

Oral Traditions in Performance

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When I arrived at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1986 to teach Performance Studies in the Department of Communication Studies, I found I was to teach a relatively new course on “Oral Traditions.” The course I inherited was constructed as a Western history of oral performance, beginning with the classical rhapsode, moving through medieval minstrelsy, turn-of-the-century elocutionary traditions, rising to the American progressivist Chatauqua circuit and modern studies of literature in performance.¹ In this sense, the course served both as an introduction to types and practices of “high” orality and as a history of one current in the field, establishing what until relatively recently had been “Oral Interpretation” as a classical correlate of drama and rhetoric.

In the mid-eighties (some will say earlier) the field exploded, in part leading, in part following the “performative turn” across disciplines.² As the humanities and social sciences absorbed the deconstruction of the “text,” and the revered object of literary study began to dissolve into processes of production and reception, Interpretation became Performance Studies, signaling above all the expansion of “performance” to include heretofore “low” forms of oral performance (performance in everyday life, personal and life narrative performance, rites of conservation and resistance) as well as large-scale processes of social change and identity formation. The literary met the anthropological; the text collapsed into context—and a fury of debates over the nature, status, and value of performance ensued.

My course changed. I clung to the chronological model for a while, expanding it to include non-Western traditions. But over the years, I have felt more and more compelled to engage students in a *performative*

¹ For a powerful account of the modern history of Performance Studies, see Edwards 1999. On contemporary developments, see Strine et al. 1990 and, e.g., Phelan and Lane 1999.

² See, e.g., Conquergood 1989 and 1991.

epistemology: a mode of knowing by doing and feeling the sensuous, concrete, vital, risky, relational, and highly contingent claims of live performance. I have also, like many of my colleagues in the field and across the disciplines, felt the upwash of digital communication: the orality/literacy dichotomy—for all of its faults—had been a useful trope for highlighting the distinctiveness of nonliterate communication; and yet it seems to have less and less traction. The students don't relate.

In my own work, moreover, building on another current in the field, I have been primarily concerned with the power of performances embedded in dialogic social relations.³ The key question for me has consequently become less what does a particular performance do or accomplish in a given context than what do the participants in that context do or accomplish through mutually composed and multi-layered performances? The performance is a co-creative event. As such, it at once embodies and makes change.

In the course, this has meant, among other things, emphasizing the play of invention and adaptation in “tradition”; focusing on contemporary practices that circulate in and among what may otherwise seem prevailing modes of literacy and post-literacy; engaging students in the ethics and politics of doing the work of oral traditions; and, to some extent, de-centering the text in the classroom, constantly recalling students to the value of narrative truths, to their own bodies and memories as repositories of tradition, and to the power and pleasure of improvisation.

I have now redesigned the course around narrative co-production—and four projects: a kidlore autobiography with an active, small group presentation; the evocation and analysis of a family storytelling event, presented as part of a mass “family dinner” in class; in-depth interviews with someone at least two generations older than the student, witnessed in the classroom in the form of a first-person re-performance; and finally, *critical in(ter)ventions*: student projects designed to mobilize oral traditions to *make a difference*—whether, for instance, by initiating a family reunion, transforming a grandmother's stories into a grandson's CD, reinventing a church tradition to honor elders' histories, or introducing personal narrative performances into town policy debates about the rights of troubled teens. The point is to take hold of the tail of performance—and hang on through the unsteady making and remaking of local cultures, large and small.

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³ See, e.g., Pollock 1998 and 1999.

References

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