



Literature as Foundation, Fiber, and Future Form

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ABSTRACT: In this essay, I frame the performance of literature as foundation, fiber, and future form to provide a conceptual map for understanding the diffracted landscape of literature and performance through which communication and performance educators might move. Reflecting on my own experiences in performance studies and communication classrooms, I narrate the various ways we can locate performance of literature in our pedagogy. Ultimately, I argue that viewing our work as occurring within a diffracted landscape opens possibilities for pedagogical change and growth.

KEYWORDS: performance, literature, pedagogy, diffraction

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Wallace A. Bacon's (1998) question, "Is there a place still for literature in the performance studies classroom?" (p. 68) hails us as we enter our performance classrooms to teach. Of course (as Bacon points out), the answer is "yes," but the specific locale remains more elusive. I have come to understand the place of literature within performance pedagogy as a set of mobile locations, and here argue that framing the performance of literature as *foundation*, *fiber*, and *future form* provides a conceptual map for understanding the diffracted landscape of literature and performance through which communication and performance educators move.

As teachers, we must move through this landscape while simultaneously contributing to its construction. Weaving metaphor from physics, Haraway (1997) conceptualizes "diffraction" as "an optical metaphor for the effort to make a difference in the world" (p. 16) and "the production of difference patterns" (pp. 34; 268). In reference to a different sort of landscape—that of "antiracist feminist multicultural studies"—she turns to the game of cat's cradle to describe the complex world of "threads," "patterns and knots" faced by scholars as we work:

Cat's cradle is about patterns and knots; the game takes great skill and can result in some serious surprises. One person can build up a large repertoire of string figures on a single pair of hands, but the cat's cradle figures can be passed back and forth on the hands of several players, who add new moves in the building of complex patterns. Cat's cradle invites a sense of collective work, of one person not being able to make all the patterns alone. One does not win at cat's cradle; the goal is much more interesting and more open-ended than that. It is not always possible to repeat interesting patterns, and figuring out what happened to result in intriguing patterns is an embodied analytical skill. (p. 268)

When I look out at the landscape of performance studies as a teacher of the performance of literature, I see a series of "interference patterns" (Haraway, 1997, p. 16) stretching out all around me, like threads in a cat's cradle being played by performance scholars past and present. Reflecting on this landscape, I have realized my own way of navigating it includes conceptualizing the performance of literature as *foundation*, *fiber*, and *future form*.

I speak from my own location in/on the landscape, looking "back" the many directions from which I have come, and "ahead" at the myriad directions radiating outward from where I stand. I began my pedagogical journey in performance studies teaching an introductory course, *Performing Culture*, as a graduate assistant. I am currently an assistant professor in a department with eight Communication specializations (including Performance Studies), and I teach several performance and general communication courses each year. I have taught an introductory theory course (*Theories of Performance Studies*) and two upper level courses (*Performance of Literature* and *Performance for Social Change*), several times each. I try to balance teaching the performance of literature as a *foundational* part of the introductory class, the *future-oriented* focus of an upper level course, and as *fibers* or threads connecting my other classes—while avoiding redundancy and striving to teach within my own dexterity. Like all curricular practices, including literature within our curriculum is fraught with tensions of diverse expertise and divergent expectations, and for me such work continues to be a learning experience. I offer these thoughts from where I stand, as reflections of a teacher-in-progress.

Foundation

In *Performing Culture*, students perform diverse literature of the Americas, learning to perform while putting their identity in dialogue with cultural Others. In *Theories of Performance Studies*, students engage with foundations of performance through experimenting in several

genres (performance of literature, everyday life, ethnography, etc.).¹ While literature is central to the former and one genre among many featured in the latter, both focus on the performance of literature as the foundation of performance studies.

We begin the *Theories* class with the performance of literature. We read about the interpretation of texts, and students perform a short piece—some poetry and others prose—to put these theories and processes into practice. Sometimes they choose their own literature, while other times I provide a few pieces from an anthology or collection, so that multiple students perform the same text. In either case, I have found the structured nature of the task grounding,² and use the assignment as an introduction to reading the world as text, as an embodied entry into an alternative kind of literacy. When Bell (1998) argues that her use of literature as a “starting place” in performance classrooms is motivated not by valorization of the canon, but rather “by a politics of literacy, a belief that reading and writing are ‘about the power to survive’ (Haraway 175)” (p. 58), she narrates what I see as literature’s first value for students in this class: that is, its function as a foundation for reading and embodying the tensions of the world as text.

