

CHAPTER 5

Performing Culture

Theory in Perspective: How Do Cultures Perform?

Anthropology, sociology, and even psychology in the mid-nineteenth century took “the study of man” as their central concern. The guiding method for these new academic areas was **positivism**, the belief that covering laws of human organization could be discovered through direct observation. This perspective maintains that the universe is orderly, and the job of scientific inquiry is to discover this order and classify it in systematic ways. Charles Darwin’s work on **evolution** was an important model for researchers in the social sciences who searched for origins in the “evolution” of culture.

Theories of the evolution of culture are interwoven with the study of religion. Three schools of theory emerged in the nineteenth century—myth and ritual, sociological, and psychological—all asking the question, Did religion originate in myth or ritual? Mircea Eliade was interested in the phenomenology of religious experience and how **myths and rituals** are expressions of both the sacred and the profane in culture that provide unity for people. The **sociological** school, led by Emile Durkheim, maintained that religion is a social creation whose function is to preserve the welfare of a society. Sigmund Freud anchored the **psychological** approach: taboos of incest and patricide necessitate rituals that appease repressed desires.

Across these approaches, performance was studied for its window into larger cultural structures, like religion, politics, economics, language, and identity (Beeman 1993). When specific performance genres were studied (like rites, rituals, games, contests, dance, and music), performance was often seen as a fixed, static product, evidence of cross-cultural similarities, and indicative of universal needs and expressions.

This chapter traces the theories that helped transform the “study of man” into the study of performance. Arnold van Gennep’s (1909/1960) rites of passage, Johan

Huizinga's (1938/1950) play theory, and Milton Singer's (1972) cultural performance laid the groundwork for the **performance turn** in the study of culture. This turn rejects the view of performances as fixed objects to be studied in the science of positivism and embraces performance as a paradigm for understanding how culture makes and remakes itself. Performance can be understood as "the embodied processes that produce and consume culture . . . performance makes things and does things" (Hamera 2006, 5).

The work of anthropologist Victor Turner, introduced in Chapter Four through the social drama, is credited for ushering in this performance turn in the study of culture. Turner rejects concepts of culture as static or deterministic structures that "imprint" themselves on waxlike, malleable humans. Humans push back in meaningful and efficacious ways on culture, and in turn, change it. Turner argues that a performance approach to culture (1) reflects dynamic cultural processes, (2) enables possibilities between and within cultural structures, and (3) provides opportunities for critique and transformation. Performances are *constitutive* of culture, not something added to culture; performances are *epistemic*, the way cultural members "know" and enact the possibilities in their worlds; and performances are *critical* lenses for looking at and reshaping cultural forms.

This chapter surveys theories that help us answer these questions: What is culture? How do people move in and through culture? What is ritual? How is culture performed individually and collectively, especially as a vehicle of history, public memory, and institutions? What are our ethical responsibilities toward cultures other than our own?

What Is Culture?

Dictionary definitions of "culture" have changed through time. From the Latin *cultura*, meaning "cultivation" or "tending," the growing of plants, crops, or animals is a very early meaning of the word. Most of us think of culture in two different ways based on definitions more than one hundred years old.

In 1882, British poet and social theorist Matthew Arnold proposed culture as the **refinement of tastes and sensibilities**. He maintained that culture is "the pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know . . . the best which has been thought and said in the world." Arnold held Western music, art, architecture, and literature as his standard for civilization and for "high culture." English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1871/1958) expanded the definition of culture as "that **complex whole** which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."

Raymond Williams (1958/1983) was the first to propose that culture is **ordinary**, the "common meanings and directions" of a society. These meanings are learned, made, and remade by individuals. Culture is at once **traditional**, a whole way of life passed on through generations, and **creative**, the processes of discovery that lead to new ways of thinking and doing.

Clifford Geertz (1973) argues that culture is **semiotic**: Systems of meaning, signification, and symbol use are central to both patterned conduct and individual frames of mind. Culture is a symbolic system unique to humans in which meanings are publicly shared and the collective property of a group. Drawing from Kenneth Burke, Geertz (1973, 9–10) argues that “human behavior is symbolic action—action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies.”

John Bodley (1994) lists three components of culture: **what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce**. Bodley summarizes the properties of culture: It is shared, learned, symbolically transmitted cross-generationally, adaptive to the physical world, and integrated with it.

Wen Shu Lee (2002) defines culture as “**the shifting tensions between the shared and the unshared**,” acknowledging that culture is contested within and across groups. She offers this example of historical and value shifts: “American *culture* has changed from master/slave, to white only/black only, to antiwar and black power, to affirmative action/multiculturalism and political correctness, to transnational capital and anti-sweatshop campaigns” (quoted in Martin and Nakayama 2004, 76).

In one hundred years, the concept of culture has developed and shifted. The tensions, however, have remained the same as theorists posit culture as between and among the individual and the group, high and low, tradition and change, symbol systems and material products, human biology and human learning, shared and unshared meanings within and between groups, systems, and power.

Approaches to Studying Culture

Robert Wuthnow (1987) outlines four contemporary approaches to studying culture that are helpful in understanding the above definitions. A **subjective** approach to culture focuses on beliefs, attitudes, and values held by individuals. Culture is conceived as *mental constructions* expressed in outlooks, anxieties, desires, and subjective states of the individual. Meaning in this approach is “the individual’s interpretation of reality” (1987, 11). Social psychologists and sociologists often take this approach when they measure people’s attitudes, values, and beliefs with surveys, focus groups, participant observation, and interviews.

A **structural** approach to culture seeks out the patterns and rules that hold a culture together. This approach looks for the *symbolic boundaries* evident within a culture created in language and how these *boundaries among cultural elements are maintained and changed*. A structural approach differs from a subjective approach: Culture is the object to be studied and observed, not the subjective states of individual members. Culture is characterized by its boundaries, categories, and elements that can be seen, read, recorded, and classified. Kinship systems are a good example of boundaries that maintain and change culture.

Wuthnow’s third category is a **dramaturgical** approach to culture which “focuses on the expressive or communicative properties of culture. . . . Culture is

approached in interaction with social structure” (1987, 13). Like structural approaches, a dramaturgical approach maintains that culture is observable, but classifies these observations as “utterances, acts, objects, and events” (13). Most important, this approach seeks to explore the dramatic ordering of social life not as information, but for the ways that rituals, ideologies, and other symbolic acts “*dramatize* the nature of *social relations*” (13). Chapter Four, “Performing Drama,” featured Kenneth Burke and Victor Turner. Chapter Six features Erving Goffman. All are considered “fathers” of this approach to culture.

An **institutional** approach to culture adds the elements of culture as studied by structuralists to the moral order studied by dramaturgists to explore the organizations that constitute culture. These organizations necessarily *require resources and influence the distribution of these resources* across members of their culture. Institutional approaches most often feature the interplay between culture and state. Marxist, socialist, and systems theorists utilize this approach. “Follow the money” is a common phrase for tracking institutions (the federal, state, and local governments, education, science, even the mass media) as agents that garner and distribute resources in a culture.

How culture is conceptualized—as mental states, structures, social relations, or institutions—is intimately linked to how culture is studied across academic disciplines and methods. Moving from social scientific models of positivism to critical models of interpretation and power, Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama (1999, 13) advocate a **dialectical** approach to studying culture *as heterogeneous, dynamic, and contested*. This approach “accepts that human nature is probably both creative and deterministic; that research goals can be to predict, describe, and change; that the relationship between culture and communication is, most likely, both reciprocal and contested.”

The tensions between the individual and the group, high and low, tradition and change, symbol systems and material products, human biology and human learning, culture and communication will pull especially tight when the study of culture leaves some members out entirely.

ACT OUT

Class Culture

Think of your classroom as a culture. Divide the class into five groups to approach this culture subjectively, structurally, dramaturgically, institutionally, and dialectically. How might this class be *described*, what elements can be *studied*, and how might *change* be advocated when approached in these five different ways?

Perform your discoveries for the class. First, create a “slice of life” in this culture that seeks to highlight your approach’s assumptions about culture, where it is “located,” and its properties. Second, present your analysis of that performance. What are the benefits of this approach? What are its limitations?



