

Performing as a Moral Act:¹ Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance

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For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity The self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighborhood, the city, and the tribe Without those moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists.

—Alasdair MacIntyre²

During the crucial days of 1954, when the Senate was pushing for termination of all Indian rights, not one single scholar, anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or economist came forward to support the tribes against the detrimental policy.

—Vine Deloria, Jr.³

Ethnographers study the diversity and unity of cultural performance as a universal human resource for deepening and clarifying the meaningfulness of life. They help us see performance with all its moral entailments, not as a flight from lived responsibilities. Henry Glassie represents the contemporary ethnographer's interest in the interanimation between expressive art and daily life, texts, and contexts:

I begin study with sturdy, fecund totalities created by the people themselves, whole statements, whole songs or houses or events, away from which life expands, toward which life orients in seeking maturity. I begin with texts, then weave contexts around them to make them meaningful, to make life comprehensible.⁴

Joining other humanists who celebrate the necessary and indissoluble link between art and life, ethnographers present performance as vulnerable and open to dialogue with the world.

The repercussions for "thinking," which Clifford Geertz attributes to Dewey, can be transposed to a socially committed and humanistic understanding of "performing":

Since Dewey, it has been much more difficult to regard thinking as an abstention from action, theorizing as an alternative to commitment, and the intellectual life as a kind of secular monasticism, excused from accountability by its sensitivity to the Good.⁵

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This view cuts off the safe retreat into aestheticism, art for art's sake, and brings performance "out into the public world where ethical judgment can get at it."⁸

Moral and ethical questions get stirred to the surface because ethnographers of performance explode the notion of aesthetic distance.⁹ In their fieldwork efforts to grasp the native's point of view, to understand the human complexities displayed in even the most humble folk performance, ethnographers try to surrender themselves to the centripetal pulls of culture, to get close to the face of humanity where life is not always pretty. Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard wrote that fieldwork "requires a certain kind of character and temperament. . . . To succeed in it a man must be able to abandon himself to native life without reserve."¹⁰ Instead of worrying about maintaining aesthetic distance, ethnographers try to bring "the enormously distant enormously close without becoming any less far away."¹¹

Moreover, ethnographers work with expressivity, which is inextricable from its human creators. They must work with real people, humankind alive, instead of printed texts. Opening and interpreting lives is very different from opening and closing books. Perhaps that is why ethnographers worry more about acquiring experiential insight than maintaining aesthetic distance. Indeed, they are calling for empathic performance as a way of intensifying the participative nature of fieldwork, and as a corrective to foreshorten the textual distance that results from writing monographs about the people with whom one lives and studies.¹² When one keeps intellectual, aesthetic, or any other kind of distance from the other, ethnographers worry that other people will be held at an ethical and moral remove as well.

Whatever else one may say about ethnographic fieldwork, Geertz reminds us, "one can hardly claim that it is focused on trivial issues or abstracted from human concerns."¹³ This kind of research "involves direct, intimate and more or less disturbing encounters with the immediate details of contemporary life."¹⁴ When ethnographers of performance complement their participant observation fieldwork by actually performing for different audiences, the verbal art they have studied *in situ*, they expose themselves to double jeopardy. They become keenly aware that performance does not proceed in ideological innocence and axiological purity.

Most researchers who have extended ethnographic fieldwork into public performance will experience resistance and hostility from audiences from time to time.¹⁵ This disquieting antagonism, however, more than the audience approval, signals most clearly that ethnographic performance is a form of conduct deeply enmeshed in moral matters. I believe that all performance has ethical dimensions, but have found that moral issues of performance are more transparent when the performer attempts to engage ethnic and intercultural texts, particularly those texts outside the canon and derived from fieldwork research.

For three and a half years I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork among Lao and Hmong refugees in Chicago. The performance of their oral narratives is an integral part of my research project and a natural extension of the role of the ethnographer as participant to that of advocate. When working with minority peoples and disenfranchised subcultures, such as refugees, one is frequently propelled into the role of advocate. The ethnographer, an unin-

vised stranger who depends upon the patient courtesies and openhearted hospitality of the community, is compelled by the laws of reciprocity and human decency to intervene, if he can, in a crisis. Further, the stories my Laotian friends tell make claims on me. For example, what do you do when the coroner orders an autopsy on a Hmong friend and the family comes to you numb with horror because according to Hmong belief if you cut the skin of a dead person the soul is lost forever, there can be no hope of reincarnation? Moreover, that disembodied soul consigned to perpetual limbo will no doubt come back to haunt and terrorize the family.

