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Virginie Magnat

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Can Research Become Ceremony? Performance Ethnography and Indigenous Epistemologies

by Virginie Magnat

*"Okay, I dare you to dance!"
That's the old saying, 'a'a ka hula, e waiho i ka hale.
I dare you to dance or stay home.*

—Keola Lake quoted by Manulani Aluli Meyer in "Our Own Liberation: Reflections on
Hawaiian Epistemology"

In *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, and Performance*, D. Soyini Madison remarks that "these days, one can hardly address any subject in the arts, humanities, and social sciences without encountering the concept of performance," and specifies that such a concept has become critical to the investigation of "the meanings and effects of human behavior, consciousness, and culture" (149). Referring to Victor Turner's notion of "homo performans," Madison envisions human beings as a "performing species" and posits performance as "necessary to our survival" (150). If that's the case, how, then, can performance ethnography become a way of engaging in research that contributes not only to our survival, as members of the performing species, but to the survival of all living species and of the natural world which we co-inhabit?

Performance as Experiential, Reflexive, and Intersubjective

Turner, who pioneered performance ethnography, traces the etymology of the word *performance* back to the Old French *parfournir*, and argues that "performance does not necessarily have the structuralist implication of manifesting form, but rather the processual sense of 'bringing to completion' or 'accomplishing.' To *perform* is thus to complete a more or less involved process rather than to do a single deed or act" (Turner 101). Accordingly, performance hinges critically upon embodiment, or the involvement of the whole being—body, mind, and heart—in the process of bringing meaningful actions to completion. This



Mural on the wall of the Kuau Mart, Maui co-created by German artist Julian Vogel and local artist Lanakila Kelliher. This is the tenth in his international "World Peace Walls" project. See <http://www.worldpeacewalls.com> or <http://facebook.com/WorldPeaceWalls>.
Photo by Virginie Magnat

leads Turner to infer that performance can “[transcend] the opposition between spontaneous and self-conscious patterns of action,” thereby affording an embodied reflexive standpoint where one is “at once one’s own subject and direct object” (Turner 111). Turner’s interest in performance processes is therefore linked to his conviction that the experiential dimension of performance is conducive to a particularly productive form of intersubjectivity, which he considers to be crucial to ethnographic research.

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Turner thus conceives of embodiment as an antidote to the visualist dimension of ethnography informed by the body/mind dichotomy inherited from the Enlightenment:

Cartesian dualism has insisted on separating subject from object, us from them. It has, indeed, made voyeurs of Western man, exaggerating sight by macro- and micro-instrumentation, the better to learn the structures of the world with an “eye” to its exploitation. The deep bonds

between body and mentality, unconscious and conscious thinking, species and self have been treated without respect, as though irrelevant for analytical purposes. (Turner 111)

Dissatisfied with the fieldwork methodologies and writing conventions of mainstream anthropology, Turner rejects the positivist notion that the ethnographer must be detached and dispassionate, thereby anticipating the postcolonial critique by non-Western and Indigenous scholars who have demonstrated that voyeurism, exploitation, and lack of respect veiled by claims of scientific objectivity and impartiality, constitute characteristic features of anthropology’s colonial legacy.

Turner therefore articulates performance ethnography as a critique of conventional research methodologies and envisions this alternative approach as a way to provide researchers with a kinetic understanding of cultural processes. Advocating the performance of ethnographic texts in order to break away from the cognitive dominance of the written, Turner proposes to turn “ethnographic texts into playscripts, scripts into performance, and performance into meta-ethnography” (100), and to establish “a dialectic between performing and learning,” so that “one learns through performing, then performs the understanding so gained” (104). Predicting the crisis of representation¹ which, after his death in 1983, would shake the foundational principles of his profession, he writes,

If anthropologists are ever to take ethnodramatics seriously, our discipline will have to become something

more than a cognitive game played in our heads and inscribed in—let’s face it—somewhat tedious journals. We will have to become performers ourselves, and bring to human, existential fulfillment what have hitherto been only mentalistic protocols. (Turner 111)

Accordingly, the next generation would foreground the performative and embodied dimensions of ethnography, thereby opening up new possibilities for performance ethnography explored by researchers such as Dwight Conquergood in performance studies, and Norman K. Denzin within qualitative inquiry across the social sciences.

