

Oral History As and In Performance

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For presentation at the Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region (OHMAR) Meeting:  
Oral History and Performance  
March 14-16 2008 New York, NY

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## Oral History As and In Performance

I have to admit up front to a little crankiness this morning, recently attended a programming meeting in which my role seemed to be to help turn histories of local faith communities into what was repeatedly described as “infotainment.” Today, I want to push a little bit at some assumptions about the performance *of* oral history by focusing on the nature and implications of oral history *as* performance. I’d like to ask: if oral history is a powerful performance (a performance full of power) in its own right, what then does or can it mean to re-perform it? Asking this question, of course, begs the prior question: in what ways does oral history comprise a performance event?

Re-performance has often been considered a “natural” extension of oral history in that both are live, oral, public, and often astoundingly beautiful—full of the kind of vernacular craft performance frames and buoys.

We may also share these, among other, ways of thinking about how oral history is not just analogous to but is a critical performance in its own right:

- 1) Oral history is *rehearsed*—it aggregates and refines an expansive network of dialogue over time and space, even across multiple generations or cultural geographies.<sup>1</sup>
- 2) It is *reflexive*—it is a representation of the self to the self, specially heightened and charged by the presence of the interviewer as a symbol and mediator of a much larger audience, providing for and promising the kind of subjectivity produced by self-witness.<sup>2</sup>

- 3) Its meanings are *emergent*—they acquire new, singular, highly contingent significance in the moment of performative reckoning, of thinking with and through the histories what is told in the process of telling, especially when “telling” is configured as a collaborative, co-generative exchange.
- 4) Oral histories are *consequential*, in the linguistic sense of performative utterance by which saying is doing: telling history makes it; accordingly, the past is always caught in a run on the future.
- 5) Oral history also embodies three classical components of performance: mimesis, poesis, and kinesis—it *represents* by *re-creating* historical events in embodied processes of *mobilizing* new ways of seeing, thinking, feeling being and doing the world.<sup>3</sup>

For now I'd like to consider at least two additional ways in which it seems to me not necessarily definitively true as much as analytically *useful* to think of oral history as performance, again, anticipating the Q: what difference might it make to embrace this way of thinking about oral history in re-performance? What possibilities does it open, or challenges does it raise?

1.

First: in 1996, Elin Diamond described an essential tension between “performativity”—as it had become popularized through Judith Butler—and “performance.”<sup>4</sup> For Diamond, performativity describes the corporeal repetition of discursive norms under some kind of threat such that the performance is compulsive and self-effacing: the repetition is done so often and so well that we don’t even see the repetition as a performance; it’s just “what’s done.”

On the other hand, she argues, performance *materializes* performativity. It is the moment in which performativity happens or the *doing of what’s done*. Accordingly, for Diamond, performance may make performativity “discussable.” This is what I call the where-the-rubber-meets-the-road theory of performance. As much as ordinary performance repeats gendered, raced, classed norms into invisibility, as much as it makes the normative seem normal, the actual *doing of what’s done* may reveal performativity for what it is—and call us to account for our unflinching repetitions.

Beyond honoring and raising up the subaltern voice, approaching oral history in this way means critically examining the ways in which any given performance repeats prevailing discourses and cultural scripts.

2.

This is the challenge Kate Willink faced in her conversations with Mr. Alder, the first white teacher in a previously all-black high school in an eastern North Carolina county. (In this case, desegregation took the form of white teachers moving into black schools rather than black students into white schools).<sup>5</sup> As they talked, Mr. Alder arrived

at a story about how he “fit in” at the all-black high school: “I guess I fit in because I played basketball. And I brought my [adult] team to play the black high school one time.” The game proves to be of a magnitude no one could have predicted. Almost despite himself, Mr. Alder regaled its explosive, erotic energy:

Black against a white: we were alllllll white. They were alllllll black. We were all older. They were high school boys.

...

You cannot believe this game. If there has ever been an outstanding game ever **played** in Camden County, it was that night that we played them! . . .

Those boys were **unbelievable** that night. I had watched ’em play . . . .

I remember one time I think we went six minutes, **nobody** missed a shot. I kept on.

I said, “We’re playing the best I’ve ever seen us play,” but I said,

“**These boys are . . .**” (*he doesn’t complete his sentence*).

They wanted to beat us so bad.

We won the game on almost a half court shot at the end of the game . . . .

The score was a 150-149.

...

Those blacks came out and just hugged us (*pause*) because they enjoyed the game.

