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Let's Get it On
The Politics of Black Performance

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bell hooks

Walking around the streets of New York City we see many homeless black people engaged in ritualistic performative acts. Some of them have routines that they repeat over and over to passers-by: narratives about death and destruction, about Babylon, the evil white people have done black folks, and how they must suffer for it. These homeless individuals are rarely begging. They are possessed spirits. In another culture - not a white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal nation - their words might be listened to, their wisdom heeded. Their presence in every city in the United States speaks to the problematic nature of African-American performance, live art and related practices in the West today. They embody the amalgamation of ancient traditions, where one performed, especially during rites of possession, for ritual purposes or to use the notion of manipulative performance for survival. This grew out of plantation culture and the experience of slavery. These two contradictory modes of performance merge and become madness. This madness articulates aspects of African-American post-modern identity - the absence of community, alienation from everyday reality, a fragmented individuality, and the loss of organised resistance - struggles that reach masses of black people across class.

Thinking about the history of African-American engagement with performance-as-art, it is useful to distinguish between performance that is used to manipulate in the interests of survival (the notion of wearing a mask), and performance as ritual play (as art). Collapsing the two categories tends to imply that the performative arts in black expressive culture emerge as a response to circumstances of oppression and exploitation. It is useful to consider these two modes of performance as both similar and different. One may engage in strategic performances in the interests of survival employing the same

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skills one uses to perform in the interest of ritual play, yet the performative standpoint alters both the nature and impact of the performance. In one context performance can easily become an act of complicity, in the other, it can serve as critical intervention, as a rite of resistance.

As young black children raised in the post slavery southern culture of apartheid, we were taught to appreciate and participate in 'live arts'. Organised stage shows were one of the primary places where we were encouraged to display talent. Dramatic readings of poetry, monologues, or plays were all central in these shows. Whether we performed in church or school, these displays of talent were seen as both expressions of artistic creativity and as political challenges to racist assumptions about the creative abilities of black folks. We performed for ourselves as subjects, not as objects seeking approval from the dominant culture. In our all-black schools and churches, performance was a place of celebration, a ritual play wherein one announced liberatory subjectivity.

Throughout African-American history, performance has been crucial in the struggle for liberation, precisely because it has not required the material resources demanded by other artforms. The voice as instrument could be used by everyone, in any location. In my household we staged performances in our living room, reciting poetry and acting in written or improvised drama.

The spoken word, transformed into a performed act, remains a democratic cultural terrain. When and where institutional structures were not available for individual black folks, we used, and still use, street corners, barbershops, beauty parlours, basketball

emphasising the act of doing, rather than the immobile quality contained in the lexeme 'ethnography'.

Drawing on MacDougall's analysis, I would see most African-American performance practice as a critical ethnography because it usually represents individual experience in ways that, as she suggests 'metonymically refer to, but can never grasp, an entire culture'. Hence it is always a partial truth, 'subjective and incomplete' that uses polyphonic strategies to convey specific aspects of black experience.

These strategies of performance are most evident in the work of contemporary black artist Anna Deavere Smith. In the introduction to *Fires In the Mirror*, Cornel West describes her work as a 'great example of how art can constitute a public space that is perceived by people as empowering rather than disempowering'.¹² Of course, it is the particular artistic medium she has chosen that makes this sense of empowerment possible. Performance as ritual re-enactment is quintessentially highlighted in Devere Smith's work because she draws on current events and on the actual statements of a range of observers present at those events. (This strategy of re-enactment has been at the core of African-American performance practice.) The sense of immediacy is there not because art intrinsically functions in the manner West describes, rather it is present precisely because performance art and performance artists invoke that sense of immediacy by working critically to intervene in public response to events, in ways that are empowering. For Smith's work to be effective as critical intervention, the re-enactment must occur in the wake of the actual events. Performed at a distance from the events the work describes, it would lose its power to act as a critical intervention. It would become a cultural product, consumed without the kind of critical engagement that might engender a response beyond that of merely good or bad performance. As Peggy Phelan contends in *Unmarked: the politics of performance*,

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. To

the degree that performance attempts to enter the reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance.

