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The Performative "I"

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Although claims to revive the first person in scholarly writing remain compelling, efforts to fulfill them have been less so. Few have survived the problems of authenticity, authority, and advocacy identified by Joan Scott and Linda Kauffman, among others. Following the model of "stunting" offered by the feminist theorist, Mary Russo, this article proposes a view toward a "performative 'I'" that invites error, disorder, and difference into the world of citationality or compulsive reiteration. The article builds its proposal on readings of two live performances and three short passages from selected texts. At their intersection, it imagines the displacement of a modernist "I" by a subjectivity defined by an ethics of sensuous coalition and a politics of errant possibility.

Keywords: *performance; performativity; writing*

Several years ago I was teaching a course on the politics of performance and was struggling to explain classical Marxist theory to a group of advanced undergraduates. They had to understand *alienation* to understand so many playwrights' and practitioners' dream of unalienated experience. They were trying hard. However, conventional examples of a rationalized labor process didn't seem to catch. The idea of a repeated, segmented activity like screwing on lugs or plucking chickens all day either was too distant or too familiar or seemed quaintly obsolete in their superdigital, hyperreal worlds.

I reached for an example closer to home and found myself asking: what about your papers for class? Almost immediately I felt that rare and wonderful shift in the very air quality in the room that comes with understanding. Their eyes widened, cheeks softened. They became eager to relate to the change from a craft to an industrial mode of production, to the division of labor under the law of efficiency and the concomitant division of the subject from the object of his or her labor, to the reproduction of ideologies to which they felt in hock; as they expressed it: the paper as grade as commodity whose surplus value lay in job interviews and entry-level salaries. They felt the evacuation of their role as artist and/or craftsperson in the

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writing process. They understood their low-level resentment of me as the "boss," the owner of the means of production (caught in the constant refrain: "I don't know if this is what you're looking for but . . ."). They even seized on the gap between whining about the particular grades they got and the larger injustice of a system that kept them so divided against themselves and isolated from each other that they could not make larger, more searing complaints. Even the idea that they were gaining symbolic capital began to feel illusory. They wanted out.

I was using writing assignments to explain Marxist theory; I now use Marxist theory to talk with students about writing assignments. Each time they seem surprised, a little sad, but mostly relieved—to be able to name their intellectual alienation, to have something of a diagnostic for why they can't seem to get passionate about a project even when they want to, for why a paper seems already "out of their hands" before they have even laid finger to keyboard.

I can't begin to address the resulting malaise with the full scope of pedagogical attention it deserves. My concern for the moment will be the problem of subjectivity this situation poses, the problem of the embodied self diminished by separation from the object of his or her writing labor. The classroom is a spatial matrix of practices that generally reiterates value hierarchies consistent with a Derridean deconstruction of speech and/or writing and classical antitheatrical biases. Here, I want to stake one view toward possibilities for performing writing in the toll paid by students who consequently continually find they are writing themselves out of themselves. In the following pages, I can only gesture toward a pedagogy of reading through performance toward writing differently. I'll do so by linking a claim on the discursive excesses of performance with instances of scholarly writing selves somewhat less alienated from performing selves, or instances of what I will call a "performative I." My aim is to think beyond the use of the first person to ways of writing in the abjected self of modernity, of enfolding in writing the "I" modernity and postmodernity generally cut up and cut out: the passionate, excessive, errant, collective, and often exuberantly irregular "I" excluded by the systematic reproduction of sameness.

We have tried to answer this situation by reviving the first person. This isn't working as well as it might.

Helene Cixous, Nancy Miller, bell hooks, James Clifford, Donna Haraway, among others jolted us out of the enchantment of "objectivity," requiring as much as inviting new configurations of the personal and the political in scholarly writing.[1] However, almost as quickly as the "I" emerged it was buried again, mired in issues of authority, authenticity, and advocacy.

In the early 1990s, Joan Scott (1992) dispensed with the authority of the "I," deconstructing the foundational category of experience, and making it next to impossible to argue from experience or by the evidentiary logic of eyewitness—by which truth rests on the sovereignty of an empirically stable I/eye: I am, I was there, I saw: it's true. For Scott, experience is discursively conditioned. The "it" to which the I/eye pays witness is the naturalized discourse in which the subject/self is immersed. "Experience" as such thus turns back on the ocular-centered I, displacing its security by contingency and its truths by situated partiality.

At about the same time, Linda Kauffman (1993) pilloried personal testimony in an essay that first drew us into an intriguing tale of her childhood life as a grifter and then abruptly revealed that it was all made up: a fiction we bought because, well, we want to believe that where there is scandalous revelation there is truth. "Personal testimony can sometimes be eloquent," she argued, "but it is not an infinitely exhaustible genre. Too often it reinforces the blind belief that we are all intrinsically interesting, unique, that we deserve to be happy" (p. 274). Kauffman tantalized the reader-voyeur with the prospect of a transparently revealed self that nonetheless also served as a mirror and/or confirmation of the reader's own individuality and potential for narrative redemption.

