

Books in Review

REVIEW ESSAY

POETICS, PLAY, PROCESS, AND POWER: THE PERFORMATIVE TURN IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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“WE DEAL here with performed texts” and “texts must be performed to be experienced” could be quotations from a book on performance studies. Instead, these passages are cited from Edward Bruner’s Introduction to *The Anthropology of Experience* (7), and are examples of how deeply the language of “performance” and “performed text” has penetrated anthropology. Since the waning of positivism, anthropologists have rejected many dualisms and dichotomies, such as subject-object and structure-function, but, according to Clifford Geertz, “Two other resonant terms, ‘text’ and ‘performance,’ come into the center of attention” (Turner and Bruner, 377). The conversation between anthropology and performance studies has moved beyond the recognition that social life is performative. A growing number of ethnographers are taking performance as both the subject and method of their research.

This breaking sub-discipline that Victor Turner called “anthropology of performance” is pursuing two complementary projects: (1) empirically grounded fieldwork studies of performance genres and processes, particularly non-western and non-elite traditions; (2) conceptual development of performance as a paradigm for meaningful action. The second program is derived from the first, and represents a shift from the study of “cultural performance,” or “performance of culture,” to the study of “culture as performance.” The shift from thinking about performance as an Act of culture to thinking about performance as an Agency of culture¹ has prompted a reflexive turning back upon the conduct of inquiry itself. Now ethnographic research, the “doing of anthropology,” is discussed as performance. The progression from focussing on performance as a context-specific event to performance as a lens and method for conducting research has promoted a vigorous critique of research presuppositions, methodologies, and forms of scholarly representation.

This performative turn in anthropology has produced a distinctive vocabulary and way of speaking about social life that privilege certain insights and displace other viewpoints. A good way to grasp the contours of the “anthropology of performance” movement is to examine keywords that project its world view. I offer four keywords as significant terminals in this discursive network: *poetics*, *play*, *process*, and *power*. Each word is linked to a chain of related terms and invokes a cluster of issues and set of interests that collectively define this research program.

All words derive their meaning in relation to other words that they either support or oppose. As a set, these four words derive much of their meaning from the terms they resist and displace. They are set in opposition to terms such as "science," "structure," "system," "distance," "objectivity," "neutral observer," and "falsifiability." The performative turn in anthropology has developed as a counterproject to logical positivism. After clearing conceptual space by challenging the ideals of a unified, value-free science, it is now staking out its own claims about "the construction and reconstruction of self and society."²

1. *Poetics*. Performance-centered research features the fabricated, invented, imagined, constructed nature of human realities. Cultures and selves are not given, they are made; even, like fictions, they are "made up." Ethnographers are attracted to those cultural fabrications where ambiguity and artifice are most conspicuous: rituals, festivals, spectacles, dramas, narratives, metaphors, games, celebrations. These heightened, reflexive genres reveal the possibilities and limits of everyday role-playing and invention. They remind us that cultures and persons are more than just created; they are creative. They hold out the promise of reimagining and refashioning the world.

Moreover, ethnographic research is likewise constructed and creative. Participant-observation research is based on artifice, and requires the willing suspension of disbelief by both parties to the encounter. Ethnographic monographs and articles derive their authority from the construction of a scholarly persona. Scholarly writing is the persuasive telling of a story about the stories one has witnessed and lived.³

2. *Play*. This term is linked to improvisation, innovation, experimentation, frame, reflection, agitation, irony, parody, jest, clowning, and carnival. As soon as a world has been made, lines drawn, categories defined, hierarchies erected, then the trickster, the archetypal performer, moves in to breach norms, violate taboos, turn everything upside down. By playing with social order, unsettling certainties, the trickster intensifies awareness of the vulnerability of our institutions. The trickster's playful impulse promotes a radical self-questioning critique that yields a deeper self-knowledge, the first step towards transformation. Appreciation of play has helped ethnographers of performance understand the unmasking and unmaking tendencies that keep cultures open and in a continuous state of productive tension. The metacommunicative signal "this is play" temporarily releases, but does not disconnect, us from workaday realities and responsibilities and opens up a privileged space for sheer deconstruction and reconstruction.

