

# FIVE

Performing Writing

*Della Pollock*

We are all in a position of ravishment—call it lack, if you must; our only hope for survival—call it love—being, against all odds and through all our divisions, to keep on writing.

—Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*

Contemporary discourses of history, culture, and identity seem still to be spinning in “textuality,” feeling the loss of reference as a loss of bearings, feeling suddenly, uneasily lifted from ready cartologies of meaning into an Oz-like world not of meaninglessness exactly but of duplicity, doubleness, and simulation. From the eye of this storm, what is/was is always on the verge of becoming something else. Words don’t stick. They are “Janus-faced,” “fickle,” indifferent to discourses of truth and meaning.<sup>1</sup> In language as difference, in language riddled with difference, criticism becomes an exercise in double plays: in pastiche, parody, punning.

But with each turn and return of language, “textuality” seems increasingly to fold in on itself, to turn back on the very act of writing, making it difficult if not impossible to make sense, to make claims, to make meaning, making writing its own object/subject, which duly un/writes itself in every figure and turn, sometimes in cynical pleasure, sometimes in abject horror, leading Julia Kristeva, for instance, to ask, what is there but writing? what is there to do but write?<sup>2</sup>

Kristeva’s questions anticipate and exhaust the so-called linguistic turn. In so doing, they also echo earlier questions, the question Theodor Adorno posed in the early sixties, for instance, the question asked by a character in Sartre’s play *Morts sans sepulture*, “‘Is there any meaning in life when men exist who beat people until the bones break in their bodies?’” Adorno writes on the edge of referentiality, at once referring the question itself to



the atrocities of the Second World War and anticipating, on those grounds, the collapse of both referential and normative meaning systems. With this question, Adorno ushered in a new or "post-" modernism in which the literature of commitment (exemplified for Adorno in the plays of Bertolt Brecht) was particularly suspect. Drenched as it was, Adorno argued, in the discourses of capital, political literature of various kinds focuses in turn on "the question whether any art now has the right to exist; whether intellectual regression is not inherent in the concept of committed literature because of the regression of society."<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, Adorno claimed a narrow and fading aesthetic margin, a space from which, for instance, Beckett's characters might at least underline speech with silence.

In the place of Adorno's dark margin, the last resort of high modernism, is now the debris of walls previously keeping work from play, art from politics, high from low culture, speech from writing, aesthetic from commodity discourses. Out of the resulting inky spillage, out of what we have come to call "textuality" or the sense that all discourse is encompassed within a multilayered, reflexive/reproductive "text," rise questions trembling with imperatives for performance: What words remain to the body made at once abject by history and abstract by textuality? How then can we speak? What is or might be the purview of the writing/performing subject? How might writing break up the regressive reiterations of "textuality"? How might *performative* writing not only speak the surrounding darkness but hail loss and lost pleasure in the place of rank commodification?

Writing between Brecht on the one hand and Beckett on the other, Adorno centers the question of writing in performance, in brutally chastened hopes for embodied, creative counterspeech. I recall Adorno/Brecht here in order, among other things, to recall performative writing to performance, to the arena of corporeal history in which Adorno himself wrote. Sue-Ellen Case has argued that "the critical discourses of speech-act theory and deconstruction ultimately bring the notion of performativity back to their own mode of production: print."<sup>4</sup> Rethinking writing from the twin loci of Adorno and Kristeva challenges an easy identification of performativity with print and the subsequent absorption of performance into textuality as "performativity." At the same time, it refuses an equally easy and equally false distinction between performance and text, performance and performativity/textuality, or, for that matter, performativity and print-textuality.

Rather, at the brink of meaning, poised between abjection and regression, writing as *doing* displaces writing as meaning; writing becomes meaningful in the material, dis/continuous act of writing. Effacing itself twice over—once as meaning and reference, twice as deferral and erasure—writing becomes itself, becomes its own means and ends, recovering to itself the force of action. After-texts, after turning itself inside out, writing turns again only to discover the pleasure and power of turning, of making not sense or meaning per se but making *writing* perform: Challenging the boundaries of reflexive textualities; relieving writing of its obligations under the name of "textuality"; shaping, shifting, testing language. Practicing language. Performing writing. Writing performatively.