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READ MORE ABOUT IT

“This Was My Life as an Undergraduate”

Donna Marie Nudd (1998, 152), Professor of Communication at Florida State University, regularly participates in teaching workshops offered at the beginning of the fall semester for new teaching assistants. She and her colleague from theatre, Frank Trezza, create and perform scenes of classrooms with the PIE (Program for Instructional Excellence) Players. The idea is to show, rather than tell, new teachers classroom dilemmas. They follow the performances with periods of discussion. The following is Nudd's description of one eight-minute scene (featuring Terry Galloway) and her analysis of the audience's reaction.

It's the third day of class, the teacher is taking role. Terry enters late and slams the door. Undergraduates mutter comments to themselves or each other: "Oooh, that's tough on a hangover," "God, her student loan must not have come through," etc. The teacher continues to call role from the desk. Terry, chatting with a student behind her, misses her name as she is actively engaged in conversation about the price of books. Class begins. The teacher tries to facilitate a discussion on affirmative action and its effect on women. She writes, "A.A." and "Women" on the chalkboard. Class discussion begins. Thinking the topic at hand is Alcoholics Anonymous, Terry at one point in the group discussion launches into a seemingly unrelated monologue about her sister who is a member of that organization and her resentment of its religious overtones. The teacher is thrown by

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Terry's response, but picks up some lone thread of Terry's monologue and tries to weave it back into the topic at hand. Another member of this class makes fun of Terry and her ridiculous ideas. Terry responds in kind. As the situation becomes even more heated, the teacher unsuccessfully tries to regain control. The class degenerates into name-calling. Finally, at her wit's end, the infuriated teacher calls an end to the discussion. She tells them, "It's over!" With her back again toward Terry, she tells the class to get into their assigned small groups and adds, "You have exactly ten minutes to summarize all the key points from the textbook in regard to affirmative action's effect on women." Terry, watching the students stand up and move, and having lip-read "It's over!" thinks the class has been dismissed and leaves the classroom muttering snide comments.

That was the scene. In their small group and large group discussions, 200–250 teaching assistants analyzed this scene by noting (1) that the teacher was woefully unprepared; (2) that topics such as "affirmative action" are controversial and difficult to handle in the classroom; (3) that the rude, not-too-smart, volatile, and clearly disturbed student, Terry, should be immediately advised to go to the counseling center. After the graduate students expressed their views, the emcee of the plenary session quietly motioned to Terry. Terry said simply, "I'm deaf; this was my life as an undergraduate." Once the proverbial pin had dropped in the auditorium, Terry spoke briefly about being a deaf college student. After Terry's autobiographical follow up, the PIE Players replayed the scene. This time, the nine or ten clues to Terry's disability that were built into the scene seemed thrown into relief—her slamming the door, her missing entire sections of the teacher's lecture when the teacher was writing on the blackboard, her shifts in volume level . . . her previously viewed non-sequitur about A.A. . . .

Hundreds of graduate students were made acutely aware of how difficult it can be to pinpoint a disability even in what might seem to be the most obvious of circumstances.

SOURCE: Donna Marie Nudd, "Improvising Our Way to the Future." In *The Future of Performance Studies: Visions and Revisions*, edited by Sheron J. Dailey, 1998. Used by permission of the National Communication Association.

From Studying "Man" to Theorizing Movement and Play

D. Soyini Madison (2005, 149) writes that performance is central "to the meanings and effects of human behavior, consciousness, and culture. These days, it seems one can hardly address any subject in the arts, humanities, and social sciences without encountering the concept of performance." Performance—as central to the study of humans across academic disciplines—didn't take center stage overnight.

Two important theorists in the twentieth century asked new questions of culture to begin the shift from studying "man" as a "bearer of culture" to studying performance as constitutive of culture. Arnold van Gennep theorized rites of passage and John Huizinga theorized play as founding moments in and through culture.

Play and rites of passage are central to thinking differently and asking different questions about what people do, the movement through cultural processes, and the products they produce. Play and ritual are often conceived as opposite cultural structures:

[P]lay is understood as the force of uncertainty which counter-balances the structure provided by ritual. Where ritual depends on repetition, play stresses innovation and creativity. Where ritual is predictable, play is contingent. But all performances, even rituals, contain some element of play, some space for variation. And most forms of play involve pre-established patterns of behavior. (Bial 2004, 115)

The next two sections trace the development, central concepts, and intertwining of rites of passage and play that lay the groundwork for a performance approach to culture.

Rites of Passage: Moving through Culture

In 1909, French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep published a book entitled *Les Rites de Passage* (*The Rites of Passage*). At the time, ethnography as an academic endeavor was thriving, but van Gennep was critical of the tendency to “extract data,” the rites, ceremonies, and other practices, from the social settings and contexts in which they were performed. Van Gennep is interested not only in the “what” of religious beliefs and practices across the world, but in the “how” and “why” of those practices (Kimball 1960).

Van Gennep’s central thesis is that *all individuals undergo “life crises,” and that ceremonies exist to assure safe travel through those crises; hence, rites of passage*. While the forms and contents of these rites differ from group to group through time, van Gennep argues,

For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross: the thresholds of summer and winter, of a season or a year, of a month or a night; the thresholds of birth, adolescence, maturity, and old age; the threshold of death and that of the after-life—for those who believe in it. (1909/1960, 189–90)

While a number of ethnographers and anthropologists have studied, for example, “puberty rites” or “marriage rites” in particular cultures, van Gennep describes and explains their significance in three new ways.

1. Rites of passage are **ordered in a typical, recurring pattern**: *separation, transition, and incorporation*. All rites of passage begin by separating the individual from his or her customary environment; a period of transition is marked by

liminality—betwixt and between the two worlds; the third stage is incorporation into the new group or state and a return to the customary environment.

2. **Transition** is the stage that *orients and enables* the other two stages. If the transition period is lengthy, it will usually repeat within it the separation, transition, and incorporation phases.

3. Rites of passage are **territorial passages**. That is, they involve *physical space*, and these spaces are not just “symbols” of movement. “In fact, the spatial separation of distinct groups is an aspect of social organization. . . . In short, a change of social categories involves a change of residence, and this fact is expressed by the rites of passage in their various forms” (192).

Categories of Rites of Passage

Van Gennep categorizes six kinds of rites of passage. He begins with the often elaborate ceremonies that deal with **strangers** (greeting rituals, signs of friendship, protections, and taboos) and how to move them from separation, to transition, and to incorporation safely within the group. Rites of **pregnancy and childbirth** follow the threefold structure: The pregnant woman is separated or isolated from the group because “she is considered impure and dangerous or because her very pregnancy places her physiologically and socially in an abnormal condition” (1909/1960, 41). These may be marked by special taboos against food, sex, or places during pregnancy. Birth usually marks the beginning of “a transition period with gradual removal of barriers,” and then “reintegration into ordinary life” (44) as a “social return from childbirth” for the mother.

Birth and childhood rites of passage often begin with ceremonies for the newborn child to highlight separation from mother’s body. Transition rites for the newborn or the child feature moving into this new world. Incorporation involves being accepted into family, extended family, tribe, and clan through naming ceremonies, ritual nursing, or baptism. All of these serve “to introduce [the] child into the world.” (54). In naming rites, especially, the child is “both individualized and incorporated into society” (62).

Initiation rites for van Gennep include a host of ceremonies “which bring about admission to age groups and secret societies” (65). Van Gennep is careful to distinguish “puberty rites,” which usually involved physical or sexual maturation, from what he called “social puberty.” Instead of marking the advent of sexual activity, which varies so vastly from group to group, he notes that “these are rites of separation from the asexual world, and they are followed by rites of incorporation into the world of sexuality, and, in all societies and all social groups, into a group confined to persons of one sex or the other” (67). Initiates are often cut or marked as a “a sign of union” with the new group. For clan membership or secret society, entrance is often gained through a death/rebirth dramatization. “Twice born” and “born again” are phrases that indicate a new life.

Betrothal and marriage is the fifth category of rites of passage. “Marriage is an essentially social act,” according to van Gennep, and its repercussions cross groups,

economics, and emotions. “To marry is to pass from the group of children or adolescents into the adult group, from a given clan to another, from one family to another, and often from one village to another” (1909/1960, 124). Marriage ceremonies, as separation from old worlds, are often denoted by acts that cut, break, or throw away something associated with the old world. The transition is sometimes marked by breaking “virginity” symbolically, bathing or anointments, veiling oneself, or changing one’s name or personality. Other marriage separation rites include passing over something, whether stepping, jumping, or being carried over (131), or breaking a ritual threshold of some kind.

