Performing in Space and Place

Julianna Kirschner

A performer walks onto the stage. The lights are so bright that it is difficult to see, but she keeps her eyes open anyway. Looking out into the crowd, she sees no one she recognizes; the faces become homogeneous, blurred by the streaks of light emanating from above. A dividing line is not apparent between their bodies and hers. The stage, as it appears from her perspective, blends into the rows of people. The lines of people are not perfectly straight, nor are there ushers seating people in their assigned seats. There are people that have gathered behind her as well, and she knows this without having to turn around. The people shift slightly in anticipation. The space is full, and as she squints to find the end of the mass of people that surrounds her, no end appears in sight. Despite the enormity of the crowd, she does not feel closed in or claustrophobic by the situation as one might assume. The space still remains open, and the ability for movement is still possible. Making note of the expectant eyes, she begins her performance by moving her body in traditional Indian dance. The blended faces around her cheer, and they encouragingly chant for her to continue. She looks upward during her movement to see that it is not a bright, engineered bulb illuminating her embodiment. It is the sun at the highest point of the day.

Most performers do not appear on a traditional stage, and one can learn much about performance praxis by going out into the community to see people perform in ways that are not regulated by hegemonic structures. Performances in the places of community are one of many forms of resistive practices. Communities come in many forms, including virtual collectives. The study of performance in public spaces is a growing area of research, and scholars are approaching this work from a variety of methodologies and fields of study. As more people become involved in the scholarly conversation of performative spaces, the practice will be better illuminated for generations to come. To observe the point at which the conversation stands right now, I will analyze the recent publications of scholars from fields within and related to Performance

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and Cultural Studies, particularly: Performance and the Politics of Space, edited by Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz; Performance in the Borderlands, edited by Ramon H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young; Concrete and Dust: Mapping the Sexual Terrains of Los Angeles, by Jeanine M. Minge and Amber Lynn Zimmerman; “Finding Our Way(s): A Theoretical Model of Performance Studies and Homeplace,” by Shauna MacDonald; and “You Had Me at Foucault: Living Pedagogically in the Digital Age,” by Danielle M. Stern. Performance in relation to place and space is best expressed first in a text that embodies its connection to and separation from theatre.

In Performance and the Politics of Space, the collection of works provides an introduction of performance to the reader, and it highlights the complexities of the books and articles that follow later in this review. To bring readers into the scholarly discussion of the politics of space, Fischer-Lichte and Wihstutz provide exemplars of traditional theatre and performance of the everyday. Pertinent to the study of culture, the contributors to this anthology interweave notions of agency and policing. “One of the primary duties of the police therefore consists of the prevention of politics” (Fischer-Lichte and Wihstutz 5). The urban space is one in which a great deal of performance is held, whether the performers themselves are conscious of the stage or not. The works in this collection embody the urbane in many ways, and a couple selections from the collection will serve as examples of the main thematic root set forth by the introduction, particularly public embodiment and the control enacted by hegemonic power.