I want to explore some of the ways what we have come to call "performative writing" answers discourses of textuality not by recovering reference to a given or "old" world but by writing into a new one. For me, performative writing is not a genre or fixed form (as a textual model might suggest) but a way of describing what some good writing *does*. All good writing isn't and needn't be performative. Nor would all the writers cited here consider their work performative. Performativity describes a fundamentally material practice. Like performance, however, it is also an analytic, a way of framing and underscoring aspects of writing/life. Holding "performative writing" to set shapes and meanings would be (1) to undermine its analytic flexibility, and (2) to betray the possibilities of performativity with the limitations of referentiality.

Unfortunately, performative writing has come to carry its own *faux* referents: stylish, trendy, clever, avant-garde, projecting in turn a kind of new formalism. Performative writing is, for me, precisely not a matter of formal style (especially in the degraded sense of glinting, surface play).<sup>5</sup> It is a discursive practice that—misprisoned—may have disastrous consequences, that may be *bad*—or, for that matter, *good*. The discourses of textuality have removed the veil of innocence from language, drawing us away from questions of what words do or don't mean into the complex problem of *how to mean* in words and yet tend to limit the answer to such questions to the reiteration of social, historical, textual formations. The question thus turns back on itself, deflecting the possibilities for normative critique of the way we write or *do* writing and of what writing *does* that it nonetheless implies.

Performative writing is an important, dangerous, and difficult intervention into routine representations of social/performative life. It has a long and varied history in anthropology, feminist critique, and writing about



performance, taking much of its impetus from the cross-disciplinary "break" into poststructuralism.<sup>6</sup> But my aim here is neither to assess the history of performative writing nor to represent performative writing in all its forms and implications, but rather to identify the need to make writing speak *as* writing. To discern possible intersections of speech and writing. To resolve the alienation of meaning and reference within postmodern textualities not by reinscribing presence *per se* but by making writing exceed its determinations within structures of absence/presence in order to perform a social function. Performative writing spins, to some extent, on the axis of impossible and/or regressive reference and yet out into new modes of subjectivity and even referentiality. Finally, then, I want to read performative claims on textuality for their immanent utopics, for their susceptibility to the democracies of imperfect, inexpert repetition, revision, replay, and remand.

#### *Performance Writing/Writing Performance: One Way In*

Several years ago I attended a workshop/conference on writing history. The conference discussions circulated around the rise of "experimental" history writing, the new "narrative history," and what was variously called self-revelation, self-disclosure, and self-reflection in the composition of history.<sup>7</sup> One argument in particular has continued to haunt me. A distinguished feminist historian argued that more "conventional" forms of writing history—the dull but steadfast forms of the academic article and the monograph—were more "democratic" than the new (or renewed) forms of narrative history because they could be taught.<sup>8</sup> As forms of intellectual and cultural capital, they could be relatively easily and equally distributed across social class differentials. And having acquired such conventions and/or plain techniques, anyone could contribute to the formation of social knowledge.

Like my colleague, I was and remain suspicious of a preening avant-gardism in new (history-)writing. I am wary of the extent to which a new/old formalism (even in the form of Brechtian alienation techniques) might divert attention from the subject(s) of history to their fine containers. But my primary response at the time was one of stifled horror. I recall flushing and stiffening at what seemed to me democracy become mediocracy, at the looming sense of democracy as a science of the lowest common denominator, as competency trumping specialty, as random access to generic

brands. I recoiled from the gray, undifferentiated space of this democracy. Here, it seemed to me, was the democracy of the Food Lion, Kmart, and superstores everywhere: flatline consumption disguised as purchasing power; democracy turned over to the bland multiplicity of bodies pushing identical carts up and down aisles promising equally bland satisfaction.

In his argument against the "politics of clarity," Henry Giroux decries what he calls the "populist elitism" implicit in such a view. Referring to the often smug tendency to privilege clarity in popular discourses of writing and education (how could anyone with any common sense not be for clarity?), Giroux argues, "clarity becomes a code word for an approach to writing that is profoundly Eurocentric in both context and content"—writing that conforms to presuppositions about standard language use and neglects the historical, political, and cultural specificity of diverse audiences or publics.<sup>9</sup> Claims for such writing assume a correspondence theory of language that effaces questions of voice, style, and difference and "flattens" the relationship between language and audience, refusing not only the endless mediations and negotiations that compose their relationship and the meanings that flow from it, but the recognition of subaltern claims on language use that a more genuinely plural reading/writing democracy would entail. The homogenization of language in the name of clarity tends to cleanse knowledge of "complex discourses or oppositional insights." Giroux argues,

there is a tendency to perceive members of diverse public cultures as objects rather than subjects, as socially constructed pawns rather than as complex and contradictory human agents who mediate, read, and write the world differently. The politics of such a position often either leads one into the exclusionary territories of Eurocentrism, elitism and colonialism, or into the political dead end of cynicism and despair.<sup>10</sup>