Marriages are essentially “rites of union,” so rites of incorporation, uniting two people together, often involve exchanging gifts and food, sharing the same seat, washing or anointing each other. Van Gennep maintains that “all these rites of incorporation should be understood literally rather than symbolically: the cord which binds, the ring, the bracelet, and the garland which encircles have a real coercive effect” (134).

Finally, van Gennep details the stages of separation, initiation, and incorporation in **funeral** ceremonies. For mourners, separation involves marking them off as a special group, often designated by special clothing and prohibitions; their specialness increases depending on their relation to the deceased. Ordinary social activity is suspended. Transition often involves the “extended stay of the corpse or coffin” in wakes or viewings. The funeral itself, for the mourners, is the transition. The meal or gathering after the funeral is a rite of incorporation, serving “to reunite all the surviving members of the group with each other, and sometimes also with the deceased, in the same way that a chain which has been broken by the disappearance of one of its links must be rejoined” (164–65).

Van Gennep sought to explain the structures that move people between life stages, groups, and social stations. “Safe travel” is always about thresholds, movement, and territory.

From Individuals to Cultural Membership

While rites of passage may seem to focus on the individual, rites of passage are crucial to culture constituted in and through its performances. Barbara Meyerhoff, Linda A. Camino, and Edith Turner (1987) argue that rites fulfill the crucial task of “inculcating a society’s rules and values to those who are to become its full-fledged members” (383). Ritual participants are especially susceptible to learning during



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rites: Old habits and ways of being are stripped away, awaiting new forms of participation and performance in culture. The crux of learning and transformation is in the performance.

While anthropologists have studied rites of passage across the world, performance studies research tends to feature historical and contemporary American rites and performances that enable group unity and personal development. Ann Larabee (1992, 53) details a rite of passage before 1914 at Wellesley College, one of the first women's colleges in the United States. First-year students had to pass under the chair of a statue of Harriet Martineau, a femi-

nist educator, in "a brilliant and brutal parody of the transition into college life." Elizabeth Fine's 2003 *Soulstepping* explores how step shows are an integral rite of passage into full membership in the brotherhood or sisterhood of African-American fraternities and sororities. Fine (2003, 53) maintains that "joining an African American Greek-letter society involves a transition to greater social visibility as well as a fictive kinship of brotherhood or sisterhood." Tracy Stephenson (2004) investigates backpacking as a rite of passage for American youth that is a performed achievement by the individual.

Eric King Watts (2005) explores Eminem's film *8 Mile* through the real and symbolic violence of Rabbit's initiation; and Robert Westerfelhaus and Robert Brookey (2004) analyze *Fight Club* for its celebration of homosocial bonding available through initiation's liminal phase. These film analyses of rites of passage—as a tripartite structure, as transitional, and as physical movement—argue that race and heterosexual privilege are maintained at the violent expense of others. The learning that happens in these rites need not be libratory for culture.

GO FIGURE

Passage on the Web

Some argue that Northern American culture is devoid of rites of passage, giving rise to individuals without a compass or direction. The Internet is full of organizations that offer programs, retreats, and journeys for "at-risk youth," "adolescent girls," "directionless women," and even "inner-city gang members."

Choose one Web site and analyze the organization's characterization of rites of passage, its functional claims for the individuals and society, and its created ceremonies. How do these organizations enact van Gennep's three phases? How is the transition period enacted? How does the rite involve territorial movement?

Homo Ludens/Playing Man

John Huizinga was a Dutch historian well known at the time for his 1914 book, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, but he began as a scholar of Indian literature and cultures. He brought a vast knowledge of history, literature, and cultural forms to his theory of play. Huizinga wrote *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* in 1938; the first German edition was published in 1944; the English edition was published in 1950.

Huizinga begins his treatise on play as a cultural phenomenon with an amazing claim and description:

Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing. We can safely assert, even, that human civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play. Animals play just like men. We have only to watch young dogs to see that all the essentials of human play are present in their merry gambols. They invite one another to play by a certain ceremoniousness of attitude and gesture. They keep to the rule that you shall not bite, or not bite hard, your brother's ear. They pretend to get terribly angry. And—what is most important—in all these doings they plainly experience enjoyment. Such rompings of young dogs are only one of the simpler forms of animal play. There are other, much more highly developed forms: regular contests and beautiful performances before an admiring public. (1938/1950, 1)

Huizinga argues that play is a special and significant form of human activity, one of the main bases of civilization, a founding moment of culture.

Huizinga begins by rejecting previous theories of play that assume that play must serve some purpose: discharge of energy, need for relaxation, practice in skills, wish fulfillment, imitation, and so on. None of those explanations treat play *as play*, what it is, and what it means to the player. Nor do any of those theories account for fun. Huizinga outlines the characteristics of play as play.

Characteristics of Play

1. Play is **voluntary**. It must be freely chosen, otherwise it becomes duty or obligation. Remember when your mother *made* you play with a cousin you hated?
2. Play **steps out** of “real, ordinary life” and **into** a “temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own” (8). Play literally transports us into another world, and we are fully aware that this other world is “pretend.” Play is not serious, but it is absorbing. The “intensity” of play is observable on the face and body of any “absorbed” video game player.

3. Play **creates its own limits** of time and place. These limits, in backyards or on front stoops, are often broken when someone hollers, "Time for dinner!" As certain forms of play are repeated, they become traditions: Repetition and alternation are integral.

The space and place for play, the play-ground, is marked off beforehand, "either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course" (10). Whether in solitary games of puzzles or skill or in gambling and athletics, play tests the player's prowess and abilities.

4. **Nothing is "produced"** by play. There are no material gains or profits, except the joy of play itself.

5. Play **creates its own rules**. These rules must be agreed to by all and adhered to by all, otherwise rule-breakers are "spoilsports." Unlike cheaters, spoilsports destroy the play world, shattering the *illusion* (which literally means "in-play") of play.

6. Play promotes both **secrecy and social groups**. Play is especially wonderful when a "secret" is made out of it, promoting and pertaining to "us" and not others. Play also creates permanent play-communities, oftentimes marked by "dressing up."

For Huizinga, these characteristics of play fund connections between play and three concepts: language, myth, and ritual. All are permeated with play. Language is always a "play on words," creating a symbolic world alongside material realities. Myth is an account of the world that plays "on the border-line between jest and earnest." In ritual, Huizinga insists, the "spirit of pure play" is "truly understood" (4–5).

Is Ritual Play Really Believed?

Ritual performances exhibit all the same formal characteristics as play: A special place is staked out, a sacred ground, creating a rule-bound world of its own. And play, as "pretend," infects poles of belief in ritual acts. Huizinga argues that all ritual involves participants who, on some level, question the "reality" of what is happening. On another level, they willingly participate and experience the moods and feelings the rite seeks to create. Huizinga writes, "Whether one is sorcerer or sorcerized one is always knower and dupe at once. But one chooses to be the dupe" (23).

Huizinga's claim is borne out by the experience of believing in and enacting traditions of Santa Claus in the West. Carl Anderson and Norman Prentice (1994) interviewed fifty-two children to ask, "When did you stop believing?" Around age seven, they claimed. The children reported they enjoyed being "in" on the Santa story. But children also "pretended" to believe for three reasons: to protect younger siblings, to avoid disappointing their parents, and to continue to garner gifts. The seriousness of "play" in the language, myth, and ritual of Santa is manifested in performances—individual, family, and culture.

READ MORE ABOUT IT

The Lion Is Real

Camara Laye, author of The Dark Child: Autobiography of an African Boy (1954, 100–101, 106, 109), tells the story of the ceremony of the lions, prelude to his rite of passage to manhood in the Malinke tribe of French Guinea (now Mali, in northern Africa).

Konden Diara, “the lion who eats little boys,” was a constant “bogeyman” of his childhood, used by authorities to elicit his good behavior. The ceremony begins with drumming and rounding up the boys to go face the lion. Laye writes, “Here was Konden Diara leaving the dim world of hearsay, here he was taking on flesh and blood, yes, and roused by Kodoke’s tom-tom was prowling around the town! This was to be the night of Konden Diara” (1954, 94–95).