I have performed the stories of the refugees for dozens of audiences. In addition to academic audiences, where the performance usually complements a theoretical argument I want to make about the epistemological potential of performance as a way of deeply sensing the other, I have performed them before many and varied non-academic audiences. I have tried to bring the stories of the Lao and Hmong before social service agencies, high schools where there have been outbreaks of violence against refugee students, businessmen, lawyers, welfare case workers, public school teachers and administrators, religious groups, wealthy women's clubs, and so forth. Often I have been gratified to see the way the performance of a story can pull an audience into a sense of the other in a rhetorically compelling way. Many times, however, the nonacademic audiences are deeply disturbed by these performances. I have been attacked, not just in the sessions of discussion and response immediately following these performances. One time the anger and hostility was so heated that I was invited back to face the same group two weeks later for a three-hour session that began with attack and abuse but moved gradually, and painfully, to heightened self-reflexivity (for me, as well as them). The last hour we spent talking about ourselves instead of the refugees.

Here is a partial list of the offenses for which I am most frequently condemned. Members of certain religious groups indict me for collaborating in the "work of the devil." My refugee friends are not Christian, and their stories enunciate a cosmology radically different from Judeo-Christian traditions. Fundamentalist Christians perceptively point out that by the very act of collecting, preserving, and performing these stories, I am legitimizing them, offering them as worthy of contemplation for Christians, and encouraging the Lao and Hmong to hold fast to their "heathenism." Welfare workers despise me for relating the refugees' assimilation into mainstream America and thereby making the caseworker's job more difficult. From their point of view, these people must be Americanized as quickly as possible. They simply must drop their old ways of thinking, "superstitions," and become American. Developing resettlement programs that involve careful adjustments and blends between the old and new would require too much time or energy or money. Some social workers and administrators clearly emphasize that videotaping ancient rituals, recording and performing oral history are not morally neutral activities. Some public school educators interrogate me for performing in a respectful tone a Lao legend that explains the lunar eclipse as a frog in the sky who swallows the moon. After one performance I was asked, "How do the Lao react when you tell them they are wrong?" When I replied that I do not "correct" my Lao friends about their understanding of the lunar eclipse, the audience

was aghast. Some stormed out, but some stayed to chastise me. I've been faulted for not correcting the grammar and pronunciation of the narrative texts I've collected and thus making the people "sound stupid and backward." Weeks after a performance I've received letters from people telling me how angry they were, that they "couldn't sleep" when thinking about the performance, and that it had given them "bad dreams."

In another vein, from an audience who are moved by the performance, I am sometimes challenged in an accusing tone. "How can you go back to being a professor at a rich university? Why don't you spend full time trying to help these people learn English, get jobs, find lost relatives?" In comparison to nonacademic audiences, the criticism from academic audiences pales. Nevertheless, remarks get back to me about how I'm "moving the field off-center." The ostensibly neutral question, "What does this have to do with oral interpretation of literature?" thinly veils deep misgivings. One specialist in eighteenth-century literature was more direct, and I respect him for that. At a Dartmouth conference, this senior gentleman rose to his feet after my presentation and in authoritative and measured tones declared: "You have confused art and nature, and that is an abomination!"

