

What Do We Mean When We Talk About Performance?: A Metacritical Overview of an Evolving Concept

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It goes without saying that the field of theatre studies is rapidly being re-shaped by the principle of performance, abetted by the rise of multiculturalism, interdisciplinarity and gender studies.

Bert O. States, “Performance” (2)

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.

Dwight Conquergood, “Of Caravans” (137)

We use the verb *to perform* and the noun *performance* all the time. We wonder how our investments, our cars, our colleagues, or our children are performing, and we discuss the performances of sports figures, politicians, lovers, dancers, singers, and actors. Performance plays a central role in business, economics, literature and other arts, the hard and social sciences, law, education, computer science, political studies—the list is lengthy.¹ Deriving from the French *par fournir*, the definition has evolved over time: “1530s: ‘carrying out of a promise, duty, etc.,’ from *perform* + *-ance*. Meaning ‘a thing performed’ is from 1590s; that of ‘action of performing a play, etc.’ is from 1610s; that of ‘a public entertainment’ is from 1709. *Performance art* is attested from 1971” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). Yet *performance* now means much more than the etymologies of this contested term would suggest. As performance studies assume a significant role in the academy, scholars have found connections that did not exist before, just as they simultaneously

struggle to define the parameters of the new field. Even if we were to limit our understanding of performance solely to the public entertainments of the performing arts and their emphasis on the body, we could not help but make connections between the related disciplines of theater, dance, cinema, and music (vocal and instrumental). Much more, however, the evolving definitions of this contested term and the concepts related to it now take into account the development of both new disciplinary fields and interdisciplinary connections among existing ones. In the twenty-first century, performance, performance art, performativity, and performance studies foreground new ways of exploring embodiment as they simultaneously pay their debt to anthropology, sociology, folklore, linguistics, gender studies, cultural studies, political science, and philosophy, among others.² The bibliography on the many related aspects of the topic is growing exponentially, thereby making it difficult in this essay to offer more than a glimpse at what we mean when we talk about performance. In what follows, I lay out many of the principal critical and theoretical concepts and debates related to performance in the hope that my overview of this still-emerging and evolving concept will provide a useful touchstone for future study.

It is clear that, in the overlapping fields of Hispanic literature, drama, and theater, the vocabulary we use to discuss these fields and the ways in which we think about performance have been transformed in the last twenty years. Indeed, one measure of the evolution of the term and concept has recently been captured by Paola Marín, who posits: “El o la performance como forma artística, comúnmente tiende a ser identificada por el uso del cuerpo como soporte, así como por el hecho de que el evento se desarrolla en el mismo espacio y el mismo presente de los espectadores, intervenidos por el artista” (196). Marín contrasts her definition, which many Latin Americanists might use to describe “lo performático,” with more traditional definitions of the theater, ones that emphasize the representation of a text in a fictionalized time and space, thereby creating distance between an audience and the spectacle (196; see also Taylor, “Translating” 47). Diana Taylor, who has played a significant leadership role in engaging with this emerging discipline as it pertains to Spanish American theater, examined the study of performance in a 1992 talk, “Negotiating Performance.”³ Taylor described the first sense of the term *performance*—i.e., as a staged text—as posing three key problems for Latin Americanists and Latinos. First, theater in a more traditional sense can produce problems for populations who do not have economic access to formal stagings or editions of plays, which may be one reason why public spectacles

such as street theater, Carnaval, public demonstrations, and festivals may be more frequent in the Americas. In addition, the dramatic canon and the production and reception of theater derive from or are mediated by Europe or North America rather than by connections between and among theater practitioners from the rest of the Americas. Taylor asserts that Latin American theater too often remains pushed to the margins of invisibility vis-à-vis perceptions of originality and universally recognized value. Finally, she focuses attention on the marginalization in particular of women writers and indigenous or other minority dramatists within the Hispanic world, a claim that has been made less viable, I would suggest, in the years since the publication of this piece of Taylor's research. This is due in great measure to her own efforts to promote the recognition of women and other minority writers, as well as to focus on how the mechanics of the theatrical representation itself might be employed differently so as to avoid approaches that all too often undercut what those involved in the performance were attempting to accomplish.⁴

Taylor points to the fact that in Latin America, where the term *performance* is used in both Spanish and Portuguese to refer to performance art, embodied practices, and social dramas, the word is both feminine and masculine: "‘El performance’ usually refers to events coming out of business or politics, while the feminine ‘la performance’ usually denotes events that come from the arts" ("Translating" 47, 50). Taylor adds, "*Performance* includes but is not reducible to any of these words usually used to replace it: *teatralidad*, *espectáculo*, *acción*, *representación*" ("Translating" 47).⁵ Ultimately, she concludes that the untranslatability of *performance* is more positive than negative: "As a term simultaneously denoting a process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment, and a means of intervening in the world, it far exceeds the possibilities of these other words offered in its place" (49). Nonetheless, one might argue that as a result of the radical questioning emanating from much of postmodernist theory, attempts to define the term continue to serve as sites of contention. Taylor and Sarah Townsend spend the first pages of *Stages of Conflict: A Critical Anthology of Latin American Theater and Performance* exploring possible definitions as well as the uses and abuses of three prominent terms found in their book's title: *Latin America*, *theater*, and *performance* (1-3). In particular, they describe performance as:

... a broader concept that includes practices such as ritual and dance that do not presume the notion of a "stage." Performance has the advantage of being a relative newcomer without some of the baggage

that theater carries in tow; the word was not used by the Spanish or Portuguese conquerors, and it only recently gained currency in English. It also implies a sense of agency that has historically been denied to those who got the short end of the stick in their “encounter” with the Europeans. Yet it is not without its own difficulties. Today, the word is invoked by business people as much as it is by academics. And if we are not careful, the concept’s very flexibility and amplitude can lead us to overlook important differences among practices that fall under its wide umbrella. (2)

This is but one of many instances in which scholars in this emerging discipline are finding it necessary to define terms and turf; we are not (yet) all on the same page—nor the same stage.

Latin Americanists have nonetheless been drawn to performance studies; our discipline appears to have welcomed the opportunities that performance provides for better understanding the making of meaning in the political, social, and cultural worlds of Latin America, with the connections between performance, memory, and politics emerging as particularly pervasive topics of critical discussion.⁶ Observing the explosion of interest in the critical and artistic aspects of performance studies (461), Roselyn Costantino suggests why scholars in our discipline might have found it an especially useful critical and theoretical approach:

The need to develop new ways of thinking and writing about cultural production became even clearer when confronted with the work of numerous artists: artist and activist Jesusa Rodríguez, performer Denise Stoklos, visual artists Maris Bustamante and Rubén Valencia, performer Astrid Hadad, visual and performance artist Felipe Ehrenberg, and Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani, as well as social activist Super Barrio and Latin American politicians, subway performers, street vendors and religious leaders and icons that populate Latin America’s social and cultural landscapes. (460)

In addition to Costantino’s idea that performance studies offers an effective methodology for talking about the wide variety of performance practices seen throughout Latin America, Mauricio Barría Jara asserts that it is commonplace to refer to the art of the performance as a field of discursive resistance; it functions as a type of artistic event defined by its refusal to be reduced to any definition (101). Barría Jara’s comment hints at the ideological elements involved in attempting to define *performance* and *performance studies* in the Americas.

It is clear that performance studies as a discipline offers a good fit with research in Latin American studies. The relatively new field of performance studies, both on the larger scale of cultural performances in general and within Hispanic studies, found its origins in anthropology and drama departments. An early voice was that of anthropologist Victor Turner, most notably in *From Ritual to Theater* and *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors*, in which he proposes that a society's culture is best understood by means of its performances, i.e., certain rehearsed and repeated actions.⁷ Richard Schechner, an academic and theater practitioner, has authored a number of books that explore the connections between theater and anthropology as well as performance theory. He has also played a major role in the birth and development of the discipline by founding this country's first Performance Studies department and editing *TDR: The Drama Review*. A key essay presents Schechner's attempt to define or categorize what he calls "loaded" terms that lack neutral synonyms: "script," "drama," "theatre," and "performance" ("Drama, Script" 7). Schechner sees these fundamental terms as overlapping, concentric circles or discs; from the smallest to the largest, his model follows:

Drama: a written text, score, scenario, instruction, plan, or map. The drama can be taken from place to place or time to time independent of the person who carries it.

Script: all that can be transmitted from time to time and place to place: the basic code of the event.

Theatre: the event enacted by a specific group of performers; what actually occurs to the performers during a production. The theatre is concrete and immediate. Usually the theatre is the response of the performers to the drama and/or script; the manifestation or representation of the drama and/or script.

