

ing your work.

- Reading your drafts out loud, as you complete each section, is one of the best methods to truly “realize” what you have written and notice what needs more work.

Writing as Performance and Performance as Writing

Because of you I have listened to others. I have performed in writing, sometimes in writing, sometimes instead of in talking, touching, and staging, our narrative rites.

—Della Pollock, *Telling Bodies
Performing Birth* (1999)

In Della Pollock's path-breaking essay "Performing Writing" (1998), she defines performative writing as (a) evocative, (b) metonymic, (c) subjective, (d) nervous, (e) citational, and (f) consequential. This section draws primarily from Pollock's important contribution to performative writing and serves to extend her six components of performative writing through the interactive characteristics of the relational, evocative, and the embodied, and concludes by reiterating Pollock's idea of the consequential.

Performative Writing as Relational

Understanding performative writing as something relational means you are writing for an audience of readers and you care about them. You are invested in them, because you are hoping that what you write makes a difference to them and that it makes some kind of contribution. You want your words to matter to your audience. In performative writing, you want your readers to come away with something they did not feel or know before they read your words. Your writing is an offering, because you care about what they receive from your writing and how they receive it. Performative writing is relational because it is generous. You consciously extend yourself to your readers. You want them to take in your words without it being complicated for the sake of being complicated.

What I mean here is that writing that is hard to read or writing that is hard for the sake of being difficult is not smart writing. Making the writing complicated doesn't necessarily make it more substantive. You should not unnecessarily overwork or overburden your readers for the purpose of proving yourself smarter than them. It is more important that your readers grasp and encounter your writing than it is for them to be impressed by how deep or brilliant you are. This does not mean that simplicity is always a virtue either. Sometimes keeping it simple is really just simplistic thinking. In performative writing, there is virtue and beauty in the complex if it is purposeful and not gratuitous or self-indulgent. Complexity can be the most generous offering, because it demands growth, challenges the expected, and disturbs the complacent. Relational writing means that you find the very difficult balance between the necessity for simplicity and the necessity for complexity because you are offering your words to Others and you care about what it does for them.

Performative writing emphasizes the relational. This does not, however, mean that all writers should claim the relational as a quality of their work. Some writers will argue that they write for themselves and for the passion that enlivens their own being. They argue that they write from the center of their individual heart, soul, and life-world, in which the reader is welcome

to share. They write with the conviction that they will be true to their own voice, and the readers will then enter as a result of that truth.

Performative writing emphasizes the relational dynamic between writer and reader in a spirit of caring about the dialogic and communicative quality of the connection. This does not mean that the performative writer must repress his or her own unique voice or soul to appease the reader. Nor does it mean that the performative writer *only* writes *for* the reader, or that every word or idea is focused on what the reader might think, but we do not fixate on our own individuality either.

Performative writing as a relational act means we do not write purely as individuals. We live in a world with Others, and their imprint is upon who we are and what we write. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) states,

Everything that pertains to me enters my consciousness, beginning with my name, from the external world through the mouths of others (my mother, and so forth), with their intonation, in their emotional and value-assigning tonality. I realize myself initially through others: from them I receive words, forms, and tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself. . . . Just as the body is formed initially in the mother's womb, a person's consciousness awakens wrapped in another's consciousness. (p. xx; qtd. in Goodall, 2000, p. 140)

An example of how performative writing both affirms and complicates Bakhtin's (1984) words in the way we realize as well as lose ourselves and the Other is illustrated in the performative writing of performance scholar Judith Hamera (1996, 1997, 2002). The following passage, from Hamera's (2001) ethnographic study on virtuoso dance, discusses how the relational simultaneously encompasses dancer, audience, ethnographer, and the ethnographer's ability to write about it all. In this essay, Hamera describes how she is remade through the dancer and the dance and discusses the challenge of what this means when the ethnographer must grapple with language and discourse to bring that embodied presence to the page:

Roxanne told me that she and Oguri dance out of what she called a strange obligation, and unpeaceful obligation, because she said, they took it seriously when a member of their audience told them she never came in with a problem their dances couldn't solve. I find this ironic because I never come in with a discursive, representational solution that these dances couldn't make problematic.

The issue is this: Roxanne is a dancer of enormous grace and power but Oguri overwhelms. His body, his movement vocabulary, his ethos are almost excessively present. He is always almost too much there and not, or not only, because of the choreography or mise-en-scene. His work is beautiful, terrifying, "at the limits of the possible" (Barthes, "Romantic Song," 286). His excess of

presence, and my joy and anxiety in the face of it, leave me searching for language up to the task of representing, not only the dance, but how I am remade through it. How was he better, and what was he better at, and how can I tell you? And in the search for the ways to tell you, I lost his body to language. (p. 236)

representing body w/ language

Performative Writing as Evocative

Seeing performative writing as an evocative act means that what is written down in words is now lifted from the page into a more sensuous awareness. In the sentiment of Norman Denzin (2001, 2003), performative writing enacts as it describes. What is described becomes evoked through detail, sensuality, and verisimilitude into another felt-sensing presence (Bacon, 1979). The readers enter this new presence through the guiding hand of the writer because they have been given enough information and enough inspiration to make a metaphorical leap from the page to a fusion of imaginations: The writer's imagination evokes the reader's, and words are not just words anymore, flat on a page, but are now images woven through meaning. Performative writing is evocative because it is a braiding of poetry and reportage, imagination and actuality, critical analysis and literary pleasure. Pollock states (1998),

