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### Special Issue on Performance Studies

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# What is Performance Studies?

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Because performance studies is so broad-ranging and open to new possibilities, no one can actually grasp its totality or press all its vastness and variety into a single writing book. My points of departure are my own teaching, research, artistic practice, and life experiences.

Performances are actions. As a discipline, performance studies takes actions very seriously in four ways. First, behavior is the “object of study” of performance studies. Although performance studies scholars use the “archive” extensively – what’s in books, photographs, the archaeological record, historical remains, etc. – their dedicated focus is on the “repertory,” namely, what people do in the activity of their doing it. Second, artistic practice is a big part of the performance studies project. A number of performance studies scholars are also practicing artists working in the avant-garde, in community-based performance, and elsewhere; others have mastered a variety of non-Western and Western traditional forms. The relationship between studying performance and doing performance is integral. Third, fieldwork as “participant observation” is a much-prized method adapted from anthropology and put to new uses. In anthropological fieldwork, participant observation is a way of learning about cultures other than that of the field-worker. In anthropology, for the most part, the “home culture” is Western, the “other” non-Western. But in performance studies, the “other” may be a part of one’s own culture (non-Western or Western), or even an aspect of one’s own behavior. That positions the performance studies fieldworker at a Brechtian distance, allowing for criticism, irony, and personal commentary as well as sympathetic participation. In this active way, one performs fieldwork. Taking a critical distance from the objects of study and self invites revision, the recognition that social circumstances—including knowledge itself – are not fixed, but subject to the “rehearsal process” of testing and revising. Fourth, it follows that performance studies is actively involved in social practices and advocacies. Many who practice performance studies do not aspire to ideological neutrality. In fact, a basic theoretical claim is that no approach or position is “neutral”. There is no such thing as unbiased. The challenge is to become as aware as possible of one’s own stances in relation to the positions of others – and then take steps to maintain or change positions.

Performances occur in many different instances and kinds. Performance must be construed as a “broad spectrum” or “continuum” of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to

surgery), the media, and the internet. Before performance studies, Western thinkers believed they knew exactly what was and what was not “performance”. But in fact, there is no historically or culturally fixable limit to what is or is not “performance”. Along the continuum new genres are added, others are dropped. The underlying notion is that any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance. Many performances belong to more than one category along the continuum. For example, an American football player spiking the ball and pointing a finger in the air after scoring a touchdown is performing a dance and enacting a ritual as part of his professional role as athlete and popular entertainer.

As a method of studying performances, the relatively new discipline of performance studies is still in its formative stage. Performance studies draws on and synthesizes approaches from a wide variety of disciplines including performing arts, social sciences, feminist studies, gender studies, history, psychoanalysis, queer theory, semiotics, ethology, cybernetics, area studies, media and popular culture theory, and cultural studies. Performance studies starts where most limited-domain disciplines end. A performance studies scholar examines texts, architecture, visual arts, or any other item or artifact of art or culture not in themselves, but as players in ongoing relationships, that is, “as” performances. Briefly put, whatever is being studied is regarded as practices, events, and behaviors, not as “objects” or “things”. This quality of “liveness” – even when dealing with media or archival materials – is at the heart of performance studies. Thus, performance studies does not “read” an action or ask what “text” is being enacted. Rather, one inquires about the “behavior” of, for example, a painting: how, when, and by whom it was made, how it interacts with those who view it, and how the painting changes over time. The artifact may be relatively stable, but the performances it creates or takes part in can change radically. The performance studies scholar examines the circumstances in which the painting was created and exhibited; she looks at how the gallery or building displaying the painting shapes its reception. These and similar kinds of performance studies questions can be asked of any behavior, event, or material object. Of course, when performance studies deals with behavior–artistic, everyday, ritual, playful, and so on–the questions asked are closer to how performance theorists have traditionally approached theatre and the other performing arts. I discuss and apply this kind of analysis more fully in every chapter of this book.