Legitimizing Embodied Ways of Knowing

In his dialogic ethnography of Hmong shamanism, *I Am a Shaman: A Hmong Life Story with Ethnographic Commentary*, Conquergood credits Turner for privileging “the processual, interactive dimensions” of the ritual practices he investigated (Conquergood and Thao 63). Following Turner, Conquergood infers from his own work on ritual that ethnographers must necessarily take into account the “experiential understanding that is realized through performance” (63). He further contends that since the Enlightenment project of modernity, “ways of knowing rooted in embodied experience, orality, and local contingencies” (Conquergood 146), that is to say, epistemologies grounded in process, practice, and place, have been discredited through the systematic institutionalization of print-culture. He notes that in today’s academy, “the class-based arrogance of scriptocentrism” once denounced by Raymond Williams continues to “assume that all the world is a text” and to construct non-literate cultures as the Other of this hegemonic economy of knowledge (Conquergood 148).

Scriptocentric constructions of the non- or pre-literate Other are also scrutinized by Diana Taylor, who posits that performance “constitutes a repertoire of embodied knowledge, a learning in and through the body, as well as a means of creating, preserving, and transmitting knowledge” (365). Taylor argues that “Western culture, wedded to the word, whether written or spoken, enables language to usurp epistemic and explanatory power. Performance studies asks us to take seriously other forms of cultural expression as both praxis and episteme” (Taylor 7). She points out that in Latin America, her area of specialization, “the legitimization of writing over other epistemic and mnemonic systems assured that colonial power could be developed and enforced without the input of the great majority of the population” (7). Stressing that forms of writing did exist prior to the conquest of Latin America but never as a form of knowing separate from oral traditions and other forms of embodied knowledge, she infers that “the schism does not lie between the written and the spoken word but between discursive and performative systems . . . between literary and embodied cultural practices” (7). Taylor and Conquergood thus seek to legitimize embodied ways of knowing that underlie cultural processes, thereby

redefining culture as a set of performance practices that can no longer be invalidated by the “culture-as-text model” (Conquergood 149). Indicting the “hegemony of textualism,” Conquergood states: “The root metaphor of text underpins the supremacy of Western knowledge systems by erasing the vast realm of human knowledge and meaningful action that is unlettered” (147). Consequently, “the visual/verbal bias of Western regimes of knowledge” (146) drastically limits the investigation of social and cultural processes by failing to account for the type of knowledge that is produced, acquired, and transmitted by means of performance.

Building on Conquergood’s approach, Norman K. Denzin employs performance ethnography in the social sciences to develop qualitative inquiry strategies informed by critical race theory, postcolonial studies, and arts-based research methodologies. Denzin envisions performance as “a form of kinesis, of motion, . . . an act of intervention, a method of resistance, a form of criticism, a way of revealing agency, . . . a way of bringing culture and the person into play” (Denzin 9–10). From such a perspective, “every performance, every identity [is] a new representation of meaning and experience,” as well as a site of struggle, negotiation, and hope: “a site where the performance of possibilities occurs” (328). The most provocative and productive dimension of Denzin’s approach to performance ethnography is arguably its integration of the critique of Euro-American research by Indigenous scholars. Indeed, this critique also calls for the legitimization, in the academy, of embodied knowledge as a counter-hegemonic mode of inquiry. Denzin, writing in support of collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, asserts that “Westerners have much to learn from Indigenous epistemologies and performance theories,” and suggests that “the performance turn in Anglo-Saxon discourse can surely benefit from the criticisms and tenets offered by Maori and other Indigenous scholars” (108).

Nevertheless, while Denzin charts new directions for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research, his approach to performance ethnography draws extensively from Euro-American experimental theatre and arts-based research, combining surrealist montage techniques with text-based dramatic structures, and relies considerably on Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy and Augusto Boal’s post-Brechtian *Theatre of the Oppressed*. In the preface to the *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, Denzin and his co-editors state in a section titled “Limitations” that they were “unable to locate persons who could write chapters on . . . arts-based methodologies . . . and indigenous performance studies” (xii). Later on in the introduction, Denzin and Lincoln advocate what they describe as a “post-colonial, indigenous participatory theater, a form of critical pedagogical theater that draws its inspirations from Boal’s major works: *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974/1979), *The Rainbow of Desire* (1995), and *Legislative Theatre* (1998)” (Denzin et al. 7). As I have argued elsewhere,²

recent critical reassessments of the Marxist-inflected emancipatory discourses underpinning Boal's relationship to the work of Freire demonstrate that the seemingly unilateral integration of the Boalian performance paradigm by social scientists is far from unproblematic, especially when applied to an Indigenous context.³

Performance, which is vital to the embodied transmission of traditional knowledge, significantly informs the decolonizing research methodologies developed by Indigenous scholars and activists.