Laye’s description speaks to the multiple levels of experience, secrecy surrounding the rite, and the “game” played. The initiates are taken to a special place in the bush, cleared of tall grasses, near a bombax tree. They are ordered to kneel on the ground and cover their eyes, to wait for Konden Diara to appear.

We were expecting to hear this hoarse roar, we were not expecting any other sound, but it took us by surprise and shattered us, froze our hearts with its unexpectedness. And it was not only a lion, it was not only Konden Diara roaring: there were ten, twenty, perhaps thirty lions that took their lead from him, uttering their terrible roars and surrounding the hollow; ten or twenty lions separated from us by a few yards only. . . .

“You mustn’t be afraid!” I said to myself. “You must master your fear! Your father has commanded you to!” . . . How was I to stave off fear when I was within range of the dread monster? If he pleased, Konden Diara could leap the fire in one bound and sink his claws in my back!

I did not doubt the presence of the monster, not for a single instant. . . .

What was it my father had said? “Konden Diara roars; but he won’t do more than roar; he will not take you away.” . . . Yes, something like that. But was it true, really true? . . .

And do not people also die of fright? Ah! how I wished this roaring would stop! How I wished I was far away from this clearing, back in the . . . warm security of the hut! Would this roaring never cease? . . .

Whereupon, suddenly, they stopped!

. . .

Later I got to know who Konden Diara was, and I learned these things when the time had come for me to learn them. . . . No, they were not real lions that roared in the clearing, for it was the older boys, simply the older boys. They created the roaring sound with small boards, thick at the center, sharp at the edges. . . . There was a hole on one side that permitted it to be tied to a string. The older boys swung it around like a sling, and, to increase the speed of the gyrations, they too turned with it. The board cut through the air and produced a sound like a lion’s roar.

. . .

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I know that such conduct must appear strange, but it is absolutely true. If the ceremony of the lions has a character of a game, it is for the most part pure mystification, yet it has one important feature: it is a test, a training in a hardship, a rite; the prelude to a tribal rite, and for the present that is all one can say. . . . It is obvious that if the secret were to be given away, the ceremony would lose much of its power.

SOURCE: Excerpts from *THE DARK CHILD* by Camara Laye, translated by James Kirkup, Ernest Jones, and Elaine Gottlieb. Copyright © 1954, renewed 1982 by Camara Laye. Reprinted by permission of Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

Characteristics of Ritual

Ritual theorists, across academic disciplines and methods, have agreed on three characteristics of ritual activities, according to Catherine Bell (1997, 94). First, ritual action is **communal**, involving groups of people who gain social solidarity through their participation. Second, the action is **traditional** and “understood as carrying on ways of acting established in the past” (94). Third, ritual is **rooted in beliefs** in divine beings.

Ritual action is often divided into sacred and secular, but these categories are usually not distinct from each other, especially when approached as “genres of ritual action.” Bell lists these genres: rites of passage, calendrical rites, rules of exchange and communication, rites of affliction; feasting, fasting, and festivals; and political rites. All of these activities are “strategic ways of acting” (7) that in turn produce and organize our knowledge of the world. These ways of acting range from the “religious to the secular, the public to the private, the routine to the improvised, the formal to the casual, and the periodic to the irregular” (138). Bell explains five characteristics of ritual-like activities, demonstrating that ritualization is a process, flexible, and strategic.

1. **Formalization** is the degree of formality in dress or speech that marks an activity as ritual-like. Ceremonial costumes, language, gestures, and movement occur on a continuum between informal and casual to highly restricted and formal. These restrictions say a great deal about hierarchy, authority, and symbolic messages. A family dinner at the kitchen table and a state dinner at the White House differ in degrees of formality.

2. **Traditionalism**, or “we have always done this” (150), appeals to cultural precedents. Bell gives the examples of using great grandmother’s lace tablecloth at Thanksgiving, the British judicial system’s powdered wigs and robes, and academic regalia as examples of traditional ways of acting. The Pledge of Allegiance to the U.S. flag, “invented” in 1954, testifies to the fact that “traditional” practices may be quite young.

3. **Invariance** emphasizes “precise repetition and physical control” (152). Actions are performed exactly the same each time. Military marching maneuvers and high kicks of the Radio City Rockettes are examples that speak to the rigorous

training of the body. This repetition testifies to the “timeless authority of the group, its doctrines, or its practices” (150). The structures and formulas enacted at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, for example, are the same everywhere.

4. **Rule-governance** maintains that ritual-like activities are governed by rules that guide and direct the activities, especially by designating what is not allowed or acceptable. Sporting events and games, debates, and legal proceedings all have specific rules that “hold individuals to communally approved patterns of behavior” (155).

5. **Sacral symbolism** appeals to supernatural beings. People and objects become sacred through the ritual acts, or ritual-like acts, that create them. The Christian cross, the Star of David, the American flag, even places (war memorials, Niagara Falls, and Mt. Everest) become something special in and through ritualization.

Rituals Are Performed

All of the above characteristics are manifested in and through performance. In short, ritual or ritual-like events do not exist outside of the performances that create them. In Victor Turner’s phrasing (1981, 155–56), “I like to think of ritual essentially as *performance*, as *enactment*, and not primarily as rules or rubrics. The rules frame the ritual process, and the ritual process transcends its frame. A river needs banks or it will be a dangerous flood, but banks without a river epitomize aridity.”

Rituals, and ritual-like actions, abound in our daily lives as a way to give meaning and significance to experience. Memorials and tributes, for example, spring up



SOURCE: Photograph by Jack Delano. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [reproduction number LC-USW3-2809-D].

spontaneously for local victims of tragic deaths or for episodes of violence that capture national attention (Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti 1998). These are important moments that not only memorialize the deceased but attempt “to address larger, causative, social problems” like domestic violence, child kidnapping and abuse, massacres, and war protests (Santino 2004). September 11 tributes at baseball parks across America sought to comfort participants, but soon turned to propaganda of “belligerent patriotism” (Butterworth 2005).

Ritual events are also marked by joy, fun, and anticipation: the Olympic Games, Halloween, birthday parties, Native American powwows (Roberts 2002), the return of *Monday Night Football*, even the annual televised showing of *The Wizard of Oz* (Payne 1989). For Turner, this is the “room for play” that ritual performance enables: play with symbols, play with meanings, and play with words (1981, 162).

This room for play is evidenced in contemporary “do-it-yourself rituals.” Laine Bergeson (2004, 66) writes,

Ritual celebrations knit us into history, and even into prehistory, connecting humans to each other over geography and time. . . . Many still find connection in the rites and ceremonies passed down to them from the lives and faiths of their parents and grandparents. For others, contemporary life has grown so secular, colored by irony, or just plain different that the old ways of marking major transitions no longer resonate. As more people enter nontraditional romantic partnerships, choose not to have children, and change jobs or genders or continents, the rituals of the past feel increasingly outdated. The need for ritual is so deep, though, that people have begun creating their own.

Do-it-yourself (DIY) rituals include celebrating the arrival of menopause, births and deaths marked without religious ceremonies, divorce ceremonies, even “marry yourself” ceremonies. Remi Rubel married herself in a public ceremony, saying, “this relationship will last.”

ACT OUT

DIY Rituals

Divide the class into groups. Each group should create its own ritual to mark, celebrate, mourn, or honor something in its group life. Pay special attention to levels of formality, tradition, invariance, rules, and symbols as you create the performance. How does this ritual hold possibilities for transformation for individuals? How does this ritual express, confirm, and embody cultural values?

From Great Tradition to Cultural Performance

In 1954, Milton Singer, of the Chicago School of Urban Ecology, traveled to India in search of “The Great Tradition” in Indian civilization. “The Great Tradition” claims that a civilization is assumed to have a charter for action, for organizing,

a “worldview” that structures belief and calls for action. This charter is often available in sacred texts—“oral, written, inscribed, carved and painted, sung and acted” (Singer 1972, 4).