The first selection from Performance and the Politics of Space is an interesting exploration of how a space performs urbanity despite not having the official demarcation as an urban center. In “Performing Like a City: London’s South Bank and the Cultural Politics of Urban Governance,” Michael McKinnie is concerned with the South Bank as a performative locus; its revitalization has resulted in performative changes that speak to the ability for a space to be so easily shaped by the investment of money. “The South Bank, though, is very much a legacy of welfare state cultural and urban planning,” McKinnie writes, “and this history does not simply disappear with its conscription into the operations of neoliberal capitalism (and its associated forms of production, consumption, and governance)” (68). The area itself is inscribed with its history, and it is a prime example of the failure of neoliberalism as a means of so-called revitalization. The readers are guided through the conflicting performances that have resulted from the introduction of a new population with money to the preexisting residents with considerably less income. In the end, McKinnie concludes by illuminating the cultural practices as those which will be continually be changed over the upcoming decades when the space tries to find a new equilibrium. The conflict described in the essay will likely continue for some time.
In another essay from *Performance and the Politics of Space*, “Thresholds of Tolerance: Censorship, Artistic Freedom, and the Theatrical Public Sphere,” Christopher Balme addresses the degree of autonomy permitted in public spaces, particularly when it comes to expression. Like the issues of gentrification raised in McKinnie’s work, Balme focuses on urban spaces as places constantly in flux, specifically in terms of the acceptable adornments on public property and surfaces. The essay outlines the recent merging of the public and private, but at arm’s length. There is a fear in the corporate world that such immersion will result in lower profit margins because they are not able to control their consumers in ways that benefit the bottom line. Even when considering traditional theatre, which Balme calls a private space, politics of the opera can transcend the walls of the performance hall and enter into the streets. “Thresholds of tolerance are negotiable and reconstitute themselves along spatial and not just conceptual lines,” Balme writes, “In all cases the political intervention happened once the theatrical images in question left the privacy of the theatrical and entered the public sphere” (112). When this occurs, the main idea set in the introduction comes to life, and policing and censorship grows in the streets. Conflicts grow as a result of performance, whether the performances are of a traditional or unorthodox manner. The figurative walls that grow between people make communication a contentious practice, if it occurs at all. To build upon the foundation set by *Performance and the Politics of Space*, the next book will provide more specificity with regard to separation created by a different set of walls.

The collection of essays in *Performance in the Borderlands* marks a wide range of approaches to the lineation of established borders. Walls tend to be a recurring theme in many of the works, both figuratively and literally. Divisions create tensions, misunderstandings, and territoriality. The commitment to maintain a national stake in what would otherwise be unclaimed public space creates a punitive performance situation, one in which transgressions are not permitted. Generally speaking, the theme of movement is also one that the works of this collection have in common. Crossing borders may not necessarily involve the use of documentation, whether the papers are present or not. The host countries have the power to determine the acceptability of those who enter its borders, and if they do not conform to the social conditions set by the dominant group, the nomadic people are forced to move again. Deterrents have spread in countries with wealth; barbwire fences and blockades are simply the spatial markers of the intolerance for anyone who breaks the rules. Current spaces and places demonstrate the historical and social pasts, which the editors describe so precisely in the introduction of the text: “Performances gain their force from the circuitry of influences, both historical and contemporary, that shape experience and cast them into the present and future of public enactments” (Rivera-Servera and Young 5). The contributions to the text illuminate intersectional-
ties in the selected contexts of each essay. To evaluate these approaches critically and directly, a couple selections from the text will be considered at length. Although these selections do not embody the entirety of the text, we can use them as focal points with which we can view the aims of the text.

The first selection from *Performance in the Borderlands* is E. Patrick Johnson’s piece entitled, “Border Intellectual: Performing Identity at the Crossroads.” Johnson uses an autobiographical or autoethnographic approach to studying the performances at bordered spaces. He describes his identity as two-fold; he is a scholar and a person with lived experience. Sometimes these identities are in conflict with one another when considering life on the border: “[N]one of these spaces is wholly nurturing or wholly discouraging; rather, they are liminal spaces that require agents within them to simultaneously conform to and transgress the temporal boundaries and borders that enclose them and the politics that emerge therein” (Rivera-Servera and Young 147, emphasis original). Johnson proposes that we move one step at a time and within the moveable space of hegemonic space, but we should only do that for a time. Whenever there is an opening outside of the structure, we must take that opportunity, even if the road is not paved or our feet are bare, both metaphorically and literally. Therefore, Johnson asserts that he is not entirely in one identity or another, or perhaps neither; he is in a space of between-ness. The first few pages appear to be a shedding of expectations and established rules, because Johnson makes it clear who he is as a person at this time in his life. He simultaneously interacts with the scholar and the embodied, experienced personhood that he possesses, but there does not appear to be a lack of fluidity because of this interesting dance with words. As I consider his work, Johnson’s perspective makes the work richer and contextual for the detail provided, but I do not think it would have been possible if he had nurtured one part of his identity and not the other.

