

## ***1000 Cuts: A Performance Studies Curriculum*** **Artists Statement**

Desirée Rowe and Michael Tristano Jr.

### **One Way Street of Abstraction**

We started by collecting. Collecting stories, collecting fragments, collecting snippets of conversations and notes. They were all small. But we felt all of them. They were part of our mundane routine. We both were experiencing these small cuts.

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**Desirée D. Rowe** received their interdisciplinary Ph.D. from the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. She is currently a professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Towson University. Desirée's research digs into the tangible embodied interactions of our cruel fantasies of life. Through queer performance ethnography, arts-based methods, and critical qualitative interventions her investigations center on negativity in twoways. First, through reparative negativity (a la Sedgwick) that allows space for re-framing and revisioning institutions and institutional life. Second, through embracing a contradictory negativity, one that is an unruly anti-productive or unwell negativity. She has published articles in *Women and Language*, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *Cultural Studies* <-> *Critical Methodologies*, *Rethinking History: A Journal of Theory and Practice*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Western Journal of Communication Studies*, and many book chapters. In 2019 she was named a Fulbright Scholar to Kyushu University in Fukuoka, Japan. She currently serves as the associate editor of the Performance Space in *Text and Performance Quarterly*. **Michael Tristano Jr.** (he/him) is assistant professor and director of cultural studies at Towson University. A performance ethnographer, his work is at the intersection of performance studies, queer studies, and critical/cultural communication studies. Michael's research focuses on the material conditions of queer and trans people of color and the means by which queer and trans communities of color engage in worldmaking practices and perform joy in light of oppressive conditions. Michael labors and lives on the unceded ancestral homelands of the Piscataway and Susquehannock peoples. He is currently an associate editor of *Text & Performance Quarterly*. His recent work can be found in *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking*, *Women's Studies in Communication*, *Sexualities*, *Cultural Studies* <-> *Critical Methodologies*, and *Text & Performance Quarterly*. Michael unequivocally supports the Palestinian Liberation movement and stands in solidarity with all who resist, refuse, and rebel against the genocide of the Palestinian people. He calls upon all of us to halt the gears of empire.

Tiny injuries to the body sustained in passing and rather than tend to the annoying, gnawing pain alone we began to share them. There was the line in the manuscript review, the email(s), and then something a university colleague said, and then the offhand hallway comment, and then and then and then. We would snarl and laugh about them over drinks in grimy bars as a way to commiserate and sort of...let it go. For now. And then we turned, and returned, to the manuscript, the university, the hallway, to let it all happen again.

The ongoing challenge of performance studies is to refuse and supercede a deeply entrenched division of labor, apartheid of knowledges, that plays out inside the academy as the difference between thinking and doing, interpreting and making, conceptualizing and creating. The division of labor between theory and practice, abstraction and embodiment, is an arbitrary and rigged choice, and, like all binarisms, it is booby-trapped. It's a Faustian bargain. If we go the one-way street of abstraction, then we cut ourselves off from the nourishing ground of participatory experience. If we go the one-way street of practice, then we drive ourselves into an isolated cul-de-sac, a practitioner's workshop or artist's colony. Our radical move is to turn, and return, insistently, to the crossroads. (Conquergood, 2002, p. 153-154).

These small moments of deep frustration that were emergent in our own everyday began to build into a type of archive. We keep a running list of the comments, just to hold them somewhere else in addition to our own bodies, just so someone else can see them. This collaborative performance was born out of that list, and our own consistent efforts to make visible the persistent material barriers of interdisciplinary performance work at our own institution and within the discipline. When the video begins you see us smiling with colorful streamers attached to our homemade instruments. Pleasant music which conjures a nostalgic sense of department store browsing is overlaid as we set up our 'funny little props'. The music reinforces what we, as performance scholars, already know: this is banal. It's a regular. We routinely carry with us what the possibilities of what performance offers. With all its potentialities and complexities. With all its toys and glitter. Indeed, we are much like a travelling circus with bright colors and smiling faces, inviting each new audience into our conversation. We perform. Over (and over and over and over and over...) again. In classrooms, conference spaces, theatres, hallways. We perform. *Anywhere we can*. It doesn't matter if no one is there, or we are stuck in an uncomfortable room, or they aren't even making eye contact – we show up. Streamers and smiling. *1000 Cuts* is almost parody.

