



READERS IN CULTURAL CRITICISM

**PERFORMANCE  
STUDIES**

*edited by erin striff*



# Performance Studies

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Edited by Erin Striff



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Introduction, selection and editorial matter

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# General Editor's Preface

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Culture is the element we inhabit as subjects.

Culture embraces the whole range of practices, customs and representations of a society. In their rituals, stories and images, societies identify what they perceive as good and evil, proper, sexually acceptable, racially other. Culture is the location of values, and the study of cultures shows how values vary from one society to another, or from one historical moment to the next.

But culture does not exist in the abstract. On the contrary, it is in the broadest sense of the term textual, inscribed in the paintings, operas, sculptures, furnishings, fashions, bus tickets and shopping lists which are the currency of both aesthetic and everyday exchange. Societies invest these artefacts with meanings, until in many cases the meanings are so 'obvious' that they pass for nature. Cultural criticism denaturalises and defamiliarises these meanings, isolating them for inspection and analysis.

The subject is what speaks, or, more precisely, what signifies, and subjects learn in culture to reproduce or to challenge the meanings and values inscribed in the signifying practices of the society that shapes them.

If culture is pervasive and constitutive for us, if it resides in the documents, objects and practices that surround us, if it circulates as the meanings and values we learn and reproduce as good citizens, how in these circumstances can we practise cultural *criticism*, where criticism implies a certain distance between the critic and the culture? The answer is that cultures are not homogeneous; they are not even necessarily coherent. There are always other perspectives, so that cultures offer alternative positions for the subjects they also recruit. Moreover, we have a degree of power over the messages we reproduce. A minor modification changes the script, and may alter the meaning; the introduction of a negative constructs a resistance.

The present moment in our own culture is one of intense debate. Sexual alignments, family values, racial politics, the implications of economic differences are all hotly contested. And positions are taken up not only in explicit discussions at political meetings, on television and in the pub. They are often reaffirmed or challenged implicitly in films and advertisements, horoscopes and lonely-hearts columns. Cultural criticism analyses all these forms in order to assess their hold on our consciousness.

There is no interpretative practice without theory, and the more sophisticated the theory, the more precise and perceptive the reading it makes possible. Cultural theory is as well defined now as it has ever been, and as strongly contested as our social values. There could not, in consequence, be a more exciting time to engage in the theory and practice of Cultural Criticism.

Catherine Belsey  
*Cardiff University*

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# Contents

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<i>General Editor's Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<b>1 Introduction: Locating Performance Studies</b> <i>Erin Striff</i>	1
<b>POPULAR PERFORMANCE</b>	
<b>2 The Power Team: Muscular Christianity and the Spectacle of Conversion</b> <i>Sharon Mazer</i>	14
<b>3 Ethnological Show Business: Footlighting the Dark Continent</b> <i>Bernth Lindfors</i>	29
<b>4 Striptease: Desire, Mimetic Jeopardy, and Performing Spectators</b> <i>Katherine Liepe-Levinson</i>	41
<b>PERFORMING BODIES/PERFORMANCE ART</b>	
<b>5 The Surgical Self: Body Alteration and Identity</b> <i>Philip Auslander</i>	54
<b>6 Reconsidering Homophobia: Karen Finley's Indiscretions</b> <i>Lynda Hart</i>	67
<b>PERFORMING HISTORIES/MEMORIES</b>	
<b>7 Spectacular Suffering: Performing Presence, Absence, and Witness at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum</b> <i>Vivian M. Patra</i>	82
<b>8 Hearing Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas</b> <i>Peggy Phelan</i>	97



**PERFORMANCE AND THE WORLD**

- 9 The Street is the Stage** *Richard Schechner* 110
- 10 Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World**  
*Joseph Roach* 124
- 11 ‘Jewels Brought from Bondage’: Black Music and the  
Politics of Authenticity** *Paul Gilroy* 137

**PERFORMATIVITY/PERFORMANCE**

- 12 Critically Queer** *Judith Butler* 152
- 13 Choreographies of Gender** *Susan Leigh Foster* 166
- Summaries and Notes* 178
- Suggestions for Further Reading* 208
- Notes on Contributors* 210
- Index* 212

# 1

## Introduction: Locating Performance Studies

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Erin Striff

What constitutes a performance? To what extent are performances occurring throughout culture(s)? If a performance isn't defined by the purchase of a ticket and entering a theatre space, when and where can it be seen to begin and end? Is it still a performance if there are no spectators present? Performance is often perceived to be an activity that only takes place behind the proscenium arch or is contained within the box set. The discipline of performance studies has expanded upon this definition so that we can now see that performance is an inherent part of the customs, rituals and practices of cultures.