3. *Process*. This term spins off a chain of adjectives that includes emergent, temporal, contingent, provisional, indeterminate, dynamic, destabilizing. Commitment to process and the shift from product to productivity has had a corrosive effect on positivism. Instead of static structures and stable systems with variables that can be measured, manipulated, and managed, culture is transacted through performance. Culture becomes an active verb, not a noun. It is a shift from mimesis to kinesis. Metaphors of motion and sound—energies, flux, flow, chorus, ensembles, voices, polyphony and cacophony—compete with spatial and visual images and abstractions that dominate scientific writing. Instead of pinning down concepts, researchers attempt to listen over time to the unfolding voices, nuances, and intonations of performed meaning. This process-centered way of thinking and talking about culture alerts ethnographers to the irreducible and evanescent dynamics of social life—all the forces that resist closure.

4. *Power*. This keyword invokes politics, history, ideology, domination, resistance, appropriation, struggle, conflict, accommodation, subversion, and contestation. Because it is public, performance is a site of struggle where competing interests intersect, and different viewpoints and voices get articulated. Ethnographers are now asking, How does performance reproduce, legitimate, uphold, or challenge, critique, and subvert ideology? And with the influence of processualism, they are more and more phrasing their questions so that they embrace a both/and complexity, instead of an either/or polarization; viz., How are performances situated between forces of accommodation and resistance? And how do they simultaneously reproduce and struggle against hegemony? What are the performative resources for interrupting master scripts?

Likewise, the conduct of ethnographic research is absolutely embedded in issues of power and authority. The practice of fieldwork mediates a set of power relations that determines who is observing whom. And, as Edward Said has argued compellingly, the textual representations of the Other in scholarly publications are sites where power is enacted with far-reaching consequences.⁴

I have selected four books to represent the range of commitments and questions that underpin the "anthropology of performance" movement. It is fitting to begin with two books by Victor Turner. Clifford Geertz provocatively asserted that academic schools of thought are comparable to tribal villages and susceptible to ethnographic analysis.⁵ If this is the case, then all the kinship networks in the "anthropology of performance" lineage group can be traced back to the intellectual leadership and seminal writings of Turner. Geertz is an influential in-law, having married into the "culture as performance" family from the powerful "culture as text" clan. But Turner is the undisputed founding father. He established the intellectual apparatus and set the agenda through defining or giving fresh currency to terms such as "social drama," "cultural performance," "liminality," "communitas," and "reflexivity."

Turner died in 1983. The fact that his papers have been collected and posthumously published in two books (a third is being planned) testifies to his extraordinary productivity, as well as the large following of scholars still eager for his insights. His prolific writings developed audiences and a disciplinary community gathered around the provocative dialogue between performance and anthropology that he initiated.

On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience, edited by his widow and co-fieldworker Edith Turner, collects twelve papers and lectures, five of them previously unpublished, and many of the others published in lesser known sources, as well as a previously unpublished essay positioned as the Epilogue, "Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?". The mission of this volume is two-fold: to make accessible more of Turner's scholarly writings, and to present them as points that punctuate the development of a long and wide-ranging intellectual career. Edith Turner's "Prologue: From the Ndembu to Broadway" is a succinct and invaluable intellectual biography that links the development of Turner's early interest in social dynamics and ritual process to his eventual focus on performance *per se* and development of performance theory. The Prologue is written in a remarkable style. Drawing upon her own experience as intimate participant-observer—she is both wife and fellow anthropologist—she situates Turner's theoret-

ical contributions within their impinging professional and personal contexts: "For his readers it was a series of ideas; for me it was a life" (1).⁶

The first part of the book, titled "Processual Analysis," documents Turner's earliest interest in "social dynamics, and not in social statics" (68) that attracted him to the explanatory force of concepts drawn from drama and performance. Three essays are grounded in his early extensive fieldwork among the Ndembu in Africa. Two essays focus on medieval Icelandic sagas and demonstrate his passion for art and literature as well as fieldwork. One essay draws from his later fieldwork on Brazilian carnival. The section is capped with a brilliant conceptual piece, "Process, System, and Symbol: A New Anthropological Synthesis."

Part II is titled "Performance and Experience" and consists mostly of previously unpublished material. It is the richest part of the book, containing some of his boldest contributions to performance-centered anthropology. The first essay in this section, "The Anthropology of Performance," constitutes his clearest statement of this perspective. He defines humankind as "*homo performans*," a culture-inventing and self-making creature (187). From this conceptual startingpoint, "performance, whether as speech behavior, the presentation of self in everyday life, stage drama, or social drama, would now move to the center of observation and hermeneutical attention" (182). Performance as an analytical frame privileges process. He positions his focus on performance as aligned with "postmodern ways of thinking" (185).