Performance: the broadest, most ill-defined disc. The whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that takes place in both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of the performance—the precinct where the theatre takes place—to the time the last spectator leaves. (8)

In his 1985 book, *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, Schechner describes, in an "East meets West" approach that brings together theory and the practice of a wide variety of performative events, the ways in which audiences and performers interact, the creation and structure of performances, communication via performance, and the assessment of performance. John J. MacAloon, in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural*

Performance, posits that cultural performances are “more than entertainment, more than didactic or persuasive formulations, and more than cathartic indulgences. They are occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others” (1). Anthropology has influenced and impacted the ways in which we now view theater, helping us recognize the connections between the theater and such fundamental concepts as ritual and ceremony and highlighting scripted behaviors and a host of other performance practices.⁸

Growing increasingly important as a discipline in the past two decades, performance studies has emerged as the iconic representation of a field in evolution. In *Teaching Performance Studies* (2002), editors Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer assert that this new discipline “takes as its subject human performance behaviors in cultural, aesthetic, and social contexts; it finds its methods in ethnography, communication, cultural studies, literary studies, theatre, anthropology, and especially, in performance itself” (10). In a review of Stucky and Wimmer’s volume, Jonathan Chambers notes:

As a discipline and method of analysis, “performance studies” stands as one of the most heterogeneous and, in many circumstances, contested terms in academia.... [T]he openness and diverse character of the field of performance studies makes it slippery as both a term and concept, and exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to define conclusively or to historicize in a manner universally accepted. While some in the academy have found the borderless nature and fluid quality unusual, off-putting and, in some cases, troubling, others have embraced it enthusiastically and, in turn, revel in the freedom and possibilities afforded by such a wide open field of play. (537)

Underscoring the difficulties inherent in pinning down the nature of performance studies as both term and concept, Chambers reminds us that its very openness and blurring of traditional boundaries can produce reactions ranging from uneasy discomfort to overwhelming acceptance.

W. B. Worthen’s important 1998 *PMLA* essay, “Drama, Performativity, and Performance,” offers an account of the “conceptual crisis in drama studies” that characterized the field in the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on Elin Diamond’s *Performance and Cultural Politics*, Worthen suggests that the experimental theater of the late-1960s, the application of theory to performance, and the work of post-structuralists such as Barthes and Derrida (who dealt with Brecht and Artaud, respectively) had created an opposition

between drama studies/theater studies and the new discourse on performance. Performance had devalued investment in the authority of the playwright and the dramatic text and had moved to create both a new set of terms and a corresponding increase in the disciplinary institutionalization of the concepts of performance and performativity, with performance studies often centering on “nondramatic, nontheatrical, nonscripted, ceremonial and everyday-life performances,” which placed drama studies in the role of being merely a subdivision of the larger construct (1093).⁹ This new field, Worthen asserts, invites new objects of inquiry to the table: ethnographies of performance, psychological and postcolonial models of representation, institutional studies, studies of street performance, performance art, performance in everyday life, and theoretical investigations of identity performance (1094). Real tensions emerged between the two camps as the traditional field found itself coming under attack from both the inside and the outside, even as it was also being recreated from the ashes of its deconstructed self by theorists who saw the potential for much more.¹⁰

As specialists in this area, many of us in Latin American theater studies grew up, intellectually speaking, in this time of radical rethinking, although it is fair to state that most of us still found our center in the authority of the written text, with “performance” referring to either the representation of a play or the idea of a public form of entertainment in which the body is employed to speak to issues of cultural importance. It is clear that the concept—and, specifically, its definition(s), form(s), and function(s)—have evolved a great deal in the last few decades, and many of us have expanded our own usage and constructions of the term to adapt to the developmental changes in the discipline. Our understanding of performance studies has morphed, becoming more wide-ranging and popular. Perhaps the best known academic site for staking out this relatively new field is the Department of Performance Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts/Institute of Performing Arts at New York University, founded by Schechner in 1980. Even more specifically, the Tisch School proclaims on its website that “The Department of Performance Studies is the first program in the world to focus on performance as the object of analysis.”¹¹ Tisch’s graduate program description, although lengthy, is particularly useful for this essay, because it outlines the various ways in which the discipline is articulated in 2011; the program:

... explores the ways that performance creates meaning and shapes social life. “Performance” is at the center of the theoretical, historical, and methodological courses offered in the department. Courses

train students to document, theorize, and analyze embodied practices and events.... We study actual performances, from postmodern dance and Hip Hop to world's fairs and orature, from performance art and staged dramas to spirit possession, political rallies, and the law court, from Butoh and vaudeville to capoeira, Olympics and jazz.... We use performance as an organizing concept for studying a wide range of behaviors and situations, from museums and food to landscape and the aesthetics of everyday life. We use performance as a theoretical lens for thinking about how elections are organized or how gender, race, and sexuality are performative (and often performances).... We explore Latin/o-American, Caribbean, African and African-American, Asian and Asian-American, European, and American performance. Performance Studies challenges aesthetic hierarchies and analyzes how they are formed.... By theorizing embodiment, event, and agency in relation to live (and mediated) performance, Performance Studies can contribute to other new fields, such as Cultural Studies and Visual Culture. We draw on such fields as anthropology, theatre, and history. Our courses explore feminist, queer, postcolonial, Marxist, psychoanalytic, and critical race theory. Our methods of research and analysis include fieldwork, interviews, archival research, and movement analysis.... We integrate theory and practice in workshops and courses in performance composition, performance writing, dramaturgy, theories of directing, and performance and technology. ("What is Performance Studies?")