The rest of Johnson’s essay expounds on his experience of a scholar-becoming, and the interactions between traditional academia and what is typically considered the relatively “new” focus of Performance and Cultural Studies. As a new teacher, Johnson conveys some of the problems he encounters when trying to raise the inner activists in his students, and the backlash he receives is much like the deterrents of the borders. Any attempt to refashion the rules or break them entirely is met with distain from the dominant power, or worse. Johnson is hired at one of his prior universities to teach in a traditional manner, but his natural pedagogical training expanded well beyond the constraints of rigid formality:

I was hired to teach African-American literature and cultural studies but through using traditional methods sanctioned by the “reigning hegemony”; instead, I taught literature through performance, a mode anathema to the very existence of the department on whose faculty I was a member. The stu-
students’ enthusiasm for this alternative way of engaging a text, coupled with
my [identity as a black gay man]... nearly catalyzed an implosion of the de-
partment and my career (155-156).

Johnson’s anecdote describes the risk that one must be willing to take in order
to adequately challenge the walls that have been built. As he explains later in
this essay, Johnson continues to experience negative responses to his teaching
until he finds a place that he can call his academic home, specifically North-
western University. Finding a home is at the core of his work, and it is one with
which many of the other contributors of this collection discuss to a great extent.
However, that search can be dampened by the physical and nonphysical rem-
nants of border control, no matter where one might be in proximity to it.

The remnants are the focus of Josh Kun’s “Playing the Fence, Listening to
the Line: Sound, Sound Art, and Acoustic Politics at the US-Mexico Border,” a
second selection from Performance in the Borderlands. Kun’s work is different from
Johnson’s in that he focuses primarily on the soundscape of the border, the
nontraditional music of entrances and exits mixed with the sounds flowing from
one radio to the next. However, the commonality between Kun and Johnson’s
work is the extent to which the border reaches us in tangible ways, even if we
are far from the actual space of crossing.

Although Kun’s piece describes acoustic phenomena in a concise manner,
this essay could serve as an introductory work for anyone interested in the au-
thor’s broader academic portfolio, which explores many of these notions to a
larger degree. Kun, an Associate Professor in Communication at the University
of Southern California, offers a wide variety of scholarly approaches to sound,
from traditional conceptions of music to the abstract notions of John Cage. In
this particular essay, “Playing the Fence, Listening to the Line,” the sounds of
the border constitute a community, particularly one of transit and destination.
Kun explains, “[M]usic is at its heart a dialogic process of interpersonal com-
munication between players and listeners, and players as listeners; through the
performance and reception of sound, communities of listeners are forged” (19).
The co-creation of sounds at the US-Mexico border is the focus of Kun’s work,
and the sounds themselves stay with us even after we have made our dissent
past the walls of separation. The border is often described as a visual, physical
place in academic and popular writing. While its physical space is important,
Kun asserts that sound offers us a richer understanding of what it means to be
at the border, in the space in between. This focus is termed “the aural border,”
which is a space that illuminates the border as a tango with authority, a waltz
with which we are granted permission to cross the boundary.

The musical dance between places is also co-mingling with the sounds of
security; the buzzing of the fences serve as yet another deterrent from the space
that it guards. More than the humming of electricity, sounds are also used as a
means to keep people out when coupled by fake dead horses, as in the case of
Marfa, Texas. Symbolic of the deterrents used to shield guard stations in World War I, the horses lay strewn about near a border crossing. “The closer you get to them,” Kun describes, “the more you realize they are virtual sonic bodies alive with crackling broadcasts and haunting melodies” (29). Two horses play music of the funerary sense, while the third serves as a speaker so officials can listen in on those who have encountered the fake dead horses. Encountering this scene sounds strange and cryptic, but Kun uses it as a distinct example of an alternative mode for regulating transit between the United States and Mexico. Much like Kun’s work, other scholars are incorporating sound as a facet through which their work can gain deeper meaning.

