A Second Take

On Performative Writing and Reading

Peggy Phelan

In "Notes on Hope: Revisiting Unmarked *30 Years Later," also published in this issue of* TDR, *I refer to experiments in writing and "what came to be called performative writing" as "a story for another day." Another day has now arrived.*

As it was developing in the field of performance studies, I found possibilities in performative writing, which is to say as well, in performative reading. The two tasks are entwined in much the way we think of the entanglements of time. This essay is a recollection of the past; writing it now I also renew and distort it. Misreadings, misunderstandings, mistakes are inevitable, even as I try to cite and recite what happened and how I understood it then and how I understand it now. Reading, writing, and arithmetic: acts, misfires, numbered dates on numbered pages. This is a kind of history, a kind of world-making. Failure assured, as Beckett showed us, let's begin with some of the dismal political discourse that greeted performance art in the late 1980s and helped inspire what came to be called performative writing.

Performance Studies and the Culture Wars

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Republican senators launched attacks on the funding decisions of the National Endowment for the Arts. The senators argued that the NEA was using taxpayer money to fund offensive art. They were particularly incensed by photographers and performance artists (Phelan 1990, 1991). After targeting the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, the senators, loosely led by Jesse Helms (Republican-South Carolina), demanded that four performance artists—Holly Hughes, John Fleck, Karen Finley, and Tim Miller—be denied funding. All four had been recommended to receive grants by the Solo Theater and Mime panel. Dismayingly, NEA director John Frohnmayer agreed to overturn the peer panel's recommendation and to deny the grants.

> Expressing a truly dismaying disregard for the function and purpose of his office, Frohnmayer attempted to save the Endowment by "sacrificing" a few "lambs" to the salivating jaws of Helms, [...] Reverend Donald Wildmon, and friends. But why these particular lambs? In selecting four white artists to target, all of whom openly acknowledge the existence of homosexuality, AIDS, racism, sexism, homophobia, love, and death in their work, the Endowment seeks to avoid further charges of racism *and* wagers that

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> the increased homophobia prompted by AIDS will provide a large enough cloak to mask the particular violence of this political reality.
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> Miller and Fleck are "gay men"; Hughes is a "lesbian"; Finley is a "feminist." These labels are ridiculously inadequate and absurdly reductive, but this is how performers' identities get marked in Washington [...] (Phelan 1991:135)

The whole debacle made clear that there was a large gap between the work the artists were creating and the descriptions of it offered by politicians and the mainstream press. When the NEA was established in 1965, it included grants for critics and scholars to educate the public about new art. Gradually, however, the educational ambition of the NEA was channeled into grants for artists to do workshops and other teaching in public schools, while grants for scholars and journalists became the province of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Eliminating critical writing from the NEA's funding categories had far-reaching consequences for art scholarship and journalism in the United States.[1]

The political attacks on radical art took place when arts and humanities scholars in the United States were especially enamored with poststructuralist theory. As commentators began thinking through the "use value of the signifier" and the simulations, repetitions, and iterations of postmodernism, many performance and visual artists introduced ideological critique into their work. This mutual appetite for Big Ideas increased the hermeticism of scholarly writing about art, eventually leading to a weird combination of pseudo-philosophical density and dull predictability in critical writing. The politics of citation began to resemble a fashion runway: on this runway, Freud, Lacan, and Derrida; and on this one, Jameson, Lyotard, and Barthes. Frequently, the political-activist ambition of the artists was flattened by the critical apparatus devoted to interpreting it. Reading critical essays about contemporary art during this period reminded me of how I felt as a child putting my hands in a Cracker Jack box: I started with great excitement that increased through the first few paragraphs, only to be disappointed to find the same plastic prize, eight pages in. In this context, performative writing that aimed to enact an argument rather than deconstruct it seemed appealing.

To counter what I called "the systematicity of critical theory," I began to experiment with the possibility that my scholarly writing might attend explicitly to the emotional force of art. I was tired of what was beginning to feel like abstract posturing and craved commentary attentive to the extraordinary emotional pools and swells viewers swam through when Pina Bausch's dancers were drenching themselves in silk gowns and impossible shoes while exploring unusual ways they might slap or carry each other. I wanted to write about all of these gestures and so I began reading dance criticism like a maniac.

Reading Performatively

Enacting the Object of Analysis

Jill Johnston's writing about Judson Dance Theatre from *The Village Voice* in the 1960s alerted me to the possibilities of pushing critical prose beyond its descriptive tasks. As the JDT dancers developed new movement phrases and choreographic manifestos, Johnston transformed the genre of the performance review into what she came to call her dance diary (see Johnston [1969] 1971, [1962] 1998). She found creative ways to match the artistic innovations of the JDT artists by developing inventive prose that braided details of her personal life and thoughts into her responses to dance concerts. Arguing that her criticism was itself art, Johnston followed the JDT dancers' efforts to remake modern dance with a parallel effort to remake journalistic reviews. In her first published review of Yvonne Rainer's work in 1962, Johnston is clearly doing the job of the dance reviewer, although even from the start she is tapping at the window of what Fredric Jameson called "the prisonhouse of language" (1972):

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[1] See Cindy Brizzell's article in *TDR* for a fuller account of how these debates influenced the development of ArtNow, a loose group of art organizations that held a rally in Washington, DC, in March 1996 to protest funding cuts. A highlight of the day was Tony Kushner's rousing speech, reprinted in Brizzell (1998:134).

> And then Yvonne Rainer came on with "Ordinary Dance." It is an ordinary dance because it is autobiographical and Miss Rainer does a lot of talking while she moves, ordinary-type talking, telling you the facts (Hugo St...oh yes I forgot to mention Gilroy the two wheel cart that moved the earth...1941–1942...let's see...uh...panhandle, early morning, white...I am really not telling you much am I...). Poetry of facts. The title has its ironic aspect. The dance is out of the ordinary. [...] [...S]he did some movement nobody ever saw before. I cannot say any more now except to note that the audience responded tumultuously, and we had good reason. (Johnston [1962] 1998:39–40)

Johnston's review suggests that the mood, the title, the words, and, crucially, the spectator's response to what counts as ordinary, might be the proper focus of a review, rather than the description of steps that had been the mainstay of dance criticism prior to Johnston's effort to remake it. Moreover, she uses Rainer's wry spoken commentary, "I am really not telling you much am I" as a justification for her own parallel statement, "I cannot say any more now." In 1962, Johnston's "I" appears on the page only to admit she can say nothing. The reader gets the impression that Johnston, like Rainer, does have something to say; however, she has not yet found a way to say it. As she continued to write about the downtown New York dance scene, Johnston's prose, punctuation, and syntax became increasingly unorthodox and, in the main, thrilling. However, the wonderful blurring of the "I" Johnston deployed in her first Rainer review gradually became more ragged and inward. To risk over-simplifying, one might say Johnston's writing evolved from reviewing into something approaching excellent stand-up, as in the last sentence of this entry in her dance diary from 1969:

> As a dance critic I'm even falling apart, I'm too good to be true. I know I'm ideally suited to the work I'm not doing. ([1962] 1998:288)

Every blocked writer surely identifies with that last self-definition. Setting aside the subsequent direction of Johnston's life and work, reading her early writing about dance expanded my sense of what a critical essay might be, both conceptually and poetically.

While I admired Johnston's writing about Judson, I did not want to become a journalist. I fell into a job that became a life; reading, teaching, and writing for decades has suited me beyond all reason. As I learned how to *be an academic* (a strange ontological condition then and now), I noticed how rhetorical performances, often unwittingly, exposed operations of asymmetrical power. While I, along with so many others, admired Clifford Geertz's celebrated essay, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," I was struck by the rhetorical structure of its opening pages, which read like fiction. Originally published in *Daedalu*s in 1972, I read it for the first time in 1985 or 1986. During that interval, Geertz's beguiling interpretation of the Balinese cockfight had done considerably more for the anthropologist, and for Western anthropology, than it had done for the Balinese cockfighters. By the mid-1980s, it would have been easy to point to it as an example of Western intellectual imperialism.[2] When I read Geertz's essay though, I was riveted by its rhetorical sleight of hand. For the first three pages, Geertz uses the third-person plural, "we" and "our," to describe the time before he and his unnamed/unmarked wife, the anthropologist Hildred Geertz, get caught up in the police raid.

> **We** were intruders, professional ones, and the villagers dealt with **us** as Balinese seem always to deal with people not part of their life who yet press themselves upon them: as though

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[2] This was part of what I meant above about the predictability of some ideological critique. But it might also be said that the very success of Geertz's essay prompted some of the ethical skepticism about western anthropology that became prominent in the late 1970s and 1980s.

> **we** were not there. For them, and to a degree for **ourselves**, **we** were nonpersons, specters, invisible men. (Geertz 1972:1; emphasis added)

These opening pages make clear Geertz's writerly skills. His tone is inviting and welcoming. More subtly, Geertz's essay enacts a ritual structure. The befuddlement Geertz emphasizes in his opening paragraphs is an instance of what Victor Turner would call the pre-liminal or preparation phase (1969). In other words, Geertz's essay seeks not only to interpret Balinese cockfighting, but to engage in a kind of meta-interpretive deep play *with* it. Geertz's disorientation upon arrival establishes a bond with the reader who finds herself wondering if she will find a place for her own thoughts and feelings in an essay about cocks and cockfighters. Geertz's opening asks the reader to offer the Western couple, who surely are hypervisible in the Balinese village, sympathy and compassion because they feel unseen. Geertz asks for a kind of double reading. We know the couple stood out in the Balinese village, yet we accept his assertion that they felt ignored. We accede to Geertz's emotional interpretation, despite knowing better. Why? He was there; he knows more; we trust him, and we dislike doubting someone's feelings, especially early on. This gives Geertz an advantage that he, not unlike a wily cock, will exploit.

Additionally, Geertz's opening paragraphs whet the reader's appetite for change. We begin rooting for a liminal event, some action that will "save" the anthropologists from their hosts' indifference. When Geertz recounts their chaotic escape from the police raid on the cockfight in the central square, the reader cheers them on and hopes for their safe escape. His essay deploys the ritual structure analyzed by Van Gennep, Turner, Schechner, and others:

1. Pre-liminal phase: preparation (1972:1–3)
2. Liminal event: the chase and escape (4–6)
3. Aftermath: Geertz's interpretation of Balinese's cockfights (6–34)

In keeping with ritual structure, the liminal event of the vice raid confers visibility and personhood on the anthropologists, precisely what Geertz claims the couple lacked prior to the liminal event.

However, one crucial consequence of this transformation occurs at a rhetorical level. As Geertz brilliantly summarizes the immediate transformation produced in the wake of the raid, his prose moves from the third person to the first:

> [The police raid] was the turning point as far as **our** relationship to the community was concerned, and **we** were literally "in." The whole village opened up to **us**, probably more than it would have otherwise [...] Getting caught, or almost caught, in a vice raid is not a very generalizable recipe for achieving that mysterious necessity for anthropological field work, rapport, but for **me** it worked very well. [...] It gave **me** [an...] immediate inside-view grasp [...] that anthropologists [...] normally do not get. (Geertz 1972:4)

The reader shares the joy, relief, and the comic delight of the Geertzes' escape. And yet, in this paragraph, Geertz begins in the third person (we, our) and ends in the first-person, "for me it worked very well." There is no more "we" or "us" in the remaining 34 pages. Abandoning the "we," Geertz renders Hildred, if logically possible, more invisible than she had been in the first paragraph.[3] At the level of narrative plot, the police raid allows both Geertzes to be accepted into and recognized as members of the community. At the level of scholarly argument, though, the police raid allows Clifford to surmount Hildred's presence; any influence she likely had in the ensuing commentary is erased.[4] Both Geertzes escaped the police, but Clifford's narrative recounting of the event "arrests" Hildred in the wake of their escape and removes her from the rest of the essay. He treats her in the manner he accuses the Balinese of treating "them" in his opening paragraph: as if she were not there. Thus, Hildred is a "nonperson, a specter, invisible" in the opening pages and again after the vice raid. The only time she is vividly present is during the liminal phase of the chase. Geertz's prose allows the reader (and perhaps too the Balinese cockfighters) to interpret something often overlooked in Western anthropological culture in the 1970s: the propensity to use *others*, no matter how intimate, in the service of the anthropologist's interpretative project. After the raid, Clifford finds his subject, the all-male arena of cockfights, and Hildred, like the women of Bali, literally and rhetorically has no place, and no apparent role in the "deep play" of the cockfight. But the play is indeed deep.

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[3] "Invisible" means lacking visibility so the phrase "more invisible" makes little sense. And yet, one's awareness of what and who one sees changes quite a bit. My point here is that Hildred Geertz's absence is less noticeable as Clifford's interpretation of the cockfight proceeds. Thus, the cocks kill more than birds.

[4] Hildred Geertz (1927–2022) was a social anthropologist with expertise in Java, Morocco, and Bali. She wrote, or cowrote, nine books. Her first, *The Javanese Family* (1961), remains an essential study of Javanese kinship systems. With Clifford Geertz, she coauthored *Kinship in Bali* (1978), and with Clifford and Lawrence Rosen, she wrote *Meaning*

Although Clifford Geertz does not refer to Hildred after he recounts the raid, the term "wife" continues to recur in the essay. In fact, Geertz mentions "wife" seven more times, all in footnotes. Thus, while Clifford removes Hildred from the body of his text to establish his singular authority, his footnotes keep referencing stories and myths that underscore the centrality of wives and women to the meaning of the cockfights. While Clifford believes he is interpreting an all-male Balinese activity, he is also unwittingly exposing the logic of cultural exclusion. Structures of misogyny, racism, and other forms of social repression illuminate the ideological investments of those who are doing the excluding.

As Geertz moves from the opening capaciousness of the third person "we" and "our" to the stricter authority of the far narrower "I," his rhetorical performance enacted the things I was discovering I disliked about scholarly authority ("for *me* it worked very well"). That it may have worked less well for Hildred, or for Balinese women who play no apparent role in the ritual, seems irrelevant to Geertz's overall interpretation. Moreover, the assumption that scholars are truth-tellers often exempts their writing from the kind of close reading I am offering here. The interpretation of scholarly culture's deep rhetorical play remains too often unmarked.

To mark the rhetorical and even fictional aspects of scholarly writing, I invented a range of narrators to anchor the arguments in my next book, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (1997). Again, as with *Unmarked*, I believed that the book would be read in its entirety and the fictional cast of these narrative "I"s would be obvious. I assumed that the abundant incompatibilities of the narrative "I"s throughout the book—they included a member of the *corps de ballet* of the New York City Ballet, a psychoanalyst, and an art historian—would make clear that doubt and uncertainty were (and are) fundamental critical tools. Not only did I introduce multiple narrators, in one chapter I varied the font from bold, to italic, to Roman and back again as each of three narrators unfolded their arguments. The *mise-en-page* and the *mise-en-stage* were aligned precisely by virtue of being misaligned at the level of font. While I was (literally) dreaming all of this up, however, I somehow overlooked the complexity of the task I was creating for my reader.

My first inkling of the problem came shortly after I gave a seminar devoted to one chapter in *Mourning Sex* at the University of Pennsylvania. About a week or so after the event, I received a letter of reprimand from a professional psychoanalytic group in Pennsylvania chiding me for coming too close to revealing the identity of one of my patients in my remarks. They wrote to me, they said, as "a courtesy." Yet it was clearly a reprimand and a warning. I immediately began drafting a letter of defense, explaining that the narrator was fictional, that I was not a psychoanalyst and that they had misread me. After I drafted this letter and sat with it in my hand, I slowly realized that I had misread the analysts. They felt compelled to alert me that I was injuring a real person, my colleague and friend, the late Rena Grant. Indeed, it was my friendship with Rena, and my grief over her death, which led me to compose the essay that had alarmed the Pennsylvania analysts. What I viewed as an instance of performative writing that made good on my subtitle's claim, "performing

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and Order in Moroccan Society (1979). Her last book, *Storytelling in Bali*, was published in 2016, when she was 90. She was also the long-time chair of Princeton's Anthropology Department, a task she began in 1973. The first woman to hold the position, she compared the job to raising male ducks: "You get only squawks and no eggs" (in Saxon 2022).

public grief," they viewed as ethically suspect. While they had mistaken me for a practicing psychoanalyst treating a living patient, they had correctly registered that there was something amiss in what I had written. I also understood that my fictional psychoanalytic case history was too convincing, too plausibly a real case history. Since I was not a psychoanalyst, in the end I decided not to reply to their letter of reprimand. Receiving it had shaken me up though and left me uncertain about what I could do to fix the problem.

I had already agreed to give the same seminar as the one I had given at UPenn at the University of California-Irvine's Humanities Institute. But while the UPenn event was a one-hour talk, the Irvine event was a three-hour faculty seminar. I had circulated the same chapter that had prompted the letter from the analysts, "Failed live(r)s: Whatever happened to her public grief? In memory of Rena Grant (1959–92)." Before her death, Grant had written two important essays for the journal *Lacanian Ink*. The first was an exemplary race-conscious reading of Joan Rivière's 1929 "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1992), and the second (1994) was a stunning analysis of Richard Aldrich's 1962 film, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* I wanted to find a way to bring attention to what I viewed as extraordinary work. Chapter 7 of *Mourning Sex* offers a reading of Grant's reading of these two psychoanalytically dense texts. That would have been a dauntingly ambitious task on its own, but I complicated things still further by creating two fictional narrators who were affected by Grant's essays. One fictional narrator, Echo, is a professor at NYU. The other narrator is Echo's psychoanalyst; her case history of Echo provides the third narrative voice in the chapter. All three protagonists are white women who write about dreams and fantasies about what it means to be and to perform as, a white woman intellectual.

When I went to Irvine to discuss the chapter, my interlocutors were insistent that I clarify whose dream the psychoanalyst was recounting in the case history. This took me aback. I kept pointing out that all dreams are reconstructed texts and the only query we could bring to them concerned their metaphorical and literary qualities. The seminar members countered that the ethics of psychoanalytic interpretation required that the dream be truly reported. What I intended as abundant, proliferating narrative "I"s that revealed the inevitable blurring between the fictional and the real, between phantasy and truth, was received as...what?—shady, suspicious, silly. And once I said, "Echo and the psychoanalyst are fictional," the rest of my argument about Grant's work was dismissed.[5]

Looking back, I can see that I made (at least) three fundamental errors. By leaving unmarked my own relationship to Grant, Echo, and the unnamed psychoanalyst, when "Peggy Phelan" appeared in embodied form to give talks, the audience wanted to locate me, to figure out if "Peggy Phelan" was "really" Echo or the psychoanalyst or maybe Bette Davis. By refusing this demand, and attempting to take refuge in the conceptual category of the unmarked, I caused a kind of injury (or irritant) that produced censoring responses. Additionally, by mixing Grant's actual "true" writing with the writing of two fictional characters, I overlooked the different relationships readers create with fictional and real narrators. And perhaps most egregiously, while I assumed that by engaging closely with Grant's arguments I was offering her homage, grieving her death, and asking others to keep her work alive, readers felt I was criticizing a dead woman who had died much too early. My intention was to demonstrate that the real and the phantasmatic were braided together so tightly that it was impossible to separate them; performative writing, I hoped, was one arena in which that admixture could be exposed. However, I had underestimated the grip of the real in public mourning. And I had also failed to grasp the depth of the impatience in the larger field of critical theory with feminist psychoanalysis. Beginning with Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and buttressed by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), critical theory had been preoccupied with questions of sexual difference for about two decades. But by 1997, other questions seemed more pressing.

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[5] All of this was before the genre of creative nonfiction absorbed the attention of scholars.

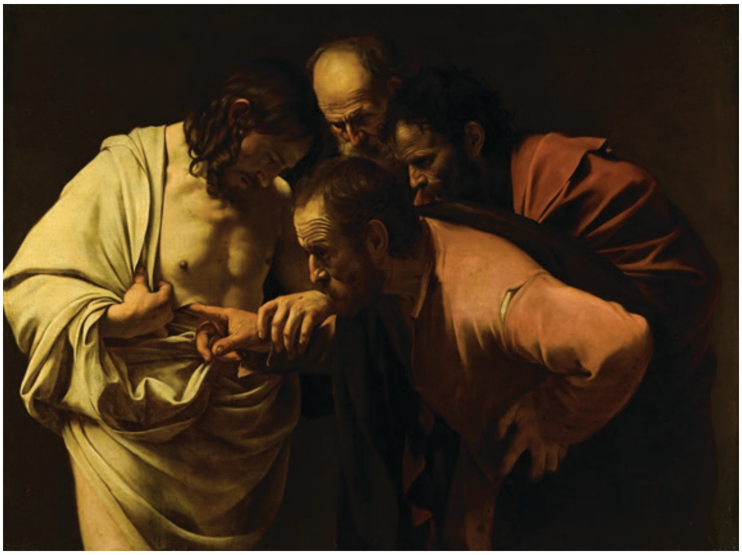

Figure 1. The Incredulity of Saint Thomas *(1601–02) by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. (Public domain)*

With the benefit of hindsight, I also see *Mourning Sex* tried to bring my literary imagination to the fore. I created multiple narrators, took up a range of literary genres, and pushed hard on the limits of criticism itself. I wanted the book to DO something, to go somewhere, to live beyond its pages. I wanted my words to unleash "the more-in-them-than-themselves that made it possible to create something we could never control, the more-in-them that made it possible for them to travel to places whose topography we could never map" (1997:7). Unfortunately, I had completely forgotten the violence wrought from the transformation of the multiple narrating "I"s into "them," a lesson that I should have learned from reading Geertz's essay.

And yet, the nonscholarly response to *Mourning Sex* taught me things I value. I was delighted when a Harvard student, Ryan McGee, adapted chapter 6, "Shattered skulls: Rodney King and Holbein's *The Ambassadors*," as a play; seeing it performed on campus was one of the highlights of the book's public reception. A textile artist made beautiful pillows with quotations from *Mourning Sex*, and one of the poems in the book was circulated among poets I admire. Additionally, a Catholic theologian and a lawyer wrote me long insightful letters in response to my discussion of Caravaggio's decision to depict Christ with a bloodless wound in chapter 2, "Whole wounds: bodies at the vanishing point." This chapter, and the "ethically suspect" chapter 7, remain my favorite writing in the book. But the overall negative scholarly reception of *Mourning Sex* gave me pause about the limits of performative writing and led me to create embodied, rather than textual, performances, something I had been doing off and on since college.

Letters and Lectures

The many experiences I had as a conference attendee and presenter made clear that "the academic talk" is a genre in need of attention. As an audience member, I would often feel that the talk would have been more successful as a written article than as a live event. When I first began giving academic talks, I was torn between my desire to be seen as smart and convincing (or to be a follower of Stanley Fish, whose slogan "I want to be right!" appeared on T-shirts worn by many academics in the 1980s) and my desire to heed E.M. Forster's advice in *Howards End*: "Only connect!" Gradually I became less interested in being right and more intent on conveying how artists and their ideas compelled my thinking. This led me to try composing actual letters to artists and reading them in public. I liked crossing the personal address and the public recitation; instead of adding multiple narrators to one argument, I would add multiple auditors to one letter.

Collaborating with Adrian Heathfield, we created a lecture-performance employing an epistolary structure, *Blood Math* (Phelan and Heathfield 2001). Heathfield lived in England at the time and I was in New York, and we corresponded regularly via email before we decided to create the performance. The physical performance was minimal: we spelled out a word one letter at a time on a chalkboard.[6] I'd done a couple of performances prior to creating *Blood Math*. I wrote a

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[6] We performed *Blood Math* at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999, at the PSi conference in Arizona in 2000, and again at LIFT (the London International Festival of Theatre) in 2001.

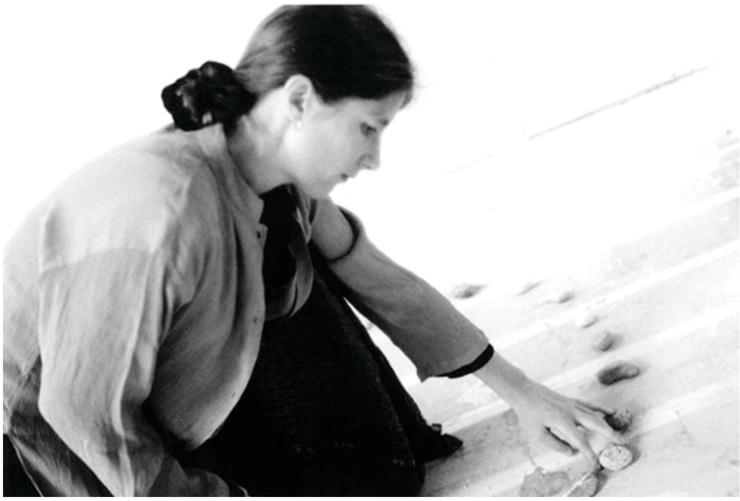

Figure 2. Peggy Phelan, Eat Crow. *Fourth International Women Playwrights Conference, Galway, Ireland, 1997. (Photo by Lucia Sander; courtesy of the author)*

play called *Eat Crow* and, in collaboration with Brazilian artist and musician Lucia Sander, performed it in Galway, Ireland, as part of the Fourth International Women Playwrights Conference in 1997.[7] I also did a performance with Lois Weaver at the ICA in London called *Femme*, *Lec*, *Dem* in which I wore a tuxedo and wielded a red laser pointer as Weaver struck poses that she called "being a living slide."[8] I enjoyed performing, although I felt more anxiety than I could handle performing with someone else. I was fine with accepting my own failures, but I did not want to be responsible for bringing anyone else's work down.[9] I decided to pursue performing on my own, and supplemented my presence by adding music and slides in place of collaborating human partners.

Writing open letters to specific, often well-known artists allowed me to address their work in a personal way, using direct address that helped break down scholarly distance. The music and slides allowed me to evade some of the oppressions of the (male) gaze. I had mixed feelings about what to do with the created texts after I performed them. Part of me thought they were simply one-offs, attempts to embrace the ephemeral. Some were published, including ones to Marina Abramović (Phelan 2004b) and Tehching Hsieh (in Phelan 2009a). My favorite one of these performances was *P.S.*, a (love) letter to Jacques Derrida, performed in New York in 2000 on the occasion of his 70th birthday ([2000] 2020). I played Sam Cooke's "You Send Me" to introduce my discussion of Derrida's *La Carte Postale*, his meditation on correspondence. Derrida's book begins with a brilliant reading of two postcards that reverse the order of philosophy's transmission. Matthew Paris's engraving, which appears on the face of the postcard, depicts Plato teaching Socrates, rather than the historically accurate order of Socrates teaching Plato. This reversal of the student and the teacher, the P and the S, prompts Derrida's philosophical interest in the reversal of the order of speech and writing, among other things. Derrida's close reading of the P and the S gave me an entry point for bringing performance studies' own PS into correspondence with Derridean deconstruction, if only as a performative signature, another PS, another Afterword of sorts.

Toward Institutionalization

As performance studies moved from its position as enfant terrible in the humanities, some of the experimental, creative energy of its first 10 to 15 years got channeled into the tasks of administration and institutionalization, editorial boards, and conference organizing. In 2001, I left NYU after 16 years, having been both the chair of the Department of Performance Studies and one of the founders, and, subsequently, the treasurer and then president of Performance Studies international. Prior to the founding of PSi, I served as the NYU faculty director of two performance studies conferences, one of which led to the collection of essays I edited with Jill Lane, *The Ends of Performance*. (This volume includes Della Pollock's rich essay, "Performing Writing" [1998:73–103]). I was hired by Stanford University's Department of Drama with the expectation that I would help transform that program into a performance studies department. After chairing, hiring, and writing a million memos, emails, and reports, the Stanford Drama Department officially became the Department of Theater and Performance Studies, unofficially known as TAPS, in 2012.

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[7] I can no longer find the text of the play, but some reviews included photographs. I hope to restage it at some point (see Trotter 1997).

[8] For a fuller description of this performance see *The Only Way Home Is Through the Show: The Performance Work of Lois Weaver* (Harvie and Weaver 2015).

[9] I have also written texts that performers and other artists have made use of in their own work. For example, the dancer/choreographer Sara Wookey licensed my "Love's Geography" (2000) for her 2008 performance at REDCAT Theater, *Love's Geography Revisited*. Wookey's piece also toured and there are short excerpts on YouTube. Other texts I have given away to a range of performers on the condition that my authorship remain unmarked and unnamed.

In recent years, I have been helping build collections and adding to the archive of the field of performance studies.[10] This work involves looking at film, video, and photography, and learning the logic of metadata. The obligations of art history and future scholarship have forced me to expand the valorization of the present tense that drove *Unmarked*.

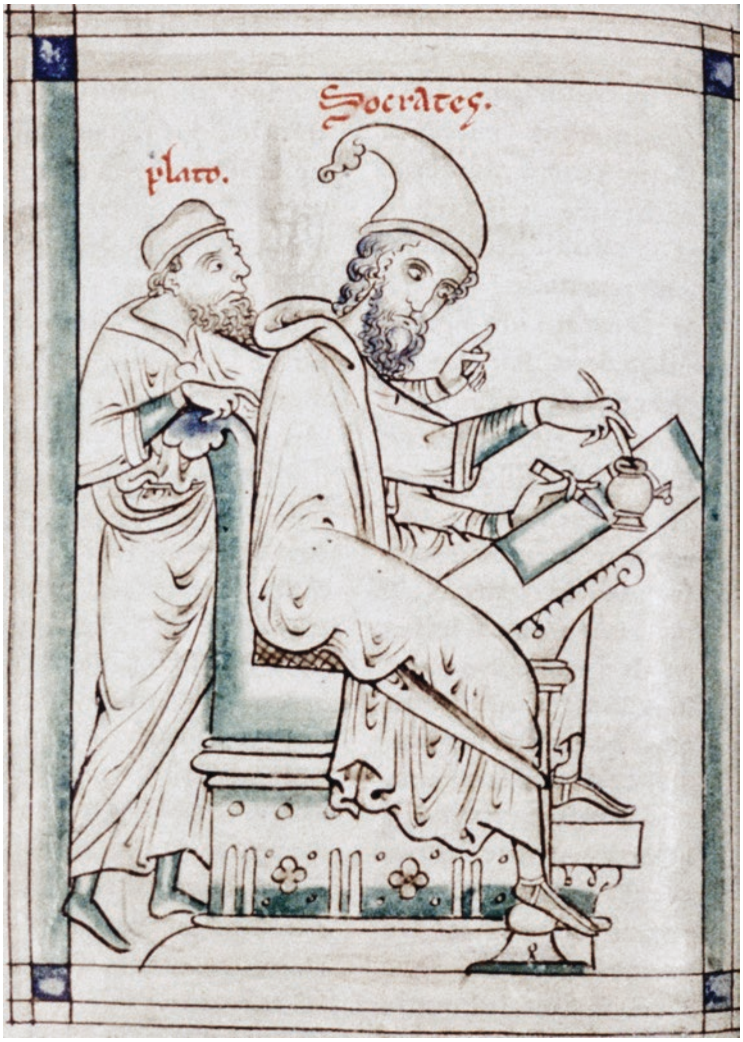

Figure 3. The Postcard *by Matthew Paris (1217–1259) depicting Plato and Socrates. The image appears in a 13th-century manuscript of fortune-telling tracts. (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Ashmole 304)*

Writing about a live event involves different skills than writing about visual art. I have come to love doing both, although the radical discrepancy of support for this work concerns me. While I am neither an art historian nor a dance critic, writing about dance is much more fraught for me than writing about painting or photography.[11] When addressing the latter, I feel I am participating in a robust and secure conversation. When I write about dance, however, I worry that I am broadening the parameters of what counts as dance too much and that "real" dance critics would object.[12] This worry reflects the larger politics of the contemporary art world, in which dance—with a few notable exceptions—is more likely to be neglected or given short shrift than painting, sculpture, or film.

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[10] Although my argument about the ontology of performance is often misread (see "Notes on Hope" in this issue of *TDR*; see also Bottoms 2020), I have long been dedicated to increasing the archival record of performance and visual art. I simply believe it is a documentary aid and not the performance itself.

[11] On the relationship between theatre and painting see "Lessons in Blindness from Samuel Beckett" (Phelan 2004a). On painting, performance, and narrative see "Shards of a History of Performance Art" (Phelan 2005a). On issues of feminism, intimacy, and photography see "Helena Almeida: The Interior of Us" (Phelan 2005b). On photography and death see "Francesca Woodman's Photography" (Phelan 2002). And on the feminist erotics of cinema see "The Returns of Touch" (Phelan 2007). For a longer, detailed argument on the importance of the photographic present-tense see "Haunted Stages" (Phelan 2009b).

Major museums and galleries pay writers for their contributions to catalogs, websites, and research archives. Commercial magazines such as *Art in America* or *Artforum* are economically viable in ways that *Dance Ink*, *Movement Research*, and even *PAJ* can only envy. While major museums have been busily addressing their long neglect of performance and dance in recent years, they have been doing so primarily by turning performance and dance into photography and video. I have tried to intervene by calling attention to the value of the ephemeral and the mortal. I have no illusions that my work does much to alter their collecting and curation of live art, however. These institutions have large investments in preservation and conservation departments and little patience for arguments that suggest live art actually disappears. Moreover, major museums often have complex relationships with deep-pocketed donors and the billion-dollar global art market. But I have not refused to write catalog essays for these institutions, participate in biennales, or otherwise absent myself from the logic of capital that organizes art museums no less than universities. Rather, I have tried to bend their attention toward supporting research and commentary that will, hopefully, expand art and thought beyond the static object as such.

In 2012, I edited and contributed to *Live Art in Los Angeles: Performance in Southern California, 1970–1983*. Part of the Getty's Pacific Standard Time initiative, *Live Art in LA* brought attention to the performance archives of LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), the journal *High Performance*, and some of the artists who established southern California as a major center for performance art in the 1970s and '80s. Most recently, I have been absorbed by Andy Warhol's photography (Phelan and Meyer 2018) and I am currently exploring how the advent of machine learning will transform the scholarship of art history. Working with a digital archive of 130,000 digital exposures, I am considering how to conceive of Warhol's photography not as the source for painting, but rather as the source for data, a body of work organized by math more than visual aesthetics.

While I no longer pursue performative writing, my recent writing is indebted to this previous work. For example, "Hypothetical Focalization and Queer Grief" (2015) borrows its method from the Caravaggio essay in *Mourning Sex*. Both essays take a central innovation—the invention of the vanishing point in painting, and the concept of hypothetical focalization in narrative theory—and bring it to bear on Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601–02) in the first instance and queer theory in the second. In "Hypothetical Focalization," sentences dedicated to untangling queer grief are indebted to the intensity of questions dramatized in the Caravaggio essay:

> The question of love is the question of the painting—and I suppose to some degree the question of the Bible as love story. [...T]his is the question the two central bodies [Christ and Thomas] ask one another. Such a question must go beyond the surface; it must be a question forever welling up within one's own body, and a question infinitely more difficult for the subject to recognize within the body of the other. (1997:31)

Although now I cringe a bit at the extravagant calculations measured by terms such as "forever" and "infinitely more," the argument gave me ballast when I wrote about the late Lynda Hart in "Hypothetical Focalization." The essay explores the influence of queer theory and performance in narratology. It culminates in an homage to Lynda Hart, the lesbian performance theorist who died of breast cancer in 2000. I was with Hart when her doctor delivered terrible medical results over the phone:

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[12] For representative examples see my mediations on: Trisha Brown's "Orfeo" (Phelan 2004c); Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham (Phelan 2017); on dance as a way of knowing (Phelan 2010); on Yvonne Rainer's movement from dance to film (Phelan 1999).

> I can still see the swirl of her arm, can still feel the angle of her fingers pressed against her pen and the thrust of her arm as she delivered the sticky-notes across my lap. And I still feel the slow fall of them falling to the floor: derelict confetti, whispering grief. (2015:95)

Performative Writing and Reading Today

Taking it all around, I still find some performative writing beautiful, even at times transporting. Performance studies has become richer, denser, and thornier than it was in its early years. And as it has grown, some of the experimental verve that drove performative writing has become more diffuse. Under the title "Writing and Performance," *Performance Research* published some great essays on performative writing, including Theron Schmidt's excellent "How We Talk About the Work *Is* the Work: Performing Critical Writing" (2018:37–43). One of the most influential writers in this field is Adrian Heathfield, whose concept of "event-writing" may have more heft and gravity than performative writing in the long run (2006:179–82). Daniel Sack illuminates some of the richness revealed by combining the critical and creative imaginations in his edited volume *Imagined Theatres: Writing for a Theoretical Stage* (2017).

Thus, this account is decidedly not an overview of the expanded field.[13] It reflects my current memory of a time that seems, in 2024, both close to me and so far from me as to be fictive. I am aware that this account risks making "the field" a mini version of what happened to and for me primarily in one department in New York over a brief period. Nonetheless, I offer it here as a way of giving witness to the energy of that time, and to offer my continued commitment to discovering how to find and "shape the word that takes its place in the ocean of sentences to come, decisions determined by the echo of sounds that precede that tide" (Phelan 2015:88).

The invocation of time and tides reminds me of Sarah Sunde's performance, *36.5 / A Durational Performance with the Sea*. When writing about it, I tried to capture the rhythm of the ocean's tide in my prose ("We are together; we are alone"; 2020:255). In *36.5*, Sunde stands in the world's oceans for the length of a tide, roughly 12 hours, accompanied by local fellow travelers. Sunde's global performance, in nine different bodies of water, and the passionate critical responses it has inspired, speaks to the dire nature of the climate crisis. The vast geographical scale of the piece hints at the various modes of thinking, including art thinking,[14] that will be required to alter the course we are on. Performative writing and reading may only generate small eddies on the shore of global thinking and doing; yet, as climatologists have long known, eddies can become strong enough to transform the weather (see Yang et al. 2023). As climate change and weather patterns become ever more prominent in contemporary thought, I hope performative writing and reading might become a resource to help divert us from our current catastrophic course.

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[13] See Della Pollock (1997) for a good overview of performative writing to that date, and a later essay, "The Performative 'I'" (2007), which does an excellent job of updating the results.

[14] For a fuller discussion of "art thinking," see Phelan (2021).

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