

In this piece, I am attempting to fashion my own performative writing. To that end, I have used the script of my presentation as a foundation, and have inserted comments, both my own and those of other scholars, throughout in order to create a dialogue between ideas. The original presentation is formatted in italics and the quotations used during it are embedded as a part of my own rhetoric.

*I was particularly struck by Susan Leigh Foster's descriptions of dance and theatre in public space in the 1960s and 1970s, and how these site-specific performances raised issues about the constructs of performance. As she says:*

*"Moving art into life as they did, these dances excavated the mechanisms of specialness, usually implemented within the confines of the theatre, through which art achieves its status. In their attempts to complexify or eradicate boundaries between art and life, they often transported the specialness that accompanies traditional theatre to other locales, and in so revealed its aesthetic function... [by] incorporat[ing] task-oriented and other pedestrian-based behaviors so as to challenge prevailing values concerning the kinds of activities that are appropriate for theatrical presentation" (127-128).*

*This seemed to synthesize, for me, what the task of performance of this period entailed:*

*An oppositional, resistant movement concerned with the breaking down, questioning, and reformulation of hegemonic performative rituals, and celebrating the liminality that is created through this process.*

*By extension, performance studies, which critically and reflexively engages with this milieu, is also defined, by Schechner, as a non-canonical discipline, similarly oppositional and resistant to orthodox tradition:*

As a field, performance studies is sympathetic to the avant-garde, the marginal, the offbeat, the minoritarian, the subversive, the twisted, the queer, people of color, and the formerly colonized. Projects within performance studies often act on or act against settled hierarchies of ideas, organizations, and people. Therefore, it is hard to imagine performance studies getting its act together or settling down, or even wanting to... This is to be expected because performance studies is noncanonical which means it is extremely difficult to define or pin down. (2002, 4-5)

*This, in my mind, is a false claim – I have yet to see evidence of oppositional, or even truly alternative, academic discourse within this area of study. While it certainly moves beyond descriptive accounts of theatre, I wonder at Schechner’s non-canonical definition and claims. Because the discipline studies something subversive, does that characteristic then colour the discipline? Schechner seems to make this equation when he compares performance studies with avant-garde performance: “Preponderantly, their approach has been experimental – to stretch the limits of their arts in ways analogous to how performance studies stretches the limits of academic discourse” (11). In her discussion of the goals of performance studies, Diana Taylor notes that complex, sometimes contradictory definitions of “performance” make it historically “untranslatable,” with little engagement between divergent uses of the term. These ruptures in its containment, however, are exactly what makes the practice of unpacking it so “culturally revealing.”*

Performance studies, for her, "...functions as a wedge in the institutional understanding and organization of knowledge" (Schechner 2002, 12).

*But if a discipline utilizes the same tropes, refers to a shared academic discourse, and complies to institutional methodology, isn't it inherently canonical? Isn't it, in fact, the role of any good scholarship to perpetually act as a wedge, driven into the fissures, ruptures, and disjunctures of the world, including institutional understanding and the organization of knowledge? Why is this the special dominion of performance studies? Doesn't this claim only solidify its position in the academy? Isn't it precisely through the process of disciplining ideas that they become canonical? Peggy Phelan highlights some of the issues inherent in the institutionalization and consolidation of this discipline/disciplining of performance studies:*

...one could accuse the discipline of practicing some of the very colonialist and empire-extending arts it had critiqued so aggressively. One could argue that performance studies was a narrow, even small-minded, version of cultural studies. One could say that performance studies had so broad a focus precisely because it had nothing specific to say. One could suggest that the famous "parasitism" of J.L. Austin's linguistic performative was actually a terrific description of performance studies itself (Schechner 2002, 13).

