to the gallows, the accompanying ministers pressed her with frightening questions, “mixing with words of Consolation, something of Terroure”:

O Esther, How can your heart abide! Don’t you here behold terrible displayes of Justice: you are surrounded with Armed men. . . . The terrible place and Engines of Destruction, are but a little before us, where you must in a few Minutes Expire; and there lyes your Coffin that must receive your perishing Body: How can you bear the sight of all these things?<sup>50</sup>

And even after she had climbed the scaffold ladder, and delivered a deeply moving speech to the audience of thousands, and an even more emotionally pitched and passionate prayer, and after the sheriff had tied the blindfold over her face, just moments before he placed the noose over her head, another attending minister, Reverend Wise, stepped forward and took that moment to cross-examine her again: “Now is the great Crisis of Time. Does your Faith hold in God and Christ still? She answers, *God be thanked it does, God be thanked.*” Then, with the rope around her neck, and after her final, almost frantic, outcry—“O Lord Jesus, Now Lord Jesus, I am a coming. . . .”—even at that most vulnerable, plaintive moment, as she waited for the drop, “Lifting up her Hands to Heaven,” the unflappable Reverend Wise stepped forward again, and extended her only the conditional comfort

of the subjunctive mood: "If your Hopes can lay hold upon the irresistible Grace and Mercy of God in Christ, and [if] you can cast your self into His Armes, you are Happy for Ever. And so we must bid you Fare-Well."<sup>51</sup>

The Ipswich pastors seized the occasion of Esther Rodgers's execution to dramatize and drive home the point that conversion was a moment-by-moment contingency: at any instant mortals could be "assaulted with Temptations to Unbelief or Fear."<sup>52</sup> Esther died a saint, but throughout the protracted drama of her execution-*cum*-salvation her state of grace was both affirmed and deferred, contrapuntally played out and kept in agonizing suspense right up until the end. The processual, equivocal, anxious, contested dynamics of conversion heightened the tension and turned a familiar execution scenario into a cliffhanger. The moral drama was heightened and made compelling by this deep interplay between knowing, and not knowing, for sure.

Further, Puritan sermons were filled with warnings against dissemblers, hypocrites, and charlatans who masqueraded piety: "Lyars: Such as are deceitful, and dissembling, who speak otherwise then they think; and do otherwise then they speak; such as accustom themselves to speak falsly" and those are "partial and feigned in their repentance."<sup>53</sup> Esther Rodgers was a person who knew how to keep secrets, how to feign and hide: she had concealed not one, but two pregnancies, carried the babies to term, secretly delivered, and no one knew, not even the fathers. And she had successfully covered up the first murder. At least one supporter felt the need to preempt questions about the sincerity of her jailhouse conversion: "Neither shall any need to question the truth of the repentance of the person Condemned, and after Executed, from the shortness of the time of her Experiences: The Thief that Commenced Converted on the Cross . . . is a proof of the possibility hereof."<sup>54</sup>

The ambivalence of her spiritual condition, the gap between closure and uncertainty that the ministers pried open, also provided a space for multiple ways of seeing and other spectatorial positions unbounded by Puritan orthodoxy. Executions encouraged spectators to gaze intently at the body on display and granted extraordinary ritual license for the condemned, especially if they were women, to make spectacles out of their bodies.<sup>55</sup> Just as the sentence of death had to be "executed on her body," so also the signs of grace had to be manifested bodily.<sup>56</sup> Execution audiences closely monitored the prisoner's gesture, carriage, countenance, demeanor, deportment, vocal intonation, inflection, timber. An "admiring observer" noted Esther's "Composure of spirit, Cheerfulness of Countenance, pleasantness of Speech, and a sort of Complaisantness in Carriage towards the Ministers who were assistant to her."<sup>57</sup> But was there slippage in the frames through which she was viewed? And did even a pious allegorical reading pivot on a doubling of vision, an interplay of perspectives that saw her as both a wanton woman and an aspiring Christian? She had been, until very recently, a harlot. Everyone knew the sexual nature of her crime and her "scarlet" past. She had confessed that she was a creature wholly given over to "lust."<sup>58</sup> Reverend Rogers reminded her, and everyone else, in his morning execution sermon: "Thy ways have been all filthy, thy whole Walk, a walk after the Flesh; thy course a course of filthy Communication and Conversation."<sup>59</sup>

With that phrase still ringing in their ears, how did spectators view her "Walk" to the gallows? Her choice to forego the customary cart and to "walk on foot"?<sup>60</sup> How did they observe the moving body of this young, sexually active woman, surrounded by men, as it paraded by them? Was she a walking palimpsest, the imprint of her harlot past shadowing and alternating with her Christian image? Which image came into sharper and

more sustained focus for whom, at what points in the procession? How did bystanders interpret her vivacious physicality, especially the remarkable moment when she responded to a minister's question by "turn[ing] about, and looking him in the face with a very smiling countenance"?<sup>61</sup> What did various spectators make of the moment when she stumbled upon first seeing the gallows, and then, after this "Reluctancy of the Flesh," her recovery when "she lift up her Feet, and Marched on with an Erected, and Radiant Countenance"?<sup>62</sup> How did different audience members construe "the very affecting Gestures" with which she took her leave of the ministers at the foot of the gallows?<sup>63</sup> How did they watch her as she paused, composed herself, "and so without stop or trembling went up the Ladder"? And what went through their minds during the physically delicate moment of "turning herself about" on the narrow ladder so that she could face the crowd? And how did they take in her spectacularly displayed body, especially when she arched it, "being bid [by the sheriff] to lean her Head back upon the Ladder, to receive the Halter"?<sup>64</sup>

We can be sure that profane ways of looking commingled with pious perspectives within this huge gathering. The sheer size of the crowd, numbering in the thousands, must have created a social effervescence. Executions in England during the same time period were rowdy, rambunctious, "carnavalesque" affairs.<sup>65</sup> And the large number of young people in the audience—"great Numbers whereof were expected" and their large presence was "accordingly" noted—must have charged the event with libidinal energy.<sup>66</sup> Puritan sermons reverberated with warnings about "youthful lusts."<sup>67</sup> The massive ideological pressure of the execution sermons attests indirectly to the excitement and desire that the preachers struggled so forcefully to rein in and control. If we read these official documents against the grain of their orthodoxy, we can understand that all the appeals to "serious and

thoughtful spirits" were pulling against other, more unruly and irreverent dispositions.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, sensuality was not banished from Puritan piety. Recent historical research disputes the stereotype of the dour, sexually repressed Puritans and argues that they exuberantly "conjoined earthly and spiritual passion" and that a striking aspect of their religious life was "the eroticisation of the spiritual."<sup>69</sup>

Execution audiences were encouraged to identify deeply with the condemned as fellow sinners. They did not shrink in moral revulsion from even the most despised and heinous criminals. The typical response was "there but for the grace of God, go I." At the 1674 execution of Benjamin Goad for sodomy, Samuel Danforth vehemently denounced his horrid and unnatural "lasciviousness" but then reminded the audience: "there are sins with the Spectators, as well as with the Sufferers. . . . If we ransack our own hearts . . . we shall finde such sins with us. . . . The holiest man hath as vile and filthy a Nature, as the Sodomites. . . ." <sup>70</sup> This way of seeing encouraged a deeply sympathetic, theatrical identification in which the spectators could imaginatively exchange places with the condemned, instead of holding themselves aloof in distanced judgment. The ideal spectator at executions became a deeply engaged, co-performative witness.

The Puritan structure of feeling that embraced wrongdoers as members of the same moral community in need of repentance was superseded in the nineteenth century by a gothic view of criminals as "moral aliens" and "moral monsters."<sup>71</sup> The dramaturgy of executions changed from large-scale public rituals of redemption and reincorporation to exclusive, privatized rituals of retribution and expulsion. This new, bourgeois structure of feeling about criminals is registered powerfully in an 1848 *American Whig Review* article, "On the Use of Chloroform in Hanging."<sup>72</sup> Criminals are now seen as "miserable

wretches whom we simply wish to cast contemptuously out of existence.”<sup>73</sup> Class lines are now sharply drawn and patrolled by social performances of civility and respectability, all based on bodily deportment: “the rude have one species, the refined another.”<sup>74</sup> A “gentlemanly nation” should be “severe towards crime”; therefore the respectable classes “must overcome sympathy”<sup>75</sup> to criminals who are “aliens to the race”:

The reason should condemn them, the fancy recoil from them, and the pride scorn them. All that can spring from the deepest determination to wipe out such stains from humanity, or express the universal strong disgust which they inspire, should be brought to bear against them. Mankind are bound to affect towards them the manners of loathing and horror.<sup>76</sup>

Peck proposed chloroforming prisoners before hanging them, not out of any compassion for the condemned, but because some of the loathsome creatures had the bad manners to struggle and convulse while being executed, “thus tending to disturb the nervous peace, which is the support of refinement.” A botched execution was “against good manners, and unbecoming in a civilized Christian people.”<sup>77</sup> Coming midway between the 1701 execution of Esther Rodgers and the 2001 executions of Timothy McVeigh and Juan Raul Garza, Peck’s pivotal document registers the profound shift in structure of feeling about the death penalty and prefigures the modern interest in new methods and technologies for sanitizing death. Although Peck’s idea to anesthetize criminals before executing them was not adopted in his day, it resurfaced in 1977 when Oklahoma invented lethal injection as the preferred mode of capital punishment for the modern age. The lethal injection protocol includes a first dose of sodium pentothal, which puts the prisoner to sleep, followed by a muscle relaxant that paralyzes the lungs, and then potassium chloride that stops the heart.<sup>78</sup>

Putting the prisoner to sleep before killing him or her is more about cosmetics than compassion; it keeps up the appearance of decency, protects the witnesses from messy scenes, and masks the violence of state killing with a humane medical procedure.

#### THE MAGICAL REALISM OF MODERN CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

The multibillion dollar business of incarceration with its ramified rituals of punishment provides the bodies—and they are disproportionately racialized and working-class bodies—that serve as the concrete referents for society’s ideas about “justice,” “law and order,” and “public safety.”<sup>79</sup> Executions anchor belief in the criminal justice system, dramatizing in an especially vivid way that “something is being done,” that the system is in control, order has been restored. Foucault argued: “without the right to kill, would the judicial system be anything more than a public utility a bit less efficient than the post office? The right to kill is the last emblem of its supremacy.”<sup>80</sup> Never has Foucault’s insight been demonstrated more clearly than in the FBI bungling of the McVeigh evidence in the most high-profile capital trial in recent history; the FBI lost 4,400 documents, evidence that should have been turned over to the defense team. This was such a breach of due process that Attorney General John Ashcroft had to issue a one-month stay of execution.<sup>81</sup> If the judicial system can break down and bungle a case of this magnitude, under an international media spotlight, imagine what happens with everyday prosecutions. This crisis of confidence was redressed by speedy review, and within a few weeks the McVeigh execution bandwagon was back on track and a new death warrant signed for June 11. These events dramatically drive home Foucault’s larger point that executions justify Justice, that they provide a satisfying sense of closure and cover for a shaky system that pretends to be

infallible. Northwestern University's Center for Wrongful Convictions has documented more than one hundred cases of men and women who were sentenced to death and then exonerated. In Illinois, 13 men in recent years have been freed from death row; that is one more than the state has executed since the United States reinstated capital punishment in 1976. One of these released men, Anthony Porter, came within 48 hours of being put to death; he had already ordered his last meal and been measured for his coffin.<sup>82</sup>

Contemporary execution rituals work their magic and derive their efficacy from the effusive power of the effigy. Here I draw together Joseph Roach's performance theory of the effigy in *Cities of the Dead* with Michael Taussig's rereading of the anthropological literature on effigies and magic in *Mimesis and Alterity*.<sup>83</sup> Effigies are crudely fashioned surrogates that bear little resemblance to the person for whom they stand in. They produce magical power from parts, pieces, effluvia, operating on principles of contiguity and synecdoche—the piece, the part that stands for the whole—more than likeness or resemblance. Effigies are rough fabrications made from distorted parts of a person, often excrements such as saliva, blood, hair, fingernail parings, semen, fingerprints, footprints, which are then performatively deployed to put the real person in harm's way. An effigy is the fusion of image and body, symbol and source, the figurative and the physical. Because a jury will never vote to kill a human being, the fundamental task of the prosecutor is to turn the accused into an effigy composed of his or her worst parts and bad deeds. Before they are strip-searched and strapped down to the execution gurney, the condemned must first be stripped of all human complexity and reduced to human waste, the worst of the worst. These waste parts are then crafted onto prefabricated figures: stereotypes of the violent criminal, cold-blooded killer, animal, beast, brute, predator, fiend, monster. Thus a young,

attractive, completely rehabilitated, devoutly spiritual Karla Faye Tucker was transformed into an effigy, a scarecrow, and methodically put to death as “the Pick-Axe Killer.” These effigies take on manifest powers and become not just surrogates for the accused, but stand-ins for crime and all anti-social forces of evil that threaten law and order. When the Federal government strapped Juan Garza onto a gurney on June 19, 2001, and stuck a needle into the calf of his right leg, it was not killing a loving father of young children who was much, much more than the single worst thing that he had ever done. They were sticking pins into an effigy: “Drug Kingpin,” the headlines blared on execution day. And they did this in the name of Justice and for the sake of Order to ward off omnipresent social dangers and the specter of crime.

Race figures prominently in the construction of these effigies. Glaring racial disparities at every level of the death penalty system are shocking and egregious. Of the 760 people put to death since capital punishment was reinstated in 1977, 44 percent have been minorities, when minorities are only 29 percent of the population. And this disproportion is even more skewed if we focus on blacks: 35 percent of the people executed were black, when blacks are only 12 percent of the population (Table 26.1). And 43 percent of the prisoners currently on death row are black (Table 26.2). The racial profile of people put to death becomes even more stark when we look at juvenile offenders. First, I need to point out that the United States is one of a small number of countries in the world that still has a juvenile death penalty. Not only is the US out of step with other western democracies that long since have stopped putting their citizens to death—abolition of the death penalty is a condition of membership in the European Union—but also only five countries that still retain capital punishment execute minors: Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. And no nation in the world has



reported executions of minors since 1997, except the United States: we have executed seven juvenile offenders since 1998, three in 2000, one in May, 2002 (Napoleon Beazley, the young African American man, whose last words I quoted in the epigraph for this essay). Not even China, the world leader in number of executions per year, still executes juvenile offenders. Of the 38 states with death penalty statutes, 23 authorize the execution of children; 18 states allow the execution of children as young as 16 (Table 26.3). Texas has executed 11 of the 19 juvenile offenders

**Table 26.1** Race of 760 Defendants Executed, 1977–2002

	<i>(US pop.)</i>		
White	430	56%	(71%)
Minority	330	44%	(29%)
Black	265	35%	(12%)
Latino	50	7%	(12%)
Other	15	2%	(5%)

U.S. Census 2000  
Execution count up to February 19, 2002

**Table 26.2** Race of Death Row Inmates

Minority	54%
Black	43%
Latino	9%
Other	2%
White	46%

January 1, 2002

**Table 26.3** Juvenile Death Penalty

*23 of the 38 Death Penalty States Permit the Execution of Minors*

<i>Minimum Age</i>	
16	(18 states)
17	(5 states)
18	(15 states)

**Table 26.4** 19 Juvenile Offenders Executed Since 1985

<i>Texas Executed 11</i>	
7 Minority	64%
6 Black	
1 Latino	
4 White	36%

May, 2002

**Table 26.5** 83 Juvenile Offenders on Death Row

<i>26 on Texas Death Row</i>	
22 Minority	85%
11 Black	42%
10 Latino	39%
1 Asian	4%
4 White	15%

February, 2002

who have been put to death since 1985, and 64 percent of that group were minorities (Table 26.4). And 26 of the 83 juvenile offenders currently awaiting execution are on Texas' death row: 85 percent of them are minorities (Table 26.5).<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, if we look at other jurisdictions in addition to the 38 states with death penalty statutes, the racial disparities are even more glaring. The United States military has its own death penalty statute, and 86 percent of the military prisoners on death row are minorities (Table 26.6). This statistic does not augur well for the military tribunals that President Bush has authorized by executive order to adjudicate capital cases in the wake of September 11. The federal government also has its own death penalty statute that authorizes the execution of prisoners in the name of every citizen in the nation. 84 percent of the prisoners on federal death row are minorities (Table 26.7). Because of these statistics, the federal government went to great lengths to

**Table 26.6** U.S. Military Death Row

<i>Total 7</i>		
Minority	6	86%
Black	5	71%
Asian	1	14%
White	1	14%

Reinstated in 1984 by executive orders of Pres. Ronald Reagan

Last military execution in 1963 (hanging)

**Table 26.7** Federal Death Row

<i>Total 19</i>		
Minority	16	84%
Black	14	74%
Latino	2	10%
White	3	16%

(Four cases pending: 3 Black, 1 Asian)

January, 2002

assure that McVeigh would precede Mexican-born Garza to the federal death chamber. The federal government had not put anyone to death in thirty-eight years, so whoever inaugurated the newly built state-of-the-art federal execution chamber in Terre Haute, Indiana—strategically chosen as the geographic “crossroads of America”—would attract extraordinary media attention. Garza originally had been scheduled to go to the gurney first, August 5, 2000, but two stays of execution pushed back his date to June 19, 2001, behind Timothy McVeigh who was scheduled for May 16, 2001. The shocking revelation on May 10 that the FBI had failed to turn over 4,400 documents of evidence to the McVeigh defense team, as they were required to do by law, threatened to derail McVeigh’s timely execution. However, Attorney General John Ashcroft granted only a one-month reprieve, which kept McVeigh just in front of Garza, absorbing the full

media spotlight as the “first” prisoner executed by federal government in 38 years. In this sense, McVeigh’s high profile execution was a perverse form of whiteface minstrelsy, a whiteout of the glaring racial inequities in the way capital punishment is meted out in America. Juan Raul Garza, a Mexican American who came to this country as an impoverished migrant laborer, was far more representative of death row inmates than Timothy McVeigh, especially on the federal death row, which is 84 percent minorities. A similar whiteface staging occurred in 1979 when there was much maneuvering around who would be the historic “first” person executed since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty with the 1976 Gregg decision. John Spenklink, a working-class white man, was cast in that leading role. Despite his lawyer’s argument that his execution was speeded up for purely political reasons, that as a white man Spenklink’s execution “would inoculate Florida from 150 years of racial discrimination in capital cases,” Spenklink was carried, terrified, to Florida’s electric chair on May 25, 1979, to become the first person executed involuntarily since the 1976 restitution of capital punishment.”<sup>85</sup>

Race refracts and distorts other parts of the death penalty system as well. 95 percent of all the prosecutors responsible for death penalty cases are white. Because only a tiny fraction of all homicides are prosecuted as capital cases it is very disturbing to see such systemic racial asymmetry with an overwhelmingly white group of people holding the power and responsibility to decide which cases are prosecuted for death and at the other end a staggeringly disproportionate number of people of color sentenced to death (Table 26.8). Race registers its greatest impact when we look at the race of victims in capital cases.<sup>86</sup> Even though only 50 percent of all murder victims are white, 81 percent of murder victims in capital cases are white. And interracial murders compound the effects of race: “African Americans who

**Table 26.8** Race of Prosecutors Responsible for Death Penalty Cases

95% White, 2% Black, 3% Latino			
State	White	Black	Latino
Texas	137	0	11
Virginia	113	8	0
Missouri	115	0	0
Florida	19	1	0
Oklahoma	26	0	0
1998			

murder whites are 19 times as likely to be executed as whites who kill blacks.<sup>87</sup>

And in America, race articulates with class. Middle and upper class people who can afford to hire skilled lawyers do not end up on death row. Mumia Abu-Jamal, currently on Pennsylvania's death row, observed: "Them's that got the capital don't get capital punishment."<sup>88</sup> All of the whites on death row are working class and poor. According to Stephen Bright, a seasoned death penalty lawyer, defendants get the death sentence "not for the worst crime but for the worst lawyer."<sup>89</sup> Even though statistics on the class status of people sentenced to death and executed are not systematically collected or as accessible as those on race and gender, there are other ways of ascertaining class status. Anyone who doubts that people sentenced to death in this country are overwhelmingly impoverished and working class should go to the web site of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. For some bizarre reason, it posted the last meal requests of all the people it has put to death.<sup>90</sup> Because food preferences are shaped and bounded by class "tastes," it is a very revealing and poignant experience to read through the last meals requested by the Texas condemned.<sup>91</sup>

There is also some evidence of the role that homophobia plays in creating execution effigies. Because of the fluidity of sexualities, as well as the difficulty of collecting data on

sexual orientation—prison is not a safe place to be "out," notwithstanding the non-normative sexual activity that is encouraged by these enforced homosocial environments—it is difficult to know exactly how many queers are on death row. However, one 1992 article in *Advocate* estimated that 40 percent of the women on death row are lesbians.<sup>92</sup>

The death penalty is a potent political symbol, a sign and litmus test for tough-on-crime politicians. The symbolic center of the "war" on crime, it is a gendered symbol, a mantle of "political macho" that female politicians, like Dianne Feinstein and Jeanne Shaheen, the first woman governor of New Hampshire who vetoed the legislation to abolish that state's death penalty, can wear to masculinize themselves in the public sphere. Male Democratic politicians can use their vigorous support of the death penalty to counter charges of "soft" liberalism.<sup>93</sup> Bill Clinton masterminded this New Democrat centrist strategy. He infamously left the presidential campaign trail in 1992 to return to Arkansas to oversee the execution of Rickey Ray Rector, a young African American man so mentally impaired that at his last meal he asked the guards if he could save the piece of pecan pie for later.<sup>94</sup> During the year 2000, when he campaigned for the presidency, George W. Bush presided over 40 Texas executions, which broke the record for the largest number of annual executions ever performed by a state in the history of the nation.

In 1984, Velma Barfield, a North Carolina grandmother, probably became the first woman executed since 1962 because a trial judge set her clemency hearing four days before the general election. Her execution became a political issue because Democratic Governor James Hunt was locked in a tight race for the United States Senate against ultra-conservative Jesse Helms. It has been twenty-two years since a woman had been put to death in this country, and there was strong support and pressure for Governor Hunt

to grant clemency to this sweet-natured grandmother who had become a model prisoner. But fearing a political backlash in his closely contested senate race with Helms, Hunt allowed the execution of Barfield to proceed. The prison personnel responsible for killing Barfield, who was affectionately called "Granny," as well as the entire prison staff who had come to know and like her were absolutely devastated by her execution.<sup>95</sup> It took fourteen years before another state had the stomach to execute a woman. In 1998 Karla Faye Tucker became the first woman put to death in Texas since before the Civil War. Her execution, which attracted widespread media coverage, seemed to break the execution chamber glass ceiling for women. In 2001, three women were executed, all in Oklahoma. The last time three women were executed was 1953, when the Federal government electrocuted Ethel Rosenberg in New York, gassed Bonnie Headley in Missouri, and electrocuted Earle Dennison in Alabama. Wanda Jean Allen, one of the three women executed in 2001, became the first black woman put to death in 47 years. The prosecution highlighted her lesbianism in arguing for the death penalty.<sup>96</sup>

Federal Judge Robert Bork provides insight into the expressive and performative politics of the death penalty. In a brief he filed in support of the 1976 Supreme Court decision that reinstated the death penalty—the Gregg Decision—he argued that capital punishment "serves a vital social function as society's expression of moral outrage."<sup>97</sup> This thinking releases capital punishment from accountability as a crime-fighting tool a deterrent, and reframes it as a theatre of retribution and revenge. It becomes a form of "poetic justice," a "revenge tragedy" that operates on the principle of mimetic magic: the belief that only violence can cross out violence. Timothy McVeigh was caught at both ends of this contagious chain of mimetic violence. He bombed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City to

express his moral outrage and mimetically respond to the FBI's botched raid and burning of the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco, Texas. He chose April 19, 1995 as the date for blowing up the federal building because it was the second year anniversary of the Waco conflagration and the 220th anniversary of the Battle of Lexington and Concord.<sup>98</sup> In his warped imagination and twisted aesthetics, the violence he perpetrated in Oklahoma City was the performative reparation for the violence that the federal government wreaked on the Branch Davidian Compound. He, in turn, paid with his life when the federal government responded in kind by killing him. At McVeigh's execution, anti-death penalty activists exposed the circular absurdity of mimetic violence with this question carried on placards and emblazoned on T-Shirts: "Why Do We Kill People, Who Kill People, to Show that Killing People Is Wrong?"

The persistence of the death penalty defies logic and exceeds rational explanation. There are at least four troubling problems with capital punishment. (1) It is not a deterrent to crime. Even conservative criminologists no longer justify it as a deterrent to crime. (2) It is meted out in an inconsistent and capricious way. There are glaring racial and geographical disparities in its application. (3) The system sometimes executes the wrong person: one scholar estimates an error rate of one innocent person out of every seven executed.<sup>99</sup> (4) It is extremely expensive. Each execution (from trial to death chamber) costs on the average 1.5 million dollars, far more expensive than a life sentence.<sup>100</sup> Why then does it persist? When logic cannot uphold it, when it does not work, and then it is not cost-effective? It is adhered to for emotional and expressive purposes that can be exploited for political gain. Like other rituals of sacrifice, executions tap the generative power of violence and harness the volatile energies surrounding death for political purposes. Newt Gingrich once explained that the two cornerstones for

building a conservative majority in the United States are (1) tax cuts, and (2) the Death Penalty.<sup>101</sup> A close reading of the dramaturgy of contemporary execution rituals reveals the deep and terribly fraught contradictions, conundra, tensions, and anxieties that are never fully reconciled.

**THE DRAMATURGY OF CONTEMPORARY EXECUTIONS**

The central performance challenge of execution rituals is to differentiate between judicial killing and murder.<sup>102</sup> This distinction is dramatized through the careful and elaborate staging of props, participants, and players: the entire scenography and choreography of the event signal order, control, propriety, and inevitability. The real violence of state killing is veiled behind protocols of civility and the pretense of courtesy toward the condemned—hence the hollow gestures of permitting the condemned to order his or her last meal and to speak his or her last words. Some guards and wardens even eat with the condemned to give them some company during the ceremony of the last meal. The prison staff show an unusual attentiveness and air of concern for the condemned during the final countdown hours of the death-watch.<sup>103</sup>

But all this consideration is as much about controlling the performance, making sure that it proceeds smoothly without a glitch, as it is about compassion or empathy for the condemned. Inasmuch as possible, spontaneity and improvisation are foreclosed in the execution scenario. Everything is carefully scripted, choreographed, rehearsed, and directed—micro-managed right down to the tiniest of details, nothing left to chance. The condemned must order his or her last meal seven days in advance. Ritual theatre intersects with management science to produce the bizarre contemporary form of modern executions.<sup>104</sup> Much of the debate surrounding the death penalty since the 1890 invention of the

electric chair has focused on the performance technology of executions.

Officials are anxious to control the performance because condemned prisoners, although acutely vulnerable, are not without agency. They can fight back and force the guards to drag them kicking and screaming to their death. In June 2000, Gary Graham, also called Sankofa, refused to cooperate and go quietly to the execution chamber. A helmeted “extraction team” maced and forcibly removed him from his holding cell. Protesting his innocence he resisted every step of the way, and even as the poison was dripping into his veins, he loudly protested, “They’re killing me tonight, they’re murdering me tonight.”<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, prisoners sometimes panic and collapse in terror at the moment of the final walk to their premeditated death. Either response—defiant resistance or terrified hysteria—rips off the mask of civility, the illusion of order, inevitability, procedure, due process, the fiction that what is taking place is “natural,” “clean,” “solemn,” “dignified,” and “humane,” an acceptable performance of Justice in a modern democracy.<sup>106</sup>

Sometimes executions are botched simply because of the performance anxiety or ineptitude of the executioners. Each one of the methods for putting people to death requires a mastery of technique, and none guarantees a death that is quick, painless, and clean. Hanging involves an intricate calculus between the length of the rope and the weight of the prisoner. If the drop is too short, the neck is not broken, and the condemned kicks and writhes in the agony of slow strangulation. If the drop

**Table 26.9** All Nations Have Abolished the Juvenile Death Penalty Except Five

<i>Iran, Pakistan, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and the United States</i>
The U.S. has executed seven juvenile offenders since 1998 (three in 2000)

is too long, the head is ripped off. The electric chair requires skillful application of electrodes to the shaved head and leg to ensure a good connection, and the careful measurement of voltage and timing of the jolts. With too powerful a charge, the condemned catches on fire, which happened twice in Florida's electric chair in 1990 and 1997. But even when electrocutions go smoothly they are messy affairs. The eyes bulge, sometimes popping out of their sockets, and the condemned urinate and defecate in the chair. The gas chamber was supposed to be a technological improvement over the rope and the chair, but it proved no more efficient or humane than the other technologies. Prisoners had different reactions to the poison gas. Some convulsed violently, thrashed and foamed at the mouth, and bashed their head against the back metal pole. Even lethal injections, the most antiseptic and clinical of all the modes, are sometimes botched. Sometimes the technicians cannot find a good vein; there are documented cases of them searching and pricking both arms, ankle, and finally going to the neck, taking 45 minutes to insert the needle. Sometimes the needle pops out under the pressure of execution, spewing the toxic drugs and spraying the witnesses. Some prisoners heave and violently choke. Botched executions knock down the ritual frame and expose the gruesome reality of actually putting a human being to death. The illusion of nonviolent decency is torn away. Botched executions also are the stuff of sensational news stories and political embarrassments. Graphic images and grisly reports of botched executions erode the public faith in the "ultimate oxymoron: a humane killing."<sup>107</sup> To prevent embarrassing glitches and disruptions, modern executions have become ever more controlled, engineered, and bureaucratized performances.<sup>108</sup>

The regular rehearsals, precise stage directions, and obsessive planning and detail reveal

the fragile and volatile nature of these modern rituals of state killing. *The Execution Protocol*, a 56-page manual issued by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, outlines the procedures (see below).<sup>109</sup> Leaving no detail to the imagination, the last page of the execution manual instructs that the execution chamber should be cleaned by staff "trained in hygiene and infectious disease control."

#### Section V. "THE FINAL THIRTY MINUTES PRIOR TO THE EXECUTION"

##### A. *Final Sequence of Events: Preparation*

1. Bringing the Condemned Individual to the Execution Room: At a time determined by the warden, the condemned individual will be:
  - a. removed from the Inmate Holding Cell by the Restraint Team
  - b. strip-searched by the Restraint Team and then dressed in khaki pants, shirt, and slip-on shoes
  - c. secured with restraints, if deemed appropriate by the Warden;
  - d. escorted to the Execution Room by the Restraint Team
2. Restraint Team Procedures

In the execution room the ambulatory restraints, if any, will be removed, and the condemned individual will be restrained to the Execution Table. . . .

#### VI: FINAL SEQUENCE OF EVENTS: EXECUTION

##### A. *Staff Witnesses*

1. Staff participating in the preparation for the execution will exit the Execution Room but stand by in an adjacent area
2. Staff members remaining to participate in and observe the execution will include the:
  - a. Designated United States Marshal
  - b. Warden
  - c. Executioner
  - d. Other staff authorized by the Director of the Bureau of Prisons

*B. Countdown*

1. Once the condemned individual has been secured to the table, at the direction of the Warden, staff inside the execution room will open the drapes covering the windows of the witness room
2. The Warden will ask the condemned individual if he/she has any last words, or wishes to make a statement. The condemned individual will have been advised in advance by the warden that this statement should be reasonably brief. . . .
3. At the conclusion of the remarks, or when the Warden determines it is time to proceed, the Warden will read documentation deemed necessary to the execution process. The Warden will then advise the Designated United States Marshal that, quote, "We are ready." Close quote. A prearranged signal will then be given by the Designated United States Marshal to the Warden, who will direct the executioner to administer the lethal injection.
4. If the execution is ordered delayed, the Designated United States Marshal will instruct the Executioner to step away from the execution equipment and will notify the condemned individual and all present that the execution has been stayed or delayed. the Warden will direct stand down procedures and return the institution to normal operations after the condemned individual has been returned to appropriate living quarters.

*C. Execution*

After receiving the signal from the Designated United States Marshal, the Warden will direct the executioner to administer the lethal injection.

And the condemned prisoner is enlisted as a cooperative player within this grisly script. The condemned face a devil's bargain. When all hope for reprieve is gone, the only option left is in common phraseology "getting through this," with as much dignity and as little pain as possible. Perhaps one of the most perverse cruelties is the way the prisoner is coerced

into a pact of complicity with his or her executioners. This is perversely apparent with the gas chamber, with the customary final admonition to the condemned as some form of: "Breathe deeply, it'll go easier for you that way." But the life-force is so strong that few comply, and that's why the gas chamber was soon dubbed a chamber of horrors. Norms of masculinity are deployed when wardens exhort prisoners in cliched fashion to "go to your death like a man, take your medicine like a man." My interview with the warden at the Terre Haute Federal Prison revealed a new innovation in the casting of execution scenarios. With federal executions, the administrators now bring in staff from other institutions, just for the executions, As explained by the warden: "It's too traumatic for the local staff who know the prisoner and in some cases have formed a relationship with him or her over the years on death row." And I hasten to add that I interviewed the new warden, David Olson, who is now in charge of the Federal "execution facility," as it is called in the bureaucratic manuals. His immediate predecessor, Harley Lappin, scored high marks for directing the June, 2001 executions of McVeigh and Garza, again the first federal executions since 1963. By the time I was able to return to Terre Haute in September, 2001 to tour the prison and talk with staff, Lappin already had been rewarded with a promotion and transfer. He is now the Director of the Mid-Atlantic Region, with twenty prisons under his supervision.

Even the demonstrators who come to protest the executions are carefully monitored and controlled. No one is permitted onto the prison grounds with his or her own transportation. At both the McVeigh and Garza executions, we had to meet at a designated park, walk down a fenced corridor, and get searched before being permitted to board the Bureau of Prisons busses. We were required

to take a “Pledge of Nonviolence,” which included: “we will not swear or use insulting language. We will not run in public or otherwise make threatening motions. We will honor the directions of the designated coordinators. In the event of serious disagreement, we will remove ourselves from the Vigil Action.” Once on the bus, two guards with rifles accompanied us, one riding up front, the other in the back. Each bus was escorted to the prison by two police cars with flashing lights, one car in front, one in the rear.

“What is at stake,” Sarat asks, “when the state imagines itself killing painlessly, humanely?”<sup>110</sup> When it invents new and improved technologies for putting people to death with “decency” and “dignity”? What do the shifting modes and methods of execution say about public standards of taste and thresholds of squeamishness? The quest for quick, efficient, and clean modes of execution that do not disfigure the corpse is for the sake of spectators more than the condemned. When Ronald Reagan was governor of California, he was one of the first government officials to imagine lethal injection. He observed, “as a former rancher and horse raiser, I know what it’s like to eliminate an injured horse by shooting him,” recommending instead, “a simple shot or tranquilizer.”<sup>111</sup> Reagan’s point was not to spare the defendant pain, but to shield the executioners—and by extension, civil society—from the horror and anguish of exterminating a human being.

In 1977 Oklahoma reinvented capital punishment for the modern age by developing the new performance technology of “lethal injection.” In 1982 in Texas, Charles Brooks became the first prisoner executed by lethal injection. Outside the United States, China first used lethal injection in 1997, which it deemed more scientific than shooting a kneeling prisoner in the back of the head at close range. When lethal injection was first discussed in the Oklahoma legislature, advocates argued the merits of: “No pain,

no spasms, no smells or sounds—just sleep, then death.” Governor David Boren pointed out that it provided “a nice clean exit plan.”<sup>112</sup> Susan Blaustein, a media witness to a lethal injection in Texas, described the experience in a *Harper’s Magazine* article titled, “Witness to Another Execution in Texas: Death Walks an Assembly Line.” She wrote: “The lethal injection method has turned dying into a *still life*, thereby enabling the state to kill without anyone involved feeling anything at all. . . . We have perfected the art of institutional killing to the degree that it has deadened our natural, quintessentially human response to death.”<sup>113</sup>

Tulsa Republican representative William Wiseman, Jr., was the principal architect of Oklahoma’s lethal injection bill. He argued that the needle would “make the death penalty more humane by eliminating the brutality and violence of electrocution”—Oklahoma’s then current method for executing criminals. In June 2001, Wiseman published an apologia in the *Christian Century*. He admitted: “The dramatic irony of my action as a legislator is that what purported to be a means of reducing violence became instead a means of increasing it. The moral burden I carry is that, if it were not for my *palatable technique* of death, many who have now been executed would likely have been spared by squeamish juries.” He left politics and is now pursuing a Master’s of Divinity degree at a theological seminary in Tulsa.<sup>114</sup>

Lethal injection, the favored method of modern capital punishment, borrows props from the medical profession and eerily mimics a therapeutic intervention. Missouri’s lethal injection chamber at Potosi Correctional Center is right in the center of the prison hospital ward.<sup>115</sup> One of the uncanny consequences of this slippage between curing and killing is that there is a new emergent justification for executions: executions are justified so that the families of victims can heal and achieve “closure.” This is a new development



in the history of justifications for capital punishment. We have moved from support of capital punishment as a deterrent, as retribution, and now as an extension and necessary part of the grieving process and form of group therapy. This link between capital punishment and mourning is aligned with the politics of the powerful victims rights movement: "By transforming courts into sites for the rituals of grieving, that movement seeks to make private experiences part of public discourse."<sup>116</sup> Appellate Judge Alex Kosinski says that when he reviews and signs off on executions, he "hear[s] the tortured voices of the victims calling out to [him] . . . for vindication."<sup>117</sup>

The execution of McVeigh demonstrates the political efficacy of mourning. The same group of mourning survivors and family and friends of victims who planned the Oklahoma City National Memorial also campaigned for passage of the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, legislation that restricts the right of appeal and habeas corpus in order to streamline and speed up the execution process. They also successfully lobbied Attorney General Ashcroft to telecast McVeigh's execution to an invited group of designated mourners in Oklahoma. In an unprecedented move, Attorney General Ashcroft authorized the closed circuit telecast of McVeigh's execution to an arena filled with relatives of victims and survivors of the Murrah building bombing. He infamously said that survivors and families of victims need to be able to see McVeigh executed "to help them meet their need to close this chapter in their lives."<sup>118</sup> Over one thousand people were invited to the live telecast of McVeigh's execution, more than half declined, and on the morning of June 19, 2001, 232 showed up at the telecast site, a federal prison.<sup>119</sup>

Several of the invited people went directly from watching the telecast of McVeigh's execution to the Oklahoma City National Memorial Center, thus collapsing the execution into personal rituals of bereavement.

One of them, Tom Kight, placed the blue federal badge identifying him as "Witness 223" at the execution telecast on the commemorative chair for his stepdaughter killed in the blast.<sup>120</sup> Several newspapers reinforced this conflation of capital punishment with rites of mourning by running full color photographs of the Oklahoma City National Memorial Center underneath banner headlines announcing McVeigh's execution. On June 12, the *New York Times* ran "McVeigh Dies for Oklahoma City Blast" headline above a photograph of family members kneeling and grieving by the chair commemorating their mother at the Oklahoma City National Memorial Center. The caption explained that the family members had just come from watching the execution on closed-circuit TV.<sup>121</sup> The same day the *Chicago Tribune* ran "U.S. Executes Its Worst Terrorist" banner headline above a panoramic photograph of the Oklahoma City National Memorial Center likewise showing grieving family members just arrived from viewing the execution, kneeling at memorial chairs. On an inside page, there was another photograph of a woman holding a radio and listening intently while kneeling in front of one of the memorial chairs. The caption read: "Renee Pendley listens to a radio report on the execution as she kneels near the memorial chair for her friend Teresa Lauderdale."<sup>122</sup>

Two of the relatives of Oklahoma City bombing victims, who won the lottery to witness the McVeigh execution live in Terre Haute, pressed photographs of deceased loved ones against the window as they watched McVeigh die. What does it mean when the rituals of state killing are conflated and enfolded within rituals of mourning and bereavement? In the wake of September 11, 2001, with its massive trauma to the national psyche, we can expect to see the death penalty figure prominently in the politics of grief as executions are argued for and justified as necessary therapies of collective healing and closure.