Similarly, in *Performing Culture*, students enact Bacon’s idea that performing literature is “an encounter with the text as an Other” (Coonfield and Rose, 2012, p. 196). Throughout the class, students are asked to match their “inner form” to the “inner form” of a piece of literature (Bacon, 1979, p. 37-38) while wrestling with the ethical implications of such matching, and so experience a sense of having become someone and moved somewhere else without entirely losing self or leaving home. Here, students meet the tensions of the world as text through the text as a product and/or representation of a specific other. The “matching” seems most successful when students imaginatively enter the lifeworlds of Others with risky, corporeal fierceness—when the “outer form” that is their performance confronts the audience with an unfamiliarity that brings some version of the experiences of the literature into full presence in the room. I once witnessed an international student (and non-native English speaker) perform Wendy Rose’s “Julia.” In this poem, we hear of the betrayal of Julia Pastrana, a nineteenth century indigenous Mexican woman whose husband/manager displayed her as a “freak”—she was “born with a deformed bone structure of the face and hair growing from her entire body” (Rose, 1994, p. 630)—first alive and then after death (he had her stuffed). The poem is filled with the “profound suffering” of “the crisis of silence” Julia experiences in life and after death (Andrews, 2010, pp. 96, 103). This student performed the poem with such conviction, honesty, and aesthetic acuity that her reticence, her understandable struggles with the language, and her obvious difference from the speaker added whole new layers of meaning to the poem. She stood, solitary, dressed in a simple light dress, in front of a projected image of bars. Caged by shadows, she spoke the poem haltingly, quietly, but with the surety of one who has felt the simultaneous pangs of loneliness and exposure. Her simple gestures and subtle movement (mostly tethered to one spot), her syncopated phrases and silences, pulled us closer, caused us to lean in, to *look closer*. I recall the class being enraptured. When the dialogue works well—when the matching process is genuine, or tragic, or ecstatic—the class has an encounter with an Other that shifts the cultural landscape, if only for a moment. Even when a performance misses the mark aesthetically or ethically—when a student strays too close to stereotype or relies only on the “easy” choice—the encounter can provide teachable moments, if we collectively interrogate the politics, ethics, and

¹ I did not personally design either of these courses. *Performing Culture* is a course regularly taught at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, while *Theories* was designed by my colleague, Dr. Heidi Rose. I have, of course, restructured them to fit my own pedagogical style and goals each time I have taught them.

² This is not unlike Gilbert’s (1998) discussion of how she structured the early part of her course, and why (p. 61).

aesthetics of the encounter. Kinesis (that is, the “breaking and remaking” of cultural ideas through performance) (Conquergood, 1995, p. 138) might happen after the performance in some cases, but the key point is that it happens.

Fiber(s)

I infuse all of my pedagogy with performance theories and methods, often using performance of literature (and other genres of performance) as threads or fibers connecting my overall pedagogical approach. In classes where it is not the focus, I have most effectively turned to performed literature as *an object of study*, an example of the power of aesthetic communication to *do something* in the world. Across my classes (including *Qualitative Methods* and *Public Speaking*), I show videos and/or provide opportunities for students to witness live performances. Outside of the classroom, my colleagues and I turn to performed literature as a mechanism for education and social change, directing students in a performance of feminist texts for a 2013 gender violence prevention event, for example. On campus and in various classes, our students experience performances of literature.

In witnessing the slam performances of Sarah Kay or Javon Johnson (among others) students see how literature serves as public speech that makes a difference. Though I am not sure “Performing literature remains *one of the strongest* civic actions by which to display and negotiate social conventions” (emphasis added, Doyle, 1998, p. 76), it is *one way of doing* public discourse. In addition, *audiencing* performed literature allows students to experience its impact in their own bodies. If, as Langellier (1983) explains, “the performance of literature prepares us to become what we can be in our humanity” (p. 35), bearing witness to this work encourages students to be aware of their sociality, demonstrating that performed literature can be pedagogical in its indexing of the world as felt text. Finally, micro attempts to perform literature (often through in-class activities or extra-curricular events) engage communication majors in creative processes that broaden their understanding of the discipline and introduce them to a performative worldview.

In my Fall 2013 *Public Speaking* class, I asked students to read and attend a play as part of an interdisciplinary program, “InterAct-ive Pedagogy through Performance and Discourse,” created by Dr. Heidi Rose and Dr. Gail Ciociola. Heidi and I had asked students to attend other plays separately and as part of the program—a partnership between Villanova and the InterAct Theatre Company—but it is certainly not common to ask our public speaking students to attend an off campus play as part of a class. Because I believe in the pedagogical value of audiencing performance, and because the play was about the process of crafting and delivering a presentation, I simply could not pass up the opportunity to lead these students into the city to witness live performance. *We Are Proud to Present A Presentation About The Herero of Namibia Formerly Known as South West Africa From the German Sudwest Africa Between the Years 1884-1915* follows a group of actors who, in devising a play (within a play) about genocide, learn difficult lessons about racial identity. In working through the text as a text and then seeing it performed, students followed a path similar to that of a performer of literature, moving (albeit vicariously) “from the ‘outer form’ of the literature to the ‘outer form’ of performance” (VanOosting, 1991, p. 68). As *readers* and *audience*, students had the opportunity to compare their interpretations with others’ while also feeling the “presence produced by and through the relation of performer-text-audience-place and established by expressive embodied acts” (Coonfield and Rose, 2012, p. 195). For classes in which performed interpretations are not the focus, such opportunities encourage students to take a small but formative step toward

