

Introduction

Texts, Practices, Performances

by Anne Warren Johnson

Introduction

Since its rise in the 1960's and 70's as a focus of study, performance has occupied a central place in anthropology and folklore.

Focusing on context and process, performance-centered folkloristics began as a reaction against the text-based studies that had occupied many folklorists since the inception of the discipline. Performance became important as an object of study and also as an approach to folklore theory and methodology.¹ Performance encompasses not only an expressive genre in which people engage, but a means of responding to and commenting upon cultural experience.

I hope that this paper will serve as a general introduction to the study of performance, grounding the articles that follow by providing a broad theoretical framework within which many of the authors' approaches may be situated. At the same time, this framework may itself be challenged, critiqued, and expanded by the ways in which these authors view performance.

Performance and Community

Most explanations of performance focus on two things: communication and action (or practice). As Richard Bauman writes, "not only

is communication socially constituted but society is communicatively constituted, produced and reproduced by communicative acts" (1992:xiv). And performance is not just communicative, it is metacommunicative; that is, it is reflexive; performance forms are "social forms about society, cultural forms about culture, communicative forms about communication" (Bauman 1992:xiv). To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, performances are stories people tell themselves about themselves (1973).

Performances are also art forms. Their aesthetic qualities are one way of setting them apart from everyday life; they may involve poetic language, costume, stylized gesture, or other artistic elements. They take place in front of audiences whose members (usually) share a cultural repertory of knowledge about aesthetics and are able to judge the relative artistic merits of the performance as well as the appropriateness of its content. The fact that performance is set apart from everyday life, or marked, makes it a heightened experience for its participants. Possibilities exist, then, for moments of what Victor Turner (1974) called "communitas," moments when structural relationships between people dissolve and are replaced by a kind of camaraderie based on shared experience. This experience of "feeling together" (Fernandez, quoted in Noyes 1995) plays a major part in "Performance as Discourse." Sherilee Johnston's article about *qawwali*, a Sufi musical form from South India. She argues that the performance of *qawwali* bridges the gap between observer and observed and creates a shared habitus that encompasses performers and audience; community thus emerges in performance. Similarly, in "Hands Passing in the Light," Samantha Krukowski writes about the shared experiences of actors and audience members within the context of a performance art piece from Germany. She imagines the reactions of members of an audience confronted with two performers intentionally inflicting pain upon one another, arguing that, in this instance, the performance serves to stimulate bodily sensations in the audience as well as to sublimate those reactions as the performance continues. Both Johnston and Krukowski focus on the performance as constituted in this relationship between participants.

Much of what has been written on performance in the last twenty years has focused on the emergent aspect of performance in opposition to earlier conceptions founded on the idea that performance "comes after" life (Schechner 1988:38). This move away from performance conceived as a "mirror" to performance as emergent—taking form in practice—was accompanied by a change in focus from the performance

text to the context of performance, and to a concentration on form as well as content. Bauman writes:

Performance usually suggests an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience. The analysis of performance—indeed the very conduct of performance—highlights the social, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of the communicative process. [1992:41]

For these reasons, performance is more than an imitation or an idealization of a cultural ideal. It is where social actors construct society, drawing upon past events and experience in ways conditioned by the present, always with "an eye to the future" (Brenneis 1993:296).

Performance, Power and Authenticity

Drawing upon the past often evokes a sense of nostalgia, of an "authentic" history or identity constructed in performance. Yet recent studies of performance demand a problematization of the notion of "authenticity." As Peter Haney argues in his article "Recovering *La Carpa*," certain Mexican American performances in San Antonio have drawn upon a particular theatrical "heritage" as a means of revalorizing the "authentic" past as a form of cultural capital, a project which Haney ties, at least in part, to a late-modern aesthetic. He then contends that, within performance, authenticity may become complicated by hybrid notions of time and by dialogues between memory and history. Through the medium of performance, the authentic past as an object becomes a series of (postmodern?) historical juxtapositions that ultimately contest a monologic version of history.

Ben Chappell's contribution to this issue, "Is a Lowrider Postmodern?" provides an interesting counterpart to Haney's argument. In answering the question posed in his title, Chappell counters the modernist "authentic" aesthetic that privileges notions of purity and exclusion with a postmodern "authentic" aesthetic whose conglomeration of symbolic forms speaks to the deterritorialization and compression of time that characterizes the postmodern condition. According to Chappell, lowriders are public performances whose hybrid nature confounds concepts of authenticity that are linked with modernism, yet simultaneously addresses the modernist political aims of human rights and collective struggle.

“Authenticity” is further complicated in “Simulated Natures,” Peter Kirby’s account of Wild Blue, a “fake” beach in Tokyo, Japan. Wild Blue is the site of what Kirby terms a Japanese “performance of leisure.” He argues that Wild Blue is a form of meta-theater that parodies the versimilitude of “real” beaches—a “tame” construction of nature, it is clearly a simulacrum, yet it is also perceived as a contrast to the confused, post-modern space of industrial Tokyo. The “artificial” and the “real” are involved in a dialectical relationship that is mediated through beach-goers’ leisure performances.