Although this is, for Kauffman, a reason to distrust "personal" writing, it also underscores the fictiveness of any "I." It's not just that Kauffman managed to get away with a lie because we wanted it; she dramatized the lie in language, the signifying opacity of linguistic figures like *I*, *me*, *you*, *him*—all of which are materially embedded in language systems that, then, are as much given to lies as they are to truth, or are essentially fictive. The projected or, for that matter, effaced "I" is thus always a creative self-fashioning that the desirous reader, the reader hungry for truths produced by the impression of scandalous rupture, willingly ignores.

Swimming hard against these deconstructive and realist currents are feminist claims to "owning" voice and story. Powerful gestures in feminist consciousness raising and the affective consolidation of political alliances, "owning" and "owning up" to one's past can nonetheless backfire. "That's my story" often seems to come with a warning tag: don't touch, no trespassing, private property (turn back now!). Indeed, the ownership model is rank with democracy as rugged individualism and free market economies, infamously leading *The New Yorker Magazine* dance critic, Arlene Croce (1995), for instance, to insist that it wasn't necessary to attend Bill T. Jones' production, *Still/Here* (based on workshops with people living with cancer and HIV/AIDS) to pan it as "victim art"—why see what you know (or think you know) you won't be able to critique: people telling their "own" stories of cancer and illness? In the same way that we may feel no one has a right to tell me what to do with my property, we feel prohibited from "doing anything" with someone's else's story-as-property.

Briefly returning to a pedagogical scene: A graduate student submitted a seminar paper reflecting on the normative treatment of epilepsy in which she repeatedly interrupted a linear argument with performances of epileptic consciousness as she knew it. She pursued a critique that took force, in part, from its alarming juxtaposition of scholarly and medical discourses, on the one hand, and evocations of the body fallen out of syntax, on the other—of normative scholarly practice and the a-normative subject. She wrote in to her critique the chaotic body-subject the discourses she was addressing (and, to some extent, using) would have written out. Her professor responded with an *A* and no comments other than swift insistence that she couldn't—or wouldn't—comment. In effect, she marked this textual body with a scarlet *A* and refused to get any closer.[2]

Does the first person exempt writing from critique? Does it operate outside the scope of power and resistance—or is it just convenient to act as if it does? Is it the

reader or the writer who "uses" the first person to foreclose on possibilities for critical dialogue? In so many of these instances, I want to say that the reader chickens out, refusing to be part of the relational drama initiated by the writer's breach in scholarly decorum, scared off in part by the proximity of the body that emerges in the breach.

More generously: We don't have sufficient protocols for reading or writing the first person in scholarly discourse[3] and are all too often left regarding it as incontestably determined or merely arbitrary, absolute or relative, esoterically remote or toxically close, and, either way: untouchable. This then radically delimits possibilities for practicing new subjectivities, for beginning to do in and through writing what theories of hybrid, multivoiced, engaged, and embodied social subjectivities have encouraged us to imagine.

The "I" is pretty much stuck in self-reference. We've got it cornered. In the next few pages, I want to think about ways to draw out the self-subject through performance and performativity, to write and read a performative "I" that is bigger, more bracing, and more beautiful—productive and self-productive—than we have, for the most part, allowed the first person to be.

I'll do so by continuing in the mixed mode of theoretical inquiry, pedagogical example, and critical-speculative argument I've begun here. I'll offer a very brief introduction to the theory and problem of *performativity* to pose some working premises for thinking about *performance*. I'll turn then to the suggestive promise of just two instances of live performance. Reading these under the rubric of Mary Russo's (1994) vision for "critical stunting," I argue that performance may help us not only to write but to read writing better. I proceed then to read three, short examples of scholarly writing in which what I will call a performative "I" seems to open and enter into new fields of subjectivity, specifically: a subjectivity grounded in an ethics of error forecasting a politics of possibility.

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Judith Butler has drawn us into a vortex of performativity (see Butler, 1990, 1993). Through her particular revision of Austin through Derrida she argues that identity is neither essential nor constructed exactly: It is the material effect of embodied repetitions. Gender, she argues, is "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (140, italics in original). It is "the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds"—tuned to the rhythm of prevailing norms, discourses, and disciplinary structures—"constitute the illusion of an abiding self" (p. 140).

Butler finds hope in failure. If the illusion of selfhood depends on repeated acts in time, then

> the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction. (Butler, 1990, p. 141)

Elin Diamond (1996) characterizes the particular tension between repetition of the same and the tremulous moment in which repetition—because it occurs in time and space—is different as a tension between the thing done and the doing, between performativity and performance as a counterweight embedded in, in effect, doing the thing done.

