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EMBODYING AN HEMISPHERIC POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE: DIANA TAYLOR'S CULTURAL PRACTICES

This interview with Diana Taylor, which took place at the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in August 2012, touches upon several issues. First Diana Taylor focuses on the innovative nature of Performance Studies, having as its object of study an object of analysis that is never given “a priori”, but that, instead, has to be created and circumscribed from time to time. In this sense she emphasizes the methodological effectiveness of Performance Studies in stepping forward as an analytical lens aiming at investigating various forms of behavior and “embodied” cultural practices, understood as forms of transmission of meaning. Secondly, turning the attention to the work done with her Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, Diana Taylor highlights the political value inherent in the performative expressions and examines both the important connection between theory and practice in the field of Performance Studies, and the transdisciplinary or postdisciplinary dimension that characterizes it. Finally, reflecting on the ontology of performance, she affirms that, resulting from a mix of codes and conventions, performance never “happens” for the first time, and that any attempt to “save” or “preserve” it is intended to fail.

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CC: I would like to talk with you about Performance Studies in general and then I would like to go deeper and talk about some specific topics in Performance Studies. So the first thing I would like to ask you is about how you got to Performance Studies.

DT: Well, I started out looking in theater, but it became very clear to me around 1990 that I couldn't really think about theater without thinking about everything that was going on outside of it. I knew that, I always knew that, but I had just finished a chapter on Grisenda Gambaro, a very important playwright from Argentina and then I went to Argentina right afterwards, and then I realized that even the texts could not really understood without that context or pre-text or whatever we wanna call it. So I decided that I was going to really look at the whole scenario, the whole environment first, and then try to think about how texts or scripts and then performance work in that larger framework. So I guess it's the inversion of the framework that allowed me to think of Performance Studies in a broader way and theater as one certain type of performance within that larger framework.

CC: Thanks! This leads me to something else which is pretty close to what you have just said, and which is about the difference between the Performance Studies perspective and any other perspective we can adopt when we analyze something specific. So I am just wondering if you can help me to clarify what the Performance Studies perspective can give new to your own object of analysis (which is pretty close to what you have just said).

DT: Well I would say that the object of analysis in Performance Studies is never a given. There is no object as such out there, so that it's probably more of a lens, than it is an object. So for example I

can look at lots of different kinds of things, using a Performance Studies lens, and then I create my object of analysis, and I think that that's why Performance Studies is so different than say Theater Studies or Cinema Studies or Literature Studies, because Cinema Studies looks at cinema and Literature Studies looks at literature and those kinds of studies are focused by those particular objects, but we don't have that object of analysis; we look at performance, which is very very broadly understood as behavior, I guess, it could be animal and human behavior, but it's not locked into any specific thing. So for me to be able to study say ritual or dance or a social movement or anything like that as performance I have to create my object of analysis, so that means I have to find the frame that says: "Ok! This is the object of analysis that I am looking at". So I don't have a frame that comes from the outside, that is it's not a film, it's not a text. So I have to frame it; I have to say: "This is the beginning; this is the end". I am going to go from before the Dirty War to the end of the Dirty War for example, in Argentina. I am going to look at these different kinds of interactions; I am going to focus on these particular spaces. So I have to create that object of analysis, which is a very different project I think than most scholars have. I think in fact we are closer to historians than to any other scholars in the arts. Because historians like Performance Studies scholars have to frame and create their object of analysis.

CC: Thanks! So it's more about the lens than about the object itself. So what's so specific or so peculiar about the lens in Performance Studies?

DT: I think if you think about behaviors, embodiment, presence, all those forms of thinking about how animals or humans transfer knowledge, make meaning out of different kinds of practice, use practice to transfer meaning, all of those things you are not just looking at say, for example, a dance or a piece of theater, something that is defining almost by the form. You are looking at many kinds of behaviors that perhaps haven't been formalized, haven't been thought through as a form. And so the Performance Studies lens allows you to look at that as a kind of behavior, the way the people use something, the way the people move in a certain space; we can think about the ways people move in public spaces as performance; we can think about the ways people display their things at the market... what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls a performance of everyday life. So it's basically the frame that's allowing us to look at that as performance, rather than saying: "Ok! Those objects in and out themselves constitute a category, that is an object; but to think of an object of analysis means that somebody has already constituted it as an object, and we haven't done that. So I think that that's what the enormous promise of Performance Studies is. It doesn't say: "Ok! I am accepting this as an object of analysis, but that means that it has already been defined. So we define and we create our own object of analysis.