My historian colleague seemed to be arguing, in Giroux's words, for "deepening the possible relations between the discourse of education and the imperatives of a radical pluralized democracy" by availing a wide range of producers of the means of production.<sup>11</sup> Her argument ultimately aimed to return the surplus value of writing to students through access to writing/literature as a set of techniques or tools.<sup>12</sup> Yet her arguments for accessibility and clarity (per Giroux) rest precariously on the romantic assumption that more "artistic" efforts are the privilege of specially gifted sensibilities—of geniuses or real "talents" whose skills are anointed or otherwise bemused. For better or for worse, the argument seems to go, this is another



kind of writing, written by "other" kinds of people whose peculiarly uncommon capabilities make them, in turn, peculiarly incapable of performing the role of the common citizen within a democratic culture. Even in its claims for the writer, the argument divides the writer and the artist along lines distinguishing technique and talent, reprivileging technique while reifying its difference from talent.

While enticing, the argument seems to me to fail on two counts: (1) it reduces the agonistic pleasures and possibilities—indeed, the performativities—of democratic exchange (conflict, compromise, dialogue, debate) to equal access, and (2) it reiterates, even in its disavowal, the elitism of nineteenth-century, Anglo-romantic conceptions of the poet/writer, reproducing distrust for artistic, imaginative, and opaque writing, as opposed to allegedly serviceable and clear uses of language, identifying democracy with the latter and refusing or deferring writing that, in effect, as Trinh Minh-ha observes, "does not translate a reality outside itself but, more precisely, allows the emergence of a new reality": writing as the constitutive form of unrealized democracies.<sup>13</sup>

### *Moving Out*

As I consider the problematic appeal of what has come to be called "performative writing," I want not so much to dispel the mystery my historian friend ascribed to the poet/writer as to dissolve the dichotomies on which her argument is built, especially those dividing the historian and the artist, and what are conventionally considered their respectively common and uncommon discourses.

At the same time, I can't entirely abandon the logics of function and effect. Reading Michael Taussig's claims for "writing effectively against terror," for instance, I have to reserve for "good" writing the expectation that it will serve a social function.<sup>14</sup> Its value depends on its effectiveness, on how well it performs within a system animated not only by democratic conflict but by conflict over the nature and aims of democracy. That conflict in turn performs writing as an effect, as a sedimentation in the form of a specific social relation. What I want to call performative writing is thus both a means and an effect of conflict. It is particularly (paradoxically) "effective." It forms itself in the act of speaking/writing. It reflects in its own forms, in its own fulfillment of form, in what amounts to its performance of itself, a particular, historical relation (agonistic, dialogic, erotic) between author-subjects, reading subjects, and subjects written/

read. Performative writing is thus no more and no less formally intelligible than a road sign or a landmark: its styles may be numbered, taught, and reproduced, but its meanings are contextual. It takes its value from the context-map in which it is located and which it simultaneously marks, determines, transforms.

I am left then with what seem contradictory desires: on the one hand, to make a taxonomic display of performative writing in order, among other things, to make performative writing generally available for use; and, on the other hand, to insist on the difficulty of performative writing/writing performatively. I want to suggest that performative writing is a technique, even a technology, that must and can be commonly deployed, and yet this appropriation of *techne* can be no more merely stylistic or mechanical than it should be instrumental—conclusions, I'm afraid, to which a list/manifesto of performative elements, options, directions may lead. Against both boutique and "how-to" (social-realist) models of performative writing, I want to suggest a third possibility: performative writing as a dynamic response to the extent to which writing and performance have failed each other by withdrawing—whether defensively or by pejorative attribution—into identification with either arcane or apparently self-evident means of knowledge production.

