



Of Caravans and Carnivals: Performance Studies in Motion

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Of Caravans and Carnivals

Performance Studies in Motion

Dwight Conquergood

Peggy Phelan has presented us with a challenging exercise: to identify a key issue, a pressing point of intersection between our local institution and the more expansive future of the field—and, she has enjoined us to be brief.

I offer the following principle more as a catalyst for opening conversation than a proposition for closing down controversy. The starting point for discussion that I affirm is this: Performance is an essentially contested concept. I borrow this idea from Strine, Long, and Hopkins' fine metadisciplinary essay, "Research in Interpretation and Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Priorities" (1990).¹ Thinking about performance as an "essentially contested concept" locates disagreement and difference as generative points of departure and coalition for its unfolding meanings and affiliations. Any attempt to define and stabilize performance will be bound up in disagreement, and this disagreement is itself part of its meaning:

Thus, we understand not just that others disagree, but that this disagreement is inevitable and healthy. [...] Factions in the controversy do not expect to defeat or silence opposing positions, but rather through continuing dialogue to attain a sharper articulation of all positions and therefore a fuller understanding of the conceptual richness of performance. (Strine, Long, and Hopkins 1990:183)

The idea that performance is a contested and contesting practice rings true for me in my dual role as an ethnographer of cultural performance and as an administrator of an academic department of performance studies. What I have learned from both fields—ethnographic "fieldwork" as well as the disciplinary "field" of performance studies—is that performance flourishes within a zone of contest and struggle. That observation is as true for the everyday resisting performance practices of subaltern groups as it is for performance studies programs. Life on the margins can be a source of creativity as well as constraint, what Michel de Certeau described as "makeshift creativity" and a mobile art of "making do" (1984:xiv, 29). Performance studies is a border discipline, an interdiscipline, that cultivates the capacity to move between structures, to

forge connections, to see together, to speak with instead of simply speaking about or for others. Performance privileges threshold-crossing, shape-shifting, and boundary-violating figures, such as shamans, tricksters, and jokers, who value the carnivalesque over the canonical, the transformative over the normative, the mobile over the monumental.

Victor Turner, inspired by his performance ethnography collaborations with Richard Schechner, coined the epigrammatic view of “performance as making, not faking” (1982:93). His constructional theory foregrounded the culture-creating capacities of performance and functioned as a challenge and counterproject to the “antitheatrical prejudice” that, since Plato, has aligned performance with fakery and falsehood (Barish 1981). After his sustained work on social drama, cultural performance, liminality, and, of course, definition of humankind as *homo performans*, it would be hard for anyone to hold a “mere sham and show” view of performance. Turner shifted thinking about performance from mimesis to poesis.

Now, the current thinking about performance constitutes a shift from poesis to kinesis. Turner’s important work on the productive capacities of performance set the stage for a more poststructuralist and political emphasis on performance as kinesis, as movement, motion, fluidity, fluctuation, all those restless energies that transgress boundaries and trouble closure. Thus, postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha deployed the term “performative” to refer to action that incessantly insinuates, interrupts, interrogates, antagonizes, and decenters powerful master discourses, which he dubbed “pedagogical” (1994:146–49). From Turner’s emphatic view of performance as making not faking, we move to Bhabha’s politically urgent view of performance as breaking and remaking.²

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Donna Haraway argues for a performance-friendly worldview, a “reinvention of nature,” in which “objects” of study are actively engaged and seen as dynamic “agents”: “we must rethink the world as witty actor and agent of transformation, a coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse” (1991:201). Performance studies, in Haraway’s view, would be the search for trickster figures “that might turn a stacked deck into a potent set of wild cards, jokers, for refiguring possible worlds” (4). Kinesis unleashes centrifugal forces that keep culture in motion, ideas in play, hierarchies unsettled, and academic disciplines alert and on the edge: “the guerilla tactics of multiple, uneasily jostling theories and stories can at least disrupt the smug assumptions of comfortably settled monologics” (Tsing 1993:33).³

And now I turn to the second part of Phelan’s challenge: to sketch the local institutional context where performance issues and ideas take shape. Anna Tsing’s rethinking of “the local” is relevant for my sketch of a particular institutional configuration of performance studies: “By ‘local,’ I do not mean to invoke tiny bounded communities, but rather acts of positioning within particular contexts” (31). I chair the Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University. Housed within the School of Speech, Performance Studies attracts a robust mix of faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate majors. They are an unruly and rambunctious group. I tremble before the task

of summarizing them. They give new meaning to the idea of performance as a creative and contentious space—and I say that with the utmost respect and affection. However, my task in representing them is made less daunting by the fact that many of my Northwestern colleagues, graduate students, alumnae, and undergraduate majors are attending and participating in this conference. They are quite able to speak for themselves. Collectively, their presentations at this conference reflect the diverse array of performance perspectives and projects that defines our program. Having said all that, still it might be possible to set forth some shared commitments that provide common ground, meeting places, in the midst of all the eclecticism.