In many ways, I feel that ethnomusicology occupies a similar functional position within music scholarship as performance studies occupies within theatre and dance scholarship. Ethnomusicology is a similar blending of anthropology with a performative aesthetic discourse. Ethnomusicologists study the moment, the living culture, in conjunction with an omnivorous array of multidisciplinary paradigms. The discipline engages with, and is

actively sympathetic to, minoritarian, subaltern, and colonized populations. Perhaps it is due to my background in what I see as a remarkably similar endeavor of study, that I come away feeling cheated by performance studies. Both Schechner's and Taylor's descriptions of the field focus on characteristics of "performance," and marginalize the position of "studies." But performance studies is not simply performance and can't be automatically understood as occupying the same epistemological space. *While performance moves art into life, performance studies does not seem to move academic discourse into life. While performance questions the kinds of activities that are appropriate for theatre, there seems to be little to suggest to me that performance studies questions the kinds of activities that are appropriate for academic institutions.*

Despite my criticisms, I think that the strength of performance studies lies, in fact, in its self-conscious elision of the boundaries between performance and scholarship, between the aesthetic and the intellectual. If scholarship could appropriate the open, liminal quality of art, as performance studies claims to do, then I feel this would truly be a resistant scholarship. And if performance studies could effectively offer performance and other aesthetic or artistic practices as a viable alternative to the constrained prosaic tyranny of the academy, then I feel it would truly be an oppositional discipline. In Umberto Eco's discussion of "the open work," he points out how art is contained by its definition as "art," but also allows for open signification. Thus each reception is performative, allowing the viewer/interpreter to take an active role in creating meaning:

A work of art, therefore, is a complete and *closed* form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an *open* product on account of its susceptibility to countless different

interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence every reception of a work of art is both an *interpretation* and a *performance* of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself... In fact, the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood (Eco 1989, 4).

The role of the audience has been fundamental to performance and the study of performative ritual, but exists only as a potential in scholarly academic work, which gains its intellectual validity through its singular intelligibility. Della Pollack finds the openness of textuality in its creation, not as a production of a singular discourse, but as a performance of discourse: "...at the brink of meaning, poised between abjection and regression, writing as *doing* replaces writing as meaning; writing becomes meaningful in the material, dis/continuous act of writing... (75-97). Indeed, performative writing is one way that scholars have tried to open up the process, *but this very concept seems problematic to me because it exists within a discourse already dense with fixed signification*. While the performance of writing might exist in the process of doing it, words are still tied down to the specific representations available to the interpreter. *This is connected both to intellectual tradition and the conditions of visual culture, which, according to Marshall McLuhan, are closely linked:*

*"If you think of every human sense as creating its own space, then the eye creates a space where there can only be one thing at a time... It would almost seem that the very physiology of the eye promotes the idea that everything is in sequence – that is, in its proper place, at the proper time, in a linear, teleological relationship... the human eye appears to be the father of linear logic. Its very nature encourages reasoning by*

*exclusion: something is either in space or it isn't – the constraints of Western logic are tied to our sense of sequential relationships – logic made visible” (38-40).*

*Performative writing is non-linear, fluid, and non-homogeneous, making it a difficult fit with the visual and textual culture of which it is a part. McLuhan goes on to contrast this visual culture with acoustic space, calling it:*

*“...a dwelling place for anyone who has not been conquered by the one-at-a-time, uniform ethos of the alphabet. There are no boundaries to sound – we hear from all directions at once. It is both discontinuous and non-homogeneous. Its resonant and interpenetrating processes are simultaneously related with centres everywhere and boundaries nowhere. It requires neither proof nor explanation but is made manifest through cultural content.” (42)*

*As romantic as this description sounds, I think these qualities point toward the oppositional potential of an acoustic scholarship. In keeping with Eco's idea of the open work, sound, “...installs a new relationship between the *contemplation* and the *utilization* of a work of art” (Eco 1989, 24). In its boundlessness and multi-centred resonance, scholarship using sound holds the potential for open and multivalent interpretative performance. Jacques Attali acknowledges the importance of sound, not just as an object of study, but a way of being in the world and tool of understanding:*

Listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political... It is at the heart of the progressive rationalization of aesthetics, and it is a refuge

for residual irrationality; it is a means of power and a form of entertainment (Attali 1985, 6).

