

Performance, Personal Narratives, and the Politics of Possibility¹

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Opening and interpreting lives is very different from opening and closing books.

—*Dwight Conquergood, Performing as a Moral Act*

You know as well as I, Old Wife, that we have not been scuffling in this waste-howling wilderness for the right to be stupid.

—*Toni Cade Bambara, The Salt Eaters*

I don't want my good name and what I'm telling you to be tossed around up there at that there University like some ol' rag.

—*Bertha Baldwin, 93 year old domestic worker, narrator, and "theorist of the flesh"*²

There is a great deal of talk about "the problem of speaking for others"³ and the ethics and responsibility involved when performing personal narratives, especially of Subjects⁴ whose identities and cultural practices are underrepresented

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uses tropes
of dualism to
reality to
her own
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and contested. This “talk,” for the most part, is necessary and productive; however, once in a while there are regressions and ramblings that stridently bump up against the more complex and thoughtful deliberations on representations, identity, cultural politics, and fairness. On the surface, these ramblings appear to come from two opposite viewpoints: on the one side are the cynics; and on the other side are the zealots. The cynics believe any attempt toward a self-critical or dialogical performance of an Other is unattainable; and the temporary and tenuous “putting on the ‘flesh’” of an Other is ultimately an act of crass appropriation, self-indulgence, and distortion. Therefore, all such performances, reflexive or not, are inauthentic and exploitative. The zealots, however, believe they have cloned the mind, body, and soul of the Other. They speak *for* the Other better than the Other can speak for herself, and they *know* what it means *to be* the Other. In their often new-found awareness, they do not pause to reflect on the consequences of their actions, because they know all the answers. They are loquacious advocates with insider status.

There are important comparisons that need to be made between these two seemingly different perspectives. The cynics, entrenched in uncomplicated suspicion, dismiss the serious work of performers struggling over questions of the politics of representation as dubious and contradictory. The zealots, entrenched in uncomplicated enthusiasm, dismiss this kind of work as well, only their dismissal is due to an arrogance and naïve zeal that overlooks the question in the first place. The cynics uphold the Not Me and disregard the Not Not Me. The zealots uphold the Not Not Me and disregard the Not Me. There is, however, a greater irony of comparisons between the present day cynic and zealot to be made with an earlier tradition of representing Otherness.

Much has been written (from across the Atlantic to our own varied concentrations in Communication Studies) about the long held dispositions toward privileging the written word at the expense of shunning the poetics, oral rhythms, and improvisational expressions of subaltern communities. In privileging canonized print productions above oral practice productions, we observe the tendency (in the Arts and Sciences) to prescribe either our meanings or languages upon Others or to simply ignore them. History and politics notwithstanding, written cultures have also colonized orally—epistemologically and ontologically—by way of the production and representation of knowledge. The contemporary cynic and zealot would be the first to loudly disavow this textual fixation that distorts or casts the Other as invisible. The irony is

that in the negation of performance by the cynic and the lack of serious self-critique by the zealot, they ultimately enforce the very tradition they would disclaim. Although the cynic and zealot are often very sincere and well intentioned, one in their suspicion and the other in their enthusiasm, in the end, they too create silence and distortion. When the cynic blatantly nullifies the performance of oral narratives because of a preoccupation with authenticity, important voices and the potential for greater possibilities are obscured; therefore, a form of silence is the result. When the zealot uncritically reveres the performance of oral narratives because of an infatuation with difference, important voices and the potential for greater possibilities are also obscured; but, in this case, a form of misrepresentation is the result.

My hope is that we are able to find that more creative, complex, and slippery terrain between the zealot and the cynic; the space between the fear of authentication and the fear of universalism; the space between absolutely refusing to perform because the stakes are *too* high and absolutely rushing to perform because they *are* so high. In this essay, I am concerned, primarily, with the performance of subversive and subaltern narratives, the challenge of traveling between domains of power, and the “moral responsibility”⁵ of artists and scholars in fashioning more humane possibilities for the problems that “beset our world”⁶ (Dyson, 153; Hall, 9). I offer some brief thoughts on a *performance of possibilities* that seeks out that more complicated space between the cynic and the zealot.