Although I rely on Butler's reclamation of the embodied self, and the pressure Diamond puts on performativity through performance, failure is not enough. It is not enough to reveal the phantasmatic nature of identity or to see, as Diamond does, the tension between the thing done and the doing of it as primarily an opportunity for (as yet idealist) critique.

For Butler and Diamond, performance remains performativity's weak sister—a kind of incidental tremor in a system that depends on live repetition for its upkeep. I want to claim more power for performance: to think about the tension between the thing done and doing as a collision of past and present producing the excess of what's as yet undone, what's yet to be done. I want to think about how performance propels us forward into a future perfect world, a world full of dangerous and fantastic possibilities.[4] What I am imagining here is doing the thing done so vigorously as to undo it and simultaneously to call down the gaping grace of what else might be done.

A couple of performances in which this seemed to occur:

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More than 20 years ago now, two friends took me to see Carol Channing in *Hello Dolly* at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago.[5] I don't know how many people the Auditorium seats. Memory would suggest it was in the tens of thousands. The theatre was full. You could hear the first notes of the title song. Our collective gut string drew taut. Then: there she was, at the top of the winding staircase, one long gloved hand laid along the white balustrade: she was every dame, mame, belle who had ever descended (or had ever wanted to descend) a wide, winding staircase to a waiting chorus of high-kicking men. She and we relished every wigged, lip-sticked, and sequined step, each timed so perfectly that she arrived on the stage apron with the final crescendo of the music, which seemed to rise on our cue, as we rose to clap and clap and clap, performing a standing ovation literally to beat the band. And then that grin was moving toward us. This wasn't in the script. And yet, this was still Dolly—or was it Carol? Well, Dolly/Carol was now gently and elegantly gesturing for quiet. When a stunned hush finally reigned, Carol/Dolly—Dolly/Carol took one more carefully balanced step toward us, bent slightly at the hip as if about to share a secret, each gloved hand now melting into the sparkling flow of white fabric covering each thigh: she spoke with glowing, exaggerated precision, in an absolutely delicious stage whisper—as if alone to each of the thousands in attendance: "Shall we do that again?"

The moment of shocked silence that followed was as deafening as the subsequent roar. Somehow she was suddenly back at the top of those stairs. Somehow,

magically, we heard again the first teasing strains of *Hello Dolly! Well, hello Dolly!* And this time, well, this time, it was different because it was unbelievably the same all over again! This doesn't happen! For all the talk of "you never know what will happen in a live performance," it never meant this. Maybe a misstep. A lost line. A particularly good night. But not the diva's reclamation of the power to do it again, oh, just do it again. This was the same with a difference. It was more of the same and more than the same: it was performance exceeding performativity, repetition breaking out of reproduction. Carol/Dolly violated—for all of us it seemed—the supreme law of stage and vernacular theatre: don't break character.

Repetition, for Butler, is meant to secure the illusion of "character" or identity under disciplinary threat. In this breakout performance, Channing was doing the thing done—repeating grin for grin, slide for twirl—the established and explicitly scripted protocols of the musical play. She did so, however, to the point of almost unbearable excess, revealing and reveling in the repetition at the core of a performance aesthetic, in the process undoing what could have become merely mechanical reproduction, abandoning all of us to the ever-more human pleasures of repetition.[6] Her understated "Shall we do that again?" suggested an invitation to dance, to take another stroll around the block, to play. She and I in immediate, intimate relation are going to do this again. "Again" of course evokes the child's pleasure in repetition: do it again—again—again ("again again" seems generally reserved for testing the claims of gravity and human form against flight, as in: swing me up high again, spin me around again, flip me upside down and over again).[7] I am pure kid: giddy with pleasure not in the fact that we're going to get to see this again but in the act of stalling out, topping out the mechanisms of reproduction with production. We are in thrall to Channing's tender, comic redistribution of power, making repetition part of a performance of "as if" collective choice: shall we do that again?: of course we will. And of course the amazing thing is that we/they can do it again, the same, all over again. They are, and we are now with them, magicians in our shared ability (rather than compulsion) to repeat exactly. And so, with Channing's mock invitation, the performance launches onto or, more precisely, off of a new plane of repetition: now, repetition that exceeds both the thing done and the doing of it in the production beyond reproduction of an errant, sassy, vast subjectivity embodied in the collective triumph of virtuosity over form (see Hamera, 2000).

Another New York story—although this one far from Yonkers and further still from Broadway. In the spring of 2002, I was teaching a graduate seminar on the performance of memory. In the spirit of remembering, at the end of the term I asked the students to repeat the initial assignment: remember someone.

