

Screening Bodies: Performance and Technology

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For some years now, I have explored dichotomous constructions—fact-fiction, live-mediated, presence-absence—and the relationships among them within the context of mediated performances. With the help of Jacques Derrida, Pierre Lévy, and Philip Auslander, I have argued that the elements of these dichotomies are problematically perceived both exclusively and hierarchically in relation to each other. Furthermore, I have shown the ways in which these dichotomies, and the elements of each, are correlative and co-constitutive. For our purposes here, I am interested in the pairing of and relationship between body and text—yet another dichotomy that is inextricably related to those I have examined thus far, and that rests squarely with the broader pairing of performance and technology.

In this essay, I first introduce you to the virtual site and event that helped spark my interest in the relationship between performance and digital technology. The site is LambdaMOO, a text-based virtual reality in which you can create a character, interact with other characters, and build or modify the environment in which your character resides. The event was “[A Rape in Cyberspace](#)”—an event and phrase now immortalized in journalist Julian Dibbell’s *My Tiny Life: Crime and Punishment in a Virtual World*, a narrative account of his time spent in LambdaMOO. I will summarize his report, highlighting

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the issues that are pertinent to my examination of the relationship between performance and technology, and how this relationship informs our understanding of the relationship between performance and performativity.

Within my summary and across my analysis, I variously interrogate and apply Judith Butler's performativity and Pierre Lévy's virtual. Furthermore, I provide examples of cybertheorists' analyses of on-line interactivity and their employment of the term "performance" to describe such interactivity in order to determine how media theory can be informed by performance theory and vice versa. To be more specific, I question the degree to which we can *define* on-line interactivity as performance, or whether it is best *described metaphorically* as performance. Such questioning is in the general spirit of performance theorists Dwight Conquergood and Richard Schechner, whose work I will address at the conclusion of this essay.

Living Large in 'My Tiny Life'

When you connect to [LambdaMOO](#), you will be greeted with a two-paragraph message that begins:

LambdaMOO is a new kind of society, where thousands of people voluntarily come together from all over the world. What these people say or do may not always be to your liking; as when visiting any international city, it is wise to be careful who [sic] you associate with and what you say.

The message continues with a disclaimer similar to those found in Op-Ed columns of newspapers: we, the operators, are not responsible for what is said (done) here and we do not necessarily agree with everything that is said (done) here. This greeting, though not exactly a friendly one, is more than a typical disclaimer; it is a warning. You are entering a space that is not always safe.

In the spring of 1992, residents of LambdaMOO learned this lesson the hard way when they suffered the malevolent actions of a

character named Mr. Bungle. Dibbell, having access to the character's profile, reports Mr. Bungle's description as follows: "[H]e was at the time a fat, oleaginous, Bisquick-faced clown dressed in cum-stained harlequin garb and girdled with a mistletoe-and-hemlock belt whose buckle bore the quaint inscription *KISS ME UNDER THIS, BITCH!*" (13). Dibbell tells us that Mr. Bungle executed his actions in the Living Room, a large area designed for lively public chat, accessible by anyone who enters the mansion of Lambda—a mansion initially modeled after creator Pavel Curtis' home. Although it has expanded exponentially since its inception, the core of the mansion—including places such as the Living Room, the Bedroom, the Patio, and the Kitchen—remain popular spots for everyone and anyone to convene and chat. The Living Room, however, is consistently the most populated of these areas, and perhaps of Lambda in its entirety. It is the place where all newcomers are directed having first logged in, and it is the place that many old-timers gather for open and engaged discussion. Mr. Bungle knew these facts and planned his deviance accordingly.

Relying on a subprogram of LambdaMOO called a virtual voodoo doll, Mr. Bungle forced other characters to do things against their will. The two primary unsuspecting characters were exu and Moondreamer. Dibbell describes exu as "a South American trickster spirit of indeterminate gender, brown-skinned and wearing an expensive pearl gray suit, top hat, and dark glasses" (13). Moondreamer is "a rather pointedly nondescript female character, tall, stout, and brown-haired" (13). Mr. Bungle singled them out and, through the use of his voodoo doll, made Moondreamer engage in "unwanted liaisons with other individuals present in the room" (13). Then he forced exu to "eat his/her own pubic hair" (13). At this point, he had only just begun.

The sole quotation Dibbell offers of Mr. Bungle's action is the action taken against Moondreamer, the character who "was given the unasked-for opportunity to read the words *As if against her will, Moondreamer jabs a steak knife up her ass, causing immense joy. You hear Mr_Bungle laughing evilly in the distance*" (15; emphasis in original to

indicate computer command). Mr. Bungle's violence was only stymied when "at last someone summoned Iggy, a wise and trusted old-timer who brought with him a gun of near wizardly powers, a gun that didn't kill but enveloped its targets in a cage impermeable even to a voodoo doll's powers" (13). At last, the rapist was contained.

These events, though horrific, incited lengthy and laborious conversations regarding Lambda as a society and its existing and potential systems of justice. Dibbell recounts the dialogue and events that followed the violence in the Living Room in spring of 1992. In short, after weighty deliberations, and at the initial request of the player behind exu, Mr. Bungle was toaded. That is, the character was eliminated. It did not take very long, however, for Mr. Bungle to be reincarnated as Dr. Jest. Any body behind a character that has been toaded can return as a different character by way of a new account. Although Dr. Jest did not behave as horribly as his predecessor, he was not very pleasant company. After a little while, Dr. Jest disappeared on his own accord.

Sometime in the months that followed, Dibbell learned from "two separate and credible sources" that

the virtual psychosis of Mr. Bungle had been more or less communal property of an entire NYU dorm floor, [and] that the young man at the keyboard on the evening of the rape had acted not alone but surrounded by fellow students calling out suggestions and encouragement [. . .]. (30)

Communal ownership of a character is against the expressed rules of LambdaMOO; the rule, however, is nearly impossible to enforce. No one can ever really know for sure if a character is played by one person consistently, or by several people at once. Nevertheless, the rule and logic behind it are interesting given the context of the space.

If you want to be a resident of LambdaMOO, you must apply for a character. Approval can take several weeks, as wizards (i.e., system managers) make sure that you have chosen a character name

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that no one else has, and also assure themselves—to the best of their ability—that you are not a previously toaded individual. Once approved, you are e-mailed a “Getting Started” document. In it, you read a rule governing your character-use (“only one character is allowed per person”) and a warning regarding your password, the key to activating your character every time you log on to LambdaMOO. The warning reads: “Keep your password secure; do not let anyone else connect as you. Remember, you are responsible for what your character does. If you no longer want your character, do not give it to anyone else.” The admonishment undermines any sense that LambdaMOO exists in a vacuum, completely devoid of any “real” world mechanisms—language, in particular—capable of cause and effect. Furthermore, the security measures—having a password and keeping it secret—bespeak several ontological tensions. While LambdaMOO is a space designed for make-believe, it is simultaneously a space of making. You are both your character and not. The fictional text you write effects realities and affects bodies. While you may be sitting at your computer alone, thousands of miles away from other users, you are all co-present in a reality that is both virtual and real.

The Virtual and the Real

As cybertheorist Pierre Lévy has shown through his theorizing of virtuality, the common understanding of “virtual” is often simply defined by its relationship to reality (i.e., the “virtual” is not “real”). Lévy convincingly argues for a more complex and broader view of virtuality as one component of a multifaceted reality. The other components include the actual, the possible, and the real. Each of these components operates “almost always” (176) in conjunction with the others. Lévy is not interested in these components as stable modes of existence. Rather, he is interested in “*the process of transformation from one mode of being to another*” (16; emphasis in the original). Specifically, he engages in the “study of virtualization that ascends from the real or the actual toward the virtual” (16). According to Lévy, this transformation moves in the opposite direction from the transformation that always has been studied in the philosophical tradition (from the virtual or actual to the real). This is

significant for while actualization moves from problem to solution, “virtualization [moves] from a given solution to a (different) problem” (27). While the real is present-oriented (in the temporal and spatial sense of the term), the virtual is future-oriented, asking, *what could be?*, rather than, *what is?*

Further defining the virtual in relation to the physical, Lévy’s continues: “[The virtual] is a fecund and powerful mode of being that expands the process of creation, opens up the future, injects the core of meaning beneath the platitude of immediate physical presence” (16). This “immediate physical presence” or “tangible presence” is what is often mistakenly construed as “reality.” Within Lévy’s conceptualization of reality, the “psyche provides a canonical example of the virtual, a virtual that is actualized through its affects” (135). Thus, examining the process of receiving and interpreting stimuli can tell us something about the “integral psyche” (131) in relation to the material world.

In Lévy’s model the psyche is constituted by the four dimensions of affectivity: topography, semiotics, axiology, and energics. Furthermore, this “model of the psyche can be applied to a text, film, message, or any work of art” (134). That is, any text or message is comprised of signs (semiotics) that are connected between and among them (topography). These signs and connections are associated with positive and negative values (axiology) to varying degrees (energics). Lévy further explains:

The message as a whole, if we concentrate on its signification, functions as a dynamic configuration, a kind of unstable force field (which can be variously interpreted) that must obviously refer to an exterior in order to function: other messages, real referents, interpreters. (134)

In other words, no message stands alone. Every text is intertextual. Signs can only be understood in relation to other signs. Furthermore, signs and messages have valences. Texts, then, are polysemic and polyvalent. Unfortunately, under the influence of logocentric discourse, people are inclined to strip signs/texts/messages of their

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multiplicity (i.e., within logocentric discourse, presence is good and absence is bad; or, presence is positive and absence is negative). Possibilities are eliminated, actualities are realized, and virtualities are reified. Such limiting and repetitive maneuvers both effect and affect subjectivities and adversely impact our perception of the world around us.

Lévy seeks to combat logocentrism and its material effects by rendering the psyche as virtual. He states:

By its nature, and although it is always connected to its physical body, the affective subject extends beyond physical space. [. . .] Because of its construction, the psyche transforms the exterior into interior (the inside is a fold of the outside) and vice versa, since the perceived world is always already immersed in the element of affect. The psychic landscape, as I have described it, is a kind of dynamic configuration. It exists as a knot of forces, constraints, and finalities, the intimacy of an aggregate of tensions, the image of an unstable field of heterogeneous attractors that defines every unbounded problematic situation. (135)

Possibility, the resistance of reification, heterogeneity, and instability characterize the virtual. Nevertheless, the virtual is also constituted by its vulnerability to reification, stabilization, and homogenization. These insights into virtuality are integral to the understanding of our perception of the world around us, as our world is always already mediated. Reality, as we experience it, is a complex combination of exteriority (the stimuli around us) and interiority (our interpretation of such), as well as the ways in which we perceive the combination at any given time in any given context.

Those who were involved in the Mr. Bungle fiasco—whether they were directly targeted or passersby—interpreted the event in provocative ways. By perceiving a textual message as action, they provide us with an example of the effecting and affecting power of language—performativity. Consequently, this performativity in action provides us with an example of the ways in which we tend to

concretize possibility and actualize events, rather than allow the existence of virtuality. That is, although the people behind the characters of exu and Moondreamer were not physically raped, the performativity of the textual rapes had material effects (possibility was concretized). Furthermore, the affected players who experienced and witnessed the event conceptualized it as a problem that needed to be solved (actualization). Although I believe that concretization and actualization are not as productive as the virtualization of mediated messages, I am very sympathetic toward the reactions of the LambdaMOO residents. While I may find the power of performativity disheartening in many cases, I recognize its value in others. I believe that humans will always seek stability in the world around them—stable environments, stable identities, stable definitions, and the like. We must not, however, rest easy with the stability we seek or impose. Virtual realities on-line and performances of all kinds can teach us something about the mechanics and dangers of reification and the possibilities (good and bad) of virtualization.

For many of the residents of LambdaMOO, several ontological tensions became glaringly apparent as a result of Mr. Bungle's heinous actions. Players were forced to consider the relationship between players and characters, between language and action, and between virtual and real worlds. Dibbell reports that players' characterization of Bungle's behavior as "rape," "in no way implied that the players had lost sight of all distinctions between the virtual and physical versions" (22). Nevertheless, "little patience was shown toward any attempts to downplay the seriousness of what Mr. Bungle had done" (22). Dibbell provides an example of one player's attempt at such and the response:

When the affable Shermie-Rocko proposed, more in the way of a hypothesis than assertion, that 'perhaps it's better to release . . . violent tendencies in a virtual environment rather than in real life,' he was tut-tutted so swiftly and relentlessly that he withdrew the hypothesis altogether, apologizing humbly as he did so. (22)

Dibbell notes that as the conversation continued, "more philo-

sophical” questions were asked and pondered. For example, Quanto, a player described by Dibbell as “young,” asked: “Where does the body end and the mind begin?” Shermie-Rocko responded with a rhetorical question and an assertion: “Is not the mind a part of the body?” and “In MOO, the body IS the mind” (22). While Shermie-Rocko’s conflation of the body and the mind is a provocative ontological assessment of bodies in a MOO, I prefer to remain focused on the relationship between the body and the text for it is this relationship that may tell us something more about the relationship performance and performativity.

Performance and Performativity

Theorizing on-line ontology is not a new endeavor (see the archive of the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* for numerous examples). A common aid to such theorizing is the work of Judith Butler. In this section, I devote significant space her conceptualization of “performativity,” its relationship to performance, its typical application by theorists of virtual reality, and my concerns with such applications.

To theorize language and language effects, Butler works from J. L. Austin’s conceptualization of performative language. Seeking to explore the ways in which language can effect change, Austin distinguishes between illocutionary speech acts and perlocutionary speech acts. The illocutionary speech act, such as “I beg you to stop,” is at once the doing and the pronouncement of the doing. The perlocutionary speech act is an announcement that an act will occur as a result of the announcement (e.g., “I want you to stop by the time I count to five.”) Butler explains: “The illocutionary speech act is itself the deed that it effects; the perlocutionary merely leads to certain effects that are the same as the speech act itself” (*Excitable* 3). In either case, language is effecting; it is performative. As Butler claims: “Language is a name for our doing: both ‘what’ we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences” (8).

Butler departs from Austin in order to explicate the ways in which language effects and affects the body. Borrowing from Louis Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatus, Butler argues that language *effects* the subject by positioning the body within pre-existing social structures. Language *affects* the body by comprising its subjecthood, its legitimacy in the social structure. In Butler's words: "Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible" (5). Butler states further, "If language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence" (5). This is not to say, however, that language is all-powerful. For Butler, language and the body are "incongruously interrelated" (11). Butler best explicates this relationship in her theories of gender.

In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," it is Butler's contention that "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (274). This series of acts that one engages in has "been going on before one arrived on the scene" (277), and the constitutive force of the acts depends upon the prior existence of the acts. That is, the efficacy of the speech act depends upon its "condensed historicity," its ritualization. Language will only have force, will only be performative, if "it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance" (*Excitable* 3). Here we begin to see the way in which Butler understands the relationship between the individual and the social and the relationship between performativity and performance. According to Butler, through performativity—the repetition of speech acts—subjects are constituted and maintained. Through performance, an individual acts within a complicated relationship to the subjecthood constituted by performativity.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler explicates the difference between performativity and performance in terms of gender. Her comments deserve lengthy quotation:

In no sense can it be concluded that the part of gender that is performance is therefore the ‘truth’ of gender; performance as bounded ‘act’ is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists of a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’; further, what is ‘performed’ works to conceal, if not disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable. *The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake.* (234; emphasis added)

Hence, Butler understands performance to be an individual act understood only in relation to performative language. Furthermore, performance is misleading in that it attempts to deny its relationship to the preceding norms of performativity. Such characterizations of the relationship between performativity and performance may prove disheartening for individuals who seek to resist the norms imposed upon them by performative language. Nevertheless, her argument is compelling, especially when applied to the activity in MUDs/MOOs.

In the earliest endeavors to theorize cyberspace, many scholars viewed MUDs/MOOs as places where anyone can be anybody, free from the constraints of identificatory cues and social scripts of gender, class, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion. For example, in her article, “[Constructions and Reconstructions of Self in Virtual Reality: Playing in the MUDs](#),” Sherry Turkle claims that a MUD “allows its players to experience rather than merely observe what it feels like to be the opposite gender or to have no gender at all” (par. 37). (For example, I could be “Toaster” and describe myself as “Neuter. A cooking device.”) This assertion is not only overly optimistic but also dangerous as it claims an erasure that simply does not occur—nor, perhaps, should occur—in MUDs/MOOs. Lynn Cherny, in “‘Objectifying’ the Body in the Discourse of an Object-Oriented MUD,” makes the case that the textual bodies that inhabit MUDs/MOOs are effected and affected by gendered discourse. She also provides excerpts from MOO conversations to illustrate the “complexity of the relationship that holds between a character and a

user” (par. 6). Her conclusions and examples are similar to Dibbell’s in *My Tiny Life*; however, his subject, cyber-rape, is extreme. It should be noted that the gendered discourse of MUDs/MOOs can be just as violent within more mundane interactions—just like in “real” life.

No matter what gender you choose in LambdaMOO, you must choose a gender. Thus, gender is not ever really erased. It is highlighted. Race, on the other hand, is a different matter. In “[Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet](#),” Lisa Nakamura notes the unequal treatment of gender and race in LambdaMOO. While a gender choice is required of any player, race “is not only not a required choice, it is not even on the menu” (par. 6). Nakamura further observes: “The majority of players in LambdaMOO do not mention race at all in their self description, though most do include eye and hair color, build, age, and the pronouns which indicate a male or a female gender” (par. 6). Descriptors such as eye and hair color, as Nakamura notes, still evoke race, however. Furthermore, the race that is evoked is usually the most invisible of them all. Nakamura explains:

[W]hile the textual conditions of self-definition and self performance would seem to permit players total freedom, within the boundaries of the written word, to describe themselves in any way they choose, this choice is actually an illusion. This is because the choice not to mention race does in fact constitute a choice. In the absence of racial description, all players are assumed to be white. (par. 6)

Noting that this assumption is partly due to the demographics of the Internet (“most [users] are white, male, highly educated, and middle class” [par. 6]), Nakamura also astutely claims that the attempted erasure of race is due to “the utopian belief-system prevalent in the MOO” (par. 6). That is, because the MOO “should be a free space for play,” the system “strives towards policing and regulating racial discourse in the interest of social harmony” (par. 6). Thus, the textual virtual realities that constitute MUDs/MOOs also constitute the bodies that reside there. The text *effects* the bodies. To equal degrees, and in a multitude of ways, the text also *affects* the bodies—both the

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characters and the players behind them.

Despite the fact that MUDs/MOOs are often framed as sites of make-believe, the effects of language are no less diminished in relation to “real” life language effects. In fact, because the virtual reality of MUDs/MOOs is text-based, the language effects are often afforded more force in cyberspace. Bodies, actions, and spaces exist only through language—the performativity of language. Nevertheless, no one can deny that MUDs/MOOs—like theatrical performance—are qualitatively different from “real” life. (A “Toaster,” neutered or not, will never, ever walk into your living room and give you a hug. Do not expect Madame Butterfly or James Bond to do so, either.) Does this mean that such characters have no influence on “real” life or the flesh-and-blood people who inhabit it? How might we understand the relationship between performativity and performance? Butler has a suggestion.

Earlier in this section, I offered Butler’s claim that the “reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake” (*Bodies* 234). Clearly, they are two different modes of agency, though they are interrelated. Like her characterization of the relationship between language and the body, the relationship between performativity and performance is incongruous. Comparing the acts of a transvestite on the street and on the stage to make her case, Butler argues: “In the theatre, one can say, ‘this [cross-dressing] is just an act,’ and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real” (“Performative” 278). On the other hand, Butler asserts that “[o]n the street or in the bus, the act [cross-dressing] becomes dangerous, if it does, precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the *purely imaginary character of the act*, indeed, on the street or in the bus, there is *no presumption that the act is distinct from reality*” (emphasis mine, 278). Though I agree that a transvestite (or any body, for that matter) on stage is probably safer than a transvestite (or any body) on the street, I must point out that Butler’s commentary is characteristic of the view that performance is “faking” rather than making; that it is merely an act of deception with no “real”-world consequences. Clean distinctions between fact and

fiction are always complicated, but especially so in the context of performance, live or mediated. In this essay, I argue that Butler's distinctions between and ranking of performativity and performance are further complicated by the spatiotemporal characteristics of text-based virtual realities.

Butler in Cyberspace

More and more, cyberspace theorists apply Butler's theories of performativity to on-line activity. This move is understandable. I am concerned, however, with the increasingly common use of the term "performance" to characterize the activity that occurs on-line. As a performance theorist, I get nervous when the term is bandied about by individuals who might not possess the knowledge that has been accrued by theorists devoted to the study of performance. What I find more problematic is cyberspace theorists' lack of recognition that performance and performativity—in Butler's eyes—are not the same thing.

Nakamura's observations and theories about race in cyberspace are perceptive and insightful. Her work, however, is exemplary in the casual use of "performance" as an explanatory term for on-line activity. In "Race In/For Cyberspace," Nakamura tells us that Internet users "perform their bodies as text" (par. 1). This is particularly so in the case of MOO residents. Because one has "the ability to 'set' one's gender, race, and physical appearance," one "project[s] a version of the self that is inherently theatrical" (par. 6). Nakamura's focus is on the performance of race according to stereotypes. In particular, she analyzes the performance of stereotypical Asian males (e.g., warriors) and females (e.g., submissive sex objects). Informed by Butler's *Bodies that Matter*, Nakamura argues that cyberspace can only be a useful tool to combat racial stereotypes if players abandon degrading scripts in the formation of their characters and in their chat with others. In other words, players must halt the repetition of racist performatives that effect and affect bodies.

While I agree generally with Nakamura's analysis and conclusions, I have trouble accepting her employment of "performance" along side of Butler's theories. Quoting from *Bodies that Matter*, Nakamura states, "Performing alternative versions of self and race jams the ideology-machine, and facilitates a desirable opening up of what Judith Butler calls 'the difficult future terrain of community' (242) of cyberspace" (par. 19). Nakamura does not acknowledge Butler's differentiation between "performance" and "performativity"—a differentiation explicitly given eight pages prior to the quote she includes. I can only presume, then, that Nakamura does not consider MOOs to house fiction in the way a stage does, or, she does not grasp Butler's differing characterizations of performance and performativity (or, the significance of the differentiation). Because I find Nakamura to be a credible researcher and theorist, I cannot believe that she does not understand Butler. Hence, it may be that she assigns MOOs a degree of reality that she might not assign the stage; thus, the performances that occur in a MOO have more power to effect than the performances on stage. If MOO activity is, as Nakamura claims, "inherently theatrical" (par. 3), participants can say (*a la* Butler) "this is just an act" ("Performative" 278). Then the act can be dismissed as "something quite distinct from what is real" ("Performative" 278). Given Nakamura's analysis and arguments, I am certain that she would not be comfortable with the dismissal of MOO activity as such. The question remains, would Butler maintain her anti-theatrical bias in an analysis of MOO activity? And, would Butler approve of the application of her theories by cyberspace researchers?

Though perhaps interesting to some, these questions are not the most pressing at the moment. The most important question I currently face is, what is the relationship between performance and performativity in MUDs/MOOs? In what follows, I review briefly the work of three scholars as an example of theory that addresses some of the nuances of Butler's thoughts in the context of theorizing cyberspace.

In “[The Performance of Cyberspace](#),” Barbatsis, Fegan, and Hansen employ reception theory (primarily that of Wolfgang Iser) in their analyses of email, chat, and 3D conference systems. The authors claim that cyberspace is “an ideational object constituted by a ‘text-reader’ relationship” (par. 1), and they argue that the performance of cyberspace is a “self-reflexive ideation about meaning making itself” (par. 1). Examining cyberspace as “discursive, liminal, and transformative” (par. 1), the authors distinguish between performance and play in interesting ways.

While the authors appear to have a clear understanding of Butler’s work on performativity, they (like Nakamura) do not mention Butler’s differentiation between performativity and performance. They do, however, distinguish between performance and play within their observations regarding chat rooms (the site that is most relevant to my discussion here): “The perpetual present and fleeting nature of this discursive space [of chat rooms] enables a willing suspension of disbelief among participants and an opportunity for role play” (par. 30). By “role play,” they are referring to such activity as gender-switching. For these authors, “play” is characterized by ephemerality, indeterminate boundaries, and spontaneous behaviors; performance is characterized by permanency, determinate boundaries, and repetitive behaviors. Throughout their discussion, “performance” begins to look a lot like Butler’s “performativity.” In fact, I want to take a moment to show how these terms are conflated in some problematic ways.

When characterizing 3D cyberspace, Barbatsis, Fegan, and Hansen state:

These ideational realities are social worlds where what is fixed is only what is repeated (Butler, 1990). While their articulatory moments are also rhetorical and ludic, they are primarily performative. Consideration of the social as performed thus directs us to the study of performative social action [. . .] . (par. 34).

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In other words, “the social” is “performed” and the (ideational) realities of cyberspace are constituted by performativity. Performance is not the same thing as play, and play is certainly not performative. Are we then to deduce that “performance” is performativity? According to Butler, we are not, for the “reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake” (*Bodies* 234). Again, we are left wondering whether Barbatsis, Fegan, and Hansen do not recognize or understand Butler’s distinction.

Throughout the essay, Barbatsis, Fegan, and Hansen seem to use “performance” as shorthand for “performativity.” At times, however, they seem to indicate that “performance” is something different from “performativity,” though they are interconnected. Mapping the relationships between discursive spaces, the authors state:

Because the discursive properties of rhetoric, play and performance are likely to overlap rather than to exist as separate and discrete, we can see the discursive spaces of rhetoric and play as versions (or subcategories) of performance. Each space *is*, we have argued, because, and only because, it is performed. At the same, it is the fully interactional properties of a compositional structure [. . .] that we experience the ideational performance of language. (par. 38)

I want the authors to recognize that performance and performativity are not the same thing in Butler’s eyes. If they understood her distinction, I do not know why they would not choose to say things like: “Each space *is*, because, and only because it is effected through performativity.” I want to believe that the authors see the power and potentiality of performance as I do: performance is a way of coming to be and to know. I want them to consider performance as a site of possibility and potentiality—a site of virtuality. I want them to see performativity as a process of stabilization and reification. More important, I do not want the authors to espouse an anti-theatrical bias the way Butler does.

All of my questioning regarding the slippery uses of

“performance” and “performativity” in cyberspace research is not a matter of splitting hairs and word games. I value and respect Butler’s theories of language and discourse; however, I cannot abide by her disparagement of the power of performance. Like Butler, I believe that the body and the text are “incongruously interrelated” (*Excitable* 8). Moreover, I believe that the body and the text correspond respectively with performance and performativity. (Performance is associated with bodies; performativity is associated with texts.) However, I question the degree to which the force associated with each of these related terms (body-performance; text-performativity) is consistently disproportionate. That is, I do not believe that the transvestite on stage is always safer than the transvestite on the street. I do believe that bodies and texts, and performance and performativity, are inextricably tied. Therefore, I do not believe that the body on stage (whether “real” or “virtual”) is always engaged in an act that is “distinct from reality” (“Performative” 278). If this were the case, the rape in cyberspace would not have been experienced or attended to as it was. Reality, as Lévy tells us, is much more complicated than we would like to believe. Furthermore, performance is much more powerful in its ability to change the debilitating effects of performativity than Butler would have us believe.

If we put into dialogue the work of Butler and Lévy, we could conclude that performativity prohibits virtualization while performance invites it. Performativity, like Derrida’s logocentrism, limits possibilities by establishing an epistemology driven by a logic of “either-or.” As language effects, subjects are either constituted within the realm of normalcy or they are not. Performance, on the other hand, can combat the reification of subjectivities by presenting audiences with possibilities of difference. Although one can never really offer texts/bodies that are completely distinct from our own complex realities (i.e., every text is intertextual), one can call attention to alternatives. Performers can highlight multiplicity by manipulating various media (e.g., electronic and digital screens, costumes, and language). Thus, our perception of reality might become complicated in beneficial ways. Contra Butler, the goal of the performer is not always to encourage the audience to “de-realize the act”

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(“Performative” 278); many times the goal is to encourage the audience to consider possibilities—the way things *could* be. Performance can be a process of virtualization and thereby resist the concretization of performativity. Perhaps the ability to resist the stabilizing logic of logocentrism is to adjust our valence scales.

Logocentrism and Corpocentrism

Valuing the word as truth and as presence is the heart of logocentrism. Without such valuing, logocentrism would not exist nor would it have the power that it does. Nevertheless, as Derrida acknowledges in *Writing and Difference*, we cannot escape our “metaphysical complicity” (281) that perpetuates logocentrism. Indeed, without such complicity, we could not critique such complicity. Without such critique, we may run the risk of reification—of allowing the signifier to become the signified (281). Reification renders texts stagnant, only capable of making presence (or making present authorial intention). If we assent to the privileging of presence, we are reducing our task as interpreters to determining what is, at the sacrifice of recognizing what *can be*.

“Presence” in performance often is equated generally with the live body, and the co-presence of live bodies, in particular. Most clearly, we can see this privileging in Peggy Phelan’s ontology of performance. While I contend that this type of privileging (coinciding with the devaluing of alternatives such as electronically or digitally mediated bodies) is a function of logocentrism, I now want to consider a further specification of such privileging in performance theory. When we equate the presence of performance with the body in performance, we are engaging in a *corpocentrism* that endangers our ability to recognize various manifestations of what can be considered “performance” and what constitutes “the body.” The focus on and valorization of the body in performance, however, makes sense within the history of our field.

Around the time that Pelias and VanOosting pondered the degree to which our field was transforming, performance theorists and

practitioners began to broaden their focus of what constitutes performance as a whole. For decades, interpreters of literature held the text in the highest regard. After all, as Wallace Bacon professed, the purpose of interpreting the text is to better understand literature. The body was merely a tool for the completion of such understanding. In fact, many interpreters (myself included) were instructed to do everything they could to diminish an audience's focus on the performing body (e.g., wear black and stand still). To ensure further that the text was the most important presence on stage, interpreters would hold or rest the poem on a podium in front of them. (These tactics remain in high school and collegiate forensic events.) In short, the text was the presence of performance.

Today, the once revelatory observations of Pelias and VanOosting seem commonplace, their assertions axiomatic. Our view of what constitutes a "text" has expanded; our previous devaluing of the body now seems dangerously negligent. "The body" has become a phrase that populates countless discussions of performance and performance theory. Its presence has grown into nearly monolithic proportions. What, then, is absent from our talk? What is overshadowed by the formidable presence of "the body"?

Perhaps it is "the text" that now returns to a subordinate position; perhaps, we have come to equate "text" with "absence." As Derrida repeatedly argues, however, there is no such thing as "pure" presence. Presence is always partially constituted by absence, and vice versa. Thus, the body is partially constituted by the text, and vice versa. Rather than making sense of the world around us in terms of dichotomous constructions, we would fare better seeking the multiplicity of the sensory stimuli around us. Like Lévy, I believe that embracing virtualization is a way to resist reification and provide each other the ability to recognize and create possibilities. Like Auslander, I believe that performance can further aid in the process of virtualization if we reconsider performance ontologies that privilege only the live body and exclude various forms of mediation. Finally, like the oral interpreters of years ago, I believe that performing texts will help us better understand them.

The “Is” and the “As”

Mediation (textual, electronic, or digital) has some effect on the body and how we perceive it. Our perception and understanding of the body affects the way we perceive and understand images and text. In this essay, I have attempted to illustrate relationships between the body and various media, as well as indicate the effects certain media have on the body. I have done so with the help of performance theory and media theory; I believe each can inform the other for a better understanding of life in a Western mediated society.

Although for many years performance theorists and practitioners have contemplated the role of technology and electronic media in performance (e.g., Kostelanetz; Brockett and Findlay), very few have examined digital mediation from a performance perspective (e.g., Birringer; Rayner; Senft). This lack of theorizing is noteworthy given that many media theorists apply the vocabulary of performance to explicate the activities that take place on-line. I hope that this essay serves as one starting point for those interested in interrogating the applicability of performance theory to current mediated contexts. Moreover, I believe it behooves performance theorists to provide their expertise to the current work being executed by media theorists who see on-line activity as performance. In general—like the performance theorists Dwight Conquergood and Richard Schechner—we need to think more about the difference between the “is” and the “as” of performance.

In Conquergood’s “Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics,” he offers several provocative questions regarding the ramifications of collapsing the often-held distinction between performance and text—between perceiving something as performance and claiming something is performance.

What are the consequences of thinking about performance and textuality as fluid, exchangeable, and assimilable terms? What is at stake in the desire to blur the edges, dissolve the

boundary, dismantle the opposition, and close the space between text and performance? What are the costs of dematerializing texts as textuality, and disembodying performance as performativity, and then making these abstractions interchangeable concepts? (25)

Throughout the essay, Conquergood “emphasize[s] performance as a counterbalance to the weight and prestige given texts in the academy—both text as metaphor for conceptualizing social reality, and actual texts [. . .] as representations of knowledge” (33). For Conquergood, we must maintain a distinction between performance and text for two reasons: first, for the sake of valorizing the knowledge that is located and accrued within the body; and second, for the sake of minimizing the power associated with the written word (logos).

Schechner, in his essay “What is Performance Studies Anyway?,” raises similar issues and offers an answer to Conquergood’s central question regarding the relationship between performance and performativity: “Are there any limits to performativity? Is there anything outside the purview of performance studies? To answer, we must distinguish between ‘as’ and ‘is’” (361). For Schechner, performance is all about the “is”: “Performances mark identities, bend and remake time, adorn and reshape the body, tell stories, and allow people to behave with behavior that is ‘twice-behaved,’ not-for-the-first-time, rehearsed, cooked, prepared” (361). As for the “as,” Schechner explains: “Any event, action, item, or behavior may be examined ‘as’ performance. [. . .] One can consider things provisional, in-process, existing and changing over time, in rehearsal, as it were” (361). His distinctions, however, are not a disparagement of performance-as-metaphor or explanatory model in an attempt to valorize performance-as-object. Rather, he believes one can help us make sense of the other, in addition to highlighting the complexities of the reality each constructs. He explains:

The performative engages performance in places and situations not traditionally marked as ‘performing arts,’ from dress-up to certain kinds of writing or speaking. The acceptance of the

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performative as a category of theory as well as a fact of behavior has made it increasingly difficult to sustain the distinction between appearances and facts, surfaces and depths, illusions and substances. Appearances are actualities. And so is what lies beneath appearances. Reality is constructed through and through, from its many surfaces or aspects through its multiple depths. (362)

Though I agree with Schechner's characterization of "reality" as constructed, I must, in the spirit of Lévy, take issue with his assertion that "Appearances are actualities." Yes, reality is (or, I should say, "realities" are) constructed. However, the processes of the production and consumption of reality are highly complex. It is not enough to state that what seems to be, is. More important, it is dangerous to make such a statement. What seems to be does not have to be. What seems to be can be perceived as transformative rather than stable. In a mediated society such as ours, we must learn to see the possibility and the potentiality of that which is before us—whether live or mediated.

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