THE PERFORMANCE OF POSSIBILITIES

In a *performance of possibilities*, I see the “possible” as suggesting a movement culminating in creation and change. It is the active, creative work that weaves the life of the mind with being mindful of life,⁷ of “merging text and world,”⁸ of critically traversing the margin and the center, and of opening more and different paths for enlivening relations and spaces. The performance of possibilities functions as a politically engaged pedagogy that Lawrence Grossberg describes as, “never [having] to convince a predefined subject—whether empty or full, whether essential or fragmented—to adopt a new position. Rather, the task is to win an already positioned, already invested individual or group to a different set of places, a different organization of the *space of possibilities*” (Giroux & McLaren, 19). Grossberg asks us to consider a model beyond the dichotomous refrain of “domination and resistance”—what Gloria

Anzaldúa describes as a counterstance that locks us in a duel of oppressor and oppressed (561). Grossberg calls for a model “which may enable the mobilization of people’s memories, fantasies, and desires, and redirect their investments in politics and the [sic] Other . . . we must collectively articulate a common affective vision of a shared political future, based on a politics of practice—what people do, what they invest in, where they belong”(20). The performance of possibilities centers on the principles of transformation and transgression,⁹ dialogue and interrogation, as well as acceptance and imagination to build worlds that are possible.

The question then becomes, how does a *performance of possibilities* invoke an “investment in politics and the Other” keeping in mind the dynamics of performer, audience, and Subjects while at the same time being wary of both cynics and zealots? We may begin to address the question by critically examining our *purpose* and *assumptions*. Then, we can pointedly elicit responses from our Subjects, people in our field and people in related fields, who are committed to political efficacy, aesthetic virtue, and ethics. Although we understand that assumptions and questions of purpose are ideally enriched, revised, and illuminated as the performance evolves into its many shapes and directions, these initial questions are the impetus for that evolution. It takes time, energy, and courage to undertake each process of probing self-examination, of seeking honest questions, and of collaborating in generative meanings. Because this undertaking does not always follow in this neat order and because it does not stop at the initial questions, these processes will converge and diverge. Without them, however, the issues of purpose and assumptions can not be ethically and productively engaged. Therefore, in a performance of possibilities we take the stand that performance matters because it does something in the world (Langelier, 245–76). And what it “does” for the audience, the Subjects, and ourselves must be driven by a thoughtful critique of our assumptions and purpose.

Only after we answer these questions may we go on to ask three more questions: (1) By what definable and material means will the Subjects themselves benefit from the performance? (2) How can the performance contribute to a more enlightened and involved citizenship that will disturb systems and processes that limit freedoms and possibilities? (3) In what ways will the performers probe questions of identity, representation, and fairness that will enrich their own subjectivity, cultural politics, and art? I will turn now to these three questions as each resonates exclusively with Subjects, audience, and performer.

THE SUBJECTS

The means by which the Subjects themselves will benefit from the performance are explored by examining the arenas of voice, subjectivity, and interrogative field. By voice, I do not simply mean the representation of an utterance, but the presentation of a historical self, a full presence, that is in and of a particular world. The performance of possibilities does not accept “being heard and included” as its focus, but only as its starting point; instead, voice is an embodied, historical self that constructs and is constructed by a matrix of social and political processes. The aim is to present and represent Subjects as made and makers of meaning, symbol, and history in their fullest sensory and social dimensions. Therefore, the performance of possibilities is also a performance of voice wedded to experience.

