

## **Liminality and the Sacred: Discipline Building and Speaking with the Other**

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*Performance Studies is a border discipline, an interdiscipline, that cultivates the capacity to move between structures, to forge connections, to speak with instead of simply speaking about or for others.*

— Dwight Conquergood<sup>1</sup>

Mark Lewis Taylor's recent book, *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right: Post-9/11 Powers and American Empire*, opens with the sentence, "Many see religious faith today as having a chokehold on people seeking global peace and justice" (ix). Although Taylor goes on to pursue a critique of the Christian Right's political influence that balances, in his words, "dissent and hope" (xiii), his opening declaration expresses a widely shared sentiment about the Christian Right: the Christian Right is an "other" with which it is impossible to speak. How can one engage in dialogue with a constituency whose militant variant of religious belief fosters a violent politics, both nationally and internationally?

From a Performance Studies perspective, the violent character of the Christian Right derives less from religious faith in general—which might produce a wide range of social, cultural and political performances, most of which remain contained to specific spheres like the home or church and therefore receive little attention from within Performance Studies—than to the way in which the Christian Right performs and professes its version of the sacred in public. In other words, the Christian Right, defined by Clyde Wilcox and Carin Larson as the "mobiliz[ation] [of] evangelical Protestants and other orthodox Christians into conservative political action" (6), performs and professes its version of the sacred out of place. Peggy Phelan's analysis of pro-life group Operation Rescue in her book *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* provides a useful example of the way in which, from the perspective of a Performance Studies scholar and practitioner, the display or deployment of religious language and gesture out of place "generate[s]," in Phelan's words, "a feeling of terror" (131). After observing that the protests—or 'rescues'—

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<sup>1</sup> Striff, Erin, introduction, *Performance Studies*, ed. Erin Striff (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003): 2-3.

carried out by Operation Rescue in front of abortion clinics “tend to be emotionally and often physically violent” (131), Phelan describes with care the elements of Operation Rescue’s protest that register for her, in performance terms, as violence. She writes:

Off to the side, most of the women from Operation Rescue form what is called a ‘Prayer Support Column’: they chant hymns, stand still, try to maintain an air of ‘above the fray’ about them, and keep their hands open and raised toward heaven... Inside the clinic, a group of other people lock themselves into chairs in the waiting room, and if possible, to the desks of the clinic workers. While lying there waiting to be removed by the police, they sing Christian hymns. (132)

Although Phelan does not investigate exactly how the above actions generate a feeling of terror, it seems that for Phelan the use of prayer and singing, at least in this instance, result in emotional and physical violence in part by destroying the conditions for dialogue. The women in the prayer column address themselves to heaven, ignoring the potentially damaging impact of their ‘rescue’ on the individuals entering the clinic. The singing of the protesters renders them passive in relation to those who ask them to desist. This version of the sacred, performed out of place and imposed on others, places a chokehold on peace and justice.

Phelan’s understandable anger in response to Operation Rescue’s activities—an anger shared by many scholars and practitioners within Performance Studies who care deeply about or identify with the individuals whose race, class, gender or sexual identity renders them vulnerable to similar acts of violence—expresses itself by figuring Operation Rescue participants as not only violent, but insincere. Phelan writes, “The members of Operation Rescue *pretend to believe* that by staging demonstrations outside abortion clinics they will rescue the unborn” (*emphasis mine*, 131). In her own protest against Operation Rescue’s actions, Phelan denounces their deployment of a ritual repertoire by classifying this repertoire as mere theater. Reduced to theater, Phelan assumes that the prayers prayed and songs sung in the course of the ‘rescue’ are empty, in the same way that J.L. Austin finds the utterances of an actor on stage “hollow and void” (22).<sup>2</sup> Rejecting not only the version of the sacred performed and professed by Operation Rescue but also the possibility that Operation Rescue participants might sincerely believe in the spiritual efficacy of their prayers and songs, Phelan casts the Operation Rescue participants as beyond the pale of a potential dialogue.

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<sup>2</sup> When it comes to conflicts over the sacred, this rhetorical move has a long history. When Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries wanted to contest and reject Catholic liturgical forms, they did so by asserting that the mass was merely theater. See Colin Rice, “Puritans and theatres,” *Ungoldly Delights: Puritan Opposition to the Theatre, 1576-1633* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 1997) 9-26. See also Stephen Greenblatt, “Exorcism into Art,” *Representations* 12 (1985) 15-23, for an excellent analysis of the way church authorities used the charge of theater to demystify, control and contain ancient spiritual practices that competed with ecclesiastical authority.

While Phelan's analysis of Operation Rescue's activities makes an important contribution to performance theory by exploring the complex interplay between power and visibility in the political sphere and, in the process, recognizes that the Left could potentially learn from the far Right's use of "a finely calibrated invisibility" (140), at no point does Phelan attempt to understand Operation Rescue's actions in their own terms. To do so would require engaging seriously with the religious framework that gives meaning to their performance. Instead, Phelan retreats entirely from what an Operation Rescue participant might consider the sacred or religious aspect of a 'rescue' and turns to what remains a central, perhaps the central, concept in Performance Studies: liminality. She writes, "To employ that much-overused Turnerian term, visibility and invisibility within representation are always liminal" (140). Although the term "liminal" does not quite satisfy Phelan—she feels compelled to apologize for it—the term simultaneously evokes a ritual flavor in keeping with Operation Rescue's protest and releases Phelan from investigating the religious register of Operation Rescue's performance more closely.

