

ANTROPOLOGIA PORTUGUESA

Neste número

Práticas Artísticas na Modernidade

*Um Encontro sobre
Antropologia das Artes*

Vol. 11
1993

DEPARTAMENTO DE ANTROPOLOGIA
UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA

EMBODIED MEANING BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGY AND PERFORMANCE

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No one has done more than Victor Turner to open an exchange of ideas, methods, and cooperative ventures between anthropology and theatre. He helped move social science away from preoccupations with universal system, structure, form, and towards particular processes, practices, people, and performances. A dedicated fieldwork himself, he wanted the professional discourse of cultural studies to capture the struggle, passion, and praxis of village life that he so relished in the field. The language of drama and performance gave him a way of thinking and talking about people as actors who creatively play, improvise, and re-present social identities, roles, and scripts. He mentored and empowered a new generation of anthropologists who shifted the issues from “convention” to “invention” (Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*), from “finalities” to “instrumentalities” (Michael Jackson, *Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry*), from “observation” to “participation” (Paul Stoller, *In Sorcery’s Shadow*), and from “informative” to “performative ethnography” (Johannes Fabian, *Power and Performance: Ethnographic Explorations Through Proverbial Wisdom and Theater in Shaba, Zaire*).

To the extent that all disciplines are constructed rhetorically through discourse (John Nelson, *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences*), Turner coined and privileged keywords such as “liminality”, “communitas”, “reflexivity”, “social

drama”, “cultural performance” that set the stage for post-positivism academic agendas. Social theorists moved away from “prediction and control” towards “process”, “paradox”, “predicament”, “and improvisation” (Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth; The Remaking of Social Analysis*; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*; Smadar Lavie, *The Poetics of Military Occupation*). In a rhetorical masterstroke, Turner subversively redefined the fundamental terms of discussion in the human sciences, and particularly anthropology, by defining human kind as *homo performans*, a culture-inventing, social-performing, self-making, and self-transforming creature (*Anthropology of Performance*, 187; see also *From Ritual to Theatre*, and *On the Edge of the Bush; Anthropology as Experience*, as well as *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*). Always for Turner the emphasis is on humankind alive, the creative, playful, imaginative, conscious, articulate expressions of ordinary people grounded in the challenge of making a life in this village, that valley, this intersection of self and other.

While formalism and positivism have not disappeared, to be sure, they have been contested, and conceptual space has been cleared for thinking and theorizing through *performance*. Educated in the Manchester school of structuralist-functionalist anthropology, Turner was not trained in performance theory. He came to performance through his fieldwork among the Ndembu of Central Africa. Through month after month of intensely participatory experience of village life he gradually understood how Ndembu people deeply reflect and theorize about themselves through their performance practices. From Ndembu people he learned to appreciate the spontaneous cultural creativity and potential explored through crisis and conflict-cultural exigencies that he named “social dramas” with four phrases of breach, crisis, redress, and resolution (see *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*).

Turner’s concept of social drama has had widespread influence in other disciplines. He emphasized the constructional, meaning-making, culture-building nature of performance as poesis, “making not faking” (*From Ritual to Theatre*, 93). Far from frills and fakery, performance events are processes, according to Turner, are the very stuff and heart of culture. After Turner, it is difficult to anyone to hold a “mere sham and show” view of performance (see Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*).

Defining characteristics of performance-centered research emerge from his detailed and elaborated work on social dramas and cultural performances. Whether we are talking about the cultural performance of ceremony or the aesthetic performance of dramatic text, *the Performance Paradigm privileges particular, participatory, dynamic, intimate, precarious, embodied experience grounded in historical process, contingency, and ideology*. Another way of saying it is that performance-centered research takes as both its subject and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history. Whereas the Cartesian split

devalued bodily experience as a way of knowing, the Performance Paradigm restores the body as both a site of knowing and a site of ideological struggle (see especially Allen Feldman *Formations of Violence; A Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*). The performance Paradigm insists on face-to-face encounters instead of formal abstractions. Emmanuel Levinas reminds us that “faces shatter forms”. The Performance Paradigm requires interpreters both of culture and literature to face up to people and texts with an immediacy, vulnerability, and complexity that resist reductive generalizations.

Turner is doubly appreciative of the heuristics of embodied experience because he saw how social dramas have to be acted out and rituals have to be performed in order to be meaningful, and he realized the researcher also must be a co-performer in order to understand those embodied meanings. In one of his earlier works Turner enunciated the role of the performing body as a hermeneutical agency both for the researcher as well as the researched:

*The religious ideas and processes I have just mentioned belong to the domain of performance, their power derived from the participation of the living people who use them. My counsel, therefore, to investigators of ritual processes would be to learn them in the first place “on their pulses”, in coactivity with their enactors, having beforehand shared for a considerable time much of the people’s daily life and gotten to know them not only as players of social roles, but as unique individuals, each with a style and a soul of his or her own. **Only by these means will the investigator become aware...** (Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual, 28-29; *emphasis mine*).*

The bodily image of learning something “on the pulses” captures the distinctive method of the performance paradigm. The power dynamic of the research situation changes when one moves from the days of the detached observer to the intimate involvement of “coactivity” or co-performance with historically situated, named, “unique individuals”.

From the radical empiricism of his African fieldwork where he lived in villages, shared food and conversation with Ndembu villagers, developed deeply personal friendships (see “Muchona the Hornet” in *Forest of Symbols*), and danced at their ceremonies, it was not a big step to move from fieldwork practice to the performance of fieldwork and ethnographic texts. The same bodily participation is at play whether one moves into the center of a village or inside a text through performance — one is attempting to understand a form of life by learning it “on

the pulses”, dwelling within it: “Perhaps we should not merely read and comment on ethnographies, but actually perform them” (from *Ritual*, 89). After studying performance with Richard Schechner at New York University he calls on anthropologists to add oral performance of ethnographic texts to their repertory of critical and methodological skills:

We will have to become performers ourselves and bring to human, existential fulfillment what have hitherto been only mentalistic protocols. We must find ways of overcoming the boundaries of both political and cognitive structures by dramatic empathy, sympathy, friendship, even love... (from Ritual to Theatre 101).

He wrote in fascinating detail about experiments with “performing ethnography” in graduate seminars at University of Chicago and University of Virginia (Anthropology of Performance).

Turner’s most radical contributions to anthropology and cultural studies are the methodological implications of his performance theory. No one has discussed performance as a hermeneutics for ethnographic understanding more explicitly than Turner. Promoting performance as a method of studying is an even more radical challenge to conventional academic practices than focusing on performance as the subject or lens of study. As the subject of study, the performances of others can be textualized without the researcher risking embodied experience. We have all read disembodied analyses, structuralist formulas and positivist dehydrations where people are absent from the texts. Performance as a method of doing of research, however, renders the researcher vulnerable, because she or he cannot escape the body. The bodily presence of a performing researcher is foregrounded: the ethnographic fieldworker must get his or her body — not just the mind — into the field. You cannot do fieldwork without exposing your body to the climate, food, living conditions, face-to-face encounters with other bodies. You cannot study literature through performance without putting your body on the line between text and audience. Observers look at others from a controlling point of view, creating unity out of diversity through perspective (see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*). Performers, on the other hand submit themselves to the gaze of multiple onlookers, offering themselves out to the variable apprehensions of audiences. It is a kind of *sparagmos*, dismembering of the body. Performance is a sacrifice, an art of exposure, turning the inside-outside. Situated on the border between self and other, a frontier of *alterity*, performance is an *altar*, the site for turning inside-outside. Performing researchers are those

who are willing to play with these alternatives, reversals, transformations, and paradoxes, these reciprocal give-and-takes between self and others.

The exchange between anthropology and theatre has gone in both directions. Theater workers are forsaking the “professionalism” and elitism of the bourgeois stage and “entering the field”, that is, engaging in collaborative projects with ordinary people that resemble the “participant-observation fieldwork” methods of anthropologists. They have abandoned the classical euro-centric canon, and, like anthropologists they are interested in culture (with a small c) instead of Culture (with a capital C). Notable examples are, of course, Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*; Eugenio Barba, *Beyond the Floating Islands* and *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*; Eugene van Erven, *Radical People’s Theatre*; Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology and Performance Theory*.

But I am most interested in those anthropologists who are explicitly deploying performance as a method of conducting fieldwork research. Johannes Fabian provides one of the fullest documentations of “performing ethnography” in his remarkable book *Power and Performance*. During the summer of 1986 he worked with the Mufwankolo theatrical troupe in a collaborative study of the manifold meanings, ambiguities, expressions, contestations, and representations of power in Shaba, Zaire. Beginning with the enigmatic proverb, “Power is eaten whole”, we worked with the theatrical troupe as they developed, composed, rehearsed, and performed a play titled after the proverb. He describes his research as “a search for understanding that begins with cultural performances” (259).

He argues eloquently for performance as a site of cultural production and interpretive reflexivity and “therefore a radiant prism for the multi-layered refractions of meaning. He contends:

What has not given sufficient consideration is that about large areas and important aspects of culture, not even the native, have information that can simply be called up and expressed in discursive statements. This sort of knowledge can be represented — made present — only through action, enactment, or performance (6).

He pushed his insight that “knowledge about social life is, in important respects, performative rather than informative” (21) toward its methodological imperative: performance as a method as well as a subject, of ethnographic research. Taking seriously the epistemological idea of performance as a way of knowing, he applied it to the researcher as well as to the researched:

“performance”, his study will argue, “is not what they do and we observe; we are both engaged in it.” Further if performance “is involved in creatively giving expression and meaning to experience” then “it is also *required in studying such expressions*” (XV, emphasis mine). He describes his work as a shift from “informative” to “formative ethnography”, that radically realigns the power dynamics of fieldwork research towards doing “ethnography *with not of*” a group of people (43).

I want to ground this lecture in my own ongoing attempts to do performance ethnography. I am now in my fourth year of living in inner-city Chicago to conduct ethnography research *with* street gangs. As you can imagine, gangs are not an easy culture to penetrate. For a number of reasons, they are a close-knit boundary vigilant, secretive society. You do not gain access to or information about a gang culture through asking questions or conducting interviews, or distributing questionnaires. Instead of waiting for the years to pass that would be necessary to establish rapport with gang leaders and gain entry into this closed society, I drew on the ideas of Boal and formed a performance company with gang members after living in the neighborhood for six months. I worked with this performance company during the summer of 1978, and, like Fabian, I found performance a deep revelatory vehicle of culture, for the gang members themselves, as well as for me. Long before I would ever be told about or invited to initiation rituals, the protocols of inter-gangs fights, and the elaborated ceremonies of bereavement at gang funerals, I witnessed these constituent moments of gang identity as the gang members *acted them out, performing their culture*. Their arguments about scripting and staging (we performed in the open air, in an empty lot) these events, and the way they critiqued and coached one another on the proper way of acting and “carrying oneself” in the several scenes, were most illuminating for me, the neophyte in terms of gang culture. Now that I have logged for years of living and working with Latin Kings gang in this neighborhood, I can look back to the performances of the summer of 1988 and see how culturally apt and authentic they were. I have now been to too many actual funerals of slain gang members who were my neighbors and friends. I knew what to expect at these ceremonies because I ever went to a “real” gang funeral I had seen one acted out in performance. They titled the performance piece they created *This Ain’t No Joke*, a series of scenes that told a story that was ultimately critical of the violence of gang culture. [See appendix attached for a copy of “the script” — basically an annotated outline of improvisatory scenes].

Before I move to my main example of performing ethnography — the Health theatre I helped initiate in Refugee Camp Ban Vinai, Thailand (1985), which I will illustrate with several slides, I would like to summarize and chart some of the key issues, that surface at the intersection of anthropology and

performance. The performance paradigm in anthropology opens us several questions that can be clustered around five intersecting planes of analyses:

1. Performance and Cultural Process. What are the conceptual consequences of thinking about culture as a verb instead of a noun, process instead of product? Culture as unfolding performative invention instead of reified system, structure, or variable? What happens to our thinking about performance when we move it outside of Aesthetics and situate it at the center of lived experience?

2. Performance and Fieldwork Practice. What are the methodological implications of thinking about fieldwork as the collaborative performance of an enabling fiction between observer and observed, knower and the known? How does thinking about fieldwork differ from thinking about fieldwork as collection of data? Reading of texts? How does the performance model shape the conduct of fieldwork? Relationship with people? Choices made in the field? Positionality of the researcher?

3. Performance and Hermeneutics. What kinds of knowledge privileged or displaced when performed experience becomes a way of knowing, a method of critical enquiry, a mode of understanding? What are the epistemological and ethical entailments of performing ethnographic texts and fieldnotes? What are the range of varieties of performance modes and styles that can enable interpretation and understanding?

4. Performance and Scholarly Representation. What are the rhetorical problematics of performance as a complementary or alternative form of “publishing” research? What are the differences between reading and analysis of fieldwork data, and hearing the voices from the field interpretively filtered through the voice of the researcher? For the listening audience of peers? For the performing ethnographer? For the people whose lived experience is the subject matter of the ethnography? What about enabling the people themselves to perform their own experience? What are the epistemological underpinnings and institutional practices that would legitimate performance as a complementary form of research publication?

5. The Politics of Performance. What is the relationship between performance and power? How does performance reproduce, enable, sustain, challenge, subvert, critique, and naturalize ideology? How do performances simultaneously reproduce and resist hegemony? How does performance accommodate and contest domination?

Appendix A

“This Ain’t no Joke”

SCENES:

I. GRAFFITI. Chico. Prez of the Chicanos, and his boys are making a wall for one of their brothers who was killed. Whiz does the “When I die / Have no pity” Chicano gang rap, Blanco, Prez of the Warriors, approaches with his heads and challenges: “What you be About?” The Warriors splash the wall and spray the face of a Chicano bro. Fight Breaks out. Shyboy has been watching all this and jumps in to stick up for the Chicanos. Police arrives and arrests Shyboy.

II. JAIL. Blanco and the Warriors recognize Shyboy. Shyboy gets jumped in jail. Whiz defends him until cop comes and breaks up the fight.