To consider performance is to study how we represent ourselves and repeat those representations within everyday life, working on the assumption that culture is unthinkable without performance. The theatricality of everyday activities, such as the way clothes are worn or a meal is served, can be analysed in terms of performance studies. There are also many public spectacles with similarities to the traditional theatre, such as a trial or a soccer match, which can be read as performance.

When we view performances in the theatre, what is performance and what is not may appear to be sharply delineated, even though these distinctions are not always that simple. These delineations become even more blurred when a performance takes place outside a theatre, because performance may or may not include traditional characters, acting, or a script. Performance can therefore be understood as being related to theatricality, a sense of otherness, of non-identical repetition, that can occur anywhere, at any time. It may consist of societal rituals, or it may be understood as the conscious and unconscious adoption of roles that we play during everyday life, depending on the company we keep, or where we are located at the time. The theatrical metaphor is a fundamental tool we use to understand culture. As Pelias and VanOosting write, '[t]o alter the balance between artistic and rhetorical foregrounds in the theatrical experience displays performance as an integral part of everyday life, rather than a rarefied event on the periphery of communal experience'.<sup>1</sup>

If we think of the primary constituents of theatre, we might return to the importance of audience. Is a necessary aspect of performance therefore something to do with monitoring? Of watching yourself being watched? Marvin Carlson writes that '[p]erformance is always performance *for* someone, some audience that recognises and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that audience is the self'.<sup>2</sup> A performance might assume there are spectators appreciating the act *as performance*, even if we are only watching ourselves. Further, if there is no proscenium arch separating actor from audience, this can mean that the spectators are implicated as much as the performer.

Though we can perhaps give an indication of what needs to be present in order for an act to be read as performance, it is very difficult to come up with a definition of what performance actually is. Our understanding of performance is largely based on what we recognise as theatre, but performance may lack any or all of the signposts we associate with a theatre production. The object of a particular performance could be anything from proselytising to protesting, but what is the most productive way to analyse the meaning of what is performed?

In this introduction I attempt to raise some issues surrounding the discipline of performance studies, mapping what is a relatively new field, to prepare the reader for the important explorations other scholars have made in performance studies. I'm reminded of the title of the Fifth Annual Performance Studies conference I attended in Aberystwyth, Wales, in 1999, entitled 'Here Be Dragons'. This phrase, of course, was written on ancient maps to indicate uncharted territory, linking the unknown with danger. To define performance studies is to attempt to chart that border region where a map becomes mystery. With a new field, and a particularly contested one, it is difficult, and possibly reductive, to attempt any sort of definitive guide to that which lies beyond. There will always be competing maps that chart vastly different topographies to the ones I've travelled. If performance is primarily about *practice*, however, it is appropriate to let the authors in this volume speak for themselves. Maps are never drawn alone, and it is therefore through their examples that we may gain an understanding of that uncharted territory. For this reason, I will here trace briefly a history of performance studies as an academic discipline, then proceed to discuss how each of the chapters and sections in this volume may further our understanding of additional aspects of performance studies.

As performance studies has become increasingly influential, questions have been raised as to where (and to whom) performance studies belongs? Should it be situated and studied within the realm of theatre studies, or social sciences, or viewed through the lens of cultural and critical studies? Dwight Conquergood said at the first Performance Studies Conference in 1995 that 'Performance studies is a border discipline, an interdiscipline, that

cultivates the capacity to move between structures, to forge connections, to speak with instead of simply speaking about or for others.<sup>3</sup> Performance studies draws together many different academic fields, languages, and metaphors. It is consequently read and defined very differently depending on one's background, and this has created much debate as to how the field might be claimed/defined. Because so much of the development of the field has come about as a direct result of these disagreements, it is impossible to separate a consideration of performance studies from the genesis of the discipline, which became widely recognised internationally in the 1990s.