By no means is my purpose here to endorse the violence perpetrated by groups like Operation Rescue or to suggest that Performance Studies embrace a conservative Christian vision of the sacred. Nor is my purpose to take issue with Phelan's analysis of Operation Rescue. Rather, I'm using Phelan's analysis as a point of entry because this particular part of her work seems to me to enact a problem facing many of us working under the purview of Performance Studies. I'm going to tentatively define this problem as the theory/relationality divide or the theory/engagement divide and suggest that this problem manifests itself most dramatically when scholars and practitioners working within Performance Studies encounter politically mobilized religious constituencies. Intent on exposing, interrupting and reversing cultural processes identified from within Performance Studies as perpetuating violence against marginalized peoples—processes like hegemony, reproduction, writing, and the archive, to name just a few—when confronted with religious practitioners whose political aims seem to reinforce centers of power, Performance Studies practitioners tend to produce theories about these religious practitioners without seeking to relate or engage with them.

However, I am struck by the fact that when Performance Studies attempts to define itself, it imagines itself not as a site of theory production, but as an academic site fostering a particular mode of engagement. Dwight Conquergood writes, "Performance Studies is a border discipline, an interdiscipline, that cultivates the capacity to move between structures, to forge connections, to speak with instead of simply speaking about or for others" (qtd. in Striff 2-3). While Conquergood's statement does not resolve the question organizing this issue of *Liminalities*, which asks "Is Performance Studies a discipline, a method, an ethic, a politics, or some ensemble of various incarnations of these?" he provides a vision for the modes of engagement made possible by the idea 'Performance Studies.' In doing so, he articulates a call to action compelling those of us working within Performance

Studies to engage in dialogue even with those who destroy what we consider the conditions necessary for its success.

Clearly, speaking *with* an ‘other’ implies reciprocity, which means that individuals associated with the Christian Right have a responsibility for their end of any dialogue; a responsibility which involves recognizing the ways in which their potential interlocutors experience terror and violence.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Conquergood’s formulation very wisely defines a Performance Studies action not as successful dialogue—which depends on many factors beyond our control—but as the act of cultivating the capacity to enter into dialogue. With this in mind, my hope in what follows is to cultivate the capacity of Performance Studies practitioners to speak with individuals on the Christian Right. I will do this by tracing the story of two terms central to the development of Performance Studies as an academic discipline. These terms are *liminal* and *sacred*. I suggest that as the term *liminal* grew in importance within Performance Studies, the concept of liminality acquired many dynamic conceptual elements previously associated with its parent term, *sacred*. While Performance Studies gained a remarkably supple theoretical tool in the concept of liminality, the term *sacred* underwent a reduction in scope, leaving Performance Studies with an impoverished capacity to engage with religious groups, communities and constituencies.

### **Performance Studies: the Liminal Field**

Performance Studies as a field engages in a sustained reflexivity, pushing simultaneously to expand and define its disciplinary boundaries and endeavoring to produce new knowledge about the cultural processes and objects within its expansive horizon while evolving a coherent and yet flexible understanding of itself as a discipline. The notion of the liminal plays a special role in this double project, serving as a unifying concept in a field otherwise characterized by what Jon McKenzie calls an “explosion of paradigms” (48). He writes, “What is performance? What is Performance Studies? ‘Liminality’ is perhaps the most concise and accurate response to both of these questions” (50). The notion of the liminal serves as a unifying concept by describing the position of the Performance Studies scholar and practitioner, working from a space between disciplines and on the threshold of multiple cultural sites, as well as the kinds of objects and practices the Performance Studies scholar/practitioner investigates. Richard Schechner describes Performance Studies as “‘inter’—in between” (qtd in McKenzie 50), and describes performance in almost identical terms: “Performance isn’t ‘in’ anything, but ‘between’”

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<sup>3</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick’s recent article on changes in the internal make-up and political power of the Christian Right suggests that this constituency, or at least younger evangelicals, may be increasingly open to dialogue with the political left. See “The Evangelical Crackup,” *New York Times Magazine* 28 October 2007, 15 January 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/28/magazine/28Evangelicals-t.html?pagewanted=1&sq=christian%20right&scp=16>>.

(Schechner 24). Structurally, the Performance Studies scholar and the performances studied occupy an interstice.

More fundamentally, the notion of the liminal articulates the agency of Performance Studies as a discipline, identifying its perceived potential to make cultural interventions, whether within the academy by questioning and re-forging the way in which knowledge is produced and organized, or beyond the academy by engaging, through practice and analysis, with performance modes that shape or reshape bodies, spaces, identities, and communities. McKenzie calls this disciplinary agency the “*challenge of efficacy*” (30, italics in original). He writes: “at the heart of its movement of generalization, Performance Studies scholars have constructed cultural performance as an engagement of social norms, as an ensemble of activities with the potential to uphold societal arrangements or, alternatively, to change people and societies” (30). While McKenzie is here describing the way in which Performance Studies attributes the challenge of efficacy to the objects it studies, the frequency with which scholars use metaphors of a threshold or in-between space in order to define the action of, and action possible from within, Performance Studies links the discipline to liminality in such a way that Performance Studies becomes the efficacious space par excellence. Dwight Conquergood, as already cited, attributes Performance Studies’ dynamism to its threshold status. Schechner associates this liminal dynamism with Performance Studies’ structural ambiguity, describing it as “intergeneric, interdisciplinary, intercultural—and therefore inherently unstable” (qtd. in McKenzie 50). Likewise, Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer write, “Performance Studies is a field with a continually moving center of gravity” (10). The Performance Studies project imagines its transformative potential as directly correlated to its liminal disciplinary and cultural status.