Author's note: I have delivered earlier versions and different parts of this essay at four conferences where I received helpful and incisive comments, critiques, and suggestions. I thank Jill Dolan and David Román for inviting me first to present this new work as part of the "Fresh Print" series at the ATHE convention in Chicago, August, 2001. I thank Janelle Reinelt for inviting me to present another version at the "Performance, Policy and Culture: *Dead Man Walking* and the Death Penalty in America" conference at University of California, Irvine, March, 2002. I am grateful to Helen Schwartzman, Chair of Northwestern's Anthropology Department, who invited me to present an extended version as the annual Frontier Lecture in Anthropology, March, 2002. I thank Peggy Phelan for inviting me to present and curate a panel on the death penalty at the "Theatres of Life" Performance Studies International conference at New York University, April, 2002. I am especially grateful to my colleagues Micaela di Leonardo and Lisa Merrill for their sustained and generous responses to this work. And I thank Leigh Bienen, Tracy Davis, Harry Haines, E. Patrick Johnson, Dwight McBride, Denise Quirk, Sandra Richards, Mary Strine, Sunwolf, and Mary Weismantel for bracing discussions and sharing resources.

## NOTES

1. These are the last words of Napoleon Beazley, a young African American man, who was executed in Huntsville, Texas, May 28, 2002. His last words are posted on the web site of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

2. Albert Camus, "Reflections on the Guillotine," *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: Vintage, 1995 [1960]), 234.

3. John Whitley, the warden responsible for directing executions at Louisiana's Angola State Prison, quoted in Ivan Solotaroff, *The Last Face You'll Ever See: The Private Life of the American Death Penalty* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 34.

4. Austin Sarat, *When the State Kills: Capital Punishment and the American*

*Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 242.

5. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979 [1975]).

6. *Ibid.*, 307.

7. *Ibid.*, 302.

8. There are several excellent books that track this history: Stuart Banner, *The Death Penalty: An American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Hugo Bedau, ed., *The Death Penalty in America: Current Controversies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Jesse L. Jackson, Sr., Jesse Jackson, Jr., and Bruce Shapiro, *Legal Lynching: The Death Penalty and America's Future* (New York: New Press, 2001); Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Who Owns Death?: Capital Punishment, the American Conscience, and the End of Executions* (New York: Morrow, 2000). See also Thomas Laqueur, "Festival of Punishment," *London Review of Books*, 5 October 2000: 17–24; Gary Wills, "The Dramaturgy of Death," *New York Review of Books*, 21 June 2001: 6–10.

9. The most authoritative source for updated data on the death penalty is the Death Penalty Information Center, Washington, D.C. Their excellent web site address is <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/>.

10. See John D. Bessler, *Death in the Dark: Midnight Executions in America* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997), 146.

11. See especially Banner, *The Death Penalty*.

12. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Military Order: Detention, Treatment, and Trial of Certain Non-Citizens in the War Against Terrorism*, 13 November 2001.

13. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

14. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969) and *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982); Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See also Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For important studies of political rituals, see Katherine A. Bowie, *Rituals of*

*National Unity: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Richard J. Evans, *Rituals of Retribution: Capital Punishment in Germany, 1600–1987* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). For a historical case study of execution rituals, see Mark Fearnow, "Theatre for an Angry God: Public Burnings and Hangings in Colonial New York, 1741," *Drama Review* 40, T150 (1996): 15–36.

15. Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1986), 48.

16. Robert Johnson, *Death Work: A Study of the Modern Execution Process*, 2nd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1998), 20.

17. Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 36–37. See also Schechner's *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

18. For pathfinding analyses of the processual and improvisatory dynamics of ritual see Nicholas B. Dirks, "Ritual and Resistance: Subversion as a Social Fact," in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 483–503; Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, and Agency* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

19. Louis P. Masur, *Rites of Execution: Capital Punishment and the Transformation of American Culture, 1776–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 6. See also Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978); John R. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990); Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

20. Cotton Mather, *Faithful Warnings to Prevent Fearful Judgments. Uttered in a Brief Discourse, Occasioned, by a Tragical Spectacle, In a Number of Miserables Under a Sentence of Death for Piracy* (Boston: printed and sold by Timothy Green, 1704).

21. John Dunston, quoted in Edwin Powers, *Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts, 1620–1692: A Documentary History* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), 295.

22. *Ibid.*, 296.

23. Wayne Minnick, "The New England Execution Sermon, 1639–1800," *Speech Monographs* 35 (1968): 80.

24. Banner, *The Death Penalty*, 25. Theatre historian Peter G. Buckley concurs: "Of all colonial ritual, executions drew the largest crowds." See Peter G. Buckley, "Paratheatricals and Popular Stage Entertainments," in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre* I, ed. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 428.

25. Cotton Mather, *A Sorrowful Spectacle. In Two Sermons, Occasioned by a Just Sentence of Death, on a Miserable Woman, for the Murder of a Spurious Offspring. The One Declaring, The Evil of an Heart Hardened, under and against all Means of Good. The Other Describing, The Fearful Case of Such as in a Suffering Time, and much more such as in a Dying Hour, are found without the Fear of God* (Boston: printed by T. Fleet & T. Crump, 1715).

26. See "Hanging Day" in Banner, *The Death Penalty*, 24–52 and "The Design of Public Executions in the Early American Republic" in Masur, *Rites of Execution*, 25–49. See also Ronald A. Bosco, "Lectures at the Pillory: The Early American Execution Sermon," *American Quarterly* 30 (1978): 156–76; Daniel E. Williams, "'Behold a Tragic Scene Strangely Changed into a Theater of Mercy': The Structure and Significance of Criminal Conversion Narratives in Early New England," *American Quarterly* 38 (1986): 827–47.

27. John Rogers, *Death the Certain Wages of Sin to the Impenitent: Life the Sure Reward of Grace to the Penitent: Together with the only Way for Youth to avoid the former, and attain the latter. Delivered in Three Lecture Sermons; Occasioned by the Imprisonment, condemnation and Execution, of a Young Woman, who was guilty of Murdering her infant begotten in Whoredom* (Boston: Printed by B. Green and T. Allen, 1701), 147.

28. See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

29. Banner, *The Death Penalty*, 44.

30. Rogers, *Death the Certain*, 144.

31. *Ibid.*, 2, 118. For important historical studies of Puritan culture, see Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment:*

*Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989).

32. *Ibid.*, 153.
33. *Ibid.*, 124.
34. *Ibid.*, 123.
35. *Ibid.*, 2.
36. *Ibid.*, 2, 142.
37. *Ibid.*, 3.
38. *Ibid.*, 118.
39. Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
40. Rogers, *Death the Certain*, 118.
41. Samuel Danforth, *The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into: Upon Occasion of the Arraignment and Condemnation of Benjamin Goad, For his Prodigious Villany. Together with a Solemn Exhortation to Tremble at Gods Judgements, and to Abandon Youthful Lusts* (Cambridge: printed by Marmaduke Johnson, 1674).
42. Rogers, *Death the Certain*, 3.
43. *Ibid.*, 119. On “performative metaphors,” see James Fernandez, *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
44. Rogers, *Death the Certain*, 2.
45. On “interpretive communities,” see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).
46. John Williams, *Warnings to the Unclean: In a Discourse from Rev. XXXI. 8. Preacht at Springfield Lecture, August 25th. 1698. At the Execution of Sarah Smith* (Boston: Printed by B. Green and J. Allen, 1699), 7.
47. Rogers, *Death the Certain*, 118, emphasis added.
48. *Ibid.*, 133.
49. *Ibid.*, 115–16.
50. *Ibid.*, 119, 144.
51. *Ibid.*, 152.
52. *Ibid.*, 132.
53. Williams, *Warnings*, 12, 37.
54. Rogers, *Death the Certain*, 3.
55. For important works on spectatorship see Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988); Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).
56. Rogers, *Death the Certain*, 133.
57. *Ibid.*, 153.

58. *Ibid.*, 122.

59. *Ibid.*, 114.

60. *Ibid.*, 143.

61. *Ibid.*, 144.

62. *Ibid.*, 119.

63. *Ibid.*, 146.

64. *Ibid.*, 152.

65. See Thomas W. Laqueur, “Crowds, Carnival, and the State in Early English Executions, 1604–1868,” in *The First Modern Society: Essays in English History in Honour of Lawrence Stone*, ed. A. L. Beier, David Cannadine, James M. Rosenheim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 305–55.

66. Rogers, *Death the Certain*, 113.

67. Danforth, *The Cry of Sodom*, i.

68. Rogers, *Death the Certain*, 2.

69. Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 55.

70. Danforth, *The Cry of Sodom*, 10.

71. See Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Leigh B. Bienen, “A Good Murder,” in *The Death Penalty in America*, ed. Hugo Bedau (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 319–32.

72. G. W. Peck, “On the Use of Chloroform in Hanging,” *American Whig Review* 8 (1848): 283–97. Peck opens with an extended “essay on manners” and does not even mention capital punishment until page 292, ten pages into the essay. Peck is much more interested in the everyday performativity of class—manners, deportment, refinement, cultivation of speech and gesture—than he is in the cultural performance of executions. His essay resonates with other elocutionary texts of the period. For a discussion of the class and racial exclusions upon which the elocutionary movement was based, see my “Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20 (2000): 325–41.

73. *Ibid.*, 295.

74. *Ibid.*, 286.

75. *Ibid.*, 291.

76. *Ibid.*, 292.

77. *Ibid.*, 296.

78. See Johnson, *Death Work*.

79. See Michael Taussig, *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 187. On the massive incarceration campaign and prison building boom, see Elliott Currie, *Crime and Punishment in America* (New York: Metropolitan

Books, 1998); Joseph T. Hallinan, *Going Up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation* (New York: Random House, 2001); Marc Mauer and The Sentencing Project, *Race to Incarcerate* (New York: Free Press, 1999); Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (New York: Verso, 1999).

80. Michel Foucault, *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1994), 435–36.

81. See David Johnston, “Ashcroft Delays Death of McVeigh Over FBI’s Lapse,” *New York Times*, 12 May 2001, A1.

82. See the Center On Wrongful Convictions web site: <http://www.law.northwestern.edu/depts/clinic/wrongful/index.htm>.

83. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 36–41; Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

84. The Death Penalty Information Center is a reliable source for demographic data on the death penalty. See also, Deborah Fins, *Death Row USA*, Quarterly Report, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2002.

85. See William S. McFeely, *Proximity to Death* (New York: Norton, 2000), 69. Gary Gilmore was executed by a firing squad in Utah in 1977, making his the first post-Furman execution. But because he refused all appeals, he was considered a “volunteer.”

86. See U.S. General Accounting Office, “Death Penalty Sentencing: Research Indicates Pattern of Racial Disparities,” in *The Death Penalty in America*, ed. Hugo Bedau, 268–74. See also Bienen, “A Good Murder,” 327.

87. Jackson, Jackson, and Shapiro, *Legal Lynching*, 75.

88. Mumia Abu-Jamal, quoted in *ibid.*, 35. For an astute historical analysis of the codependent connection between capitalism and capital punishment, see Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

89. Stephen Bright, “Counsel for the Poor: The Death Sentence Not for the Worst Crime But for the Worst Lawyer,” in *The Death Penalty in America*, ed. Hugo Bedau, 275–309.

90. <http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/stat/finalmeal.htm>

91. See Mary Douglas, “Food as a System of Communication,” in *The Active Voice* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 82–124; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the*

*Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

92. Victoria Brownworth, “Dykes on Death Row,” *The Advocate*, June 1992, 62–64. See also Victor Streib, “Death Penalty for Lesbians,” *National Journal of Sexual Orientation Law* 1 (1995): 105–26; Richard Goldstein, “Queer on Death Row,” *Village Voice*, March 2001.

93. Lifton and Mitchell, *Who Owns Death?*, 135.

94. *Ibid.*, 101.

95. See Bessler, *Death in the Dark*, 142. For studies of the stress and trauma that executions wreak on the prison staff whose job it is to actually carry out this grisly work, see Donald A. Cabana, *Death at Midnight: The Confession of an Executioner* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996); Johnson, *Death Work*, 109–16; Ivan Solotaroff, *The Last Face You’ll Ever See: The Private Life of the American Death Penalty* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

96. Tonya McClary, “Sexuality and Capital Punishment: The Execution of Wanda Jean Allen,” *Outfront: Amnesty International’s Program for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Human Rights*, Winter, 2002, 1, 4, 6.

97. Robert Bork, quoted in Sarat, *When the State Kills*, 33.

98. Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck, *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 226.

99. Sarat, *When the State Kills*, 258.

100. Jackson, Jackson, and Shapiro, *Legal Lynching*, 110.

101. Sarat, *When the State Kills*, 17–18.

102. Timothy McVeigh’s death certificate listed the cause of death as “Homicide.” See “Coroner Prepares to Sign Death Certificate,” *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, 11 June 2001, A6.

103. See Johnson, *Death Work*.

104. See Jon McKenzie, *Perform Or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

105. See Frank Bruni and Jim Yardley, “Inmate is Executed in Texas as 11th-Hour Appeals Fail,” *New York Times*, 23 June 2000, A18. See also, Amy Dorsett, “Execution Day,” *San Antonio Express-News*, 22 June 2000, 1A, 8A.

106. For scathing critiques of the hypocrisy of sanitized lethal injection as a modern and humane method, See Lifton and Mitchell, *Who Owns Death?*, 43–69; Sarat, *When the State Kills*, 60–84.

107. Lifton and Mitchell, *Who Owns Death?*, 44. For examples of botched lethal injections, see *ibid.*, 65–66. Bungled executions are so commonplace that the Death Penalty Information Center documents them under the special topic, “Botched Executions.” See <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/botched.html>.

108. Modern executions conflate the three performance paradigms that Jon McKenzie identifies as “the efficacy of cultural performance,” the efficiency of organizational performance,” and “effectiveness of technological performance.” See McKenzie, *Perform or Else*, 27–135.

109. A redacted version of the *Execution Protocol* is posted on the internet at <http://www.thesmokingun.com/archive/bopprotoc011.shtml>.

110. Sarat, *When the State Kills*, 69.

111. Quoted in Jackson, Jackson, and Shapiro, *Legal Lynching*, 113. In 1984, Reagan issued an executive order that reinstated the Military Death Penalty.

112. William J. Wiseman, Jr., “Inventing Lethal Injection,” *Christian Century*, 20 June 2001, 6.

113. Susan Blaustein, “Witness to Another Execution,” in *Death Penalty in America*, ed. Hugo Bedau (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 387–400.

114. Wiseman, Jr., “Inventing,” 6. See also James Walsh, “The Medicine that Kills: Lethal Injection for Execution,” *Lancet*, 7 February 1998, 441.

115. See Lifton and Mitchell, *Who Owns Death?*, 97.

116. Sarat, *When the State Kills*, 35. On victims’ rights movement, see Wendy Kaminer, *It’s All the Rage: Crime and Culture* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995); for trenchant critique of the privatization of public discourse, especially the way victims are cast in the role of exemplary citizen, see Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

117. Alex Kosinski, quoted in Lifton and Mitchell, *Who Owns Death?*, 162.

118. See Mike Dorning, “Hundreds Will Watch McVeigh Die,” *Chicago Tribune*, 13 April 2001, 1, 20.

119. See Rick Bragg, “McVeigh Dies for Oklahoma City Blast,” *New York Times*, 12 June 2001, A1, A19; Lisa Anderson, “In Oklahoma City, Some Feel Cheated by ‘Easy’ Death,” *Chicago Tribune*, 12 June 2001, 1, 14.

120. Anderson, “In Oklahoma City, Some Feel Cheated,” 14. For an excellent study of the politics of memory and how this played out in the contested process of planning, designing, and building the Oklahoma City National Memorial Center, see Edward T. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

121. Bragg, “McVeigh Dies,” A1.

122. “The McVeigh Execution,” *Chicago Tribune*, 12 June 2001, 14.

# 27

---

## Who Is This Ancestor?

*Performing Memory in  
Ghana's Slave Castle-Dungeons  
(A Multimedia Performance Meditation)*

SANDRA L. RICHARDS

I initially wrote this piece in spring, 2003 in order to formally inaugurate my tenure as the Leon Forrest Professor of African American Studies at Northwestern University. Luckily, my endowed chair represented more than a name from a distant past, for the late novelist and department chair had recruited me to Northwestern. Thus, the event occasioned multiple, bittersweet remembering. I was revisiting the recent loss of a colleague who at times acted like a wonderful mirror that could capture and reflect my potential in ways that I had not suspected. Defying logic as memory often does, I wished that Leon could be present to enjoy how the university was honoring his 24 years of academic service and his stellar contributions to the fields of African-American and American literature. In that he was deeply engaged by performance—the sermonic styles of black preachers; the

elegance of a Mahalia Jackson, Nat King Cole, or Michael Jordan; and interdisciplinary collaborations with sculptor Richard Hunt and composer T. J. Anderson<sup>1</sup>—the occasion also gave me a certain license. I would not have to deliver the usual academic lecture; his creative history authorized me to move back towards my own past as a theatre director and to transform it. After years of watching my faculty colleagues and graduate students in the performance studies department, I could take center stage and attempt to enact my research.

Like many other college-educated African-Americans, I had grown up with poet Countee Cullen's question, "What is Africa to me?" made all the more provocative by intellectual and social structures that posited Africa as lack. Perhaps I had been haunted by its challenge without realizing it, and my subsequent focus first on African-American and later,

African theatre had been a way of answering. More recently, I had begun to study African-American tourists to slave sites in the Black Atlantic. In conducting ethnographic research in West Africa, I was keeping journals of my own reactions, but I did not know quite how to incorporate them into academic texts in a way that preserved the emotional integrity of my responses. Further, as I discuss in this text, one particular memory of my trips to Ghana kept recurring: The grave site of eighteenth century Anglican priest Philip Quaque repeatedly came to mind, challenging me to come to terms with his history.

"The real magic happens when the word hits your breath," says Anna Deavere Smith (Roach, 1995, p. 45). In choosing to perform the letters that Quaque wrote to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in England from his post at Cape Coast Castle, I had to confront questions like the following: Where does my subject stand in time? How do I understand the historical quality of the emotion that animated Quaque and then translate that intellectual apprehension into my own emotional responses? Why does his biography both repel and attract me? What is my investment in now attempting to inhabit his words?

These are some of the challenges that memory also poses. Thus, in my script readers will encounter memory, not as the recuperation of a fixed past, but rather as a social and moral practice through which individuals labor to constitute the remembered object even as the object determines their experience and sense of identity (Antze & Lambek, 1996, p. xii). As a social practice, memory insists upon a collective identity in which we posit ourselves as descendants in a genealogy to which we may have no actual, blood relationship; we see ourselves as the inheritors of a legacy transmitted by those who preceded us and enact various rituals, like elementary school Thanksgiving Day pageants, in order to deposit into the body and naturalize constructions of collective identity. In addition, as social practice memory

operates "strategically" (Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert, 2000), for we visitors to heritage sites treat it as a pedagogical exercise that teaches a lost history and orients students towards the present and future. We explain our activities through such truisms as "those who don't know their history are destined to repeat it," or "you can't know where you're going unless you know where you came from." Closely related to this instrumental deployment of memory is the moral demand that we honor the sacrifices of the dead by making our present world better. In the case of black people, whose communities worldwide have historically been under siege, this moral demand is intensified. The suffering of the past is redeemed, so this line of thinking argues, by the quality of the lives we presently lead.