Most scholars agree that performance studies was initially popularised at New York University and Northwestern University. Richard Schechner was extremely instrumental in establishing the field – as early as 1979 he created a course at New York University's Drama Department entitled 'Performance Theory' and brought in visiting faculty from anthropology, psychology, semiotics and the performing arts.<sup>4</sup> Because of their increasingly interdisciplinary approach, the department changed their name to Performance Studies in 1980. Northwestern University's department of Performance Studies is housed within a School of Speech, and has links with a related field known as Oral Interpretation. As Conquergood explains, Northwestern takes 'performance as both subject and method of research'.<sup>5</sup> They perform texts such as diaries and ethnographic field notes, but do not stage traditional plays. These two institutional histories demonstrate that performance studies has had a variety of influences, adding to its interdisciplinary nature.

As its methods began to become more well known (and appealed to those scholars who were doing similar work by a different name) the First Annual Performance Studies conference was held at New York University in 1995, and took place at Northwestern the following year. Only a short time later, performance studies has become an increasingly popular subject to study, in the United Kingdom where I write this, as well as in other departments around the world.

Performance studies has had, at times, an uneasy relationship with theatre studies, partially because of the 'evangelical fervour'<sup>6</sup> as Philip Auslander puts it, with which some academics have embraced it. Richard Schechner, for example, in a much-quoted address he gave at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference in 1992, has gone so far as to say:

The new paradigm is 'performance', not theatre. Theatre departments should become 'performance departments'. Performance is about more than the enactment of Eurocentric drama. Performance engages intellectual, social, cultural, historical, and artistic life in a broad sense. Performance combines theory and practice. Performance studied and practised interculturally can be the core of a 'well-rounded education'.<sup>7</sup>

Here and in a number of other pieces on performance studies he questions whether, since the *raison d'être* of many theatre studies programmes is to train practitioners, and since there are very few jobs to be had in the theatre, would it not be better to train students how to think about performance in a more broadly based way, which might also prepare them for other careers? This kind of dichotomy risks characterising theatre studies as an increasingly limited area, focusing on what is seen to be a rarefied art form. Jill Dolan acknowledges that some theatre departments are pre-professional institutions that have little interest in theory. However, she rightly points out that other theatre studies departments employ critical and cultural theory as a way of looking at texts and performance, so that it is reductive to view performance studies as the only field where this kind of work is taking place.<sup>8</sup>

The question of how theatrical texts are used within performance studies is another important issue. Performance studies acknowledges that much of world drama is created without the dramatic scripts taken as a given in what many think of as 'traditional' theatre; consequently, it has a very all-encompassing view of what might comprise a performance text. W. B. Worthen writes that '[r]econsidering how, or whether, texts are actually opposed to performances, is one way to rethink the disciplinary instruments that map the contours of drama/theatre/performance studies today'.<sup>9</sup> He shows concern that some will simply equate theatre studies with dramatic text and performance studies with performance, clearly a reductive approach.

Concerns have also been raised about the way in which performance studies is using the metaphors of theatre studies but simply not applying them to the theatre. Jill Dolan argues that theatre studies should be 'acknowledged and visited, rather than raided and discarded...'<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, considering the pervasiveness of the theatrical metaphor in performance, the question of what can be identified as a performative act can easily turn into 'what can't?' Has the theatrical metaphor become so over-determined in performance studies that it ceases to mean anything? Other critics question how useful this metaphor is in our thinking about culture. Philip Auslander writes,

Although I recognise that just about anything can be looked at as performance, I'm not sure that it's profitable in every case to do so. It's also not entirely clear how looking at other phenomena 'as performance' is different from looking at them 'as theatre'. Generally when the uninitiated want to discuss the 'performative' aspect of some event or routine of living, they refer to it as 'dramatic' or 'theatrical'. What questions does thinking in terms of the performance metaphor raise that thinking in the theatre metaphor does not? The theatrical metaphor has a long history and is deeply ingrained in our culture, in our thinking about performance

and, arguably, in performance itself. As Herb Blau has written, 'it is *theatre* [...] which haunts *all* performance whether or not it occurs in the theatre' (1987:164–5). Much as some practitioners of performance studies would like to establish performance as an episteme separate from theatre, it may well be that our primary concept of what performance *is* derives inevitably from theatre.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that, in performance studies, we are never far from the theatre, whether or not we are considering traditional theatrical productions. We must not, of course, not to assume that theatre is any less complex than performance, but that it is a particular style of performance which should not be discounted.