The second essay in this section, "Experience and Performance: Towards a New Processual Anthropology," is by itself worth the purchase price of the book, and is available nowhere else. It advances performance theory by pushing beyond "culture as performance" to the potential of performance as a way of knowing, a hermeneutics for intercultural understanding. Turner calls for the deployment of performance as part of the methodological training of fieldworkers: "... part of the training of fieldworkers might include deriving playscripts from the best descriptive ethnographies and encouraging the trainees to enact them ..." (223). Aware of the epistemological risks of such a venture, that "actual fieldwork" might eventually call into question "the 'meaning' of the whole performance," he nevertheless affirms its pedagogical and methodological value: "At the very least, potential fieldworkers would begin to grope, in a more than cognitive way, towards an experiential or 'inside view' of the other culture. They would also learn something about reflexivity, since they would be learning about themselves and their own value and modes of assigning meaning even as they attempted to grasp and portray those of the other group" (223). This performance of fieldwork experience should shape the textualizing of fieldwork experience (writing fieldnotes, collecting data):⁷ "It would greatly assist the development of the anthropology of experience if fieldworkers kept in mind the possibility of scripting the sociocultural actions encompassing them into scenarios reproducible in the classroom or drama workshop" (224). The emphasis is on classroom, workshop, rehearsal process. Turner envisioned the methodological promise of performance as a laboratory for testing, interrogating fieldwork data and self, a method for intensifying and sustaining fieldwork's experiential way of knowing both before one enters and after one leaves the field.

Whereas *On the Edge of the Bush* presents a compendium of the key issues that shaped Turner's career, *The Anthropology of Performance* features his contributions to performance theory. In the first piece, "Images and Reflections: Ritual, Drama,

Carnival, Film, and Spectacle in Cultural Performance,” he enunciates the relationship between performance and power: “. . . cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting ‘designs for living’ ” (24). He also makes a case for conceptualizing media texts—film, televisual discourse—as cultural performances: “Cinema comes back again to ritual. . .” (31).

“Rokujo’s Jealousy: Liminality and the Performative Genres” is a virtuoso piece that displays Turner, the anthropologist, as a sensitive and sophisticated reader of literary texts and artistic treatises. To establish his point that humankind lives under “the sign of reflexivity” (108) and inevitably creates “performances about performances about performances” (107), he turns to Japanese culture and interprets Lady Murasaki’s great novel, *The Tale of Genji*, against the Noh play *Aoi No Uye*. This intricate analysis draws a new term, “metaperformance,” into the discussion of social metacommentaries, those reflexive genres through which cultures “can look honestly” at themselves, a necessity of survival as much as aesthetics (122).

In the penultimate piece, “Performing Ethnography,” Edith and Victor Turner discuss in detail their experiments with performance as a way of knowing. They offer fascinating examples of this performance-as-hermeneutics approach from graduate seminars they taught at the University of Chicago, the University of Virginia, and particularly at the Department of Performance Studies, New York University, where Turner spent summers working with Richard Schechner.⁸ There are many caveats, frank acknowledgements of the dangers as well as powers of performing ethnography, worry about whether “any culture can be adequately translated into the action-language of another” (151). But fieldwork, of course, is fraught with epistemological and ethical ambiguities, and even physical hardship and danger, yet no one recommends abandoning the method. In the quest for understanding the Other, it is worth hazarding the risks of performing ethnography because it can open up areas of knowledge not reached by fieldwork experience alone: “Whenever our classes have performed scripts based on our own fieldwork among the Ndembu of Zambia in Central Africa we have undoubtedly learned something about that culture that we failed to understand in the field” (151). Moreover, the Turners recommend using performance as a tool for critiquing published monographs that purport to describe, from the native’s point of view, social dynamics and rituals: “The actor’s ‘inside view,’ engendered in and through performance, becomes a powerful critique of how ritual and ceremonial structures are cognitively represented” (140).