CC: Can you tell me a little bit more about the intersection between Performance Studies and the work that you do here at the Hemispheric Institute?

DT: Well, when I first came to the department of Performance Studies, here at NYU, I knew I only wanted to be in a Performance Studies department; that's the only kind of project I was interested in really investing my time and energy in. But I also saw that it was very angled, that means that most of the literature, most of the conversations we were having in Performance Studies at NYU, were among scholars in the US, Europe and Australia. And I thought that is really important to think

about performance in the Americas because one of my major theories about performance in the Americas is that body practice is actually an extremely important form of communicating knowledge through the Americas, mostly because in some places 50% of the population is semi-illiterate, which means that knowledge production does not pass automatically through printed culture; so it passes around printed culture, before, around and after. It goes through *fiestas*, it goes through demonstrations, it goes through religious practices, it goes through all sorts of embodied practices that don't have very much to do with printed culture. So I think it's very important to think about how performance doesn't necessarily have an aesthetic end, but sometimes a very instrumental end which is that communities learn to do certain things within conventions that are carried through a body practice; and those get handed on from one generation to another, or from one community to another, and that's how this knowledge production spreads. So I thought that it was important to think about Americans within that constellation, and I think that that has in a way opened up a little bit more the conversation in Performance Studies even in our angled world. I think that perhaps we pay a little more attention to colonization, to the role of archival culture in conversation with, but not in opposition with embodied culture or the repertoire, as I call it. So I think it has allowed us to think the other kind of more angled Performance Studies, also from a different way.

CC: Thank you! So it seems like this is exactly the point where you can find the political power of Performance Studies in a certain way. Do you agree with this? And where else we can find the political power of Performance Studies?

DT: I think that that is right! I think that once you start looking at transmission of behavior, you very very quickly see these are forms of forms of power, these are actions of power. One of the reasons I thought it was so important to distinguish actions that pass through bodies, embodied practices as a way of knowing, not just the archival, that pass through documents and things like that, but there is a way of knowing and there is a way of transmitting knowledge, so that we think about performance not as that which disappears, but as that that remains. This became important politically because if you think about the way the Western cultures have prioritized knowledge as archival, and expressions perhaps as embodied, then we understand that the embodied can never have the explanatory power of the archival. It can never have the legitimating force of the archival, the persuasive force. So, all of the sudden you see that it becomes a really second class form of knowledge production, so that what's really important for analysis is the archival, the documents, the texts, the records, and everything else has been seen as ephemeral, as that which disappears, and so forth. So by going back to the conquest and by thinking of colonialism you understand that the indigenous populations in the Americas had their ways of transmitting knowledge; it is not that they did not have knowledge; they did not record it through texts. So when the Spanish people came and started taking the lands and taking possession of everything, they were saying: "Well, we have the documents! Queen and King in Spain gave us these. Here are the documents!" And of course Amerindians had no way of proving documents, and they had no "value" of proof. So the fact they lived there, that they practiced their life there and lived their life there did not have the power of proof. I am trying to think through how embodied practice has that power. And in fact I think we have seen an incredible progress in the last ten-fifteen years, because finally courts of law, for example in Canada, are beginning to accept embodied practice as a form of legitimation. So native