We arrived at class one day to find that the desks had been shaped into a loose arc. Kate was at the front of the room, busily arranging cheese on one of those tin platters you can buy in the grocery store for a potluck or last minute party. Someone had left U.S. flag transparencies on all of the windows. I tried to ignore them until I realized that we each had a small flag on a wooden stick at our respective desks and that the edge of a flag bandanna was falling out of Kate's jeans

jacket pocket. I have to admit: I was just cringing. Not Kate, I thought; she hasn't succumbed or I haven't misunderstood her this badly. This must all be left over from something. A routine public speaking class. Somebody's bad performance of a patriotic poem. This was the time when Bin Laden "wanted posters" decorated the back windows of pick-ups. When patriotism was bought and sold in the form of just about anything red, white, and blue. In a town given to team rivalry, uniforms, and logos, all of this seemed to me a faint reprisal of kitschy fandom run amuck.

But there was Kate, now just as cheerfully passing the cheese and crackers, handing out napkins, a truly generous hostess inviting us into conviviality; now pouring each of us a glass of wine! Something starts to play in the background. Classical music. A recorded interview of some kind. Kate removes a flag-wrapped object from her pocket and bends to place it carefully on the floor. She stomps. I hear a familiar, muffled crunch: the sound of a light bulb breaking, the bulb often substituted for the designated wine glass in the Jewish wedding ceremony (it works just as well to insert the sound of sorrow into a time of festive celebration). Kate gently shakes the glass shards off the scarf, leaving them at her feet; she ties the scarf around her neck and slowly rises. We snack on. The music gently swells. She grasps another wine bottle in one hand, a wine glass in the other, and—with what fingers she could wriggle free—she awkwardly (no big band virtuosity here) draws the bandanna up over her eyes, blindfold-style. She extends her arms out (still holding the wine bottle and glass) into an inverted "V" . . . she is . . . oh yes, Blind Justice now. What is she up to? Slowly raising the wine glass in her right hand—higher, higher yet; her arm stretches to its full length: the glass is now Liberty's torch. She raises the open wine bottle to the lip of the glass and begins to pour.

She meant to pour herself a glass, she tells me later. To offer a toast. Something else happens. She pours and pours. She doesn't stop. The red wine is spilling, sloshing over the sides of the glass. It winds down her arm, twisting around it like a vine, dripping off her elbow, falling in splotches off her clothes, in a slow steady run from the bottle to the glass across her body to the floor where it washes up the scattered glint of glass shards. This is a libation and a blood sacrifice. Kate stands in the pool of wine that spreads now toward our toes, that has spattered our bodies and clothes, and that we have each sipped. There have been no words that I can recall. We wait in anxious repose for Kate to release her arm.

Like Channing, Kate made a perfect mess of the performance space: endlessly repeating the discourses of conventional patriotism in the images of the flag and Lady Justice/Lady Liberty, and even in her performance of gendered hospitality, she did what's done and what was at the time driving us to war in Iraq: with lady-like decorum, she performed protocols of patriotism. However, much to our mutual surprise, she kept doing the thing done: she kept pouring and pouring from what seemed an inexhaustible source. Acting far beyond intentionality, Kate became subject to her own performance. Overtaken by invention, she was reinvented. The

ego-"I" who planned all kinds of things was displaced by a becoming-"I" (on the verge of [a] becoming "we") who traveled on the currents of improvisation and reinvention into a place of strange joy and greater grief than most of us had ever dared imagine.

The performance immediately called to mind variations on this "cup runneth over." I like the biblical magnitude of the metaphor and its ironic understatement of the literal size of this spill. At the same time, I am frustrated by its neat location of the performance event within a given Judaeo-Christian mythos, especially to the extent to which Kate's performance, her doing, surpassed reproduction of the same. The performance refused the discursive hold even a biblical phrase cited ironically might have on it. For me, it recalled a more ancient past in the classical libation for the war dead and called down a more perfect future, a future perfect in which blood and hope spill over rank nationalism, a future we touched and tasted and felt, even as we felt the stain of discourse on our return performance of passive witness.

This was how Kate remembered her dear friend, Herman Sandler, a great supporter of classical music in New York, who died in the World Trade Center disaster. It was also a way in which her memory became incorporated into our own, even insofar as the next presenter insisted on leaving the spilled wine where it was, and sitting, stained, at its pooling center, while proceeding to recall her deceased grandmother.[8]

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In very different ways, Kate and Channing performed stunts. They risked complete disaster in spectacular display, in doing the thing done until it—and we—were almost undone. Both recalled the critical practice Mary Russo (1994) calls "stunting." The practice of stunting, for Russo, "belongs to the improvisational, to the realm of the possible" (p. 24). It is a tactical maneuver she associates with female stunt pilots and the "doubled, dwarfed, distorted (stunted) creatures of the sideshow which stand in as the representatives of a well-known cultural presentation of the female body" (p. 22). Joining these two versions of female exceptionalism, Russo reclaims the female grotesque as "an embodiment of possibility and of error." She poses feminine possibility against the logic of modernist progress, acknowledging that where there is possibility there is error: the mistake, imperfection, or transgression that challenges the normative repetition of the same and so invites correction, punishment, and recrimination. The thrill of flight, for Russo, is heightened by the chance of falling, of getting things terribly wrong, by risking death or its semiotic correlate, abjection.[9]