Moreover, whether one likes the performance or not, one cannot completely undo or unknow the image and imprint of that voice (inside experience) upon their own consciousness once they have been exposed to it through performance. Performing subversive and subaltern voices proclaims existence, within particular locales and discourses, that are being witnessed—entered into one’s own experience—and this witnessing can not be denied. The subjects themselves benefit from this proclamation through the creation of a space that gives evidence that “I am here in the world among you,” but more importantly, “I am in the world under particular conditions that are constructed and thereby open to greater possibility.” How then does all this benefit the Subjects? Human desire implores that we be listened to, comprehended, engaged, and free to imagine in and with worlds of others. I often quote Barbara Myerhoff who observed “unless we exist in the eyes of others we come to doubt our own existence” (Myerhoff, 103). This idea of existence and self is further illustrated in !Nisa, a !Kung woman, speaking to anthropologist Marjorie Shostak as she expresses the fear of the disappearance of her stories: “I’ll break open the story and tell you what is there, this like the others that have fallen out onto the sand, I will finish with it, and the wind will take it away” (Shostak, 233). That we are all social beings where self is necessarily constituted by others reflects Mikhail Bakhtin’s words, “nothing is more frightening than the absence of an answer” (111). The nature of Bakhtin’s “answer” is a profound giving back that affirms we are real to others (therefore to ourselves) and that we are not alone. This is not to argue that we do not have a Self (or soul) that generates its own will, action, and meaning—“I think

therefore I am"—but that the Self is reciprocally joined to other Selves (or souls) for its own being and creations—"I am because We are and We are because I am." This acknowledgment of voice within experience, relative to the social world is just the beginning; a deeper connection is necessary that now takes us a step further into the realm of subjectivity.

Subjectivity requires that we delve more deeply into the desires resonating within the locations of the Other. It is the move beyond the *acknowledgment* of voice within experience to that of actual *engagement*. Audience and performer must now engage the material and discursive world of the Other. Because subjectivity is formed through a range of discursive practices—economic, social, aesthetic, and political—and meanings are sites of creation and struggle, subjectivity linked to performance becomes a poetic and polemic admixture of personal experience, cultural politics, social power, and resistance. We witness Subjects as they work for and against competing discourses and social processes in the quest for security and honor in their locations. The acknowledge Others become Subjects when the audience and performers actually identify with the substance of who they are, where they are, and what they do. We have entered, albeit symbolically and temporarily, in their locations of voice within experience. Through performance, we are tangential, Subject to Subject, in that contested space while, as bell hooks describes, oppressed "people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping new identity, naming their history, telling their story" (hooks, 43).

How the Subjects themselves benefit from this quality of engagement is illustrated in a student performance of personal narratives by University cafeteria workers at Chapel Hill who went on strike in 1968. The workers protested for back pay, over-time pay, better working conditions, and job descriptions. It was a tumultuous strike: the national guard was called in, the Chapel Hill police circled the cafeteria with guns in hand, and classes were canceled. For the two African-American women who led the strike, it was a difficult time and an unforgettable ordeal. One of the women was fired; the other still works in the University cafeteria.

In 1993, the University was celebrating its bicentennial, and it was a major state wide event. However, some of us felt it was time to honor the leaders of the (in)famous 1968 cafeteria workers strike, as well as labor culture on campus. After some time a performance based on the personal narratives of the

two leaders and other service workers was finally scheduled as part of the bicentennial celebration. For the opening night performance, the strike leaders and the workers were given a special invitation: cafeteria workers, housekeepers, brick masons, yard keepers, and mail carriers were honored guests with reserved seats before an overflowing crowd. Although the University never acknowledged the strike leaders' struggle or their contribution to labor equity on campus, almost thirty years later the leaders, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Brooks, watched themselves and their story being performed in a crowded theatre. Their full attention was focused on the stage, and their partners, children, grandchildren, friends, and co-workers were also focused, watching every detail of the performance. As I watched them watch themselves in performance, my fears deepened: Did we do justice to their stories? Will they approve of our presentation of them? Will they feel in any way exploited or embarrassed? How is the cast being affected by all this?