By introducing noise, both literally through works of sound and figuratively through the disruption and unintelligibility of open work, into the academy, acoustic scholarship can represent transgression, opposition, and critique.

*And the characteristics of sound itself recommends it as a tool to performance studies.*

*Peggy Phelan states that, "...performance's being becomes itself through its disappearance. [It] honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward" (Auslander 1997, 51).*

*Sound inherently shares this ephemerality, this ontology of disappearance that characterized performance. Sounds, like performing, are deeply tied to the place and the specific movements that create them.*

*However, unlike Phelan's description of performance, sound is non-representational. Without the visual, sound remains a floating-signifier, not only non-representational, but also non-referential. This is true of both live and recorded sound – because of the unbounded nature of sound, sources are often obscured. Thus, sounds, in and of themselves, are void of meaning and are apt to receive any meaning – a quality that is not diminished or changed through recording or repetition. In both cases, as soon as a sound is produced, it no longer belongs to the producer. It becomes an acousmatic*

*sound object – open to interpretive possibility as a vehicle of scholarship and intellectual criticism.*

*As an example, I would like to present my acoustic response to Richard Schechner's, "Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance." By a response, I don't mean that I'm responding to the content of the piece, but rather to its medium. Schechner drew together a variety of examples and sources from across space and time, creating, in my view, a Dobbish torte of self-indulgent, irresponsible scholarship. His post-modern, performative approach failed, in part because of his ego, and in part because of the teleological constraints of the visual culture and the written word that I outlined earlier. So, in response, I have drafted what I see as a possible oppositional direction for scholarship, including similarly divergent sources. While I don't make any claims at it's brilliance, I feel that this works better than Schechner's because of the medium.*

**Play the sound file: "Form Divorced From Matter."**

How do you account for the fact that sounds can never be separated from meanings? All the sounds you played had meaning for listeners. Sometimes, the meaning might diverge, but in our class, many of us heard in a similar way. So the sounds create a narrative for us. Even when sounds are totally abstract, people tend to create narratives out of them. This effect was exacerbated by the fact that you shaped the sounds in the form of a "work", a recording that we listened to like a musical piece. How could you avoid creating a "classical" musical "work" and thus raising all the expectations of your listeners about that genre? Your "piece" had recurring motives, and thus abstract "form" and "structure". This gave it yet another layer of meaning. How do we avoid

'aestheticization" when we shape sounds as you did? Sounds, when manipulated by people, become art, no? (Levitz 2008)

This is not to pretend that sounds don't have meanings embedded in them, but multiple meanings that are not tied down to the material object that produced them can exist polyphonically within one sound. This becomes clear when you imagine the physical path a sound must travel before you hear it. It is produced by a source, but is modified by every surface it bounces off before reaching your ear, which also modifies it. The sound acquires characteristics from the source, but also from every surface it comes in contact to, embedding more and more meaning as it travels. The same is true of musical composition – a piece acquires meaning from every context it comes into contact with, including your own. So while a sound will always have these accumulated meanings for every listener, there are so many points of contact on its physical and cultural path that there can be almost unlimited choice in how a sound can be interpreted. Sounds are abstract in the slippage of meaning that can occur within this process, where these multiple sources become foregrounded, backgrounded, or totally obscured. This signification process epitomizes “open work” in its reliance on the listener to complete the performance – it is collaborative in its meaning creation and multivocality.

Designating it as a “work” does contain this interpretation, but allows it to be considered with specificity as a discreet object and a “balanced organic whole,” but it remains an open product in its “susceptibility to countless different interpretations.” This containment and the accompanying aestheticization is unavoidable if sounds are going to be considered scholarly pieces, and are important in differentiating acoustic scholarship from background noise. The assertion here is that they should not simply be aesthetic

objects, musical compositions, and accompanying material, but rather considered viable scholarship in their own right. Scholarship that is open, intellectual, collaborative, provocative, performative, and noisy.

**Play the sound file: “Acoustic Commentary.”**

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