Mr. Alder's story rehearses the larger-than-life athletic and cultural dramas in which, as Willink notes, "'communities engaged the tensions, possibilities, and contradictions of the world around them.'"<sup>6</sup> Willink was a captive witness:

Listening to Mr. Alder, I am captivated by the back and forth of the game, including six minutes during which "**nobody missed a shot.**" Mr. Alder remembers a powerful moment in which an historically divided community came together in a grand show of intimate contact: what was probably the first time some members of the white and black communities ever hugged each other in public.

Mr. Alder quickly cooled the narrative heat. As Willink notes, his next comment initially seemed a nonsequitor:

But they're [black people] just as nice as they could be. I had a lady—I still think a lot of her today. She was a cafeteria manager—she always filled my plate up. I said, "Miss Hall, you made me start gaining weight, you know that?" I joke— (*We laugh*).

As materialized in performance, or made *corporeally and processually evident*, the performative arc of the ecstatic story is staked in a commonplace reiteration of common banter. Willink observes:

At a second glance, Mr. Alder's humor does more than calm the emotional volatility of the basketball game. It completely puts aside all the radicalness of the scene—a voluntary desegregation of blacks and whites in intimate physical contact, sharing a common passion for the game of basketball. With Mr. Alder's joke about the cafeteria manager and his gaining weight, he separates blacks and

whites again—literally by a cafeteria line—into their “proper” places. Thus the joke releases the tension of the moment and its transgressive possibility dissipates. He returns us with laughter to a normative place where “they” are “nice,” perform menial labor, are safely divided by service and consumption roles, and literally serve the white man exceedingly well.

In the course of telling “his” story of desegregation, Mr. Alder relies on conventional narrative structures, such as the joke, and customary discourse, such as the cafeteria line banter, to stake whiteness, even as he challenges its preeminence in the school structure. Playing out this, among other elemental contradictions, Willink discerns the controlling performativities of race—the recurrence of racial privilege in a narrative performance otherwise dedicated to dramatizing its collapse—that govern Mr. Alder’s performances of masculinity, authority, and “fit” in the high school, the community at large, and the interview scene.

Mr. Alder’s performance as such marks the fragility of given social structures and the role performance plays in securing them. In Rivka Eisner’s exchange with Co Dinh, a former revolutionary for the North Vietnamese imprisoned in the infamous con Dao “tiger cages,” performance proves an affective relay, co-implicating participants in what Kelly Oliver calls respons-ability—or the subjectively definitive ability to respond, to take action on and with histories told and heard, heard and told again in the alternative repetitions of witness.<sup>7</sup>

Co Dinh was initially reluctant to speak. She had previously, insistently deferred to other women she felt were more appropriate bearers of war and revolutionary history—until she apparently could no longer resist the compulsion to tell. Unlike the

compulsion under threat that defines performativity, I would call this a counter-compulsion: a propulsion against threat and the normativity it commands.

The interview that ensued took place in co Dinh's home in Ho Chi Minh city, just as Eisner and her translator, Nhina, were about to leave. Eisner recounts an eruption of words that, even as they poured forth, fell away against co Dinh's re-presenting of a bullet wound—a scarred gouge in her upper thigh. The first words recorded are Eisner's own, as she speaks the scene to which she is now subject:

Scars, scars . . .oh!

She is pulling up her pant leg,

Oh!

Oh!

Oh, my god.

How did she get *that*?

It's on the inside of her left leg.

Oh my—

Oh—

Co Dinh continues through the translator, Nhina:

This leg is a bit shorter.

At that moment,

The, the ladies were on the street.

And they fire—

They shot—

And without doctor—

And they sent her to prison,

And it got worse.

Soon the three voices overlap. Co Dinh clutches her pantleg, now raised to expose the upper thigh.

Eisner: Oh. Co Dinh/Nhina: It got worse.

Oh—

Eisner repeats the performance in an elaborated description of the primary relations of which it is comprised, prefacing her own account by saying “this is a firestorm, not a story”:

Trying to keep up with co Dinh’s rapid-fire pace, Nhina’s translation echoes co Dinh’s urgency with compounding, additive phrases, “*And they fire—and without doctor—and they sent her to prison, and it got worse, it got worse.*” . . . I am shocked, suddenly overwhelmed. I feel caught. “Oh! Oh!” *I am hit. I am hit.* My skin is pinned to the green plastic couch. My shoulders lift and tighten. I am frozen. Tense. Unable to escape. Co Dinh walks towards me. I look at her leg. “How did she get *that?*” There was no warning. “Oh, my god.” Now it is too late to stop or leave. It is already happening. “They fire—they shot.” “Oh—.” There is no escape. Co Dinh’s memories, dramatized in the bodily place where bullets pierced her, are piercing me.<sup>8</sup>

Broken, shattered, even astructural, but powerful beyond control, co Dinh’s words hijack Eisner’s subjectivity in a blast of co-performative reckoning.