But memory at times defies this neat teleology. Like performance, it can confound time so that past, present, and possible future seemingly become one undifferentiated force field of emotion and identification. For example, African-American travelers to slave dungeons sometimes conflate their persons with enslaved ancestors. Film maker Shirikiana Aina, whose work I excerpt in my performance, speaks of the Cape Coast castle-dungeon from which "we were sent away" (*Through the Door of No Return*, 1997). Further, she imagines contemporary Ghanaians as surrogates (Roach, 1996, p. 2) for indigenous populations of some two to three hundred years ago when she wonders whether the people left behind will remember her identity. Not only is memory operating as imagination, but in this instance of collective trauma, it is also functioning as the desire to reverse history. The victims will perform their history differently this time: Enslaved Africans were driven through the castle-dungeon door to be shipped across the Atlantic, and European traders arrogantly proclaimed that exit "the door of no return." Now free Africans, in the surrogates of Aina and other diasporans, have made the trip *back* across the ocean and walked through these same castle doors. As one



professor, who undertook a similar journey, triumphantly exclaimed, "Now there is a door of return. Their spirits have come back" ("The Great Homecoming," 1998).<sup>2</sup> Not only have the long-lost returned, but as enacted in naming ceremonies staged for diasporans, they have taken their place within the family lineage. Orphaned in the Americas, answering the seductive trope of family used by American and Ghanaian tourism, we journey across the waters hoping to be able to re(?)locate ourselves within the clan, thereby achieving full personhood and freedom.<sup>3</sup>

But our capacity to imagine ourselves as surrogates standing in the place of long-gone ancestors is not without danger. We run the risk of displacing the past entirely, planting ourselves center on the stage of the past rather than seeking to negotiate our relationship to that past. Given the denigration of blackness that connects the transatlantic slave trade to present day aggression on Africa-descended people, very often the gesture of erasure happens quickly and goes unnoticed. Thus, for example, in the video segment included in the performance, the expatriate African-American guide leading visitors on a tour of Ghana's slave dungeons moves effortlessly from recalling the distress of enslaved ancestors to that of black children growing up in America's ghettos. What is unclear is whether, assaulted by the heat, smells, and oppressive history of this slave monument,<sup>4</sup> he and his listeners recognize their location as relational rather than identical. As Deborah Britzman (2000), writing about the trauma of the Jewish holocaust, has observed, "For part of what must be worked through are the projective identifications that impede our capacity to make an ethical relation to the stranger, to encounter vulnerability as a relation" (p. 35). We are challenged to recognize that our pain is twofold, constituted by the contemporary conditions we are undergoing and by "the secondary effects of distress, helplessness, and loss that the [earlier] pain symbolizes" (p. 39).

Because Philip Quaque's history as an Anglican priest, whose religious practice facilitated European penetration of the then-Gold Coast of Ghana, was a memory that I initially did not want to claim, I thought I had been spared the risk of superimposing my narratives onto his. But as I admit in my script, I did want him to speak to my identification with those shipped to the Americas. "I know the memory I want to have," I protested, but he continued to haunt me, refusing my desires yet demanding that I attempt to see him and understand how we are connected. In other words, I was not spared the challenge of determining what would constitute a productive remembering that deployed empathy but recognized difference, disjuncture, and irrecoverable loss as a starting point for reconfiguring the present and imagining another future (Simon et al., 2000). In performing his words and mine, in now writing about the text, I continue to be haunted by Quaque who returns to ask: "For what purposes are you using your research? How does inhabiting my words change how you move through your world?" I suspect that Quaque knows better than I that with each reappearance of memory, his significance and my answers to his questions will be different.

In introducing this script, there is one other observation I wish to make. It relates to what I term "the politics of citation." Readers will see that I refer to the pressures of memory with Yoruba and Ibo terms (*abiku* and *obanje*, respectively) rather than with Freudian terminology. I do not deny that a concept such as "the return of the repressed" is equally appropriate, but I wish to stress that Africa-descended peoples produce(d) knowledge and generate(d) theories of the world that are as viable as those grounded in European history and experience. With the institutionalization of black, ethnic, women's, and performance studies, this emphasis has in one sense become *passé*, as the academy has moved to recognize the

contingent, perspectival quality of truth claims. Yet, too often relevant articulations emanating from the so-called margins are still treated as having no validity for their own cultures as well as for the mainstream; they do not appear in bibliographies or are cited as simply repeating what has already been pronounced in a western metropole. In speaking of abiku and not of Freud or Lacan, I insinuate a reversal in the directional flow of knowledge production.

As scholars, we are challenged to use and develop effective—that is, deeply informed and sufficiently nuanced—analytical tools that describe particular phenomena. As Philip Quaque’s biography attests, the globalization that linked Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas produced societies that were simultaneously distinct and hybrid. And, as his reappearance asserts, we must enact answers to the challenge: Knowledge and memory for what purposes?

---

### WHO IS THIS ANCESTOR? PERFORMING MEMORY IN GHANA’S SLAVE CASTLE-DUNGEONS

#### **Voices**

**SLR** who at various points is the Scholar, the Tourist and Journal Writer, and the Performer now divulging her subtext. She is dressed not in her usual, western-style clothing but in an African print and style, purchased during a trip to the continent.

#### **Video Travelers**

**Philip Quaque** noted in the script as KWAKU in order to remind SLR of the correct pronunciation.

#### **Mr. Adoy**

#### **Setting**

An ordinary, campus lecture hall with a proscenium stage. This one has two aisles on the right and left sides, allowing SLR to circle the audience.

### **I. GREETINGS**

*(In the tradition of welcoming and listening to what the a cappella singing group “Sweet Honey in the Rock” terms “the ancestors’ breath” [Barnwell, 1993], this event begins and ends with music that the ancestors enjoy.)*

*(Music: “Exu” from Odum Orim [Afro-Brazilian music] [Grupo Ofa, 2000])*

#### **SLR the Performer**

Having studied Yoruba belief systems in Nigeria, Brazil, and other parts of the Americas, I know that no undertaking is safe from mishap if Esu is not acknowledged at the outset. With this music and movement, I greet the so-called trickster god, the

divine messenger who reminds us that each day is unique, presenting the traveler with choices as to how she will craft her life-script. May Esu, ancestors known and unknown who have accompanied me so far, and the spirits of Mahalia Jackson and Leon Forrest who loved her so, be pleased and guide me.

*(Music: "Summertime" [Gershwin, Gershwin, and Heyward, 1935], followed by "Motherless Child" from The Best of Mahalia Jackson [1956/1995])*

Summer time and the livin is easy  
 Fish are jumpin and the cotton is high  
 Oh, your daddy is rich and your ma is good lookin  
 so hush little baby, do . . . n't you cry.  
 One of these mornings  
 you gonna rise up singin  
 you gonna heist your wings—ohhh—and take to the sky  
 And til that mornin  
 nothin will harm you  
 with daddy and mammy, they'll be standin by.

*(During "Summertime" SLR enters from house right and proceeds counterclockwise through the auditorium, handing out programs and greeting audience members.)*

#### **SLR the Performer** thinks

The slow, gentle tinkle of a piano and the clear, sweet moanin' of Mahalia Jackson. She uses the "Summertime" melody for both songs. In moving seamlessly from the popular, *Porgy and Bess* folk opera song "Summertime" to the traditional spiritual "Motherless Child," Jackson belies her protests that she sang only religious music. Both feel like a blues of longing for the security that a family presumably provides. Why in the good times of summer, with material plenty, does the baby cry? What danger does the mother anticipate and hope to preempt with the image of the child assuming a bird's form? Will daddy and mammy—in a later verse, Mahalia substitutes "mommy"—indeed protect the child/me from a world of racist violence? As if responding to my question, Mahalia switches and acknowledges her/my sense of latent danger.

*(With the beginning of "Motherless Child" SLR picks up her baggage and continues circling the space.)*

Sometime I feel like a motherless chile  
 Sometime I feel like a motherless chile  
 Sometimes i feeeel like a motherless chile  
 just a long way from my home oh lord  
 just a long . . . way from home

*(Jackson hums and repeats "Summertime.")*

#### **SLR the Performer** continues (thinking)

The deliberate, bass notes on the piano sound as though someone is moving resolutely through the world. A whole race of motherless people, diaspora people, torn from our

places of origin, hated in the world in which we have been forced to make a home. And so, some of us attempt the trek back . . . back to the "green beginning of the world," as playwright Derek Walcott would have one of his characters say (1970, p. 326). The "green beginning" of imagination and desire, come face to face with the realities of contemporary West Africa. Though Mahalia coos, "don't you cry," the juxtaposition of the soaring, crystalline beauty of her voice against the awe-filled history back to the present and future, sketched by that voice, seems to predict that tears will be part of the journey.

*(SLR sets props—big Bible and file of Quaque's letters to Society for the Propagation of the Gospel—in Quaque's space, stage left [SL] and then sets down her own props—books, candle—in her space, stage right [SR])*

## II. THE LECTURE-PERFORMANCE

### **SLR the Scholar** *(Speaking from podium downstage right [DSR])*

Why, you might ask, is someone trained in theatre scholarship and practice researching tourism to slave sites? What intellectual credentials validate her venturing into such an area? Consider some of the parallels between tourism and theatre. Travel mobilizes a variety of calculations concerning the possible roles that both hosts and tourists can adopt: As host, how do I represent/re-present my hometown and identity therein, so that visitors, in search of some emotional experience that they may not be able to define, will discover something sufficiently distinct or different from what they left at home? How must I disguise my required labor and economic interests as open, voluntary hospitality? As tourist, how do I present myself or perform an identity in relation to what I have read about, hope to find, or encounter at my destination? Or think of a heritage site, like the slave-castle dungeons of Ghana, as a large set on which the tourist audience joins a local troupe of host-actors. That is, through its arrangement of artifacts, narration of history, and interactive engagement with visitors, a successful heritage site, much like a play in the theatre, seeks to create an illusion or transform an abstract absence into a palpable presence.

To these issues of identity and difference, role playing, and mediated authenticity, cultural travel to slave sites adds several more: How is a history of pain to be represented so that people will want to visit (and revisit) the site? Whose story is to be narrated? In that enslavement meant being dispossessed of one's body, let alone of material possessions, how is absence to be memorialized?

African-Americans who travel to Ghana's slave castles often explain their motivation in terms of ancestors. They speak of hearing the ancestors' voices urging remembrance of a painful history, demanding descendent recognition of links and obligations to that past.

### **Video: "Ghana Slave Dungeon Document: St. Paul Trip to Ghana"**

*(Visuals of well-fed, middle class travelers, dressed in African print, weighted down with photo and video cameras and water bottles, and waiting to begin their tour of the Cape Coast castle. An unseen male voice intones)*

This [video] is for my ancestors who are unknown because they were omitted from the history books,

This is for my ancestors murdered and left to rot in unmarked graves on land and in the sea . . .

This is for my ancestors who worked plantations from sunup to sundown with disgust and mistrust of anyone who tried to justify their enslavement . . .

Time has not let their spirits rest . . .

Join me in paying homage to them whose spirits are still living in the shadows, riding the wind, restless because they will always be unknown.

This tribute is written in anger, in tears.

It is a reminder to those of us who are here today and have no knowledge of yesterday

The spirit of our unknown live in all of us.

You honor them when you take time to acknowledge them.

Join me so that they can be free.

(Brown, 1996)

**Video: "Through the Door of No Return"**

*(Next seen is a match being lit in the darkness. Gradually becoming discernible are water and Cape Coast Castle from the perspective of the Atlantic Ocean. As an unseen boat approaches the castle, a woman's voice confesses:)*

My father's voice joined my ancestors' voice to call me back, as they called him . . . "Our arms reach up from the depths of the ocean to guide you. Come back home. Come back home . . . We wait for you, with never-closing eyes, to return home . . ." Millions of hands from billions of bones reach up through the leagues of cold, cold water . . . hands of weavers, hands of carpenters, . . . and painters and children loving to play.

*(As the castle comes more clearly into view, the voice says:)*

Here it is. Here it is. The point of departure, the door of no return. Here it is. It is from here that we were sent away at night by the water, and it is at night by the water that I return. Do they remember us? Do they remember us? Is our memory buried here? Is our memory buried here? Can I find my father's memory here? my ancestors' memory? my memory? Can I find our memory? Who's here? Who can answer me? Can these walls talk?

*(The unseen voice has joined a group of diasporic Africans on a private castle tour and ritual of healing conducted by One Africa founders, IMAKHUS, and Nana Okofu Iture Kwaku I. Now deep underground in the slave dungeons, the voice wonders:)*

Is this where my father stood, on the very ground on which my ancestors stood before being shipped out into the horrible time of the Middle Passage? How do we

face this history of exile? The legacy of the lash on our backs now imprinted on our souls seems to give us the strength to remember.

*(Nana reminds these tourists/pilgrims:)*

We are here today to come back forward and to give thanks and praise that the Almighty has spared our life . . . These are the monuments that have been built to corral us, to house us. So we come forward today to say thank you to our ancestors: Help us to go back and pull that youngster or that brother, that sister together and say, "Hang on. Stay strong. You're gonna make it. . . ." *His voice begins to break.* Hallelujah . . . hallelujah, hallelujah . . .

*(Then, he instructs the group:)*

Blow out the candles. Take a moment. Call out the names of those ancestors who have gone on. Harriet Tubman. Frederick Douglass . . . Rosa Parks . . . the local postman, Maude Robinson, my son Kelly. Don't be ashamed. Call them out. Let those ancestors know that we're still fighting. Amen.

(Aina, 1997)

*(SLR joins the circle of video travelers, picking up her candle, blowing it out when instructed, and repeating names as they do. The video fades to black.)*

**SLR the Scholar** *(moving downstage center [DC]:)*

The former bondswoman, Sethe in Toni Morrison's (1987) *Beloved*, knows what her traveler descendants will experience when she counsels her daughter:

If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. . . . Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. . . . The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you . . . nothing ever dies. (p. 36)

But, as Denver soon learns, sometimes even if you never go there, what was there, the past, will come to you, unexpectedly, when your defenses have relaxed, when your rational mind has taken a coffee break. Memory is an abiku, an obanje, an unruly child who torments its parents by being born and dying again and again; it keeps coming back, appearing to accept our inducements to lead a domesticated, ordered life, and then mysteriously disappearing yet again. Memory is an abiku, an obanje demanding that we confront the past (Davies, 1994; Ogunyemi, 1996; Okri, 1992). "To repress memory, 'to keep the past at bay,'" says literary critic Helene Moglen (1997) "is to divert it into the dark silences and crippling diversions of hysteria" (p. 206). On all sides of the Atlantic—in the United States and Canada, in Britain, in Ghana and Senegal—nations of hysterics, exhausted perhaps from doing battle with ghosts, are beginning to look at the past, yet are tempted to transmute it into palatable, comprehensible, theme

park narratives that will take away the pain and shame of genocide, slavery, and unjust privilege.

Memory is also like grandmother's crazy quilt, made out of scraps of cloth that lie next to each other in no immediately apparent pattern. Thus, one bit of memory sometimes stimulates another scrap that logically does not belong with the first, and together they engender even more pieces whose coherence may promise an emotional, if not a factual, truth.

So what happens when, warmed by grandmother's crazy quilt, we begin to listen to ancestors? What happens, when the ancestral world complies with the desire of humans to remember but with a perverse logic, sends representatives whose stories we would rather forget? I found out in 1998, after I had returned home from a month-long tour of slave routes in Ghana and Benin, sponsored by Northwestern's Institute for Advanced Study and Research in the African Humanities in collaboration with the African Humanities Institute at the University of Ghana, Legon. Jet-lagged from the transatlantic flight home and stimulated by a performance of Leon Forrest's *Divine Days*, I remember my trip to Cape Coast Castle and then (*look at SLR's chair upstage right—(UR)—look back at audience, and then*) watch myself remembering (*moving into SLR's personal space*), as I record in my journal: (*SLR reads from the journal.*)

Temporarily located betwixt Ghana and Illinois time zones, I awaken in the early Chicago hours to read a chapter of Morrison's *Paradise*. I can't go back to sleep and thus decide to meditate. The grave of Philip KWAKU (Quaque) comes clearly into my vision. Why have you come to me, Philip? You who were the first African, Anglican missionary, trained in England and posted to the trading company at Cape Coast?

At least you help my memory's eye/I to differentiate between Cape Coast

(*Slide of Cape Coast Castle appears*<sup>5</sup>)

and Elmina,

(*Slide of Elmina appears*)

merged into one site of horror, the one castle-dungeon barely distinguishable from the other unless I force myself to linger over the memory and recall carefully. In remembering the site of your grave there at Cape Coast,

(*Slide: Philip Quaque's grave*)

there in the blazing sun on the ground floor of the castle, I realize that at Cape Coast, one can at least see the sea, hear its roar from the ground floor.

(*Slide: Cape Coast Castle with its cannons facing the sea*)

In contrast, when I picture myself standing at ground level in Elmina castle, all I can see are the various rooms built by the Portuguese and later, by the Dutch.

(*Another slide of Elmina: This time of the Portuguese chapel, later converted into a slave market hall.*)

No glimpse of the sea beyond, only the confines that are Elmina. This recall of the sea at Cape Coast gives me a momentary lift: at least present in that place was some sense of nature, of something beyond man's control into which a captive could escape for a

brief comfort. But then later, I realize that my perspective is wrong: I am seeing from the vantage of the sailors and merchants, those free to walk about on the ground floor of the castle. No, I need to readjust my view to where it "belongs"

*(Three slides of dungeons)*

down below in that dungeon, where there were too many people, too little air, too much stench, too much fear and despair (2 March 1998).

**SLR the Scholar** *(now rises and moves slightly downstage)*

Years have passed, I have begun to research and write—in academic tones—about the experience of visiting Cape Coast and Elmina castle-dungeons. But like an abiku or obanje, you Philip KWAKU (Quaque) keep returning. Why have you captured my attention, demanding that I learn more about you? Let me then recite the history of this ancestor who has taken a seat at the memorial table.

**SLR the Performer** *(moving center towards Quaque's space)*

Along with two other boys, you left your Cape Coast home in 1754, at the age of 13, to sail to England and acquire a Western education. In 1766, now as the Reverend Philip KWAKU (Quaque), first *African*, Anglican priest, you returned as "Missionary, Catechist, and School Master" to the indigenous people on the Gold Coast" and as "Chaplain" to the English "gentlemen"—as the merchants and officers were called—and to the soldiers at Cape Coast Castle. For the next 50 years, you dutifully wrote letters to your sponsor, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, even though in all that time, the Society rarely wrote back. *(No longer the composed scholar, SLR quarrels)*: Preaching the Christian gospel to *slave* traders, inside and outside the castle fort! What was this Christian education supposed to do? Render believers more humane in their trade?

The story I want is the one of what happened under the ground, in the dungeons. I pore over your letters, searching for the clear assertion of repulsion or distress at what is transpiring below. I know the memory I want to have, so I continue to read, squinting at your handwriting preserved on microfilm. But along the way, I become seduced by the life your letters reveal. I devour them, read the missionary accounts of your mentor, the Reverend Thomas Thompson, and even turn to *Stories of a Strange Land and Fragments from the Notes of a Traveller*, authored by one Mrs. R. Lee who traveled with her young daughter to the Gold Coast in the mid-1820s. Even though she approaches the castle from the sea, and I have seen it only from land-side, we agree that it is impressive. She writes,

I had ample time to contemplate the lovely appearance this place presents, when viewed from the sea. The castle. . . is a large white stone building. . . . The native houses, interspersed with the more tasteful dwellings of European merchants, lie to the right; and everywhere the hills rise from the water's edge, covered with the richest and most luxuriant forest. (p. 302)

For me, such an incongruous, natural beauty that belies the manmade horrors. Somehow, I would have more easily understood an ugly physical site, but no, Cape



Coast, the even larger castle-dungeon of Elmina, clearly visible in the distance, and the mighty Atlantic ocean with its plumes of water hitting the rocks are beautiful.

