

## **Geographies of Learning: Theater Studies, performance and the "performative"**

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The American academy in which theatre studies is lodged is a rapidly changing geography. The explosion of critical theory in the mid-80s through the present has redrawn disciplinary maps with productive alacrity. Area studies programs like Women's Studies, African-American Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, Asian-American Studies, and more, have broadened the body of knowledge, critiquing the exclusions wrought by the "objectivity" of the old canons. Theory and identity have become institutionally linked in feminism, race theory, and gay and lesbian studies, as new methodological strategies - postmodernism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, cultural studies - help to describe new objects and subjects of inquiry.

The proliferation of performative metaphors is prompted in part by post-structuralist vocabulary that refuses a notion of inherent, essentialist ontology, but that suggests instead a constructionist notion of identity as anti-metaphysical, emphatically material and historical, constantly refashioning itself in various contexts and configurations of reception. "Performativity" as metaphor is used increasingly to describe the nonessentialized constructions of marginalized identities, like white and ethnic women, gays and lesbians, men and women of color, and various conflicting combinations and intersections of these categories and positionalities. Performativity might be most useful here because marginalized identities are self-consciously alienated from "the real" of subjectivity to begin with.

Theories of the performative - in feminism, gay and lesbian studies, performance studies, and cultural studies - creatively borrow from concepts in theatre studies to make their claim for the constructed nature of subjectivity, suggesting that social subjects perform themselves in negotiation with the delimiting cultural conventions of the geography within which they move. But as much as performativity seems to capture the academic imagination, and as much as performance captures the political field, theatrical performances, as located, historical sites for interventionist work in social identity constructions, are rarely considered across the disciplines, methods, and politics that borrow its terms.

My desire to see theatre studies acknowledged and visited, rather than raided and discarded, as part of the proliferation of the performative, is hampered by its traditional insistence on privileging the humanist ideology of the aesthetic and by its ubiquitous

theory/practice (even mind/body) split. But by borrowing back concepts of performativity, the divided sides of our home departments might find ways not to heal the schism with some transcendent artistic coherence, but to employ complementary languages to do intellectually and culturally committed, moving, embodied, and relevant work.

I want to engage with a reconfiguration of "home" in both a political and a disciplinary sense, attempting to redraw the community with whom I would live. I'm drawn to Biddy Martin's and Chandra Mohanty's interest in "the configuration of home, identity, and community" in the tension between "being home... the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries" and "not being at home... a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself."

These same tensions pull at my affiliation with theatre studies as a "home" for my scholarship and theatre practice, and as one whose apparent coherence I want to be productively disrupted, by the inclusion of people it has historically excluded - white women, men and women of color and various ethnicities, lesbians and gays and all those who intersect these categories - and by antihumanist theoretical models. Both inclusions seem antithetical to theatre's historically elitist self-consideration as "high art."

Remapping the territory of "home" also resonates with the geographical metaphors that describe, in part, the shifting focus of performance work in American theatre, marked by identities and positionalities that refashion theatre's spatial boundaries to include "other" ones. These metaphors challenge the centrality of white heterosexual male culture, and of New York City as the apex of theatre production and criticism. The newly mapped geography locates specified (rather than humanistically universalized), historically marginalized identities as active participants in the production of theatrical meaning.

Numerous play anthologies published recently mark a new geography of American theatre as it hyphenates itself in print - *On New Ground* (1987), a volume of Hispanic-American plays; *Between Worlds* (1990), Asian-American; *Out Front* (1988), gay and lesbian; even Lenora Champagne's edited collection of women's performance art pieces, *Out From Under* (1990), all use metaphors of location to title themselves in conjunction with identity positions crossed by gender, race, or sexuality. The publication of these plays as collections of dramatic literature makes them accessible to wider readerships. They also enter a pedagogical circuit that allows them to disrupt the canon of American drama, when they are assigned and discussed.

Of course, the titles of these anthologies are caught up in certain assumptions about the self-evidence of the identities they frame, assumptions that plague the calling-card method of notating position and difference. The hyphenates of these anthologized identities also point to a possible recuperation into the fabric of something more recurrently, hegemonically "American." As Jennifer Brody argued at the 1992 Women and Theatre Program conference in Atlanta, the hyphen marks a state destined to be dissolved into a totality. She noted that while white skin privilege escapes hyphenation, men and women of color find that their hyphens often join conflicting positionalities, and serve as temporary connectors that are bound to either assimilate or separate the terms. The theatre anthologies that proudly bear their hyphenated authorships belie a total detachment from American theatre's hegemonic past and present, but figure the body of canonical American theatre as miscegenated in potentially subversive ways.

I intend to argue here for the retention of theatre studies as a disciplinary "home" deeply influenced by interdisciplinary methods, one made less coherent and less safe (even dangerous) by its determined inclusion of other (ed) geographies, other (ed) desires, and bodies othered by what hegemony has refused to allow seen. I would like to sketch a model of exchange between theatre and other fields and disciplines, rather than one in which the performative evacuates theatre studies.

Some of the locations from which my argument moves and to which it returns are performance studies, a discipline to which theatre studies is historically already tied; cultural studies, now being institutionally established across disciplines; feminist multiculturalist and gay and lesbian studies, which describe identity as performative; and feminist theoretical writing on identification and empathy that uses the power of theatricality to describe and to change the way social identities are performed and received.