Indigenous Perspectives: Relationality, Experience, and Knowledge

How, then, might Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies rooted in traditional cultural practices contribute to the future(s) of performance ethnography, indebted as it is to the contested discipline of anthropology and to Euro-American conceptions of theatre? From an Indigenous perspective, "the central tensions in the world today go beyond the crises in capitalism and neoliberalism's version of democracy" since according to Native Canadian, Hawaiian, Maori, and American Indian pedagogy, "the central crisis is spiritual, 'rooted in the increasingly virulent relationship between human beings and the rest of nature' (Grande, 2000, p. 354)" (Denzin et al. 13). In response to this crisis, Indigenous researchers propose "a respectful performance pedagogy [that] works to construct a vision of the person, ecology, and environment" compatible with Indigenous worldviews (13).

In *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*, Kenneth J. Gergen contends that a sustainable relationship between human beings and the natural world is critical to the survival of all forms of life on earth: "To understand the world in which we live as constituted by independent species, forms, types, or entities is to threaten the well-being of the planet Whatever value we place upon ourselves and others, and whatever hope we may have for the future, depends on the welfare of relationship" (396). In light of this compelling notion of welfare, I would argue that it is urgent to consider ways in which performance ethnography can become informed and possibly transformed by Indigenous perspectives.

Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith suggests in *Decolonizing Methodologies* that

Indigenous communities have something to offer to the non-Indigenous world [such as] Indigenous peoples' ideas and beliefs about the origins of the world, their explanations of the environment, often embedded in complicated metaphors and mythic tales [which] are now sought as the basis for thinking more laterally about

current theories about the environment, the earth and the universe. (159)

Smith points to the strategic essentialism that characterizes the way in which Indigenous peoples have managed, in spite of colonial epistemic violence, to preserve an embodied knowledge of who they are. She specifies that, although "claiming essential characteristics is as much strategic as anything else, because it has been about claiming human rights and Indigenous rights, ... the essence of a person is also discussed in relation to Indigenous concepts of spirituality" (74). Indigenous perspectives on research are thus informed by "arguments of different Indigenous peoples based on spiritual relationships to the universe, to the landscape and to stones, rocks, insects and other things, seen and unseen," which, she remarks, "have been difficult arguments for Western systems of knowledge to deal with or accept" (74). She suggests that such arguments "give a partial indication of the different world views and alternative ways of coming to know, and of being, which still endure within the Indigenous world [and which are] critical sites of resistance for Indigenous peoples" (72). Honouring Indigenous worldviews which colonial powers violently attempted to suppress therefore constitutes an important part of the healing process which is key to Indigenous research. Moreover, performance, which is vital to the embodied transmission of traditional knowledge, significantly informs the decolonizing research methodologies developed by Indigenous scholars and activists.

For Hawaiian scholar Manulani Aluli Meyer, conducting decolonizing research that heals entails privileging a form of embodied knowledge that includes feelings, the senses, and intuition. She argues that feeling something is not strictly emotional but reflects an "instinctual sense" ("Our Own Liberation" 142). She specifies,

This distinction fine-tunes how feelings shape epistemology and brings us back into our *senses*, "our basic perceptions," and how they shape how and what we know. Knowledge is not carved from anger or joy. Knowing something is *feeling* something, and it is at the core of our embodied knowledge system Perhaps then, feelings precede emotions, then wisdom develops. (142)

Meyer goes on to cite Hawaiian mentors who explain that, while the brain is considered to be the seat of power, intelligence is located in the area of the stomach, liver, and guts (143). These mentors point out that the head, associated with logic, and the stomach, associated with the heart, must be connected for people to make sensible decisions. Meyer refers to "the merging together of 'head and heart'" as a "dual system of knowing" in which "information, experience, and feelings" are interdependent (142–143). She stresses that, from a Hawaiian perspective, "embodied knowing ... is not divorced from awareness, from body, from spirit, from place" (144). Healing, for Indigenous peoples, therefore often

depends upon reaffirming the value of an experiential way of knowing which challenges dominant views of what constitutes intelligence.