*(Moves stage left—[SL]—to Quaque's—[Q's]—table)*

Did you notice the beauty of the landscape as you returned to the Gold Coast in February 1766 with your English wife, the former Catherine Blunt? *(Now sitting in Q's chair)* Lodged in Cape Coast Castle and beginning his ministry, the Reverend KWAKU (Quaque) wrote to his benefactors *(finding the letter on Q's table)* in September of that year, that given the recent death of the more religiously minded castle governor, he had little hopes for success, because the men are *(searching for the exact wording)* "all Scotch and Irish people, rank Presbyterians" (1766/1972); illiterate, they "defile" themselves by having multiple liaisons with local women. Further, the Caboceer or Fanti chief is ambivalent about Christian conversion and education.

**SLR the Scholar** *(Shifting in her seat, SLR is the Scholar once again)*

What emerges from these letters is a picture of the precariousness of life on the Gold Coast, given the formidable health challenges that many Europeans fought against—and lost—and given the political instability, violence, and ambition that the slave trade unleashed upon African populations. The terms "whites" and "blacks" are used, indicating that racial significations are operative, yet they are crosscut by more powerful ethnic, religious, and class identities: Thus, the reverend writes of rivalries that fracture the whites into Scotch and "rank Presbyterians" versus English and Anglican, English versus Dutch, officer versus soldier. The "blacks" include Ahantas who possess *(consulting letters again)* a "quiet temper, a ready mind and [are] easy to be governed" (Quaque, 1766/1972, p. 125), versus the Fantis who, though allied to the English, are nonetheless "strangers to civil discipline . . . enemies of public tranquillity" (Quaque, July 30, 1775/1972), and the even more menacing Asantes, who for more than 40 years waged wars against their neighbors in order to build an empire that extended from Kumasi down to the coast, some 140 miles away.

Literally related to both groups, negotiating both worlds are biracials or "mulattoes," as they were termed, who were acquiring the cultural capital to advance in the new world brought about by Portuguese "discovery" in 1471. Also evident is the fact that Philip KWAKU (Quaque) is operating in a world where racism does not yet exist. Europeans seem to treat him as an equal who is tolerated or disliked, because they find his religious commitment to saving *their* souls, irrelevant or annoying. He, in turn, condemns or looks down upon his countrymen—and he does use that term of collective identification—because of their wily refusal to convert to Christianity.

Two topics capture my attention, as I pursue my mission of remembering, namely, KWAKU (Quaque)'s comments about his wives—he married three times—and his relentless proselytizing. Though he never mentions any of his wives by name, it is clear that KWAKU (Quaque) felt closest to the English Catherine Blunt, for she, like him, was schooled in Christian doctrine and behavior. Thus, he writes that some six or seven months after their arrival, she is dying; *(consulting next document)* in March of 1767, he admits a "piercing loss," made even sharper in "these sullen and cruel climates," as he records for the Society's benefit Blunt's last testament of faith. Some two years later, he wrote informing the Society that he had married Blunt's former waiting maid

in hopes of silencing those reproaching his widowerhood. By 1772, KWAKU (Quaque) had buried his second wife and married a third “girl” whom he first baptized. He says only, “She is very tractable and seems willing and mindful for the little time she has been with me, which is now two months and better,” and in the next sentence states the numbers of people whom he has buried (March 8, 1772/1972).

*(SLR the Scholar rises and moves center, hoping that this simple movement captures the attention of those whose interest may be wandering)*

But even the brief references to these unnamed African women offer painful, yet telling insights. Painful because seemingly, no one thought these African women—who are my ancestors too—important enough to remember them by name. Telling because of the shift in Fanti life from a clan-focused, collective, or corporate identity to an individual perspective. “Wretchedly reduced” to debilitating illness and concerned about the confusion that rumors of war are engendering, KWAKU (Quaque) also complains in one of his last letters in 1811:

*(Returning to Q’s table for the relevant document)*

My own family, whom I have brought up . . . are plotting my ruin, particularly by raising up a malicious dispute with Mrs. KWAKU (Quaque) merely through jealousy and hatred and envy, and opposing every measure I take for the future benefit of my wife, as if a man has not power and authority to do and dispose of his own property as he pleaseth, without the controlling or interfering of anyone. (Priestley, 1967, p. 138).

**SLR the Scholar** *(puts the letter down and continues her lecture.)*

This dispute over inheritance is intimately related to the reverend’s larger project of winning converts, for according to Fanti custom, descent and the resources accruing therefrom are traced through the mother. KWAKU (Quaque) was apparently related to Cudjo Caboceer, an important chief and brother to the King Amrah KoFI (Coffi) (Thompson, 1970, p. 34). Cudjo Caboceer served as chief linguist or negotiator between the British and the locals and had selected KWAKU (Quaque) for scholarship abroad. By custom, KWAKU (Quaque) was obligated to Cudjo Caboceer and expected to contribute to the collective wealth of his extended, maternal family. Yet, as his letter suggests, the reverend was planning to defy custom by passing along his inheritance to his wife.

KWAKU (Quaque) never ceased hoping that his “uncle” or head of the family, the Caboceer, would convert to Christianity, for if the chief did, many of the other relatives and townspeople would follow his example. In seeking to enlighten his countrymen, the reverend was engaged in an elaborate dance in which each party in this cultural “contact zone” of shifting and uneven power relations (Pratt, 1992, pp. 6–7) acquiesced, resisted, masked, and tested the resolve of the other. *(Here SLR uses appropriate hand gestures to emphasize her point about the subtle negotiations that occurred. These gestures will change to resemble a waltz in the story that follows.)* Let me illustrate my point with a story about events over a three-week period in August 1767.

**SLR the Performer** *(taking up a position SL, near Q’s pulpit)*

One Sunday morning, Reverend KWAKU (Quaque) prepares for service in the castle *(moves forward SL 2 steps as in an assertion)* but is summarily ordered to remove

all the sacred items (*backs up 2 steps*). Disappointed but not defeated, (*moving forward*) he does so and then goes to town (*forward again*) where he casts his “lot” with “my own countrymen who behaved laudably and very decent, much beyond my expectation: although attended w/ a little inconveniency of noised and clamour.” (Quaque, 1767/1972). No longer fluent in Fanti—or in the customary modes of social interaction—KWAKU (Quaque) explains the sacrament of baptism as best he can, promising to send for Mr. Frederick Aday, who will serve as his translator.

*(Mr. Aday comes through the auditorium and waits DSL of Q's pulpit. SLR is now standing SR of the pulpit.)*

**SLR the Performer** continues:

The next week, Mr. Aday comes from his village, and together they preach the word of God to some 25 townspeople. On the following day (*SLR moves sideways, SR*) two elders arrive to thank him and to assert that now that he has made them Christians by reading and showing them the word of God or NYANCUMPONG (Yancumpong), he should give them something to drink. (*Two steps back*) KWAKU (Quaque) gives them a flask of liquor, because as he reports to his superiors, he reasoned that through such a device, he will lead them to God. But when next (*moving forward on a diagonal*) he tries to hold service with the townspeople, they respond that they are involved in the critical duties of making sacrifices (*back again 2 steps!*) to restore the health of sick neighbors. The following Sunday, Reverend KWAKU (Quaque), with Mr. Aday as his translator, begins his service before 20 congregants

*(SLR the Performer moves to Q's pulpit, opens the Bible, and assuming Q's role, motions for Mr. Aday to take his position DSR. But Mr. Aday remains SL)*

**Aday:**

Excuse me, sir, but Mr. Adusain says liquor will aid their ability to follow your teachings.

**Quaque:**

But—Mr. Aday, please translate (*Q gestures again for him to take up his position. Mr. Aday complies, moving DSR.*)

**Quaque and Aday:**

You know that my predecessor Reverend Thompson always preached that we must take care not to drink immoderately of spiritual liquor. (*Q pauses, waiting for the translation and their response. Sensing their restiveness, he adds*). I am a “young fellow, unexperienced in Life, (*pause*) surrounded with many difficulties, [and] temptations to encounter in this wicked and degenerate land,” (Quaque, 1767/1972). (*Mr. Aday stops after “temptations.” Aday and Reverend KWAKU (Quaque) exchange glances.*) (*Q repeats his words*) . . . wicked and degenerate land. But, (*pause*) if you will remain silent (*pause, pleading with congregants*) until the service is over, then we can partake, (*pause*) in friendship.

*(Still as Quaque, SLR the Performer moves away from the pulpit and sits at Q's table)*

**SLR the Performer**

I admit, most Venerable and Worthy Benefactors, I hoped in this way to win these unthinking people over to our form.

*(Switching back into her Scholar mode, SLR rises)*

**SLR the Scholar**

In citing the Reverend Thompson as his authority for initially resisting and then acceding to their expectations, KWAKU (Quaque) was deploying the local custom of demonstrating respect for one's elders. Indeed, the Reverend Thompson, who was the Society's first missionary to the Gold Coast, had written of similar resistance in his *An Account of Two Missionary Voyages* (1937), for not only did the Fanti locals comment upon the immorality of the Christians in their midst (p. 36), but they are also reported as saying in perhaps yet another dance of assertion, masked deference, and reassertion:

*(Using forward dance step again)* The Christian religion is white man's fashion. White men know best, *(moving back)* but *(moving forward and firmly taking a position)* black man follow black man's fashion. (Thompson, 1937, p. 68)

And so, for the next 49 years, KWAKU (Quaque) and the local people danced in this way, with a small number of "thinking" people converting to Anglicanism. Sometimes as many as seventeen, and sometimes as few as two mulatto boys and girls attended his school, held in his castle rooms.

But, looking at pictures of the castle, replaying the physical landscape in my mind's eye, *(glancing towards Q's space)* I wonder: What did you do when a new convoy of captives, weary from trekking hundreds of miles, were finally brought through the castle gates? From the "gentlemen's" quarters above, did you hear the men led into the underground dungeons? Did you see the shackled women herded across the courtyard to the pens near what would become the gate of no return? Did you reach for your Bible then?

*(Addressing her audience directly, SLR the Scholar says)*

**SLR the Scholar**

In the entire fifty years of corresponding with the Society, Philip KWAKU (Quaque) seems to have made only two explicit comments on slavery. In February 1876 he reports first on an uprising that occurred on a Dutch ship about to set sail for the Americas. About 150 captives overpowered the ship's crew, in the captain's absence. KWAKU (Quaque) continues: *(SLR sits at Q's table and reads)*

But the most dreadful circumstance of all is that after having laid their scheme with subtlety and art, and decoying as many as their countrymen who came far and near to plunder on board and near the ship, and also some white sailors from an English ship in hopes of relieving them, were all indiscriminately blown up to upwards of three or four hundred souls. This revengeful but very rash proceeding we are made to understand to be entirely owing to the Captain's brutish behavior, who did not allow even his own sailors, much more the slaves, a sufficient maintenance to support nature. If this is really the case, can we but help figuring to ourselves the true picture of inhumanity those unhappy creatures suffer in their miserable state of bondage, under the different degrees of austere masters they unfortunately fall in with, in the West Indies? (Priestley, 1967, p. 133)

Interesting, that though KWAKU (Quaque) documents the captives' ingenuity, he attributes the rebellion to the captain's negligent behavior rather than to any basic, human drive for personal autonomy.

Immediately following these sentences, KWAKU (Quaque) mentions a revolt that domestic, castle slaves carried out in November of that same year. Now, (*crossing SR out of Q's space*) I should interject here that in my tours of Cape Coast and Elmina castles, guides say virtually nothing about castle slaves; they tend to deploy a passive voice in which there are victims subjected to unidentified agents. But walking through these large, stone fortifications and catapulting myself back into the past, I can not help but wonder: Who fed, cleaned up, or doctored those captives destined for international markets? How did these people interact with locals, what did they tell locals about events that transpired inside the castle-dungeons? Written histories, such as Lawrence's (1964) *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa*, provide some of the answers; undoubtedly, proverbs, songs and other documents in indigenous languages provide others. Retaining men, women, and children, all the European trading companies used castle slaves to perform skilled, artisanal, and agricultural tasks, domestic chores such as laundering and cooking, and unskilled labor such as portering. They, like all the inhabitants of the castle or the smaller forts, were compensated for their work in goods that could be bartered in the market; presumably, their "pay" was sufficient only to keep them alive, but through careful husbandry, these slaves might amass a small surplus. They could not be sold into the transatlantic trade, unless they had committed serious crimes (Priestley, 1967, p. 134, footnote 76; Lawrence, 1964, pp. 49–50).

Well, Philip KWAKU (Quaque) writes that on November 14, all these slaves deserted their posts—a sort of *Day of Absence!* Excuse me, but I can't help but think of Douglas Turner Ward's 1960s comedy, in which all the black folks desert a small, Southern town, leaving their white employers to figure out how to empty the trash and to plead for the return of their "nigras" (1966). Except this day lasted a month, and though KWAKU (Quaque) says that no one has yet understood "the real cause of their desertion," he posits—but does not elaborate upon—an analogy between their complaints and the sufferings of the Biblical children of Israel under Egyptian pharaohs.

(*SLR the Scholar moves further upstage as though headed for the security of her books*)

### SLR the Scholar

I attempt an explanation of why the reverend fails to recognize those enslaved beneath his feet as his brothers and sisters in Christ: They weren't, in fact, Christians. Besides, as his counterpart, the former slave and Dutch-educated Reverend Jacobus Capitein had argued, freedom is constituted by spiritual apprehension, not physical status. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17; Capitein, 2001, pp.105–107; Prah, 1989, pp. 59–61). But this line of reasoning feels like sophistry; it does little to assuage KWAKU's (Quaque) periodically demanding, *abiku* resonance in my memory. Sylvia Wynter's (1992) theory of the science of the human, articulated both in dense, analytical terms and in an affective, folk language provides a stronger answer. She argues that our bioculturally programmed, altruism-inducing mechanism enables us to recognize an affinity and obligation not to "human beings" but to a particular mode of the human. Ideologically blind to the partial character of this human whom we think of as universal, we tolerate all

kinds of inhumane treatment of those who are defined as outside (Wynter, 1992, pp. 237–250).

Within the clan, everything.

Outside the clan, nothing.

Family have, you have! Outside the family, tough!

Lineage fight lineage like the Dutch fight the British. The British fight the Prussia.

(Wynter, 1963/rev.1983 p. 62)

says one of Wynter's dramatic characters in explaining the African origins of the Jonkonnu mask in Jamaica.

But as one descends into the bowels of the earth, into the small pens in which hundreds of captives were housed, this intellectual understanding of how constructions of identity necessitate an excluded other is hard to maintain. My body overrides historical particulars to empathize with the captives. Later in remembering those bodily responses, I am tempted to dismiss Philip's life work, his faith and perseverance in the face of educating so few students and enduring the scorn or indifference of those to whom he was supposed to minister. (*Moving USR to settle in her chair*)

Yet, once you turn down the chatter of daily events and begin to pay real attention to grandmother's crazy quilt, you also discover that the ancestors send a variety of messages in order to disturb your arrogance. First were the newspaper accounts of enslaved boys in the Sudan. Then, Philip KWAKU (Quaque), I suspect, "sent" graduate student Mark West with an even more direct challenge. Mark came with his performance studies piece about more than one million young Indian and Nepalese girls who are presently captives in brothels in South Asia (West, 2003). Even without his use of quotations from Frederick Douglass and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the ancestors' message was clear: How does your remembrance of a past catastrophe translate into action against this present disaster? Or, are you/we content to view slavery as a past event which we mourn and about which we can congratulate ourselves for the distance traveled away from that inhumanity?

Perhaps Philip KWAKU (Quaque), you have come to this memorial event to issue a challenge. Perhaps you have come to demand of me and others a "productive remembering" that does not impose our current distress on the historical specificities of the past. A both/and remembering that uses empathy as one avenue to knowledge of and connection to the past and at the same time, acknowledges the differences that will always keep that past beyond our desiring grasp. A difficult, both/and memory of continuity and disruption that in our acts of re-membering (*using a gesture that suggests a putting back together*) challenges us to act differently, to interrogate and reconfigure our present (Simon, 2000, pp. 118–123; Simon, et al., 2000, pp. 4–8).

(*SLR the Scholar closes her book and looks SL towards Q's space*)

I take one, small step in the direction of your challenge, Philip KWAKU (Quaque).

(*SLR picks up the candle, rises and begins to move SL*)

Medaase, thank you, my ancestor.

(*SLR exits, SL. As she begins to exit:*)

### III. L'ENVOI (FAREWELL MUSIC FOR THE ANCESTORS)

(Music: "Nature Boy" from *Unforgettable* [Nat King Cole, 2000])

There was a boy, . . .  
 A little shy and sad of eye  
 But very wise was he . . .  
 A magic day he passed my way,  
 And while we spoke of many things—  
 This he said to me:  
 The greatest thing you'll ever learn  
 Is just to love and be loved in return.

**SLR the Performer** remembers to herself

This song was one of Leon Forrest's favorites. The orchestral arrangement is lush, yet Nat King Cole's delivery sounds effortless, his message, simple but profound. Like Cole, Leon had a gentle, seemingly unassuming manner in interacting with people. His writing was another matter: voluble, pulsating, attuned to and unflinching in representing the hidden desires, foibles, triumphs, and sometimes sad jokes in people's lives. His was a fierce love affair with life. May I learn from Cole and Forrest to explore the apparent contradiction, to temper my scrutiny with humility, to remain open to magic.

(Music: "So Sa So (Eleggua)" from *Orishas [Afro-Cuban]* [Sintesis, 1997])

**SLR the Performer** continues

This song comes from Yoruba beliefs as they were adapted to the harsh conditions of slavery in Cuba. Hopefully, Esu has enjoyed our time together and departs happily. Certainly, we will meet again—and again—at the crossroads. Oriented by the memory of what I have learned from these life travels, when I meet you as Esu, Eleggua, or High John the Conqueror, may I respond to your challenges with grace. Ase. Amen.

#### NOTES

1. See such Forrest (1994) essays as "In the Light of the Likeness—Transformed," "Souls in Motion," "Michael's Mandate," or "A Solo Long-Song: for Lady Day."

2. Ghanaians—or at the least the state—share in this desire to rewrite history. Emancipation Day ceremonies, celebrated on the African continent—in Ghana—for the first time in 1998 included the transportation of the remains of two Africans enslaved in the Americas back through Cape Castle for final interment in Assin Manso.

3. See Aidoo's (1970) play *Anowa* where a lineage-less person is a synonymous term for slave. Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, Rebecca J.

Scott (2000), and Orlando Patterson (1982) have argued that for enslaved Africans, freedom was conceptualized less as the absence of bondage and more as grounding in a familial network.

4. There is an absence of consensus as to whether these structures do indeed memorialize slavery. See Bruner (1996) and Richards (in press).

5. Readers may want to consult the visual archive compiled by Handler and Tuite (n.d.) at <http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery>

#### REFERENCES

Aidoo, A. A. (1970). *Anowa* [Script]. London: Longman Drumbeat.

