

Remind Me of the World I Want

Michael LeVan

The Festschrift tradition is one of the most touching rituals in academia. Usually appearing upon retirement or at a scholar's 65th birthday, a Festschrift celebrates the impact a scholar has had on a discipline, on the work of close colleagues, and on former graduate students. These academic friends congregate in print, offering a public collection of essays extolling the scholarly virtues of the honoree. Often, several contributions highlight the daring of the celebrant's work; sometimes contributors offer daring work themselves, a sort of celebratory collusion of outlaw argumentation.

Less well known is the Gedenkschrift, a collection with the same celebratory goals of Festschriften, but appearing posthumously as a memorial volume. The celebratory effect is dampened, of course, by the absent honoree; contributors are often energized as much by grief as by celebration. It is rare for a scholar to have made much disciplinary impact by age 36, which makes the tragedy of John T. Warren's death so much more acute.

This Gedenkschrift for John Warren carries a queer weight of arriving several decades before it should; but it also carries along the joy and persistence of someone who pushed limits, pushed others to reject complacency, and sometimes pushed buttons to make points otherwise easily avoided. John's work resided among cultural studies, performance studies, whiteness studies, critical pedagogy, and queer theory. He published widely and often. At 36 he was already a full Professor and had already challenged, inspired, and mentored many cohorts of graduate students.

When I first met John in 1996, he was a brand new MA student, exhibiting the two most important qualities of those likely to succeed in graduate school: he was insecure about his level of knowledge and he was scared to death of teaching. He used these as reflexive touchstones as he worked his way through the twin morasses of becoming a scholar and a teacher simultaneously—thrown into the thick of things, where learning and experience collide. These qualities of insecurity and fear eventually morphed for John into a more mature sense of radical reflexivity: knowing that knowledge is always limited and limiting; seeing teaching as an open yet delicate space of possibility, hope, and transformation.

John was often motivated by injustice. A critical anger simmers in much of his work. Yet he never let this blind him to his own situatedness and implication in the very discourses and power structures that he railed against. In the first issue of *Liminalities*, he writes of the power of performance to “lift me up and remind me of the

Michael LeVan is editor-in-chief of *Liminalities*.

world I want and remind me of my own accountability in making it so.”¹ He brought this view of the power of performance into all of his work, and it shines through as well in the contributions to the Performance and Pedagogy series of essays that he edited for *Liminalities* from 2007 until his death in 2011.

About two weeks before he lost a very short battle with cancer (it is perhaps better to say he was mugged by the disease), he told me that his prognosis was grim. In his characteristic fashion, John found a way to hope in the face of overwhelming odds. In response to his local doctors encouraging him to prepare for death, he said, instead, “I’d like someone who believes.” As a scholar and teacher, John was always one who believed, one who saw potential for change no matter how grim the outlook. His steadfast belief in the power of education to trump political and social despair has not been lost on the contributors to this volume. As he wrote in his editor’s introduction to the Performance and Pedagogy series,

The degree to which pedagogy can be revolutionary and liberatory is increasingly diminished today. We in performance can find great hope in the theories and enactments of our pedagogy, not only to make clear what happens in classrooms, but also to show how our work makes education better for those who encounter it. This is not the time to be silent about education; it is the time to make education richly textured and socially relevant. The work of engaging in research on performance and pedagogy certainly serves disciplinary purposes; but it also serves political ones.²

As tragic as it is to have lost John, it is wonderful to see several generations of scholars represented here to honor his memory and his academic legacy.

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¹ John T. Warren, “Watching ‘Flag’ and my Relative Disinterest of Generic Clarity,” *Liminalities* 1.1 (2005), paragraph 8. <http://liminalities.net/1-1/disinterest.htm>

² John T. Warren, “Editor’s Introduction: Pedagogy and Performance,” *Liminalities* 3.1 (2007), paragraph 6. <http://liminalities.net/3-1/pedagogy.htm>