The list that follows assumes a negative case: a kind of writing antithetical to the vitality of performed culture, writing that threatens to dehydrate performance or that subordinates performative temporalities to the spatial and alien(ating) conventions of the (scholarly) "text." As insidious/disappointing as such writing (or the prospect of such writing) may be, it is not in the nature of writing per se to wring the life out of performance—or to remarginalize it within cultures of scholarship. To write performance is not in and of itself to betray it. Rather, it seems to me, the betrayal consists in not writing it, in conceding to the deployment of language against performance and so to the absence/death of performance in processes of knowledge formation. The answer to the claims of textuality on performativity is thus not to write less but to write more: to write in excess of norms of scholarly representation, to write beyond textuality into what might be called social mortalities, to make writing/textuality speak to, of, and through pleasure, possibility, disappearance, and even pain.<sup>15</sup> In other words, to make writing perform.

I offer the following list then with some irony. It is descriptive/prescriptive, practical/theoretical. As itself an excursion into performative writing, it is intended to map directions/directives for performative writing without foreclosing on the possibility that performance may—at any moment—



unhinge or override its claims (assuming that performance, as practice, is never fully in control of its effects). My use of the list form is intentionally hyperbolic: it is meant to yield entry into the discourses of performative writing and simultaneously to indicate its own insufficiencies and instabilities. Directed at once at the loose currency of "performative writing" and rising anxiety about how to define it, how to name *it* once and for all, this list is meant to un/name performative writing, to refuse its recuperation to matters of style and form by positioning definitional claims within a broadly normative framework.

I don't think that performative writing is a matter of "anything goes" or that anyone can do it anymore than "anyone" can write "good" history or that "good" history is not fundamentally a prescriptive category with elaborate implications for evaluation. What follows is then only a suggestive framework for what neither the specially talented nor the evaluatively unreflexive might do in the name of expanding the realm of scholarly representation.

### *Six Excursions into Performative Writing*

1. Performative writing is *evocative*. It operates metaphorically to render absence present—to bring the reader into contact with "other-worlds," to those aspects and dimensions of our world that are other to the text as such by re-marking them. Performative writing evokes worlds that are other-wise intangible, unlocatable: worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect, and in-sight. Whereas a mimetic/realist perspective tends to reify absent referents in language, thus sustaining an illusion of full presence, a performative perspective tends to favor the generative and ludic capacities of language and language encounters—the interplay of reader and writer in the joint production of meaning. It does not describe, in a narrowly reportorial sense, an objectively verifiable event or process but uses language like paint to create what is self-evidently a *version* of what was, what is, and/or what might be.

What I want to call performative writing (often felt only in a flash or, per Turner, a "flicker")<sup>16</sup> collapses distinctions by which creative and critical writing are typically isolated.<sup>17</sup> It is neither entirely self-constitutive (in the manner of an avowed fiction) nor referential (in the sense of pointing to or revealing a world outside language). It does not entail "going over" into creative writing or expropriating the resources of the creative writer for criticism per se, but hybridizing the very terms by which such claims

might be made, suggesting an in-between, "liminoid" field of possibility, a field of hybrid, mixed forms that exceed categorical distinctions in their effort to *make possible*, to make absence present and yet to recover presence from structural, realist mimesis for poesis.

Performative, evocative writing confounds normative distinctions between critical and creative (hard and soft, true and false, masculine and feminine), allying itself with logics of possibility rather than of validity or causality, the scientific principles underlying positivist distinctions between "true" and "false." It shifts the operative social paradigm from the scientific "what if" (what *then?*) to its performative counterpart, "as if" (what *now?*),<sup>18</sup> drawing the reader into a projected im/mediacy that never (mimetically) forgets its own genealogy in performance.

In the poesis of *making possible*, performative writing simultaneously slips the choke hold of conventional (scientific, rational) scholarly discourses and their enabling structures. It moves *with*, operates alongside, sometimes through, rather than above or beyond, the fluid, contingent, unpredictable, discontinuous rush of (performed) experience—and *against* the assumption that (scholarly) writing must or should do otherwise. It requires that the writer drop down to a place where words and the world intersect in active interpretation, where each pushes, cajoles, entrances the other into alternative formations, where words press into and are deeply impressed by "the sensuousness of their referents."<sup>19</sup>

