

Performance Pedagogy in/as Community Intervention(s)

Nichole Nicholson

Aubrey Huber writes that, in her experience, “performance and pedagogy are always stitched together” (422). This has been my experience, too. I do not remember a time in which I did not think of myself as a performer. My mother was a dancer, a dance teacher, and I grew up in a dance studio surrounded by teachers and students of performance. Here I learned, from two years old, about and from bodies in motion, in collaboration; this is where I learned first about music, storytelling, art, relationships, and community. My education was moving, mobilized, by the tumbling and twirling bodies of girls and women in leotards and legwarmers, by my body finding ways to express in movement what I felt and thought and knew. After years of dance, I sang as a soloist and choir member for two years, and then in high school a love of reading and a stubborn speech teacher landed me on the Speech Team, competing in the verse and prose events. I understood myself as a performer and in performance. This history “shaped the way I learned, which was grounded in embodied and performed ways of coming to knowledge, [and] it also shaped the way I came to teaching and performing” (422). When I started college, it only took me a semester to switch my major to Performance Studies, and I’ve never looked back.

Like David Jenkins, “my arrival to performance studies has given a deeper sense of connection not only to what I do, but also to the surrounding world in which I do it” (420). Our performances and performance practices are always embedded in broader contexts, in communities of which we are or play a part, and performance studies asks us to take these cultural contexts into consideration. At the Patti Pace festival in 2014, Jason Del Gandio and Gretchen Stein Rhodes asked us to take these contexts seriously in an experiment in community intervention. Rhodes’ workshop assignment for the course of the festival asked us to experience Augusta, Georgia, the workshop location, to remember that our performances happen in the context of the place

Nichole Nicholson is an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Pierce College Puyallup, where they teach and direct in a developing theater program. Nicholson’s research interests include new media, performance, schizoanalysis, and queer feminisms.
Website: <http://nicholenicholson.com>

we inhabit together as we work. To that end, participants were asked to engage with the history of Augusta through photographs and historic sites, the people of Augusta through conversation and mundane sites, and with our own relationship to the space through the telling of personal anecdotes related to our experiences on these other excursions.

At first glance, the group of students I was facilitating was overwhelmed by the workshop assignment. It seemed like so much to do in so little time! The time constraints turned out to be a good thing, however, because we didn't have time to waffle over decisions. Armed with two locals and a car, my group quickly picked a place to go and we were off. The location we chose was the site of an old mill, no longer present. Left behind was only evidence: the waterfall that had powered the mill, a pool of clear and cold water, and a few pieces of wooden detritus here and there. Again, we didn't have time to debate a strategy; we got straight to work. I asked the students to embody the movement and sound of the location, to consider how those things worked together. We didn't chat about this; we just did it, our bodies finding ways to express the motion in the water, the trees, the train tracks running next to us. One group member, an Augusta local, offered a story about going on a picnic date here, and discovering during the picnic that his partner had been doing sex work. The story and the site were intertwined, bound up in each other.

Once we were piled back up in the car, we drove around the city, and the locals of the group told us about the Masters Gold Tournament, an important part of the city's economics and culture. They told us about how, during this one period of time, the amount of sex work in Augusta is more than the entire rest of Georgia for the rest of the year. They expressed frustration about the way the community dealt with this, knowing it to be true but refusing to really talk about it. They spoke about how it had real and tangible effects on their lives, on how they thought about their city, and on their relationships—on the picnics near the old mill that ended in the discovery of secrets. It was clear that they felt this was something worth talking about, worth performing about, that teasing out the connections between the site of labor of the old mill and the site of labor that is the Masters sex trade was an intervention they felt important.

The next day, we returned to rehearsal. Earlier in the festival, we saw a performance piece by Flora Ceka and Joanna Lugo from University of North Texas in which the performers read secrets collected from the festival audience. Many of these secrets were laced with sexuality. It seemed to resonate for our group with the work we had been doing the previous night, with the poorly kept secret that was the heightened presence of sex work during the golf tournament once a year, and the impacts that has on the people who call Augusta home. And so these secrets, too, became part of our performance.

Together, my students built a machine. It was inspired by the movement of the natural landscape of the old mill site, as well as a photo of historic Augusta during a flood, but it seemed to speak to the repetition of systems of labor, as

well, and how we do or do not talk about this labor. Into this machine, we inserted the personal narrative we had been offered by one group member, factual information about the relationship between the Masters and sex work, and some of the secrets we had heard earlier in the festival. As we moved and spoke together, it emerged that these secrets erupted when the machine broke down, when it stopped working smoothly. This seemed necessary to us; it seemed to expose something we felt about how the things we do not want to talk about, the things that systems of labor want to keep hidden, come to the fore despite our best efforts.

Through this work we can see community intervention—or at least active participation—happening on at least two levels. The first is as intended by the workshop assignment. The students I was working with and I learned and spoke to a socio-political issue facing Augusta through and with performance as both method and demonstration of our work. The second level in which we discovered ourselves intervening in community was in the disciplinary community. Through our performance work together, we discovered ourselves in dialogue with other work happening in the performance community, which gave us a deeper understanding of the performances we saw at the festival as well as our own performance work.

Truly, this is the opportunity that festivals grant us, encapsulated so beautifully in Rhodes' workshop assignment. In our festivals together, we see and embody how pedagogy and performance get wrapped up in one another, how our performances, teaching, and learning are grounded in specific contexts, in the spaces where we do our work, in disciplinary conversations, and in the communities we inhabit as scholars and performers. This is where education is mobilized, in collaborative performance praxis, in our theatres and black boxes, across institutional boundaries, and in dialogue with disciplinary commitments and conversations.

Works Cited

- Huber, Aubrey A. "Document a Present: Coming to Performance Studies." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33.4 (2013): 422 – 424. Print.
- Jenkins, David M. "Finding My People." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33.4 (2013): 418 – 421. Print.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 5.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/5.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA