



#Review: Anthropology, Theatre and Development #Performance

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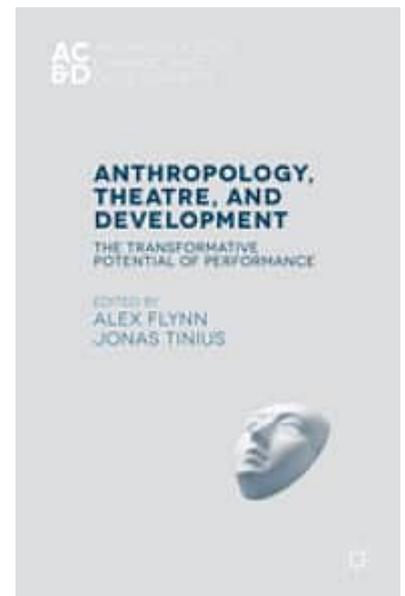


In their introduction to [*Anthropology, Theatre and Development: The Transformative Potential of Performance*](#), Alex Flynn and Jonas Tinius do an admirable job of lending conceptual coherence to the fourteen essays comprising their edited collection. Rather than treat the variety of analytic approaches, subject matters, and social and cultural contexts thereby assembled as just part of the nature of such collections - as all-too-often seems to be the case these days - the authors take up the challenge of articulating common themes and explicating



differences with gusto. Equally commendable is the way its contributions take up such common themes and, through elaborating them with regard to their respective objects and realms of inquiry, reveal their potential for ethnographic development and contextual transformation. To list only those contributions not mentioned elsewhere in this review, such objects include: reflexive alternatives to Theatre for Development in Sub-Saharan Africa (Plastow, Chapter 4); the performative dimensions of and responses to the post-genocidal *gacaca* courts in Rwanda (Breed, Chapter 5); the political implications of street artists moving their work off the street and into liminal realms of ‘performative invisibility’ (Schacter, Chapter 8); the politics of artistic process in contemporary Arabic theatre (Hemke, Chapter 10); or the political theatricality of the Pussy Riot trials in Putin’s Russia (Rau and Schuler, Chapters 11 and 12).

Prior to setting to the task of offering a theoretical frame for the volume as a whole, their essay begins by juxtaposing descriptions of the entryways to their own respective ethnographic contexts: a rural encampment of the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST - *Movimento Sem Terra*) in southern Brazil, which serves as the everyday backdrop to the local genre of dramatic performance known as *mística* (Flynn); and an elegant 19th-century former workers’ spa housing the *Theater an der Ruhr* in Mulheim, “a pleasant German city in the post-industrial Ruhr valley” (Tinius). I take the basic point to be that the underlying similarities between these seemingly unrelated subject-matters can be extended to the volume as a whole. Still, although the authors do not elaborate on the montage-form thereby enacted, this is a particularly effective way of introducing not only the theoretical discussion into which they then delve, but also one of the key matters that may well contribute to the (practical and theoretical) impact of the volume as a whole: its emphasis on a broadly *ethnographic* approach to both ‘development thinking’ (as part of the book series *Anthropology, Development, and Change*), and to





'political performance' (the primary focus of the introduction, and of this review).

The individual essays vary a great deal as to their implicit and explicit conceptions of ethnography and the role it plays in their arguments, no less than the manner in which they enact that role in their own writing.

Nonetheless, in the introduction, after first elaborating what they mean by 'politics', 'performance' and 'political performance' in dialogue with a number of other contemporary authors, and introducing what they consider their own principal conceptual contribution, 'relational reflexivity', Flynn and Tinius eventually tackle ethnography as a concept in its own right. As stated in the concluding paragraph, "the ethnographic is committed to describing action in a nuanced way that highlights the reflexive dilemmas, radical aspirations, and social contexts of any performance. The ethico-aesthetic, highlighted by ethnography, denotes the multiple ways in which such reflected actions turn aesthetic praxis into ethical poiesis" (p. 23). Are you intrigued, even if not quite sure what more precisely this means or entails? (The quote has been taken out of context, after all.) Here, the short answer might be: Well then, get the book and read it!