This description of the department's theoretical and methodological approaches to the field illustrates the ways in which the Performance Studies department at NYU has created, in theory and practice, a vision that simultaneously echoes and diverges from that of more traditional theater and drama or literature and culture departments.

Among Hispanists, Taylor is arguably the academic most frequently linked to performance studies as a result of her position in the Performance Studies department at NYU, her many publications on the topic, and her work as founding director of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics. The Institute is a group of artists, academics, and institutions whose mission statement underscores the distinguishing elements of Taylor's view of performance, most specifically a focus on embodiment:

... the organization explores embodied practice—performance—as a vehicle for the creation of new meaning and the transmission of

cultural values, memory and identity. Anchored in its geographical focus on the Americas (thus “hemispheric”) and in three working languages (English, Spanish and Portuguese), the Institute’s goal is to promote vibrant interactions and collaborations at the level of scholarship, art practice and pedagogy among practitioners interested in the relationship between performance and politics in the hemisphere. (“Mission”)

In “Translating Performance,” Taylor discusses the problems inherent in defining the concept of performance (she refers to such difficulty as the “anxiety of definition,” [44]). For many people, *performance* refers to performance art, while for others, such as the Mexican Jesusa Rodríguez, the term itself becomes an object of (word)play. Illuminating the foundational work of her home academic department, Taylor asserts that “[p]erformances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated or what Schechner has called ‘twice-behaved’ behaviour” (44-45; see Schechner, *Between* 36). She talks about performance as the “many theatrical practices and events—dance, theatre, ritual, political rallies, funerals—that involve theatrical, rehearsed or conventional or event-appropriate behaviors” (45), but also as “the methodological lens that enables scholars to analyze events as performance,” examples of which include civil disobedience, citizenship, gender, and ethnic or sexual identity (45). Performance and performance studies embrace multitudinous subcategories, from performance history to translation studies, from traditional, formalized, or ritualized spectacles to those springing out of popular culture, from theory to practice. The discipline analyzes theatrical space (including the street) as well as the relative importance of all those who co-create or participate in the performance: the author, director, actors, audiences, set designers. It can also focus on the evaluation of specific performances, the idea of role-playing and its connections to language, history, politics and culture, and embodied behaviors of all types—the list is extensive and virtually limitless.

As the ethnographer Dwight Conquergood suggests, “Performance studies struggles to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice. This embrace of different ways of knowing is radical because it cuts to the root of how knowledge is organized in the academy” (“Performance” 145-46). In a categorization similar to NYU’s framing of the discipline, Conquergood describes the three *a*’s of performance studies espoused by his department at Northwestern University:

1. *Accomplishment*—the making of art and remaking culture; creativity; embodiment; artistic process and form; knowledge that comes from doing; participatory understanding; practical consciousness; performing as a way of knowing.
2. *Analysis*—the interpretation of art and culture; critical reflection; thinking about, through, and with performance; performance as a lens of human communication; knowledge that comes from contemplation and comparison; concentrated attention and contextualization as a way of knowing.
3. *Articulation*—activism, outreach, connection to community; applications and interventions; action research; projects that reach outside the academy and are rooted in an ethic of reciprocity and exchange; knowledge that is tested by practice within a community; social commitment, collaboration, and contribution/intervention as a way of knowing: praxis. (152)¹²

Conquergood's essay is particularly insightful in its exploration of the contested role of performance studies within the academy.

In "Scenes of Cognition: Performance and Conquest," Taylor further clarifies the idea of performance as a lens: it "denotes the constructed-ness of the critical apparatus as well as the object of analysis. It is the way in which the critic frames the event (for example, Argentina's Dirty War) that allows her to think of it as a *mise-en-scène* of the national imaginary and not, necessarily, the more visible staging of power and the positioning of social actors" (353). In this study of Amerindian performance, Taylor identifies four ways in which performance theory can help us deal with the "impossible task of fixing definitions and perspectives" for the events and practices that the early chroniclers attempted to describe:

- 1) As an object of analysis, performance "allows us to examine discrete embodied acts—each with a beginning and an end—that involve conventional behaviors including a dance, a skit or a farce.... Participants enact socially agreed-upon roles. Everyone in a given community knows the rules of accepted behaviour and interaction."