And yet where there is error there is possibility—even the impossible possibility of human flight, of just taking off, breaking through, achieving all new heights and forms of human being and, in the process, creating new alliances of embodied subjectivities, what Russo (1994) calls "new political aggregates—provisional, uncomfortable, even conflictual coalitions of bodies which both respect the concept of situated knowledges and refuse to keep every body in its place" (p. 16).

Russo (1994) uses *stunting* to describe her own critical practice, one based on the startling juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous images, and the process of reading them off of each other for their "invisible potential" (p. 41). She takes the acrobat as the model for the feminist scholar who achieves the "aerial sublime," who—in the spirit of Kate and Channing's performances—answers the fundamental question: "what are the possibilities of reinhabiting the old in a way that will alter it" (p. 30) by substituting the pleasures and power of improvisational error for anything like "failure" to do things right?

What would this mean for writing?

First of all, it would mean inviting apparently fixed forms into the realm of the improvisational and the possible.

It might mean, then, "stunting" on established grammars of meaning, making writing "grotesque" at least in the sense that it is characterized by the perils of error, that it risks error in the name of possibility.

It would mean, in turn, enjoying the subject that emerges as a writing self, not a writer or author per se but a figure of semiosis-in-process, a becoming I/we, that may then be full of surprises.

And it would mean reading the self that emerges from un/doing writing as a possible self, an "I" that performs beyond the contractual terms of veracity or authenticity, a subjunctive of what could be or might be or might as well be—a remembered or imagined identity written "as if" it were real. This "I" enjoys neither the presumption of a foundational ontology nor the convenience of conventional claims to authenticity. It is (only) possibly real. It is made real through the performance of writing. Accordingly, its reality is never fixed or stable. To the very extent that it is written, it is always already about to fly off the page into being and becoming.

Ideally, this self is a mess of errors. She is not so much unruly as superruly, surpassing convention and form on a dare. Errant, playful, and beautiful: she is Kate and Carol striking awe into our hearts; she is the student writer whose epileptic body and/or consciousness is not put under the erasure of an institutional *A*; she is the female stunt pilot outdoing the straight line of modernist progress by performing the wild twists and turns of impossible possibilities.

But what if the pilot falls out of the air? What if the show didn't go on? What if we all became drenched in blood and wine? What I want to call performative writing substitutes the open, dangerous, even grotesque range of "what if?" for the closed, causal logic of "if, then."[10] The latter is the logic of progress, holding advancement to the premise of prior achievements. It is a citational logic, locked in to what's come before, or: repetition as reproduction. "What if" opens a space between what is and what might be, answering what John Fiske (1993) called the "tyranny of the indicative" with possibility (p. 119). This is an ethical space: a space of mobilizing the difference between imagined and entrenched realities; and it is a performance space: a space of mobilizing the difference in repetition for ethical ends.

I can only begin to point to some examples of scholarly writing in which I find a trace of this performing/becoming "I." And I'm well aware that these examples may pale next to Dolly-again or even the wine-soaked seminar performance. However, let me suggest in retrospect that, in each of these cases, what was large began small. The performances turned on a dime. In a matter of seconds and only five words, Channing changed what might have been just one more among thousands of wonderful Dollies into the performance of a lifetime; and whatever held Kate's pouring arm up changed her seminar presentation from what might have been a conceptually sound, well-planned but slightly gimmicky event into a metaphorical plunge into pools of remembering from which I have yet to emerge. These were tiny shifts that made all the difference. In each case, performance wreaked havoc on less than a moment's notice.

So, reading for the miniature "stunt" (sublimity charged by a sudden, potentially wrong turn), I'll begin by asking: what if the writer-scholar makes a mistake?[11]

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In her virtuosic essay, "What a Rag Rug Means," Steedman (2001) reflects on a trick of memory—on how she transposed her recollection of a rag rug on a hearth from Richard Hoggart's description of his working-class home in *Uses of Literacy* into an account of Elizabeth Gaskell's novel, *Mary Barton*. In fact, there wasn't a rag rug on the Bartons' hearth and yet, she says, "I remember a rag rug." More to the point: she wanted a rag rug to warm that hearth. Steedman offers her error as a reflexive performance of the tendency to dehistoricize working-class domestic life—to "remember" it as common and quaint across eras—and of her wish to write memory and desire into working-class history, and so to historicize history. This essay is not about how memory can trap you or how to watch out for error bred of desire. To the contrary, Steedman locates history in the vicissitudes of memory and desire. She articulates the subjective labor of the historian with the ostensible objects of his or her research, dissolving the lines conventionally dividing not only psychoanalysis and labor history, literary analysis and cultural theory, but subject and object as the definitional parameters of "doing" even the most scrupulous archival work. Desire moves and exceeds the performance of history. It spills over even Steedman's slow and careful writing/making of the errant self at its core. For Steedman, history may be most telling in the errors desire yields.[12]