Like many of the approaches mentioned earlier, the work of Jeanine M. Minge and Amber Lynn Zimmerman in *Concrete and Dust: Mapping the Sexual Terrains of Los Angeles* begins as an autoethnographic and ethnographic composite, and the interactive website that accompanies the text also includes the acoustic art of Michael Deragon. The book traces a path in first person, particularly from the perspective of Jeanine M. Minge, an Assistant Professor at California State University, Northridge. Each step in the geographical space of Los Angeles leads to interactions with people, to performances not yet written. As Minge describes, each passage of time is also the reliving of another prior moment. It is the incongruent geographical moments in combination that make Los Angeles one whole sprawling body. If one pairs the reading of the text with Deragon’s soundscape, it feels like immediate transportation, a border crossing of sorts.

The crossing involves several different neighborhoods that partially constitute Los Angeles, but not every community of Los Angeles is explored. The quality that these select areas generate speaks to the methodology of the work, and the importance of detail far outweighs any potential and unfounded criticism about quantity. The areas of focus include the Los Angeles River, Burbank, Chatsworth, the Hollywood Hills, West Hollywood, and Topanga Canyon. Each locale has significance to the authors, particularly Minge, who has had many lived experiences in each space. Selections of any other space would have lessened the impact of the book, because the richness that each section provides is well articulated through embodiment and historical roots.

The raw description allows one to connect with Minge’s experience of loneliness and transformation. When she describes living in Burbank during a troubling time with her girlfriend, whom she followed to California, Minge describes the disconnected feeling using poetry:

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the madness of the machine makes the monster.
but the machine is hidden/covered/behind the perfect smile.
behind hidden doors.
behind studio fortresses.
I hear her say, "This celebrity, that celebrity wanted this to eat today."
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I hear her say, “You should have seen how slow this director, how impossible that director was.”
I hear her say, “I won’t be home until 3am. Can you take care of her?”
I hear myself say, “Fuck this. Fuck you.”
We’ve been eaten alive by the impact of hungry, hollow Hollywood (37-38).

The poetics and prose combine to irradiate the performances of specific spaces, and in this case, the entertainment industry set the scene for the fall of a relationship. Interspersed with the challenging moments of Minge wanting to find a place to call home, while recalling earlier moments in her life where she would visit horse stables, a theme emerges. The notion of setting oneself free, of releasing oneself from the topographic barriers that psychologically bind us, the rest of this text sets out on a journey to find a means of release.

Along the way, Minge makes friends and continues step-by-step in the spaces of Los Angeles that she inhabits. The metaphoric hike through the terrain has literal consequences, many of which haunt Minge throughout the work. Images of rape and pornography, of excess and famine, and those who have and those who have not immerse the reader into the world of Los Angeles in an evocative and transcendent way. The stretching and pulling of skin also demonstrates the desire to be desirable.

While in the Hollywood Hills, Minge develops a term which she calls the plastique: “Women pull skin in the bathroom and feel incomplete. Here, beauty is a layer of skin, a tiny frame, pain and plastique” (Minge and Zimmerman 104). In the description of women trying to maintain their youthful appearance, there is an interesting struggle noted throughout the remainder of the text. The desire to be static and unchanging is an impossible goal, and the unacceptance of aging is one that is illuminated in the exchanges between Minge and the people in her life. With the plastique, there are absences of many sorts; the ability to find real, thoughtful relationships is unlikely, and to be oneself is nearly an impossibility (Minge and Zimmerman 143). The theme of the plastique is an interesting comparison to the instability of living in the Hollywood Hills, and it mirrors the potential danger of being in an area such as this one during a natural disaster. The foundation is not consistent and could crumble at any slight movement, much like the image that women of this geographic space have of themselves and the pseudo-relationships connected with such vanity.

Like Johnson, Minge does find a home, and her home-story is in Topanga Canyon, an area where she finds like-minded people and similar qualities to the home where her parents live in New Paltz, New York. The area itself still has its complexities and problems, but Minge finds a space that is comfortable and welcoming. It is one that does not remind her of past losses of self, and it speaks to the immense contradictions of the Los Angeles landscape. For Minge, Topanga Canyon is a form of escape and a place to renew.
Shauna MacDonald describes a similar exploration when describing her search of home in, “Finding Our Way(s): A Theoretical Model of Performance Studies and Homeplace,” the fourth text of interest in this review. In this journal article from *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*, MacDonald describes the gap in research as it stands with relation to homeplace, a space that one journeys to in order to remember and regain an understanding of what it means to be in the world. The space does not have to exist physically; MacDonald asserts that it can also be a place to which we retreat in our minds. To guide readers through these main ideas, MacDonald makes interesting claims about homeplace and its relationship to performance:

Somewhat like homeplace, we [performance studies practitioners] talk about performance as a thing that exists, and yet we have a hard time holding it for very long. If homeplace is always on the move... performance studies as a dynamic discipline may just be able to catch up with it from time to time (27).

