

On the Medium: Embodiment, Textuality, and Performativity

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The piece grew out of close work with both the person and the texts of performance artist, theorist and rhetorician, Dr. Lynette Hunter. It considers the physical, embodied practice of reading. The writing shows how a reading (during ethnographic fieldwork on Afro-Brazilian religious practices in the interior of Maranhão state) becomes a lesson on performance rhetoric. This paper both *is* and *describes* a collaborative process that generates performativity, which is also a situated textuality that enables situated knowing. As such, the “reading” in the context of a *consulta* using tarot cards, generates performativity. And “performativity is the place where the sociosituated generates processes for alterior becoming, knowing, and valuing” (Hunter: 2019).



I: *A Carta Tá Dizendo*
(the card is saying)

“[T]he critic’s task is also to take a piece and trans/scribe it, loosen the fibres of cooptation, nudging the anthro-material back into a medium through (res, form and embodiment – and to know when, why, how and where to labour on the text” (Hunter 2014).

*Terá um grande corte na vida.
Fazendo uma correspondência com
uma grande luz que brilha no
caminho
Pela casamento ou separação
E esse casamento ou separação
Tá trazendo felicidade
Mas tem uma mulher com uma
Grande cruz no seu caminho
Uma grande cruz no seu caminho
Com uma correspondência com
uma grande família*

*Trazendo uma grande dissolência
na família
Na família, companhia de um
grande amor
Esse amor terá a companhia de
um grande amor
Esse grande amor desceu pelas
águas abaixo, trazendo a sua vida.*

II: On the Medium: Embodiment, Textuality and
Performativity

MEDIUM- Origin: A borrowing from Latin. **Etymon:** Latin *medium*.
b. Spiritualism. A person believed to be in contact with the spirits of the dead and to communicate between the living and the dead. Hence: a clairvoyant, a person under hypnotic control.
e. Any physical material (as tape, disk, paper, etc.) used for recording or reproducing data, images, or sound.
2. Logic. The middle term of a syllogism; a ground of proof or inference. (*Obsolete.*)

Consider substituting the verb “reading” for “writing” in the following passage from Jon Rossini’s “Texto Performativo: Thinking Writing”:¹

“... ~~writing~~ **reading** is a physical, embodied activity that itself can be framed as performance. The materiality of the act of ~~writing~~ **reading** matters – the texture of touch and contact, the muscular tension and movement of the fascia in the fingers, hands, arms, torso, neck, head . . . Fingertips on a ~~plastic keyboard or glass screen, or on a pen, pencil, or brush steadied by the opposition of thumb and fingers~~ **card**. And sometimes it is better slower, and sometimes it is better faster, but it is always at some level at the speed of being human and as such exists with thinking” (Rossini, 2020: 12).

Consider the practice of reading.

In the following passage, the author gives her ‘I’ over to the text, embodies it, accepts its gifting, becomes its *cavalho*:²

¹In Rossini’s essay, he subjects a selection from Conquergood’s *Radical* to this type of treatment, substituting the word “writing” for “performance.”

²Literally, “horse.” The person whose body is mounted and ridden by a spirit during possession trance is referred to as a “cavalho.”

*Um grande deseja a morte
Um paixão incurável
Mas tinha uma mulher,
Quem é uma grande cruz no seu
caminho
Trazendo no seu caminho
felicidade.
Dentro da sua felicidade vem:
Um casamento separação
Mas terá no seu caminho uma boa
notícia
Que vem por carta ou por pessoa*

*Trazendo uma grande
prosperidade na vida,
uma grande alegria
Tem uma grande riqueza
Por uma viagem por terra, por mar
Vem uma grande herança
Por um grande trabalho
Mas trazendo sua vida muito
desgosto.
Nesse desgosto terá no seu caminho
Uma grande companhia, uma
grande amizade na vida.*

*Dentro desta amizade vem uma
notícia que vem por carta ou por
pessoa
Um cavaleiro no seu caminho
Esse cavaleiro que vem no seu
caminho,
Ele traz uma correspondência
um correspondência que traz uma
boa sorte no desgosto*

“I read, and read again, and read again, I become taken into some of the patterns and holdings and releasings of the language. **It’s as if my somatic complexity is (in)fused with another SOMATIC MESHING**, as if there’s a morphing going on that subtly adjusts my becoming/knowing as **‘I’ gives way to other ways**” (Hunter 2019: 85, my emphasis).³

This “case study” also begins with a Reading—a *consulta*. A reading that is a performance. This particular performance is for a peculiar kind of audience—a *cliente*. As such, it generates performativity with an audience that is “collaborating on making ways of becoming, knowing and valuing.” (Hunter 2019: 34).

