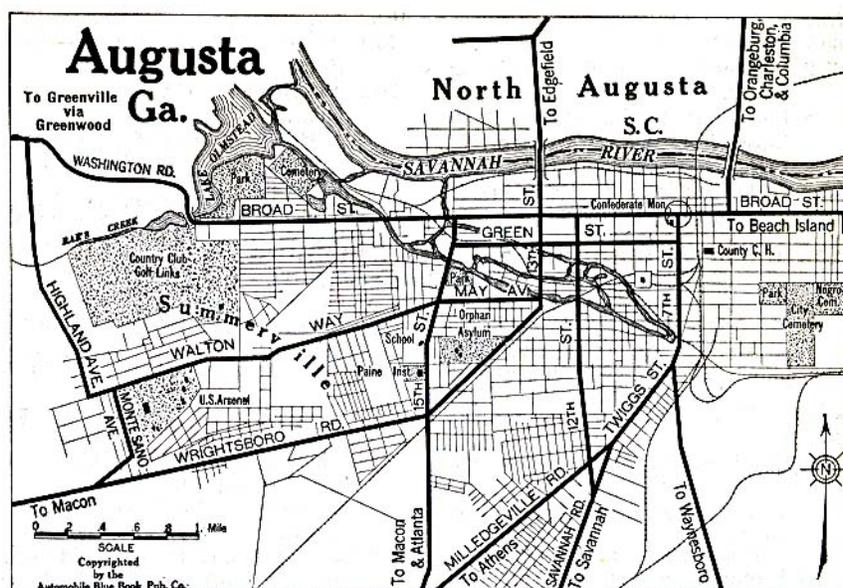


My Augusta: A Workshop in Community Engagement

Gretchen Stein Rhodes



Performance is increasingly challenging the dictionary definition of activism as being solely “the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change” (OAD), upsetting the often-implied elements of confrontation exercised with the term. Performance is reminding us that ‘activism’ might not begin with igniting change, but rather, with celebrating ‘what is’: operating as a building block for cohesion, marking polyvocality, pluralism and diversity. Activism, in this sense, can equally be defined as widespread community engagement. — Bronwyn Preece¹

¹ Preece, Bronwyn. Blog Post. *Activist Performance*.
<http://activistperformance.wordpress.com/2013/09/26/place-ing-a-poetic-gesture-celebrating-community-engagement-as-activism/>. Sept. 23, 2014.

Welcome to Augusta and the 2014 Patti Pace Performance Festival! Your workshop this weekend will ask you to compose a performance based on your brief and partial experience of the community of Augusta over one weekend. This exercise takes a site-specific and sensuous approach to understanding community. Our goal is 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.

We will be following the lead of Mike Pearson, whose site-specific performance work in *In Comes I* emerges from a series of excursions, together with fragments such as maps, photographs, conversations and personal memories. According to Pearson, the excursions, a term he borrowed from geology in which the field trip includes the exploration of multiple layers of strata, serve as “mnemonics for reflection upon the theory and practice of performance, upon links between topography and experience, history and identity, and as a means to elaborate the social, cultural, and environmental conditions within which performance is enacted.”² Pearson’s work teases out the affective bonds between people and place or setting. Yi-Fu Tuan has termed this affective bond between people and place “topophilia.”³ The exercises that comprise this workshop are intended to help you create and explore a topophilic relationship with the sites that you will visit and to become “deeply, affectively invested in the cross-currents and matrices” of these spaces.⁴ As David Abram states in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, “we can know the need of any particular region only by participating in its specificity – by becoming familiar with its cycles and styles, awake and attentive to its other inhabitants.”⁵

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² Pearson, Mike. *In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape*. University of Exeter Press: Exeter, 2006.

³ Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. Prentice-Hall:Englewood Cliffs, 1974.

⁴ Madison, D. Soyini. *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2010.

⁵ Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. Vintage Books: New York, 1997.