The fluidity with which home and performance must be described creates a notable concept about place and space not addressed by the previous texts in this review. We must be open to the possibility of a terrain existing in the past and not currently accessible to occupation, one existing in the mind, or a combination of both. Space is not limited to maps in an atlas, and they can often change with the introduction of performance. Performative work does not follow linear time, or even the straight line of one’s journey through a space.

To provide specificity to her claims, MacDonald presents detailed suppositions developed by performance practitioners addressing homeplace as an area of research. In an analysis of two major journals in Performance Studies, the composite themes are: event, text, director, and performer (27). Although the themes of research are not exhaustive, they do provide a great deal of insight and have the propensity to overlap. First, homeplace as an event speaks to the assertions made earlier; performance of space and place does not have to be bound to the physical. We can enter our childhood bedrooms in the home of our minds, and we can recall the smell, the texture, and the warmth of the space. We remember through storying, which MacDonald claims is the most powerful means of expression: “Though a variety of performance strategies may be used to transform memories and projections of homeplace into material events, the strongest strategy seems to be through narrative” (30). Narrating can also overlap with MacDonald’s second theme of text.

Textual Studies, in its basic form, looks at everything as a text waiting to be read; the object in question does not need to have an organized language inscribed to it. Non-traditional objects of study can be explored using textual analysis in order to reach conclusions that would be impossible otherwise. “Like words on a page, these seemingly benign lines index complex discourses of power that leave imprints, sometimes scars, on people’s bodies, and that shape
people’s performances,” according to MacDonald (32). Texts traverse space in a way that other methods cannot. When considering Minge’s work, one can jump from West Hollywood to Topanga Canyon far faster than it is possible on Los Angeles streets and freeways. Similarly, the third area of focus that MacDonald considers is the director, or the person(s) involved in directing the space and who can cross it. Raising some of the same issues as *Performance and the Politics of Space* and *Performance in the Borderlands*, MacDonald discusses how those in power have the ability to move through space relatively uninterrupted. When describing her homeplace of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, she explains how easily her role of tourist is accepted; whereas, other displaced people do not have such a luxury. She alludes to diaspora and the issues many people face in their new communities, and an elaboration of these ideas is a worthy task for future writers to explore.

Performers, in the way MacDonald describes, do not have to be limited to living, breathing human beings. The ways we construct spaces also have a performer element, and when people interact with them, they take on a life of their own. “These places performed for me, told me stories, and took my breath away” (MacDonald 37). From architectural designs to graffiti, a space can communicate many things to an observer, and our perceptions of homeplace reflect our responses to these stimuli. When people narrate about homespaces, “The places they describe are active; they speak and tell stories, they teach, they reach out to grab people,” according to MacDonald (37). Performers interact with events, texts, and directors in a way that brings all four of the author’s themes together.

MacDonald’s work reframes the geographic binding of a space; in fact, her theoretical framework actually frees it from the regulating power of hegemonic rule. One overarching area of her work that stands out most is the temporality of space. It is easy to be convinced that a place will always be there when we return. However, if we have the privilege of returning to a homeplace, it will not be the same. The interactions of other people have changed it, and a new identity of the space has been formed. The transitory nature of spaces is further complicated when one considers the online world.