This performance, this “reading,” engages the not-known, brings it near. The bringing it near reveals that something will happen, but it cannot be known. Rather than making known, the performance generates speculation. The reading spurs possible world-to-word fits understood as speculative truths in which the spectral futures signified are open-ended (unbounded), so that the fixing of interpretations—assigning meaning—is always deferred. It is processual and unsettled, wandering.

The performer is Pai de Santo Antônio Carlos, more often called Tô de Ogum or Seu Tô. I employ the term “performer” in Hunter’s sense as an in-person artmaker who uses “their practice to engage with materials that cannot be known, and to open to the changes that happen in that process. And then to make affect, or the energy of that change, available to others to feel, to engage with, and to change” (2019: 66). His task “is to change and to

³ All citations reference page numbers in the PDF version of Hunter’s text.

*Trazendo um grande furto na sua vida
Mas terá uma mudança muito grande
[He holds up the card to show me.]
Este mudança vai cortar esta carta de desgosto na sua vida.*

*Tem na sua vida uma felicidade muito grande.
E ainda esse felicidade tem uma grande traição.
Dentro dessa traição sua vem:
Nessa prosperidade vem uma felicidade
Mas tem perca nessa felicidade.*

*A senhora. Tem uma grande alegria nessa felicidade.
Um grande cruz na sua vida.
Esta cruz que vem na sua vida tem uma companhia de um grande amor contra essa traição desse caminho.
por sua falsa.
[Aqui é carta – crosses his palm across his face/forehead and up and down cross-wise – falsa
[Esse não presta, he says, throwing out a card.]
J: Vem de que forma?*

generate change for others” (2019: 69). This is also his role in larger community rituals.

I’ am his co-laboring audience. I am there “Feeding on the Text: listening responsively to what hasn’t been said” (Hunter, 2014). I am both audience and consumer.⁴ Our collaborative process generates performativity, which is also a situated textuality that “enables situated knowing” (2019: 46). “Performativity is the place where the sociosituated generates processes for alterior becoming, knowing, and valuing” (2019: 46). And it is the desire to loose myself in these modes of becoming, knowing and valuing, and to experience a felt-sense of change, that pulls me toward these outwith situations.

But ~~my~~ writing now — this textual performance — is yet another reading. My bibliographical references are my deck of cards, that chorus of voices in my fingers. In performing my written reading of Seu Tô’s reading “the writing on the wall,” I invite my reader to enter into this ecology.

Pai Tô’s reading or ‘*consulta*’ is an allegorical performance, “signifying ‘other speaking,’ other than what is said, or, what is not said” (2019: 188). Hunter describes allegory as a rhetorical stance “that in literature includes the writer, the words and the reader into a processual reading event called ‘text’ or textuality” (2019: 191). “Allegory teaches us that a medium requires both performer and audience to be engaged with what happens when the not-known of the materials changes the ecology, and changes us as part of that ecology.” (2019: 18).

⁴ I also, in a way, bring the score. The cards which appear to be read and the particular sequence in which they appear have to do with my material presence. That is, I am the medium’s medium.

PT: Vem de uma senhora de seu trabalho.

*Mas vem no seu caminho uma grande felicidade.
Terá percas nessa felicidade.
Mas terá um grande alegria na sua vida
[He holds up a card.]
Pela companhia de um grande amor.
Vai ter uma companhia segura você dando os mãos descendo baixo as águas.
Mas é de uma grande amizade que vai ter um traição.
Dentro desse traição, tem uma carta de receber que traz uma segurança
Esse carta traz uma grande felicidade
Uma viagem no seu caminho
A sua vida amorosa,
PT: A senhora não é cassada.
J: Não.
PT: Então, a senhora é senhorita.
Tem muito prosperidade no seu caminho
Muito felicidade

Mas só que tem um trabalho que encaixa no seu caminho
Um trabalho faz uma barreira na sua frente
São que os seus trabalhos que fazem a sua vida.
É sua vida*

Allegory is also “the literary term for performativity” (2019: 43). “Performativity is an ongoing process that we experience in the moment, so that we cannot know what will happen next. Its engaged rhetoric is part of the process of presencing (2019: 69). “Performativity occurs in the alongside and in the performer’s engagement with the audience: the engaging with what is not-known, the losing/loosing of individual autonomy, the collaborations needed for changing and embodying” (2019: 70). “[P]erformativity is always about the quality of not-knowing that occurs in performance” (2019: 11). And “[e]verything we do not know enables the possibility that change will happen” (2019: 187).