In performance studies, questions of embodiment, action, behavior, and agency are dealt with interculturality. This approach recognizes two things. First, in today’s world, cultures are always interacting – there are no totally isolated groups. Second, the differences among cultures are so profound that no theory of performance is universal: one size cannot fit all. Nor are the playing fields where cultures interact level. The current means of cultural interaction – globalization – enacts extreme imbalances of power, money, access to media, and control over resources. Although this is reminiscent of colonialism, globalization is also

different from colonialism in key ways. Proponents of globalization promise that “free trade”, the internet, and advances in science and technology are leading to a better life for the world’s peoples. Globalization also induces sameness at the level of popular culture – “world beat” and the proliferation of American-style fast foods and films are examples. The two ideas are related. Cultural sameness and seamless communications make it easier for transnational entities to get their messages across. This is crucial because governments and businesses alike increasingly find it more efficient to rule and manage with the collaboration rather than the opposition of workers. In order to gain their collaboration, information must not only move with ease globally but also be skillfully managed. The apparent victory of “democracy” and capitalism goes hand in hand with the flow of controlled media. Whether or not the internet will be, finally, an arena of resistance or compliance remains an open question. Those resisting the “new world order” are too often stigmatized as “terrorists”, “rogue states”, and/or “fundamentalists”.

As a field, performance studies is sympathetic to the avant-garde, the marginal, the offbeat, the minoritarian, the subversive, the twisted, the queer, people of color, and the formerly colonized. Projects within performance studies often act on or act against settled hierarchies of ideas, organizations, and people. Therefore, it is hard to imagine performance studies getting its act together or settling down, or even wanting to.

What is gaining in importance is hypertext, in the broadest meaning of that word. Hypertext combines words, images, sounds, and various shorthands. People with cell phones talk, of course. But they also take photos and use the keypads to punch out messages that combine letters, punctuation marks, and other graphics. A different kind of freedom of speech is evolving, even more rapidly in the so-called “developing world” than in Europe or North America. In China – the world’s largest market – more than 1 billion people owned cell phones as of 2012 —and the global total is 6 billion, out of a total world population of nearly 7 billion. Not as many people have access to the internet as own cell phones. But the two platforms are converging and very soon just about everyone on planet earth will be able to communicate with everyone else and also be on the internet. Email, the internet, cell phones, blogs, instant messaging, and wi-fi are transforming what it means to be literate. Book reading is supplemented and to some degree supplanted by a range of ideas, feelings, requests, and desires that are communicated in many different ways. People are both readers and authors. Identities are revealed, masked, fabricated, and stolen. This kind of communicating is highly performative. It encourages senders and receivers to use their imaginations, navigating and interpreting the dynamic cloud of possibilities surrounding each message.

Performance studies as an academic discipline is gaining in importance and acceptance. The discipline is conceived, taught, and institutionalized in a number of different ways. At present and broadly speaking, there are two main brands, New York University’s and Northwestern University’s. NYU’s performance studies

is rooted in theatre, the social sciences, feminist and queer studies, postcolonial studies, poststructuralism, and experimental performance. NU's is rooted in oral interpretation, communications, speech-act theory, and ethnography. But over time, these two approaches have moved toward each other sharing a common commitment to an expanded vision of "performance" and "performativity." In China, there is "social performance studies." Other parts of the world also have their own versions of performance studies. I welcome this diversity.

But for all this, is performance studies truly an independent field? Can it be distinguished from theatre studies, cultural studies, and other closely allied fields? One can construct several intellectual histories explaining the various specific outlooks of performance studies as practiced by different schools of thought. The narrative outlining how performance studies developed at NYU concerns interactions among Western and Asian philosophies, anthropology, gender studies, feminism, the aesthetics of everyday life, race theory, area studies, popular entertainments, queer theory, and postcolonial studies. These interactions have been heavily inflected by an ongoing contact with the avant-garde – both the Euro-American "historical avant-garde" (from symbolism and surrealism through to Dada and Happenings) to the more current avant-gardes being practiced in many parts of the world. Many students, and some professors, of performance studies at NYU are also practicing artists – in performance art, dance, theatre, and music. Preponderantly, their approach has been experimental – to stretch the limits of their arts in ways analogous to how performance studies stretches the limits of academic discourse.