Performative writing is evocative. It operates metaphorically to render absence present—to bring the reader into contact with “other worlds,” to those aspects and dimensions of our world that are other to the text as such by re-marking them. Performative writing evokes worlds that are other-wise intangible, unlocatable: worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect, and in-sight. (p. 80)

Performative writing renders absence present by evolving a world of meaning upon which the reader may now enter. Performative writing defies monologism; it is an inherently dialogic endeavor. A collaboration of imaginations between reader and writer in evoking a world that is Other and wise is illustrated in the work of Dwight Conquergood. A scene is evoked from Conquergood's (1988) fieldwork in Thailand: Through his performative writing, he brings the camp to us in a quintessential moment that captures the history of dislocation, struggle, and transnational politics that is metaphorically contained in one woman's song:

A Hmong widow walks to a crossroad in Camp Ban Vinai, surveys the scene, and then settles herself on a bench outside the corner hut. Bracing her back against the split-bamboo wall, she begins to sing. At first softly, as if to herself,

she sings a Hmong Khy txhij (folksong). Aware of a gathering audience, she raises her voice to fill the space around her. She sings a lamentation, carving her personal anguish into a traditional expressive form. With exquisitely timed gestures, she strips and peels with one hand the branch of firewood she holds in the other. Tears stream down her face as she sings about the loss of her husband, her children, her house, her farm, her animals, and her country. She sings of war, and flight, and breaking, and of a time when she was wife and mother in the Laotian village where silver neck-rings were worn. She punctuates each refrain by tossing away a sliver that her strong fingers have torn from the wood she holds across her lap as if it were a child.

The sad beauty of her singing attracts a crowd. She never makes eye contact but acknowledges the crowd's presence in her spontaneously composed verses, subtly at first, and then more confidently. She is both lamenting and entertaining. With nothing left to tear away, she makes the final toss of the last splinter, rises, and begins to sway with the rhythm of her song. People set out food for her. I give her the few ath I have in my pocket. Her face still wet, she breaks into a broad smile. Strange laughter interrupts her otherwise balanced verses. (p. 174)¹

takes you into that place

Performative Writing as Embodied

Performative writing as something embodied means the evocations of “Other-wise” worlds are not disembodied creations (Pollock, 1998). Writing has been considered a marriage between the imagination and intellect. In performative writing, we recognize that the body writes. Critical ethnography adheres to radical empiricism: the intersection of bodies in motion and space. Meanings and experiences in the field are filtered and colored through sensations of the body—that is, through body knowledge. If we accept that knowledge has infinite origins and forms, we are able to accept knowledge from and of the body. Body sensation as body knowledge is not to be equated solely with the sensational or feelings of arousal, though it certainly includes these elements. Rather, body sensation as body knowledge comprises impressions and interpretive meaning. Body knowledge is the emotion and cognition of physical pain: blazing heat burning the skin, hunger that dulls the senses, grotesque smells that sicken the stomach. As physical pleasure, it is the night breeze caressing the skin, the delicious taste of a communal feast, the alluring smell of locally made body oils. Because these knowledges of the body are embedded with meanings that filter and guide our experiences in the field, they will obviously inform and influence what we write. We write from our body and we write through our body.

In writing from our body, we are writing from the memories (and field notes!) of our embodied space and impressions in the field. When we are writing through our bodies we move to the space and the act of putting

words down on a page. In writing through our body, the act of writing becomes the enactment of an embodied voice. In performative writing, the reader is not taking in disembodied ideas and images from a cognitive word machine or an omniscient knower. In performative writing, words are inherited by a subject with a voice. To state that there is a subject and a voice is to state that there is a body. There has been a great deal of discussion over the notion of *voice* in writing: "finding your voice," "honoring your voice," "listening to your voice," and so forth. Goodall (2000) states,

Voice is the personal rhetorical imprint of who we are and what we write. Singularly and multiply, voice is the sound of a character speaking. Voice sums the way in which prose communicates a writer's vocal range and tone, her or his sensitivities to the nuances and passions of spoken language, and the essential phenomenological essence of what is being said. Voice is the sound of the ethnographic world being called into being. It is a pattern of heard recognitions, and of differences, that convey to readers the self that is textually constructing other and contexts. (pp. 139–140)

The performance artist and scholar E. Patrick Johnson (2003) enacts embodied writing with a clear presence of voice in his description of a gay nightclub:

Inside, my friends and I squeeze down the staircase and descend into the sea of bodies onto the dance floor. There is barely enough room to breath, let alone move, every inch of the space is filled with bodies—every body imaginable. Clearly, the body is on display: There are drag queens in skintight hot pants and platform shoes. There are "butch" men donning their black leather jackets, lining up along the wall like two by fours holding the structure together. There are "queens" dressed in black chiffon blouses unbuttoned to their navels and tight black jeans, who are constantly pursing their lips while looking over the tops of their retro "cat-eye" shades; there are older men (in this context anyone over 45) sitting on bar stools, dressed conservatively in slacks and button-up shirts sipping their scotch and sodas while looking longingly at the young bodies sauntering across the dance floor. The hip-hop contingent is sprinkled throughout the club in their baggy jeans, ski caps, sneakers, and black shades, some sucking on blow pops while others sip Budweiser's. And there are those like me and my friends who are dressed in designer jeans (Calvin Klein) and tight, spandex muscle shirts, performing middle class (acting bourgeoisie)—as if we actually have two nickels to rub together! (p. 104)²

Performative Writing as Consequential

Performative writing is consequential because it inheres in performance as a contested concept that "crashes and breaks through sedimented meanings

& political struggle and normative traditions and plunges us back into the vortices of political struggle" (Conquergood, 1998, p. 32). Performative writing is conducive to critical ethnography because it embraces political struggle and is not ashamed of its politics and advocacy (Agger, 2002; Denzin, 2001). Della Pollock (1998) states,

As the effect of social relations and as a mode of cultural, historical action, performative writing throws off the norms of conventional scholarship for an explicit, alternative normativity. It operates by a code of reflexive engagement that makes writing subject to its own critique, that makes writing a visible subject, at once making it vulnerable to displacement by the very text/performance it invokes and shoring up its capacity for political, ethical agency. As performance, as writing that stipulates its own performativity, performative writing enters into the arena of contest to which it appeals with the affective investment of one who has been there and will be there at the end, which has a stake in the outcome of the exchange. The writing/subject puts his/her own status on the line . . . in the name of mobilizing *praxis*, breaking the discursive limits of the emperor's stage, and invigorating the dynamics of democratic contest in which the emperor and his new clothes (or lack thereof) are now continually refigured. (p. 96)

The following example of performative writing as a consequential act is taken from my fieldwork in Ghana (Madison, in press). I'm writing performatively about the relationship between globalization and poverty in the global South:

The human body is indeed a wonder. In its beauty it is a miracle. The beautiful body can heal itself in mysteries beyond science. In marvelous precision the beautiful body can inhere remarkable strength, speed, and endurance past its own expectation. . . . The Other bodies, the loathsome bodies—the dirty body, the disfigured body, the sick body, the body that smells of refuse, the body that oozes, excretes and cannot shelter its waste, the body where matter is grotesquely "out of place" emitting itself in public view—are the bodies that wrenching poverty engenders and breeds in its abominable lack.

For much of the global South, specifically Africa, dirt is a contentious symbol. Blackness, dirt, and disgust are perennially linked. It is within designated locales where we only see dirty people having dirty children with dirty clothes and dirty faces. We see them living in dirty spaces on dirty roads filled with all kinds of dirty things. We know that dirt is to be gotten rid of, but do we remember that when water is inaccessible dirt dwells? Do we remember that dirt braces disease when sanitation systems are not effectual, or existent? Dirt is a stigma and an effect of many of the world's poor. It is both imagined and real. Dirt resides when poverty annuls the time and resources to attend to it, and when global machinations neglect its relief. Dirt and the political economy

are insidious partners. Dirt is a fact of material and political conditions but it is too often cast as a moral flaw . . . This village, these people and the 2,800 million people who live on less than \$2 a day and comprise 46% of the world's population are 2,800 million stories of epoch injustices. . . The heat is blazing . . . I look at Patience sitting beside me. I ask her to take a photograph with the village women we have been talking with all day before we leave to go back to the city. . . .³

Warm-Ups

1. Place four different and ordinary objects on the floor or a table—they can be any kind of objects that you find in the room. Arrange them together. Now, write about them. Describe in great detail their appearance, their arrangement, and their function.

2. Write a story describing what you did yesterday from the beginning of the day until you went to sleep. How can you write the yesterday story so that it would be interesting to read and hear?

3. List what you consider the joys or the difficulties (or both) of writing ethnographic accounts.

Notes

1. Reprinted with permission from the publisher from Dwight Conquergood, "Health Theatre in Hmong Refugee Camp: Performance, Communication, and Culture." *TDR/The Drama Review*, 32:3 (T119-Fall 1988), pp. 174-208. © 1988 by New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

2. Reprinted with permission from the publisher from E. Patrick Johnson, "Strange Fruit: A Performance about Identity Politics." *TDR/The Drama Review*, 47:2 (T178-Summer 2003), pp. 88-116. © 2003 by New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

3. Excerpted from author's essay "My Desire Is for the Poor to Speak Well of Me" to be published in D. Pollock (Ed.), *Remembering: Performance and Oral History* (forthcoming). New York: Palgrave/St. Martin's Press.

Suggested Readings

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