Nearly none of the words in the preceding paragraph are my own. But the assemblage is composed according to I want to say. Each sentence is a card laid out on the table in a highly devised order that requires a practice, a care-ful laboring. I have read and read again. I have brought the text nearer, rehearsed it, distilled and rearranged it. Seeking entry into the texts’s ecology, I effort forth, opening myself to necessarily imperfect *under*-standings, availing myself to morphing. I dance with the Hunter. I rehearse in pursuit of a fluency with what her text is doing, so that my writing undergoes changes. I am having a relationship with the text, inviting a meshing. *Hunting* for whatever is digestible, I seek to integrate this other “language into my skin” (2019: 194).

Developing one’s mediumship is a very serious thing.

“The performativity of medium happens when practitioners train an engaged mimesis into their work with materials.” Mimesis is used here in the sense of “enabling wandering pathways that can be walked again and gain energy, repeating

*Esta é a sua melhor profissão.
A sua vida é seu trabalho.*

*Você tem um proteção muito forte
Tem uma luz que ilumina seus
caminhos.*

*Tem uma luz que ilumina seus
caminhos.*

*Este luz que é uma flor do oriente
no seus caminhos*

É Oxóssi.

[Tá vendo?]

E tem Iansã.

*Oxóssi com Iansã vibrando na sua
vida. [Tá vendo?]*

*Terá uma correspondência muita
grande na sua vida e no seu
caminho.*

*Esse correspondência te lbe traz
uma força muito forte*

Que se faz a defender

De que não presta na vida.

Que ela anda bastante

Viaja bastante.

E nessas viagens a senhora tem

*Muita entendência [sic: de
entendimento]*

Muita vibração com as pessoas

Que lbe dá muita atração.

*Só tem uma falsidade no seu
caminho*

Esse é um amigo falso

*Pra lá mesmo [waves his hand
to indicate the distance of the
“lá” meaning the U.S. The
wave of the hand accents the
“a”].*

rather than replicating” (2019: 191). I shuffle the cards that they may offer new releasings.

Textuality is happening as I become “aware of moments of (rest, generate form, and embody those forms” (2019: 190). This embodiment generates mediations, generates a *medium*. “A medium comes about when practices find pathways that enrich the body and its engagement with material, give it energy so that it becomes a materiality, rather than lose its energy” (2019: 194). A medium is effectively a performance ecology, a curated situating location” (2019: 161). A happy medium.

Plagiarism is not ventriloquism is not plagiarism. Therein lies the difference between presenting something and presencing something. The presencing is a composition, a score.

Ventriloquism is not plagiarism is not ventriloquism. But I am not ventriloquating [sic] here anyway. Which would seem to be so much easier than all this equivocating—the exacting work of extracting exactly the intractable-yet-impactful.

The *cartomante’s* (card reader’s) task differs from that of the ventriloquist, though both could be understood as exercises of mediumship. Is it too simple to say that the ventriloquist *gives voice to* and the *cartomante reads aloud from* alterior sources?

Fake Etymology Interruptus:

SOURCE - derives from sorcery and sauce; Lit. the sauce of sorcery. Ex. “The source of life’s flavor is in savoring the sauce of sorcery.”

Não é pra cá.

[He shuffles again.]

J: Na forma de mulher ou
forma de homem?

PT: Mulher. Sim senhora.
*“Olho grande” he explains,
pointing his index finger to his
temple/eye.*

*Em seu trabalho e na vida
amorosa*

Inveja que faz isso daí.