- Aina, S. (1997). *Through the door of no return* [Videotape]. Washington, DC: Mypheduh Films.
- Antze, P., & Lambek, M. (Eds.). (1996). *Tense past: Cultural essays in trauma and memory*. New York: Routledge.
- Barnwell, Y. (1993). We are. [Recorded by Sweet Honey in the Rock]. On *Sacred ground* [Compact disk]. Redway, CA: Earthbeat! Records. (1995).
- Bartels, F. L. (1955). Philip Quaque, 1741–1816. *Transactions of the Gold Coast and Togoland Historical Society*, 1(5), 153–177.
- Braun, N. K. Slides of Elmina and Cape Coast Castles.
- Britzman, D. P. (2000). If the story cannot end: Deferred action, ambivalence, and difficult knowledge. In R. I. Simon, S. Rosenberg, & C. Eppert (Eds.), *Between hope and despair: Pedagogy and the remembrance of historical trauma* (pp. 27–57). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bruner, E. M. (1996). Tourism in Ghana: The representation of slavery and the return of the black diaspora. *American Anthropologist* 98(2), 290–304.
- Brown, C. (1996). Ghana slave dungeon document: St. Paul trip to Ghana. [Videotape]. Brooklyn: Trans-Atlantic Productions.
- Capitein, J. (2001). *The agony of Asar: A thesis on slavery by the former slave, Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein, 1717–1747* (G. Parker, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener.
- Cole, N. K. (2000). Nature boy. On *Unforgettable* [Compact disk]. Los Angeles: Capitol Records.
- Cooper, F., Holt, T., & Scott, R. (2000). Beyond slavery: Explorations of race, labor, and citizenship in postemancipation societies. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Davies, C. B. (1994). *Black women, writing and identity: Migrations of the subject*. New York: Routledge.
- Forrest, L. (1992). *Divine days*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Forrest, L. (1994). *The furious voice for freedom: Essays on life*. Wakefield, RI: Asphodel Press.
- Gershwin, G., Gershwin, I., & Heyward, D. (1935). *Summertime*. Los Angeles: Warner Chappell Music.
- The great homecoming [Videotape]. (1998). Accra, Ghana: Visionlink Productions.
- Grupo Ofa. (2000). Exu. On *Odum orim, festa da musica* [Compact disk]. Salvador, Brazil: Geleia Geral–Warner Music Brasil.
- Handler, J. S., & Tuite, M. L., Jr. (n.d.). *The Atlantic slave trade and slave life in the Americas: A visual record*. Retrieved April 27, 2004, from <http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/SlaveryIabolish> (the anti-slavery portal). <http://www.iabolish.com>
- Jackson, M. (1995). Motherless child. On *The best of Mahalia Jackson* [Compact disk]. New York: Sony Music Entertainment.
- Lawrence, A. W. (1964). *Trade castles and forts of West Africa*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lee, Mrs. R. (former Mrs. Edward T. Bowdich). (n.d.). *Cape Coast Castle; or, the adventures of Sir Thomas Fitzosborne among the people of Fanti*. London: Griffith and Farran.
- Lee, Mrs. R. (former Mrs. Edward T. Bowdich). (1835). *Stories of strange lands; and fragments from the notes of a traveler*. London: Edward Moxon.
- Moglen, H. (1997). Redeeming history: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In E. Abel, B. Christian, & H. Moglen (Eds.), *Female subjects in black and white: Race, psychoanalysis, feminism* (pp. 201–220). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Morrison, T. (1987). *Beloved*. New York: New American Library.
- Okri, B. (1992). *The famished road*. New York: Doubleday.
- Ogunyemi, C. O. (1996). *African wo/man palava: the Nigerian novel by women*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Patterson, O. (1982). *Slavery and social death: A comparative study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pratt, M. L. (1992). *Imperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation*. New York: Routledge.
- Priestley, M. (1967). Philip Quaque. In P. Curtin (Ed.), *Africa remembered: Narratives of West Africans from the era of the slave trade* (pp. 99–139). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Prah, K. K. (1989). *Jacobus Eliza Johannes Capitein, 1717–1747: A critical study of an eighteenth century African*. Braamfontein, South Africa: Skotaville.
- Quaque, P. (1972). Letters of Philip Quaque 1766–1811 [Microfilm]. Wakefield: EP Group, Microform Division.
- Richards, S. L. (in press). What is to be remembered? Tourism to Ghana's slave castle-dungeons. *Theatre Journal*.
- Roach, J. (1995). Culture and performance in the circum-Atlantic world. In A. Parker & E. Kosofsky Sedgwick (Eds.), *Performativity*



- and performance* (pp. 45–63). New York: Routledge.
- Roach, J. (1996). *Cities of the dead: Circum-Atlantic performance*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Simon, R. I. (2000). The paradoxical practice of zakhor: Memories of “what has never been my fault or my deed.” In R. I. Simon, S. Rosenberg, & C. Eppert (Eds.), *Between hope and despair: Pedagogy and the representation of historical trauma* (pp. 9–25). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Simon, R. I., Rosenberg, S., & Eppert, C. (2000). Introduction: Between hope and despair: The pedagogical encounter of historical remembrance. “In R. I. Simon, S. Rosenberg, & C. Eppert (Eds.), *Between hope and despair: Pedagogy and the representation of historical trauma* (pp. 1–8). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Sintesis. (1997). So sa so (elegua). On *Orishas* [Compact disk]. Burbank, CA: Milan Music Entertainment.
- Thompson, T. (1937). *An account of two missionary voyages*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
- Walcott, D. (1970). *Dream on Monkey Mountain and other plays*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Ward, D. T. (1966). *Happy ending and day of absence: Two plays*. New York: Dramatists Play Service.
- West, M. (2003, March 15). Go to the deep pine woods: Trafficking, war, and broken-down ethnography in South Asia [Performance]. Mussetter-Struble Theater, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.
- Wynter, S. (1992). Rethinking “aesthetics”: Notes toward a deciphering practice. In M. Cham (Ed.), *Ex-iles, Essays on Caribbean cinema* (pp. 237–279). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Wynter, S. (1983, March 6). Maskarade. Revised unpublished manuscript. (Original version written 1963)

# 28

---

## The Polemics and Potential of Theatre Studies and Performance<sup>1</sup>

JILL DOLAN

This essay offers a brief history of the relationship between theatre studies and performance studies, and describes the trajectory of the theory/practice debate within both fields. My aim is pedagogical, in that I want to help students and practitioners of the field recall its theoretical past, and pragmatic, in that I'm concerned with how we use theatre and performance studies to teach students and ourselves productive ways to be what I like to call "citizen/scholar/artists" (Becker, 2000). Since my commitment is to the politics of performance and its scholarship, I'm most concerned with how we can think about teaching, creating, and theorizing performance as a public intellectual practice with the potential to intervene in restrictive or oppressive representations of human capabilities. In making this argument, I will trace the ways in which identity politics, the first theoretically inflected project to reject the more empiricist bent of the field, began to transform theatre studies from a more conventional academic pursuit to one

with radical possibilities. I'll go on to describe the burgeoning of theatre and performance studies as interdisciplinary gold mines for scholars interested in the workings of culture; launch an argument about "teaching the conflicts" through performance; and then end with an exhortation for theatre and performance scholars and practitioners to return to a capaciously humanist, utopian performative approach to our mutual work.

### IDENTITY POLITICS AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THEATRE STUDIES

In the last 20 or so years, the objectivity and empiricism of traditional theatre departments have been challenged mostly on the basis of identity politics, an approach to the social in which categories like gender, race and ethnicity, class, sexuality, and ability offered primary lenses through which to view its workings. Identity politics as methodological tools rooted themselves in the critical and theoretical

traditions of feminism, queer studies, critical race studies, and most recently disability studies, all of which prompted ideological adjustments with enormous impact on the field. In particular, feminism's application to theatre has insured that universal "man" can no longer be presumed as the objective or "real" subject of any performance, contemporary or historical. Along with feminism, critical race studies has had perhaps the largest, most visible influence, so that racial and ethnic categories, as well as gender, can no longer be elided responsibly, or located purely in instances of cultural impersonation like minstrelsy and black-face that absented people of color as subjects even while they derided them as objects of an imperialist white gaze. Margaret Wilkerson (1991), in an article that stresses the changing demography of American theatre, reminds theatre scholars that they will have to continue to rethink the Eurocentric history of their theory and practice if theatre programs are to succeed further into the twenty-first century. Wilkerson says, "Theatre provides an opportunity for a community to come together and reflect on itself . . . It is not only the mirror through which a society can reflect upon itself—it also helps to shape the perceptions of that culture through the power of its imaging" (p. 239; see also Elam & Alexander, 2002; Hatch & Hill, 2003; Hatch & Shine, 1996; Uno & Burns, 2002). Wilkerson's aspiration for theatre requires that the discipline, and the scholars who teach it, look elsewhere than the Eurocentric canon for knowledge.

James Hatch (1989) offers a similar reminder of the continuing importance of criticizing racial and cultural exclusions in the contents and methods of theatre studies. Hatch excoriates theatre programs for continuing to overlook African influences in theatre history and African-American work in contemporary theatre. He suggests, "The roots of the problem are woven inextricably into

America's social history and perpetuated by graduate programs in theatre departments. This continuing apartheid in an era when our scholars show increasing sophistication in national and multiethnic theatre history is unfair to students—and dishonest" (p. 149). Hatch and Wilkerson propose using knowledge gained from identity politics to infuse theatre studies' practices and methods with difference. Wilkerson says, "We can no longer teach or even study theatre as we have in the past. Those of us in theatre production programs will find ourselves increasingly marginalized or isolated in our institutions if we do not include in very fundamental ways the new population (students of color and others) constituting our student bodies. . . . The path-breaking scholarship in [other] fields is revolutionizing the ways in which we see ourselves and the places where we look for knowledge" (1991, p. 240).

Despite their location in academic institutions that sometimes militate against such thinking, university theatres, for example, could respond to Wilkerson's and Hatch's admonishments by offering a forum for embodying and enacting new communities of performers and spectators and by using their laboratories to enact the possibilities of difference. By doing so, they could become sites for more radical interventionist work. University theatres are spaces that might productively be given over to theories and practices of identity in all its complex intersectional variety, and studies of performance in all its aspects, rather than protected as museums to house imitations of the canonical white masterpieces of dramatic literature. Yet such moves remain surprisingly difficult. Panels at many professional conferences continue to address the unequal or misaligned representations of race and gender in the industry, in the profession, and in theatre departments, and panelists and participants continue to bemoan the lack of opportunities on their campuses for

production work that includes attention to minoritarian experience. Even when the curriculum has improved attention to new ways of thinking about social identity in performance—through the addition of courses on women in theatre, gays and lesbians in theatre, people of color in theatre—and to critical approaches to the experience reified in canonical drama, production programs tend to lag far behind. Sometimes, these imbalances stem from the separation between theory and practice in many theatre and performance studies departments; sometimes, the excessively conventional seasons our departments offer come from an unimaginative notion of what audiences want to see and the kinds of theatre they're willing to attend. These shopworn ideas about spectatorship need to be overhauled to reinvigorate how our production seasons speak to our students' needs and those of the communities in which we work.

As Joseph Roach (1992) reiterates, after Raymond Williams, "The convergence of material productions with signifying systems inheres in the fundamental nature of theatrical performance" (p. 11). Because of such a productive convergence, theatrical performance offers a temporary and usefully ephemeral site at which to think through various important questions about the representation not only of individual identities but of social relations within, across and among identity categories, and across communities and cultures. For instance, questions of the signifying body that determine how we read what bodies mean, by considering them as "signs" of meaning, are readily available by looking at actors' gestures and their relationships to each other in the physical space of the stage. Questions of how bodies in space exemplify social relations can be studied in the embodiment of texts as performance, and in a director's choices to position actors around a set or within an empty space. Because performance demonstrates the ways in which any reading is always multiple, and illustrates the undecidability of visual as

well as written meanings, it provides a way of seeing identity as complex, as crossed with difference, and never as the static, innate, unchangeable thing it's described to be in other venues of social life. Performance allows an investigation of the materiality of the corporeal, since the presence of bodies requires direct and present engagement. Such questions can be brought to bear in the temporary communities that theatre-producing and theatre-going construct. Theatre scholars might productively borrow the language of science to explain their goals and methods. As Wilkerson has remarked, research universities understand the workings of "laboratories."<sup>2</sup> Theatre studies might use the analogy, even while it discards its positivist trappings.

#### PERFORMATIVITY, PERFORMANCE STUDIES, AND THEATRE STUDIES: A PERSONAL GENEALOGY

The importation of identity politics to the academy, and their inflection with post-modern understandings of culture that privilege undecidability rather than truth, gave rise to theories that described identity as malleable and social, superficial and constructed, rather than innate and fixed. Theorists like Judith Butler described identity as performed, which gave rise to new notions of "performativity" as a way to talk about gender and sexuality, especially, as functions of surface rather than depth (Butler, 1990; see also Austin, 1962). The new language of performativity propelled performance to new visibility in academic discourse and participated in the project of unsettling white hegemony in the academy and in theatre studies. But the theorists who used the metaphor of performance to talk about identity itself were mostly interested in the performance of identity constructions in everyday life, rather than in performance *qua* performance. As a result, feminist, queer, and critical race theorists seem to borrow the language of theatre without giving serious consideration to

the artifacts that we prize in our study—the richness of performance itself.

The general introduction to Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach's edited volume, *Critical Theory and Performance* (1992), is insightful about the peculiar status of theatre studies as a discipline; performance scholarship, the editors note, has always crossed institutional disciplinary lines. Yet theatre scholarship belongs to a particular tradition,<sup>3</sup> one that Reinelt and Roach recall has had a long history of theoretical speculation, now bolstered by the interest in critical theory across the academy. "Ironically," Reinelt and Roach write,

the history of the discipline of theatre studies is one of fighting for autonomy from English and Speech departments, insisting on a kind of separation from other areas of study. It was necessary, politically necessary, to claim this distinctiveness, even at the expense of becoming somewhat insular and hermetic—a result that unfortunately became true of many departments of theatre. Now, however, it is even more necessary to recognize and insist on the interdependency of a related series of disciplines and also on the role of performance in the production of culture in its widest sense. (Reinelt & Roach, p. 5; see also Bottoms, 2003; Jackson, 2004)

The field of performance studies has come to encompass this broader approach to cultural production.

While theatre studies traces its genealogy through speech departments that once focused on the oral interpretation of literature, as well as English departments that focus on dramatic literature, performance studies has also branched off from several different genres of academic study. One prevalent form of performance studies incurs an equal debt to the transformation of texts from page to stage in speech departments, while another grounds itself in methods and theory borrowed from literary criticism, folklore, social science, and the study of popular culture and performance in

everyday life. The Department of Performance Studies at New York University has perhaps been the primary proponent of this latter, interdisciplinary, social sciences-based branch of the field, and Richard Schechner, an experimental theatre director working actively since the 60s, and a long-standing faculty member in NYU's performance studies department, historically has been one of its preeminent spokespeople. At a conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) in the mid-1990s, and in a "Comment" in *The Drama Review* (TDR) he published shortly after, Schechner argued that professional theatre training programs sell "snake oil" to students, and that they should be dismantled so that theatre can return to the humanities (and social sciences) through performance studies, in all its cultural variety (see Schechner, 1992, 1995).<sup>4</sup> Essentially, he was arguing that so-called "professional theatre training programs," or any program that purports to prepare young students for a theatre industry in which they can hardly make a living, is offering a corrupt sense of possibility, and training undergraduates for a future that doesn't exist.

Schechner's comments, and a slowly building consensus among some scholars in the professional organizations that theatre studies could well be amplified by a broader attention to performance, led to various public debates about the relationship between the two fields. That debate saw the establishment of a performance studies focus group in ATHE, which eventually led to the formation of Performance Studies international (PSi) as a freestanding professional organization. In addition, performance studies divisions or subgroups have been established in the National Communications Association and in the American Studies Association, and the field has come to influence more and more the direction of work presented in the relatively august Drama Division of the Modern Languages Association. This infiltration of the professional organizations,

which provide important venues for visionary work and its distribution, has had a large impact on the visibility of performance studies in theatre departments around the country, and has changed the status of “drama” as a genre study in English departments.

I was a graduate student at New York University just after it had converted its graduate drama department into the Department of Performance Studies in 1981. I originally returned to grad school because I wanted a supportive intellectual context in which to think about feminist theatre criticism. I had an activist artistic agenda that the feminist political community in which I then lived in Boston wouldn't support, so I decided to see how the academy might facilitate and nourish my thinking. As I learned more about performance studies, it appeared that although I hardly knew what I was getting into, I'd made the right choice. In performance studies, I'd landed in a program that was proud of its resistance to traditional modes of knowledge, and that wanted to give students the tools to produce knowledge differently, through popular culture studies, interculturalism, and folklore. Performance Studies was nonconventional enough to enable feminism to carve out a niche there, which was important to my own nascent interest in feminist criticism and theory.<sup>5</sup> The notion of performance could accommodate the marginalized productions of women's theatre. It offered methods through which to account for women creating texts of their bodies and their lives, whether as mimes in front of Greek theatres, or in upper-middle-class salons. A performance paradigm helped analyze these women's rejection of public architecture, which was in any case out of their reach, to create new meanings in private spaces in which they wielded some power.

As Dwight Conquergood (1991) notes, “Particularly for poor and marginalized people denied access to middle-class ‘public’ forums, cultural performance becomes the venue for ‘public discussion’ of vital issues

central to their communities, as well as an arena for gaining visibility and staging their identity” (p. 187). Performance not only broadened what I could study, but it helped me understand how feminism could profit from thinking through performance as an embodied relationship to history and to power. The notion of performance could let me find Dick Hebdige's book *Subculture: The Meanings of Style* (1979), and use it to theorize about lesbian erotics and style as a performance of resistance. I charted my own itinerary through my own desires and, through performance studies, helped establish for myself an embodied relationship to poststructuralist theory, which was just beginning to be applied in feminism.

Through poststructuralism, I escaped from the essentialisms of some forms of feminism that promoted strict and rather conservative understandings of gender, race, and sexuality as innate; I moved outside the hegemony of authorship into an understanding of performance and theatre as “readerly” texts open to multiple interpretations, which I found very helpful politically in making my arguments; and I freed myself from searching for “true” politics to assert against the dominant, hegemonic “truths” from which I thought theatre and performance could dissent. Although I later came to reassert some of the values that poststructuralist criticism and theory taught me to suspect (such as the usefulness of metaphysics and notions of truth), when I first applied poststructuralist ideas to my research on feminist performance, I found that they revolutionized my thinking in performance studies.

When I confronted a class of students as a first-time teacher in the School of Drama at the University of Washington in 1987, I had to explain my training in performance studies, and entice students to go with me as we revised the frame of reference through which to look at theatre. My performance studies education let me persuade them that the plays

we read extended well outside the classroom, that they were artifacts of culture (what James Clifford calls “survivals”) that needed to be engaged, studied, and contested to figure out what they might tell us about how we live, but more importantly, how we might live (Clifford, 1993, p. 68). I encouraged students to stage cross-gendered versions of scenes from the canon in my play analysis class. We delighted in the fact that gender was a performative practice (although we didn’t have that language then) that was part of our performances. Feminism brought me to an embodied approach to learning for which performance offered a strategy. Using performance in the classroom became a different epistemology, a way of knowing not just our selves, but also the world. Performance studies refused to privilege the text, and connected theatre and performance as what Schechner calls “restored behavior” (Schechner, 1985; see also Carlson, 1996; Schechner, 1988). These ideas invigorated my interventions into a more traditional theatre studies curriculum, and the classroom became a new site of my feminist activism around gender and representation.

#### USING PERFORMANCE STUDIES TO REINVIGORATE THEATRE STUDIES AND PRODUCTION PROGRAMS

I needed a politicized performance paradigm to generate ways of looking at theatre that aren’t gilded with the rhetoric of highbrow culture, and with what Lawrence Levine (1998) calls its missionary attitude toward saving or guarding itself against an “uncivilized” public. I wanted to help find rationales for theatre studies and performance in the academy and in culture that aren’t about how they rescue people from degeneracy, but that clearly and forcefully articulate tools for cultural intervention, ways of engaging and thinking about social relations as we know them and as they could be. This remains a continuing struggle for several reasons: The

ways in which theatre is viewed in the academy too often restrict it to something precious, or expensive, or irrelevant; the divide between theory and practice in our departments tends to work against a more broad-based commitment to performance as a public cultural practice; and American culture still predominantly views theatre as “entertainment,” rather than as an important site of social understanding and political coalition-building.

For example, when I chaired the Department of Theatre and Drama at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in the mid-1990s, bemused administrators tolerated my impassioned explanations of our work in theatre studies, but never appeared to take our department seriously. Our productions seemed pale imitations of work they hoped to see in New York, the real center of what they understood as theatre production.<sup>6</sup> Our scholarship seemed odd in its interdisciplinarity; I recall the Dean of Graduate Studies, as I was trying to impress upon him the connections theatre studies has made with a number of different fields, asking why we needed to work in a theatre department. As Marvin Carlson (1992) has written, we have to be able to “say clearly what distinguishes theatre history from [other histories],” or the “university administrators, legislators, or funding agencies . . . may . . . begin to wonder why our activity cannot be as easily taken care of by one or several of these other disciplines” (p. 92). The very interdisciplinarity that’s invigorating the field could endanger it within universities and colleges always looking to streamline their administrative and academic structures.