What if an invisible "I" is similarly partial? In the opening of *Call to Home*, Carol Stack (1996) invites us to reimagine the massive migration of African Americans from the North to the South in the 1970s and 1980s through one family's story. Here, in fact, there is no "I" other than the one implied by seeing what a body could and/or would see rounding the bend, returning home in the company of an as yet unnamed descendant of the former sharecropper, Samuel Bishop, disappearing almost entirely into the tenuous rhythms of identification with and respect for Bishop's family and its homeplace. Stack writes through the intimacies of others' recollection of Samuel. She reflects her vision and admiration of him in minute attention to the details of the land through which she passes "as if" in real time, as she draws us into the provisional landscape of Burdy's Bend:

> Upstream from the land that Samuel Bishop lived and died for, the water moves dark and slow in the creek bed. The course of the creek twists, doubles back and redoubles, and works itself almost into knots, writing out the territory like anxious knuckles squeezing a sponge. But at the edge of Samuel's sixty acres, land and waterway suddenly seem to sort themselves out, as though a hand of God had just then and there reached down to do the work of the Third Day of creation; the creek swings out deep and wide, cutting a broad arc, and the ground lifts back and away from a fringe of cypress and gum trees up gently through all the acres of fields. Samuel was born on this land, though hardly born to it; it belonged to the white folk, and there was more than half a century of fretting and sweating before he could claim it all for his family, free and clear.
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> This land in a loop of creek has always been called Burdy's Bend. On the highest ground, in the neck of the land, sits the house where Samuel was born in 1922, where he and Pearl lived their married life and raised their ten children. Pearl still lives there; she has running water now in her kitchen, pumped from the well through a hose, installed by her grandson Sammy, that snakes across the backyard and pokes into a hole in the kitchen wall. Maybe it was never much of a house, but after all these years its tin roof has buckled and gapped, and the framing has pulled back from the windowsills, leaving cracks big enough for cats. Pearl's blankets shade the windows. But the number of children over the years who came to call this house home, and to call Pearl Bishop "Miss Pearl," is almost beyond counting: there were Pearl and Samuel's own ten, and all the nieces and nephews sent back and forth by parents in New York, and there were the two little cousins who came after their mother passed—fourteen children at least at many a time, and sometimes seventeen, sometimes more. There are still children in the house, grandchildren now. Pearl is still Miss Pearl. (pp. 1-2)

Coming into the projected present where "Pearl is still Miss Pearl," Stack proceeds to imagine with us Pearl's sense of Samuel, writing in something like the indirect discourse of narrative fiction:

> Pearl always worried about Samuel when he was up north: she fretted that someone or something might grab onto him and keep him in New York and she fretted even more that he might drink away that fat New York paycheck of his. Around home, he would go and have a drink, but up north he was a *drinking* man, a man who headed straight to Horace's every day after work and sat till closing time in the company of dozens upon dozens of his once and future neighbors, people he had first gotten to know back in Burdy's Bend and New Jericho. Every time he left home he swore to Pearl that the day the job was over he'd come straight home to her, bearing money for the land—and the kind of man he was, he always kept his promise.
>
> That was Samuel for you: when he set out to do something, he was just going to do it. He went straight at it and stuck to it and did it, and then he made sure you knew just what he'd done and how he'd done it so that when the time came, you could do it for yourself, in his image. In your muscles, down to the bone, you'd feel just how he would have moved and done a thing, and even deeper than the bone would be the resonations of his voice and his spirit. (p. 4)

Stack performs Samuel's legacy. She embodies in writing the extent to which "in your muscles, down to the bone, you'd feel just how he would have moved and done a thing, and even deeper than the bone would be the resonations of his voice and his spirit" (p. 4). She moves into and through this landscape of family relations and raced history the way "he would have moved and done a thing,"

echoing yet again—creating "resonations" far beyond Burdy's Bend—Samuel's relationship with the land and people he called home.