- 2) Performance is not just a set of cultural practices, but a “learning in and through the body, as a well as a means of creating, preserving, and transmitting knowledge.”
- 3) “[P]erformance as spectacle creates a network of relationships in which social arrangements, hierarchies, and values are made visible.”
- 4) “[P]erformance serves as a lens, a way of seeing and understanding the world. Mesoamericans and Andeans saw existence quite literally as a battle between the forces of creation and destruction, and they accepted their duty to fight ceaselessly for the continuation of life, [which] set all these practices in motion.” (365-66)

Taylor also reminds us of the contradictions inherent in performance. On the one hand, she observes, it is ephemeral, because no subsequent performance can capture what has been performed live.¹³ On the other hand, performance is always linked to the “transfer and continuity of knowledge” as a result of its connections to memory and history (Taylor, “Translating” 46).

As performance studies developed from its founding in 1980 as an NYU department, a number of academic journals began to play an ever-increasing role in disseminating research in the field. Schechner renamed *The Drama Review* to reflect the shift in emphasis, giving it the subtitle *The Journal of Performance Studies*.¹⁴ Other important professional journals include: *Performing Arts Journal* (now known as *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*); *Text and Performance Quarterly*; and *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*.¹⁵

Several academic journals in Hispanic studies have evolved along with the changing theoretical climate related to performance. *Latin American Theatre Review* has long been a leader in combining textual exegesis with performance-oriented studies, as it highlights theatrical productions, theater festivals and interviews with theater professionals; the essays increasingly model performance-based, rather than text-based approaches. *Gestos: Revista de Teoría y Práctica del Teatro Hispánico* addresses “los discursos teatrales como performance, práctica teatral y producción teatral,” as the editor, Juan Villegas, asserts in the 25th-anniversary volume of the journal: “En la actualidad, *Gestos* describe su campo como la difusión e integración de las teorías sobre el teatro, la teatralidad y la *performance* con énfasis en su relación con otras artes visuales y prácticas performativas” (11). Villegas notes in particular the fact that researchers have increasingly tended to shift the focus of their approaches and theoretical stances from an emphasis on the dramatic

text to the idea of spectacle and the staging of that text, which has led to the concomitant shift towards focusing on the director and actors rather than the author (11-12). Like *LATR*, *Gestos* combines textual analyses, often framed by a theoretical grounding in performance, with reports on theater festivals or other stagings and with interviews with theater professionals, and each number includes previously unpublished playtexts from both well-known and rising dramatists. Both *LATR* and *Gestos* also publish critical monographs and editions of playtexts.¹⁶ I would suggest that throughout the Hispanic world, as more plays have become accessible to a wider public, through the internet and also through translation, there has been a related interest in the performance of those plays by both professional and non-professional groups. In like manner, as more plays (and other performative events) are staged, and as more theater festivals across the globe have helped to promote even further interest in the topic, the academic world has focused its theoretical and critical attention on the innumerable ways in which the theater makes meaning through performance.

Performance art represents yet another piece of the performance puzzle, and like other terms sharing the same root, it is marked by a fair amount of semantic cloudiness. Marvin Carlson's description of the concept, however, merits attention:

Its practitioners, almost by definition, do not base their work upon characters previously created by other artists, but upon their own bodies, their own autobiographies, their own specific experiences in a culture or in the world, made performative by their consciousness of them and the process of displaying them for audiences.... Typical performance art is solo art, and the typical performance artist uses little of the elaborate scenic surroundings of the traditional stage, but at most a few props, a bit of furniture, and whatever costume (sometimes even nudity) is most suitable to the performance situation. (6)

Carlson reminds us that the concerns governing discussions of performance would apply equally to performance art: "what it means to be postmodern, the quest for a contemporary subjectivity and identity, the relation of art to structures of power, the varying challenges of gender, race and ethnicity" (7). Performance art is experimental, live, and often interdisciplinary.¹⁷

The concept of performativity has also emerged as an allied element of performance studies.¹⁸ Much of the important early linguistic work in the area of pragmatics, especially that of J. L. Austin and John Searle, centered on speech act theory, a way of examining language in context or showing

how we “do things with words.”¹⁹ The logical extension of that concept to the examination of scripted language (complementing or competing with non-linguistic performance) illustrates the connections between ordinary language philosophy, performativity, and performance studies. Worthen notes that “[l]iterary engagements with performativity tend to focus on the performative function of language as represented in literary texts, and much performance-oriented criticism of drama, for all its invocation of the theater, similarly betrays a desire to locate the meanings of the stage in the contours of the dramatic text” (1093). As Gail Bulman contends, “Theater theorists have argued that each performance is in itself a translation, an interaction or intersection between the dramatist’s, director’s, and/or actors’ interpretations of a text” (233). Yet various critiques of this prioritizing of the text—on speech—shifted the focus: “performing reconstitutes the text; it does not echo, give voice to, or translate the text” (Worthen 1097).