As an organizing theoretical principle, however, the liminal also produces a blindness for, or at least impatience with, institutions and cultural performances associated with reproduction and structure rather than resistance or subversion. Although McKenzie notes that the efficacy of cultural performance includes its capacity to “uphold societal arrangements” just as much as its capacity to “change people and societies” (30), as a result of the field’s focus on liminality, Performance Studies arguably privileges the idea that efficacious performance precipitates cultural change. As McKenzie says, “it is transgressive or resistant potential that has come to dominate the study of cultural performance” (30). This preference for efficacy as change also, problematically, leads the field to dismiss and ignore the theoretical framework in the context of which the notion of the liminal first evolved. The term *liminal* enters the field of Performance Studies through the work of anthropologist Victor Turner, who borrows the term from an early twentieth-century anthropologist named Arnold van Gennep, whose study on rites of passage introduced the term *liminal* as a key concept. For van Gennep, an understanding of the liminal requires a theory of the sacred. Solon T. Kimball writes in the introduction to the English translation of van Gennep’s work, “Van Gennep, with others, accepted the dichotomy of the sacred and profane; in fact, this is a central

concept for understanding the transitional [liminal] stage in which an individual or group finds itself from time to time” (viii). The particular efficacy of the liminal can’t be thought apart from a theorization of the sacred.

Although an understanding of the liminal depends on a theorization of the sacred, Performance Studies emphatically does not employ the word *sacred* in the stories it tells about itself; not in describing its choice of objects or demarcating its sphere of intervention. Given the degree to which thinking about ritual has shaped thinking about performance within the field, this silence in relation to notions of the sacred comes as something of a surprise. Whether told from a perspective that foregrounds the genesis of the field through New York University, where Performance Studies develops out of a cross-pollination between theatre and anthropology in the context of the Tisch School of Arts, or from a perspective that foregrounds the emergence of Performance Studies within the field of Oral Communications with Northwestern University as its hub (Jackson 8-9), an account of the field unavoidably entails reference to the surge of interest in ritual which occupies much of the early work in Performance Studies. While Shannon Jackson’s observation that “Marvin Carlson required an entire book—*Performance: A Critical Introduction*—just to describe the possible paths of intellectual influence [in the field of Performance Studies],” provides a much-needed reminder that many performance scholars would not “craft chronologies” for themselves that include inquiry into ritual (12), the fruits of an inquiry into ritual form one of the “many”—and important—“disciplinary strains that contribute to the intellectual ferment surrounding performance” (4). McKenzie goes so far as to claim that ritual provides the initial means for thinking performance beyond theatre. He writes, “ritual processes provided early performance scholars with an important model of efficacy, one which they generalized across the entire field of cultural performance” (42). By taking ritual as a “*functional* model for theorizing the transformational potential of theater and other performative genres” (italics in original, 36), performance scholars were able to “pass from product to process, from mediated expressions to direct contact, from representation to presentation, from discourse to body, from absence to presence” in their theoretical work and practice (38). This important passage built on work like that of van Gennep’s, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, and Emile Durkheim; work expressly interested in investigating the constitution of the sacred.

And yet, if anything, Performance Studies defines its intellectual and political investments in opposition to the term *sacred*. A quick trip to the Oxford English Dictionary offers a few clues as to why the field may avoid the word *sacred* in its meta-narrative. A very old word, entering the written English language in 1380 in reference to the Eucharistic elements,<sup>4</sup> the term *sacred* mobilizes a citational network that includes several hundred years of use in the context of Western Christian

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<sup>4</sup> “Sacred,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1989, 12 May 2005 <http://www.oed.com>.

religious practice. Complicit in the cultural power and influence of this institution and by extension a host of other institutions which Performance Studies works to resist—heterosexual normativity, colonialism, imperialism, logocentrism—the word *sacred*, from a Performance Studies perspective, frequently signals an alignment with conservative forces, structures protected from scrutiny, and an invocation of a divine entity. Further problematizing the use of *sacred* in defining a knowledge project, the word does not, according to the OED, have a noun form apart from the awkward “sacredness.” Consequently, unless used as an adjective, the term *sacred* comes packaged with a universalizing “the”—as in “the sacred”—and invokes a set of intellectual projects, like a search for origins and essential identities, antithetical to the Performance Studies investment in transgression, resistance, and social change.

Nonetheless, however problematic, however citationally complicated or inconvenient, Performance Studies finds itself indebted to a theory of the sacred for one of its most energizing and foundational tools. In fact, while Turner’s work on liminality does not make it into the OED, which attributes the word “liminal” to a separate discourse in psychology,<sup>5</sup> it cites him in the development of a new verb in the field of Anthropology, *sacralize*, meaning “To endow with sacred significance (frequently through ritual)” and “to set apart from ordinary life or use as sacred.”<sup>6</sup> While its longer association with the practice rather than study of religion taints the word *sacred* with a complicated referentiality and marks it as a word easier for a field like Performance Studies to avoid than recuperate, this complicated referentiality may actually provide a passageway back and forth across the theory/practice divide, a portal between an academic discourse about the performance of religion or religious concepts and the experience of acting from within a religious framework.