Singer quickly discovered the difficulty of the task. Across three million square miles, India is marked by twenty-three different, official languages and twenty-eight different geopolitical boundaries shaped by vastly different historical influences and religious affiliations. Where to begin putting his finger on “The Great Tradition”? Singer describes what happened:

I discovered what I suppose every field worker knows, that the units of cogitation are not units of observation. There was nothing that could be easily labeled Little Tradition or Great Tradition, or “ethos” or “world view.” Instead, I found myself confronted with a series of concrete experiences, the observation and recording of which seemed to discourage the mind from entertaining and applying the synthetic and interpretative concepts I had brought with me. (70)

Singer named these concrete experiences, observable to an outsider and recordable for study, **cultural performances**. More important, Singer claims that his Indian friends “thought of their culture as encapsulated in these discrete performances, which they could exhibit to visitors and to themselves. The performances became for [Singer] the elementary constituents of the culture and the ultimate units of observation” (71).

Elements of Cultural Performances

Singer (1972) outlined five components of cultural performances, beginning with their **formal characteristics**. Each cultural performance can be characterized by (1) a limited time span (a beginning, middle, and end), (2) an organized program of activity, (3) a set of performers, (4) an audience, and (5) a place and occasion of performance.

The **cultural stage** is the place where the performance occurs—in homes, temples, public halls, and community centers. Oftentimes the cultural training in the home, the rearing of children and passing down of traditions, is informal and casual. Traveling performances, without a fixed institutional base, are often difficult to pin down, as they create their stages in and through the performance.

Performances are created by **cultural specialists**, people who are especially recruited, trained, paid, and motivated to engage in performances. Singer lists priests, scholars, reciters, storytellers, singers, dancers, dramatic performers, and musicians. In mass mediated cultures, editors, program directors, story writers, and producers are also cultural specialists. Still other specialists assist the performers—production assistants, costumers, makeup artists, teachers, patrons, and organizers of performances. These cultural specialists often serve as arbitrators of cultural tastes, as well as make cultural policy.



SOURCE: Photograph by Beatrice Queral. Copyright © 2006 by Beatrice Queral. Courtesy of Mickee Faust Club.

Cultural media are the modes and forms of *communication* the performance utilizes: singing, dancing, acting, and recitation as well as graphic arts. Many cultural specialists are known for their mastery of one of these media. While *spoken language* is often the premiere cultural medium, nonlinguistic media are also utilized in performances. With developments in mass media, analysis of cultural performance requires considering how “cultural themes and values are communicated as well as on processes of social and cultural change” (77).

While Singer didn’t discover India’s “Great Tradition,” he did describe a way to “trace the actual lines of communication” that create and transform cultural patterns constituted in performance, expressive of cultural beliefs and practices, and important to sociopolitical organization.

The “Performance Turn” in the Study of Culture

Van Gennep’s work on rites of passage, Huizinga’s characteristics of play, and Singer’s characterization of cultural performance are all important developments for enabling the “performance turn” in the study of culture. This turn argues that not only are performances legitimate objects to study, but they can be the entry point for studying culture. Victor Turner sought to humanize the study of culture as performance by conceiving of humans as performers, *Homo performans*.

If man is a sapient animal, a tool-making animal, a self-making animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less, a performing animal, *Homo performans*, not in the sense, perhaps that a circus animal may be a performing animal, but in the

sense that man is a self-performing animal—his performances are, in a way, reflexive, in performing he reveals himself to himself. (1988, 81)

A performance-centered approach enables four features of culture to be highlighted: process, play, poetics, and power. On **process**, Dwight Conquergood (1989, 83) writes, “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.”

Huizinga’s work on **play** was an important foundation for Turner’s interest in Carnival, ritual reversals, tricksters, and the way cultural structures are manipulated, critiqued, and changed in and through performance genres. Carnival in Rio de Janeiro is evidence of “society in its subjunctive mood—to borrow a term from grammar—its mood of feeling, willing, and desiring, its mood of fantasizing, its playful mood” (Turner 1988, 123). Barry Ancelet (2001) and Patricia Sawin (2001) both explore play at Louisiana Mardi Gras celebrations. They argue that the serious work of group commitment and the emergence of alternative communities are enabled through play. Yoram Carmeli (2001) examines play as central to all circus performances—from its arrival in town to its departure.

Poetics emphasizes the constructedness of culture. Rites of passage, for example, are constructions—“fabricated, built, and created”—to move us through and to the stages a culture deems important (Meyerhoff et al. 1987). Chapter Four surveyed how our participation in social dramas questions and reinvents cultural values and rules as they unfold in our lives and makes them anew. But culture as “ordinary life” is also a poetic construction through cultural forms. Aleksandra Wolska (2005, 93) writes, “When we look for lost keys, burn our dinner, or crash into a garage door, our engagement with technology slips into farce, tragedy, or a combination of both. In this sense, performance remains embedded in the very fabric of cultural poesis [sic], in the ordinary process of doing things.” Culture is not merely created, but it is creative (Conquergood 1989, 83).

Power is especially important in light of Turner’s analysis of the social drama. “Because it is public, performance is a site of struggle where competing interests intersect, and different viewpoints and voices get articulated” (Conquergood 1989, 84). Viewpoints and voices are always embodied: “The body, within cultural and narrative performances, is of great importance as it functions as a site where politics and power are written on and through” (Holling and Calafell 2007, 61). Instead of conceiving of culture as disembodied static structures, work, rules, and top-down law, culture constituted in performance in and through embodied process, play, poetics, and power are important lenses.

Liminality: Betwixt and Between

Victor Turner built on van Gennep’s liminal stage in the rite of passage to argue for a more encompassing notion of **liminality** to include categories of people and public places. *Limen*, or *the threshold between rooms*, is literally “betwixt and between.” For ritual initiates, especially in rites of passage, they are “neither here

nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1967, 98). Stripped of former markings of status, belonging, and group identification, liminal persons *have* nothing and *are* nothing: “no status, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows” (98).

Liminality, as betwixt and between, also applies to people *between social and cultural structures*: “teenagers, students, trainees, travellers, those with new jobs, and people in times of major disaster” (E. Turner 2005, 99). Their statuses are ambiguous, and they are often perceived as dangerous to established structures. Thousands of people displaced by Hurricane Katrina in September of 2005 not only lost everything; they—mostly Black and poor—stood in an ambiguously dangerous position to the Bush administration and FEMA.

Liminality can also be experienced in *public places*, like Mardi Gras or Carnival. “Taboos are lifted, fantasies are enacted, indicative mood behavior is reversed; the low are exalted and the mighty abased. Yet there are still some controls: crime is still illicit, drunken bodies may be moved off the sidewalks” (V. Turner 1988, 102). The key features of liminality in these public spaces are heightened emotions, suspension of the rules of normal life and time, and centralization of the marginal.

Communitas: Magical Togetherness

Whether stripped of everything in formal rituals, a natural disaster, or at Mardi Gras, something is also generated among the participants who experience liminality. *Communitas* is “the sense of sharing and intimacy that develops among persons who experience liminality as a group” (E. Turner 2005, 97). *Communitas* is “the gift of togetherness. . . . It has something magical about it” (E. Turner 2005, 98).

Musical jam sessions among jazz musicians form a prototypic example. In these sessions, *communitas* is *normative*: It is characterized by “we” feelings, a loyalty to the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for it. The group is mobilized toward a goal—to make music together that no one member could make alone. *Communitas* is *existential*: Group differences in status are diminished, even dissolved; “the self becomes irrelevant. In the group, what is sought and what happens is unity, seamless unity” (E. Turner 2005, 98). Direct and unmediated communication takes place as musicians seem to “read each other’s minds” and know the next riff or direction for the music. Finally, *communitas* is *spontaneous*: There is a shared “flow” of action and awareness; the structure is not governed by outside rules but by rules that emerge in the process of making music itself.

Many other groups experience *communitas*: religious pilgrims, parishioners of pentecostal and charismatic churches, dancers, singers, any group that “engage[s] in a collective task with full attention” (E. Turner 2005, 99). Larry Russell (2004) and Bernadette Calafell (2005) write of their own pilgrimages as ways to desire, honor, and constitute their own identities in cultural history.

Most important, *communitas* invites critique of established rules and structures because it arises “1) through the interstices of structure in *liminality*, times of change of status, 2) at the edges of structure, in *marginality*, and 3) from beneath structure in

inferiority” (E. Turner 2005, 98). Liz Locke (1999, 3) explains how “inferiors” create *communitas* in their view from below: “The non-athletes, the readers, the musicians, the skate rats, the gamers, the geeks, the metal-heads, the ravers, the stoners, the net-heads, the writers, the outcasts, the refugees—we find a way to create communities.”