Performativity surfaced as a particularly useful metaphor to describe what Jill Dolan defines as “the nonessentialized constructions of marginalized identities, like white and ethnic women, gays and lesbians, men and women of color, and various conflicting combinations and intersections of these categories and positionalities.” “Theories of the performative,” she adds, “—in feminism, gay and lesbian studies, performance studies, and cultural studies—creatively borrow from concepts in theatre studies to make their claim for the constructed nature of subjectivity, suggesting that social subjects perform themselves in negotiation with the delimiting cultural conventions of the geography within which they move” (419).

Coming from the disciplines of philosophy and feminist theory, Judith Butler posits the application of theatrical metaphors to explain the playing out of gender roles in society. Butler offers connections between her ideas on “acts” and those of speech act theorists such as John Searle and phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and George Herbert Mead, who examine the constitution of social reality. Gender, Butler suggests, “is in no way a stable identity or agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (“Performative Acts” 519). She adds that because gender is instituted through a stylization of the body, it “must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (519). Identity is, therefore, constructed, a “performative accomplishment” with actors and audiences, and gender identity is a performa-

tive accomplishment “compelled by social sanction and taboo” (520). Butler adds, “In terms of an explicitly feminist account of gender as performative, it seems clear to me that an account of gender as ritualized public performance must be combined with an analysis of the political sanctions and taboos under which the performance may and may not occur within the public sphere free of punitive consequence” (526). Moreover, she connects the theatrical tension between illusion and reality to the “reality” of gender, proposing that “gender reality is created through sustained social performances;” it is not a *role*, but “an ‘act,’ broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority” (527-28). Butler underscores the connections between theater, culture, and embodiment: “Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” (526).²⁰

In her 1993 article, “Geographies of Learning; Theatre Studies, Performance, and the ‘Performative,’” Jill Dolan asked, “How are the performance metaphors gaining currency in other fields advancing our visibility and sophistication in the academy and in the culture? How can theatre studies avoid being dispersed into metaphor while developing new ones to use, to enable us to include more identities, practices and theories under our increasingly broad purview?” (417).²¹ As the discipline of performance studies and the wide range of interdisciplinary connections that derive from performance have gained traction in the academy, Dolan’s questions have found quite a few answers in the almost two decades since the publication of her essay. It is clear, however, that the more performance in all of its permutations has been employed to open new interpretive doors, the more those doors then open onto even newer paths of exploration.

As indicated earlier in this study, one of the fundamental issues brought to the surface by more recent theories of performance is the relationship between text and performance: is the performance relegated to a secondary position vis-à-vis the (written) text—or should it be? Certainly, semioticians of the theater such as Keir Elam have explored the “written text/performance text” relationship as “a complex of reciprocal constraints constituting a powerful *intertextuality*,”²² with each text both constraining and bearing the trace of the other (208-09). Yet in recent years, Worthen and others have critiqued the idea that performance is a “reading, interpretation, realization of the text,” suggesting instead that “[t]he text is absorbed into the multifarious verbal and nonverbal discourses of theatrical production,

transformed into an entirely incommensurable thing, an event” (1100). This is heady stuff, exposing the contested nature of all types of authority formerly attributed to the text/performance relationship, from the original author to the actor, director, set designer, etc., and questioning the ways in which both texts and performances create meaning. Moreover, it brings into the discussion the question of multiple performances of the same text and the relative aesthetic value of those stagings that most closely repeat the original written words. Versions and adaptations compete with museum-like renderings of the text for claims of authenticity and authority, producing debates on what the author originally intended or an insistence that the way the play might have been staged at the time of its conception should be a kind of Ur-performance against which all other performances should be judged.²³ If, as some contend, the performance is a type of translation of the original text, multiple possibilities emerge: we might see that translation as loose and colloquial, as strictly following the original, or as something in between—or as completely irrelevant in modern conceptions of the relative role and primacy of the dramatic text. Perhaps Hollis Huston says it best: “In a sense, no performance of a text can be as complete as my imagination of it, but that sense is mere tautology, for performance is what incompleted the text” (104).

It has been argued that although contemporary approaches to the related concepts of performance, performance studies, and performativity have opened the field wide open, they have simultaneously created an environment in which anything goes. Both expanding boundaries and crossing them, performance studies brings under one large umbrella academic disciplines and approaches that used to exist in separate worlds. Still, the discipline studying performance has been accused of focusing too much on human behavior, often at the expense of more traditional aesthetic approaches to the seemingly endless events that constitute it. Ultimately, however, human behavior is precisely what is underscored when we perform. Indeed, as Schechner proposes, the subject of performance is “transformation: the startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become—for worse or better—what they ordinarily are not” (*Future 1*).