Here goes: Most of us at Northwestern are committed to a bracing dialectic between performance theory and practice. We believe that theory is enlivened and most rigorously tested when it hits the ground in practice. Likewise, we believe that artistic practice can be deepened, complicated, and challenged in meaningful ways by engaging critical theory. What all this means is that our curriculum, from freshman gateway course to advanced doctoral seminar, embraces courses in which students perform as an embodied way of knowing, as a supplement to (not a substitute for) the more conventional epistemologies and pedagogies of reading and discussing texts, writing research papers, conducting fieldwork, and so forth. Stated succinctly: at Northwestern we take performance as both subject and method of research. And I should make it clear for newcomers to performance studies that our students by and large are not performing plays: the study of dramatic texts at Northwestern is handled most excellently by our neighbors in the Department of Theatre. Because the study of canonical plays and their production processes and histories by no means exhausts the range of performance genres and practices, the performance studies department picks up where the theatre department stops: the study of nondramatic texts and nonelite performance practices. We have faculty in our department who specialize in the adaptation and staging of fictional and nonfictional texts alongside scholars of Yoruba ritual performance. Because of the division of labor, we have an excellent relationship with the theatre department, remarkably free of border disputes and turf struggles. We also are in intellectual and institutional solidarity with anthropologists, literary critics, and ethnomusicologists, as well as other interdisciplinary programs such as cultural studies, women's studies, African studies, diaspora studies, and queer studies. The distinctive contribution we bring to the table is the heuristic potential of performance as concept, practice, and epistemology.

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Another way to express our departmental commitment to a theory-practice dialectic is to say that many of us endeavor, not so much to position as to pivot our work on a turning point among analytical, artistic, and activist perspectives. We believe in the replenishing coarticulation of analytical insights, artistic energies, and activist struggles—approaches to problems that all too often are segregated, polarized, or pitted against one another. I think that our departmental commitment to praxis, to multiple ways of knowing that engage embodied experience with critical reflection is strengthened structurally by the fact that we

have both an undergraduate major and a PhD program. Our undergraduates are unusually bright but, like most undergraduates, they have little taste for jargon or tolerance for undue abstraction; certainly they hold our feet close to the ground of experience. On the other hand, our doctoral students keep pushing the limits and advancing the conceptual frontier of what counts as performance studies. Many of them work on dissertation projects for which they have something at stake, both personally and politically. The interaction between undergraduate majors and PhD students in performance studies is complex and mutually invigorating. Certainly it would be simpler to devote all our energy and resources either to an undergraduate or a PhD program, but, ultimately, I think it would be less interesting. There are important and lively points of intersection and exchange between the undergraduate and PhD programs, but even their different and sometimes competing concerns, demands, and agendas all help to keep things stirred up and moving.

I will leave you with a resonant quotation from Gloría Anzaldúa: “the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures” (1987:80). Anzaldúa was speaking about the future of the planet, but this insight is just as relevant for “the future of the field” of performance studies. Instead of a stable, monolithic paradigm of performance studies, I prefer to think in terms of a caravan: a heterogenous ensemble of ideas and methods on the move.

Notes

1. Strine, Long, and Hopkins' discussion of performance as an essentially contested concept builds on the work of W.B. Gallie (1964).
2. I first traced the performance as mimesis-poiesis-kinesis trajectory in 1992 (Conquergood 1992a).
3. Even the imagery of kinesis needs to be questioned and located. It can be invoked for repressive as well as progressive ends. Emily Martin (1994) has analyzed how late 20th-century capitalism has appropriated the postmodern imagery of motion, mobility, and flexibility in the service of capital accumulation and consolidation. Elsewhere, I have documented ethnographically how dominant powers deploy the imagery of flux and motion to stigmatize subordinate groups, e.g., “transients,” “floaters,” an “influx” of poor people, “transitional” neighborhoods, demographic “turnover,” etc. (Conquergood 1992b).

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