But as that would cut my review a little too short, let me proceed with a longer answer as to why I think you *should* be intrigued, and as to some of the multiple ways that ethnography has indeed highlighted the contextual, ethical and aesthetic implications of political performance, as exemplified in and across the essays comprising the collection. Before addressing some of the individual contributions, let me first offer more of a sense of what ethnography has to do with 'political performance' - the principle subject-matter of the volume, after all.

After juxtaposing their respective ethnographic entryways to the MST's *mística* performance and the *Theater an der Ruhr*, Flynn and Tinius argue that there is an overall thrust common to the varied forms of political performance addressed in the volume: **"There is a powerful ethico-aesthetic quality inherent to these political performances that moves people, one that causes them to reflect**



and therefore consciously decide that they will interact with the world in a different manner” (p.3).



Gacaca court, Rwanda ([Photo](#) by [Elisa Finocchiaro](#), flickr, [CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

They go on to state the overall rationale of the collection as providing “an interdisciplinary analysis of political performance, juxtaposing ethnography and anthropological theory to highlight how dimensions of aesthetics and politics can interrelate and create new forms” (p.3). Here, one possible approach to reviewing their collection would be to address the extent to which the ‘ethnography’ provided in the collection as a whole matches the ‘theory’ offered - in the introduction, no less than in the individual essays. Yet such an approach would fall into the trap of either merely reiterating the connections already drawn in this regard, or unfairly faulting the collection for offering what might rather be read as one of the principle *strengths* of well-done ethnography: that of offering sufficient details and acknowledging complexities in such a way as to render possible *other* readings than those explicitly stated in the ‘theory’.



What if, instead, the very quality they address with regard to political performance were extended likewise to the essays themselves: what if the essays were read less as objective descriptions or analytic dissections of the performances of which they write, and more in terms of their performative aspect in their own right, insofar as they likewise give voice to a “powerful ethico-aesthetic quality” capable of thereby moving their readers, provoking them to reflect upon the world(s) addressed, and to decide to act accordingly?

Admittedly, writing a review may not be the kind of decisive action that Flynn and Tinius had in mind when they penned the quote from which the question above draws – and, more importantly, treating ethnography itself in such reflexive and/or performative terms is not one of the primary conceptual concerns of the collection. Still, responding to the collection along these lines does allow me to take up one of the collection’s central concerns – relational reflexivity – and extend it from political performance to the ethnographic elaboration thereof, as addressed with respect to a particular selection of the contributions.

As a consequence of this approach, I have not followed the order of the rest of the essays as found in the book itself, well-ordered in five sections and two overall parts: *Ethnographies of Political Performances in Developing Contexts* and *Theatre as Paradigm for Social Reflection*. Let me note, however, that this frame – more than a convenient way of dividing up the essays – foregrounds the central conceptual issue at stake in the volume as a whole: the relation between ‘politics’ and ‘reflexivity’ in political performance. Accordingly, the first part begins with Flynn’s nuanced exploration of the reflexive dimensions of the MST’s *mística* theatre, as reflected between its ‘religious’ and ‘political’ frames; while the second part starts off with Tinius’s equally perceptive investigation of the immanent political dimensions of *Theater an der Ruhr*’s intensely reflexive – ethical and aesthetic – experiment in “refugee theatre”.



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While breaking with that frame, my non-linear approach does indirectly echo the collection on another level, however, insofar as both Flynn and Tinius and other contributors of this book have very usefully highlighted numerous connections – and points of contention – between their respective essays and those of the other contributions. Besides constituting a clear sign of a well-edited volume in this regard, such cross-referencing of both resonances and dissonances between the essays could be taken as indirectly reflecting the definition of the ‘political’ given in the introduction – following Chantal Mouffe – as “a critical term highlighting deliberation and dissent” (Flynn and Tinius, p. 7). My own deliberations below are offered in a similar spirit.

As the last two essays explicitly address the relation between ethnography and performance, and their placement lends them to be read as concluding statements in this regard, let me start there, in some detail; this way, my own readerly biases will also become more evident.