This characterization of performance leads back to its transformative role in Latin American theater of the twenty-first century. Of special importance is the relationship between performance and politics: the staging of history, power, and memory is fundamental to our understanding of performance. As Jeanette R. Malkin affirms, postmodern theater is connected to “agendas of remembrance and forgetting, serving, at least in part, to re-call

the past from repression or from its canonized ‘shape’ in order to renegotiate the traumas, oppressions, and exclusions of the past” (1).²⁴ Also compelling is Brenda Werth’s *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics in Argentina* in its examination of performing acts of recovery. In addition to the connections between performance and politics/history/memory, the staging of gender has assumed a key role in our discipline, as has the performance of, by, and about indigenous and other minority writers, as made evident in dozens of monographs, critical editions, and anthologies of primary texts, as well as virtually every issue of *LATR* or *Gestos* in recent years. In much of the research in these areas, issues related to alterity and its role in colonial and post-colonial theater are paramount. Performance-studies approaches have frequently served as central elements of the theories and practices at the heart of staging such polemical issues in Latin American culture and society.²⁵ At least equally striking are the non-traditional performances that typify our now-broader definitions of the term as they simultaneously define the Latin American experience, including street theater, circuses, puppet theater, *charreadas*, religious rituals, public demonstrations, strikes, parades, *ferias*, dance, *Carnaval*, public acts of mourning, and alternative theater, to name just a few. Schechner reminds us that performance is inherently amoral and can therefore be useful both to tyrants and practitioners of guerrilla theater; it can—and has—changed lives, societies, nations. Through the lens of performance studies, the field with almost as many definitions as participants and theorists, we can see how meaning is made and embodied. If, as Schechner has suggested, the subject of performance is transformation, it could also be contended that what is transpiring in this field also has the potential to transform the ways we approach theater, drama, and performance in Latin America now and in the future.²⁶

Indiana University

Notes

¹ Bert O. States posits that “[p]erformance is clearly one of those terms that Raymond Williams calls ‘keywords’ or words (e.g., *realism*, *naturalism*, *mimesis*, *structure*) whose meanings are ‘inextricably bound up with the problems [they are] being used to discuss’” (1). Dwight Conquergood asserts that performance can be viewed (1) as a work of *imagination*, as an object of study; (2) as a pragmatics of *inquiry* (both as model and method), as an optic and operator of research; (3) as a tactics of *intervention*, an alternative space of struggle (“Performance Studies” 152).

² Phillip B. Zarrilli emphasizes the tension between traditional views of performance and the broader approach that has gained traction in recent years: “In view of the more comprehensive notion of performance, the narrower foci of traditional theatre—history/historiography, aesthetics, literary theme, etc.—become important specific strands in the nexus of cultural meta-commentaries” (372).

³ The talk, a keynote address at the Latin American Theatre Today conference, was published the next year in *LATR*. Taylor’s speech drew from her co-edited book of the same title.

⁴ “Performance, como una estrategia deconstructiva, nos permite de-establecer un sistema de representaciones basado en un sistema binario exclusivo y reificante” (“Negotiating” 54). Taylor then examines two of those binary oppositions: “espectáculo/espectador” and “la ‘cultura’/lo ‘primitivo’” (54-56).

⁵ See also “Negotiating Performance”: “... la palabra ‘performance’ en inglés tiene varios sentidos contradictorios. Más problemático aun es que no existe la palabra equivalente a ‘performance’ en español” (49).

⁶ Of particular note is the pioneering work of Kirsten F. Nigro in focusing attention on the text of performance, as seen, for example, in her 1977 study of *La noche de los asesinos*.

⁷ See also Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), where he uses theatrical metaphors to talk about the actions in which we each engage in daily life.

⁸ See also Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s introduction to *Performativity and Performance*.

⁹ Diamond describes this as a “terminological expansion of performance and its drift away from theater” (12 n22). See also Michael Vanden Heuvel, who states: “Performance deconstructs authorial power and its illusion of Presence, and disperses its quanta of energies among the performers and the spectator as a potential source of deferred, hypothetical, and immanent power” (5).

¹⁰ See also Harvard University’s internet site, “A Student’s Guide to Performance Studies,” for its overview of the field.

¹¹ Zarrilli discusses the emerging field in 1986, observing, “When New York University recently rechristened its Graduate Drama Program as the ‘Graduate Department of Performance Studies,’ it signaled that something was afoot. This move from ‘drama’ to ‘performance’ gave institutional and programmatic recognition to the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of both the practice of performance and the theoretically concerned study of performance” (372). The Department of Performance Studies in the School of Communication at Northwestern University is considered by many the other major U.S. academic department with a strong performance studies emphasis, although other departments with similar approaches to performance have proliferated in the years since Northwestern’s department was created in 1984.