At the end of the performance, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Brooks were introduced and the audience gave them a thunderous and lengthy standing ovation as the cast presented them each with a bouquet of roses. After the show, members of the audience and the press surrounded the two women with admiring questions and accolades. The next day the newspaper stated that "the production told a true and previously untold tale. . . . You can see from the tears in my eyes how I felt about it.' . . . Still clutching the bouquet of cellophane wrapped flowers the cast had given her while singing *This Little Light of Mine*, Mrs. Smith said a night like Tuesday night made her struggle worthwhile." In another paper it was reported the grandchildren of Mrs. Smith said they understood their grandmother's life better after seeing the performance; "It definitely makes you have more respect for what they've gone through." As I walk across campus four years later, I am stopped from time to time by workers who still remember and want to talk, with pride and satisfaction, about that night four years ago when their stories were honored in performance. It was the narratives of Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Brooks and the other workers "identifying themselves as subjects" and "telling their story" in the mediated space of performance that empowered them before strangers and kin. Performance proclaimed and affirmed who they were and how they were. Performance also proclaimed that what they did was noticed, appreciated, and that it made a difference.

But what about those performances when the Subjects cannot be present to witness the performances of their stories? Aside from thinking of performance

as a movable space that itself can travel to communities and locales where the Subjects work and live (parks, community centers, churches, schools, etc.), we must also remember what is still being communicated even in the absence of their physical presence. The performance strives to communicate a sense of the Subjects' worlds in their own words; it hopes to amplify their meanings and intentions to a larger group of listeners and observers. These listeners and observers are, then, affected by what they see and hear in ways that motivate them to act/think in forms that now beneficially affect (directly or indirectly) either the Subjects themselves or what they advocate. At this point, the audience moves from the performance space to the social world or the interrogative field.

The interrogative field is the point where the *performance of possibilities* aims to create or contribute to a discursive space where unjust systems and processes are identified and interrogated. It is where what has been expressed through the illumination of voice and the encounter with subjectivity motivates individuals to some level of informed and strategic action. The greatest benefit to Subjects is for those who bear witness to their stories to interrogate actively and purposefully those processes that limit their health and freedom. I do not mean to imply that one performance can rain down a revolution, but one performance can be revolutionary in enlightening citizens to the possibilities that grate against injustice. Furthermore, I believe that performance is a most persuasive and poignant "everyday act of resistance" without necessarily succumbing to the simplistic duality of oppressor versus oppressed.

One performance may or may not change someone's world; but, as James Scott reminds us, acts of resistance amass: "rather like snowflakes on a steep mountainside, set off an avalanche. . . . Everyday forms of resistance give way to collective defiance" (192). In the *performance of possibilities*, the expectation is for the performers and spectators to appropriate the rhetorical currency they need from the inner space of the performance to the outer domain of the social world in order to make a material difference. This may mean joining or starting organizations, volunteering, working to influence policy, involvement in protest demonstrations, donating money, resources, services, etc. At the time of our performance for the bicentennial, the campus housekeepers were embroiled in a court battle with the University. "The House Keepers' Movement," as it was called, was reminiscent of the Cafeteria Workers strike in 1968. The housekeepers wanted improved working conditions, better pay, and

training for supervisors. Several of the narratives the students performed were from housekeepers' contextualizing the Movement, as well as mediations on their personal lives and futures. At each performance, the House Keepers' Movement set up a table outside the theatre for donations toward court costs and legal fees, announcements about rallies, petitions, sale of Movement paraphernalia, and membership information for faculty, staff and students. Some in the audience knew little or nothing about the housekeepers on campus, least of all their Movement. For the strike leaders and the housekeepers, the performance did not bring forth a utopia or eradicate inequity, but it did provide a means for their voices, subjectivities, and ultimately their fight for fairness to be heard, felt, and joined.

THE AUDIENCE

How the performance will contribute to a more enlightened and involved citizenship is another question arising from the *performance of possibilities*. Creating performance where the intent is largely to invoke interrogation of specific political and social processes means that in our art we are consciously working toward a cultural politics of change that resonates in a progressive and involved citizenship. To regard the audience as citizens with the potential for collective action and change is part of the groundwork upon which a *performance of possibilities* is based. Toni Morrison underscores the symbiosis between art and politics:

I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams—which is to say yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now; if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite; if it has none, it is tainted. The problem comes when you find harangue passing off as art. It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time. (497)

Where the intent is both "the political and irrevocably beautiful," art assumes responsibility for political effectiveness in communicating the principle that we are all part of a larger whole; and, therefore, we are radically responsible to each other for all of our individual selves. Linda Alcoff describes a "web" where our social practices are made possible or impossible by

agents and events that are spatially far from our own body which in turn, can affect distant strangers: "We are collectively caught in an intricate, delicate web in which each action I take, discursive or otherwise, pulls on, breaks off, or maintains the tension in many strands of a web in which others find themselves moving also" (Alcoff, 20). A *performance of possibilities* strives to reinforce to audience members the "web" of citizenship and the possibilities of their individual selves as agents and change makers.