groups can make claims based on practices there, which before they would not be able to make a claim. The UNESCO for example is trying to figure out forms through their Intangible Cultural Heritage projects, of valorizing cultural practices; so there is a lot of interest now in thinking embodied practice and how we can give it its political value, that it had lost because of this legitimating system that was based on archival logic. So I think that that is something that's really important. I think that when it gets down to like for example demonstrations or to the politics on the street, we also have to think about embodied practice as being very very powerful. If you think again about print culture, if you want to publish a book, it is very easy to do it through a printing press. It is very easy to control things that go through television, radio and all those other means of transmission, but it is very difficult to control bodies. If you want to make a protest, it could be either bodies on the street like in groups, which is what we have seen throughout the Americas in the last two years, or they can be very settled things, like for example even in theatre in moments of dictatorship the theatre practitioners had to give scripts over to the censors, so that scripts could look innocent enough. And then when the performers enacted the roles the slider gestures could communicate a very different meaning to the audience than the meaning that is in the script. So that would mean that censors would have to go to every single performance in order to control bodies. So bodies have an enormous potential for communicating in a kind of coded way, in a way that other people do not understand necessarily. So it becomes a huge resource in terms of the political agency of populations in times of control.

CC: Thank you! I agree with all this, and this actually makes me think about the impossibility of controlling Performance Studies as a field in a certain way, and performance itself. You are mentioning different things, such as he attempts done by UNESCO. Thinking about the essay you wrote about UNESCO I was just wondering which one might be a way to deal with performance, its ephemerality and the political impossibility of saving something without going against the nature of the thing in itself.

DT: I guess my critic of the UNESCO project and the critic of any kind of project that tries to "save" performance is that I think it is a contradiction in terms, and undoes the very dynamic energy of performance. So quite if it is the attempt at saving and what the "saving" means. Saving is a kind of preservation. It's as if we are turning practice into a script. So the impossibility I guess is that you can't save performance by turning it into something it is not, which is a script or a notation or a video or something like that. Performances last and have futures only if people are interested in carrying them out. But they are never repetition of the same, as Deleuze would say; it is not the repetition of the same; it's a repetition through practice that is always going to be different. You might think it is the same, you might say it is the same, but it is not the same. And if you are interested in doing it, that's what's going to keep it alive. And if other people find it interesting and continue to do it, then it is going to have a future. But there is no point of saving something when there is no interest by the community in doing that practice. Let me just give a very flat-footed example. See for example language. If you have a community of people who speak a language and they are interested in speaking it, for whatever reason that language will survive, it will live, it will change because all languages change... that is a function, or, if you want, a characteristic of its being alive. But if nobody speaks that language anymore, then what is the political or aesthetic or pedagogical reason to keep it alive. You can. Think of Hebrew. Hebrew was a dead language.

Hebrew was a language that was taken up to be used as the official language of the state of Israel. A lot of people put time and energy into it, there was a lot of political commitment to make it happen, and they did it. But that was a political project and a very conscious project. But see for examples the last speakers of a certain language died out, and nobody wants to speak that language because they are speaking their own languages; there is a political project for it; how are you gonna keep it alive? What's the community of practice? So if there is no community of practice then practices died out. And that's how it is. So, instead of saying "we are going to keep it alive", why not accept that we have to support other communities of practice. If we want a practice to remain alive, then it's those communities that need to be supported, rather than the practices. So I guess that's where my emphasis is on how we can think about performances into the future. Performances are going to change and, as I said, when we think that they can't change that's when we kill them; when we think that we have to save them somehow, and I just don't think that it is the case. There are lives where the future comes through a very different avenue than through preservation.

CC: Thanks! There is another basic aspect which is about the intersection between theory and practice in the field of Performance Studies. This was one of the aims at the very beginning when the department here at NYU was founded in the early 80s. It seems like the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics is one of those realities actually able to put together theory and practice. My question is about the Hemispheric Institute, but it is also about the field in general. Do you think that the field of Performance Studies still wants to point out this relation between theory and practice, or it is more about academic things?