In between the stacked jars and folded sheets of Stack's, Pearl's, and Samuel's viewpoints, we might ask: Did Pearl actually say this? What if she had? What if she were to? The effect would be much the same:[13] to give us a deepened sense of how Samuel's character is passed through muscle and bone and spirit, even as his story is passed through Pearl through Stack to us. We become then part of the "you" who'd "feel just how he would have moved and done a thing" so that when the time came "you could do it for yourself, in his image." You/I/we could do things the way that Samuel did them, repeating his performance of self, race, and labor as part of the generations that spread out after him, in the hard wake of industrial development. I marvel at who "I" become every time I read this novelistic passage. "I" cease to be "I" in any kind of denominative sense, the sheathing of "my" identity slipping away with each step further into this landscape and world, as "I" am finally enfolded in Samuel's steadfast way of doing things. I can feel in my muscles and bones not only the possibility but the imperative to do the thing done, to reenact and to reinvent the traditions Samuel set in motion. At the same time, and out of the same well of performative propulsion (as opposed to Butler's compulsion), I feel drawn past repetition toward revision of whats been done from which these bodies of knowing and doing have been so radically abjected. Accordingly, I would have to say that Stack performs history to excess. In her process of "doing the thing done," she gently undoes it, infusing "home" with the provisional time and/or space of what's as yet undone, of what's yet to be done.

What if writing buried the sensuous reality of its object in the folds of an emerging subject? Could their twin becomingness comprise a less alienated practice of performative knowing? This is Julie Taylor's project in *Paper Tangos* (1998), an ethnographic reflection on the paradoxical status of the tango in Argentina. Taylor writes herself into and through the process of realizing that she had to learn and practice the tango to write it. Her emerging subjectivity begins in collective identification with others reentering the world after the demise of the Junta in 1979, rising through a scrapheap of notes and streets into and through dialogic composition:

> In the effervescent release from fear at the fall of the Junta, we timidly began to recreate our social worlds and to compare notes. The exiles into which Argentines had been thrust became familiar episodes—internal exile, as it was known, as well as external. We had been engaged in the lonely task of inventing Argentine culture on our own, often far from Argentina, investing memories and customs with the meaning we each pulled out of our pasts. Nostalgic as we were, many bits and pieces of everyday life had been permeated with longing for a lost peace: food, trivial news and gossip, and the tango. . . .
>
> On one of the city's sunny but cold July winter days, I found myself alone in downtown Buenos Aires. My son was away on a visit. I was between tasks. My bags were all packed, as I had moved out of one apartment but was unable to move into the next. Startled, I realized that I was free to look for the addresses that, for years, I had jotted down one by one, never really believing I would someday be able to

> follow them out—to people who taught the tango and to places it was danced. I pulled innumerable scraps of paper from notebooks, pockets, and handbags and began by making my way through miles of ramshackle corridors to find a tiny set of offices whose bemused inhabitants gave me mimeographed sheets of addresses of neighborhood cultural programs that included tango. The night of that same day, in my first class, other students and onlookers praised and criticized teachers and dancers, providing information that sent me on more journeys all over the city, piecing together a universe I had not known existed. The rhythm of my classes and practices rapidly accelerated.
>
> "But *why* do you do all this dancing?" an acquaintance asked in conversation with several unbelieving Argentines. Another member of the group, who had initially expressed some bewilderment, suddenly lit up. She announced to the rest of the group in the Italian understood on porteno streets, "Perche la piace!" Because she likes it. And she was right. I was in a world deeply familiar from my years as a dancer, a world that gave me back my body and the modes of learning with it and from it that had formed my earliest perceptions. As the tango threw all this sharply into focus, I recuperated something that had been obliterated by years of rational argument. I recuperated ways of knowing, ways of knowing art, ways of knowing violence, ways of knowing fear—ways of knowing them to be bound up together in a body to which I could lay a tentative claim. (pp. 18-20)

Through the course of the book, Taylor becomes more subject than self: a visceral register of national and cultural power, a body of understanding to which she can lay a claim and yet only a "tentative" one. As much as she "recuperated ways of knowing," she does not own them—any more than does the tango or the nation own her. Whatever sense of self gains is a function of being pierced into recognition or re-knowing by others' perspectives and bodies of experience.

In this last paragraph, the authorial self is jarred out of and into knowing by an acquaintance who takes over textual as well as subjective and/or social space with her demanding question: "But why do you do all this dancing?" The question is echoed in the faces of other "unbelieving" witnesses. Taylor seems at a loss for an answer. The question ricochets such that "another member of the group, who had initially expressed some bewilderment, suddenly lit up." She then answers in the Italian patois of the street, not only answering but answering back to the circle of suspicious power of which she had previously been a part, "Perche la piace!" Taylor translates, referring to herself in the third person: "Because she likes it." And translates again, this time into her own language, now saturated with at least three others: "And she was right."

Through the kind of hard dialogue by which the authorial "I" is initially, entirely overcome by unauthorized others, Taylor becomes a knowing subject. She writes herself having been written into new ways of knowing, of now knowing art, violence, and fear in and through the passionate vulnerability of embodiment, of which *tango* is a literal process and a vibrant metaphor, carrying with it its own dialogic force. It is tango that "threw all of this into sharp focus."