Striving toward an enlightened and involved citizenship also means that, although formerly the focus was on subjectivity relative to the Subjects, it must now move to intersubjectivity relative to the audience. Because performance asks the audience to "travel" empathetically to the world of the Subjects and to feel and know some of what they feel and know, two life-worlds¹⁰ meet and the domains of outsider and insider are simultaneously demarcated and fused. I have an identity separate from the Subject, and the performance clearly illuminates our differences. In the space of the performance, I am outsider; in the space of the world, these positions are more than likely switched. I am insider and the Subject is outsider. While I see that I am an outsider to the Subject's experience, the performance ironically pulls me inside. I am now in the midst of a profound meeting. Do I remain here at the margins of the meeting, or is the performance beautiful enough and political enough to compel me to travel more deeply inside the mind, heart, and world of the Subject? In this ability to travel across worlds, two identities meet, engage, and become something more. Maria Lugones describes this process of intersubjectivity: "The reason why I think that traveling to someone's 'world' is a way of identifying with them is because by traveling to their 'world' we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*. Only when we have traveled to each other's 'worlds' are we fully subjects to each other" (637). Performance becomes the vehicle by which we travel to the worlds of Subjects and enter domains of intersubjectivity that problematize how we categorize who is "us" and who is "them," and how we see *ourselves* with "other" and different eyes.

As I argue that action beyond the performance space is of essential benefit to the Subjects, so it is to the audience members as well. Ideally, as an audience member consciously re-enters the "web" of human connectedness and then "travels" into the life-world of the Subject where rigid categories of insider and outsider transfigure into an intersubjective experience, a path for action

is set. Action, particularly new action, requires new energy and new insight. In the performance of possibilities, when the audience member begins to witness degrees of tension and incongruity between the Subject's life-world and those processes and systems that challenge and undermine that world, something more and new is learned about how power works. The question to what extent these life-worlds are threatened and, in turn, resist, is only partially captured in the space and time of performance. The audience, however, as involved citizens who are both disturbed and inspired may seek the answer long after the final curtain. This is a pursuit of possibility, a gift of indignation and inspiration, passed on from the Subject to the audience member. The *performance of possibilities* expects the audience member to continue, reaffirmed, or at least to begin honing her skills toward "world traveling." In the *performance of possibilities*, both performers and audiences can be transformed: They can be themselves and more as they travel between worlds.

The performance ambitiously hopes to guide members of the audience and give them equipment for the journey: empathy and intellect, passion and critique.

There are creative tensions at the borders between Self and Other, yet the performance hopes to challenge them to become witness, interlocutor, subversor, and creator. This is the move from transformation to transgression that Dwight Conquergood describes as the unleashing of "centrifugal forces that keep culture in motion, ideas in play, hierarchies unsettled, and academic disciplines alert and on the edge" (138). In 1937, the black artist, activist, and intellectual, Paul Robeson¹¹ brought light to the particular responsibility of academics to transgress: "There is no standing above the conflict on Olympia Heights. There are no impartial observers. . . . The struggle evades the formerly cloistered halls of our universities and other seats of learning. The battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear" (52). That we remove and contest this "sheltered rear" is the inheritance of a *performance of possibilities*.