Johnston presents what may be a more familiar take on the “authentic” in her examination of *qawwali*. She writes that, as a “traditional” form meant to evoke an ecstatic response in audience members, *qawwali* is currently located at the nexus of devotional practice—perceived by participants and spectators as “authentic”—and spectacle—perceived as “inauthentic.” Ultimately, Johnston argues for performance as a heteroglossic medium through which the private, devotional aspects of *qawwali* are dialectically related to its public, spectacular qualities. Embodied religious experience is framed as “performance,” to be watched and appreciated by an audience that includes the ethnographer.

In Chappell’s argument, performance becomes a form of resistance to hegemony even as the lowriders/performers appropriate symbols of the dominant group. Haney constructs the performance he examines as an alternative history that resists monologic interpretations. Cory Locke, in her essay “Heifers Branded,” also focuses on the relationship between performance and power. She takes a historical approach to performance in her analysis of cross-gendering in cowboy dances that took place in Texas during the 1800’s. Her entry into the performance is by way of a photograph, one that at first glance seems to typify “the Old West,” but upon closer inspection, forces the author to rethink her presuppositions. Rather than attempting to represent the performances that she has never seen, Locke chooses to contextualize them in the political ideology of the time. She reads male dancing in nineteenth-century Texas as a means by which men performed an idealized concept of equality while at the same time masking racialized and gendered forms of domination. In this argument, a performance form that seems to defy gender conventions ultimately functions as a means of maintaining the social order.

Performances and Texts

Given that performances are necessarily embodied practices that create certain emotional effects in their audiences, turning performances

into texts has been a problematic activity for many scholars. Some, particularly in the field of communication studies, have argued that texts cannot approximate the reality of performances and that ethnographers should turn themselves into performers rather than writers. Dwight Conquergood has called for “empathetic performance as a way of intensifying the participative nature of fieldwork, and as a corrective to foreshorten the textual distance that comes from writing monographs about the people with whom one lives and studies” (1985:2). But other scholars argue that the written text does not have to be a distancing mechanism. Dennis Tedlock (1983) has created a form of transcription that he feels serves as a means of translating performance into text. His method demands the inclusion of para- and extra-linguistic performative markers like intonation, silences, pitch, and gesture. For Tedlock, the ultimate goal of performance transcription is re-performance. Other performance theorists have focused on the performing body, attempting to translate movement into written symbols in order to fully represent performance on the page (c.f. Farnell 1994). But Johannes Fabian writes against the idea that there can be a “final” text of a performance. According to him,

Text and performance are aspects of a process; they may relate to each other as phases (when production is considered) or as layers that can be discerned (when communicative events are analyzed), but they do not relate as tokens or representations to events. A text is not a representation, much less a symbol or icon, of a communicative event, it is that event in its textual realization. [1990:9]

In this view, performance is both “the ways people realize their culture” and “the method by which an ethnographer produces knowledge about that culture” (Fabian 1990:18). Therefore, writing is as much of a performance as those events that scholars have typically labeled “performance.” As Deborah Kapchan writes, performance and ethnography are both

framed activities concerned with giving meaning to experience. Both may use strategies of mimetic reproduction to effect a “natural” context that makes the audience forget the staging of artifice. Both may also break this facade in order to jar the audience into reflexive awareness . . . ethnography is first and

foremost performative—aware of itself as a living script in which meaning is emergent. [1995:483-4]

Krukowski is the author in this journal who comes the closest to realizing a performative text. Like Lock, Krukowski writes about a performance she has never seen; instead of claiming the traditional ethnographic authority of “I was there,” Krukowski attempts to evoke a performance event and create an effect in her audience through her writing. She is also drawn into the performance by a photograph, remembering the performance as an image, fixed in time and space—a memory that she discovers is not infallible. She imagines the experiences of the actors and the audience, invoking concepts of the body in pain, creating a “presence” of a performance that, by its nature, is always already past. She argues that fixed representations of performance are temporally and experientially removed from the performance itself and that interpretations of the performance are at yet another level of remove from the “original.” Like many of the other authors, Krukowski problematizes authenticity, subverting the power of the “original” in creating a text—at once a representation and an interpretation—that is itself a performance.

Conclusion

Performance is a concept capable of embracing a wide range of issues, including power, history, authenticity, textualization, memory, emotion, and embodiment. It is a site for the emergence of culture, as well as a medium for reflecting upon culture. Performance is ephemeral; it exists for a brief moment in a particular time and space. But it continues to resonate in the memories, practices and texts of scholars, participants and observers, as the authors of the articles in this issue make clear.

Notes

¹ See Fine (1984) for a more in-depth look at the antecedents of the performance-centered approach to folklore.

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