

## Introduction: Performance and Community Intervention

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*Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.*

— Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

The 2014 Patti Pace Performance Festival hosted by Georgia Regents University in Augusta, Georgia engaged students in a workshop titled “MY AUGUSTA: A Workshop in Community Engagement” as part of the festival theme of “Performance and Community Intervention.” Workshop leader Gretchen Rhodes described the workshop operating as:

[A] site-specific and sensuous approach to understanding community... to understand that any identification or representation of a particular community is inherently partial, fragmented, and subjective. Additionally, our participation within any community, the degree to which we choose to (or not) engage with the people and places of that community impacts and changes it. We thus understand that there is an ethical dimension to our emplacement within any community. (1)

Students were asked to use their brief time in Augusta as an opportunity to explore the theme of community engagement through a process of attending to and reflecting on the bits and fragments of conversation, sights/sites, and (personal) stories that one collects when immersed in a new place for a short time, like a long weekend at a festival. The topoi of excursion, conversation, image, and memory/anecdote informed how students were asked to focus their brief experience of a new topography over the course of the festival and translate that into a group performance. Each type of experience collected was then transformed into one of the other forms noted above as part of constructing the final performances; a photograph was transformed into a personal story, etc.

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Guides were included for each group, both Georgia Regents University students for the geographical and cultural navigations and graduate students to assist with traversing the theoretical and practical landscapes of the performance process. In this process of collection, transformation, and interaction, Gretchen's assignment works in many ways like the festival itself can and does, as a model of pedagogy reflecting Freire's belief that knowledge requires invention and re-invention, through a process of inquiry that engages others and the world around.

The function of the academic performance festival is to encourage maximum creative exposure and exchange around a chosen theme, topic, or method in a compressed time and space. Patti Pace Performance Festival has the added element of occurring in different locations around the country from year to year, which can influence various dynamics of the festival. These temporally fleeting and spatially shifting events provide multiple modes of inquiry and insight for students and faculty alike. Everyone who brings a performance or show or engages in the workshops gets the benefit of receiving outside feedback of their work in both formal responses and informal conversations throughout the festival. Undergraduates get to see how others approach and enact performance, meet fellow undergraduates interested in performance at various levels, engage with graduate student mentors, and meet faculty from potential graduate programs. Graduate students get to share their work at various stages of development, serve as mentors to undergraduates, learn strategies for leading formal talkbacks, as well as gathering materials from workshops to incorporate into their own developing pedagogy. Faculty are able to share their productions beyond their home institutions and often with the advantage of a chance for peer review, enhance their pedagogy through leading and learning from workshops, and expose their students to all of the opportunities listed above. Like Gretchen's assignment, participants choose from a number of elements that make up the festival experience to frame their performative engagement with and take away from the specific event. Each time we (re)engage the festival format, we (re)invent the doing, teaching, and sharing of performance through what is collected, transformed, and discussed.

With each iteration of the festival, there is a dynamic that creates lines of opportunity and threads of discourse that draw upon the same wellspring of topoi (performance, workshop, feedback, mentorship) based on the particularities of each festival's theme, leader, and, in the case of Patti Pace Performance Festival, location. Following de Certeau, the format guarantees some consistency in structure, despite differences in place of occurrence, that allows participants to move through the festival experience with a frame of reference for what will be encountered in the space of the festival. At the same time, the "practiced place" of each generation of the festival creates its own space within the ever expanding map that makes up the topography of performance festivals as a whole (117). In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the inhabitants of Ersilia

construct webs of relationships within their transient communities that they hope will outlast their particular lives and structures:

In Ersilia, to establish the relationships that sustain the city's life, the inhabitants stretch strings from the corners of the houses, white or black or gray or black-and-white according to whether they mark a relationship of blood, of trade, authority, agency. When the strings become so numerous that you can no longer pass among them, the inhabitants leave: the houses are dismantled; only the strings and their supports remain.

Thus, when traveling in the territory of Ersilia, you come upon the ruins of the abandoned cities, without walls which do not last, without the bones of the dead which the wind rolls away: spider-webs of intricate relationships seeking a form. (76)

The 2014 Patti Pace Performance Festival with its theme of “Performance and Community Intervention” and the “MY AUGUSTA” workshop, evoking themes and methods of community engagement, adds to the web of relationships that continue to exist long after such events are completed. We carry these lines of connection in the pedagogy and praxis we develop out of these experiences, which are then often woven back into future festivals. We draw upon certain topoi of the festival experience and find ways to transform the bits and fragments we collect into ever dynamic ways of knowing, doing, teaching, and discussing performance together and again and anew.

## Works Cited

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