### **From Liminal to Liminoid: the Disappearing Sacred**

In order to understand the reasons Performance Studies leaves the sacred un- and under-theorized, and in order to recover some of the theoretical value of a concept of the sacred, we must examine carefully the process by which the notion of the liminal develops as a theoretical tool. Although Turner by no means represents the entire field of Performance Studies during its early period, an analysis of the evolving relationship between the terms *liminal* and *sacred* within the field must trace the way in which Turner borrows and adapts van Gennep’s notion of the liminal phase in a rite of passage, gradually divorcing a theory of liminality from a concept of the sacred. For the field of anthropology, this divorce of liminality from the sacred facilitates a move from thinking about tribal cultures to thinking about industrial cultures. For the emerging field of Performance Studies, this divorce of liminality from the sacred enables Performance Studies to enact its autonomy from

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<sup>5</sup> “Liminal,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1989, 12 May 2005 <http://www.oed.com>.

<sup>6</sup> “Sacralize,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1989, 12 May 2005 <http://www.oed.com>.

anthropology by adopting a theoretical concept nourished by but distinct from ethnographic practice and capable of describing the transformational effects of a wide range of cultural performances.

As indicated above, van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* begins with the sacred. In the third sentence of his opening chapter he writes, "[T]he only clearly marked social division remaining in modern society is that which distinguishes between the secular and the religious worlds—between the profane and the sacred" (1). Although he sees the sacred as often linked in industrialized societies to the religious sphere, for van Gennep the term *sacred* primarily refers to the results of a disruption of the social order caused by the movement or change in state of an individual, group, or even the natural world. He writes, "Sacredness as an attribute is not absolute; it is brought into play by the nature of particular situations" (12). He then gives as an example an image of physical displacement. "A man at home, in his tribe, lives in the secular realm" says van Gennep, "he moves into the realm of the sacred when he goes on a journey and finds himself a foreigner near a camp of strangers" (12). Summarizing van Gennep's understanding of the sacred, Kimball writes, "The person who enters a status at variance with the one previously held becomes 'sacred' to the others who remain in the profane state" (viii). A vocabulary of the sacred in van Gennep helps identify and articulate instances of transformation in the social structure.

Van Gennep's definition of the set of ritual practices that he distinguishes as rites of passage follows directly from this understanding of the sacred as a "pivoting" attribute (van Gennep 12), a designation continually "shifting as a person moves from one place in society to another" (13). Rites of passage coalesce around instances of transformation, moments in which an eruption of the sacred, produced by transition, would otherwise threaten the cohesion of the social structure. According to van Gennep, "The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another" (3). He holds that, "Such changes of condition do not occur without disturbing the life of society and the individual," and concludes, "it is the function of rites of passage to reduce their harmful effects" (13). Rites of passage for van Gennep, then, serve a conservative function. They smooth out the process of social change, "enable[ing] the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined" (3). The sacred—understood as a technical term designating the set of contradictory tensions that arise around shifts in the social domain—indicates a dynamic occurrence. The sacred tracks movement, friction, process, and change.

The term *liminal*, so consequential for Performance Studies, actually constitutes in van Gennep's thinking just one part of a larger process. He divides the rite of passage into three phases, present to varying degrees from rite to rite: rites of separation (*séparation*), rites of transition (*marge*), and rites of incorporation (*agrégation*). Restating this schema, he also calls these same phases "preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of



incorporation)” (11).<sup>7</sup> Giving examples for rites that emphasize each phase—funerals emphasize separation, betrothal emphasizes transition, and marriage incorporation—he then spends the rest of the book examining the configuration of separation, transition, and incorporation rites surrounding each of the major life phases from birth and childhood through death. He also includes a chapter on the crossing of physical thresholds like doors and borders, and a chapter on initiation rites. Together, these two chapters exert the most influence on Victor Turner’s thinking.

In his discussion of thresholds and initiation, van Gennep firmly establishes that the liminal phase of a rite of passage coincides with the turbulent production of sacrality, against which the rite safeguards. Using the neutral zones between geographic territories as an example, van Gennep writes, “Whoever passes from one [zone] to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds” (18). This wavering or limbo characterizes the liminal: “It is this situation which I have designated a transition,” he continues, “this symbolic and spatial area of transition may be found in more or less pronounced form in all the ceremonies which accompany the passage from one social and magico-religious position to another” (18). When it comes to novitiates, van Gennep makes the connection even more explicit. “The novices are outside society,” he says, “and society has no power over them, especially since they are actually sacred and holy, and therefore untouchable and dangerous, just as gods would be” (114). The transformative, efficacious quality of the liminal in van Gennep’s work derives from its relationship to the sacred, a category to which the liminal phase grants a temporary free play in the interest of eventual containment.

Victor Turner first makes use of van Gennep’s concept of the liminal in an article titled “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*,” published in 1967 in his second book, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Turner, in adopting *liminality*, shapes it into a highly portable set of ideas.<sup>8</sup> Where van Gennep, wanting to establish the universal applicability of the *rite de passage*, provides an exhaustive and exhausting list of examples of initiation rites with little elaboration on the concept of liminality itself, Turner makes explicit the theoretical heft implicit in van Gennep’s catalog of rites. Expanding on van Gennep’s basic premise that “during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) is ambiguous” (Turner, *Betwixt* 94), Turner describes the liminal phase as an “interstructural situation” (93). In the context of structuralism, this

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<sup>7</sup> Marvin Carlson indicates that the terms “preliminal, liminal, and postliminal” were terms introduced by van Gennep’s translators and not used by van Gennep in the original French publication (21). Carlson also indicates that van Gennep used the term *limen* as an alternate to *marge* for the middle phase.