The philosophical antecedents to performance studies include questions addressed in ancient times, in the Renaissance, and in the 1950s to 1970s, the period immediately before performance studies came into its own. Early philosophers both in the West and in India pondered the relationship between daily life, theatre, and the "really real". In the West, the relationship between the arts and philosophy has been marked, according to the Greek philosopher Plato, by "a long-standing quarrel between poetry and philosophy". The ancient Greek felt that the really real, the ideal, existed only as pure forms. In his *Republic* (c. 370 BCE), Plato argued that ordinary realities are but shadows cast on the wall of the dark cave of ignorance. (One wonders if shadow puppetry, so popular in Asia from ancient times, was known to Plato.) The arts – including the performing arts – imitate these shadows and are therefore doubly removed from the really real. As if this weren't enough, Plato distrusted theatre because it appealed to the emotions rather than to reason, "watering the growth of passions which should be allowed to wither away." Plato banned poetry, including theatre, from his ideal republic. It was left to Plato's student Aristotle to redeem the arts. Aristotle argued that the really real was "indwelling" as a plan or potential, somewhat like a genetic code. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle reasoned that by imitating actions, and by enacting the logical chain of consequences flowing from actions, one might learn about these

indwelling forms. Far from wanting to avoid the emotions, Aristotle wanted to arouse, understand, and purge their deleterious effects.

Indian philosophers had a different idea altogether. Writing at roughly the same time as the Greeks, they felt that the whole universe, from ordinary reality to the realm of the gods, was *maya* and *lila* – illusion, play, and theatre on a grand scale. The theory of *maya-lila* asserts that the really real is playful, ever changing, and illusive. What is “behind” *maya-lila*? On this, Indian philosophers had several opinions. Some said that nothing was beyond *maya-lila*. Others proposed realities too awesome for humans to experience. When Arjuna, the hero-warrior of the *Mahabharata*, asks Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* section of the epic to show his true form, the experience is terrifying in the extreme. Still other philosophers proposed the existence of *brahman*, an absolute unity-of-all which a person can enter through meditation, yoga, or living a perfected life. At the achievement of *moksha*, or release from the cycle of birth–death– rebirth, a person’s individual *atman* (the absolute within) becomes one with *brahman* (the universal absolute). But for most people most of the time, reality is *maya-lila*. The gods also enter the world of *maya-lila*. The gods take human form, as Krishna does in the performance of Raslila (Krishna’s dance with adoring female cow-herders and with his favorite lover, Radha) or as Rama does in the performance of Ramlila (when Vishnu incarnates himself as Rama to rid the world of the demon Ravana). Raslila and Ramlila are performed today. Hundreds of millions of Indian Hindus believe in these enacted incarnations – where young boys temporarily become gods. (Notions of *maya-lila* are discussed more fully in Chapter 4 of the book *Performance Studies—An Introduction*, 3rd edition, by Richard Schechner. London and New York: Routledge).

In Renaissance Europe the widely accepted notion that the world was a great theatre called the *theatrum mundi* was well put in William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* when Jaques says, “All the world’s a stage | And all the men and women merely players; | They have their exits and their entrances; | And one man in his time plays many parts” (2, 7: 139–42). Hamlet, in his instructions to the players, had a somewhat different opinion, more in keeping with Aristotle’s theory of mimesis: “[. . .] the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ’t were, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (3, 2: 21–25). To people living in the *theatrum mundi* everyday life was theatrical and, conversely, theatre offered a working model of how life was lived.

The most recent variation on the *theatrum mundi* theme emerged shortly after World War II and continues to the present. In 1949, Jacques Lacan delivered his paper “The Mirror Stage,” an influential psychoanalytic study proposing that infants as young as six months recognize themselves in the mirror as “another”. In 1955, Gregory Bateson wrote “A Theory of Play and Fantasy”. Bateson emphasized the importance of what he termed “metacommunication”, the message that tells the receiver that a message of a certain kind is being sent – social communications

exist within a complex of frames. Bateson's ideas were elaborated on by Erving Goffman in a series of works about performing in everyday life, the most influential of which is his 1959, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. At roughly the same time, philosopher J. L. Austin developed his notion of "performativity." Austin's lectures on the performative were published posthumously in 1962 as *How to Do Things with Words*. According to Austin, performatives are utterances such as bets, promises, namings, and so on that actually do something, that perform. A little later, in France, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Guy Debord, and Félix Guattari proposed what were then radical new ways to understand history, social life, and language. Many of these ideas retain their currency even today.