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In each of these examples, the writer reinhabits the old in ways that alter it, recounting or suggesting ways in which she is altered in turn. Each recalls research

to the realm of "the improvisational, the realm of the possible," reclaiming the foundations of knowledge in bodily error and contradiction. In each case, the writing "I" gains authority less by proprietary claims on experience than by dispersion in and through the representation of experiences that produce a changed and changing subject. In each case, the ego-identified or intentional self disappears into reflexivity, story, boundless otherness, other times and places, embodied knowledges, unspeakable violence, and discovery itself as a really great mistake. In each case, moreover, the abject returns with the performed self in process and radical contingency; in the sensuous body—in all of its pleasure and terror; and in embodied difference—raced, gendered, sexed, and classed.

This performative "I" thus has a politics and an ethics. Performing displacement by error, intimacy, others, it moves beyond the atomization, alienation, and reproduction of the authorial self toward new points of identification and alliance. Following Russo, a mobile, performative "I" may thus also produce "new political aggregates—provisional, uncomfortable, even conflictual coalitions of bodies." The student moving into or as yet renting space in this subjective habitus may find herself wildly confused, without ready means of textual housekeeping. And yet, to the very extent that—disorderly, aberrant, accident-prone, and uncompromising in her embrace of what might otherwise make us cringe—the reader and/or writer as female stunt pilot makes a perfect mess of conventional scholarly forms, she renews our contract with possibility.

Notes

1. I am referring here to only a few of the founding texts in the cross-disciplinary challenge to conventional critical writing, texts directly related to the so-called crisis in representation in the social sciences and to feminist claims on "voice," both of which are tied to changing conceptions of the scholar and/or researcher's relation to truth. See, in particular, Cixous (1976), Clifford (1986), Haraway (1991), hooks (1989), and Miller (1991). For general review of what has come to be called "performative writing," see especially the essays by Pollock (1998) and Sedgwick (1998).

2. Paper discussed with the student's permission.

3. The problem of evaluative protocol for "literary" ethnography is explicitly addressed by Richardson (2000). See also Bochner's (2001) response to the dismissal of personal narratives of suffering.

4. For a similar elaboration of Diamond, see Sandoval-Sanchez and Sternbach (2001), p. 97. On performance and possibility, see Madison (1998) and, for example, Pollock (1999) on the performance of a "possible real."

5. See Schneider's (2001) brilliant reflection on the relation between reproduction, cloning, and various Dollies.

6. Walter Benjamin's (1968) essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (appropriately continues to frame discussion here; Peggy Phelan (1993) has provocatively raised the possibility that performance may be a mode of representation without reproduction.

7. Re: the ludic implications here, see, for example, Turner (1982).

8. Performance discussed with the student's permission. I do not mean in any way to suggest that this is a definitive critique or eulogy, and recognize that the performance event did not directly address any number of related issues. What I can say, however, is that the performance—and stories of it—have spurred ongoing discussion about performance, 9/11, the war on Iraq, and memory and memorialization, among other topics. It left a strong trace in subsequent reckonings of which this is but one.

9. See Kristeva's (1982) founding discussion of abjection.

10. Accordingly, I have encouraged students to assume a "what if" stance in critical discussion of others' work. Undergraduate students in particular seem particularly stricken by the need to keep their "hands off" others' work, especially if it in any way explicitly entails first person subjectivity. Evaluative critique rests on an "if, then" logic: if you did this, then this would be better. Although I don't wish to abandon evaluation, what if seems an effective way to circumvent students' reservations about criticizing their peers (often defended in playground variations on rank relativism: "that's his story; I can't say"; "that's my interpretation; you can't say!") and to reinvigorate evaluation with ethics. I consequently shift the classroom discourse slightly toward possibility: what if he or she did this or that?, to the extent that, in at least one recent class, students began to raise their hands to indicate: "I have a 'what if': what if he or she did this or that?"

11. None of the texts I address are typically identified with "new" or "auto" ethnography, nor are they explicitly or experimental critical or "performative" writing.

12. This is in many ways what is happening in a book such as Beverly Skeggs' (1995) edited collection, *Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production*—in which the contributors perform their reflexive consciousness about the process of completing major scholarly works. They reflect on the seedy underside of scholarship: the problems, the fixes, the knots, the error of their ways, showing how they got driven into a certain corner by a method or theory, or how they found a rabbit hole and jumped in. They also imagine alternative routes: what else they might have done or might do. In this sense, they undo the completeness of prior work, drowning it in process—past and present, dramatizing the perilous possibilities that hide out in the otherwise smooth surfaces of scholarly achievement.

13. Re: narrative truth, see Trinh (1989), especially 119-121.

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