While highlighting the specificity of traditional ways of knowing, Meyer contends that Hawaiian epistemology is relevant and valuable beyond the confines of its geographical and cultural boundaries. Indeed, she posits an Indigenous conception of universality based on the notion that specificity leads to universality. Meyer defines this form of universality as hinging upon “respect and honoring of distinctness” (“Indigenous and Authentic” 230), which she ties to Hawaiian elder Halemakua’s provocative statement “*We are all indigenous*” (“Indigenous and Authentic” 230, italicized in the original). Fending off potential controversies, Meyer cautions that “to take this universal idea into race politics strips it of its truth” (“Indigenous and Authentic” 231). She specifies that Halemakua believed that “at one time, we all came from a place familiar with our evolution and storied with our experiences. At one time, we all had a rhythmic understanding of time and potent experiences of harmony in space” (“Indigenous and Authentic” 231). Characterizing this type of embodied experience as our shared human legacy, Halemakua thus seemed to be calling out to Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians, urging them to “tap into this knowing to engender, again, acts of care, compassion, and the right relationship with land, sky, water, and ocean—vital for these modern times” (“Indigenous and Authentic” 231). The conception of indigeneity evoked here by Halemakua and supported by Meyer is therefore grounded in a place-specific understanding of universality predicated on the interrelation of land and self, experience and spirituality, and embodiment and knowledge.

Performance, Tradition, and Research as Ceremony

Meyer builds on this conception of indigeneity to redefine epistemology as necessarily linked to direct experience and to a “culturally formed sensuality.” She explains that “Mentors’ belief that they are links in a Hawaiian chain reaching back to antiquity helps to prioritize how knowledge is acquired, exchanged, and valued Knowledge as a ‘sequence of immortality’ summarizes this sense of spiritual continuity, as does the notion that we, by ourselves, cannot bring about the kinds of knowing that endure” (“Our Own Liberation” 128). Cultural continuity thus vitally depends on the embodied transmission of traditional performance-based practices such as ritual chanting and dancing.

The *Kumulipo*, a Hawaiian genealogical prayer chant, is a case in point. Martha Warren Beckwith remarks that “since writing was unknown in Polynesia before contact with foreign culture,” it was the responsibility of the *Haku-mele*, or master of song, to memorize and perform this chant made up of over two thousand lines. The oral transmission of this sacred chant entailed the acquisition of specific vocal techniques combining

vibration (*kuolo*), a guttural sound (*kaohi*), and a form of gurgling (*alala*), produced by different parts of the vocal apparatus. Beckwith notes that “such a feat of memory ... was hence common to the gifted expert in Polynesia” (Beckwith 35–36). Halemakua’s description of indigeneity as a “rhythmic understanding of time and potent experiences of harmony in space” (“Indigenous and Authentic” 231) can thus be perceived as a reminder of the extent to which the trans-generational transmission of Hawaii’s remarkably rich musical legacy has contributed to the type of spiritual continuity identified by Meyer as crucial to Hawaiian identity and cultural sovereignty.

The relational dimension of what constitutes traditional ways of knowing is discussed by Cree scholar Shawn Wilson, who observes that “knowledge itself is held in the relationships and connections formed with the environment that surrounds us” (87). He notes that relationships made with people and relationships made with the environment are equally sacred, and states that bringing people and things together in the same space strengthens the relationships they share, which, he specifies, is “what ceremony is all about” (87). Wilson infers from this conception of relationality that research itself is ceremony since it is about strengthening relationships that hinge upon respect and reciprocity, for the way in which research is conducted affects “the relational quality of knowledge and knowing” (91). Relationality implies that Indigenous research must be inclusive of a multiplicity of perspectives, since “one person cannot possibly know all of the relationships that brought another’s ideas” (92), a view which promotes a form of epistemological egalitarianism (94). Moreover, as noted by Wilson, relational accountability is key to conducting respectful and mutually beneficial research, thereby displacing claims to objectivity made by dominant research systems (101). Interestingly, Wilson relates this conception of relational accountability to Meyer’s equation of knowledge with hermeneutics (102).

Indeed, Meyer states, “We are active in our understanding. We are engaged in it. Knowing something becomes something *we create*” (“Our Own Liberation” 132). She provides the example of the Hawaiian word *a’o* for “teaching and learning,” whose sound she suggests seems to infer reciprocity, and which she notes is also part of the word for ‘taste,’ thus implying that “tasting experience is a large part of understanding it” (“Our Own Liberation” 132). Moreover, she relates *a’apo*, the word for “touch,” to experiential knowledge by pointing out that “the sense of touch informs our understanding, particularly when we ‘grasp’ something. We can know through our bodies, our bodies become instruments of knowing, and instruments for cultural expression” (133). By linking the senses to teaching, learning, and cultural expression, Meyer posits an embodied agency grounded in the relational dimension of knowledge discussed by Wilson. She observes that “the genesis of Hawaiian knowledge is based on experience, and experience is grounded in our sensory rapport” (133), inferring that

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knowledge itself is shaped by the senses, so that awareness, intuition, and insight depend on sensual maturity, or what she describes as the art of paying attention, a “culturally specific ‘deep internalized knowledge’ ... achieved only through practice” (134). By providing alternative perspectives on the relationship between embodiment, knowledge, and cultural practice Meyer, Smith, and Wilson therefore open up an array of new possibilities for the development of methodologies situated at the intersection of Indigenous epistemologies, performance studies, and experimental ethnography.