*Mas a senhora tem uma anjo de
guarda bem forte*

*Tem muita força os anjos de
guarda.*

*A senhora pode ser casada com
uma pessoa viúva.*

*Um viúvo. A senhora pode ser casa
com uma pessoa que já foi casada
(pra continuar?)*

*Mas tem pecados esse casamento
E tem uma companhia por um
grande amor da luz*

*Você tem uma correspondência que
vem no seu caminho muito forte.*

*Esse correspondência foi uma
grande paixão.*

*Nesse paixão a senhora tem uma
segurança muita pesada.*

*A senhora dentro seu caminho tem
uma correspondência com uma
comunicação pessoal, espiritual
Bem próxima uma relação muito
forte.*

The ventriloquist gives voice to material that comes from
outwith—what in Brazil might be called the “*oriente*,” a term
which does not correspond to geographies referenced by Edward
Said. Rather, in the everyday speech of Brazil, *oriente* refers to the
unknown “out there” ... *sei lá*.

The *cartomante*, on the other *hand*, gives voice to materials but
must translate symbols, each in a significant position, into
utterances. Then, the performance of reading—that is, presencing
—relies on the presence of a co-laborating client/audience whose
task is to enter into an ecology which generates affective
significance. Interpretation is collaborative; that is, non-
autonomous. What’s more, the not-known is never revealed,
never creeps into Heidegger’s clearing, so that the co-laboring
audience can experience only the sensation of having brushed up
against its veils.

Pai Tô reads: a light illuminating my path, a great crossroads,
a great dissolving, a great love, good news, happiness, betrayal,
loss. He reads understandings, vibration, attraction, a false
friend, guardian angels, passion, great risk and much travel. You
can see how the performativity of the text depends on my
reading-in to his reading out. This is the allegorical stance. “Good
news” might arrive “by letter or by person.” “Great travels” could
happen “by land or by sea.” There is a distinctly slippery
optimism to it all.

A (rest

Enough: all that needs to be said has been said, and
what is not said cannot be said.

Fit: not all that needs to be said has been said, and
what has not been said is said.

*Aqui é luz que brilha no seu
caminho. Daquele luz que brilha
no seu caminho.
Esse luz tá dizendo
Uma felicidade muito grande por
este cavaleiro
[Esse carta aqui:] É uma
felicidade que brilha no seu
caminho.
Tá trazendo a felicidade de união
com uma pessoa
Aqui com proteção spiritual e
amorosa no seu caminho
Que pode acontecer na sua vida.*

*Vem uma grande luz estar em seu
caminho.
Nesta carta no seu caminho
Vem companha com um grande
amor na sua vida
Vem uma grande fortuna [Tá
vendo?]
Pode ter ainda criança – filhos.
[Tá vendo?]
Vem esta amorosa no seu caminho
por um grande traição
Por perca desse amizade.
[Esse carta não presta.]
Vem alegria muito grande no seu
caminho
Trazendo esta comunicação bem
pesada.
Dentro deste comunicação, É eito
no seu negócio
O seu negócio também é uma coisa
muita pesada no seu caminho*

**Alongside: the unsaid is made in the making of
difference which is an unending process of making
present.**

**Arrest: what has not been said is said, yet that
saying renders further unsaid.**

Until: what has not been said is made present, and
then we have a choice.

Nothing: the not-said cannot be said and what is said
is nothing.

(Hunter, *Disunified Aesthetics*, 22, emphasis mine)

So much has been said.

“In a situated textuality the textuality is the material with which
all participants engage, to which their practice trains them to
open, and in which ecology, morphing and selving happen”
(2019: 190). And yet, if truth and meaning (knowledge) are not
unconcealed in the reading, what then *is* happening? There is
opening happening. There is “chance touch” when one engages
with the not-known. For me, this is what makes it worth doing,
where value emerges. “Opening to change happening, situated
textuality sensitises me to points of touch that release energy into
the material through work on not-knowing . . . ” (2019: 194).
There is a morphing going on as I read and as I listen to the tape
again and again, trans/scribing, “I become taken into some of the
patterns and holdings and releasings of the language.” Its prosody
overtakes me like the impossibility of walking out of synch with
music. “It’s as if my somatic complexity is (in)fused with another
somatic meshing . . . ‘I’ gives way to other ways” (2019: 85). I
lose myself in these generative ecologies. I could surmise,
deduce, infer, gather, reach, but the generating of possible
sensings really has more to do with the imagination and spirit of
the encounter/relationship. Sensing a sense of sense-making at