The writer and the world's bodies intertwine in evocative writing, in intimate copformance of language and experience. Thus, for instance, when Carol Mavor writes with/about the photographs of the maid-of-all-work Hannah Cullwick, collected by the late Victorian poet Arthur Munby, the reader reads with her, seeing what she sees and feeling the subtle press of Cullwick's image on her imagination. The ensuing scene goes beyond both identification and "readerly" productions of Barthes' endlessly open text to engage the reader in a material encounter with the photographs. Mavor locates herself and the reader in the act of taking up the pictures, of removing them from the collector's box stored in the Wren Library at Trinity College, Cambridge. Performing viewing, Mavor fingers an image of Cullwick's rough, working hands, laid open and blackened with soot before her, before our wondering eyes. Their hands, always already mediated by the protocols of looking and being-looked-at, touch. They touch us. In Mavor's hand/eye, the image takes on its own agency. It performs her and through her, us, now caught in a kind of *ménage à trois* of looking/feeling/wanting. Mavor draws us in as the images, in her description, "pop out of their small drawer" and catch her red-handed, in the scene of her



own (now our own) desire: "Hannah's big, disconnected hands mirror my own as I fondle the tiny pictures of hard-working woman [sic] that have been fetishistically frozen in a lovely miniature museum: a team effort by inspector Munby and the librarians of the Wren library."<sup>20</sup> The image turns back on Mavor, suggesting her own fetishistic enchantment.

And yet in gentle conspiracy with Hannah against their mirror-image—the "team effort" by "inspector Munby" and his curators to keep Hannah closed, her show shut down—Mavor tells the picture from Hannah's point of view: "Hannah took pleasure in blackening her [hands] with grime. And, because simple grime was never enough, Hannah used patches of black lead (that she would spit on) to literally draw on her skin." Mavor evokes in the very shape and feel of her sentences the twin pleasure she and Hannah take in Hannah's dark hands. As if in homage to the maid's desire to write her-self, literally to draw on her skin, inscribing herself as she did with black lead, Mavor draws her reader into the (perverse) pleasures with which she now inscribes the page:

the portrait of Hannah invites overall fingering. Feel her calluses. Feel the silky brocade fabric with its raised floral design. Feel the leather wrist strap. Imagine what it feels like to wear one. Feel the brush in her hand, in yours. Feel her muscular arms. As Hannah once said about her own hands (to Munby), "They are quite *hard* again—feel."<sup>21</sup>

Fingering, feeling, making us feel: the page is the material stage of Mavor's evocation. She reads/writes in body-time, moving the reader into (e)motion, into what can only be called critical ecstasy (*ex-stasis*) through the performance of her own subjectivity within the scene of reading-writing an image performing. Her performance echoes Hannah's in front of the camera, doubling the urgency with which Hannah displayed her hands in interaction with her reader reading, realizing Hannah's performance now in excess of the frames and boxes that contained it. Mavor brings the act of seeing images taken in the late nineteenth century into the full body of the reader's experience. She does not re-present the photographs as much as she rehearses their claim on the reader/viewer's body-imagination, making it possible for us to know Hannah not *as* different but *in* all of her demanding, resplendent difference.

2. Performative writing is *metonymic*. It is a self-consciously partial or incomplete rendering that takes its pulse from the *difference* rather than the *identity* between the linguistic symbol and the thing it is meant to

represent. It dramatizes the limits of language, sometimes as an endgame, sometimes as the pleasures of playing (*jouissance*) in an endlessly open field of representation. It recognizes the extent to which writing displaces, even effaces "others" and "other-worlds" with its partial, opaque representations of them, not only not revealing truths, meanings, events, "objects," but often obscuring them in the very act of writing, securing their absence with the substitutional presence of words, effectively making absent what mimetic/metaphoric uses of language attempt to make present.