<sup>8</sup> Kimball, in the introduction to the 1960 English translation of *Rites of Passage*, laments that “The search for additional specific critical writings on or elaborations of van Gennep’s *schéma* has proved fruitless” (xii), a circumstance which Turner’s subsequent work corrects.

definition alone constitutes a provocative formulation, which Turner further enhances by identifying a number of core characteristics of the liminal.

Although Turner does not in this article propose a connection between liminality—which he still contextualizes as a specific ritual phase—and social change, the qualities he identifies as liminal point in this direction. The liminal, according to Turner, entails structural invisibility: “The subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible’” (95). It instantiates a state of no longer and not yet: “[Liminal *personae*] are at once no longer classified and not yet classified” (96). It animates a space of paradox, androgyny, anonymity, placelessness, malleability, and fantasy. Turner describes the liminal as “a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations or ideas and relations may arise” (97), as “a stage of reflection” (105), and as “the realm of primitive hypothesis” which opens up “a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence” (106). While Turner closes the article conservatively, acknowledging that “this liberty has fairly narrow limits” in that the neophytes “return to secular society” and “become once more subject to custom and law” (106), he lays the ground work, in basic keeping with van Gennep’s concept, for a theory of transformation.

In doing so, Turner reorganizes the relationship between liminality and the sacred. In van Gennep, the sacred marks the source and site of transition and calls forth the liminal. For Turner, the sacred figures prominently in the liminal, but as a conservative tendency rather than a dynamic one. The sacred serves as a metaphor for categorizing that which confounds categories, the “at once deconstructed and prestructured” neophytes (98). “We are not dealing with structural contradictions when we discuss liminality, but with the essentially unstructured,” writes Turner, “and often the people themselves see this in terms of bringing neophytes into close connection with deity or with superhuman power, with what is, in fact, often regarded as the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless” (98). Turner also identifies the sacred with the pedagogical function of liminality in initiation rites. He calls “the communication of *sacra*” the “heart of the liminal matter” (102), and conceives of the *sacra* as “the symbolic template of the whole system of beliefs and values in a given culture, its archetypal paradigm and ultimate measure” (108). In the context of liminal rites, the sacred coincides for Turner with the “axiomatic principles of construction” the “basic building blocks that make up the cosmos and into whose nature no neophyte may inquire” (106). The sacred, for Turner, constitutes an unexamined structural nucleus around which the paradox and possibility of the liminal unfolds, and which prevents the liberty of the liminal phase from disrupting the wider social system in which it takes place.

In Turner’s next book, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), he extends the range of social phenomena defined as liminal. The more inclusive range of liminal forms clearly corresponds to an opening up of the definition of performance. Turner cites as liminal, among other things, “subjugated autochthones, small nations, court jesters, holy mendicants, good Samaritans, millenarian movements, ‘dharma bums’ [. . .] and monastic orders” (125). These

phenomena participate in the liminal in that they “fall in the interstices of social structure,” “are on its margins,” or “occupy its lowest rungs” (125). In Carlson’s words, “This image of performance as a border, a margin, a site of negotiation, has become extremely important in subsequent thinking about such activity” (20); important because this application of liminality to diverse cultural activities makes liminal rites available to the emerging field of Performance Studies as, in McKenzie’s words, “an *exemplar* of the entire field of objects, guiding not only descriptive analysis but also the theoretical and practical construction of other performances” (37). Decontextualized from the rite of passage, liminality sheds its association with an in many ways conservative ritual form in order to represent transformational efficacy.

In the course of this expansion of liminality, the referent for Turner’s use of the term *sacred* splits, no longer exclusively signifying axiomatic principles. This split takes place through Turner’s introduction of a new concept, *communitas*, closely related to the increasing emphasis on liminality as transformational. Growing out of Turner’s observation in *The Forest of Symbols* that “among neophytes there is often complete equality” during the liminal phase—an elimination of “distinctions and gradations” (99)—Turner proposes in *Ritual and Process* that liminality “reveals” a “generalized social bond” (96). Through liminality, a particular mode of “human interrelatedness” emerges: “society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals ...” (96). Although he articulates *communitas* as in dialogic tension with social structure and does not imply that *communitas* can continue indefinitely, Turner imagines *communitas* as the utopian product of liminality.

Turner relies heavily on the word *sacred* in describing this utopic bond, but uses the term in contradictory ways and without clarifying what he means. At times he uses *sacred* in referring to a vaguely defined universal human connectedness. He begins his subsection on *communitas* by claiming that liminal phenomena offer a blend of “lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship” (96), linking sacrality with what he later calls the “existential quality” of “the whole man in relation to other whole men” (127). He also, however, attributes to *communitas* the same combusive quality that van Gennep attributes to transition and labels *sacred*. Turner says, “all sustained manifestations of *communitas* must appear as dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions” (109). Returning to this theme, he writes that *communitas* “is almost everywhere held to be sacred or ‘holy,’ possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency” (128). Wavering back and forth between a loose mysticism—he cites the “frequent use of religious terms, such as ‘saint’ and ‘angel’” among hippies as an example of the link between *communitas* and the sacred (113)—and something approaching a technical use of *sacred* to designate the tension between what he calls structure and anti-structure, Turner erodes the usefulness of the word *sacred* as an analytical tool by uncritically

crisscrossing its citational networks, activating anthropological and theological iterations without attending to the implications of this move.