First, my contention here that certain qualities linked to the political performances addressed throughout the book can be read as equally reflected in and refracted through the texts themselves suggests the possibility of framing the relation between *performance* and *text* somewhat differently than as posed in Caroline Gatt's contribution, *The Anthropologist as Ensemble Member: Anthropological Experiments with Theatre Makers*. Gatt begins with an appeal to the need for anthropologists to experiment with other mediums than that of 'text' if they are to "develop a truly processual paradigm" (p.335). This perspective is reiterated in her conclusion, where she states that her essay's contributions "are premised upon decentering text as anthropological currency" (p. 349) - in large part, because "texts fix events, while by nature process is emergent and cannot be fixed" (p. 349).

Playing off of her nuanced description of a T'ai chi ch'uan and singing workshop for professional actors led by Ang Gey Pin, let me venture that the flow of her argument could have benefitted from 'decontracting' (see her discussion, p.340) the unnecessarily tense conceptual muscles at work throughout her paper in *opposing* process and performance to 'text'. Such an opposition effectively precludes exploring *entextualization* as a performative process in its own right (see Bauman and Briggs, 1991; K. Barber, 2003): not only that of writing itself, but that of the text-like entities and practices imbued within the very performative practices and 'subaltern knowledges' (see Gatt, p. 343-344) with which we engage (in writing or otherwise). No doubt, care must be taken not to merely colonise *their* practices with one of *our* favoured tropes - and Gatt's essay does effectively point out many of the dangers in regard to 'text'. Yet, allowing for the intertwining of 'text' *in* performance foregrounds the *reflexive* capacity for performances to 'cite' other things or events, no less than to cite or refer to elements of the ongoing performance itself, whether to *comment* upon them or to render them *repeatable* - in the same performance or in future instances thereof. Acknowledging something akin to the 'textual' capacity for reference and self-reference *in* performance may well *free* the performances with which we deal from being imprisoned in *our* conception of *their* "moment" - what Gatt invokes



as the “live immediacy of performance.”

The overall point here is that a more flexible approach to the relation between ‘text’ and ‘performance’ could help foreground the *ethnographically grounded* – and hence *conceptually variable* – ways in which relations of process and fixity, creativity and tradition, prospection and retrospection and the like are reflexively related (see Tinius and Flynn, p. 5-6; Flynn, p. 41) to one-another in and through the local practices, traditions, and/or ‘subaltern knowledges’ with which anthropologists engage. But that said, Gatt’s point is well taken that such engagements should not be *limited* to writing, and that other such modes of engagement may well suggest other ways of *knowing* and *relating* – or knowing as “relating to” (see Taussig, 1992: 18) – than that generally assumed in or enacted through conventional anthropological texts.



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Curiously, the essay just previous to Gatt’s, *For a Verbatim Ethnography* by



Nicholas Long, which on one level addresses one such alternative way of “relating to” ethnography, could also be read as giving *voice* - literally - to a particularly *textual* obsession: that of accurate citation, only in this case extended not only to *what* cited informants said but equally to *how* they said what they said. In exploring the potential of ‘verbatim’ techniques used in documentary theatre for ethnographic purposes, Long is careful to point out some of the problems that such an approach could present - to his credit, he does not shy away from arguments that cast doubt on the basic premises of documentary cinema and theatre alike, such as that the ‘truths’ with which they deal “are the artefacts of their own interventions (...) rather than naturally occurring events that are simply being ‘documented’” (p. 320).

