

Colleague-Criticism: Performance, Writing, and Queer Collegiality

Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Jill Dolan, and Jaclyn Pryor

Introduction

Since April 2003, we have been theorizing what we call “colleague-criticism,” a type of critical engagement in which the critic acknowledges his or her personal relationship with the artist and/or familiarity with the artists’ work and, in so doing, allows the reader to consider the context of the artist’s production as well as the critic’s response. In this way, the critic writes through his or her responsibility to the artist as a known entity, and acknowledges that artistic practice is always a process; always located in time, geography, and history; and always informed by resources and the politics of the moment. Our collective work is prompted in part by questions derived from our own identities and affiliations as feminist and queer artists and scholars: What does it mean to engage critically and publicly with the work of a queer artist and/or artist of color who privately is a friend, colleague, and/or collaborator? How might foregrounding one’s relationship as critic to the artist produce an alternative model of critical exchange in which theory and practice productively collide, collapse, and melt? How might colleague-criticism redefine the traditional hierarchical dynamic between critic and artist into a model of collaboration and alliance that speaks to and from the practice of queer politics, as well as progressive politics that address race, ethnicity, nation, and gender?

We define colleague-criticism as public criticism openly informed by private, collegial knowledge. The practice of colleague-criticism speaks to our belief that public discourse evident in written and spoken criticism is always already an assemblage of private concerns, hopes, anxieties, fears, desires, and preoccupations, and that the private discourse of gossip and feelings necessarily circulates through them. As colleague-critics, we write about performance as artists, as colleagues, as friends, and as scholars; we speak to our knowledge of both the work at hand and the experience and context of making work; we keep our theory and practice in a state of present dialogue; and we work to expand the role of the artist in local, public arts discourse. Colleague-critics foreground their relationship with one

Paul Bonin-Rodriguez is . . . **Jill Dolan** is Professor of English and Theatre and Dance at Princeton University. She is the author, most recently, of *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre*. She is also the author of *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, and other books and articles on feminist, lesbian, and queer theatre and performance studies. **Jaclyn Pryor** is an independent artist doing community-oriented work in Austin, Texas.

another and offer an informed understanding of process, context, subjectivity, and the critical object or event, raising questions about meaning and expanding understandings of the artist's material practice and the process of reception. The political gesture of this form is Brechtian in its insistence that criticism should be as historicized as performance.

As queer and feminist artists and scholars, we recognize that our writing about this process challenges normative assumptions about the role of criticism in the academy and the theatre community. Typically, critics and artists stand in a wary, adversarial relationship. They rarely address each other directly, in each other's presence. When they do, they often come to fisticuffs, rather than establishing mutual respect and common cause.¹ The artist feels betrayed by the critic, who sits anonymously in judgment, rather than taking responsibility for how his or her words will land in real time and space on the real bodies of the artists making the work. The critic feels separated from the artist and the community of process of that generates the work. In colleague-criticism, the artist and the critic sit side by side. They break bread together, metaphorically and sometimes literally; they craft words together; they erase the specious boundary, or borderland, between art and commentary.

Writing in *Movement Research Journal's* fall 2002 issue on criticism, choreographer Tere O'Connor calls for critics to become more engaged in the whole of an artist's work—his oeuvre; her pursuits both past and present; perhaps, even, his intentions—rather than relying on what he calls “stop-action” criticism, in which one danced moment is made to stand for the whole of an artist's work at that time (see Jowitt). For O'Connor, these intentions would become known through time spent in conversation between the artist and critic. *Village Voice* dance critic Deborah Jowitt noted that O'Connor was essentially asking the reviewer to present the artist in context, and to function as a productive colleague in the creation of discourse surrounding a choreographer's work.

In many ways, O'Connor's critique and our notion of colleague-criticism both respond to the crisis of criticism made evident in Arlene Croce's *New Yorker* essay “Discussing the Undiscussable” (1994) and the responses it yielded. In her now infamous opening, Croce writes, “I have not seen Bill T. Jones's [new dance] *Still/Here*, and have no plans to review it” (708). As Croce explained, the liberal subjectivity of *Still/Here*—namely, its video documentation of people living with terminal illness juxtaposed with dance—rendered it “beyond the reach of criticism” (709). Using a casually cobbled history that begins during the 1960s—which Croce calls the “twilight of modern dance” (714)—Croce argued that the cultural wars and funding crises of the late 1980s and early 1990s facilitated the growth of sympathetic

¹ See, for one example, artistic director Michael Bloom's contretemps with a critic in the lobby of the Cleveland Play House in 2006. The critic had given the company's current production a bad review; when Bloom spied him in the audience at a subsequent performance, he chased him out of the theatre, exchanging words and blows (see Diadiun).

alliances now located in “artist support networks” and the “academy” (714). Functioning as an affective lobby, these parties have made honest criticism not only unpalatable but unlikely.

Subsequent angry responses to Croce’s essay revealed the tension surrounding criticism in general and dance criticism in particular. Writing in *The New York Times*, Joyce Carol Oates attempted to provide a more expansive critical history when she reminded Croce that Aristotle’s *Poetics*, “the earliest sustained work of literary criticism in Western culture,” resonated with a similar battle. Aristotle was responding to Plato’s argument in “The Republic,” in which Plato had portrayed drama and its authors as manipulative and harmful to the well-being of the state. To Oates, Croce’s essay was not good criticism, but “a landmark admission of the bankruptcy of an old critical vocabulary, confronted with ever new forms of art.” Critic Roger Copeland attempted to move criticism out of the realm of punditry, where Croce led it, by reminding Croce that “criticism at its best is simply about telling the truth, not enforcing what one believes to be the truth” (35).

Writing in *The Drama Review*, Marcia Siegel also contended that Croce’s thesis was based on “some anachronistic vision of a purer, calmer world” (61). To Siegel, “Art comes bundled with autobiography, fiction, morality, politics, and merchandising” (62). The critic’s job is to decipher the play of subjective positions. Siegel acknowledged that Jones is adept at “manipulating his audience and his critics,” and related a story about Jones’s visit to her class at NYU in which he praised her in front of her students in a way Siegel found cloying (68). Aligning herself slightly with Croce by the article’s end, Siegel acknowledged that the demands of the marketplace have made pure criticism almost impossible: “All critics are expected to be lackeys for the profession, flacks rather than commentators, conveyors of what we’re told the artist wants to convey instead of what we see in the art for ourselves” (68). Siegel located the corruption of the critic’s voice in the preview/promotional articles that critics are now often assigned to write.

Our practice of colleague-criticism rejects the notion of “pure criticism” and tries to combine artist advocacy with a more sophisticated, nuanced public discussion about the arts in general. Through its activist consciousness and practices of a learned advocacy, colleague-criticism destabilizes the artist/critic border, exposes it as an “unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa 3) and renders the hyphenate space intimate, known, and negotiable. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa describes borderlands as “physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Preface). Anzaldúa offers the new *mestiza* consciousness as a means to break down the “subject-object duality” (80). Colleague-criticism not only informs the interstitial spaces of the borderlands, but makes the terrain accessible to others. In the process, the critic and artist enrich the process of art-making and expand the discourse about what art means to democracy. Critic and artist insist on their vital citizenship in a nation that betrays its artists, that queers them and exiles

them to an “immoral” fringe. Colleague-criticism is an ethical practice of participatory democracy, modeled by queers, artists, critics, and public intellectuals determined to make new worlds together.

Colleague-Criticism and/as Utopia

“Utopian performatives” influence our thinking and writing about and our practice of colleague-criticism in this essay, as we are concerned with how this critical practice can participate in world-making and the politics of hope. This essay theorizes as well as models colleague-criticism as a space for critics to enact their own utopian performatives through the process of writing. The concept of utopia has been a prime political force in various moments of world history, perhaps especially in the United States in the 1960s. Marxist intellectuals like Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch theorized the potential of art practices to model a social utopia through the workings of a creative, often dissident imagination, one that fantasized the world as it might be to motivate resistance to the world as it is. Our engagement with utopia follows these Marxist philosophers, finding utopian performatives in live performances that reject a fixed, more static vision of utopia, and that work instead to offer a fleeting glimpse, an ephemeral feeling, of what a better world might be like (see Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*). Utopian performatives can never congeal into a permanent, coercive, imperative social or cultural form; their power is inevitably temporary, since they are “doings” crafted from the present moment of interaction between performers and spectators in a specifically situated material, historical performance.

Utopian performatives represent an imaginative construction of both thought and action, of both everyday life and theatrical performance. The term has come to provide a kind of placeholder for our aspirations about theatre and performance, as well as to represent the apogee of the faith we bring to our own journeys into the poetic realms of the not-real, those trips we make to the theatre hoping to be both taken out of ourselves, however momentarily, and brought closer to something fundamental about who we are in relation to other human beings and our mutual potential. This dual action—of fantasizing the enormous power of the “what ifs” while at the same time critically examining the sometimes frustrating, sometimes exhilarating reality of the “as is”—imbues utopian performatives with all sorts of possibilities that, finally, bring us hope.

Our work also resonates with performative writing, a genre of critical engagement that allows the body to be viewed in the text in very material ways (see Daly and Phelan). The body, of course, is always present in writing, but here, the choice of words we use to engage and describe our work has to meet it in its own evocative, poetic terms, rather than reducing it to the quotidian reality of “criticism.” Collegial-critical practice is reminiscent of participant observation in ethnography, and exemplifies a standing *beside* rather than above the work in question (see Conquergood and Jones). Through it, we express our concern for what the work does and how it lives in the world.

A Critical History of Colleague-Criticism

Colleague-criticism emerged as Paul's final project in "Public Intellectuals and the Arts," a graduate seminar class taught by Jill at the University of Texas at Austin in spring 2003, in which Jaclyn was also a student. At the time, Jill, Jaclyn, and Paul were all engaged in projects that required us to imagine new ways of bridging theory and practice, both individually and together through our participation in the Department of Theatre and Dance's then new Performance as Public Practice (PPP) program. Jill was writing *Utopia in Performance*. At different times during her process, both Jaclyn and Paul worked as Jill's research assistants. Jaclyn was creating *floodlines*, the performance project that served as her master's thesis, which Jill and Paul both critique in this essay. Jill served as Jaclyn's thesis advisor. The previous spring, Jaclyn and Paul collaborated on the creation of a site-specific performance called "A Game of Badminton," which they presented first in the department UT and later, on a basketball court at New York University for the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) LGBTQ focus group's pre-conference. Paul was preparing to return to live in San Antonio full-time after three years of commuting for coursework in Austin, contemplating how his experience as an artist and scholar might effectively support public discourse and artistic practice in San Antonio, as well as how his dissertation might imagine new forms of support among artists. He had committed to write a new show, *Fringe and Fringe Ability*, which would open at Jump-Start Performance Co. in San Antonio in June. He was also taking qualifying exams and working with Jill, who would serve as his (and later Jaclyn's) dissertation advisor. Jaclyn's large-scale multi-site-specific performance work, BREAD, later featured prominently in a chapter of his dissertation and in the dissertation defense.

In many ways, Jill's "Public Intellectual in the Arts" course epitomized our department's recent shift from a traditional history, criticism, theory, and text paradigm to the more open-ended Performance as a Public Practice (PPP) program and its reliance on the artist-citizen-scholar configuration. Inaugurated in 2002 by a faculty committee that included feminist and queer scholars, the PPP program invited a more reflective academic approach to performance history and criticism for both students and faculty, who now mutually identified under the artist-citizen-scholar rubric. Under the banner of public practice, we were careful to name our affiliations to community vis-à-vis identity, discipline, and place, and to speak from both theory and practice when examining contemporary scholarship.

We traded expertise, stayed current with each other's projects, or participated in them. We began to think how production, reception, and documentation formed a nexus of scholarship in which the artist and the scholar were not seen as distinct parties, but collaborators in an ongoing process of arts-informed civic engagement. We critiqued each other's work and tracked them in our writing. On a very personal level, and with Jill's institutionally resourceful support, we convened a series of monthly lunches with queer students in the Department of Theatre and Dance, where undergraduate and graduate students and faculty met to discuss queer

representation as reflected in the department's casting and productions. That spring, the students in our program staged the Performance as Public Practice Conference, a three-day event that drew artists and scholars from across the nation, including Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, Jan Cohen-Cruz, and Ramón Rivera-Servera. As Jill would write in an *Austin-American Statesman* op-ed piece about the PPP program,

The point is to use our expertise and our knowledge to add passionate, nuanced arguments to public debate by doing what we do best: commenting on and archiving what happens at the theater and what it means, and demonstrating how performance can help us practice more just, more equitable, more loving ways to live.

PPP coursework focuses on how scholarship might avail us of polysemous roles and generative outcomes as artist-citizen-scholars.

The "Public Intellectuals in the Arts" course embodied the reflective form of scholarship that the PPP program inspired, as well as the ways that our scholarship and practice revealed shifting perceptions of power. In many ways, our work in PPP responded to ongoing crises about the role and value of scholarship. To those of us not living near the cultural market centers, the multi-vocal role of critics/previewers/chroniclers—the same role protested by Siegel in response to Croce—is a common phenomenon, more akin to artist-citizen-scholar than not. At a certain point in Jill's course, one student protested that an Austin critic who wrote glowing reviews about a local company repeatedly failed to acknowledge that he was writing about his spouse, leading the class to question the appropriateness of such relationships with respect to criticism. Paul held onto the notion, not sure if it could be recuperated and yet intrigued by what an admission of ongoing relationship between a critic and a performer might yield. Indeed, in an age of government secrecy, of raucous political punditry, and hidden alliances among business and political figures, an honest admission of affiliation seemed a revolutionary approach to criticism, if not to public discourse in general.

With a deadline looming, Paul ran his idea by Jaclyn, who parsed it through David Román's notion of "critical generosity," in which the critic foregrounds his or her appreciation for an artists' body of work, effectively dismissing "objectivity" and allowing collegiality to figure in the final work and its critical outcome (see Román). Following their dialogue, Paul presented the idea in class, where Jill engaged it first as a response to his paper, and later in the introduction to a summer 2004 issue of *Modern Drama* that she guest edited (and for which Jaclyn served as editorial assistant). That summer, Jaclyn and Paul publicly discussed colleague-criticism in a presentation called "Queer Lunch" at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) LGBTQ/WIP joint pre-conference at Buddy's in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto, Ontario (see Bonin-Rodriguez and Pryor 2004).

In hindsight, Paul recognizes that the spirit, ethos, and practice of colleague-criticism responds to his background as a community-based performing artist. He began his writer-performer career during an Alternate ROOTS meeting in summer

1991; he joined Jump-Start Performance Co., a San Antonio community-based theater collective, in spring 1992. Between 1991 and 2004, he created and toured a number of performance works—some solo and some not—that used community-based theater techniques in production or reception. Between 1997 and 2000, he served on the board of the National Performance Network (NPN), a consortium of artist spaces that supports the work of artists in communities. Although not all NPN-sponsored performances are community-based in origin, all NPN-sponsored residencies require that touring artists to engage communities through outreach activities. As a touring artist based in San Antonio but working as a national advocate, Paul was keen to understand and compare what amounted to each region's support infrastructure with respect to social, financial, and intellectual capital.

In *Local Acts*, Jan Cohen-Cruz defines community-based theater as working through four distinct modalities, all of which also illuminate colleague-criticism. Community-based theater emerges from a “communal context,” in which the form and substance of performance reflect issues and aesthetics important to a community shared by creator(s) and spectator(s); in the process, the nature of relationships are made evident or parsed through (92-93). Similarly, colleague-criticism begins with an act of witness in which the writer states both “I am” and “I know” and establishes the “where” of their collective context, offering the reader a sense of the relationship and a contextual lens (93). Community-based theater recognizes “reciprocity” as key to the process.

Cohen-Cruz defines reciprocity as a “mutually nourishing (albeit often challenging)” relationship (93). Reciprocity calls for civic engagement in which diverse participants establish a respectful space in which to dialogue, though not necessarily to agree (94). Similarly, the advocacy aspect of colleague-criticism does not require a critic's unequivocal praise for the artist but, instead, a generative critique drawn from the critic's ongoing engagement with an artist's work and/or shared circumstance that forms the nexus of their acknowledged and reciprocal relationship. Community-based theater relies on hyphenation: it may be both entertaining and politically efficacious, and draw from a variety of disciplines (97). In much the same way, colleague-criticism draws from the artist-citizen-scholar hyphenated identity. Finally community-based theater, like colleague-criticism, supports “active culture” (99). The work's emphasis is on process, in much the same way that the colleague-critic places the artist's work against the backdrop of his or her career, investment in community, and ongoing processes.

Effectively, colleague-criticism puts a name to Cohen-Cruz's “engaged model of criticism.” As the converse of “so-called objective criticism,” Cohen-Cruz's engaged model invites the critic to acknowledge his/her relationship to an artist's mission (118). The critic works more as a radical ethnographer, acknowledging aspects s/he cannot understand or comprehend through prior experience, but drawing on what anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo calls “passionate concern, prior knowledge, and ethical engagement” (qtd. in Cohen-Cruz 120). Cohen-Cruz notes that an engaged

model of criticism has been taken up by critics following a particular artist (such as Eileen Blumenthal's ongoing study of Joe Chaikin's career), but adds that this model's better-known opposite is Frank Rich's "consumer" model of criticism, in which the critic acts as an advocate for audiences who plan to invest time, money, and energy in spectatorship (121).²

A Word on Power

In one of our several live presentations of this project, a spectator at Arizona State University in Tempe in October 2005 suggested that we were mystifying or romanticizing the power relations among us. She insisted that Jill's position as a professor collaborating with who were then two graduate students could only be one of power over, and that, as a result, our interactions around our respective artistic work were disingenuous and could never truly be honest. But as we have suggested here, the graduate program out of which this work grew is itself committed to an anti-hierarchical understanding of power, one that sees it as capillary, rather than hegemonic. Certainly, Paul and Jaclyn began their own paired collaboration of what would later become our threesome in the "Public Intellectuals and the Arts" course, where Jill was the instructor. But because Jill was intellectually as well as emotionally excited by their "A Game of Badminton" performance, she engaged with the work from a creative-critical perspective that felt to her separate from the requirements of her position of classroom authority. Their work prompted a response based in emotional caring, as well as aesthetic compatibility; that is, Jill was both proud of their collaboration and felt akin to it politically and critically. That Paul and Jaclyn then made a space for her in their prior artistic partnership undercut her separate authority. What had been a classroom collaboration among students and teacher extended into an alliance among colleagues.

The PPP program considers its students apprentices to the academy in which they're already professionalizing, and prizes active mentorship as one of its faculty's primary contributions to their studies. But many graduate students also enter the program with a wealth of prior life experience that is in large part what makes them desirable candidates for admission. For instance, Paul's years of performing and teaching around the country; his work on the board of NPN; and his community-based theatre work with Jump-Start Performance and other theatres and universities provided an important area of expertise to the program that none of the faculty, including Jill, were able to boast.

Likewise, Jaclyn arrived at UT with extensive training in physical theatre, specifically Viewpoints, a method of generating stage pictures that became popular among undergraduate and other graduate student artist-citizen-scholars in large part

² In *Staging America*, her book about Cornerstone Theater Company, Sonja Kuflinec also calls for a model of community-based criticism that is distinct from "the conventional criticism [that] tends to adopt an aesthetic model of evaluation, grounded in late eighteenth-century Kantian thinking on discrimination, taste, and beauty, which privileges the art object" (15).

because of her willingness to teach the system and transmit her knowledge. By the time our three-way collaboration began, Paul and Jaclyn were already very much respected in their own right as contributing members of the departmental community. The PPP faculty drew on their prior knowledge with pride and excitement.

We base our colleague-critic collaboration in the precepts of queer theory, but feminist and lesbian practices of working across rank and status also influence our work (see Wolf and Dolan; de Lauretis; Gallop; Pellegrini). When feminist and women's studies was just beginning to infiltrate the academy, feminist professors frequently co-wrote articles with graduate students, to help them professionalize and to grease the wheels of scholarly publishing as they embarked on their careers. Now, in the arts and humanities, we rarely co-write journal articles with anyone, but that earlier feminist practice ghosts our work here. Those feminist professors used their position in the academic marketplace to advocate for their students, bringing them into a professional realm from which they might have remained remote without such sponsorship.

Feminist theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis and Jane Gallop, among many others, have considered the relationship between professors and graduate students through more complex, nuanced understandings of their inherent power dynamic. De Lauretis, in the early 90s, worked with an Italian feminist collective to theorize the professor-student relationship as one of "entrustment," rather than power over, and argued that we need to rethink the prohibitions on intimacy these relationships always entail. She suggested that entrustment describes a relationship between women that relies on "coming to terms with the power and the disparity—the social and personal inequality inherent in them" as a positive possibility rather than a negative consequence (qtd. in Wolf and Dolan, 194). Gallop, in *Anecdotal Theory* (2002) and *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (1997) insists that dissertation directors (or for that matter MA or MFA thesis advisors) always of necessity advocate for their students in ways that require a relationship of caring, one in which emotional as well as intellectual intimacy founds their exchange. Charges of nepotism at worst or favoritism at best sometimes hound professors perceived as "too close" to their students, but Gallop persuasively suggests that feminist practice dictates that supervising a student's intellectual and artistic development requires an attitude of care, of concern, and sometimes even of love.

We aren't suggesting that such relationships cancel the power dynamic completely, but we are proposing that they rewrite its presumptions from hierarchical to mobile, as power shifts among professor and student in unpredictable ways influenced by the historical moment. As we argue here, we have had the luxury of time over which to develop a working relationship that resists conventional understandings of power, during which we constantly exchange positions of need, support, and caring, all in the context of an ethic committed to our mutual growth and a vision of futurity. We don't shake off power, but we work to redistribute it among ourselves actively and often.

We refuse an insidious assumption of progressive politics that insists on collective, absolutely non-hierarchical, egalitarian relationships as the only ethical way of working. As feminists like Ellen Willis have pointed out, the rejection of expertise as a ruse of power by 1970s radical feminism worked against the efficacy of new social movements.

Acts of Colleague-Criticism

Our sites of practicing colleague-criticism here include three original community-based performance pieces that were generated in conversation with theory, politics, and urgent issues in the public sphere: *floodlines* (2004 – 2010), a multi-year, multi-site-specific performance installation, conceived and directed by Jaclyn; *Fringe and Fringe Ability* (2004 – 2005, written by and featuring Paul; and *From Flannel to Fleece* (2005 – ongoing), a new narrative creative non-fiction project written and performed by Jill. All three performances are resolutely queer in both form and content and all three garnered intimate, public and private colleague-critical attention from all three of us. With each performance, our roles were reconfigured and changed the ways in which we learned to talk and write about one another's work.

The actual creative work we included in the original live presentations (and excerpted in part in [hyperlinks here](#)) is now part of a larger history. Jaclyn's piece, *floodlines*, has been produced four times since our initial presentation and, as a seven-year cycle project, will continue to be performed annually for the next three years. She's also gone on to create other large-scale, site-specific performances. Paul's piece, *Fringe and Fringe Ability*, is now in a much later incarnation than when we performed originally. When Jaclyn first saw it, the play was a one-act solo performance. When Jill saw it, the play had become a two-person show, and later, the show became a two-act solo show, which premiered in Boston in fall 2005. *Fringe and Fringe Ability* has been followed by a sequel, *Higher Planes*, which premiered in San Antonio in fall 2006 and has since toured to Houston and Anchorage. Likewise, Jill's snippets of writing really live only in their original performance; they are loosely based on moments from her critical memoir-in-progress, *From Flannel to Fleece: A Lesbian of a Certain Age*, but were actually generated at a performance-writing workshop with artist Deb Margolin, who visited Austin and UT several times during Jill's time on the faculty there. Jill's creative work here, unlike Paul's and Jaclyn's, has no real life as performance outside of the colleague-critic presentation. In the demonstration of colleague-criticism to which we now turn, we hope to address some of the complexities of the variety and status of the "art objects" to which our responses refer. We also intend to try to capture some of the liveness and vulnerability that's a part of presentations at academic conferences, rather than subsuming that "fleshfulness" under the confines of print. We clearly can't publish a live practice, but we'll attempt to evoke the stakes raised by criticism as an ethical, face-to-face, rather than anonymous, practice.

Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Jill Dolan, & Jaclyn Pryor

Colleague-Criticism Applied

floodlines, conceived and directed by Jaclyn Pryor (2004, 2005, 2006, 2007)

Paul's Response: The Rush (2004)

Twenty spectators gather in a small lecture auditorium in the University of Texas Department of Theater and Dance. We believe we are attending a solo thesis performance by Jaclyn Pryor, a master's candidate in the PPP program. The fluorescent lights are on. No pre-show music plays. No props litter the front of the room. Jaclyn Pryor is not present, nor is anyone who seems to be associated with the making of a show. The audience chats freely and loudly. It is a Friday, and we are winding down from a long academic week.

Shortly, Jaclyn appears. She wears the black suit of an orthodox Jewish man and a pair of running shoes. On her head rests a *yalmulke*. From beneath her black vest, white *tzitzit*, or the tasseled ends of a prayer shawl, hang down. She is soaking wet. Her gaze—intense and direct—signals expectation. With her hand, she beckons us, and then she exits the building. We walk out into the warm and sunny afternoon to find five Volvos parked and waiting. In the windshield of each rests a sign with a Jewish star and the word “Funeral.” Drivers emerge from each car to open doors, inviting us to become passengers in a cortege. Seamlessly, without overture or warning, the audience has crossed the threshold into performance event. We fasten our seatbelts.

By the time the passengers are seated, Jaclyn, diminutive, black-suited, and still dripping wet, has started running. Over the next hour-and-a-half, our cars will follow her closely as she runs a helter-skelter path through Austin's Hyde Park neighborhood. Along her journey, other performers, all but one dressed in white, will emerge in various tableaux vivants. For example, two dapper men wearing bowlers play frying pans like violins. A flock of “elderly people” leaning on walkers advances towards us—they seem to be racing. One man checks his mail. A woman wearing a *burqua* flies through the air on a swing hanging from a tree and smiles. Another woman, the same size as Jaclyn, and dressed identically, runs past and disappears. Two women in bathing suits embrace outside the Hyde Park Baptist Church, their faces frozen in expressions of concern (or is it fear?). Outside the church, signs have been planted in the ground. They tell us of things missing: “missing in action,” “missing the point,” “missing my period,” “missing my flight,” “missing you,” etc.

In amazing sleight-of-hand, the performers will reappear in other roles at other points. They will mingle with other performers, and new tableaux will emerge. For the sake of staying together, the drivers run stop signs and occasional lights. Other cars stop out of respect. People hold traffic for the cortege. A man takes off his hat in a gesture of respect. Jaclyn runs undaunted.

Eventually, she and her twin collide in an embrace on a quiet street, where they hold something of a memorial in a gated backyard lawn of a nearby house. Reading

from a long scroll, Jaclyn invokes her grandmother's death a few years back, a history of wars and conflicts, and Ronald Reagan, among other things. Afterwards, she sheds her suit to reveal a basic black shift, and then she disappears behind another house.

The appointed drivers have already returned to their cars, and soon we follow. In a path similar to before, the original procession returns to the university. Along the way we see the detritus of our earlier pilgrimage—abandoned walkers, a pram, and an empty swing swaying gently in the warm breeze.

Situated north of campus, and long associated with student housing, Hyde Park residents are a mix of short- and long-term dwellers. Their houses are brightly colored. People walk, bikes whiz by, and the UT Shuttle runs regularly through the neighborhood. For those who don't live there, Hyde Park is a place to pass through on 38th or 45th streets, and so a performance event like this one causes those of us who become a part of it through our witnessing to look at the place as never before.

Throughout the making of her work, Jaclyn was engaged with the ideas of German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin, who believed that history and time function in layers, rather than a linear chronology of events. Moments now are informed by past and future, all laid upon each other. These moments well up and recede in a gushing tide. Despite the linear nature of the procession, Jaclyn managed to make photographic images of past and future emerge and ebb. We were flooded with memories, insights, and a sense of shared humanity. As the procession moved through the neighborhood, additional spectators gathered to watch, staying with the Volvo-driven audience until we dispersed back to our cars. Their presence testified to the human magnetism of the event.

For me, the final moment of *floodlines* proved one of the most telling. Returning to the site of departure, we found the thirty-plus performers, all still in white, waiting to applaud the spectators. On the grass behind them, a celebration waited—strawberries and sparkling grape juice (the champagne of a zero tolerance campus). Spread out among five cars, the audience could not offer a collective applause, much less the more frequent Austin custom of a standing ovation. But I was amazed and moved by the generosity of this moment. Through their welcoming gesture, the performers seemed to be saying something profound about the nature of performance itself.

Jill's response: Radical Amazement (2004)

It takes a moment, to realize that we're in the presence of performance. And some people, along the way, never realized. What does it mean, in that moment of recognition? What do we think we see, when we see performance? What do we think it means? Some people, when they "got" it, were angry—the cab driver along San Jacinto, right at the beginning, felt this game was inconvenient, interrupting his commerce. Other people wanted so much to see it as a joke; their nervousness was obvious in their wonder. Please, don't let this be real. Please, I don't know how to organize my face around what I'm seeing. Please, let it be okay to laugh. I found myself strangely empathetic to these spectators and their wondering. I'm a good Jewish girl who doesn't make a spectacle (or tries not to),

Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Jill Dolan, & Jaclyn Pryor

yet here I was, part of one, responsible in some small way for the disconcertions of those we stumbled upon in our wanderings. I had to make an effort to block them out, to not take care of them, to not explain. I could see the public, and I knew their presence was important. But I wanted this experience to be private, to be communal, to be about the making of a “we” that was as close to a “me” as anything I’ve experienced yet in Austin. Maurya Wickstrom writes about the ethical need to make of the world a home, by imagining the “what ought to be” instead of the “what is.” Through what she calls “sympathetic connectedness,” we can feel ourselves part of a humanity profitably, subtly universalized. I felt sympathetically connected in my car, and felt the stirrings of “home,” there, in this mobile place that could never actually rest. I felt nomadic, which Wickstrom says is also the condition of ethical materialism post-9/11—that we can’t stop, that home is no longer a place but a condition, a making, something we have to keep doing. A performative.

The first moment I think I realized what the performance would mean to me was when we turned on to San Jacinto, the street that runs parallel to the Theatre Department building, before we got to the guard’s box, where a UT office controls entrances to the campus. I turned back to look behind me, and saw my colleagues and friends in the following cars, and felt my throat close with a kind of love and wonder, that here we all were, following you, Jaclyn, in these strangers’ cars, as you ran. We took a leap of faith with you: we got into cars with strangers driving, we didn’t know what would happen to us, or where you would take us, but we trusted you enough to put our bodies in those cars and continue on. I was also moved because I think it was at that moment that I realized we were in cars marked with Jewish “Funeral” stickers—the Jewish star above that word was so startling for me. It’s been a while since I’ve been in a funeral cortege, and those horrible moments have always been in Pittsburgh or Baltimore, with family. There was something about the transposition of that historical experience onto the present moment that moved me. Here I was with people whom I consider my adult family, who reconstitute, for me, a sense of caring and belonging. And they’d all been resignified as Jewish, which would only resonate in that very particular way to me and to the perhaps one or two other Jews along for the ride. I was very conscious of my friends and colleagues being asked to wear, for that moment, in that car, the public sign of my own identity. What did it mean to them to be read that way?

The music on the soundtrack nearly broke my heart. I could feel the music go through me, and watch you run, and see us moved, on the current of the sound and all the ways its melodies touched me, past these amazingly clear, utterly compelling images, tableaux that changed my relationship to my world, for those moments.

***Fringe and Fringe Ability**, written by Paul Bonin-Rodriguez; performed by Paul Bonin-Rodriguez (2004, 2005), and Paul Bonin-Rodriguez and Lisa Suarez (2005)*

Jaclyn’s response: Coming Home (2004)

I arrive at the Blue Star Arts Complex at 7:35 p.m., fashionably early for an 8:00 curtain. I’ve made the one-hour-and-twenty-five minute trek from Austin to San Antonio to see *Fringe and Fringe Ability*. As I approach the theatre, I notice a bustling

crowd gathered outside. I imagine that perhaps the house is not yet open, though I wonder why everyone would chose to stand outside in the hot Texas sun rather than in—what I presume is—a comfortably air-conditioned foyer. Through a glass window, I spy Paul inside—flanked by two other men—roaming the lobby. I ask someone if she knows what’s going on, and I’m instructed that there has been a brown-out in the area, the theatre is dark, and we’re waiting to see what’s what. As new people approach the theatre, they are similarly brought into the fold: *There has been a brown-out in the area, the theatre is dark, we’re waiting to see what’s what.* No one seems at all bothered or anxious. No one is checking her or his watch, making a cell phone call home, making a plan B. Everyone, in fact, seems very content waiting, huddled together, being present.

Paul emerges with a smile and thanks everyone for coming. He explains that the show might not go up tonight, but that we should all come inside, relax, and have a drink or two on them. We are 52 people strong, and I delight in watching Paul greet nearly each and every one of us by name as we file into the dark lobby of this community-based performance space. I mingle about, feeling more like a guest at a friend’s holiday or housewarming party than an anonymous spectator at a theatre event. Just before 8:00, the electrics suddenly come back on and the crowd reconfigures itself in the adjacent black-box theatre.

The stage is empty, except for one black folding chair, top-lit by a perfect square of white light. As the house goes to half, Mama Cass’s “The Good Times are Coming” pipes in. When the lights fade to blackout, Paul enters. In a red and white striped button-down shirt, distressed designer blue jeans, and slight Texas twang, he is unmistakably Johnny Roy Hobson, the self-proclaimed small town “sissy boy,” last seen by many at the Cedar Springs Dairy Queen in Paul’s earlier performance installment *Love in the Time of College*. With his award-winning design of a new DQ uniform, Johnny earned a full scholarship to the University of Texas, leaving his best friend and DQ cohort, Delinda Domingo, his mama, and his small town life behind—or so he presumed.

Now known simply as “John” by his co-workers at Southwest Airlines and his Austin clients of his custom-made home accessory line “Sittin’ Pretty,” Johnny Roy Hobson has grown up and *out*. Almost thirty, John has developed a relationship with Doug, an older and wealthier Chicago-based interior designer who, we learn, John is eagerly en route to visit for the first time on a quick trip between SWA lines. With a seamless change of posture, voice, and affect, Paul *becomes* Doug, and, in such a way that only an experienced solo performer can, he negotiates a complex scene between Doug and John, John and Mama, John and an impatient flight attendant, and John and a needy Sittin’ Pretty client named Cynthia who urgently awaits his installation of her Roman blinds, all at once.

Though deftly executed, this technique, of course, is nothing new. What is, however, is the fact that all of these characters interact not in real time and space but across great distances, made possible by John’s shiny gold Nokia phone. At first content to see John on the go, fulfilling what we know is his longtime dream of

Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Jill Dolan, & Jaclyn Pryor

mobility, modernity, and urban comfort, I gradually find myself longing for John to slow down, be present, share a genuine moment of human connection—sloppy, vulnerable, sexual or otherwise—with someone in his world in the same way that he is willing to share it with me in the audience.

When John finally touches down in Chicago, one-hour-and-forty minutes behind schedule, he receives a voicemail message that Doug left that morning, instructing John he isn't expecting him; this is not a good weekend; they should do it another time. My heart sinks in empathy for someone who has suddenly discovered himself so much less welcome than he had imagined. With a delicate mixture of determination and naiveté, John heads to Doug's fancy downtown loft to *have* his date. My heart sinks further still, as John's physical presence comes second (and then third and fourth and fifth) to the disembodied voices on the other end of the cellular and portable phones which Doug juggles between delicate sips of white wine, with a single finger held out to his visitor, indicating that John should patiently standby and wait to become a priority.

From Fringe and Fringe Ability:

It was 4 p.m. when we arrived at the old brick warehouse. On my face, I felt a light sprinkling of rain or snow. Just beyond the building, the street dead-ended at a wall, and I saw an elevated overpass rising up and curling around the opposite side. I thought, this is a very nice crossroad between going somewhere and being somewhere.

I stepped out of the gusts and into the breezeway and pressed the button to his apartment. All was quiet for a moment. Then came a buzz, and I let myself in.

When I came around the corner, I found Doug was standing in the doorway. He wore black drawstring pants and an ecru sweater—a look that combined comfort and elegance. He was holding a phone, saying, “Yes, I tell you, they will want Clarence House for the rug—no, not the leopard, never the leopard—the antelope.”

He held a finger out to me to indicate he would be off shortly. I looked away to give him privacy. Over a background of soft Starbucks jazz, I could hear a cell phone beeping in another room.

The loft was furnished in a sparse, modern manner that other people can afford: dark stained cement floors, black Barcelona chairs, a red Knoll sofa, rice paper lamps—oh, and Eames. Through the windows, I could see the cars whizzing by and tried to imagine his Sunday mornings.

When I looked back Doug was gone, and I could hear him answering another phone. I walked deeper into the apartment and took off my coat.

On a nice chair by a designer I couldn't name, I put my things, and then I waited for Doug to return, which he did shortly.

Still speaking on his phone, Doug leaned over a coffee table to retrieve a glass of white wine. He held it up, almost like a toast, and pushed it towards me. I thought he was saying: “Do you want white wine?” So I nodded, and mouthed the word, “Sure.”

But he pushed the glass towards me again, and I thought, “Oh, he wants me to drink from it.” But when I went over and took it, he pointed to the kitchen and the fridge, and I realized he

wanted me to get him some more. Into the phone, he said, “Yes, yes,” and to me he offered a generous thumbs up.

And I smiled and started walking the kitchen.

In the fridge, I found cheese and fruit and several family-size bottles of wine. I hadn’t eaten all day. I was really hungry, but I knew even then this fucker wasn’t going to offer me anything.

I was turning from the fridge when Doug finally got off the phone. He took a moment to appraise my stuff piled on his chair.

“Yes, there you are,” he said, as he reached for the glass, kissed me quickly, and took a sip. “Cynthia is really pissed that you’re here by the way. Okay? I’ll get dressed, and then we’ll go, yes? Are you staying overnight somewhere or just going back?”

And before I could answer, his cell phone beeped again.

“Ugh!” he said, “You see why I like to come to Austin!” Then flipped it open, said, “Doug here!” and left the room.

I looked at my watch—it was 4:30. I could see the time between us diminishing. I wanted him to realize how far I had come; I wanted to show him how far I could go. And so I followed the sound of his voice.

Jachyn’s response, continued:

Paul, as John, stands upstage center, top lit by a single blue light. Almost entirely motionless, with minimalist language and a calm affect, he describes pulling down Doug’s trousers and performing oral sex on him while Doug continues to talk on the phone. With John finally in a position of power, he is able to get Doug off—the phone. As our narrator coolly describes the ensuing acts of “pushing him toward the bed,” “slapping him hard,” “rolling it down,” “moistening and massaging” and “making it hurt,” I lose my visual map and become disoriented as to who is penetrating and who is being penetrated. This, Paul assures me after the show, is intentional, a *feminist gestic* moment (see Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*; Baley) about pleasure and consumption in a post-modern world and the thin line that’s come to separate fucking and getting fucked. Much to everyone’s surprise, the scene is punctuated by a climactic cell phone ring. On the other end, we hear the quiet and familiar voice of his old high school friend, Delinda Domingo, urging John to come home immediately—his Mama is in the hospital after drinking a dangerous amount of household chemicals.

The busy urban jungle as a kind of “gay utopia” is, of course, precisely the mythology that Paul brings into question in this piece. The trope’s inverse, as well—rural areas as gay *dystopia*—is equally disrupted in *Fringe and Fringe Ability*. Paul astutely recognizes how film and media representations of such once-unknown places as Falls City, Nebraska, and Laramie, Wyoming—popularized by the violent slaughterings of Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard, respectively, that occurred in these small towns—have perpetuated yet another mythology, one which Paul seeks to interrogate: that the rural environment (what Paul, in his program notes, calls “the heartland”) is *most* hostile to LGBTQ people, and that it is from these small

towns that we must flee in order to achieve the “Gay American Dream” (see Halberstam).

Paul challenges this logic and our presumptions through his character’s pull between two worlds. As spectator, though I’m worried for John and what awaits him in Cedar Springs, I find myself strangely anxious and expectant for his journey home. Although perhaps not an ideal community for a thirty-year-old out gay man, *home* offers a possibility of respite from the global marketplace of ideas and things.

As the play closes with a tired John Hobson downstage center, driving north on an imaginary, dark and empty Interstate 35, completing his long day’s journey home, we are left to wonder together how going home might constitute a kind of radical act. As Paul astutely asks in his program notes, “If he went back home, how might he create a space to live?” As I read my program after the show, I can’t help think not just of John Hobson but of his creator, Paul, who, in returning John to the Jump Start stage after fully a decade, has once again created a space for this community to gather, think, and feel together, to question our lives and the choices that we make in the making of them and, in the course of our co-presence together—what anthropologist Victor Turner has called *communitas*—engage our own kind of radical human connectedness.

Jill’s response: *The Painfully Instructed* (2005)

As soon as the lights went down, I was struck by the power, simplicity, and straight forward charisma of your performance. You’re very “crisp” on stage, Paul, and more present than many performers I’ve seen. That is, in the continual debate over the personal/political/performative and how we read it on stage, you seem more like yourself than most people whose work I’ve seen engage these questions. Although I know, as Deb Margolin says, that as soon as we begin to narrate our lives, they become fictionalized, and although I know that Johnny is a “character,” there was a you-ness to the piece that I found moving and comfortable. I felt invited into your performative life in a way that felt intimate and familiar, yet heightened by the place, the moment, and the obvious craft of the performance.

I love the arriving-in-Chicago at Doug’s apartment monologue. You seem to settle into that performance in a different way—it could be because the night we saw it was opening night, and I knew that you and Lisa (the woman playing Delinda) were a bit nervous. I thought I could see you listening for her cues and yours, in a way that seemed distracting to you. When you hit this Chicago monologue, I felt something of relief in your bearing and in your delivery. It seemed that you were suddenly freed to just *go* with this story, and it gave the monologue a sense of pace, rhythm, and confidence. The line about being at “the crossroads of *being* somewhere and *going* somewhere” is really lovely and moving. (That was a moment I could picture, a particular, specific image that reached into something universal [see Wittig].)

I didn’t want to feel that Johnny was abject in this scene or in the others, yet sometimes I found myself resisting my own projection that that’s what I was

watching. Then I wondered if that was generational—in some ways, I see you/Johnny as so much a part of my own generation of the “painfully instructed” (see George Chauncey), the generation of gay men/lesbians/queers for whom abjection was in fact a formative part of our subjectivities from early on. I guess I was both identifying with this sneaking sense of abjection I felt and at the same time wanting to reject it, to *not* go there, probably because I wanted to protect myself and you, Paul (not Johnny).

That concern drops away at the end, when you come out, again alone, for the poignant and moving final monologue.

Paul:

All is pretty quiet here. The few who have passed so far are either locals going to the early town parade, or the newest immigrants going out to work in the fields or on houses.

On my first night back, Delinda asked me how I planned to take care of my Mama. At the time, I didn't really have a plan. I hadn't spoken to the doctor yet. I didn't know that Mama had stopped taking her meds when Larry refused to pay for them. I was thinking that when Mama had gone through a last big depression, I just supported her until I could find her some regular work. I was thinking, I'm older now and somewhat professional

Without much forethought, I tried to give Delinda a sense of what I planned to do at home, by telling her about my work in the air. I told her that in flight school we are taught to provide comfort and security in three ways: 1) we offer basic safety guidelines; 2) we offer a few amenities to make people comfortable; and 3) we limit the number of choices we offer people. In doing so, we manage to lessen the growing needs that service creates in the first place. At four in the morning, after a long journey and a bad fuck, it was the best I could do.

I could see Delinda's face growing confused as I went through my description. By the time I finished, her brow had pretty much knit a sweater and mittens. She said such service was all fine and good for a quick trip to Portland, but she hoped I could trust Mama to be a co-worker in her own wellness. She said that Mama should be invited to make intelligent decisions and take responsibility for herself. And that I should make her aware of my needs, too.

Tired though I was, I told Delinda I hoped the same things too. But I already knew that my approach was the tried and true. “Besides,” I said. “I'm at my best when I'm serving.” Delinda looked at me for almost a full minute. “Okay, then, and I'm sorry to ask you on this night especially, but why weren't you there for me when my Mama died?”

And I was confused for a moment, because I was there. I hugged her at the funeral.

“No,” she replied, “You just touched down. You didn't you come to the house or stay close afterwards.”

And I told her I did, I had come, I just hadn't gone in. I stood outside, looked into the windows instead. I saw her brother and sisters and dad gathered around each other. I witnessed the gravitational force that pulls families close. I imagined that their needs found comfort somewhere in the center of the tight circle they formed, and I knew that there was no place for me there.

“I was an employee and friend,” I said, “but I was never part of your family.”

Delinda said, “At some point, Johnny, all your doing must add up to a becoming. It's the act of being present that makes possible the moments of needs being met. Perhaps when you're able to

Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Jill Dolan, & Jachyn Pryor

Speak of your own needs in the presence of those who know you, you'll be able to recognize our needs, too. Those are the local actions that can reach across the globe."

Jill's response, continued:

It's an elegiac moment, of not-quite-reconciliation, but of redemption of a sort that I find so much (and so appreciate) in your work, that sense of being "home," not exactly "back home," but home in a different sense, one reconfigured by Johnny's choice to return, that creates possibilities for new definitions of kinship (which I think is what you say in the performance). I love ending with a realization that Johnny/Paul/me/queers can never be part of our families, and yet that we're always part of our families—that ambivalence moves and somehow confirms me.

I love looking at/reading/engaging with your work, Paul, because you're so brave (I want to say that, even though it feels like exactly the wrong word) and vulnerable and yet so strong and sure and even reckless in performance, reckless in the sense of being willing to risk the live to say what needs to be said, to risk your own power to *be* abject, for a moment, if that's what it takes to say something true about the story and your/Johnny's experience in it. I aspire to such courage, that willingness to speak out loud, as performance artist Deb Margolin has said, that's the necessary pre-condition of a theatre of desire.

From Flannel to Fleece, by Jill Dolan, an excerpt of a work-in-progress (soundtrack by Gloria Gaynor, especially "I Will Survive") (2005)

For a nickel, I'd tell you about all the women I've ever loved, as a way of spinning out for you a story about a moment in time, a moment of passion and politics and performance, a moment when my own flesh collided with history through the flesh of others. A nickel is a small price to pay for memory: the terror of memory is that it could be genetic, not in a restricted, familiar way, but genetic in a deep, community, cultural way, like the imprints of a common history that mark us all, but differently. For a nickel, I could tell you stories from my life in which you might see yourself, in which we might feel these words and memories imprint us with a present that might infinitesimally shift our DNA. These impressions might change the intimate makeup of what we then have available to pass along, not through biology, but through the genetic codes of culture that our stories represent. Standing before you naked in my clothes, I'll tell you these stories not to unburden myself, by no means to confess, but to let words linger between us that might let us feel close over the inevitable distance between us. Elin Diamond, after Freud, calls this the history of our identifications (see Diamond, "The Violence of 'We'"). For me, after no one, only prosaic old me, it's a history of how who I've loved is what I am. The story is a debt I pay to women who couldn't possibly know then who they were shaping, a debt I owe for their generosity, their grace, and my own resilience.

I want to dance with every woman I've ever loved. Sometimes, I see us all assembled in the first lesbian bar I ever danced in, the Saints, in downtown Boston,

a place transformed in the snowy evenings from a business man's sandwich and beer bar into a haven for flannel-shirted lesbians learning how to make lives with each other. I imagine myself in the center of the dance space, my crisp white shirt glowing under the purple black light along with my teeth, shining like beacons out of my face while the disco ball twirls and reflects little chinks of light onto my jeans. I imagine my hands outstretched in love and forgiveness, inviting each of my old lovers to join me in the circle for a turn around the floor, to return to the embrace, the first embrace we ever shared, that tender, lustful first moment of contact with the bodies we wanted and wanted to be near. I imagine the hope in that moment, the recovery of the past in the present, the wholeness of recapturing those moments of fleshfulness in the place, the bar, the Saints, that first gave me my body.

I imagine dancing with these women the way dance contestants do, with all the ease and grace of pros, with all the desire of those who want to win not because they're the best but because the mingling of their desire with their bodies transforms them into a dazzling spectacle of light and love. I imagine putting my arms around these women once again, embracing what we were to each other, choreographed by the sounds of the moment—Sister Sledge, Gloria Gaynor, Sylvester, Cris Williamson, all the women's music stars and singers whose melodies we captured in our dark little bars and made our own.

I imagine feeling whole in my life, recollecting all the pieces of myself I gave away to each of them, not to take myself back, but to hold those memories between us, shimmering in the light of the disco ball, to remember that what we are is always only made up of pieces of each other. I imagine myself at 48, with gray hair and a body that resists my desire to transform its musculature no matter how much weight I lift or how much fat I burn, breathlessly sending my knees over my feet on the elliptical machine, my body with its middle-age imperfections meeting my ex-lovers in the glorious imperfections of theirs, realizing how imperfect we were then and loving each other again for it.

I ache for those moments of desire that are like fusion, not of jazz, but of souls, fusion where desire leads you to be seen more clearly than you even know yourself. I ache for those moments of singular recognition when you can wrap someone in your long black wool coat on a street corner and feel your warmth bounce off their skin as you murmur your goodbyes under cover of taxi horns and bus exhaust. I ache for the loss I feel when the embrace ends and we walk away separately, our backs talking to each other over the distance that we won't turn around to mark, knowing how much that lingering would give away and not being able to afford it.

I ache to stretch those moments out live, instead of replaying them in my mind, images, memories so sharp, so full, so replete with longing and with loss that scotch only polishes them, instead of diluting them. I ache against the bodies that have lain beside me, knowing that no matter how deeply we touch, how intently we look, how honestly we talk, we can't fill the space between, not really, not with anything more than this fleeting sense of wonder and love. I ache to recreate those moments, to uncover their geography, to explore their archeology, knowing that only wishes

Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Jill Dolan, & Jaclyn Pryor

recreate them, never the *will*. I ache for the clarity and sweet pain of those moments when I measure how much I'm alive by what I can never recover. I ache for the failure of language; I ache for the continual attempt to try.

Paul's response: *The body, the word, the image* (2005)

Driving home from Jill's house after watching an impromptu, on-command, first performance of Jill's narrative-in-progress, *From Flannel to Fleece*, Jaclyn and I confess our experience of the moments before. We say we found ourselves *moved* by the stories Jill told; we found ourselves *magnetically* drawn by Jill's presence, and most especially her *modesty* and timidity while sharing new work. Moving, magnetic, modest. These are "M" words. Jaclyn will later note that the three works we are discussing—*floodlines*, *Fringe and Fringe Ability*, and *From Flannel to Fleece*—show a preference for "F" words.

Finally, in the moment of non-sequitur that marks some friendships, we speak of our love for the TV show *The L Word*. Inspired by Jill's stories of lesbian life and desire, we are on a roll of loving things performative in general and things just worth loving in particular.

From Flannel to Fleece is a book- and performance-in-progress that follows Jill's journey as a lesbian feminist coming out and of age in the 1970s. As Jill makes clear in her book proposal, lesbians from that certain age, who are now "of a certain age," found allies in the vibrant feminist movement rather than a "queer movement" that would emerge years later. In the public sphere, many lesbians devoted themselves to addressing the rigid patriarchal structures that bounded and determined women's places. The private sphere became one of intimate discovery, clandestine celebration, and the negotiation of private/public concealment/presence.

Watching Jill perform excerpts drawn from her work-in-progress, I am struck by their *noir* tinge and the paradoxes at work. At the beginning, she uses storytelling to gesture to a greater community and common history, but in a boomerang moment, she returns to infinitesimal, "intimate make up of what we then have available to then pass along." Stories reach across great distances only to "reveal the inevitable distance between us." No great light is shed on the whole because the whole itself is made up of intricate parts that storytelling can only begin to capture and illuminate. And yet through memory and acknowledgement the storyteller is able to breach the gaps of history and to reclaim its parts. By acknowledging the gift of women's love and her own persistence of memory and gratitude, Jill finds a way to make evident a private legacy. Through discourse, that legacy becomes public.

In another sequence, the performer moves to the disco, or more specifically, the memory of the disco, where the black light once illuminated her white shirt and shiny teeth like "beacons." In this single image, against a soundtrack of disco anthems, Jill revels in the joyous communion of bodies moving so freely that they are able to love and forgive at once. The shadow of paradox looms as Jill acknowledges her own age since then, the ways in which memory offers up both

accomplishments and losses, as well as the ways that the spectral antagonisms of love and forgiveness belie a darker side to love.

Perhaps it is fitting, then, that the final sequence finds the writer-performer aching for the closeness that she once took for granted. A perfectly distilled image finds her wrapping her coat and body around another woman before walking away, perhaps overly sure that the conditions that brought them together for a moment will always exist. The author aches for those moments of bodily closeness, and yet finds her own body “just introducing itself to me.”

Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson has long been credited with coining the term “the decisive moment” to describe the instant at which the composition assembles itself.³ Once captured, this image forever bears the tension of its potential movement against the stasis of its recording. With their simultaneous gesture to the once-possible and the past, Jill’s images imprint a decisive quality. However, it is Jill’s performing body as well as her body of writings which offer up two more paradoxes that revive and relieve the past.

First, in speaking the words and making evident the body that failed to hold onto its past, Dolan reclaims history and, through utterance, adheres it to her body once again. Second, as Dolan makes clear in the introduction to *Presence and Desire*, her inability to find a home in the gendered theater department of Boston University of the 1970s prompted her to focus on theater criticism. As a spectator and critic, Jill repeatedly brought her bodily presence to bear in her writings. By occupying the performance space—the same rather still, “professorial” one often associated with the late monologist Spalding Gray—Jill has reclaimed a space once denied, if not a dream deferred. In addition, she has managed to one-up history by showing that the passage of time has brought its greater share of public-worthy and publicity-worthy triumphs than defeats. Jill’s first performance of this work was marked by timidity and by a rapid-reading pace of which the teacher “Jill Dolan,” upon hearing, might have made note, and yet in that pulse-racing moment of risk, Jill showed that her performing body is ready still to live the risk, excitement, and commitment of the flannel-wearing lesbian on the happening disco floor.

Jaclyn’s response: Keeping (Lesbian) Time (2005)

I feel like this writing speaks of a desire to open up the snapshot of memory, to arrest those images that flash through the mind, to demand that they mean something not only in the past but in the present, too. Your desire to speak seems to be a desire to move memory from the contained space of your imagination to somewhere more public, more corporeal, more seducible to chance, so, as you say, memory gets not just re-played in the mind but “stretched out live.” I feel like this bespeaks a desire to feel everything all at once, rather than in parts and pieces. When you say, “I want to dance with every woman I’ve ever loved,” I hear a desire to

³ The term was derived from the title of the English edition of Cartier-Bresson’s 1952 book, *Images à la Sauvette*.

experience *every* moment of *every* love in *that* moment. By placing “all the contestants” on the dance floor together, and with you at the center, this fantasy becomes possible and we, as audience, get to be there, too. Very Benjaminian actually, but perhaps these are my preoccupations flooding your work. You invite that kind of interpellation, though, so generously. When you say, for example, “For a nickel, I could tell you stories from my life in which you might see yourself,” you are acknowledging the way in which performance, particularly the performance of memory, is never only autobiographical, how it’s no longer about “you” the second you’ve spoken it before someone else. We get to be there, maybe even to be you.

I love the way you describe this work as a “story about a moment in time, a moment of passion and politics and performance, *a moment when my own flesh collided with history through the flesh of others.*” The writing is beautiful, evocative, erotic, astute and it gets at, I think, what might be the heart of this project, which is something about the relationship between private and public life, the body/flesh and the body/politic, and the ways in which physical bodies must and do circulate and navigate in public culture, making sense of things, inventing how to live. The notion of chance, again, creeps in here for me—I think of you (as you describe in your proposal for this project) “stumbling” upon lesbian feminist performances in the East Village and this impacting, altering, establishing how you think and feel. These are moments, I think, of flesh colliding with history and history colliding with flesh, discovering one another.

The image of you standing before “[us] naked in [your] clothes” strikes a chord. It’s one of those “right” moments that we’ve discussed hesitating to name for fear that they get reduced to “good” and “bad.” It feels right, in part, I think, because of its truth about vulnerability and what it reveals, too, about the present-tenseness of the performance (even though it is, in many ways, “about” the past). In light of the title, *From Flannel to Fleece*, I get the sense that what “clothes” you are standing naked in “now” can only be understood in relation to everything you have ever “worn” before—the “flannel,” for example, or the “crisp, white shirt that glows under the purple black light along with [your] teeth” and your jeans that reflect the “little chinks of light” from the disco ball. In this sense, the “from” and “to” (in *From Flannel to Fleece*) do not signal a progress narrative for me, but a kind of constellar history—the only way to understand the materiality of the present moment is alongside that which has come before. It’s neither linear nor hierarchical, neither cynical nor nostalgic. Here, actually, I am reminded of one of Stacy Wolf’s arguments (in *A Problem Like Maria*), where she describes the way in which nostalgia operates differently in a lesbian narrative since the past is often examined “for signs of the present” (213), complicating, as she suggests, “what we think of as nostalgia” (213) and also, I would posit, how we think of (lesbian) time.

Another “line” that seems so “right” is the declaration that “who I’ve loved is what I am,” particularly when read alongside your images that the Saints is “the place that gave me a body” and “what we are is always only made up of pieces of each other.” I am stuck, in all three instances, by the notion that who we/you are in

the flesh is constituted through *practice*, and erotic practice at that, suggesting that we have a body, perhaps, only insofar as we use it. There is no there there, only small and great doings that, over time, only seem to add up to something material. It's interesting, too, reading this against your description of yourself "at 47, nearly 48," with "gray hair and a body that resists my desire to transform [it]" and seeing how, in the latter, desire turns onto itself, becoming about physical change (e.g., "musculature"); the body acts not as a location of desire but a site that "resists" it. I feel sadness when I hear that.

I am stuck by an overall desire to reclaim: places, people, moments, language, time, to (as you suggest, albeit slightly differently) wrap these people, places, and things in your long, wool coat on a street corner, and savor their warmth, stretch it out, make it last, before the inevitable moment of gradual loss that follows. I am also stuck by the way in which this writing is so *generational* and *historiographical*—it makes sense that the subtitle is "a lesbian of a certain age." I feel young when I read/hear it, the past feels, as I've suggested, present, but also really distant, something that I missed and cannot access or ever really "know" but through another. I am reminded, too, of Michael Warner's assertion that queers do not have "institutions for memory and generational transmission around which straight culture is built" (51) and so, as he suggests, younger queers must invent "from scratch." This archive, then, is indeed an archive of feelings and by this I mean an *intervention*—in the writing and forgetting of lesbian history.

To Conclude, in Unison: Making Queer Futures

With this essay and through our attempts here to embody colleague-criticism, we hope to provide a means and model for the continued practice of the form. We see the form as a call for sustained commitments between critics and artists, and perhaps even a more comprehensive understanding of the artistic role that critics play and the critical engagement required by artists. For communities whose access to a "critic" is determined by the consumer-based resources of the local paper, colleague-criticism serves as both an option and ethos for a critical archive. Likewise, colleague-criticism invites an immediate, but knowing, form of critical engagement. Because it troubles notions of the written document as some kind of two-dimensional, post-performance, final pronouncement of artistic value and merit, colleague-criticism challenges normative assumptions about the relationship between performance, writing, and time. In this sense, colleague-criticism aims to be, as well as to encourage, a new kind of performance archive, chronicling our ongoing engagements with one another's work.