While blurring his articulation of the sacred, Turner's excitement about *communitas* really drives the effort to think carefully about liminality beyond the ritual realm. Unlike liminality, linked to its ritual roots, Turner writes in an essay titled "Variations on a Theme of Liminality" that *communitas* "arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances" (46). Seeing *communitas* everywhere, wanting to trace it to instances of the liminal but also not wanting to "use liminality in a metaphorical sense," Turner asks, "[W]hatever happened to liminality in *posttribal* societies?" (39). In response, he defines what he calls the "liminoid," meaning "something that is akin to the ritually liminal, or like it, but not identical with it," in the same way that *ovoid* means egg-like and *asteroid* means star-like (43). With the advent of this new term, Turner definitively extends the liminal to cover those domains of contemporary life he sees as "descended from earlier forms of ritual liminality" or its "functional equivalents" (39): the arts, leisure, and sport.

With the definition of the liminoid in distinction from the liminal, the sacred recedes almost entirely from the concept, remaining present only as a foil useful for marking the difference between ritual liminality and the industrial liminoid. This negating of the sacred occurs in part because Turner bases his definition of the liminoid on Joffre Dumazedier's distinction between work and leisure in industrialized environments.<sup>9</sup> Through Dumazedier, Turner claims that the liminal occurs in a social universe defined by a "work-play sacred-profane continuum" (*Variations* 41), whereas the liminoid takes place in societies in which an evacuation of the sacred results in a "sundering of work and play" (*Liminal* 137). Liminality belongs to a world in which "the main distinction is between sacred and profane *work*, not between work and leisure" (*Liminal* 134). The liminoid, conversely, takes place in "large-scale complex societies" structured around a work/non-work divide produced by the Industrial Revolution (133). The liminoid excludes the sacred because it emerges in order to define a set of activities produced by a society defined as devoid of the sacred.

According to this schema, a detachment from the sacred releases the full transformational potential of the liminoid. Under the influence of a pervasive sacrality, liminal phenomena remain "centrally integrated into the total social process," "tend to be collective," unfold according to "social-structural cycles and rhythms" (*Variations* 44), consist of obligational rather than optional activities, and most importantly, as a result of these characteristics, "invert but do not usually subvert the status quo, the structural form of society" (*Liminal* 144). The liminoid, on the other hand, "develop apart from the central economic and political processes, along the margins, in the interfaces and interstices of central and servicing institutions" (158). Liminoid activities provide the space of hypothesis

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<sup>9</sup> Turner also draws on Brian Sutton-Smith's work on play. It would be equally interesting to trace the relationship between the terms *sacred* and *play* in the performance studies canon.

previously occupied by the liminal phase of ritual, opening up a liminal-like “*freedom from* [. . .] institutional obligations” and simultaneous “*freedom to* transcend social structural normative limitations” (*Variations* 42). In contrast to liminal activities, however, “*optionality*” dominates liminoid practices. In other words, practitioners choose to participate (*Liminal* 145), making liminoid phenomena “not merely reversible” but “often subversive, representing radical critiques of the central structures and proposing utopian alternative models” (*Variations* 45). “And now we are getting closer to our lost liminality,” writes Turner after listing exemplary liminoid writers and painters, “for in this modern ‘leisure,’ far more even than in tribal and agrarian rituals, the experimental and the ludic are stressed” (42). The term *sacred* here again aligns for Turner with conservative processes, freedom from which unleashes the power of subversive critique implicit in the liminal.

### **Theory Boom: Return of the Unnamed Sacred**

In the decade following Turner’s definition of the liminoid, a shift occurs in Performance Studies, challenging the conceptual ground upon which a theory of the liminal as transgressive rested. McKenzie, borrowing from Reinelt and Roach, calls this the theory explosion (39). Marked by the emergence of critical methods like deconstruction and feminism, the “theory explosion of the 1970s and 1980s” initiated a “radical questioning of presence itself,” challenging the value that Performance Studies placed on the presence of the physical body as the site of efficacy in staged or ritual action (39). In McKenzie’s words, “critical theory gradually took on the efficacy that artists, activists, and scholars had long attributed to the body” (40). He argues that, as a result, the field’s model of choice also changed, shifting from ritual to performance art and from an understanding of efficacy as transgression to efficacy as resistance (42). While Performance Studies as a discipline “cannot be *thought* without citing theater and ritual” (49), writes McKenzie, the importance of Anthropology to the field wanes and the influence of scholars like Victor Turner and Richard Schechner gives way to French poststructuralists like Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, and Lacan, and to work coming out of speech act theory, like that of Judith Butler.

Although McKenzie asserts that even after the theory boom “liminality remains one of the most frequently cited attributes of performative efficacy” (49), the term *liminal* does not seem to figure into the discourse around performance art. While art historian RoseLee Goldberg’s summary statements about performance art in her book *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*—an almost unanimously cited reference for scholars thinking about performance art from a Performance Studies perspective—resonate with Turner’s understanding of the liminal, she does not actually use the word *liminal*, the term *liminal* does not appear in the index, and she does not even use *liminal* when discussing the performance art generated between 1968 and 1986, roughly the time of Turner’s work, even when that art constructs itself under the sign of ritual. She writes in the forward, “The history of performance art in the twentieth century is the history of a permissive, open-ended

medium with endless variables, executed by artists impatient with the limitations of more established art forms, and determined to take their art directly to the public” (9), evoking a liminal-like space of play, paradox and transformational subjectivity. Somewhat more surprisingly, the scholarship on performance art within Performance Studies reproduces this absence of the word *liminal*. Philip Auslander’s four volume anthology, *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, includes five articles on performance art, only one of which uses the word *liminal*. Erin Striff’s much smaller anthology, *Performance Studies*, contains two articles on performance art, one of which uses the word *liminal*, but only to describe Jell-O as “occupying an intermediate zone between solid and liquid” (Hart 75). And Carlson’s historical survey of performance art makes use of the word *liminoid* only to point out that the description in *The New Yorker* of a new performance art genre called “rap meets poetry” appearing in the mid-90s “is strikingly similar to Victor Turner’s liminoid space” (117). These scholars do not select liminality as their theoretical tool of choice.