Spontaneous *communitas*, however, is very difficult to hold on to. Victor Turner writes (1982, 47), “The great difficulty is to keep this intuition alive—regular drug-ging won’t do it, repeated sexual union won’t do it, constant immersion in great literature won’t do it, initiation seclusion must sooner or later come to an end. We thus encounter the paradox that the *experience* of *communitas* becomes the memory of *communitas*. . . .”

READ MORE ABOUT IT

Communitas on the Front Lines of Katrina

All the characteristics of communitas—as a gift, as collective, as produced between liminal, marginal, and inferior structures, are elaborated in Elizabeth Mehren’s (2005, A12) story of “A Gospel and Granola Band.”

Days after Hurricane Katrina hit, they began cooking together in a grocery store parking lot: evangelical Christians from Texas and Rainbow Family flower children from all over.

Soon they were serving 1,000 free meals a day at their cafe housed in a domed tent. Side by side, members of this improbable alliance worked nonstop, helping the people of what was once a scenic beach town.

Gradually, barriers melted. The evangelicals overlooked the hippies’ unusual attire, outlandish humor and persistent habit of hugging total strangers. The hippies nodded politely when the church people cited Scripture. The bonds formed at Waveland Village have surprised both groups.

“We are Methodists, Episcopalians and Baptists, along with various and sundry other Christian groups,” said Fay Jones, an organizer of the Bastrop (Texas) Ministerial Alliance. “Did we ever think we would have such a wonderful relationship with hippies? No.”

Brad Stone, an emergency medical technician from the Rainbow Family, called the Christian-hippie coalition his new community. He explained: “It has been unbelievable. We are all so close. I am actually dreading leaving.”

But about three months after they got here, the Rainbow Family volunteers and the Texas church delegation are preparing to head home. They will serve a grand banquet on Thanksgiving Day—turkey with all the trimmings, which at the Waveland Village Cafe includes steamed seaweed. Over the holiday week-ends they will hold a parade.

Then the church folks will hop in their pickup trucks and the hippies will climb into their psychedelic school buses. Both groups say they have been forever changed by the experience.

“They are as amazed as we are,” said Pete Jones, who with his wife organized the ministerial group. “We have all learned so much.”

(Continued)

(Continued)

The Christians from about a dozen churches near Austin arrived first, four days after the hurricane hit Aug. 29, when the roads to Waveland were barely passable. Pete Jones, 67, said they were drawn by God to the asphalt in front of a demolished supermarket.

When the volunteers began cooking, famished storm victims emerged out of nowhere. Some were naked, having lost every stitch of clothing to Katrina. All were so hungry that the Texans began running out of food. They decided to pray.

"We thought we'd better be specific, so we prayed for hot dogs, because they could be cut up to feed a lot of people," Fay Jones said. "About the time we said 'Amen,' a guy drives up with a truck filled with 2,600 hot dogs. That was the beginning of the miracles around here."

The next wondrous event occurred when the Rainbow Family appeared. The ministerial group was exhausted from nonstop cooking for a crowd that multiplied with every meal. Hippies with dreadlocks and body piercings poured out of a bus painted like a Crayola box.

"We set up two 10-by-10 pop-up tents and started cooking," said 25-year-old Clovis Siemon, an organic farmer and filmmaker from Wisconsin. "We were trying to find someplace to fit in, somewhere to be useful."

Aaron Funk, an Arthur Murray dance instructor from Berkeley, also was among the first Rainbow Family volunteers here. Funk, 33, said his group was well prepared for the effort after decades of Rainbow Family gatherings on mountaintops and in national forests.

With tens of thousands of "brothers and sisters" scattered around the world, the Rainbow Family calls itself the largest "non-organization" of "nonmembers" on the planet. There are no rules, no dues and no officers—just a website (strictly unofficial, the group emphasizes) that promotes the belief that "peace and love are a great thing, and there isn't enough of that in this world."

Funk said the Katrina disaster response marked the Rainbow Family's first major volunteer effort. The call for help went out on cellphones and the Internet.

"We figured it was a social obligation," he said. "We already had the working knowledge of feeding large numbers of people. We got here, and the sense of desperation and urgency was off the charts. There was no time to talk about it. It was just service, time to do what we came here to do."

"The first week we were here," Siemon said, "we had a guy from the Pentagon sitting in a circle with us, chanting 'Om.' It was pretty cool."

Still, the organizers of Waveland Village say it is time to move on. Traditional stores and restaurants are reopening here, and though the landscape remains decimated, a shaky new normality is taking hold.

"Our purpose is not to detract from the local economy," Pete Jones said.

Siemon said he would be returning to his organic farm with far more than he brought to Waveland.

"What have I gained from this? Everything," he said. "I've gained the experience of working with other humans in a wall-less, prejudice-less environment where the sole purpose is to help other humanity."

"That's something not many people get to do."

SOURCE: "A Gospel and Granola Band" by Elizabeth Mehren © 2005, *Los Angeles Times*. Reprinted with permission.

What Do Cultural Performances Do?

Milton Singer's theory of cultural performance is a descriptive one—cataloguing the constitutive elements of performance. Victor Turner moved beyond description to posit the structures and functions of cultural performances as both reflective and reflexive.

As **reflective**, cultural performances communicate the content of culture through orchestrations of cultural media. Turner (1981, 158) argues that cultural performances are composed of “sensory codes” that enlist all of the senses: “All the senses of participants and performers may be engaged; they *hear* music and prayers, *see* visual symbols, *taste* consecrated foods, *smell* incense, and *touch* sacred persons and objects.”

The sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and touch of Christmas, as celebrated by many North American Christians, are particularly well-orchestrated sets of sensory codes. The content of those performances—cooking seasonal foods, singing carols, exchanging gifts, decorating inside and out, attending parties—mirrors a material world. While one family may prepare a Christmas goose, others prepare Christmas tamales, but both utilize codes and materials that reflect that culture.

This reflection of the world as communicated in performances, however, is flexible and nuanced with no set “meaning” or interpretation. According to Turner (1988, 23–24), (1) cultural performances are capable of carrying many messages at once, (2) they are capable of subverting on one level what another level seems to be saying, and (3) the full “reality” of meaning and messages is only attained through the performance.

The Super Bowl, the Miss America Pageant, graduation ceremonies, and weddings are all cultural performances in the United States *reflective of ongoing social processes*. Each of these cultural performances makes an explicit or implicit claim about who is important, what is valued, how society ought to function, and why this performance demands our participation. Beauty pageants (Jones 1998; Roberts 2002), weddings and pornography (Bell 1999), lynchings (Fuoss 1999; Stephens 2000), travel on commercial airlines (Murphy 2002), and even the office Christmas party and company picnics (Pacanowsky and Trujillo 1983) have been examined as cultural performances that reflect the social processes that fund them.

Cultural performances are not just mirrors, according to Turner, but active agents of change. As **reflexive**, cultural performances provide moments to enact, comment on, critique, and evaluate the norms and values of a culture. Turner describes **performance reflexivity** (1988, 24): “a sociocultural group turns, bends, reflects back on itself, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other components that make up their public selves.”

Kwanzaa celebrations, for example, resist the commodification of the Christmas season, celebrate Afrocentric roots and traditions, and offer alternative ways to engage in family and community. John MacAloon (1986, 372) describes cultural performances in ways particularly applicable to Kwanzaa celebrations as “occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others.”

MAKE A LIST**Carrying, Subverting, and Attaining Messages**

Make a list of cultural performances you've participated in. Then list as many of the "messages" you can think of communicated in and through the performance. (For example, The Super Bowl privileges huge men and their physical strength and endurance.)

Now argue that that same performance communicates the opposite of each item on your list. (For example, The Super Bowl privileges team owners, their money, and business acumen.)

How do these performances create such flexible and nuanced messages in and through their sensory codes (the sights, sounds, smells, taste, and touch)?