The red dinosaur (lovingly named Dino) serves as an avatar for texts within the discipline that speak towards our own frustrations with the constant

re/negotiating for both space and a recognition for embodied performances of our own, our colleagues, and our students. As we read each citation our voices grow louder, angrier, more frustrated, because we are feeling the weight of the double burden. In between listening to each citation from Dino we perform, we dance, we play and try to draw the audience in to engage with us. The double burden here is to be *scholarly* but also be *fun*. Perform! For the audience! But don't forget about that tenure and promotion package.

### Act! By Definition

Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) performed at Kyoto's Yamaichi Concert Hall inspires our engagement with the audience. In the piece, Ono sits lightly on the floor in the style of *seiza*, with her shins touching the ground while members of the audience intermittently approach the stage, take scissors, and cut off bits of her clothes. Some audience members are delicate, while others pull and tug at her. Some leave the cut pieces, some take them home. *Cut Piece* is a foundational feminist Fluxus performance that complicates the intersections of nation, race, and gender. Bryan-Wilson (2003) describes the performance as "forging a space where race cannot be understood nakedly, but rather as a dialogic production. The piece's stripping does not disclose a stable body under these costumes, but instead refuses stability in its restless repetitions and its mutable reliance on the viewer" (p.104). Ono herself describes that she wanted the audience "to start to see things beyond the shapes ... [to] hear the kind of sounds that you hear in silence ... to feel the environment and tension in people's vibrations" (Ono, 2001 as cited in Guggenheim Bilbao, 2024). Just so there is no confusion, we aren't attempting to mirror the pathbreaking work of Ono's interventions into avant-garde performance. Rather, we turn towards *Cut Piece* as generative inspiration in how to move the audience from a position of looking to a position of doing.

In post disciplinary fields such as performance studies, and in networks such as the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, we continue debating whether performance is a political act by definition, and/or if the political is always a performance. We each have a different relationship to performance, though we are all involved in its production and its reception, itself a form of intervention. (Taylor, 2016, p. 207)

Before the audience arrives, we have placed a small piece of paper on each seat that reads, FOR EACH SONG, APPROACH A PERFORMER AND COLLECT A GREEN PARTICPANT RIBBON. SHOUT IT OUT LOUD SO

EVERYONE CAN HEAR. HAND IT BACK TO THE PERFORMER. As the songs play, we play our improvised instruments, dance, and wait for someone to approach us. The ribbons they pull are green participation ribbons affixed to our large shirts with wooden clothespins. Like Ono's *Cut Piece*, some audience members are delicate – while others tug. They then read one sample of the snippets that we have collected. The audience member is interpolated into the role of provocateur, reading back to us the same lines that we snarled and laughed over. Once their line is read the ribbon goes into the box labelled, "Performance Studies Curriculum." We smile, dance, and wait for the next one.

These comments, these asides, these throw-away lines in emails between colleagues are now spotlighted on stage through the bodies and voices of our audience members. As performance studies teachers and scholars, these comments infuse themselves into our curriculum, tenure narratives, and hallway conversations. A colleague once asked us if we could see any space of generosity within these (sometimes) well-intentioned quips. Well, yes and no. Our everyday responses to this constant barrage of barbs and misinterpretations is when we are generous. We nod, we explain, we move on. Our performance, *1000 Cuts*, is what happens on the other side of generosity.