Still, whereas he treats these largely as problems to be overcome, my thought is that experiments in ‘verbatim ethnography’ could work better if they started from acknowledging the *paradoxical* frame implied by this very term. Here, on the one hand, *verbatim’s* minutely accurate theatrical portrayals of recorded speech - “Every mumble, hesitation or splutter is incorporated into the rendition” (p. 309) - effectively foregrounds both the immediately social and bodily ‘frames’ that are left out in written transcriptions; on the other hand, that very preoccupation with such ‘faithfulness’ no less effectively downplays *ethnography’s* concern for the discursive and institutional framings of such speech and the social interaction of which it is a part - such as the “setting up” of the answers given and recorded in interview settings, or the plethora of extenuating factors involved in both authorising (or de-authorising) speakers and accounting for the semantics (the ‘what’) and the poetics (the ‘how’) of that which is spoken. Long figures the potential of verbatim as a means of ethnographic representation in terms of how it offers “mercurial yet powerful windows” into the subjectivity of those portrayed; yet this seems a rather invasive metaphor to me, not unlike a hidden camera. He might well reply that my take on his metaphor misses not the ‘picture,’ but the *bodily* involvement of the actors doing the portrayal, and the *affective* involvement of the audience watching and listening to them, which Long thoughtfully elaborates with respect to the ‘affective turn’ in anthropology (p.



317).

While both Gatt and Long address theatrical alternatives to textual ethnography, what if their concern for the affective, embodied and/or performative aspects thereof were turned (back) to ethnographic writing?

Here, Long's reference to Norman Denzin's discussion of 'performance ethnography' is suggestive (p. 313-314), but the very term lends the matter to be approached as some emergent set of genre conventions and expectations - more on this shortly, via Clare Foster's contribution - whereas my intent is deliberately more piecemeal: more like pointing out performative moments that emerge in the midst of 'everyday' ethnographic writing. Moreover, my aim is to address such writing not in and of itself (focusing on its formal properties, say), but rather in terms of the relational transactions that such writing establishes with its object, and more broadly, the "messy reality in which ethnography lives" (Rutherford, 2015: 109). Let me take this matter up first through a contribution in which *dance* takes on a particularly significant ethnographic role, as this invites us to consider the writing itself as akin to such dancing to the extent that it elicits a marked readerly - personal or affective - *response*. The question is, how does this analogy between writing and dancing fair therein?

Stavroula Pipyrrou's contribution is of particular note here, not only because of its subject-matter - 'Ndrangheta mafia dance in South Italy - but also because of her own training as a traditional dancer. Besides allowing her to "master the local dance repertoire" (p. 147), she argues that such training allowed her to approach matters that were rarely commented on in public, given the generalised sense that 'public dance' was nonetheless "'Ndrangheta property" (p. 148). The ethnographic account that follows, however, is anything but a personalised account of her immersion in that local dance repertoire; rather, it fleshes out the socially choreographed relations of masculine power and status far more overtly than the formal or aesthetic properties of the dance - and the dance around which it revolves is the man/man *tarantella* dance form. And yet, this seemingly aloof,



'hands off' approach - at least in comparison to much dance ethnography - can nonetheless be read as indirectly *informed* by and *expressive* of the very aesthetic of the dance itself, which, she is told early on, is "not for beauty" - not to be judged by aesthetic criteria, but rather as displays of hierarchy and control.

One could thus say that her very "approach to politics as danced" (p. 153) is itself indirectly *embodied* in her writing's measured distance from the "live immediacy" of the dance (see Gatt above); this would also help explain why it is only just before the essay's conclusion that she offers a direct and detailed description of a particular exchange of danced movements - in this case, a *sfida* (challenge) involving the imagined use of a symbolically real knife. That description, I should note, struck *me* particularly close, as it seemed like it could have been drawn straight from an episode in *capoeira*, the Afro-Brazilian danced fighting-form that I have long practiced and has long served as my principle object of ethnographic engagement - often with respect to the performative presence of similarly enacted knives.



Capoeira ([Photo](#) by [rubatacchini](#), flickr, [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#))