At the City University of New York Graduate Center, where I chaired the PhD program in the late 1990s, I was impressed that, this being New York, people presumed they knew what it was we did in the Theatre Program. They still couldn’t quite grasp that ours was a solely academic study of theatre, and turned to us occasionally for cheap entertainments. One year Carlson, my colleague at

CUNY, was irate during the student demonstrations against the budget cuts when he was asked if the Program could put together some sketches, or something dramatic that might be effective on the streets. I had mixed responses to this request. On the one hand, I agreed with Carlson that we have to educate our institutional colleagues against the notion that our labor is simply available to throw together skits. On the other hand, following more of a performance studies itinerary through this anecdote, I do think it would have been interesting to encourage our students and faculty to work with the protesters to integrate performance into their activist strategies. For the Theatre Program to be perceived in this new way would require a different kind of institutional educating.<sup>7</sup> How can we offer what we know to student demonstrators and striking workers, to people without large public forums to share what they know, through performance? How can we offer performance as a tool that can be embraced and harnessed toward exactly that kind of public educational process, a process of difficult social change? Implicit here is a rationale for theatre and performance that extends well beyond the academy.

Theatre studies is in a unique position to experiment with the construction of knowledge and new ways of learning, precisely because many of its departments include production components that can embody the questions of content, context, theory, and history raised by its scholars. Through a performance studies model, we can think of performance as research, as part and parcel of the ideas we have to offer to the store of knowledge. Yet there remains something fundamentally divisive in how theatre departments are structured, carefully mixing and matching and sometimes blending practice and intellectual work rather than premising both on the other. The conventions of theatre training too often jealously guard the theory/practice split that hobbles our field. Caught up in still romantic notions of artistry as unthought, as unmediated by choice

and work and modes of production, academic theatre practice often aspires to imitate “real theatre” that happens elsewhere and strives to replicate the high-art, elite centers of production that progressive cultural critics, often in their own departments, are simultaneously challenging. Preprofessional BFA and MFA programs often virulently insist on unexamined discourses of high-art elitism, as they prepare students to enter what is described monolithically as “the profession.” And as Roach (1999) has suggested, even the architecture of theatre buildings tends to separate our departments from the rest of the campus, removing theatre to sometimes isolated locations with ample parking and room to build shops, fly lofts, and large auditoriums (pp. 3–10).

Some departments, working through the challenges of identity politics, have built curriculum and created production projects to challenge traditional understandings of theatre as an art, and have immersed their students in performance as an art practice with multiple articulations in the sociopolitical world.<sup>8</sup> But the theory/practice split that rends the field has allowed many production programs to continue to describe the actor, especially, as outside of history, as objective, empirical, inspired not by context but by genius and canonical knowledge. As a result, these departments are often considered naive or irrelevant to the larger intellectual project of the university or college. Theatre departments generally haven’t done very well at teaching new models for how to be artists.<sup>9</sup>

Theatre scholar Sandra Richards (1995) says that “given the evanescence of theatre, and its insistence upon subjectivity as part of its methodological approach, academics from other disciplines all too often view the scholarly validity of drama departments with varying degrees of skepticism; that ambiguity,” she goes on, “reproduces itself within departments as a contentious divide between practitioners and scholars, such that each group jostles to privilege its mode of activity, and the insights



of one often do not inform those of the other" (p. 67). To counter this unproductive standoff, Richards considers herself as a "critic working in theatre . . . whose directing constitutes a critical praxis addressed to a non-professional audience, and whose subsequent writing to an academic audience is partially shaped by those experiences" (p. 69). Such a dialectical movement keeps Richards from foundering in an unproductive debate.

Production could come to mean something much more vital in theatre departments and the communities in which they're located. Rather than succumb to the marketplace pressures of theatre, film, and television for which they're grooming some students, university theatres could take more risks, producing texts that might share with the academic and public communities something new about theatre, and about people's contemporary situation in culture. Too often, university theatres fail to use their resources to introduce their faculty and students and others to a new writer, a new performance style, a new issue or identity in the space of their stages. Rather than employing a pedagogical model of theatre production and practice, they adopt the market strategies of the industry they seek to emulate. The Broadway productions they replicate are more and more driven by market research, by audience surveys that determine the structure, shape, and narratives of mainstream product (Kakutani, 1998, p. 26). The cultural capital of seeing a Broadway show and reproducing it in a university theatre builds intellectual capital in theatre departments. But shouldn't university theatres reach higher than that, and try to create performances that reach deeper, intellectually, artistically, and even spiritually?

Theatre departments, of course, are hardly free from the market pressures that influence their students. The circulation of academic, cultural, and financial capital drives their teaching and their research and the productions they select for their seasons in one way or another (Bourdieu, 1984). Departments need majors to

survive in academic institutions that are now economically motivated, and they must be responsible for training their students toward some sort of financially viable future. But how can faculty more responsibly train theatre majors to think of their skills as critical tools, rather than encouraging their students' fantasies about their future stardom, inspired by an excessive American culture of celebrity? How can faculty persuade students that theatre degrees might make them employable later, or that a thoughtful use of their degrees can mean more, personally and politically, especially when they're young, than secure employment prospects? It sounds excessively privileged to suggest that an arts education is more important than a livelihood. But faculty committed to the arts know that they can offer important ways of structuring identity, of seeing the world critically, of thinking about and experimenting with social relations and their potential. Such critical and social thinking should be a vital part of any student's education.

#### STAGING THE ARGUMENTS IN THEATRE STUDIES

In addition to focusing the ways we teach theory and practice on their potential use in a wider social world, theatre and performance studies are ideal places to engage public debate through the methods of performance. Theatre studies might use performance and the built environment in which our departments are housed to engage students with the larger world, encouraging them to be not only scholar/artists but *citizen/scholar/artists*, not to participate in unselfreflexive nationalism but to use art and research, aesthetics and intellect to participate in a civic conversation about what "America" is and what it does. Such a vision of the university, in which various constituencies might cooperate to find a common social voice or political vision, has long made conservatives fearful, perhaps partly because such an activist intellectual

environment would clearly contribute to shaping public life. Carol Stabile (1995), in fact, argues that the “culture wars” and the debates about political correctness that have long divided college campuses were engineered by the first Bush administration during the Gulf War as a way to contain campus protests against this conflict and to manufacture consent (pp. 108–125).<sup>10</sup> Whether or not one agrees with Stabile, the culture wars have succeeded, to a certain extent, in isolating progressive academics by making them appear doctrinaire and ridiculous (Gitlin, 1995; see also Rorty, 1998). Conservative rhetoric about political correctness has made progressives seem against a democratic notion of human community and for the “special interests” that have been disparaged in public culture in recent legislative initiatives against gays and lesbians, against affirmative action, and against welfare. The very identity politics that have opened up our field remain threatening to a government that retains a vested interest in supporting a powerful, “unmarked” elite (Phelan, 1993).

The terms of scholars’ work need to change to connect more directly to a diverse public. Henry Giroux, for example, argues that literacy has to be reconceptualized as a critical cultural practice in which students become agents of their own lives by learning to understand the representational practices through which they’re often excluded. “This is not merely about who speaks and under what conditions,” he writes. “It is about seeing the university as an important site of struggle over regimes of representation and over ownership of the very conditions of knowledge production” (Giroux, 1995, p. 249). Gregory Jay and Gerald Graff (1995) suggest that rather than trying to resolve them, we should “teach the conflicts. . . . The ‘politicized’ university . . . would look to turn the campus into . . . a community where empowered citizens argue together about the future of their society, and in so doing help students become active

participants in that argument rather than passive spectators” (pp. 210, 212).

Actually staging arguments in theatre studies would make faculty and students more self-conscious of the public, progressive possibilities of theatre and performance. A good example of such a staging occurred in fall 1996, when white, Harvard/American Repertory Theatre-based *New Republic* critic Robert Brustein and the noted, often-produced African-American playwright August Wilson waged their own battle over universal versus particular knowledge, identity politics, and ways that theatre might engage with deeply contentious cultural issues. In the pages of the trade magazine *American Theatre*, Wilson argued that African-American plays should not be produced by white theatres, and spoke against color-blind and cross-race casting. Wilson’s argument, though persuasive in some respects, was an essentialist and modernist vision of identity politics. But Brustein’s universalist, blindly humanist response suggested that art conquers difference, which makes attention to the specifics of identity irrelevant. In a later issue of *American Theatre*, Patti Hartigan, a cultural reporter from Boston, suggested that Brustein and Wilson should give their debate over to African-American performer/playwright Anna Deavere Smith to stage as a polemical performance in the style of her *On the Road* pieces. Smith, Hartigan suggested, could perform it for Brustein and Wilson and the theatre community, investigating its ideologies and its implications much as she did for Crown Heights and East LA. (Smith, 1994; see also Smith, 1997; Smith, 2004). Through performance, this debate about the meaning of theatre, and how it structures representations of our culture, might enter the lives and imaginations of a much larger community. Theatre people, Hartigan implied, should assume responsibility as public intellectuals and make our work accessible and relevant to a broad public audience.

In fact, in January 1997, Smith moderated a public debate between Brustein and Wilson at Town Hall in New York City. Sponsored and organized by Theatre Communications Group, the sold-out event was one of the high points of the season, attracting a more ethnically and generationally diverse audience than typically appears for theatre productions in midtown Manhattan (Grimes, 1997, p. C9). The theatre buzzed with interest and excitement; people felt each other's presence as a necessary anchor. The liveness of the moment, and the investment in a very material commitment to a theatre community our presence represented, buoyed the spirits of the people in the large, cold hall. The evening was contentious and the power dynamics disconcerting, as Brustein and Wilson refused to cede ground to each other's arguments. Despite Smith's mediating presence, the debate framed poles of power in contemporary theatre, and still managed to leave out a wide spectrum of work and invested viewpoints. Many of the people attending were theatre-makers in their own right, who were discouraged from speaking publicly into the forum, making the evening two separate monologues instead of a true public forum about race and theatre in America. Smith read questions solicited from the audience in the second half of the evening, but Brustein and Wilson's responses only demonstrated the multiple layers of issues involved, rather than profitably untangling them to clarify, and the audience often groaned in frustration when either of the two men would drastically miss the point. And although the evening focused on race, both men displayed blind spots when confronted with gender or sexuality issues. Still, the event was invigorating and moving, a heartening demonstration of how much people care about theatre. Why don't theatre departments and performance studies departments open their theatres to just this sort of debate, about racial issues, gender issues, sexuality issues, about affirmative action, gay/lesbian civil

rights, immigration and welfare, or even about the ways in which academic courses and productions create knowledge in theatre and performance studies?

Another productive example of such public debate was staged at the ATHE conference in 1998, when the organization's Advocacy Committee programmed a plenary session on arts funding called "Showdown on the Arts in San Antonio." The debate was prompted by the city council's decision to cut the local arts budget by 15 percent, and to deny funding completely to the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, one of the city's most progressive producing organizations for the Latino and gay and lesbian communities. The city's defunding of Esperanza was widely seen as political—in fact, one of the city council members, who attended the ATHE panel, stood up in the audience to identify himself and to wave a flyer for Esperanza's gay and lesbian film festival as "evidence" of the organization's depravity. Although he was in the minority in the mostly liberal crowd, the panel framed various sides in the contentious local struggle and extended the questions raised into the national arena. The panelists disagreed vocally, and the audience lined up at microphones in the house to participate in the debate. The event proved one of the most stimulating hours at the conference and inspired much heated discussion that continued through the meetings. The plenary was an example of a more effective town hall meeting than the one that was actually held at Town Hall between Brustein and Wilson in New York. That is, the ATHE event allowed everyone who came to line up at the microphones strategically placed in the house so that they, too, could have a turn to speak into the public forum. The variety of comments, and the vehemence and urgency with which they were delivered, were themselves highly performative; the whole event was a wonderful example of performance in the public sphere.<sup>11</sup> Why shouldn't theatre faculty teach these and other conflicts, so that faculty and students can

assume the moral accountability that publicly engaging difficult debate requires? Wouldn't it be exciting, relevant, and educationally stimulating to regularly program town hall meetings in our departments for our students and for our community? Shouldn't there be contentious talkbacks after every performance that raise important issues about the production and how it relates to our lives? For example, theatre faculty might make their decisions about season selection open to faculty, students, and a wide public, who would discuss the kinds of plays that might be produced and why, taking into consideration the new knowledge and aesthetic values they might share and with whom. They might sponsor debates about curriculum with students, faculty, and staff from theatre and other departments, which could address how to balance new knowledge with canonical knowledge. They might explain the decisions they make as teachers and administrators about why they teach what and how they do, so that their choices are historicized and contextual.

In a graduate seminar I teach at the University of Texas at Austin, under the auspices of the MA/PhD program's emphasis in performance as public practice, we investigate what it means to be a public intellectual in the arts, trying to find ways to make our intellectual and artistic practices relevant to a wider public constituency that might follow or extend the town hall format. Students in this seminar have practiced these skills by producing speculative dramaturgical and critical and creative work that allows them to practice methods for centering performance in public debate and discourse. One student, for example, wrote an article for the UT student newspaper that contextualized an upcoming production of Wendy Kesselman's play *My Sister in This House* in the complex history of the real events on which it's based, arguing that the UT Department of Theatre and Dance productions could be made more vital for the wider UT student population. Another pair of students offered ways to

situate the very complicated politics of Rebecca Gilman's play, *Boy Gets Girl*, thinking of a university theatre department as the site of its production and anticipating that its very complicated sexual politics would need some interrogation to escape the incipient sexism of the piece.

Another student staged a reading of a cut from Naomi Wallace's play *In the Heart of America* for the occasion of a conference on human rights at the UT law school, and another described a performance of *A Song of Greenwood*, which premiered in 1998 and was remounted in 2001 in honor of the anniversary of the Tulsa race riots in Oklahoma, describing, in the process, the movement of history across these two public events. Another student wrote to Austin's local weekly newspaper, suggesting a new mode of arts reviewing in which "critic colleagues" would engage each other's work without the presumption of objectivity that too often limits the local dialogue about what the arts are and how they function in our community. Another student practiced for her colleagues portions of a site-specific, traveling performance that eventually took us all out into the streets of a local Austin neighborhood where we watched, as spectators moving and moved, an elegiac public performance that referred to losses we all incurred on 9/11. All of these projects and more exemplified the possibility for widening the public discussion of local arts practices, and for embedding those practices in larger discussions about pressing social issues.<sup>12</sup>

#### RADICAL HUMANISM AND SITUATED UTOPIA AS THE POTENTIAL OF PERFORMANCE

After nearly twenty years of progressive scholars using identity politics to open up the sphere of discovery in the field, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we seem poised to reembrace a more radical humanism,

one infused with the lessons about difference so useful to questioning the historically white, male canon. That is, the way we are subjects, or people in the world, is more complex now than ever. Our identities are less coherent; we see ourselves not just through one identity category (immigrant, African-American, lesbian, Jew), but through several simultaneously. As a result, how we identify within communities is also more and more complex. Theatre producing organizations often try to appeal through identity categories to spectators who are actually linked by geography or by desires that transcend the specifics of identity—they might live near the theatre, or they might share a common desire to attend the theatre, to see how it might speak to them, inspire them, and teach them something about their lives. Who they *are* can't be captured in simple categories, and what they *do* with performance—how they engage it and use it in their lives—is much more complex (Wolf, 1998, pp. 7–23). As a result, the idea of doing an “African-American play,” or an “Asian-American play,” simply to appeal to those presumptively clear identities, even in a theatre with a mixed-race population, is rather ludicrous, as the category is much too simplistic and too narrowly identity-based to be meaningful. Likewise, it's become more and more difficult to teach courses about only one area of identity, like “gender” or “race,” and much more important to find ways to teach all the vectors of identity as mutually influencing our theatre and performance practice and reception. I find that when I combine all the terms of identity into a course syllabus, other themes sometimes become more pressing and apparent. Considerations of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and the other categories of identity are urgent in the work my students and I study, but often, our materials are organized around issues like contemporary production practice more generally, or around a question like what it means to be a public intellectual in the arts. More and more, I'm interested in pedagogy

that looks at performance as a public practice, and concentrates on what it can *do* in the larger world.

As I've demonstrated throughout this essay, one of my primary goals is to train my students to use performance as a tool for making the world better, to use performance to incite people to profound responses that shake their consciousness of themselves in the world. Perhaps this is a utopian belief, the idea that theatre can do any of those things. Yet that's the depth of reaction for which I long when I go to the theatre—I don't think we should expect anything less. Theatre remains, for me, a space of desire, of longing, of loss, in which I'm moved by a gesture, a word, a glance, in which I'm startled by a confrontation with mortality (my own and others'). I go to theatre and performance to hear stories that order, for a moment, my incoherent longings, that engage the complexity of personal and cultural relationships, and that critique the assumptions of a social system I find sorely lacking. I want a lot from theatre and performance.

I've argued here for the ways in which theatre studies in the academy might be engaged as a site of progressive social and cultural practice. I urge students to be advocates for the arts, to be theatre-makers committed to creating performances of insight and compassion, and to become spectators who go to see performance because they want to learn something about their culture that extends beyond themselves and the present circumstances of our common humanity (Dolan, 2001a). I've argued that theatre and performance create citizens and engage democracy as a participatory forum in which ideas and possibilities for social equity and justice are shared, and I've suggested how we might reimagine theatre studies programs to meet these goals. The final thought of this essay takes the same beliefs, the same faith in theatre's transformative impact on how we imagine ourselves in culture, and applies it more closely to performance itself. While I'm still addressing the ways in which

theatre and performance studies promote citizenship and subjectivity, I'd like to end by imagining how a commitment to theatre and performance as transformational cultural practices might offer us, in fact, glimpses of utopia.

As theatre and performance scholars and practitioners, we might revel in what Peggy Phelan (1993) calls the nonreproductive capacity of performance, while arguing that its ephemerality is partly what helps it build community. And as performance scholar Diana Taylor (2003) argues, despite its ephemerality, performance also offers an archive of human experience, and a repertoire of cultural practices on which we can rely to ground our histories and build our futures. How can performance, in itself, be a utopian gesture? Why do people come together to watch other people labor on stage, when contemporary culture solicits their attention with myriad other forms of representation and opportunities for social gathering? Why do people continue to seek the liveness, the present-tenseness that performance and theatre offer? Is the desire to be there, in the moment, an expression of a utopian impulse? I believe that people are often drawn to attend live theatre and performance for emotional, spiritual, or communitarian reasons. Desire, perhaps, compels us there, whether to the stark, ascetic "spaces" that house performance art, or to the aging opulence of Broadway houses, or to the serviceable aesthetics of regional theatres.<sup>13</sup> Audiences are compelled to gather with others, to see people perform live, hoping, perhaps, for moments of transformation that might let them reconsider and change the world outside the theatre, from its macro to its micro arrangements. Perhaps part of the desire to attend theatre and performance is to reach for something better, for new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other. I believe that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and

contribute to the making of culture. Such desire to be part of the intense present of performance offers us if not expressly political, then usefully emotional, expressions of what utopia might feel like.