Decolonizing performance ethnography necessarily entails redefining both ethnographic research, shaped by the discipline of anthropology, and performance practice, informed by Western theatre. The relevance of theatre for Indigenous peoples is questioned by Cree performer, director, and writer Floyd Favel, who testifies to the absence of a Canadian Indigenous theatre and declares: “Theatre is new to us, and it has gone through many changes in the past hundred years, from Wild West shows to traditional dances onstage, to Aboriginal-themed dramas performed using European theatre techniques” (“Poetry, Remnants and Ruins” 33). He asserts

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that in order to reclaim Aboriginal performance outside of the Canadian theatre system, it is necessary to conceive of theatre “as a younger brother of tradition,” which, for Favel, requires “allying theatre with language and tradition as a means of revitalizing our fractured cultures through the transformative power of tradition” (33). The relationship between theatre and tradition he envisions is rooted in a conception of performance which he links to spirituality: “theatre comes from across the Big Water and our traditions originate here Where these two mediums connect is at a spiritual level. In the moment of performance, higher self is activated, and it is at this higher plane that theatre and tradition are connected and related” (33).



Floyd Favel in his solo performance *Snow Before the Sun* commissioned by the Denver Art Museum in Denver, Colorado, in 2007. The performance featured original music composed by Dene singer Leela Gilday, and according to Favell was based on the destruction of the Plains Indian cultures using the Ghost Dance as a motif, as well as on the iconic figure of Billy Jack from the B movie series popular among native people in the 1970s.

Photo by Alexander Kantaev

In an interview I conducted with Favel in January 2011, he relates performance and ceremony by explaining that the purpose of any performance technique should be to make people feel better, live longer, be happier; and he observes that ceremonies in his culture serve these purposes. He remarks that participating in ceremonies is linked to being clean, which means that there are no obstacles between oneself and another person, oneself and the tree, oneself and the universe. Since mental or emotional obstacles make it impossible for a person to feel good, being in good relationship with the universe implies being in good relationship with oneself and others, including one’s ancestors. Ceremonies are therefore an opportunity to put on a feast for the ancestors and to dance with them, which Favel associates with being healthy. In turn, ancestors can help the living by bringing them good fortune.

While Favel relates performance and tradition in his creative research, Meyer enacts in her scholarship the relationship she posits between tradition and research. She writes: “maybe the research that will be asked from you will come from ancient sources that are now ready to be known. This was the case for my own work. Learning and practicing my Hawaiian culture changed *everything*” (“The Context Within”). Envisioning and practicing research as a way of bringing about “recovery, renewal, reawakening,” Meyer suggests that knowledge is an expression of ritual, insight, relationship, and life (“The Context Within”).

Building on the interrelation of performance, tradition, and research, I would suggest that performance ethnography informed by Indigenous perspectives can teach us how research may become ceremony. Indeed, Wilson emphasizes the embodied, relational, and spiritual dimensions of research,

and states that, from an Indigenous perspective, knowledge is relational and shared, so that one is answerable to all one's relations—including one's environment, one's ancestors, and the world at large—when one is conducting research (56). If we can envision research as a “practiced knowing,” defined by Meyer as “a knowledge that keeps pace with the tides, moon and stars” (“The Context Within”), then perhaps we can reclaim Turner’s conception of performance in order to practice performance ethnography as a process that brings meaningful actions to completion, so that our work may strengthen and sustain the welfare of relationships upon which our survival, as a performing species, so crucially depends.

Notes

1. See James Clifford and George E. Marcus in the critical anthology *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986). For a re-assessment of the influence of *Writing Culture* on anthropology and ethnographic practice, see Rabinow et al. in *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary* (2008).
2. See my article titled “Conducting Embodied Research at the Intersection of Performance Studies, Experimental Ethnography and Indigenous Methodologies” in *Anthropologica: Canadian Anthropology Society Journal* 53.2 (2011): 213–227.
3. See Quo-Li Driskill’s article titled “Theatre as Suture: Grassroots Performance, Decolonization and Healing” in *Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Theory, Practice, Ethics*. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008. 155–168.

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Prior to joining UBC, Virginie Magnat held a Postdoctoral Faculty Fellowship in Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She currently directs a SSHRC-funded international research project examining women's foremost contributions to Grotowski's cross-cultural investigation of performance, and is completing a book and documentary film series contracted by Routledge.