In “You Had Me at Foucault: Living Pedagogically in the Digital Age,” Danielle M. Stern takes performative spaces in a different direction when she explores online forms of pedagogy. In this article from *Text and Performance Quarterly*, Sterne’s aim is to highlight queer teaching patterns, which have not been given the kind of reception that feminist teachings have only recently received. In an online blog environment that she establishes for a summer class, students are given the option to identify themselves in any way they choose. Some use their entire name, others use initials, and then more used screen-names that have no association with their given names. Unless students made reference to it in their profiles, their genders were also not made public (Sterne
The conversation is rich due to the performative space in which it occurs: “I cannot deny that all students—male and female—shared more and built more conversation from others’ ideas than I have witnessed before in a physical classroom,” according to Sterne (255). While Sterne can say with confidence that the blogging experience was mostly a success for her students, she explores other facets of online pedagogy in order to extend the reaches of queer theory.

Social networking is where most young adults are headed, and fewer are engaging in blogging as they once did (Sterne 256). Sterne provides context for her readers when it comes to implementing social networking into a class structure. Similar to Minge and MacDonald’s exploration of home, Sterne cites Elizabeth Grosz’s research of how the city serves a function of home:

The city brings together economic flows, political organization, interpersonal, familial and extrafamilial social relations, as well as the aesthetic and economic organization of space and place. By situating our educational institutions, hybrid classrooms, and online social networks as cities, we can explain how pedagogical bodies operate as disciplined sites of power and pleasure, interconnected to larger cultural, political, and economic motivations (258).

The comparison of the city explains Sterne’s choices as a pedagogue, and her activity in online social networking spaces. She discloses that she will accept a friend request from a student on Facebook, but she does not solicit for a growing list of friends; many of her students also follow her on Twitter. However, Sterne chooses not to disclose everything to her broader social circle online, and she leaves a lot of ambiguous space open for her sexuality (259). She wants people to think critically in social online spaces, because after all, “How political are rainbow triangle stickers in our offices really when students, but especially colleagues, are too nervous or afraid to begin that conversation?” (Sterne 256) As she conveys her approaches, Sterne remains realistic in her expectations.

As a whole, Sterne’s work is very critical and productive, and her concentration on online spaces gives a new angle through which we can view performativity, including those in online and offline spaces. Her conclusions point to a blending of the online and offline worlds, and Sterne asserts that we are always “on” and connected in some way. Teachers never leave that positionality, even after they leave the classroom or log off (Sterne 261-263). Online spaces have dramatically affected our interactions and our performances therein.

When considering these five works broadly, much can be learned about the current academic research surrounding performance in specific spaces and places. Geography, whether it is online, physical, in the mind, or some combination of the three, holds a great deal of power over the ways in which people perform within them. Sometimes, spaces do not allow performances at all, and breaking these restrictions is part of the challenge that these works suggest. Although the body of scholarly work cannot be fully represented in five select-
ed books and articles, these five have been specifically chosen for the breadth
and depth of their research, specifically: *Performance and the Politics of Space*, edited
by Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz; *Performance in the Borderlands*, edited by Ramon H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young; *Concrete and Dust: Mapping the Sexual Terrains of Los Angeles*, by Jeanine M. Minge and Amber Lynn Zimmerman; “Finding Our Way(s): A Theoretical Model of Performance Studies and Homeplace,” by Shauna MacDonald; and “You Had Me at Foucault: Living Pedagogically in the Digital Age,” by Danielle M. Stern. These works provide a place for us to pick up where they left off, to be active and willing participants in the spaces we occupy. When considered together, these five selections support the activism that is necessary to break down walls and barriers wherever they may lay. There is still more to be done, and more conclusions to be drawn based on new findings. Exploration through embodiment is the first step, because performance and cultural studies scholars should actively participate in the area they research as much as possible.

Performing for others speaks volumes about both the performer and the audience, much like my initial example of the woman dancing for the crowd. Looking up at the sun, she glances back at the audience that surrounds her, a mass that she can now see with clarity. The smiling faces call her name as she moves her hands smoothly into the air, and the crowd continues to grow. The thin fabric of her dress clings to her body as she sweats slightly from the heat radiating around her. The cheering keeps her moving, one step at a time. When she comes to the end of the traditional Indian dance, a smile spreads across her face and she is met with an uproar of applause. The sun casts a shadow in front of her as the crowd disperses, and her body is framed in a silhouette.

Works Cited


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