THEORY MEETS WORLD**Roadside Shrines as Cultural Performances**

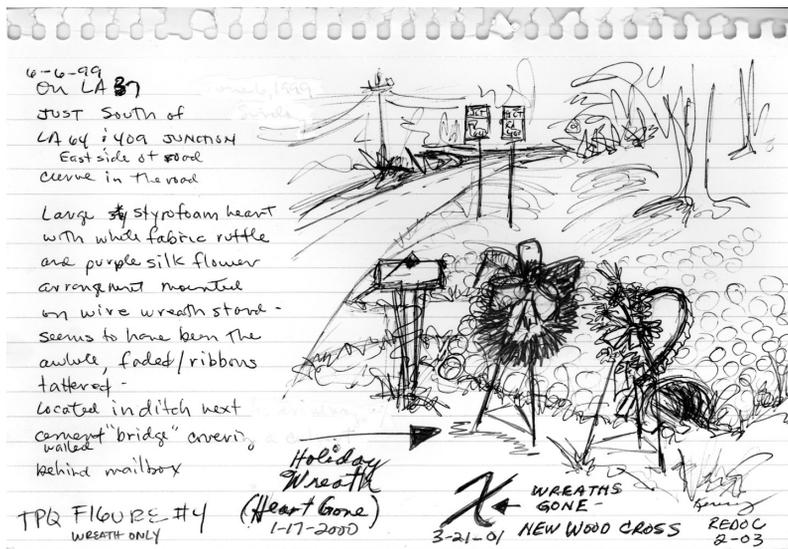
Rebecca Kennerly (2002) studied roadside shrines erected by individuals to mark the death of a loved one, usually in a vehicle crash. Kennerly describes, analyzes, and writes evocatively and poetically of her encounters with over two hundred shrines across thirty states. These roadside crosses, decorated with flowers, mementos, and notes, are familiar sights to most Americans. Kennerly maintains these shrines are "performance vortices," bringing together cultural performance, ritual performance, and resistant practices.

For mourners who erect them, the shrines mark not only the death of a loved one but the last place this loved one was alive. The shrines also fall outside traditional ways to mourn and sanctioned places to grieve at funeral homes, houses of worship, and cemeteries. Builders of shrines also create them to stand as warnings to others. One mother said she built the shrine to her daughter "to catch the eyes of every passer-by [so they know] someone died there, so they think, slow down, maybe buckle up—maybe even decide not to drink and drive" (248).

For communities, these roadside shrines are contested spaces: people argue they are unsightly, appropriate community property, utilize a religious symbol on state-owned land, and, depending on state statutes, are unlawful. Still, roadside maintenance crews often mow around them, unwilling to disturb their sanctity. If they are removed by law, shrines are often replaced with stronger, sturdier, more permanent structures. In still other states, judges utilize the building and maintenance of roadside shrines as part of the punishment of a convicted driver responsible for the crash.

Kennerly writes, "Roadside shrines call attention to themselves, insisting on a performative engagement with them from those who mourn, those who are dead, those of us who pass by, and those who would have them removed" (252). Her conclusion, rendered in poetic form that mirrors the erect cross of many of these roadside shrines, captures the many tensions in these cultural performances:

Conclusion: Resisting Arrest
 between
 literacy
 and
 orality,
 between
 secular space and sacred space,
 between
 human nature and cultural determinations
 of the
 natural,
 between
 authentic
 expression
 and
 performance,
 between
 grief
 and
 memory,
 between
 life and death,
 and between research, writing, the page, and the stage



SOURCE: Sketch by Rebecca Kennerly. Copyright © 2005. Courtesy of Rebecca Kennerly.

Performing History

Performances associated with museums, tours, tourism, and historical recreations are particularly enlightening for analysis of the reflexivity available in cultural performances. In antebellum Southern mansion tours (M. Bowman 1998), living museums such as Colonial Williamsburg and Plymouth Plantation (Snow 1993), a Polynesian cultural center (Balme 1998), the LSU Rural Life Museum (R. Bowman 2006), staged slave auctions (McConachie 1998; Thompson 1996), and souvenirs purchased at tourist sites (Love and Kohn 2001), performances construct history, people, events, places, and cultural memories. They often rely on theatrical strategies of conflict, antagonists and protagonists, and dramatic build. Cajun swamp tours, in Eric Wiley's (2002) analysis, cast the tour guide as hero against the enemy alligator. The scripted and improvised speeches of tour guides are also opportunities to explore how a community languages itself in and through performance (Fine and Speer 1985).

While many of these performances are invested in historical accuracy and mimesis, they are always creations—poiesis—that

are not neutral. They are not slice of life lifted from the everyday world and inserted into the museum gallery, though this is the rhetoric of the mimetic mode. On the contrary, those who construct the display also constitute the subject, even when they seem to do nothing more than relocate an entire house and its contents, brick by brick, board by board, chair by chair. (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1991, 389)

These performances *make* culture and public memory.

Phaedra Pezzullo (2003) analyzes “toxic tours” in the petrochemical belt of Louisiana along the Mississippi River where more than 125 companies manufacture fertilizers, gasoline, paint, and plastics, creating what residents call “a toxic gumbo.” Residents offer tours of polluted sites, lacing their speeches with stories of cancer rates, physical ailments suffered by their neighbors, and environmental damage to the community. Such tours not only mirror the reality of ecological damage but seek to raise consciousness and mobilize action. Pezzullo's analysis relies on Victor Turner's claim that cultural performances function reflexively, as “active agencies of 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’” (Turner 1988, 24).

Performing history, public memory, and political critique are potent forms of *Homo performans*, performing humans. As reflective and reflexive, the possibilities of process, play, poetics, and power are evidenced in cultural performances.

Performing Others

Dwight Conquergood (1985) writes of the moral imperatives that saturate any study of cultures outside of one's own. For three and a half years, Conquergood conducted fieldwork among the Hmong and Lao refugees in Chicago. He created

and presented performances from this fieldwork before a variety of audiences: social service agencies, educators, religious groups, and civic groups. Conquergood readily admits he was an advocate for the groups he studied.

While many of these audience members came to see the Hmong differently through Conquergood's performances of their stories, still others accused him of a number of offenses: (1) "collaborating in the work of the devil" by presenting a radically different, non Judeo-Christian religious tradition, affirming Hmong religious beliefs and stories; (2) "retarding the refugees' assimilation into mainstream America" by honoring their ancient traditions; (3) presenting the Hmong as "stupid and backward" by preserving the grammar and pronunciation of his collected texts. Conquergood also faced his own concerns about "white guilt": "What right do you, a middle-class white man, have to perform these narratives?" (4).

From these experiences, Conquergood argues that performing ethnographic materials is fraught with "complex ethical tensions, tacit political commitments, and moral ambiguities" (4). He outlines four performative stances, or ethical pitfalls, in studying and performing the "other" (see Figure 5.1).

Moral Mapping and Dialogic Performance

The poles of the box in Figure 5.1 represent the tensions among "identity" and "difference" and "detachment" and "commitment," while the center "dialogical performance" balances these poles and reconciles the extremes.

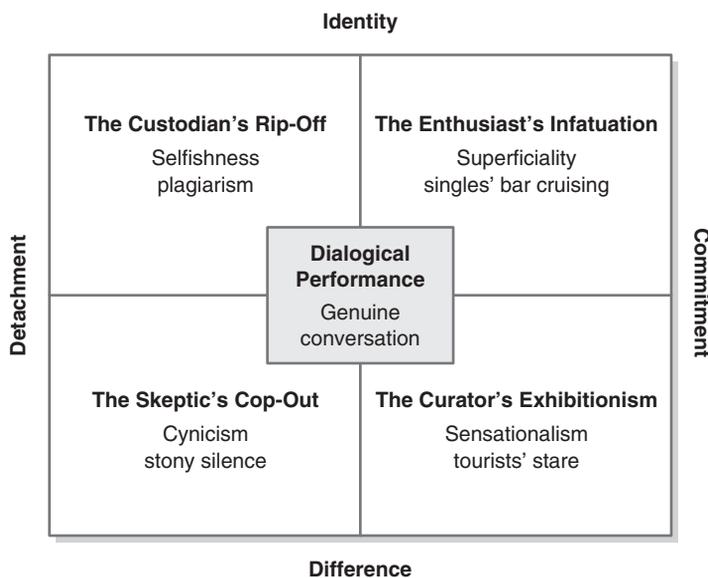


Figure 5.1 Moral Mapping of Performative Stances Toward the Other

SOURCE: From "Performing as a Moral Act," by Dwight C. Conquergood, *Literature in Performance* (1985), reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd., <http://www.informaworld.com>.