performance. When one of my students remarked, “[the play] made me feel uncomfortable, but in a good way,” highlighting her own complicity in structures of oppression, she pointed to one value of such a step. Because of statements like this, I hope to always provide opportunities for students to witness live performance—of literature and otherwise—in whatever communication classes I teach, including *Public Speaking*.

Through a communication curriculum with performed literature as connective material, students learn not only how to craft rhetorically savvy messages, but also how to make expression *matter* in ways they may have not previously considered. They learn to read the contested texts of culture differently—and to use what they learn to create transformative speech acts. This is, I think, something oral interpretation aims at—enticing performers and audiences to live for a time in their imaginations, building worlds through engaged listening and creative thinking. Is this not what we want our students to use their communication education for? To put forth ideas—in poetry or press releases—that are full, and maybe even fantastical, figurations of change? Critically audiencing the performance of literature throughout the communication curriculum—even (or perhaps especially) in classes that are not, ostensibly, dedicated to performance—teaches the potential of crafted, embodied language use. Performing texts, in turn, gives students a taste of what it means to be in relationship with past, present, and future ideas in critical, embodied ways.

Future Form

In *Performance of Literature*, students explore poetry, prose, and drama through various methods of interpretation and modes of embodiment. We devote the semester to performing as a way to understand literature, a form of self-exploration, an encounter with cultural others, and as an intertextual process of creation. Literature (broadly construed) is at the center of this pedagogical experience, and the students I teach—immersed in a liberal arts education—need little convincing that (capital “L”) literature matters. Their prior educational experiences have convinced them that they should at least *believe* that it does. Moreover, it has provided them with texts to read and a set of interpretive expectations from which to begin. This is in line with Gilbert’s (1998) suggestion that, “performing traditional literature continues to be an integral pedagogical activity for beginning students” (p. 62): their prior knowledge provides a doorway to this new (to them) mode of interacting with a text. In fact, Gura (1998) argues for the necessity of introducing students to traditional literature: “Until we have made sure our students understand the riches of the literature they do not read on their own, we can hardly claim we have equipped them for leading even an unexamined life” (p. 66). What I argue for, then, is not a replacement of traditional texts, but rather a continuation of the expansion of “literature.” Attending to canonical literature both enriches students’ understanding and prepares them for engaging with what we might think of as non-traditional texts, and so should remain part of our pedagogical practices.

What I have found my students need more convincing about is what might count as literature. Even (perhaps especially?) at my liberal arts institution, it seems students buy into the idea that the only literature of worth is that which falls securely within the Western canon. This eliminates many authors, while also convincing students that the literature they enjoy—the song lyrics, the slam poetry, the novels, the multimedia storytelling, the social media—cannot count as literature, art, or insightful communication. This is profoundly sad—not only because it closes off worlds of expression, but also because it paints their creative voices as ineffectual. If “[e]mpowering students to read” is one of our most important tasks as teachers of performance

(Bell, 1998, p. 59)—and I believe it is—empowering them to find and use their voices (well) seems of equal importance. After all, as Edwards (1999) so succinctly states, “a performance classroom, on a daily basis, is filled with people who are making art, not merely studying texts” (p. 13).

When I teach *Performing Literature*, I aim to help students rethink their idea of “text.” I consider a text to be anything that might serve as “a blueprint or script for performance” (Stern and Henderson, 1993, pp. 17-18), though I recognize some are more fruitful, appropriate, or interesting than others. Because I want students to leave my classes better equipped to respond to the texts that swirl around and through them, relentlessly and ubiquitously, I encourage them to *see* these texts *as* texts, and so use the interpretive frameworks and performance strategies we discuss as ways to navigate our contemporary world. Their texts matter, as do the digital elements of their experience. I am not sure if “Screens” actually do “swallow us” (Stucky, 2012, p. 244) but it sure feels that way sometimes. As LeVan (2012) reminds us, the shift to the digital is one we must move with, for “new digital media have altered the conditions of art, performance, and communication along dimensions of mode, material, medium, scope, and reach.” “How,” he continues, “could the center remain stable?” (p. 211). The challenge and potential of including texts from the canonical to the digital texts of (social) media, with myriad others between, are simultaneously exciting and disorienting.