All African-American engagement in the performing arts, whether through performance of poetry and plays, or through rap, risks losing its power to engage with the specific locations from which it emerges via a commodification that requires reproduction in a marketable package. As much live performance can rarely address the local in a meaningful way, because of addressing the local is sacrificed to the desire to engage a wider audience consumers.

The power of African-American performance in relation to advocating and the black liberation struggle has been enormous. During the sixties, much education for critical consciousness was done in popular culture through music. Here, I want to speak not just about the radical poets, and/or musicians who jolted many of us into consciousness (Ritchie Havens, Don L. Lee (known as Madubun), Le Roi Jones (known now as Amiri Baraka), Nikki Giovanni) who also include political leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, whose were performance art. Their speeches were powerful and moving, not solely the way they put words together on the page or extemporaneously; it was in the way they 'performed' those words that deeply affected the listener.

A few years ago in an interview that first appeared in *Angry Women*, an unpublished RE/search, I talked about the way in which I saw my performances, stating that I had learned the primacy of performance when: 'In traditional black culture, if you get up in front of an audience, you're performing, you should be capable of moving people, something should happen there should be some total experience. If you got up in front of an audience and passively reading something - well, what's the point?' I was emphasising

performance as art was revered in traditional black culture. That sense of is sustained wherever black folks live and create. It was expected of any person to use words to reach people that they would learn to offer those works in compelling performative manner. The point of this performance is to engage an in such a way that they not only participate but, potentially, are transformed in v. In this interview I shared this perspective on performance, that it was about agement - an engagement that also suggests dialogue and reciprocity between rmer and the audience...¹⁴ Increasingly the commodification of the performing ich seeks to extend work beyond the power of its immediate and often us setting, promotes passivity and negates this call for reciprocal engagement. lks came to hear the words of King and Malcolm X they were engaged in liberation struggle. The issue was not creating a marketable commodity, it was a liberatory consciousness in a disenfranchised colonised group of people. Both lers were concerned with reaching a mass audience, with talking to those most and/or oppressed. Their longing to reach the masses determined the nature of ormance, the works they chose and the way they spoke those words. These ally showed the method in which performance art could serve a meaningful role in struggle.

American engagement with the performing arts is to sustain its role as a site of al resistance, where knowledge that educates folks for critical consciousness is rough performance, then there has to be a recognition of the importance of work. Nowadays, individual black folks engaged in performance practice, who ed by radical political commitment to social change, face a culture where is increasingly commodified in ways that undermine the power of performance lay which also functions as a site of resistance. In the past the central audience in-American performance was primarily black people. Reaching diverse widens the scope of influence and contact, making it possible for black nce artists to engage in coalition building - in the formation of new es. In his introduction to *Fires In The Mirror*, Cornel West reminds us that ormance has a unique capacity to bring us together - to take us out of our

tribal mentalities - for self critical examination and artistic pleasure.¹⁵ Of course, as o seeks to interest a wider audience, the nature of material and performance alters. Mc and more individual black performance artists fashion their work so that it appe: primarily to white consumers. Black performance and related practice has yet to be fu theorised in a manner that would enable discussion of the way in which desire to reach specific audience shapes the nature of standpoint and perspective. At times it performance work of individuals (like Anna Deavere Smith, Adrian Piper, Coco Fusco name a few) appears to be specifically designed to disrupt mainstream white sensibilitie While this work is effective and fulfils a need for critical intervention in that arena, it equally important to maintain a space within various localised arenas of Africa: American culture, where performance continues to address the specific realities of bla experience, as well as the need for a continued black liberation struggle.