THE PERFORMERS

One of the initial challenges for a performer is the identity of the Subjects. In this meeting with identity the performer is confronted with questions: How is identity formed and what constitutes it? How can performance defer to the ways in which identity changes, transforms itself, and multiplies? Since the performer is transported¹² slowly, deliberately, and incrementally, at each rehearsal and at

each encounter toward the knowledges and life-world of the Subject, the performer is creatively and intellectually *taking it all in* internalizing and receiving partial “maps of meaning”¹³ that reflect the subject’s consciousness and context. This receptiveness, however, is never completely without the generative filter of the performer’s own knowledges and locales. The process of being transported, of receiving meanings and generating meanings¹⁴ is a more intimate and, potentially, a more traumatic engagement for the performers than for the audience members, because the transportation is mentally and viscerally more intense than traveling to the world of Others; it is making those worlds your “homeplace.”¹⁵ The performer is not only engaged, but she strives to *become*. For the performer, this is not only an endeavor to *live in* an individual consciousness shaped by a social world, but it is to *live in* that social world as well. Of course, by “living in that social world,” I do not mean literally changing your address, but I do mean that the performer must first seriously research all the crucial elements that encompass a cognitive map of the social, economic, cultural, and political practices that constitute that world; and, secondly, the performer must be committed—doing what must be done or going where one must go—to experience the felt-sensing¹⁶ dynamics of that world: its tone and color—the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, rhythms—the visceral ethos of that world.

In personal narrative performances, particularly of contested identities, performers are not only performing the words of Subjects, they are performing their political landscapes. This political landscape is described by Grossberg as “spatial territorialization,” that is, “places and spaces, of people, practices, and commodities. It is in this sense that discourse is always placed, because people are always anchored or invested in specific sites. Hence, it matters how and where practices and people are placed, since the place determines from and to where one can speak (or act)” (20). Identity is then constituted by identification with certain cultural practices and connected to certain locales that are often ripe with struggle, conflict, and difference just as they are with creation, empowerment, and belonging. At the same time identity is contingent upon how these practices and locales change over time. Identity is definable yet multiple, contested yet affirmed, contextual yet personal, a matter of difference and a matter of identification.

As the performer is being transported into domains of spatial territorialization, as well as the domains of the Subject’s consciousness, we understand this

process is always partial, contingent, and relative. While some performers more than others have struggled through the complicated tensions between trauma and transformation, any move toward transgression is dangerous without taking on the serious questions of identity conjoined with representation. Performance becomes the vehicle by which a representation is manifest and with it the presentation of an identity; therefore, representation of the Other is a value loaded construction of signification within a specific context. Representation and identity are largely mediated through the performer’s body—what it does and says in performance space. Therefore, in the performance of possibilities, we understand representation as first and foremost a responsibility. We are responsible for the creation of what and who are being represented; we are representing the represented; and our “representing” most often carries with it political ramifications far beyond the reach of the performance.

Because “how a people are represented is how they are treated,” the act of representing is also an act of material consequences (Hall, 27). The body politic responds to individuals and communities by the way they understand them based upon a complex configuration of discourses and experiences none of which is more profound than how these lives enter their consciousness through representations in cultural performances.

Furthermore, because we are leaving the Other vulnerable to our choices of representation and its possible consequences, the responsibility is one that is both moral and artistic. That is, we must represent Subjects in a way that interrogates their material. Although political disfranchisement must be our moral impetus, this should not be separate from our concerns with, and investments in, artistic form. Because we are about political efficacy, we must also care about the artistic virtue of our performance and continuously study it, practice it, critique it, respect it, and improve upon it. Alain Locke, the first black Rhodes Scholar and foremost critic and intellectual of the Harlem Renaissance, once said that art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid. Art helps us see and realize the unrealized. It is the sensual bridge to another side of imagining. Where there is no art there is no life; it is our special gift for being. Even though we aim to persuade, we can not afford to fall short on our art.

In a performance of possibilities, moral responsibility and artistic excellence culminate in the active intervention to break through unfair closures and remake the possibility for new openings that bring the margins to a shared center. The

performance of possibilities does not arrogantly assure that we exclusively are giving voice to the silenced, for we understand they speak and have been speaking in spaces and places often foreign to us. Neither are we assuming that we possess the unequivocal knowledge and skills to enable people to intervene upon injustice or that that they have not been intervening through various other forms all the time. We understand that in performing the contested identities of Subjects there must be *caution* and *politics*. We are involved in an ethics guided by caution and a strategy informed by cultural politics. We are not recklessly speaking to and against one location, but to ourselves and our very endeavor. Della Pollack underlines this self-reflexive and self-subversive process: "Debate and revolutionary advocacy also presume a closed mind and a fixed object of persuasion. Dialogue is quite different. It is not a matter of trade-offs, or tolerance but of genuinely opening the self to subversion" (35).