The explicit use of the term *liminal* seems to go underground not because the concept diminishes in importance. Theorized as a subversive practice of the betwixt and between, Turner casts an often unacknowledged shadow over the work on performance art in Performance Studies. In the Auslander anthology, Nick Kaye calls performance art “inherently interdisciplinary” and asserts that it has “effected a blurring of precisely the kind of discrete category its use as a generic term would imply” (218). Josette Féral says that performance opts for “discontinuity and slippage” (212), and “indicates the theatre’s *margin*” (214). And Jeanie Forte says that performance art evidences a “deconstructive intent” (251). Rather, the term *liminal* seems to go underground as the concept evolves from an explanatory theory to a practical strategy of subversive action.

Britta B. Wheeler’s contribution to Auslander’s anthology, anomalous in its direct use of the term *liminal*—and useful for this reason—asserts that liminality constitutes a methodology of artistic and political resistance. In an article titled “Negotiating Deviance and Normativity: Performance Art, Boundary Transgressions, and Social Change,” Wheeler writes, “Artists ‘create a crisis’ in order to instigate liminality in the hope of creating a new awareness and social change” (273). She defines this liminality as “a moment of activity that is difficult to define; one that causes uncertainty” (272). While consistent with Turner’s definition of the liminal as “ambiguous and indeterminate” (*Ritual Process* 95), Wheeler alters the idea slightly by thinking of the liminal as a quality that artists can intentionally produced rather than a by-product upon which artists can capitalize. For Turner, even the subversive possibilities of the arts emerge as a somewhat fortuitous by-product of industrialization. For him, the interstice, the limen, the space of play and paradox constitutes something of a found object, the cracks in a social structure otherwise largely impervious to individual practices.

In describing the liminal as a strategy, Wheeler voices the way in which the discourse on performance art adds to the concept of liminality a valence of

aggressive overflow, and then privileges this valence. The liminality provoked by performance art does not merely occupy a structurally invisible in-between space. It forces itself upon the structurally visible in order to foreground and then challenge the normative. “Performance art strategies that conflate life with art allow liminality to happen,” writes Wheeler, “because taken-for-granted boundaries are crossed, thus highlighting a boundary that was previously invisible” (272). This theme of the liminal - even when this word is not used—that crosses boundaries reoccurs repeatedly in scholarship attempting to get at performance art’s resistant potential. Forte in “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism” argues that “Women’s performance art has particular disruptive potential” (254) because it catapults “Woman” out of her structurally invisible and therefore liminal position as “the basis of the Western system of representation” (252) and positions her as a speaking subject (257). In “Reconsidering Homophobia: Karen Finley’s Indiscretions” Lynda Hart makes a similar argument. By smearing her body in waste, Hart says “Finley strikes a nerve by touching the boundary that reveals what this culture’s ordering system cannot tolerate” (76). Both these examples figure performance art as a practice which effects change by displacing marginalized persons or objects out of their interstitial positions and displaying them in non-liminal space. Correspondingly, these examples figure the liminal as result of this displacement rather than as the defining quality of action that takes place in the interstice.

This refiguration of liminality effectively circles back to an understanding of the sacred close to that of van Gennep’s. Where van Gennep used the term *sacred* to flag the charged friction surrounding cyclical transitions in the social realm, the discourse surrounding performance art in Performance Studies thinks of performance art as aiming to instigate a similar kind of transitional friction, calling it resistance rather than sacred. This postindustrial sacrality sparks up along a different set of axes than van Gennep’s. Rather than accumulating around life stages, performance art ignites tension by shuffling back and forth across binary divides, between, for example, pathology and health in performance artist Orlan’s work (Auslander 60), masculinity and femininity in Kate Bornstein’s work (63), and heterosexuality and homosexuality in Finley’s work (Hart 73). In Féral’s words, “Performance can therefore be seen as an art-form whose primary aim is to undo ‘competencies’” (215). A practice, one could say, interested in generating the sacred.

This helps explain the proliferation of descriptive language related to the sacred. Not only does Hart says that Finley “is often described as a performer with a calling” and describes her as delivering her monologues “with evangelical fervour” (73-4), she uses words like “desecration” and “defilement” to characterize Finley’s practice (77). Hart refers to Finley’s *The Constant State of Desire*, in which she sponges unboiled eggs on her body with a stuffed Easter bunny and then covers herself with glitter, as “One of Finley’s most memorable defiling rituals,” and calls the result “a palimpsestic body that is both seductive and repellent,” evoking the double valence of the sacred (76). Performance artist Orlan named her ongoing performance “The

Reincarnation of Saint Orlan” (Auslander 56). In response to this un-ending action, in which Orlan undergoes cosmetic surgeries in order to reconstruct her face according to famous art images of women, critics often describe her appearance as “alien” (58), a word evoking the sacrality of the unfamiliar or altered, much like van Gennepe’s man on a journey who finds himself near a camp of strangers. And discussions of the work of artists like Hermann Nitsch and Marina Abramovic, whose actions refer directly to ritual, abound in words like “scapegoat,” “exorcism,” “cleansing” (Fischer-Lichte 237), “polluted,” “healing” (243), “suffering bodies” (244), and “sacrificial victim” (248). All this language, without actually using the word *sacred*, describes what van Gennepe’s translator would have called the “dangerous” and “upsetting” disturbances caused by persons or objects “enter[ing] a status at variance with the one previously held” (viii-ix). However eruptive—like Finley’s act of covering her naked body in egg and glitter—or permanently confounding—like Orlan’s surgical alterations, Performance Studies reads these artists as constructing variance, as breaking unexpectedly into the sacred in order to challenge the profane.