¹² Conquergood also describes them as the three *c*’s of performance studies: creativity, critique, and citizenship (civic struggles for social justice) (152). It is fair to state, however, that NYU and Northwestern have often taken different approaches to performance studies as an academic discipline.

¹³ As Martin Esslin put it, live theater is “the function of a fixed element (the text) with a fluid element (the actors) which makes every single performance a wholly *distinct* work of art—even within a long run of one play and with the same cast, sets, lighting, etc.” (88). Or, seen another way, “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance” (Phelan 1).

¹⁴ Today it is called simply *TDR* or *TDR: The Drama Review*.

¹⁵ *Women & Performance* was founded in 1983 by NYU Performance Studies graduate students and was acquired in 2006 by Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

¹⁶ It bears noting that publications from both sides of the Atlantic on the topic of Hispanic performance often treat either performance-history examinations of the staging of plays (or a particular playtext) in the past or contemporary performances (including adaptations and translations) of new plays or of dramas written long ago. For modern Spanish theater, *Estreno: Cuadernos del Teatro Español*

Contemporáneo combines textual analyses and the publication of previously unpublished dramatic texts with studies on the performance of specific texts; see also *Estreno*'s translations into English of numerous contemporary Spanish plays. Early modern Spanish theater is treated in journals such as the *Bulletin of the Comediantes*. Although some of those scholarly studies focus on performance, the Association for Hispanic Classical Theater's journal, *Comedia Performance*, specifically treats performance topics such as "historical or modern staging of the *comedia*, translating the *comedia* for the stage, performance theory, textual issues pertaining to performance, historical issues such as audience composition, *corral* design, costuming, blocking, set design, and spectator response," in addition to interviews with directors and actors, as well as theater and book reviews ("Editorial Policy," 4). Without a doubt, the longstanding Siglo de Oro Drama Festival held for decades at the Chamizal National Memorial in El Paso, Texas, and the Almagro International Festival of Classical Theater, as well as the superb Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico in Madrid, have individually and collectively led to an increased interest in the performance of early modern Spanish theater.

¹⁷ Examples of performance art abound on the internet, from Yoko Ono's famous invitation to audience members to come and cut off pieces of her clothing to an art student shaving off virtually all of her hair in the middle of a Portland, Oregon public square.

¹⁸ See especially Schechner's chapter on performativity in *Performance Studies: An Introduction* and the book's companion piece, *The Performance Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Bial.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that Austin described theatrical performatives as "hollow or void" if uttered onstage (22), although scholars writing after his groundbreaking work tended to find that depiction unnecessarily limiting; numerous studies have made speech act theory the basis for discussing conversations in the theater as well as in real life. A particularly useful example is Shoshana Felman's *The Literary Speech Act*, which studies the performative (i.e., the promise as the means to achieve seduction) in the Don Juan myth.

²⁰ Jill Dolan poses questions that performers and directors might ask as a way to examine "the intentional performance of gender acts": "Where does gender begin in a gesture?... How can an actor employ Brechtian methods to enact Butler's theories in performance? How can audiences be encouraged to read and critique performances of gender?" (434). See also Butler's later *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Other valuable contributions to the connections between gender and performance are Teresa de Lauretis's *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* and *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, edited by Lizbeth Goodman with Jane de Gay.

²¹ At the time, Dolan was writing from what now would be described as a more traditional stance, in that an important goal of her essay was "to see theatre studies acknowledged and visited, rather than raided and discarded, as part of the proliferation of the performative" (420). Dolan critiques Schechner's attempts at that time to encourage the growth of performance studies, which she sees as undermining the potential for theater studies to respond to changing times. In like manner, the passion evoked in these debates has been echoed in the last five years as some theorists have suggested ever new points of contact between theater studies and cognition and the mind. See, for example, Bruce McConachie and F. Elizabeth Hart's *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn*.

²² Elam posits that because "the writing of the play precedes any given performance, it might appear quite legitimate to suppose the simple priority of the one over the other. But it is equally legitimate to claim that it is the performance, or at least a possible or 'model' performance, that constrains the dramatic text in its very articulation.... The written text, in other words, is determined by its very need for stage contextualization" (208-09).

²³ Worthen asks, "How can dramatic performance be conceived not as the performance of the text but as an act of iteration, an utterance, a surrogate standing in that positions, uses, signifies the text within the citational practices of performance?" (1102).

²⁴ See also Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* and *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War."*

²⁵ Two useful anthologies showcase canonical studies in the areas of performance, gender and politics; see Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay's *Routledge Readers*.

²⁶ This essay is dedicated to the memory of George Woodyard.

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