I have found intertextual performance to be one way to meet this challenge and potential, though, perhaps ironically, it has proven a difficult task for my students. From my perspective, intertextuality—that is, the idea that “every utterance—particularly, for our concerns, literary ones—is a *text*, a piece of discourse in the making” and that “every text is connected to other texts” (Stern and Henderson, 1993, p. 369) is so reminiscent of the connectivity of hyperlinks that it should possess a sort of formal familiarity, especially for people who have spent much of their lives navigating the web. The relationality and multiplicity Stern and Henderson highlight as conditions of *intertexts* make intertextual performances potentially useful ways to access and critique the digital dynamics of mediated texts, for example. However, whether out of fear of “messaging with” the text, educational conditioning, or simply a desire for more cut-and-dry assignments, the students struggle. They ask what they are “allowed” to include. They lament that they can’t find texts to perform. They suddenly forget how to use the Internet, or, perhaps, forget how it could be useful. After much discussion, though, the ones who dive into the assignment create provocative pieces that entwine their own voices, traditional literature, and mediated or found texts. One recent (white) student performed a piece featuring several poems by Mohja Kahf (most prominently “Hijab Scene #7”) (2003), in which she combined these poems, contextualizing prose from various sources, and some of her own personal writing to create a powerful statement about the legacy of racial and religious discrimination after September 11, 2001. She moved in and out of her own persona and several Others while she moved in and out of texts, weaving a challenging tapestry of a current socio-cultural context. The piece was not perfect—performances rarely are—but it demonstrated an innovative and impactful interaction with literature. It also provided an embodied experience of the tensions between canonized literature / literary standards and what we might call future forms—materializing the sort of glitch, mix, DIY, tweet culture we live in (without even entering the realm of the digital, at least, in the moment of performance).

By turning to “future form(s)” (through intertextuality and otherwise), I mean several things. First, we must continue to broaden our understanding of literature to incorporate new voices and forms. Second, performing literature can aid in our imagining of new futures. Third,

adapting our approach to include the new modes made possible by digital technology—from uploading performances to YouTube to performing Twitter poems and beyond—can help us to understand our world and so also contribute to it in aesthetically responsible ways. This is, in part, what LeVan (2012) is pointing to when he states, “The stakes of digital performance are thus stakes of emancipation” (p. 218), and while we would do well to remain critical of the potential “illusion” of “transformative power” (Edwards, 1999, p. 15) of our pedagogical enterprise, I for one prefer to err on the side of optimism.

Performing Literature Across A Diffracted Landscape

Like Gilbert (1998), as I look to the future I think, “perhaps our focus should not be on *whether* there is a future for the performance of literature but rather, ‘What will that future look like, and how can we help to shape it?’” (p. 62). Similarly, rather than focusing on pinpointing “a place” for literature in our curriculum (which is, after all, not really what Bacon was asking), perhaps a better tactic is to consciously create the conditions through which innovative and evolving performances of literature can flourish. Teaching performance of literature with an eye to the past while moving creatively into the future is one way to ensure that it continues to inform our performance and communication pedagogy. Literature moves, and we must continue to move with it, perhaps less as nomads in Conquergood’s (1995) “caravan” (p. 140) and more as digital nomads. A caravan captures the mobility required of us, but is still too linear for our digital world—people, goods, services, and information no longer march—they leap across vast distances, or divide and diffract across a field of experience. Perhaps we too, must leap—between and among literature in its traditional, non-traditional, and digital forms.

As I outlined above, teaching the performance of literature requires navigating a diffracted landscape littered with potential texts and crisscrossed by possible paths to follow. For me, teaching students (about) the craft of performing literature means leaping from thread to thread—now foundation and tradition, here intertextual play, there digital performance, etc.—while remembering the work of my colleagues holding the threads supporting me. My pedagogical choices and students’ experiences lead to new patterns—new diffractions—as the threads shift. Sometimes I settle in to the game, holding patterns so other teachers can leap. (This essay, I hope, is an example of that work). Together we create and move through a diffracted landscape of slam poems and staged prose, digital drama and live intertexts—audiencing, performing, and teaching the literature of many times, places, and people.

For me, framing the performance of literature as a) a way to read the world, understand Others, and create positive change (foundation), b) a series of through-lines connecting the classes we teach as performance studies scholars, at least as an example of what aesthetic communication can do (fibers), and c) an open, intertextual field of future forms that can help lead us into the future (future forms) allows me to make space for the performance of literature throughout my curriculum. Perhaps, by leaping across our diffracted landscape (and teaching students to do the same) we can ensure that the answer to Bacon’s question remains “yes” for many years and generations to come.

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