Still, that personal impact pales in comparison to that which Dan Baron Cohen's contribution, *Performing Transformation: Cultivating a Paradigm of Education for Cooperation and Sustainability in a Brazilian Community*, had on me. No doubt, part of the affective impact of his in-depth (and 'deep-in') narrative(s) and analysis of his involvement with the Afro-Indigenous community of Cabelo Seco, located in Marabá, a city in northeast Brazil, stems from my own brief but marked memories of Marabá, having gone there just after graduating from high school to briefly visit my family's maid from when we lived in Rio de Janeiro. Still, I hold the riveting descriptive powers and ethical implications of his writing more responsible. Cohen explains his own reason for going to live in Cabelo Seco as follows: "It has taken us five years to transform scores of children and teenagers gyrating above empty upturned beer bottles into a community programme of youth-led music, dance, video and cinema projects, supported by twice-weekly theatre interventions..." (p. 54). While this quote on its own might lend itself to be read as a sensationalistic account of up-lift and redemption through well-meaning (foreign) representatives of a theatre-and-arts-based development project, the carefully conjoined assemblage of contextual descriptions of dance and theatre improvisations, stories, songs, and images (the most poignant consisting in a photograph of a group of smiling boys-just-turning-men, clouded by the knowledge that one of those depicted had recently been killed by the police), drew me up close to the complexities, struggles and impasses faced on an everyday level by members of the community in such a way as to clearly interrupt any pretence of an 'enlightenment' narrative.

What I found particularly remarkable is the way Cohen's writing so carefully weaves indices of far-reaching social and political forces into the fabric of his account: rather than introduce them as information or part of a sociological analysis intended to serve as an explanatory context for the subjective images offered, those 'external' forces are themselves fleshed out in such a sensitively detailed way as to affectively register their local impact in writing. When Cohen turns to a more explanatory discourse in the second part of his essay, I found myself missing his earlier prose; I wonder, in this regard, if his essay would not



have worked (even) better if he had weaved the ethical, political, poetic and pedagogical principles that he elaborates in the second part into the course of his narratives. Still, I think he is quite right to affirm that indirectly, he already had – that such ‘tools of reflection’ as he proceeds to offer were already implicated in those narratives and the varied folds between them and their object. Before moving on, let me offer one example of this mutual implication of narrative and analysis, taken from the midst of a description of a “dance narrative about Cabelo Seco” created during a community workshop for local adolescents, led by their visiting Nigerian teacher:

“The netting and cleaning of the fish, the building and repairing of canoes, the sudding, scrubbing, and wringing of clothes sapped onto the surface of the Tocantins and Itacaiúnas [rivers] and then pegged between banana and *açaí* trees or electricity posts, each a gesture and fragment of lived experience. All have been woven into a choreography of shared knowledges, values, and pride in producing and sustaining life, lightened by hopscotch, flicking stone marbles, jiggling kite strings to play the wind, and skipping elastic gates, even lowering their gyrating thighs over upturned beer bottles in a humiliating dance of impish sexual availability”(p. 63).

Here, the description of that dance could be read equally as an account of the ethnographic narrative of which it is a part, insofar as the latter similarly enacts the varied textures of local life, no less than such performative ‘interventions’ therein, in its textual folds. In this respect, the last image offered, far from constituting a gratuitous reference to the same sexualised act mentioned earlier, resurfaces in the text no longer as an instance of problematic behaviour to be overcome through the pedagogical project, so much as part of the ongoing life already transformed thereby, even as the project itself embraces the plurality of experience and performative expressions of the lives it has touched.

My review thus far, in its own selective choreography of conceptual themes and their ethnographic implications in the contributions discussed – proceeding from more overtly critical engagements to this more immersive approach to presenting



my reading of Cohen's text - by no means intends to imply that the latter should serve as an ideal model for ethnographic approaches to political performance.

Rather, the broader point here is that the essays assembled in this collection lend themselves to be read in numerous other ways by an equally heterogeneous 'audience' of potential readers, ranging from anthropologists, to performance artists/activists, to those whose work revolves around 'development' in one sense or another, to the multiple combinations of these varied readerly positions.