In this case performance exceeded anything like *recountal* in *encounter*, breaking up and breaking through any lingering sense that performance is primarily a vehicle for a

pregiven, primarily intact story—or is even or always an act of storytelling. Co Dinh’s performance punctures its frame, piercing Eisner’s and, in turn, Eisner’s listener’s. The performance lies in the *cut*. In this case, the power of oral history *as* performance is registered in the body of the listener as an open wound.

3.

In Willink’s study, performance and performativity cross in her own performance of critique. Within the horizontal economy of exchange, she confronts the repetition of master codes that leaving unquestioned could leave unchanged. Eisner recasts performance as a matter of sensuous exchange realized as a profound disturbance in the field of embodied knowing. Just these two instances of rethinking the nature of oral history performance raise the critical question: what difference does or might thinking about oral history *as* performance make to possibilities and responsibilities for *re*-performance?

Engaging the critical perspective of performativity means, first of all, that we can no more rest in a hagiography even of “unsung heroes” than we can refuse to assume the response-abilities that participating in oral history performances as such require. As appropriately devoted as we may be to our co-subjects, a primarily celebratory or epideictic approach to their representation could, in fact, diminish the honor we wish to convey by, among other things:

1. tamping down critique
2. consequently helping to secure discourses that precede and condition the historical subject

3. perversely maintaining “otherness”
4. holding off the co-reckoning of the interviewer by, in effect, holding the “other’s”  
story at however beautifully crafted arm’s length
5. cutting off possibilities for a rich dialogue out of ostensible respect for the primary  
speaker
6. leaving change to what I’ve increasingly, maybe peevishly come to call happy  
empathy: feeling with the co-subject without taking up the full response-ability of  
being *different together* or what I would call *engaged difference*.

For starters, Willink and Eisner’s work suggest at least a four-fold reckoning with  
what the co-subject may not necessarily wish to recognize or did not necessarily  
intend to reveal  
what the interviewer may yet then never fully understand,  
the ghosts of present-others--historical figures, interlocutors, systemic authority,  
and even imagined audiences--that must then haunt all listeners and  
tellers,  
and reperformance as a matter of *acting on*, on the one hand, what we cannot  
imagine (e.g. life lived in torture under neglect by a foreign regime) and,  
on the other, what we must (e.g. the disputations of raced relations that  
continue to vex desegregation).

With regard to Willink’s conversations with Mr. Alder this might mean corporeally  
elaborating the terms and conditions of his history, availing audiences of “discussability.”

With regard to Eisner and co Dinh, it might mean creating the kind of renewed *encounter* between re-teller and listeners that comes at the cost of what Clifford Geertz has delicately described as the ethnographer's "inward ease" and that requires an ongoing negotiation of reflexive subject positions.<sup>9</sup> With just these cases in mind, the reperformance of oral history as performance might mean re-repeating oral histories in representational processes fraught with the risks and dangers of potential change.

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<sup>1</sup> See Samuel Schragger's landmark study, "What is Social in Oral History?," *International Journal of Oral History* 4.2 (1983): 76-98.

<sup>2</sup> Following Dori Laub's foundational work in e.g. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> See Dwight Conquergood, "Of Caravans and Carnivals: Performance Studies in Motion," *TDR* 35 (1995): 137-141 and "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *TDR* 46 (2002): 145-156.

<sup>4</sup> Elin Diamond, intro., *Performance and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Willink, "Domesticating Difference: Performing Memories of School Desegregation," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 27.1 (2007): 20-40.

<sup>6</sup> Willink, quoting Pamela Grundy, *Learning to Win: Sports, Education, and Social Change in Twentieth-Century North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> See Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Eisner, ch. 3, "Re-staging Revolution and Remembering Toward Change: National Liberation Front Women Perform Prospective Memory in Vietnam," unpublished diss.

<sup>9</sup> See Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York, Basic Books, 1983), p. 45: "the growth in range [that] a powerful sensibility gains from an encounter with another one, as powerful or more, comes only at the expense of its inward ease."