Seen through the lens of performance, the possibility for utopia doesn't only happen when the lights go down and the "play" begins. I've argued in this essay for the importance of considering production, and the "backstage" work of performance, as equally important sites of inquiry into how identities are constructed, rewarded, made visible, and understood. Extending this investigation into the possibility for utopia, for instance, might let us see rehearsals as a place to practice not only the performance at hand. Director Anne Bogart, in fact, says, "I often see my rehearsal situation as utopian. Rehearsal is a possibility for the values I believe in, the politics I believe in, to exist in a set universe which is within the room" (Bogart, 1995, p. 182). She suggests that rehearsals are the moment of utopian expression in theatre, when a group of people repeat and revise incremental moments, trying to get them right, to get them to "work." Anyone who considers herself a theatre person knows when something "works"—it's when the magic of theatre appears, when the pace, the expression, the gesture, the emotion, the light, the sound, the relationship between actor and actor, and actors and spectators, all meld into something alchemical, something nearly perfect in how it communicates in that instance. We all rehearse for the moments that work, and critics look out for them, when they're still idealistic enough to believe in them. Through an itinerary of performance, we can enlarge the potential territory in which something might "work" to the social frame of performance and look more widely for a glimpse of utopia (see Schechner, 1988).

I've been moved by the palpable energy that performances that "work" generate; I've felt the magic of theatre; and I've witnessed the potential of the temporary communities

formed when groups of people gather to see other people labor in present, continuous time, time in which something can always go wrong.<sup>14</sup> Surely any gathering can promote community. But Herb Blau (1982) once said that watching live performance is watching the actor dying onstage; I think sharing that liveness promotes a necessary and moving confrontation with mortality.<sup>15</sup> The actor's willing vulnerability perhaps enables our own and prompts us toward compassion and greater understanding. Such sentiments can spur emotion, and being moved emotionally is a necessary precursor to political movement (see Cohen, 1991, pp. 84–85). Anna Deavere Smith (1995) says, "The utopian theatre would long for flesh, blood, and breathing. It would be hopelessly old-fashioned in a technical world, hopelessly interested in presence, hopelessly interested in modes of communication requiring human beings to be in the same room at the same time" (pp. 50–51). By clinging to the fleshy seductions of old-fashioned primal emotion and presence, Smith's work spurs political action by reminding us, perhaps, that however differently we live, our common, flesh-full cause is that in performance, we're dying together.

Theatre can move us toward understanding the possibility of something better, can train our imaginations, inspire our dreams, and fuel our desires in ways that might lead to incremental cultural change.<sup>16</sup> My concern here is not with the content of performance—not necessarily with plots or narratives that *address* utopia, but with how utopia can be imagined or experienced affectively, through feelings, in small, incremental moments that performance can provide. As Richard Dyer (1992) says, "Entertainment does not . . . present models of utopian worlds. . . . Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents . . . what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an affective code that is characteristic of, and

largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production" (p. 18).<sup>17</sup> These feelings and sensibilities, in performance, give rise to what I'm calling the "utopian performative." In many ways, utopian performatives gesture toward my own desire to knit together performativity and performance, bringing real performance to the site of so much invigorating theoretical discourse. Borrowing from J. L. Austin (1962), utopian performatives describe moments which, through their *doing*, allow audiences to experience, for a moment, a sense of what utopia would feel like were the claims of social justice movements realized.

A utopian performative is like a Brechtian *gestus*; it represents, in a crystalline moment of performance, an understanding of social relationships full of potential, full of warmth, desire, caring, and love. Utopian performatives sometimes derive from a kind of performed romanticism found, for example, in solo performances by Peggy Shaw or Deb Margolin (see Dolan, 2001b, 2003). Romanticism is an affective address that, like love, has been perhaps banished too long from our discussions of performance or research (see Domínguez, 2000).<sup>18</sup> Dyer notes, "Romanticism is a particularly paradoxical quality of art to come to terms with. Its passion and intensity embody or create an experience that negates the dreariness of the mundane and everyday. It gives us a glimpse of what it means to live at the height of our emotional and our experiential capacities—not dragged down by the banality of organized routine life" (Dyer, 1995, p. 413). This intense, utopian romanticism is what creates those moments of magic and communion in performance that I'm calling utopian performatives; they lift us from our more prosaic lives, into an almost exalted sense of what life *could* be like, if we lived the "what if" instead of the "as is."<sup>19</sup>

Anthropologist Victor Turner's (1982) notion of "communitas" in social drama very much describes what I'm calling utopian performativity in performance. He says,

“Spontaneous *communitas* is ‘a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities,’ a deep rather than intense style of personal interaction. ‘It has something “magical” about it. Subjectively there is in it a feeling of endless power.’” Turner asks, “Is there any of us who has not known this moment when compatible people—friends, congeners—obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive, if only the group which is felt (in the first person) as ‘essentially us’ could sustain its intersubjective illumination?” (Turner, 1982, pp. 47–48). These moments of *communitas* offer springboards to utopia.

I’ve also argued, earlier in this essay, the importance of teaching students to be critical, engaged citizen/scholar/artists, people who can bring their passion to spectatorship just as easily as they can to their artistry. I was struck recently, teaching a class of graduating senior theatre majors, how rarely some of them even go to see theatre or performance, and realized how important it was for me, as one of their last instructors, to instill a sense of commitment to our mutual artistic pursuits. As performance scholars and students, one of our primary goals should be creating a new generation of passionate spectators, who’ll become the new arts advocates and intellectuals, as well as the artists. The passion of the audience explains why live performance continues; the desire to see it, to participate in its world-makings persists. People in my generation must instill such desire in people in the next. I want to perpetuate experiences of utopia in the flesh of performance that might performatively hint at how a different world could feel.

I know that at the end of a more sober essay about the possibilities for institutional change around the production of theatre and performance knowledge, I’m suddenly risking sentiment; I know that community and theatre, like utopia, can be coercive, that nothing is outside of ideology, and that nothing is ever, truly,

perfect. But I believe in the politically progressive possibilities of romanticism in performance, what Dyer (1992) calls “the intensity of fleeting emotional contacts . . . and the exquisite pain of [their] passing” (p. 413). I believe that in performance, we can achieve moments of spontaneous *communitas*, which Turner (1982) says “is sometimes a matter of ‘grace’” (p. 58). “*Communitas*,” he says, “tends to be inclusive—some might call it generous” (p. 51). This, for me, is the beginning (and perhaps the substance) of the utopian performative: in the performer’s grace, in the audience’s generosity, in the lucid power of intersubjective understanding, however fleeting. These are the moments when we can believe in utopia. These are the moments theatre and performance make possible.<sup>20</sup>

## NOTES

1. This essay was adapted and rewritten from the author’s book *Geographies of Learning* (2001a) and her article in *Theatre Journal* (2001b).

2. She made this remark as an audience member at an ATHE conference panel in 1998 on emerging scholarship and institutional issues in the field. This panel took place on 14 August 1998. Panelists included Shannon Jackson, Jay Plum, and Stacy Wolf, and I moderated.

3. See some of the essays in Postlewait and McConachie, particularly Vince, for narratives of theatre scholarship’s “tradition.”

4. Schechner (1992) is quoted as saying, “Get out of the phony training business and into the culture business.” A performance studies focus group is now well established in ATHE, and has been instrumental in the formation of a new association called Performance Studies international. PSi intends to remake the practices of professional associations, attempting to resist the typically conservative impulses of institutionalization while it charts new territory in this still growing field.

5. Bottoms (2003) raises important questions about what he sees as the implicit homophobia of performance studies as Schechner espoused it early in its development. Although a certain amount of misogyny was also present in the NYU training in the early 1980s, the department as a whole



still provided a context in which nascent radical critiques could flourish.

6. For further explanation of the centrality of New York as the scale by which all theatre is measured, university and otherwise, see Wolf, 1994 and 1998.

7. These misreadings of our program as only about entertainment or theatre practice persisted. In preparation for the opening of the Graduate Center's new building at Thirty-fourth Street and Fifth Avenue in fall 2000, I was asked to serve on the "Arc of Celebration" committee. People couldn't fathom why I wasn't interested in encouraging students to do some performances to honor this event. My explanation that our program is strictly academic, rather than one in which students act and direct, was completely opaque to my colleagues on the committee. This seems to me a misunderstanding of the intellectual, as well as the practical, value of theatre studies. And while, had students been interested in performing for the event, that would have been just fine, the administrators' presumption was about "entertainment," not about performance as research or social intervention.

8. For instance, the undergraduate program in theatre at San Francisco State University has a curriculum that encourages the theory and practice of performance to be applied to activism. And the Performance as Public Practice emphasis in the MA/PhD Program at the University of Texas at Austin, which I head, is committed to investigating through scholarship and performance research the ways in which people engage performance as a social act with larger political and cultural ramifications. These two examples offer just a glimpse of the kind of more culturally inflected curricula now beginning to appear in theatre and performance studies departments in the United States.

9. See Becker, 1996b, for a creative, politicized, and pragmatic approach to training artists in a postmodern era. See also Becker, 1996a, and Becker, 1994.

10. The "culture wars" generally refer to a public discourse of the late 1980s through the 1990s in the United States in which conservative commentators accused leftist academics of dogmatism and "political correctness," which they defined as a doctrinaire attitude towards social identity (see Gitlin, 1995, for example, and Dolan 2001a, for a counterargument). The culture wars also tend to refer to the public funding debates of this era, in which, for instance, artists Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, and queer performance artists Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Karen Finley were denied funding

by the National Endowment for the Arts for reasons that were egregiously political. For a discussion of and bibliography on this aspect of the culture wars, see Dolan 2001a.

11. Jaclyn Pryor has kindly pointed out that Esperanza has regular events called *platicas*, which are similar to town hall meetings in that they allow Esperanza to practice civic engagements in large public forums. I'd like to thank her for this insight.

12. These presentations/performance were by Abigail Self, Elia Nichols and Kim Dilts, Shannon Baley, Kevin Hodges, Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, and Jaclyn Pryor. Baley and Hodges went on to create Living Newspaper performances based on international workers' rights for the "Working Borders" Human Rights Conference at the University of Texas at Austin in February 2005. Bonin-Rodriguez, Jaclyn Pryor, and I are now collaborating on a project of revisionary writing about performance that we call, inspired by Bonin-Rodriguez, "colleague criticism." And Pryor's piece became *floodlines* [sic], her MA thesis at the University of Texas, which was performed in April 2004 and remounted in April 2005 as part of the Refraction Arts Fusebox Festival in Austin.

13. As Holly Hughes says ironically, "Theater tends to happen in theaters, whereas performance art tends to happen in spaces. A theater will be defined . . . as somewhere with a stage, some lights, a box office, a dressing room, head shots, and people who know how to run these things. A theater is a place that has been designed for theater, whereas a space has been designed for some other purpose: it's a gas station, an art gallery, somebody's living room, a church basement, and it's always better suited for pancake suppers and giving oil changes than for performing" (Hughes 1996, p. 15).

14. Playwright Sarah Schulman quotes performance artist Jeff Weiss, who said to her in reference to the AIDS crisis, "We have a moral and ethical obligation to persist in the living of real (as opposed to 'reel') time. That is the power of theater. We're all in this together, at the *same* time. We're totally engaged in being human together, sharing the identical instants as our time advances, parallel, in unison" (Schulman, 1998, p. 61).

15. Blau's comment is actually, "When we speak of what Stanislavski called Presence in acting, we must also speak of its Absence, the dimensionality of time through the actor, the fact that he who is performing can die there in front of your eyes; is in fact doing so. Of all the performing arts, the theater stinks most of mortality" (Blau, 1982,

p. 83). I'd like to thank Amy Steiger, who reminded me of the exact quotation by citing it in her MA thesis in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Texas at Austin, spring 2001.

16. These ideas, of course, resonate with the important work of Brazilian radical theatre theorist and practitioner Augusto Boal, who sees theatre as a "rehearsal for revolution" (Boal 1979).

17. See also Jameson, in which he suggests, "The hypothesis is that the works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated" (1979, p. 146).

18. Domínguez argues that love and affection have a place in cultural (even in scholarly) discourse. Domínguez is writing specifically to scholars in anthropology, but her comments on the necessity for love and affection in our discourse resonate usefully here. See also Sandoval (2000). See also Dolan (2005) for a discussion of German philosopher Ernst Bloch, whose theories of utopia were quite influenced by romanticism. Bloch's philosophies undergird my ideas here.

19. For a useful discussion of the utopian implications of exploring the "what if" instead of the "as is," see Wickstrom and the other essays in the special issue of *Modern Drama* devoted to utopian performatives (Dolan, 2004).

20. I'd like to thank my research assistant Jaelyn Pryor for her perceptive editorial advice and her patience with the mechanics of citation in preparing this essay for publication.

## REFERENCES

- American Studies Association. <http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/asainfo.html>
- Association for Theatre in Higher Education. <http://www.athe.org>
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.
- Becker, C. A. (1994). *The subversive imagination: Artists, society, and social responsibility*. New York: Routledge.
- Becker, C. A. (Ed.). (1996a). *Zones of contention: Essays on art, institutions, gender, and anxiety*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Becker, C. A. (1996b, November 8). A new generation of artists and art schools. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, B8-9.
- Becker, C. A. (2000). The artist as public intellectual. In G. Bradford, M. Gary, & G. Wallace (Eds.), *The politics of culture: Policy perspectives for individuals, institutions and communities* (pp. 236-246). Washington DC: New Press.
- Blau, H. (1982). *Take up the bodies: Theater at the vanishing point*. Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the oppressed*. New York: Urizen Books.
- Bogart, A. (1995). Utopia forum. *Theater*, 26(1/2), 182.
- Bottoms, S. (2003). The efficacy/effeminacy braid: Unpacking the performance studies/theatre studies dichotomy. *Theatre Topics*, 13(2), 173-187.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1979)
- Brustein, R. (1996). Subsidized separatism. *American Theatre*, 13(8), 26-27, 100-107.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Carlson, M. (1992). Theatre history, methodology, and distinctive features. *Theatre Research International*, 20(2), 90-96.
- Carlson, M. (1996). *Performance: A critical introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Clifford, J. (1993). On collecting art and culture. In S. During (Ed.), *The cultural studies reader* (pp. 49-73). New York: Routledge.
- Cohen, E. (1991). Who are "we"? Gay "identity" as political (e)motion (a theoretical rumination). In D. Fuss (Ed.), *Inside/out: Lesbian theories, gay theories* (pp. 71-92). New York: Routledge.
- Conquergood, D. (1991). Rethinking ethnography: Towards a critical cultural politics. *Communication Monographs* 58, 179-194.
- Department of Theatre and Dance. University of Texas at Austin. Performance as Public Practice MA/PhD Program. [www.utexas.edu/cofa/theatre/grad.html](http://www.utexas.edu/cofa/theatre/grad.html)
- Dolan, J. (2001a). *Geographies of learning: Theory and practice, activism and performance*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Dolan, J. (2001b). Performance, utopia, and the "utopian performative." *Theatre Journal* 53, 455-479.
- Dolan, J. (2003). Finding our feet in the shoes of one (an)other: Multiple character solo performers and utopian performatives. *Modern Drama*, 45(4), 495-518.
- Dolan, J. (Ed.). (2004). Utopian performatives [Special issue]. *Modern Drama*, 47(2), 165-332.

- Dolan, J. (2005). *Utopia in performance: Finding hope at the theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Domínguez, V. R. (2000). For a politics of love and rescue. *Cultural Anthropology*, 15(3), 361–393.
- Dyer, R. (1992). *Only entertainment*. New York: Routledge.
- Dyer, R. (1995). In defense of disco. In C. K. Creekmur & A. Doty (Eds.), *Out in culture: Gay, lesbian, and queer essays on popular culture* (pp. 407–415). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Elam, H., & Alexander, R. (Eds.). (2002). *The fire this time: African-American plays for the 21st century*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.
- Giroux, H. (1995). Beyond the ivory tower: Public intellectuals and the crisis of higher education. In M. Bérubé & C. Nelson (Eds.), *Higher education under fire: Politics, economics, and the crisis of the humanities* (pp. 238–258). New York: Routledge.
- Gitlin, T. (1995). *Twilight of common dreams: Why America is wracked by the culture wars*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Grimes, W. (1997, January 29). Face-to-face encounter on race in the theatre. *New York Times*, C9.
- Hatch, J. V. (1989). Here comes everybody: Scholarship and black theatre history. In T. Postlewait & B. McConachie (Eds.), *Interpreting the theatrical past* (pp. 148–165). Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Hatch, J. V., & Hill, E. G. (2003). *A history of African American theatre*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Hatch, J. V., & Shine, T. (Eds.). (1996). *Black theatre USA: Plays by African Americans*. New York: Free Press.
- Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. London: Methuen.
- Hughes, H. (1996). *Clit notes: A sapphic sampler*. New York: Grove Press.
- Jackson, S. (2004). *Professing performance: Theatre in the academy from philology to performativity*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Jameson, F. (1979). Reification and utopia in mass culture. *Social Text*, 1, 130–148.
- Jay, G., & Graff, G. (1995). A critique of critical pedagogy. In M. Bérubé & C. Nelson (Eds.), *Higher education under fire: Politics, economics, and the crisis of the humanities* (pp. 201–213). New York: Routledge.
- Kakutani, M. (1998, March 1). Portrait of the artist as a focus group. *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 26.
- Levine, L. W. (1988). *Highbrow/lowbrow: The emergence of cultural hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Modern Languages Association. <http://www.mla.org>
- National Communication Association. <http://www.natcom.org>
- Performance Studies international. <http://www.psi-web.org>
- Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. New York: Routledge.
- Postlewait, T., & McConachie, B. (Eds.). (1989). *Interpreting the theatrical past*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Reinelt, J., & Roach, J. (Eds.). (1992). *Critical theory and performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Richards, S. (1995). Writing the absent potential: Drama, performance, and the canon of African-American literature. In A. Parker & E. K. Sedgwick (Eds.), *Performance and performativity* (pp. 64–88). New York: Routledge.
- Roach, J. (1992). Introduction. In J. Reinelt & J. Roach (Eds.), *Critical theory and performance* (pp. 1–6). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Roach, J. (1999). Reconstructing theatre/history. *Theatre Topics*, 9(1), 3–10.
- Rorty, R. (1998). *Achieving our country: Leftist thought in twentieth-century America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sandoval, C. (2000). *Methodology of the oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Schechner, R. (1985). *Between theatre and anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Schechner, R. (1988). *Performance theory* (Rev. ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Schechner, R. (1992, September). Schechner advocates radical rethinking. *ATHENEWS*, 6(4), 1.
- Schechner, R. (1995). Transforming theatre departments. *The Drama Review*, 39(2), 8.
- Schulman, S. (1998). *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the marketing of gay America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Smith, A. D. (1994). *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992; on the road: A search for American character*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Smith, A. D. (1995). Systems of light. *Theater*, 26(1/2), 50–51.
- Smith, A. D. (1997). *Fires in the mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and other identities*. New York: Dramatists Play Service.

- Smith, A. D. (2004). *House arrest: A search for American character in and around the White House, past and present; and Piano: Two plays*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Stabile, C. A. (1995). Another brick wall: (Re) contextualizing the crisis. In M. Bérubé & C. Nelson (Eds.), *Higher education under fire: Politics, economics, and the crisis of the humanities* (pp. 108–125). New York: Routledge.
- Taylor, D. (2003). *The archive and the repertoire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Theatre Arts Department. San Francisco State University. [www.sfsu.edu/~tha/academics.html](http://www.sfsu.edu/~tha/academics.html)
- Turner, V. (1982). *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Uno, R., & Burns, L. M. S. P. (Eds.). (2002). *The color of theatre: Race, culture, and contemporary performance*. New York: Continuum.
- Vince, R. W. (1989). Theatre history as an academic discipline. In T. Postlewait & B. McConachie (Eds.), *Interpreting the theatrical past* (pp. 1–18). Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Wickstrom, M. (2004). Wonder in the heart of empire: Deborah Warner's Medea and the Angel Project. *Modern Drama*, 47(2), 177–199.
- Wilkerson, M. (1991). Demographics and the academy. In S. Case & J. Reinelt (Eds.), *The performance of power: Theatrical discourse and politics* (pp. 238–241). Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Wilson, A. (1996). The ground on which I stand. *American Theatre*, 13(7), 14–16, 71–74.
- Wolf, S. (1994). *Theatre as social practice: Local ethnographies of audience reception*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation: University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- Wolf, S. (1998). Civilizing and selling spectators: Audiences at the Madison Civic Center. *Theatre Survey*, 39(2), 7–23.