The collection of essays titled *The Anthropology of Experience* lists Victor Turner as the first editor in recognition of his role as mentor and co-convenor of the symposium on which this volume is based, even though he died three years before the final publication. It is a useful book for assessing the range, variety, and vitality of anthropological scholarship enabled by the performance perspective.⁹ Most of the essays are case studies of cultural performances that make theoretically interesting arguments. Renato Rosaldo argues that the hunting stories Ilongot men tell themselves define the kinds of experience they will seek out in future hunts as much as they reflect what actually happened. Bruce Kapferer argues that the efficacy of Sinhalese exorcisms is achieved through the deconstructive power of comic performance; solipsism of the demonic is expelled through laughter. Barbara Myerhoff subtly demonstrates the deliberate way a community of forgotten elderly Jews in

California deployed a mural and a parade to call attention to themselves and through these performed texts changed the reality of their social invisibility. Barbara Babcock's sensitive study of Helen Cordero's creation of Pueblo Storyteller figurines brings material artifacts within the performance perspective, and has much to say about the reinvention of self and tradition. Edward Bruner's Introduction, "Experience and its Expressions," provides the best overview of the performance approach, and raises the issues of fieldwork as performance, as well as the poetic and performative dimensions of published texts, that his essay "Ethnography as Narrative" pursues in detail.

In *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, James Clifford, influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin, pushes the performative and dialogical constituents of culture towards a radical critique of anthropology. Taking Turner seriously enough not to valorize him, he shows how an even deeper sensitivity to performance could have shaped Turner's scholarly texts in a style more consonant with the principles he espoused: "Overall, Turner's ethnographies are unusually polyphonic, openly built up from quotations. . . . He does not, however, do the Ndembu in different voices, and we hear little 'salty village argot.' All the voices of the field have been smoothed into the expository prose of more-or-less interchangeable 'informants'" (49). What makes good theater makes more sensitive and politically committed anthropological writing.

The implication of Clifford's argument is that writing fieldnotes and publishing monographs that are performable, that capture dialogue and drama, present complex characters, and sustain the ironies and dilemmas of the fieldwork situation, would contribute to his ideal of ethnography functioning as a "critical cultural politics" (147). The style of ethnographic text that would challenge and excite an oral interpreter because of its complexity, depth of characterizations, tensive language, double-voiced discourse, complicated and shifting points-of-view, is exactly the kind of ethnographic writing that more honestly represents the face-to-face dynamics and contingencies of fieldwork, and thereby resists monologic and totalizing manipulations of the other. In Clifford's utopian vision, "Ethnography, the science of cultural jeopardy, presupposes a constant willingness to be surprised, to unmake interpretive syntheses, and to value—when it comes—the unclassified, unsought other" (147).

This is a brilliant and subversive book. No one writing today pushes the performance perspective so deeply into the politics of fieldwork and scholarly publication. Fieldwork rests on "the performed fiction of community" (80) and "self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence" (14). "Ethnographic texts," he insists, "are orchestrations of multivocal exchanges occurring in politically charged situations" (10). Chapter Four, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," is the most conceptually playful and subversive essay. This trickster coupling of ethnography and surrealism enables the hybrid pair "to mock and remix institutional definitions of art and science" (147). Wrenching insight and perspective by incongruity are the purposes for this play: "Ethnography cut with surrealism emerges as the theory and practice of juxtaposition. It studies, and is part of, the invention and interruption of meaningful wholes in works of cultural import-export" (147).

The performative turn in anthropology is more properly thought of as a spiral of performative turnings, conceptual flips that problematize different angles of ethnographic research. It is the anthropological version of "The Turn of the Screw," with

each turn implicating the ethnographer more deeply in mystery and the "predicament of culture."

ENDNOTES

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¹See Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969).

²Edward M. Bruner, ed., *Text, Play, and Story: The Construction and Reconstruction of Self and Society* (Washington, DC: American Ethnological Society, 1984).

³James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986).

⁴Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁵Clifford Geertz, "The Way We Think Now: Toward an Ethnography of Modern Thought," *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 147-63.

⁶See also Edith Turner, *The Spirit and the Drum: A Memoir of Africa* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1987).

⁷See Elizabeth C. Fine, *The Folklore Text: From Performance to Print* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984).

⁸See Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1985). Turner's book should be read with Schechner's. The two men had a profound influence on one another. Turner wrote the Foreword to *Between Theater and Anthropology*, and Schechner wrote the Preface to *The Anthropology of Performance*.

⁹See also Bruner, *Text, Play, and Story*, and John J. MacAloon, ed., *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984).

BOOKS REVIEWED

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THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF PERFORMANCE. By Victor Turner. New York: PAJ Publications, 1986; pp. 185; \$19.95.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF EXPERIENCE. Edited by Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986; pp. 391; \$15.95 (paper).

THE PREDICAMENT OF CULTURE: TWENTIETH-CENTURY ETHNOGRAPHY, LITERATURE, AND ART. By James Clifford. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988; pp. vii + 381; \$15.95 (paper).