Whenever we choose performance as a site to build communities of resistance we mu be able to shift paradigms and styles of performance in a manner that centralises th decolonisation of black minds and imaginations, even if we include everyone else in th process. The politicisation of historical memory in performance practice, the recogniti of diverse black experience and Diaspora connections between black folks globally, i contribute to sustaining the spirit of radicalism in contemporary black performanc Recently, Cornel West and I spoke to an audience of thousands who had paid to con and hear the two of us dialogue together. The critical intellectual dialogues we engage publicly are 'performances'. Individuals come to watch the way our interaction with ea other creates a narrative as much as they come to hear the political content of what v say. On this particular evening we addressed an audience in New York City that w diverse in every way. Significantly, although the high school auditorium was packed, ar temperatures were incredibly hot, the audience was eager to stay for hours to engage wi us. Moments like this one indicate how much unmediated direct engagement with t audience, in its diverse forms, remains a place where we can educate for critic consciousness: where communities of resistance can emerge.

African-American performance has always been a space where folks come together ar experience the fusion of pleasure and critical pedagogy - a space that aims to exhib

and challenge white supremacy as a system of institutionalised domination, along with class elitism, and more lately, sexism. Recent critiques of identity politics, which have traditionally informed African-American performance practice, call us to interrogate the imitation of an emphasis on shared experience. Yet it would be a mistake for black performance artists to surrender the focus on radical subjectivity that has marked performance as a space of transgression. My perspective is akin to that of Jill Dolan who emphasises, in her collection of essays *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance*, that she is,

unwilling and unable to give up identity, however constructed, positional, and unstable, as a place from which to begin my work - not as an ontologically meaningful home and a safe, idealised origin, but as a place of material circumstance that has deeply marked my own embodiments and movements through culture and discourse.⁶

Dolan highlights the two aspects of her identity - being lesbian and Jewish - that she feels must be reclaimed. For African-Americans, performance has been a place where we have reclaimed subjugated knowledge and historical memory. Along with this, it has also been a space of transgression where new identities and radicalised black subjectivities emerge, illuminating our place in history in ways that challenge and interrogate, that highlight the shifting nature of black experience. African-American performance has been a site for the imagination of future possibilities. Importantly, for performance to continue to be subversive, to engage cultural practice in ways that are disruptive and transformative, African-American artists must claim a space for ongoing critical vigilance, where we can dialogue about the impact of the live act and where performance can be interrogated to see what works as meaningful intervention.

African-American performance artists have always played a primary role in the process of collective black political self-recovery, in both the process of decolonisation and the imagining and construction of liberatory identities. It has been a space where communities of resistance are forged to sustain us, a place where we know we are not

alone. To retain that radical potential, to realise it, the performing arts in black America must surrender to the impetus to engage audiences. The emphasis on reciprocity in American performance has marked this as a site that can challenge and interrogate. Phelan contends in *Unmarked*,

Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies. In performance art spectatorship is an element of consumption: there are no left-overs, spectator must try to take everything in. Without performance plunges into visibility - in a manic present - and disappears into memory, into the invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes and control ... performance art is vulnerable to valuelessness and emptiness. Performance indicates possibility of revaluing that emptiness; this potential reevaluation gives performance art its distinctive edge.⁷

Performance artists are here to stay, yet it is uncertain whether or not they will function in a radical way. Right now, reclaiming and maintaining African-American performance practice as a site of opposition is the crucial agenda.

1 Paule Marshall, *Prattling for the Widow* (Dutton, New York 1989)

2 Cornel West in introduction to *Fires in the Mirror* by Anna Deavere Smith

3 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the politics of performance* (Routledge, London 1993)

4 bell hooks, interviewed by Andrea Juno in *Angry Women*, *RF/SEARCH* #13, San Francisco 1991

5 Cornel West, *op. cit.*

6 Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire: essays on gender, sexuality, performance* (University of Michigan Press 1998)

7 Peggy Phelan, *op. cit.*