In this sense, Clare Foster's instigating elaboration of the ancient Athenian concept and practice of 'chorality' - itself linked to *choreuein*, lit. 'to dance' (p. 229) - could be redirected to the collection as a whole, insofar as it calls forth "a space where multiple audiences, both real and implied, both present and past, can be brought into dramatic co-presence" (p.247). Foster's contribution to the collection, *Whose Theatre Is It Anyway?*, in critically elaborating on the concept of "re-performance" with respect to transformations in ancient and modern drama, also speaks to the relation between performance and text in a manner that could fruitfully be redirected to ethnography. Whereas "texts and performances must be expected to participate imaginatively in each other in various ways, in any context where writing exists" (p. 235), the "*sine qua non* of a *reperformed* work is that it is recognisable by some social group or another: a codification of expectation expressed by the concept of genre" (*idem*; my emphasis). Admittedly, my approximation is crude compared to the care with which these considerations are historically contextualised in Foster's essay, but if translated with respect to the ethnographic concern of this collection (and this review), they suggest that the fixity and conventionality associated (by Caroline Gatt) with the ethnographic 'text' might rather be attributed to generic expectations that would tend to *prescribe* ethnography as an already formed genre with limited tolerance for experimentation, textual or otherwise. Whereas, if ethnography were to be modelled after Foster's conceptualisation of *chorality* - to quote from her concluding line - it could be taken to "embody a fractured, multiple and



contradictory 'we', rather than its own authority" (p. 247).

Before ending this review, let me add my own micro-ethnographic contribution to that chorus, as instigated by a quote from the introduction, in which the authors/editors state that:

political performance is not a mere reproduction of schemes of power; holding placards and conducting a protest march is not simply a sideways take on more formal and state incorporated rituals that incarnate the procession of power. The perspective argued for here offers a pathway into more subtle readings of the negotiation of political self-transformation, often overseen by dichotomous power-resistance readings (p.17)

In the space of a review, I can hardly do justice to either the depth or diversity in both theory and ethnography offered throughout the book; all I have offered are some 'signposts' in that regard. Following suit then, what follows are a few such placards taken from my own current ethnographic work - still very much in-the-making - on intersections between street performance and street photography in (and beyond) London. The placards in question were photographically excerpted from an episode linked to the People's Climate Change march, which took place in Central London on the 21st of September, 2014. After the official march had ended, an offshoot of those involved made their way to Trafalgar Square, where they situated themselves between the lions residing there; no sooner than a self-designated leader began to convene a new audience to the protest through his megaphone, the police showed up in numbers. Yet, instead of a direct confrontation emerging, the scene took on a more ambiguous, de-centered dynamic, as suggested by the photos that follow, and the respective placards depicted therein.



Original photo by Scott Head



Original photo by Scott Head

Taken from a similar spot, the two photographs nonetheless contain manifestly different 'texts' regarding what the protest could be read to mean. The first, "Reclaim the Power" appears straightforward enough, yet it is situated in the hand of a protestor who seems no less at a loss in regard to what to do at that moment than the authority figures in the foreground; while the sign clearly affirms the need for action, no one seems quite sure how 'the power' should be



reclaimed at that moment, or who was to do that reclaiming. The self-referential play of second sign - “This is a sign” - could be read as just an ironic play on the form and content of protest placards or even the ‘arbitrariness’ of signs in general; yet in the context of that protest, and all of the other placards waved therein, it could just as well recall the very non-arbitrariness of the signs of global warming.

Of course, this is not the place to elaborate further here, but it seems to me that these placards point to the possibility of extending the compelling investigations of the relation between reflexivity and political performance addressed throughout Flynn and Tinius’s fine collection to even apparently straightforward political performances such as that of the protest march I encountered that day. Rather than attempt to further situate the *meaning* of those placards within that context, or in turn, within the context of the collection being reviewed, let me instead end with an image taken from elsewhere in the collection. The image in question is verbal in nature, as cited in Jeffrey Juris’s excellent contribution, *Embodying Protest: Culture and Performance within Social Movements*, and consists in comments made by an activist turned ‘fairy’, armed with a feather duster, reflecting on a charged moment in the midst of the World Bank and IMF protest in Prague:

“And this sort of like stage space appears, this performance space seemed to appear between like the rows of the policemen and the rows of people blockading, like physically blockading and then there’s this gap in the middle, you know what I mean, and we found ourselves going into this gap and tickling policemen’s toes...” (p. 94).

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[Flynn, Alex and Tinius, Jonas \(eds.\). 2015. *Anthropology, Theatre and Development: The Transformative Potential of Performance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 384 pp. Hb £73. ISBN: 9781137350596.](#)

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