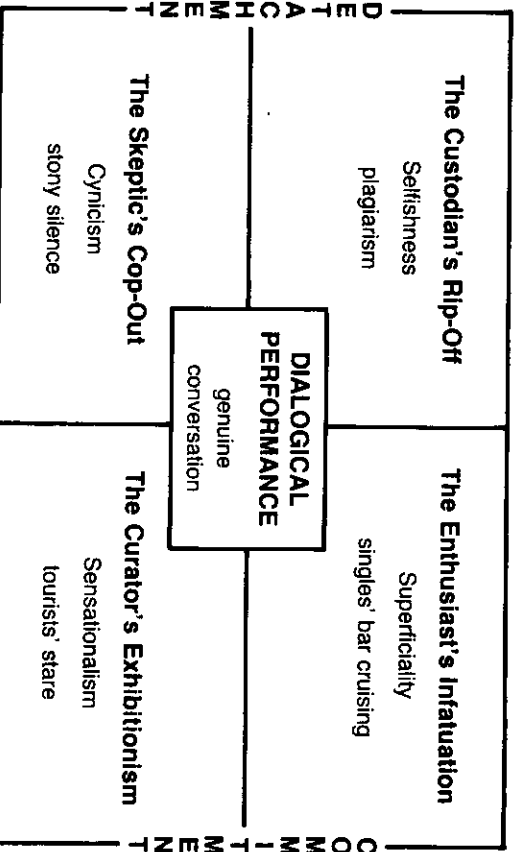
The one question I almost never get, however, is the "white guilt" accusation, "What right do you, a middle-class white man, have to perform these narratives?" Usually whoever introduces me gives some background information about my participant observation research. One time some audience members came in late, after the introduction, and sure enough, one of them was the first to raise his hand after the performance and accuse me of white man's presumptuousness. However, other audience members came to my defense before I had a chance to respond. They explained to him that I had lived with the people for more than three years, that I was not a weekend commuter from a comfortable suburban house. This information seemed to subdue him.

Even though my ego is probably as vulnerable as the next person's, I take courage in knowing that negative response, more than approving applause, testifies to the moral implications of this kind of work. I can be grateful to my detractors for forcing into my awareness the complex ethical tensions, tacit political commitments, and moral ambiguities inextricably caught up in the act of performing ethnographic materials. Indeed, I began doing this kind of work focused on performance as a way of knowing and deeply sensing the other. Hostile audiences have helped me see performance as the enactment of a moral stance. Now I have become deeply interested in the ethical dimensions of performing the expressive art that springs from other lives, other sensibilities, other cultures.

I agree with Wallace Bacon that the validity of an intercultural performance is "an ethical concern no less than a performance problem."¹⁴ Good will and an open heart are not enough when one "seeks to express cultural experiences which are clearly separate from his or her lived world."¹⁵ I would like to sketch four ethical pitfalls, performative stances towards the other that are morally problematic. I name these performative stances "The Custodian's Rip-Off," "The Enthusiast's Infatuation," "The Curator's Exhibitionism," and "The Skeptic's Cop-Out." These four problem areas can be graphically represented as the extreme corners of a moral map articulated by intersecting axes

of ethnographic tensions. The vertical axis is the tensive counterpull between Identity and Difference, the horizontal axis between Detachment and Commitment (see Figure 1). The extreme points of both sets of continua represent "dangerous shores" to be navigated, binary oppositions to be transcended. The center of the map represents the moral center that transcends and reconciles the spin-off extremes. I call this dynamic center, which folds intensive equipoise the four contraries, "Dialogical Performance."¹⁶ After mapping the five performative stances in order to see their alignments, I will discuss each one in more detail.

FIGURE 1.
Moral Mapping of Performative Stances Towards the Other*



The Custodian's Rip-Off

The sin of this performative stance is Selfishness. A strong attraction toward the other coupled with extreme detachment results in acquisitiveness instead of genuine inquiry, plunder more than performance. Bacon provided a striking example of this performative stance when he cited the case of the Prescott Smoki cultural preservation group who continued to perform the Hopi Snake Dance over the vigorous objections of Hopi elders. This group appropriated cherished traditions, reframed them in a way that was sacrilegious to the Hopi, and added insult to injury by selling trinkets for \$7.50, all in the name of preserving "dying cultures."¹⁷ The immorality of such performances is

* This graphic representation is derived from Mary Douglas' method of grid/group analysis. See *Cultural Bias* (1978) and *In the Active Voice* (1982).

unambiguous and can be compared to theft and rape.

Potential performers of ethnographic materials should not enter the field with the overriding motive of "finding some good performance material." An analogy from my fieldwork situation would be my performance of some of the stunningly theatrical shaman chants of Hmong healers replete with black veil over face and sacred costume. Not even a Hmong man or woman may perform these sacred traditions at will. You must be called to shamanic performance, which typically is signalled by a life-threatening illness, during which you have tremors, "shake" (*oy nang*, the Hmong word for "shaman," is the same word for "shake"). When the shaman shakes and chants, he or she is talking and pleading with the spirits that control the world. These ecstatic performances are extraordinarily delicate and dangerous affairs. A Hmong Shaman risks his or her life each time the soul leaves the body and ascends the tree of life on the ecstatic journey to the spirit kingdom. I had worked with the Hmong for about three years before I was privileged to witness one of these ecstatic trance performances. Now I am not only permitted, but encouraged to videotape them. I have even participated in one of these rituals of affliction as the victim. An elderly shaman "shook"—went into ecstatic performance—for my blind eye. However, I would never try to simulate one of these powerful performances because not only would that be a desecration, it would be perceived by the Hmong as having catastrophic consequences.

The Enthusiast's Infatuation

Too facile identification with the other coupled with enthusiastic commitment produces naive and glib performances marked by superficiality. This is the quadrant of the quick-fix, pick-up artist, where performance runs aground in the shallows. Eager performers get sucked into the quicksand belief, "Aren't all people really just alike?" Although not as transparently immoral as "The Custodian's Rip-Off," this performative stance is unethical because it trivializes the other. The distinctiveness of the other is glossed over by a glaze of generalities.

Tzvetan Todorov unmasks the moral consequences of too easy and eager an identification with the other:

Can we really love someone if we know little or nothing of his identity, if we see, in place of that identity, a projection of ourselves or ideals? We know that such a thing is quite possible, even frequent, in personal relations; but what happens in cultural confrontations? Doesn't one culture risk trying to transform the other in its own name, and therefore risk subjugating it as well? How much is such love worth?¹⁸

"The Enthusiast's Infatuation," which is also the quadrant where "fools rush in where angels fear to tread," is neither innocent nor benign.

Fredric Jameson, to whom we are indebted for naming the Identity-Difference interpretive dilemma,¹⁹ complements Todorov by showing how too easy affirming of identity not only banalizes the other, but seals off the self from any moral engagement:

... If we choose to affirm the identity of the alien object with ourselves—if, in other words, we decide that Chaucer, say . . . or the narratives of nineteenth-century Russian gentility, are more or less directly or intuitively accessible to us . . . then we have presupposed in advance what was to have been demonstrated, and our apparent comprehension of these alien texts must be haunted by the nagging suspicion that we have all the while remained locked in our own present with its television sets and super-highways . . . and that we have never really left home at all, that our feeling of *Verstehen* is little better than mere psychological projection, that we have somehow failed to touch the strangeness and the resistance of a reality genuinely different from our own.²⁰

Secure in our protective solipsism, those of us in this performative stance will never permit the other "to come before us as a radically different life form that rises up to call our own form of life into question and to pass judgment on us, and through us, on the social formation in which we live."²¹ Superficially suffocates self as well as other.

The Curator's Exhibitionism

Whereas the enthusiast assumed too easy an identity with the other, the curator is committed to the Difference of the other. This is the "Wild Kingdom" approach to performance that grows out of fascination with the exotic, primitive, culturally remote. The performer wants to astonish rather than understand. This quadrant is suffused with sentimentality and romantic notions about the "Noble Savage." Performances from this corner of the map resemble curio postcards, souvenirs, trophies brought back from the tour for display cases. Instead of bringing us into genuine contact (and risk) with the lives of strangers, performances in this mode bring back museum exhibits, mute and staring.

Jameson explains that when one affirms "from the outset, the radical Difference of the alien object from ourselves, then at once the doors of comprehension begin to swing closed. . . ." ²² The manifest sin of this quadrant is Sensationalism, and it is an immoral stance because it dehumanizes the other. Todorov makes strikingly clear the moral consequences of exoticizing the other in his brilliant case study of the most dramatic encounter with the other in our history, the discovery and conquest of America. ²³ He clarifies how the snap-shot perspectives of "Noble Savage" and "dirty dog" can come from the same view-finder:

How can Columbus be associated with these two apparently contradictory myths, one whereby the other is a 'noble savage' (when perceived at a distance) and one whereby he is a 'dirty dog,' a potential slave? It is because both rest on a common basis, which is the failure to recognize the Indians, and the refusal to admit them as a subject having the same rights as oneself, but different. Columbus has discovered America but not the Americans.²⁴

Too great a distance—aesthetic, romantic, political—denies to the other membership in the same moral community as ourselves.