Dwight Conquergood argues that 'Performance privileges threshold-crossing, shape-shifting, and boundary-violating figures, such as shamans, tricksters and jokers, who value the carnivalesque over the canonical, the transformative over the normative, the mobile over the monumental'.<sup>12</sup> It is also important to point out that although some practitioners of performance studies choose to focus upon performances that are transgressive in some way, there are many other performances which do not violate boundaries and in fact may be reactionary in nature.<sup>13</sup> In the same way that there is more than one style of play, and some are more likely to wind up on theatre studies reading lists than others, some styles of performances are especially privileged in performance studies.

We have seen the way in which performance studies is closely related to theatre studies, and it is important to note that the field also has very strong links with the social sciences. I will here briefly consider three theorists working in the social sciences who have significantly influenced performance studies. Erving Goffman's work, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, has been particularly useful in our understanding of the roles we adopt and the drama that we play out during daily life. According to Goffman, these roles can be taken on sincerely, so that the performer is 'convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality...',<sup>14</sup> or cynically, with the performer knowingly deluding his or her audience. In either case, Goffman emphasises the way in which we are constantly performing, whether or not we are aware of the roles we are inhabiting.

Another social scientist central to the field of performance studies is Victor Turner, an extremely influential anthropologist who worked with Richard Schechner. His work was deeply influenced by theatre studies; as Marvin Carlson writes, '[t]he language of drama and performance gave him a way of thinking and talking about people as actors who creatively play, improvise, interpret and re-present roles and scripts.'<sup>15</sup> In assessing human behaviour Turner employs the useful concepts of the liminal and the

liminoid. These terms can be understood as differentiating activities which are often cyclical, collective, and integrated within a society, from those that tend to be idiosyncratic, fragmentary, outside a society, playful, and sometimes part of a social critique.<sup>16</sup>

J. L. Austin, as a philosopher whose theories relate to the field of linguistics, has had a palpable effect on many chapters in this volume. Austin's account of the performative, or the way speech acts are translated into human behaviour, has much relevance to performance studies. In their book *Performativity and Performance*, Parker and Sedgwick express the issues at stake in performativity by asking, '[w]hen is saying something doing something? And how is saying something doing something?'<sup>17</sup> Austin's book, *How to Do Things With Words*, derived from lectures he gave at Harvard University in 1955, put forth that the performative is a speech act that should not be judged on whether it is true or false, but on whether or not it actually occurs. Therefore, performative speech, such as christening a ship or sentencing a criminal, can be seen as inextricably linked with institutional authority.

Though there is not space in this introduction to fully trace links between performance and the social sciences, Marvin Carlson in *Performance: A Critical Introduction* does just this admirably well. In the first section of his book, he relates performance to fields such as anthropology, ethnology, sociology, psychology, and linguistics. Carlson himself explains:

[a]s performance studies has developed as a particular field of scholarly work, especially in the United States, it has been very closely associated with the various social sciences, and a complex and interesting cross-fertilisation has been the result. The study of traditional 'artistic' performance, such as theatre and dance, has taken on new dimensions and begun to explore newly observed relationships between these and other cultural and social activities, while the various social sciences have found theatre and performance metaphors of great use in exploring particular kinds of human activities within their own fields of study.<sup>18</sup>

Carlson's thorough approach maps the way in which many different fields have had a profound and lasting effect on performance studies. Because this reader is also specifically aimed at students of cultural criticism, however, the chapters in this volume are more inclined to look to critical and cultural theory's intersections with performance studies than to the social sciences.