DT: I would say that Performance Studies in general is very interested in theory and practice together, although it is probably true that most people in the universities are theorists and not practitioners. I think that that's one of the things happening because academic institutions like Performance Studies, are part of a University, because they are institutionalized to a certain degree. I do not think that Performance Studies is completely institutionalized at NYU for example. I think we always have a door open because so many of our students are artists. So the connections with the Arts and especially the Arts in New York City are very strong, so I think that we do have that connection. But I think that one of the dangers that we have in Performance Studies and in any academic field is that we spend a lot of time just talking to ourselves, talking to other scholars. I think that the Hemispheric Institute has tried very hard to keep the conversation always among scholars, artists and activists. Performance means a very different thing to each of these groups, and that for me keeps the conversation alive. It is also true that those are not the only fields which are interested in performance. If you think about psychology for example, that is interested in behavior, behavior of all practices. If you think about neurology, it is interested in the way that the brain reacts as seen behavior and intrigues other behaviors and so forth. If you think about the ways lawyers perform, or there is so much of Western medicine that is performance of power, then you can say "but performance is actually valid to all these different fields", and I think that that is true. I think that the potential for the growth of performance is that in every single one of these fields, it's very important to think about behaviors, which has been our area of expertise. How do we think about behaviors? So that's going to be more and more recognized widely for all of these different areas. So there is a trans-disciplinary dimension to Performance Studies, that I think it is not the case for a lot of the other departments that are very much a product of a kind of nineteenth-century

way of thinking about knowledge production. The fact that this is such a latecomer to the academic field makes it potentially a trans- or post-disciplinary structure in a way that for me is very promising and that avoids this compartmentalization. Does it make sense?

CC: Yes, it does. It makes me think about another essay that Richard Schechner wrote many years ago, and that was about the shift from the Drama department at NYU to Performance Studies. He was talking about the fact that a lot of students in Theatre Studies could not have been able to get specific jobs because the world has been changing and so Performance Studies would have given them the chance to better understand the world the way it is becoming. So, in relation to what you have just said, I am thinking about the way Performance Studies people can use the kind of knowledge that they get through this programme in those fields that you were mentioning, like for instance in a medical environment. So which one might be the kind of contribution that Performance Studies people can give to these specific fields, in terms of something which is not academic?

DT: So, what could be an application? Well, there is a lot. If you think for example the way that cultural anthropology has thought about healing rituals. When people think about healing rituals, they think about Shamanism, and they think about Susto or these different forms of thinking about health or health issues cross-culturally. But Western medicine is as much a performance of power as the healing rituals or the Shamans. Sometimes people see somebody in a white coat with a stethoscope and all of their symptoms go away, like magically. I have seen a lot of that. So I think in a way of advising patients, and advising health care providers, in how to have a better conversation, where some of their performance of power gets minimized might be one way that it helps. Then there are some practical and horrible ways in which it helps; if you think about the ways in which for example during the wars they ask people who are trained in not Performance Studies I hope, as far as I know, but let's say for example Anthropology, to talk about the behaviors and practices of the people that the armies are invading. What cultural practice should one avoid if one does not want to offend another population, or what practice should one explicitly use to offend and to hurt and to humiliate. So those are all the ways that practices that we have learnt to think about are used for military purposes that do not have any application within our own field, but they become very very valuable. I would say that another field where it could have for me a very negative repercussion is advertising. How do people behave? Well, people in advertising know how people behave. In Performance Studies, and in Theatre Studies too, we keep saying we do not know exactly how to think about the audience, or who the audience is. But advertising knows exactly who the audience is; they know exactly how to judge that. So, do we take that role? How do we think about the audiences? There is a lot of ways that I think Performance Studies has to be very very attentive to what's happening in advertising or in the military field or increasingly in the digital world, to think about how performance helps us to make sense of what's going on, and also to think about the ways of performance and the things that we do in Performance Studies become co-opted to help the military or the commercial or business kinds of giants take advantage of consumers behaviors. So I think it's actually a really really important form of knowledge production, and one that we have to take seriously, thinking across practices at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

CC: So, maybe somebody who is not familiar with Performance Studies at all, could ask “why not psychology, why not Anthropology, why not another discipline?” Is Performance Studies able to go through all of these?