My own role in the formation of performance studies goes back to the mid-1960s. My 1966 essay "Approaches to Theory/Criticism" was a formulation of an area of study I called "the performance activities of man" (*sic*): play, games, sports, theatre, and ritual. "Actuals", published in 1970, related rituals in non-Western cultures to avant-garde performances. Both of these essays are in *Performance Theory* (2003). In 1973, as guest editor of a special *TDR* issue on "Performance and the Social Sciences", I outlined seven "areas where performance theory and the social sciences coincide":

- 1 *Performance in everyday life, including gatherings of every kind.*
- 2 *The structure of sports, ritual, play, and public political behaviors.*
- 3 *Analysis of various modes of communication (other than the written word); semiotics.*
- 4 *Connections between human and animal behavior patterns with an emphasis on play and ritualized behavior.*
- 5 *Aspects of psychotherapy that emphasize person-to-person interaction, acting out, and body awareness.*
- 6 *Ethnography and prehistory – both of exotic and familiar cultures (from the Western perspective).*
- 7 *Constitution of unified theories of performance, which are, in fact, theories of behavior.*

Over time, I developed these ideas and I related my theories to my artistic work and research activities in the USA and also in various parts of the world, India especially. Anthropologist Victor Turner—with whom I worked closely during the 1970s until Turner's death in 1983, put it this way:

Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances. [. . .] A performance is a dialectic of "flow", that is, spontaneous movement in which action and awareness are one, and "reflexivity", in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen "in action", as they shape and explain behavior. A

performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies. ("Introduction," *By Means of Performance*, Willa Appel and Richard Schechner, eds., 1990: 1.)

As I noted earlier, performance studies resists fixed definition. Performance studies does not value "purity". It is at its best when operating amidst a dense web of connections. Academic disciplines are most active at their ever-changing interfaces. In terms of performance studies, this means the interactions between theatre and anthropology, folklore and sociology, history and performance theory, gender studies and psychoanalysis, performativity and actual performance events – and more. New interfaces will appear as time goes on, and older ones will disappear. Accepting "inter" means opposing the establishment of any single system of knowledge, values, or subject matter. Performance studies is open, multivocal, and self-contradictory. Therefore, any call for a "unified field" is, in my view, a misunderstanding of the very fluidity and playfulness fundamental to performance studies.

At a more theoretical level, what is the relation of performance studies to performance proper? Are there any limits to performativity? Is there anything outside the purview of performance studies? The performative occurs in places and situations not traditionally marked as "performing arts," from dress-up and drag to certain kinds of writing and speaking. Accepting the performative as a category of theory makes it increasingly difficult to sustain a distinction between appearances and reality, facts and make-believe, surfaces and depths. Appearances are actualities – neither more nor less so than what lies behind or beneath appearances. Social reality is constructed through and through. In modernity, what was "deep" and "hidden" was thought to be "more real" than what was on the surface (Platonism dies hard). But in postmodernity, the relationship between depths and surfaces is fluid; the relationship is dynamically convective.

Many who practice performance studies resist or oppose the global forces of capital. Fewer will concede that these forces know very well – perhaps even better than we do – how to perform, in all the meanings of that word. The interplay of efficiency, productivity, activity, and entertainment – in a word, performance – informs and drives countless operations. In many key areas of human activity "performance" is crucial to success. The word crops up in apparently very different circumstances. These divergent uses indicate a basic overall similarity at the theoretical level. Performance has become a major site of knowledge and power). In relation to this relatively new situation, many ethical questions remain nakedly open. The most important concern "intervention" – biologically, militarily, culturally. When, if ever, ought force be used to "save" or "protect" people – and why say yes to Kosovo and no to the Sudan? Who has the right and/or the responsibility to say yes or no? What about genetic intervention? Who can be against preventing or curing diseases and increasing crop yields? But what about



cloning? Or modifying human traits? What constitutes a “disease” and what traits are “bad”? The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw some very nasty things done under the aegis of a eugenic “improvement” of the human species. What about genetically engineering “super athletes”? In terms of art and scholarship, what, if any, ought to be the limits to creativity and cultural borrowings?

Dwight Conquergood, one of the founders of performance studies at Northwestern, outlined in his *Rethinking Ethnography* (1991: 190) what he deemed “the five areas of performance studies”:

1. *Performance and Cultural Process.* What are the conceptual consequences of thinking about culture as a verb instead of a noun, a process instead of product? Culture as an unfolding performative invention instead of reified system, structure, or variable? What happens to our thinking about performance when we move it outside of aesthetics and situate it at the center of lived experience?
2. *Performance and Ethnographic Praxis.* What are the methodological implications of thinking about fieldwork as the collaborative performance of an enabling fiction between observer and observed, knower and known? How does thinking about fieldwork as performance differ from thinking about fieldwork as the collection of data? [...]
3. *Performance and Hermeneutics.* What kinds of knowledge are privileged or displaced when performed experience becomes a way of knowing, a method of critical inquiry, a mode of understanding? [...]
4. *Performance and Scholarly Representation.* What are the rhetorical problematics of performance as a complementary or alternative form of “publishing” research? What are the differences between reading an analysis of fieldwork data, and hearing the voices from the field interpretively filtered through the voice of the researcher? [...] What about enabling people themselves to perform their own experience? [...]
5. *The Politics of Performance.* What is the relationship between performance and power? How does performance reproduce, enable, sustain, challenge, subvert, critique, and naturalize ideology? How do performances simultaneously reproduce and resist hegemony? How does performance accommodate and contest domination?

And Jon McKenzie, who earned his PhD from NYU, declared that:

*[...] Performance will be to the 20th and 21st centuries what discipline was to the 18th and 19th, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge [italics in original]. [...] Like discipline, performance produces a new subject of knowledge, though one quite different from that produced under the regime of panoptic surveillance. Hyphenated identities, transgendered bodies, digital avatars, the Human Genome Project – these*

suggest that the performative subject is constructed as fragmented rather than unified, decentered rather than centered, virtual as well as actual. Similarly, performative objects are unstable rather than fixed, simulated rather than real. They do not occupy a single, “proper” place in knowledge; there is no such thing as the thing-in-itself. Instead, objects are produced and maintained through a variety of socio-technical systems, overcoded by many discourses, and situated in numerous sites of practice. While disciplinary institutions and mechanisms forged Western Europe’s industrial revolution and its system of colonial empires, those of performance are programming the circuits of our postindustrial, postcolonial world. More profoundly than the alphabet, printed book, and factory, such technologies as electronic media and the Internet allow discourses and practices from different geographical and historical situations to be networked and patched together, their traditions to be electronically archived and played back, their forms and processes to become raw materials for other productions. Similarly, research and teaching machines once ruled strictly and linearly by the book are being retooled by a multimedia, hypertextual metatechnology, that of the computer. (*Perform Or Else* 2001: 18)

Performance studies came into existence within, and as a response to, the radically changing intellectual and artistic circumstances of the last third of the twentieth century. As the twenty-first century unfolds, many people remain dissatisfied with the status quo. Equipped with ever more powerful means of finding and sharing information – the internet, cell phones, sophisticated computing – people are increasingly finding the world not a book to be read but a performance to participate in. Performance studies is an academic discipline designed to answer the need to deal with the changing circumstances of the “glocal” – the powerful combination of the local and the global. Performance studies is more interactive, hyper-textual, virtual, and fluid than most scholarly disciplines. At the same time, adherents to performance studies face daunting ethical and political questions. What limits, if any, ought there to be to the ways information is gathered, processed, and distributed? Should those with the means intervene in the interest of “human rights” or must they respect local cultural autonomy at whatever cost? Artists and scholars are playing increasingly decisive roles in addressing these ethical and political questions.

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