### **Downright InhosSPITable!**

The whole performance isn't really that long. Depending on the audience's enthusiasm for participation it lasts somewhere between 10 to 15 minutes. However, by the third and final song, when the music drops a menacing, hard core beat, our dancing and play has taken a turn. Through the performance we have listened to the comments, nodded, placed them in the box, and continued. By the third song, we are visibly frustrated and angry with both the scholarly voice of Dino, and the repeated misunderstandings from our audience. We have been playing and dancing for so long; we are tired from the labor of trying to engage the audience with our smiles and fun instruments. The injuries sustained by 1000 cuts have become almost too much to bear. Our bodies reflect that as we sit and listen, with building exhaustion, to the voice of Dino. As we listen, with building annoyance, to the comments on the participation ribbons generosity washes away and frustration and, frankly, exhaustion take its place.

The idea of metaphorically describing performance studies as an archipelago – a series of islands and seas – may strike skeptics as a risky maneuver. An island, after all, is defined largely by its isolation: it is cut-off from other

land, definitionally isolated and set apart. Islands can be difficult to reach, rarely visited, or downright inhospitable. They can be so remote as to be effectively outside of consideration or concern. What happens, we might worry, if we in PS become effectively marooned on an island of our own making (Simmons & Birsini, 2020, p. 33).

The exhaustion emerges from the double-bind of the subdiscipline. We are aware of the precarity of our positions, and because of this we have learned to speak multiple academic languages, while our colleagues do not. We do “performance and.” Performance and critical qualitative methods. Performance and rhetoric. Performance and critical/cultural studies. We are trained to do both so that we can do performance. That is both burden and generosity. But then, as we listen to the comments on the ribbons we realize (again) that there are so many others that are not. By the end of the performance, we realize that our ribbons and noise-makers and all the labor to make scholarship accessible and embodied...does what exactly? And for whom?

In this approach, performance works from the ground up as it situates us in the everyday. Through this it works to reconfigure relations of power. It works against dominant conceptions of knowledge by locating itself in and theorizing through the body. It offers us a critical interpretive tool and lens. It is not an ornamentation or accessory to rhetoric. It embodies and drives a sustained critique of discourse. Rhetoric needs performance to keep it critical and accountable. (Calafell, 2014, p. 116)

A cut is an injury sustained to the body. We have all experienced them. They are often tiny. Little droplets of blood may appear. Sometimes they itch. One might even need a small band-aid. But mostly. They are annoying. A nuisance. Have you ever gotten two cuts in the same day? Did you want to scream a little about it? How about 15 at once? Have you ever experienced tiny, annoying, and nuisance filled cuts sustained daily for what feels like the entirety of your career? We have. And we know many of you, dear readers, have too. And it makes us want to scream. A lot. To produce our own form of noise-making as forms of ~~ear-~~ ~~tharsis-~~ citationality. Our scholarship is embodied. But that embodiment also means we are forced to bear the scars of the thousands of cuts we face as we attempt to make our way through the academy. At the same time we bear our scars, we then must attempt to make them *legible* to the academy. In one of the final moments, we see the other side of the “Performance Studies Curriculum” box. All of the comments need to be accounted for in the annual review, or the tenure file, or promotion. The cuts are no longer frivolous. Or about our mild discomfort. They represent our livelihood; our material realities. Thus, when a

colleague stops by one of our offices and cheerily says, “I saw a play...I finally get performance!” we choke down the instinct to scream and be downright inhospitable. Instead, we reply, “That’s great! Maybe we can collaborate on bringing a performer to campus sometime.” We turn each tiny cut into more labor which can be rendered as useful and valuable to the institution. And so that our colleagues think we play nicely with others. We have to. In order to survive.

*A Thousand Cuts* layers an archive of our own “noise-making” through a selection of tasks and email excerpts in concert with disciplinary texts to create a pastiche of our own visualization of what it takes to do/attempt performance studies in our discipline. Rather than framing these complaints as solitary threads of unhappiness, we pull them together to establish a collective archive of trouble. To weave a nothing into a something. Through this performance, we hope to empower our non-performance colleagues to pull the threads with us in weaving a practice of interdisciplinary action that moves beyond the text and towards a more vibrant understanding of our labor. And really, truly, the performance is also a call of solidarity with other practitioners of performance studies. We see you, and we sure as shit feel it too.

## Works Cited

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