DT: Not exactly! And certainly not without the cost, in the sense that we can’t understand behaviors anywhere, at all times, regardless a context, no! But because we are the one post-discipline that actually focuses on behaviors, I think that we have a training that will allow us to make those steps to think about how other powers, whether it is institutional, disciplinary, military, commercial or so forth are also using behavior and thinking about behavior. So I think that if we are only studying psychology, if that is our field, I think we could understand certain elements of psychology very clearly in the sense of “why do people behave the way they do”, and if you want them to change the behaviors, what are the practices or steps that as a psychologist you take to get them to change their behaviors. That is clear. We understand what that project is. But I think that we look at the behaviors and we look at the behavior and not simple of that person, whose behavior we are trying to change, but also at the behavior of the therapist, the behavior of the all group, the way that that gets structured, the assumptions that get made about behaviors, like “what would be proper behavior”... I remember I was at a simulation center recently where they are trying to help people who come back from Iraq for example, who are traumatized because, for example, they thought that person hidden over there was an enemy, and they killed them, and then they realized that they had killed five of six children. So they try to get them to feel ok. So, “how do you feel ok about that?” Is it just that we are gonna deal with the symptom, which is their goal, or we are we gonna deal with the politics, or are we gonna deal with the ethics, or are we gonna deal with all of the other ramifications? I think that Performance Studies has a much broader lens. I think that I, as a Performance Studies person, could look at the much broader ramifications and say: “Ok, yes! You don’t want this individual deal with his trauma, but is the only aim of this to reduce trauma, like in the drones or in the remote killers of the predators.” You have killed a lot of people, and you don’t feel a bit bad about it because you got all this technology of distancing, but maybe that technology of distancing is not a good thing. Maybe it is good for the individual because it does not get traumatized, but is it good for the way that we want to interact in conflict in this world? So I think that Performance Studies allows us a much broader field to be able to ask all sorts of questions that these disciplines that are narrowly defining maybe do not ask themselves. So that’s what I would say is the advantage of having this kind of post-disciplinary lens that allows you to look at all certain different kinds of behaviors that are not limited to the particular disciplines.

CC: Thanks! There are different ways we can think about performance. For instance when Richard Schechner talks about performance, he talks about performance in terms of “twice behaved behavior”, so it is something that it is never for the first time, and then we face the fact that performance is something which is about ephemerality, something that we cannot really save. So how can we match these two things? It is never for the first time and at the same time it is something that we cannot really save.

DT: I would say that I agree with Richard Schechner completely. Performance is never for the first time, which means that performance is by definition conventional. Performance or embodied practice takes place within a series of conventions and codes, and that’s what makes it

understandable to somebody else, what makes us able to practice it, and what makes it have sense over time. So let me just give you one example. If we think about a classroom situation or a seminar situation as a performance, you have a professor, the professor sits at the head of the table or stands at the head of the class, the students know where to seat, the students know what to talk, the students understand the expectations, the professor understand the expectations, we know who has supposed to read what, or prepared what for that class, we know how long the class lasts, everybody knows how to behave, what the expected behaviors are within that class. Let's say that that is a little performance. You'll never going to have that particular class again. So what happened in that exact class is ephemeral to the degree that that particular constitution is that one time. People can take notes, there can be a record of it, there can be a video of it, there can be whatever, but the special configuration that takes place in that class happens only once. But when you think about the way the performance is sustained over time, it is through these conventions. The seminars are going take place in every country, in every university again and again and again and again. It is an established form of communication. So those are never for the first time. It's only because they are established that we know how we behave there. It is always going to be a mix of the codes and the conventions and that particular thing that happens this one time within that. So do we save this one time within that? We save it through memory perhaps, we save it by inspiring to have something special happening in the next class. We might save a record of it by our notes, by our video, by whatever, but that moment is gone. So you have that combination, that's how it works. You have the spark, you have the thing that happened that one time only, but it happens within a structure that is repeatable and reproducible.

CC: So, as Marvin Carlson would say, there is something that is about awareness in what you do every time you perform. It might be a matter of being aware...

DT: I am not sure... I am not sure if consciousness is necessarily a part of it. If you think about performance as this particular conventional thing, then yes. It's a football game, it's a mass, it's a class situation, it's a theatre performance. In that case there is a certain awareness to it, but then if you think about coded behaviors, conventional behaviors, like gender performances, or the performances of racial or national identity or something like that, are we aware of it? Yes and no, right? Well, sometimes we are aware of it; very often we are not aware of it, and we are doing it anyway. So I am not sure to what degree awareness defines this tension that you described between the ephemerality and the conventional 'ongoingness' of it, the repeatability of it. I think that that would vary.

CC: Thanks!

DT: You are welcome! Thank you!