We are involved in the "opening the self" work of *breaking* with the grandest "dialogic" possibility of *remaking*. Audre Lorde's words and work serve as an example: "My work is about difference, my work is about how we learn to lie down with the different parts of ourselves, so that we can in fact learn to respect and honor the different parts of each other, so that we in fact can learn to use them moving toward something that needs being done, that has never been done before."¹⁷

As we move into the next millennium, I am hoping we find that slippery place in the performance of personal narrative that is not at rest with the polarizing stance of either the dour cynics or the doting zealots. I hope we will always be restless and worried about performing the lives of lived Subjects, about entering body, soul, and mind into spaces—their spaces *and* our spaces—that scare us, condemn us, and confuse us, yet take us beyond.

For audience, Subjects, and performers, the *performance of possibilities* in the next millennium will "specialize in the wholly impossible"¹⁸ reaching toward light, justice, and enlivening possibilities.

NOTES

1. I want to thank professor Genna Rae McNeil for her helpful comments on this essay.
2. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga discuss "theories of the flesh" as stories that "bridge the contradictions of our experiences"—those root metaphors from the

concrete existence of the "unlettered" that keep us centered and sane. Further elaboration of theories of the flesh is elaborated in "That Was My Occupation: Oral Narrative, Performance, and Black Feminist Thought" (Madison, 1993). Bertha Baldwin is my great aunt who raised my mother. I worked with her on her oral history while completing my dissertation. This was the response she gave me when I first asked her if she would be one of the three women whose life history would comprise my study on performance ethnography.

3. I borrow from Linda Alcoff's important essay entitled "The Problem of Speaking for Others" in *Cultural Critique* (winter 1991–92).
4. I use the term Subjects interchangeable with the term Other, to suggest agency and to borrow from Latina critic Mari Lugones in her article "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception" (1987) when she refers to Others as "subjects, lively beings, resisters, constructors of visions." I am also looking at bell hooks, in *Talking Back* (1989): "Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality shaping their new identity, naming history, telling their story." I capitalize both Other and Subjects in keeping with the idea that the literal meanings of these words are displaced to represent individuals whose identities are often contested.
5. In his book, *Reflecting Black*, Michael Dyson writes about "moral responsibility" and that we "must understand moral responsibility against the backdrop of social options, cultural resources, and economic conditions that form the immediate environment within which people must live and make choices. In short, a theory of responsible moral agency must account for the conditions of *possibility* for such agency to be meaningfully exercised." (153)
6. This is a quote from Stuart Hall (9) from the Grossberg essay cited in the reference section.
7. "Mindful of Life" was introduced to me by one of my student/friends, David Dombrowsky, in a one-person performance I was directing with him. It comes from Mark Freeman's *Re-Writing the Self: History, Memory and Oral Narrative* (1993) (3).
8. Edward Said's notion that "the text and the world" must be intimately tied (1983).
9. Dwight Conquergood elaborated on transformation and transgression in his speech at the 1995 Otis J. Aggert Festival, "Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics."
10. Jürgen Habermas' idea of "life world." Habermas distinguishes the life world from structures of political power and social systems. The life world is social

integrated and possible, even when

11. With national and international movements. He also supported independence with Russia, and his former conservative groups in the U.S. In 1958 he finally regained his passport in 1963.

12. Discussed in greater detail in *Between*

13. "Why Grossberg uses it in his essay within specific locales.

14. Discussed in an article by Mariodel of Performance Process" (1987)

15. The essay from *Yearning* (1990).

16. It is explained in more detail in *The*

17. *Ways to Make My Dream* *Chile*

18. African history. A black woman educated the National Training School of the National Association of Colored Women

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