Because performance studies is located between so many disparate fields it will, of course, bring about a certain degree of controversy, which we can particularly see in the spate of articles variously critiquing or promoting the field that were published in the early to mid-nineties in journals such as *The Drama Review*. However, through their disagreements, many scholars would

back up Richard Schechner's point that 'Performance studies is "inter" – in between. It is intergeneric, interdisciplinary, intercultural – and is therefore inherently unstable. Performance studies resists or rejects definition.'<sup>19</sup> If the knowledge of this contention indicates the way in which performance studies is never one thing nor another, then we can see its potential as a mode of discourse.

Though we have seen how all-encompassing the field can be, I must here state the particular focus of my reading of performance studies. This volume does not cover the realm of traditional theatre studies; there will be no discussion of traditional plays, as such. There are chapters on music, dance and performance art, but these essays also locate performances within culture rather than considering them as aesthetic gestures alone. The chapters also tend to focus on issues of race, nationalism, gender and sexuality. Because these subjects are very often sites of contestation, reading them through the border discipline of performance studies seems particularly appropriate.

Finally, the themes that I have used to organise the chapters are intended as a possible guide rather than a definitive delineation of the book. There are, in fact, many other ways in which the chapters might have been grouped. Similarly, in the next part of my introduction, in which I will focus on themes which link the chapters and the sections together, I am attempting not to sum up each chapter, but to consider the way in which each one helps bring us closer to an understanding of performance and performance studies.

## POPULAR PERFORMANCE

The first section discusses popular performance: in particular, a group of men who perform feats of strength while evangelising, British sideshows displaying Africans in the 1900s, and strip clubs. We can easily recognise these acts as performance, but we tend to think of them as 'shows', or entertainment for the masses, rather than as 'theatre', an aesthetic event. In fact, all three chapters focus on these performances as profit-making businesses, and discuss the monetary success of these gestures. Some, in defining performance studies, accentuate that performance may be more accessible than the theatre. By considering these types of performances the authors are not attempting to elevate low/popular culture into a more sophisticated aesthetic experience; rather they are arguing that they can and should be read as performances within culture.

Chapters 2 to 4, perhaps because they are dealing with performances that succeed only if they are commercially successful, drawing in the crowds, are



deeply concerned with audience response and participation. Marvin Carlson writes that in performance:

The audience's expected 'role' changes from a passive hermeneutic process of decoding the performer's articulation, embodiment, or challenge of particular cultural material, to become something much more active, entering into a praxis, a context in which meanings are not so much communicated as created, questioned, or negotiated. The 'audience' is invited and expected to operate as a co-creator of whatever meanings and experiences the event generates.<sup>20</sup>

Though Carlson's comments apply very well to a range of cultural activities not necessarily recognised as performance, the same is also true of the chapters in this section. For example, Mazer's 'The Power Team: Muscular Christianity and the Spectacle of Conversion' (chapter 2), discusses a performance in which the evangelical message is part of the build-up that results in the 'payoff' of a performer breaking through blocks of ice. What is curious about the production is what she calls the 'altar call' finale, where the audience members are asked to sign a card dedicating or rededicating themselves to Christ. At that point it is the audience's own religious commitment which becomes the focus of the show. Those who do not participate in this religious act are made to feel out of place, not living up to the standards that have been set by others. Mazer also makes the point that by appearing as a committed religious spectator, one's image has been captured and will be broadcast as living proof of the success of the ministry. Thus, we can see how in performance studies the audience often has a complex role to fulfil. Unlike the 'high art' of theatre, where a piece's exclusivity is sometimes seen as a marker of its good taste, in popular performance it is often the size of the crowd that counts.

Bernth Lindfors' 'Ethnological Show Business: Footlighting the Dark Continent' (chapter 3), focuses upon Africans displayed in British sideshows in the 1900s. Lindfors argues that the more 'other' these Africans seemed, the more they served to affirm British cultural superiority. Consequently, as long as the Africans appeared 'savage' to the crowds, their behaviour was acceptable, as any indication of their being civilised would mean they were not sufficiently 'other' from the audience. These racist responses give us another side to the importance of audience in performance studies – that often their reaction tells us as much about the community forming the audience as it does about that which they view and judge.

Katherine Liepe-Levinson's 'Striptease: Desire, Mimetic Jeopardy, and Performing Spectators' (chapter 4) also discusses audience relationship to performance. She describes 'mimetic jeopardy' as being the point at which the spectator takes a more active role in the strip show, whether by putting a