Seu trabalho tem muito risco e
 muita viagem
 Seu negócio também e uma coisa
 muito pesada
 Mas você tem uma companhia
 muito boa no seu caminho
 Fica luz de Deus.
 Vc tem uma proteção muito
 pesado, muito forte que vibra no
 seu caminho.
 Agora a senhora tem que usar
 uma proteção com a senhora.
 Tem que usar uma proteção
 de Ogum ... de Oxalá
 E seu futuro e está pra frente cada
 vez mais.
 seu futuro e está pra frente cada
 vez mais.
 Pode lbe dar muita força
 Muita força
 Ele leva mais pra frente
 Muitos graus.
 A carta tá dizendo que
 A senhora pode ter alegria
 próxima
 Por um grande amor com uma
 pessoa mais morena da senhora.
 Tem uma luz muito forte
 Alegria próxima um grande amor,
 um grande felicidade, um
 casamento
 Este luz brilhante de seu caminho
 trazendo na vida um comunicação

 Um forte comunicação

the turn of every card—at every unknown turn. True, “Perhaps a more circuitous route to sense-making, but, in its inclusivity, offers alterior ways of knowing.”

Scents-making

“*Misturar os três juntos*,” “Mix the three together,” he instructs me; “and use this perfume:”

And he writes:

seiva de alfazema
com colônia selvagem
Água de alevante
Feitiço da amazona
E água de oxum⁵

“*Misturar os três juntos*” he repeats. And he rolls up his sleeves as if demonstrating how one does the washing. “*Pra cada vez mais...*” (figuratively: to become all the more...) But instead of finishing his sentence, he nods, then rubs his hands together as if to suggest a satisfying conclusion.

This is his recipe for what needs to be done. You might have noticed there are more than three ingredients on his list. I mix three texts in order to make this perfume: *Disunified Aesthetics*, *The Politics of Practice*, and the transcription of Pai Tô’s reading. But there are other voices in the mortar. I also have on my mind Alan Klima’s *Ethnography* #9, particularly the first chapter “Ghostly Matters;” (its title a nod to Leslie Gordon’s book by the same title) and Jon Rossini’s, recent essay “Texto Performativo:

⁵ Trans. Lavender sap, wild cologne, water of lift, fetish of amazona, water of Oxum.

*Pelo ecos dos negócios dos
trabalhos
Muito forte seu caminho.
Mais forte está
Bem forte.
Tá dizendo uma grande
prosperidade, grande alegria na
sua vida
Não tem nada de mal pesada.
Só tem esse olho grande no seu
caminho.
...pra defender deste olho grande
A senhora. Sente muito feliz com
as pessoas.
Esse é sua vontade.
Agora a senhora precisa buscar.*

Thinking Writing,” both of which are more about writing than reading *per se*.⁶ And both spectres are floating there, informing my discussion. The border dispute between writing and reading is not a new issue in literary theory, and I’ve chosen not to take it up here. I might also have brought up Bakhtin’s useful concept of heteroglossia. “Others’ speech” runs through this of course. And “intertextuality” is at the heart of my alchemy. Porous, I immerse myself (*tomar banho*) in these texts and let them wash through me.

⁶ Klima explains, “there is an ‘affinity between the sacred speech of the oracle and the potentially literary voice that emerges through what is written because none of them originate in the speaking subject’ (Loevlie in Klima 27). Much more than an informant, Klima includes the voice of his co-author, the young Thai girl he channels in writing: “Let’s just say for now that this isn’t my first language. Nor is this my first host; far from it. I’m a ventriloquist, you could say, and more: I have the run of the body of his memories and his language, awkward, intellectual constructions as they are. There’s no good way for me to put it because his words and images and style of speaking and thought and sense of audience and this language are all foreign to me, and although I use his style and am in control, it also sometimes feels as though it’s not me who is speaking” (Klima, 32).

Showing Her Cards: References and Unwitting (but not unwitty) Co-Authors:

“Perhaps the moment has come to admit that only tarot number one honestly depicts what I have succeeded in being: a juggler, or conjurer, who arranges on a stand at a fair a certain number of objects and, shifting them, connecting them, interchanging them, achieves a certain number of effects” (Calvino, 105).

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Author Note: Merging ethnography and performance, **Jamie Davidson’s** research regards mediumship, dance and spirit possession in Afro-Brazilian religions. A dancer and ethnographer, her creative practice also involves experimental and performative modes of writing about/with/as embodied practices. Her work also appears in *Anthropology and Humanism* and *Current Anthropology*. Jamie is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Performance Studies Graduate Group at the University of California, Davis.



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