The **Custodian's Rip-Off** is characterized by selfishness and the desire to take, to own, and (sometimes) to sell performances and artifacts of others, often in the guise of "preserving dying cultures" (Conquergood 1985, 5). The **Enthusiast's Infatuation** trivializes the other in superficial and often naïve performances, based on little or no fieldwork or contact. Identification with the other is too easily and quickly claimed. The **Curator's Exhibitionism** is committed to difference, but difference that is "exotic," remote, and often shaped to shock audiences. This stance denies the "other" membership in a moral, and often human, community. The **Skeptic's Cop-Out** is familiar: "I am neither black nor female: I will not perform *The Color Purple*" (8). Conquergood maintains that this detachment and difference is cynical, refusing to engage the other under a mask of arrogant imperialism. Only members of dominant groups can claim such cynical, privileged refusal. This silence forecloses dialogue with and knowledge about others.

Conquergood proposes "dialogic performance" as a way through those pitfalls. "This performative stance struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another" (9). Conquergood characterizes **Dialogical Performance** in four ways:

1. As stretched among the poles of identity, difference, detachment, and commitment, this stance falls "between competing ideologies," bringing them together even as it holds them apart.
2. As an examination of identity and difference that leads to questioning and challenging our own *a priori assumptions* about culture. Such questioning about ourselves is important to any dialogue with others.
3. As dialogue with performance, a two-way conversation with others that resists speaking to and for others.
4. As dialogue in which performance resists conclusions, but instead begins a conversation.

From Dialogue to Responsibilities

Madison (1998, 278) extends Conquergood's stances and emphasis on dialogue to argue that performances of *possibilities* are important routes for the "principles of transformation and transgression, dialogue and interrogation, as well as acceptance and imagination to build words that are *possible*." She offers three questions that help guide any performance work built on the lives of others:

1. By what definable and material means will the Subjects themselves benefit from the performance?
2. How can the performance contribute to a more enlightened and involved citizenship that will disturb systems and processes that limit freedoms and possibilities?

3. In what ways will the performers probe questions of identity, representation, and fairness that will enrich their own subjectivity, cultural politics, and art? (278)

E. Patrick Johnson (2002) utilizes Conquergood's stances and Madison's concept of "possibility" to explore the performances of "an all-white, mostly atheist, Australian gospel choir" for the contradictions among Blackness, appropriation, and authenticity. He explores the problematics of cross-cultural gospel performance as well as the mutual benefits, phrased as the transformative power available in dialogic performance, for self and other. Michelle A. Holling and Bernadette M. Calafell (2007) analyze stage performances of Richard Montoya and Guillermo Gómez-Peña through Conquergood's "dialogic performances" and Madison's "possibilities" for Chicano identities, narratives, and cultural performance.

The body within performance, and particularly ethnographic traditions, tempers the danger of speaking for "others" through sensuous engagement, privileging dialogic performance that brings together various voices, worldviews, value systems, and beliefs in conversation that resists conclusions, remaining open to ongoing discussion between ethnographers and interlocuters. (61)

Randall Hill (1995) explores ritual performances of Native American peoples as resources for rehearsal processes; the dangers, following Conquergood, are "borrowing authority" from a ritual shaman by a director and arrogant and sacrilegious attempts at "duplication" of rituals. David Olsen (1992) details the building of a performance around Kai T. Erikson's 1978 book, *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*. The performance demanded a dialogic encounter between the victims of a devastating flood in the Appalachian mountains and the economically privileged graduate students at Northwestern University.

Kristin Valentine extends Conquergood's four pitfalls with a fifth: "some audience members, not understanding the sacredness of the ceremony, perhaps unknowingly, act in inappropriate ways" (2002, 281). She suggests guidelines for "intense spectatorship," a present-minded audiencing that assumes self-reflection at cultural performances, especially sacred ones, outside one's worldview. Valentine writes,

Intense spectators do not pretend to understand the ceremony as they think a member of that culture might. Rather, intense spectators try to make sense of what *they* experience as audience members, basing their comments on extensive background research and careful observation of the *public* parts of the ceremonies. Knowing that ethical codes of conduct are not fixed, intense spectators necessarily live with ambiguity. (281)

Performing culture, as performer, audience, critic, insider, and outsider, is an intensely ethical act. Performance scholars have outlined pitfalls and suggested



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ways through the dilemmas of performing self and other, present and past, individual and community. Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1994, 21) offers an important watchword for performance border crossings that spreads responsibilities: “In order to dialogue we must learn each other’s language, history, art, literature, and political ideas. We must travel south and east, with frequency and humility; not as cultural tourists, but as civilian ambassadors.”

RETHINKING CULTURE

Positivism was a valuable way to create scientific knowledge through direct observation. But we now recognize that nineteenth-century scientists and theorists also wrote racist, sexist, and elitist assumptions on the cultures they studied: “Africa became a place of darkness, one lacking the enlightenment of the West. India has been used to model not the ‘origin of man,’ but the ‘origin of civilization.’ Both are forms of ‘othering’ for western symbolic operations” (Haraway 1989, 262).

“Others” in cultural study in the nineteenth century were most often treated as inferior, if exotic, animals ruled by biology and emotions—especially when compared with the intellectual, rational, Western white men who studied them.

Wurtham’s four approaches to studying culture (subjective, structural, dramatic, and institutional) can be risky for studying performance. When looking for attitudes, structures and functions, dramas, or resources, performances can unwittingly be turned into second-order phenomena. Catherine Bell (2004, 93) writes that much performance theory assumes an underlying “something,” a latent meaning under the performance, “that devalues the action itself, making it a second-stage representation of prior values.” The challenge is to explore performance as performance, much like Huizinga’s attempts to study play as play, and not to approach performance as automatically servicing other cultural goals or processes.

Jon McKenzie critiques theories of cultural performance that valorize liminality and performance’s potential for cultural transformation. He calls this the “liminal norm” in performance studies research, “the transgressive or resistant potential that has come to dominate the study of cultural performance” (2001, 30). When we approach performance as a constant *challenge* to cultural structures, we obscure the many, many ways that cultural performance *upholds and strengthens* cultural traditions.

Shannon Jackson (2000, 22), following Judith Butler and Joan Scott, notes that “reading” culture, history, and performances as texts can also create “misreadings.” In Jackson’s *Professing Performance* (2004, 175), she offers evidence of “gendered blindspots” and racist assumptions in the history of performance. Favoring transgressive approaches to culture in this history overlooks “the implicit, domestic, everyday, life-producing performances” women and people of color have enacted to survive.

Elizabeth Bell (1995b) critiques Conquergood’s moral stances as scripting the performer as prone to abusive power in the relationship with the other. Instead, Bell argues for an economy of knowledge in and through pleasure of performance. Knowledge of the “other” is impossible, but the pleasure of the “self”—as performer, creator, and owner—is a gift created in the economy of performance.

The study of culture in and through its performances has come a long way from the goal of the British structural-functionalist school of anthropology. Turner (1981, 139) describes this goal: “to exhibit the laws of structure and process which . . . determine the specific configurations of relationships and institutions detectable by trained observation.” With the groundwork laid by theories of rites of passages, play, ritual, and cultural performance, Turner moved the “study of man” theorized as covering laws to an enlightenment theory of culture as performed. The study of culture as performed has moved from theories of positivism to critical theories that explore voices and viewpoints as embodiments of power. Performances are *constitutive* of culture, not something added to culture after the fact; performances are *epistemic*, in that we learn and know our worlds through our performances; and performances are *critical* lenses for looking at and pushing back on culture.

The “performance turn” generated a new lens for studying culture as process, play, poetics, and power, especially in performances that generate liminality and *communitas*. Cultural performances are always reflective and reflexive, offering opportunities to confirm and transform values, structures, dramas, and institutions. Whether performing, watching, critiquing, or studying performances of others, the commitments are always ethical and political. Indeed, Mary Frances HopKins (1995) extends the “performative turn” metaphor to argue for the “performance turn and toss,” to suggest that a certain amount of squirming, of discomfort, of ambiguity is both necessary and inevitable in any study of performances that constitute culture.