As queer colleagues, we are committed to a longer-term notion of ourselves and our work, and practice a belief in our own futurity by insisting on *being there*, standing beside each other as co-artists, as well as colleague-critics. This revised sense of critical (and creative) time complements the queer project of reconceptualizing commitment outside of heteronormative models that require benediction from state or religious discourses. Our commitment comes from a queer-inflected ethic of

being together on the basis of desire in the present: the desire to see and share our creativity and our criticism, to nurture each other as artist-citizen-scholars, and to see our work grow and change over time.

Rather than standing as a final pronouncement on an artistic project, colleague-criticism changes with the art work. Just as performance is ephemeral and disappears soon after it happens, criticism, too, is always changing, morphing, disappearing along with the work to which it's intimately connected. Colleague-criticism acknowledges the necessity that the work will change with the historical moment. Because colleague-criticism presumes that the work will change, our commitment is to each other as artists/cultural workers, rather than only to the text/show in question. In this way, our essay is something of a manifesto/demonstration for a new critical paradigm, one that re-views the inherent temporality of critical work and refuses the consumerist model of judgment and value. Colleague-criticism nurtures a queer sense of time, in which past-present-future modes are profitably seen together in what Walter Benjamin calls "messianic time," because of the way in which the present moment pulsates with both history and possibility. We choose to write about the present moment of live performance not because we desire to fix it in time but because we believe that colleague-criticism is a continual process of engagement that grows and changes with the performance work on which it comments (that is, through which the criticism itself comes to live and breathe and find its future).

While we don't write about performance merely to memorialize it or fix it in some past, we do recognize our responsibility, as artists, as citizens, as scholars, and as queer people, to write for the archive. And, as Judith Halberstam reminds us, queer archives are not merely material places; they are also structures of feelings and ways of collecting memories, gathering experiences, and evoking histories. Halberstam writes,

The notion of the archive has to extend beyond the image of a place to collect material or hold documents, and it has to become a floating signifier *for the kinds of lives implied by the paper remnants* of shows, clubs, events, and meetings. The archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity. (170, emphasis added)

In this sense, this project of writing about each other's performance work archives our investment in each others' creative lives and creative work, and archives, too, similar lives and works that have fallen from history. Our critical writing is a material practice, but it is also, as Halberstam suggests, a theory of cultural relevance (see also Cvetkovich and Munoz).

As a *queer* critical archive, colleague-criticism is attentive to the ways in which all performance practices in general and queer performance practices in particular are always already marked by grief and loss. For this reason, the project of writing about performance of/as queer colleagues has profoundly political stakes. In *Mourning Sex* (1997), Peggy Phelan argues that queer lives are bound by, at one end, a first,

symbolic death of coming out (in) to a hostile world, and, at the other, a coming out of that world in a final, material death. Pinned not between life and death, but between death and death,

lesbians and gay men in the contemporary US have a particularly potent relationship to grief. Exiled from the law of the social upon which heterosexuality is based, many gay men and lesbians have introjected the passionate hatred of mainstream homophobia that take up an embattled, aggressive, and complex relationship to the death drive. The aggressiveness of this relation may make it possible for us to survive our (first deaths). While we wait for the next, we perform queer acts. (154)

Indeed, the act of performing live with our queer bodies, and the project of writing with them, too, becomes a form of what Benjamin calls this “epic remembrance” because memory, and only memory, “creates the chain to tradition which passes a happening on” (98). In this sense, colleague-criticism is our way—in spite of the inherent impossibility of queer futures (see Berlant and Edelman)—of writing against disappearance.

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987.
- Baley, Shannon. “Death and Desire, Apocalypse and Utopia: Feminist Gestus and the Utopian Performative in the Plays of Naomi Wallace.” *Modern Drama* 47 (2004): 237-50.
- Benjamin, Walter. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997.
- Bonin-Rodriguez, Paul. *Fringe and Fringe Ability*. Unpublished manuscript. 2004, 2005.
- , Jill Dolan, and Jaclyn Pryor. “Colleague Criticism and Queer Collegiality.” The Borderlands Lecture Series, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, October 2005.
- , Jaclyn Pryor, and Jill Dolan. “Colleague-Criticism: Performance, Criticism, and Collegiality.” Abriendo Brecha Conference, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, January 2005.
- , and Jaclyn Pryor. “Queer Lunch: Performance, Criticism, and Public Practice.” Women in Theater Pre-Conference, ATHE, Toronto, Ontario, August 2004.
- Chauncey, George. “The Queer History and Politics of Lesbian and Gay Studies.” *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*. Ed. Joseph Boone, et.al. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2000. 298-315.
- Cohen-Cruz, Jan. *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2005.
- Conquergood, Dwight. “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance.” *Literature and Performance* 5.2 (1985): 1-13.
- Copeland, Roger. “Not/There: Manipulating the Myth of Victim Art.” *American Theatre* 12.4 (1995): 35.

- Croce, Arlene. "Discussing the Undiscussable." *Writing in the Dark, Dancing in The New Yorker*. New York: Farrar, 2003. 708-19.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.
- Daly, Ann. *Critical Gestures: Writings on Dance and Culture*. Middleton: Wesleyan UP, 2002.
- De Lauretis, Teresa. "The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the United States, and Britain." *differences* 1.2: 3-37.
- Diadiun, Ted. "A Critical Review Stirs Things up at the Play House," Plain Dealer (Cleveland), Sunday, October 8, 2006, A2. http://web.lexis-nexis.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/universe/document?_m=bf09fe954b608360b891c4fe2aa2a324&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVtb-zSkVA&_md5=5099cdfba0ef_92f043f27870f3685b8e Accessed May 15, 2007.
- Diamond, Elin. *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- . "The Violence of 'We': Politicizing Identification." *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ed. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach. Rev., ed. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2007. 403-12.
- Dolan, Jill. "Educating and inspiring scholar-artist-citizens." *Austin American Statesman* 19 October 2004: A11.
- . *From Flannel to Fleece: A Lesbian of a Certain Age*. Unpublished manuscript. 2005.
- . "Introduction." *Modern Drama* 47, no. 2 (2004): 165-176.
- . *Presence and Desire: Gender, Sexuality, Performance*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993.
- . Public Intellectuals and the Arts. Syllabus. Department of Theatre and Dance, Univ. of Texas at Austin. Spring 2004.
- . *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.
- Gallop, Jane. *Anecdotal Theory*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002.
- . *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997.
- Halberstam, Judith. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York UP, 2005.
- Jones, Joni. "Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity." *Theatre Topics* 12.1 (2002): 1-15.
- Jowitt, Deborah. "Getting It: a choreographer squares off against critics of an evanescent art form." *The Village Voice* 28 February 2006. 9 April 2007. <http://villagevoice.com/dance/0609jowitt,72343,14.html>.
- Kuftinec, Sonja. *Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theater*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2003.
- Margolin, Deb. "Mining my Own Business: Paths between Text and Self." *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory, Practice, Future*. Ed. David Krasner. New York: St. Martin's, 2000. 127-34.
- . "A Perfect Theatre for One: Teaching 'Performance Composition.'" *TDR: The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies* 41.2: 68-81.
- Muñoz, José Estaban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "Confronting Head on the Face of the Afflicted." *New York Times* 19 February 1995. 2:1.
- Pellegrini, Ann. "[Pedagogy's Turn: Observations on Students, Teachers, and Transference-Love](#)." *Critical Inquiry* 25: 617-25.
- Phelan, Peggy. *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*. London: Routledge, 1997.

- Román, David. *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture and AIDS*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998.
- Siegel, Marcia B. "Virtual Criticism and the Dance of Death." *TDR: The Drama Review* 40.2 (1996): 60.
- Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974.
- . *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1982.
- Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. NY: Zone, 2002.
- Wickstrom, Maurya. "Wonder in the Heart of Empire: Deborah Warner's *Medea* and *The Angel Project*." *Modern Drama* 47 (2004): 177-199.
- Wittig, Monique. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon, 1992.
- Wolf, Stacy. *A Problem like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002.
- , and Jill Dolan. "Consenting to Relations: The Personal Pleasures of 'Power Disparity' in Lesbian Student-Teacher Partnerships." *Lesbians in Academia: Degrees of Freedom*. Ed. Beth Mintz and Esther D. Robinson. New York: Routledge, 1997. 192-98.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.