The *materials* from which you will construct your performance are as follows:

- You will make **two excursions** – one to a marked site of cultural/historical memory and one to a mundane or everyday site.
- You will **have a conversation** with a resident of Augusta.
- You will **select a photograph** of Augusta from the Vanishing Georgia Collection of the Georgia Archives.
- You will **share a personal memory or anecdote** with your group.

Your packet contains instructions for gathering each of the materials, as well as suggestions for how to compose the performance. Final performances should be 5-10 minutes in length. Each group has been assigned 1-2 graduate students who will act as group facilitators. It is up to each group to decide whether the graduate student(s) will perform with the group or act as a director for the final performance. Each group also includes at least one student who attends Georgia Regents University and lives in Augusta. They will act as each group's ambassadors to the city. Additionally, your packet contains cards that you can use to invite community members to the final performances.

As you engage, explore, and immerse yourself within the community of Augusta, be thoughtful, patient, and kind. Consider how your role as a visitor and tourist impacts the region. Be appreciative of the hospitality of our hosts both here at the festival and throughout the larger community. Have fun! And don't get lost. Or do.

Excursions

There is an intimate reciprocity to the senses; as we touch the bark of a tree, we feel the tree touching us; as we lend our ears to the local sounds and ally our nose to the seasonal scents, the terrain gradually tunes us in turn. The senses, that is, are the primary way that the earth has of informing our thought and of guiding our actions. – David Abram⁶

You should travel as a group to two sites in the city of Augusta. One of these should be a place that has been marked as a site of cultural and/or historical memory. A list of suggested sites is attached, although you may select a location not included on this list. The second of your excursions should be to a more

⁶ Abram. *The Spell of the Sensuous*.

mundane or everyday site. This could be a grocery or convenience store, a restaurant or coffee shop, a car wash or gas station, or even your hotel.

During each of your excursions, you want to engage all of your senses to tune in to the particularities of the place. Soyini Madison tells us that the ethics of being fully present with another requires deep paying attention.⁷ She calls it a “body-to-body convergence that pays attention to the right now and is newly comprised by all of the representations, histories, and longings that came before this moment to make the now more extraordinary.”⁸ While Madison may be specifically referring to encounters between human Others, I think we can expand her idea of deep paying attention as a way to heed David Abram’s call that we engage sensually and reciprocally with our surroundings, to enter into rapport with the multiple sensibilities (human and nonhuman) that animate the local landscape.⁹

During your excursions, make note of the sights, sounds, smells, rhythms, and movements that define and comprise the site and people’s interactions with and within it. The following questions should serve as prompts to facilitate your deep paying attention:

- How is the cultural or historical site marked or set apart from the everyday?
- How do people move through the site? Slowly? Quickly? Do they linger? Does the site contain elements that define a set path for movement?
- What sounds do you hear? What are the predominant sounds? What do you hear if you listen past those – in the background?
- What can you smell at your site(s)?
- Can you detect any non-human movement? A dog in a park? A spider building a web in a corner? Plants swaying in a breeze? A curtain fluttering in the breeze of a fan or air vent?

⁷ Madison. *Acts of Activism*.

⁸ Madison. *Acts of Activism*.

⁹ Abram. *The Spell of the Sensuous*.

Conversation

One does not have to delay entering the conversation until self and other have become old friends. Indeed... one cannot build a friendship without beginning a conversation. – Dwight Conquergood¹⁰

Part of your performance should be based on conversation(s) that your group has with residents of Augusta. Over the course of the weekend, you will have many opportunities to engage in conversations with festival participants and workers in the hospitality industry (desk clerks and cleaning staff at your hotel; servers, bartenders and baristas at the restaurants and coffee shops that you will frequent). You will also have the opportunity to interact with local guides and visitors at the sites to which you make your excursions. Think about the ways in which these interactions inform your experience of Augusta. How can you foster conversations that move beyond habitual interactions (of customer-server, for example)? The following list of questions is designed to give you ideas for moving into a conversation that sparks a collaborative and imaginative exploration of the community of Augusta:

- What is your favorite thing about living in Augusta?
- Who is the most famous person to come from Augusta? What do you know about him or her?
- Where does Augusta's drinking water come from?
- What is the biggest challenge facing the city of Augusta right now and what is the community doing to address it?
- What is a uniquely Augustan dish? Or: What is the most popular menu item here?
- What is your favorite place to visit in Augusta? What do you do there?
- What is a song that you remember from your childhood?

