

From Paradigmatic Acts to Encounters along a Line of Flight

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When Michael LeVan invited me to guest edit a special issue on paradigms in performance studies, I envisioned something entirely other than the collection of essays you hold in your hands—I mean have before you on the screen. (Or maybe the screen is in your hands? Or is it in your head by now? Like any other performance, I can't predict your reading: the conditions that allow it keep changing.) With a certain amount of ignorance—or just habit, which may be the same thing—I thought we might produce an issue of essays that presented, defended, and/or critiqued specific ways of looking not just *at*, but also *for* and *beyond* performances. In this sense, the paradigm concept would allow us, from strategically distinctive theoretical standpoints, to identify performances on and off stage, regard and read them, and discern their impacts over time as embodied aesthetic communication (Pelias and VanOosting). My thinking, here, moved typologically, arborescently, emphasizing order, linear development, and clear paths of derivation (Deleuze and Guattari).

Instead of that issue, however, you'll find this collection of essays looking at paradigms somewhat differently, perhaps more rhizomatically, topologically, tracing the influences of journeys and landmark essays, with their fragments functioning recombinantly. Each scholarly essay, after all, has the structure of a palimpsest studded with only a partial share of the bones, jewels, and trash of our ancestors—whomever we might take them to be. In addition, the very structure of a special issue such as this, dependent upon those who answer the call, invites reflection on the intermittent play of moments and movements (physical, theoretical, aesthetic, involuntary)—authors and ideas perhaps matching, meeting, and/or mutating in a warren of desires and life circumstances carved out along intersecting lines of flight. This issue does not, in other words, fulfill any natural necessity for a given table of

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contents to express itself from a Platonic world of forms as a teleological/Oedipal account of lockstep disciplinary progress from paradigm to paradigm, as if developing according to a universal schedule of insights and psycho-social achievements (Deleuze and Guattari).

Nonetheless, I confess a certain nostalgic mourning for the issue I imagined. I recognize that we often represent our work *as if* it functioned arborescently. We strategically construct curricula, prepare ordered syllabi, and give national awards even as we tactically pursue hybrid, interdisciplinary, “machinic” (Deleuze and Guattari) experiences more akin to Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zones than Thomas Kuhn’s paradigms. That “as if” becomes increasingly dishonest as performance activity—for better or worse—becomes incommensurable, uncontainable within a single developmental account that can rationalize the existence of such diverse praxis. Certainly, one reads or hears the occasional arborescent outcry against this sort of performance work in the name of that, as if we did have access to such a single disciplinary story (Hantzis; Madison). From my perspective, these outcries assume that the pathologized and championed genres form a toggled pair of distinct, mutually exclusive choices on a single coherent apparatus that depends upon their separation to function (just as a video camera must be in either “VCR” or “Camera” mode, but not both). However well meaning (and I believe they are both well meaning and heuristic), such concerns distill and reify varied practice into paradigmatic activities, placing them at odds within the dream of a single disciplinary ethic. In doing so, this kind of argument makes war on incommensurable practitioners, ironically asking them to become the same in the name of otherness. We wage this war not merely between the sort of paradigms I had in mind at the start of the project (ethnography versus autoethnography, for example), but also between levels of abstraction and certainty in our talk about the desirability of coherence for “the” discipline of performance studies.

Instead, in practice, our decisions about the nature of the work we choose to pursue varies over time. That variance aggregates into the running total of all the work undertaken by those who identify as practitioners of performance studies—and that aggregate resists attempts to survey it, let alone subject it to a common set of criteria for description and evaluation. Actual praxis on the ground, when compared to the small number of productions and other research projects conducted may well resemble the ratio of dark matter to matter that Gregory Sholette deploys to explain how collective art activity moves under the institutional radar of galleries, museums, and art journals/magazines. Nonetheless, because such surveys are themselves paradigmatic gestures of disciplines, several have recently appeared (Davis; Hamera; Madison and Hamera).