III. SHYBOY GETS V’D IN. Whiz takes Shyboy to the Chicano hood to meet Chico the Prez, Loco, Psycho, and all the brothers and introduces him to the gangbangers and try try to persuade him to join the Chicanos. They tell him about all the benefits of joining the gang — “get you reefers, get you a crib man, a cradle, anything you need, bro, you can be one of us.”. Shyboy refuses, he thinks too much has happened to him already. They tell him that he has no choice: “You’re marked, man, you’re gonna die. The Warriors gonna kill you. They know your face, man. You ain’t got no choice now, bro. You need protection, bro. You need us, bro”. Finally, Shyboy agrees, reluctantly. They take him to the wall, and with Chico calling the shots, they one by one V him in. They talk to him during the initiation. Offer him hits on a cigarette and tell him “be tough man, you can take it, now you’re one of us, bro”. Shyboy is doubled over with pain, coughing and gasping. Chico gives him a special Chicano tattoo on his arm with his new tagname “Shyboy”.

IV. PARTY. House music party for Shyboy. They mix music and make tag tapes.

V. RUMBLE. Chico sends Whiz, Psycho, and his brother and Vice Prez, loco, to the Warrior hood to arrange a rumble. The Warriors drive off Whiz and Psycho but kill Loco in the park.

VI. CHICO DISCOVERS DEAD BODY OF HIS BROTHER . While walking in the park, they sight what they think is a body. Chico rolls him over and is horrified to discover it is his brother. He refuses to believe he is dead, although the body

is cold . He tries to talk him into waking up — he shakes the body. Shyboy knows he is dead, and, sympathetically tries to pull Chico away. Chico keeps calling for an ambulance until he finally explodes at Shyboy.

VII. WARRIOR PARTY. The Warriors are parting in their hood and celebrating the hit of the Vice Prez of the Chicanos. Whiz and Shyboy spy on the party, then return to Chicano hood to report to Chico.

VIII. CHICANOS RAID AND CAPTURE TWO WARRIORS. Blanco stations Hickey and Adam as look-outs. They get captured and back at Chicano hood are threatened and tortured until they tell who killed Loco. After they trick on Honkey, they are sent back to the Warrior hood.

IX. HICKEY AND ADAM GET V'D OUT. Blanco accuses them of snitching. When it is proven they they tricked on Honkey they are V'd out of the gang.

X. THEY JOIN THE CHICANOS. Badly beaten up and friendless, Hickey and Adam cross over and join the Chicano gang.

XI. FUNERAL FOR LOCO. One by one the Chicanos go up to Loco's casket and pay their last respects. He is laid out in the Chicano colours of red and white, and they arrange his fingers so that he is representing the Chicano sign. They place personal gifts in the casket — sun glasses, a knife, flowers, and each one says goodbye to him in his special way, e.g., "I'm gonna get him for you, bro". Chico is the last one. He goes up to the casket, removes the chain from around his neck and puts it in Loco's hand, and says: "You're the best brother I ever had, Loco. Goodbye Loco... I'll see you in heaven, bro." They walk outside the funeral home and see all the Warriors leaning against the wall. The Warriors stare them down, some of them representing their sign. Chico looks at them for a minute, then, filled with sadness, he and the Chicanos just walk away.

XII. REVENGE. The Chicanos go and get Honkey to revenge Loco. Instead of killing him, they shoot him in the arm.

XIII. SHYBOY TALKS TO HIS YOUNGER COUSIN. Shyboy walks with two younger boys. Frankie and dodo, through the Chicano hood. Dodo is his cousin. He tells them what it's really like to be a gangbanger. It's not all glamor. He tells them about the bad side — jail, injuries, killings, funerals. He tells them whatever they do, they shouldn't join a gang.

XIV. BLANCO, PREZ OF WARRIORS, RESCUES ELDERLY MAN. Two of the Warriors mug an elderly immigrant man. Blanco comes onto the scene just as they are about to leave with the poor' man's money. Blanco shouts, "Hey, that's my grandfather! What are you doing man! That's my grandfather." He makes the Warriors give back the old man's money. Then he makes them apologize one by one and shake hands with the old man. "Are you O.K., pops?" After patting the old man on the shoulder and making sure he is O.K., the Warriors leave. Blanco explains to them that the man wasn't really his grandfather, but that they shouldn't "be hittin' on old people — that's somebody grandfather".

XV. THEY JOIN THE WARRIORS. Frankie and Dodo are recruited by the Warriors and they get V'd in to the gang.

XVI. SHYBOY GETS KILLED. The two pee-wees, one of them Shyboy's cousin, set him up so that he gets killed by the Warriors.

THE END

Closing Credits:

Each player walks/struts out with a nicely lettered sign that says his character's name — and his real name. For example:

Chico played by Juan Garcia

Blanco played by Scott Cappis