Photography

Memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in an intertext of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and

¹⁰ Conquergood, Dwight. "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance." *Literature in Performance*, 5. April 1985.

between all these and cultural contexts, historical moments. In all this, the image figures largely as a trace, a clue: necessary but not sufficient to the activity of meaning-making. – Annette Kuhn¹¹

Your packet includes several historic photographs of Augusta from the Vanishing Georgia Collection of the Georgia Archives. The groups should select one of the photographs to incorporate into your performance. The image that you select could be one that seems to support or relate to your excursions or it could be one that contradicts those experiences. As a group, you might want to consider some of the following questions:

- What's going on here? What can we know for certain from the photograph? What additional details about the subject and the taking of the photograph can we infer?
- Some of the details in a photograph may be unplanned – the bird on the telephone wire in the background, the stray paper cup on the sidewalk. They just happen to be there. What unplanned details appear in your photo?
- A photograph imposes an arbitrary frame around its subject. What is beyond that frame? What is not pictured?

Memory / Anecdote

A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). – Roland Barthes

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes talks about the detail within a photo that “attracts” or “stings” the viewer and which changes his or her reading of it. Barthes calls this detail the punctum. The punctum occurs in the intersubjective encounter between viewer and photograph. In other words, it is both something that is contained within the image and something I bring to it. Think back over your excursions, your conversation, and the photograph that your group has selected. Of all of those, what is the detail that stands out to you? That attracts or distresses you? That appeared as a hiccup or a break in the flow of expectation? Once you identify your “punctum,” think about why this particular detail

¹¹ Kuhn, Annette. “Remembrance: The Child I Never Was.” *The Photography Reader*. Liz Wells (ed). Routledge: New York, 2003.

has pricked you. It will likely be connected to some personal memory or anecdote. Each group member should share their memory with the group. Then, as a group, you will select one of these memories or stories to include in your performance.

Performance

Perhaps part of the desire to attend theatre and performance is to reach for something better, for new ideas about how to be with each other. I believe that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture... a glimpse of utopia. A utopian performative... represents, in a crystalline moment of performance, an understanding of social relationships full of potential, full of warmth, desire, caring, and love. – Jill Dolan¹²

You have now gathered five different forms of materials from which to construct your performance – a site of cultural/historical memory, an everyday/mundane site, a conversation, a personal memory or anecdote, and a photograph. The last stage of your workshop exercise is putting these materials together in a final group performance. In addition to providing the content for your performance, your five types of materials also represent five different genres of expression. Each of these genres or forms activates Augusta's story in unique ways, producing varied types of knowledge. For your final performance, you are to put these forms to work in new ways.

1. Activate the content of the photograph so that it becomes an everyday, mundane site full of movement and sensuous experience.
2. Turn the movements, sights, smells, and sounds of the everyday site into a personal memory or anecdote.
3. Stage the content of the personal memory or anecdote as a cultural/historical site, i.e. memorialize it. Think about how visitors would interact with this site and how the site is marked or set apart from the everyday.
4. Transform the experience of the cultural/historical site so that it is represented as a conversation.

¹² Dolan, Jill. "The Polemics and Potential of Theatre Studies and Performance." *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (eds). Sage: Thousand Oaks, 2006.

5. Turn the conversation into a tableau of images that can be combined and presented as a still photograph.

Your final 5-10 minute performance of “My Augusta” will be comprised of these five elements. How you present them is up to your group. Do you want to present each one right after the other in separate frames? Or do you want to juxtapose different images, actions, sounds, etc. in the same frame?

Do you want to incorporate repetition of images, actions, sounds or entire sequences? The repetition can occur within the same frame or in successive and separate frames.

What holds the elements of your performance together? How will you transition between each of the five elements?



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