As a thought experiment, consider that, from a Khunian standpoint, the flurry of such projects would signal, rather than preempt, a paradigm crisis. I make this observation because three indicators of paradigm crisis Kuhn identifies seem salient for performance studies at this particular historical moment: professional insecurity,

the persistence of error, and public calls for accuracy and accountability. Initially, Kuhn tells us that

Because it demands large-scale paradigm destruction and major shifts in the problems and techniques of normal science, the emergence of new theories is generally preceded by a period of pronounced professional insecurity. As one might expect, that insecurity is generated by the persistent failure of the puzzles of normal science to come out as they should. Failure of existing rules is the prelude to a search for new ones. (Kuhn 67-68)

Clearly, not many practitioners of performance studies identify with normal science in an explicit way. Implicitly, however, the various culturally orthopedic, liberatory, and critical aspects of our work and our claims about it subscribe to, at the very least, an unavowed weak form of cause and effect reasoning that “fuels” much of our talk about what a given aesthetic choice does to or for audiences; in other words, “efficacy.” The particular intellectual energy policy supporting this “fuelling” remains unexamined as we advertise the various differences our work makes. We might wisely remember that efficacy testing, along with safety testing, is a principle activity of normal science in the pharmaceutical industry. Perhaps we may soon find the kind of side-effect disclaimers prescription drugs provide listed in our production programs and essay footnotes: “Prolonged exposure to performance of this kind may lead to an inaccurate sense of accomplishment and well-being, inflationary beliefs about one’s agency, and/or false catharsis resulting in continued participation in oppression.” Really, don’t we already say this kind of thing, but simply in another register, often without the nuance of that “*may* lead to” back there? When we do so, do we imagine that the “side effects” our critiques identify necessarily outweigh the utility of a given practice/”drug” for *all* users? Aren’t the arborescent outcries I mentioned a moment ago making unavowed quantitative normal science claims that one kind of practice is “more efficacious” than another?

Kuhn identifies a second signal of paradigm crisis, without giving it a name. I think of it as “the persistence of error.” He explains it by referencing problems faced by early astronomers:

Given a particular discrepancy, astronomers were invariably able to eliminate it by making some particular adjustment in Ptolemy’s system of compound circles. But as the time went on, a [wo/]man looking at the net result of the normal research effort of many astronomers could observe that astronomy’s complexity was increasing far more rapidly than its accuracy and that a discrepancy corrected in one place was likely to show up in another. (Kuhn 68)

In my own practice on the stage and page, I tend to note such persistence when I perceive a creative double bind (Peterson and Langellier) animating the poles of my thinking in a given situation. For example, a political critique of the cooptation, by members of a dominant group, of resistant forms of performance by marginalized communities might easily lead to a perceived prohibition against such appropriation. Fine enough, at least until an advance elsewhere offers a critique of essentialism and

comes into dialectical contact with that prohibition. The critique of appropriation relies upon an implicit essentializing at its core (“This singular practice belongs to this singular people”), much as the critique of essentializing might appear to rationalize appropriation under a more neutral term, such as citation and/or elaboration. While it might be commonplace to note the appropriation of African-American forms like R & B by Euro-American figures, including Elvis, similar critiques of the appropriation of a European form like opera by African-American figures such as Leontyne Price, for obvious reasons, would seem—would arguably *be*—brutish. The parallel, but neither coherent nor coordinated development of these paradigmatic critiques of the last few decades moves the persistent error of naturalizing the social “place” of persons around; shifting the unstable question of place, rather than eliminating it; and generating more questions than it answers.

Some of these questions might well alert us to pertinent differences between the two scenarios (e.g., the epic scale of white appropriation of R & B compared with the much more limited presence of African-Americans in opera, as well as the puzzling politics of high and low culture demonizing Elvis’ sexuality and burdening Price with a yoke of racial representation within an integrationist perspective at once vital and piecemeal, one that masqueraded as easy and unproblematic, obscuring the genuine discrimination faced by Price in both everyday and professional life) (Brooks 301). In each case, a performer was or is regarded as out of place, at least by some who consider themselves stakeholders in the pertinent genre or community most associated with it; in each case they created beloved performances in that genre, revealing the contingent quality of the “alien-ness” attributed to their occupation of it, turning in musical embodiments whose persistent impacts over time increasingly challenge such a logic of place.