Oddly, when the word *sacred* appears in this discourse, it appears in order to name that against which performance art resists. Wheeler, for example, aligns the sacred with “normative social values” (274), calling these “the sacred centre of society” (275). And Auslander writes that Orlan “dismisses” the idea that “the body is sacred and magical,” because she does not consider “the body as in any sense foundational or inviolable” (59). This use of the term *sacred* mobilizes the word as it evolved in its association with the discourse of the Christian church, through which by 1530 the word *sacred* meant among other things, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “Secured by religious sentiment, reverence, sense of justice, or the like, against violation, infringement, or encroachment.” A correct usage, the interesting thing this reveals about the status of the term *sacred* in a Performance Studies discourse entails a paradox. In the field’s interest in distancing itself from anthropology, seen as implicated by the poststructuralist critique of presence, Performance Studies has stopped using *sacred* as an analytical tool for charting friction, change, and doubly-valued objects. At the same time, Performance Studies has continued to deploy, unnamed, the logic of the anthropological meaning of *sacred*, obscuring this logic by only invoking the term *sacred* as a straw man.

### **Why Re-Theorize the Sacred?**

As Phelan’s dissatisfaction with the term *liminal* suggests, perhaps the concept of liminality has reached a saturation point. Perhaps the liminal, with its intense focus on the margin, the interstice and the threshold, does not enable Performance Studies to fully address the questions now facing the field. McKenzie warns, “the persistent use of this concept within the field *has made liminality into something of a norm*” (50). According to McKenzie, “the liminal-norm operates in any situation where the valorization of liminal transgression or resistance itself becomes normative—at which point theorization of such a norm may become subversive”



(50). This does not mean that Performance Studies should abandon its commitment to liminal peoples or practices but that perhaps the time has come to think not only about resistance and subversion, but also about how to build the kind of world in which we want to live.

This means reevaluating the relationship between performance and reproduction. According to Phelan, “Performance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive” (148). Although Phelan does not use the term *liminal* here to define performance, her understanding of performance as that which “clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation” (148), as that which “saves nothing” and “only spends” (140), and as that which “becomes itself through disappearance” (146), translates Turner’s concept of liminality into reproductive terms. Where the concept of liminality has disciplined Performance Studies toward a suspicion of, and even lack of interest in, the role hegemonies, structures, systems and institutions might play in generating or sustaining change, by re-embedding liminality in the theories of the sacred from which it developed, Performance Studies might rediscover theoretical resources that make it possible to consider how what Phelan calls the “machinery of reproduction” can generate, rather than impede, the kinds of individual and social transformations of interest to Performance Studies.

For where Turner sees liminal rites, and by extension all things liminal, as the source of personal and cultural transformation, in van Gennep it’s the social group or cultural institution, interested in reproducing itself, which creates the liminal rite in order to effectively respond to changes imposing themselves on the community, whether at the micro scale (a boy becoming a man) or the macro scale (war). In van Gennep, the term *sacred* describes disruptions which demand a corporate response, and the term *liminal* describes the way in which this corporate response accomplishes two very important things at once: 1) accommodates difference, dissonance, ambiguity and change while 2) ensuring the cohesion of the corporate entity. In our present context, when so many of the problems troubling us as scholars—globalization, cultural imperialism, global warming, racism, and the list goes on—are institutional and cultural in scope and require a corporate response, it seems useful to think not only about the liminal, the spaces between, but also about how to generate (or regenerate) institutions which simultaneously accommodate difference, dissonance, ambiguity and change *and* cohere on a corporate scale. The term *sacred* can help us make this shift in inquiry from subversion and resistance to generation and corporate action.

In making the shift from questions about subversion and resistance to questions about generation and cohesion, the re-theorization of the term *sacred* will cultivate the capacity of Performance Studies practitioners to speak with, rather than simply theorize about, politically mobilized religious constituencies like the Christian Right whose religious framework drives them to an intense investment in reproduction expressed through ritually charged protests. Returning to Conquergood’s formulation, speaking *with* an ‘other’ does not mean becoming like or even coming

into agreement with an interlocutor. As Performance Studies ventures to research the role performance plays in generating and reproducing the systems and structures that facilitate corporate life, it is unlikely that the Christian Right's understanding of reproduction will prove satisfying or even tenable from a Performance Studies perspective. However, by taking the risk of engaging with this particularly difficult 'other,' Performance Studies practitioners may discover that fear of and anger toward the Christian Right, even when thoroughly justifiable, has obscured a much wider and more varied terrain of religious performance, both within the Christian tradition and beyond. By ignoring this terrain, Performance Studies practitioners miss the opportunity to engage with religious practitioners who often quite intentionally use and develop performance forms to negotiate the tension between a past, a community, or a structure they want to preserve or reproduce and a present, an 'other,' or an uncertainty they want to encounter or embrace.

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