However much you or I might see opportunity and nuance in our compromised ability to adjudicate such questions with absolute confidence, our service to and relevance for the public might also at least appear to decline in the face of such uncertain ability to articulate with agreement the causes and effects of any given representation. This possible appearance of decline takes shape against the backdrop of a culture war whose intermittent escalations demonstrate a pressure for more accurate and adequate resolution of these issues. This pressure manifests Kuhn’s third sign of paradigm crisis, an increased interest, by the public, in good answers:

Breakdown of the normal technical puzzle-solving activity is not, of course, the only ingredient of the astronomical crisis that faced Copernicus. An extended treatment would also discuss the social pressure for calendar reform, a pressure that made the puzzle of precision particularly urgent. In addition, a fuller account would consider medieval criticism of Aristotle, the rise of Renaissance Neoplatonism, and other significant historical elements besides. But the technical breakdown would still remain the core of the crisis. In a mature science—and astronomy had become that in antiquity—external factors like those cited above are principally significant in determining the timing of the breakdown, the ease with which it can be recognized, and the area in which, because it is given particular attention, the breakdown first occurs. (Kuhn 69)

Like the call for calendar reform, the culture wars ask their own version of the question, “What time is it?” The criticism of one school of thought or performance practice occurs as another rises. Perhaps the crisis is in the very notion of the paradigm itself. To move as a mobius strip does (mobiologically?), perhaps the “paradigm” paradigm is not merely *in* crisis, but *is* crisis, if by crisis we mean emergency, a state my friend Thaddeus Martin calls emergence-y: the ongoing arrival of the next moment, the next piece of work, the next revision. A state of perpetual emergence-y stirs mixed emotions: some of us watch the lightshow and others reach for a ratchet to tighten the blinds—and our response one day may not carry over to the next.

Even as the culture wars may strategically appeal to the development of a standard to resolve such questions in a final way, in my own experience the tactics used by its warriors on the field stage an interminable battle between Lyotard’s differend and Habermas’s ideal speech situation/public sphere (see Kester for an analysis of this particular double bind, although he does not frame it with that specific construct). I, for one, am only too willing to wake from the dream of a common intellectual mechanism for description and evaluation, however much that dream haunts us. I believe it motivated, for example, a portion of the excitement generated by the recent effort the Performance Studies Division of the National Communication Association undertook to establish guidelines for building and evaluating tenure and promotion cases, despite our work to build considerable respect for flexibility and difference into those pages (NCA). Nonetheless, our attention to flexibility cannot forestall the metrics by which some administrators and critics who do not perform will attempt to “objectively evaluate” performance from within a logic that, whatever other theoretical commitments we might have, still privileges the autonomous subject as the unit of tenure and rewards the commodification of performance within a capitalist regime of preferred venues for production in wealthy cities, contributing to the bureaucratization of aesthetic value.

Against all of this—this backdrop of uncertainty over the value of the paradigm construct itself—I value this issue that did transpire for its varied approaches to elements that might be considered paradigmatic—here the influence of a philosopher or concept, there a central activity—inasmuch as these pose familiar problems and seek to resolve them. Perhaps we might do with a dose of recognition, however much it might initially seem to equivocate on the meaning of paradigm and the co-locational terms these meanings imply, that our work evolves syntagmatically (Saussure)—the sentence having always been a combinatory line of flight (perhaps explaining the Language Poets’ preference for the sentence over the line). Each performance, each essay, increasingly—even virally (Fenske)—combines elements (objects of study, tools for analysis, philosophical approaches, ideal audiences, etc.) from what we might once have thought of as relatively discrete “methods” or schools of thought.

To highlight this combinatory activity, you will soon find Powell and Shaffer using Derrida’s conception of hauntology to explain how some performance praxis

has mutated and begun working along side previous strains (which we should not take as normal, given that they are themselves mutations of earlier forms). Crosby subjects the conception of “liminality” to a refunctioning backward glance, in the manner of Benjamin’s Angel of History, toward the compelling ruins of the sacred, hoping we can make new use of what she sees emerging from the ash of our neglect. Coonfield deploys Deleuze and Guattari to direct our attention to the post-traumatic refrain “I wanted to do something” that riddled the wake of 9/11, combining media- cultural- and performance studies to do so. Bonin-Rodriguez, Dolan, and Pryor refuse the paradigmatic silencing of a performance’s proximate partners, repositioning them in the critical machine from input to part of the sense-making apparatus. Finally, in the issue’s book review, MacDonald responds to Susan Kozel’s extraordinary *Closer*, itself an amalgam of dance, philosophy, and media theory. Each of these essays demonstrates the vitality of allowing indeterminacy; of recognizing hybrid performances some find out of place, difficult to evaluate, unworthy of attention, or happily forgotten in the ongoing emergence-y of performance, which, as Herbert Blau reminds us, has always been, not a paradigmatic experience, but an encounter with the unforeseen. Who can say, who can contain, what we will make of these encounters?

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