In the ironic turns of its own self-consciousness, metonymic writing thus tends also to displace itself, to unwrite itself at the very moment of composition, opening language to what it is not and can never be. Writing performed *in extremis* becomes unwriting. It un/does itself. Even this phrase—"un/does itself"—is a minor metonymy. It marks the materiality of the sign with the use of a practically unspeakable, non- or counter-presential element of punctuation, an element intelligible only by reference to visual grammatical codes by which a slash or "/" is distinguishable from a "!" or ";", that in its particular use here to divide and double a word—to make the word mean at least two things at once and so to refuse identification with a unitary system of meaning—locates language itself within the medium of print-play. It thus *does* or achieves itself by visually materializing its fixities within print and yet *undoes* that fixity by literally slashing open the word to competition between what Bakhtin considered the "centrifugal" and "centripetal" impulses in languages, the twin strategies of dispersal and containment operative in any word, at any given moment, here dramatized in a "slash."<sup>22</sup>

Exemplified in Derrida's infamous erasure [ X ], and popularized in Roland Barthes's rampant parentheticals, blank ellipses, and almost sculptural formations of grammar and alphabets (epitomized in the title of his 1975 book, *S/Z*), the metonymics of writing exceed wordplay to encompass Judith Hamera's breathless parataxis and the density with which Bruce Henderson layers camp on camp, as well as the spectral delicacy with which Jane Blocker rehearses the power of representation to rub out the very object it covets.<sup>23</sup> Reflecting on her efforts to write the work of the Cuban American performance artist Ana Mendieta, Blocker notes that she is driven by a sense of loss, by a sense of "just-having-missed" Mendieta before she was killed in 1985:

I read her biographies and histories (what few there are) over and over to convince myself that she is not gone, to repeat the familiar—the story of her life,



the story of her exile, the story of her art. I look at the slides, photographs, and films she left behind as though they might point to her presence, but they always only remind me that she has gone.<sup>24</sup>

Metonymic writing is often, as it is here, filled with longing for a lost subject/object, for a subject/object that has disappeared into history or time, and for what, in the face of that disappearance, may seem both the inadequacy and impossibility of evocation. Mendieta's earthworks (grave sites that flame and dwindle into ash, shoreline images that are no sooner inscribed in sand than they are swept away by wave after wave) are devoted to disappearance. They perform the beauty and fragility of life as dying, as gaining its flickering beauty in the process of (always already) disappearing. Centered in that place where life and performance intersect as dying, as disappearance, they moreover tremble with the beauty of life as performance.

Life, death, performance, and disappearance mix and fuse in Mendieta's work, rising to her own mysterious death in 1985. Together, they dare Blocker to go beyond obsession and fetishization, beyond desire to write the "lost" object, to find/fix it in print and so ultimately to deny the quaking essence of Mendieta's work/life, into loss, into transformation and performance. Taking up Peggy Phelan's charge to write "into" disappearance, Blocker characterizes her project as an attempt to move "from a *representation* of loss—history—to an *enactment* of loss—an admission that the story of present absence cannot be sustained."<sup>25</sup> In so doing, she opens her text to performance, to writing as a figure of loss, as a process of *losing* and so *realizing* the performed life.

The "failure" of history is not meant to suggest that the very discipline in which I am engaged somehow falls short, that it lacks efficacy. Rather, by "failure" I refer to that process whereby history self-destructs, or should I say "self-deconstructs"? I am not yet willing to relinquish the telling of stories, to suggest that as "representations" they are inherently flawed and therefore wrong. What I would like to do is to celebrate their failure; to see that they are finite, that at a certain point, by virtue of repetition, redundancy, or familiarity, they begin to break down. It is this disabling that produces or at least allows for the performative—that effect whereby history is returned to the present, whereby the reader or listener is brought into being by the tale.<sup>26</sup>

For Blocker, history/writing exhausts itself in the pleasures of performance, in its failure to save history from itself, from its return to the present in the being/becoming of the reader reading. As de Certeau has argued, whatever good history writing wins, it does not keep.<sup>27</sup> It gains by

losing, by giving itself away—in the double sense of revealing its own materiality and letting go of the object/referent conventionally held tight within a presumably transparent correspondence between the print/symbol and its referent. As Blocker suggests, writing is a metonymy of history that achieves performativity in the production of a reader reading or a surplus of meanings, an ambi/multi-valence of possible, future histories. Blocker suggests an alternative "presence"—one less tied to the nostalgic regimes of symbol-meaning than to the rigors of living in exile, on the edge of death.

In the metonymic display of its own materiality, writing underscores the difference between print-based phenomena and the corporeal, affective, processual temporalities in which they operate, thus actually featuring what they aren't. Metonymic writing invokes the presence of what it isn't, ironically, by elaborating what it is—by either camping on its own forms or running them to the limit or hyperbolizing the symbol-signifier as the figment of print and punctuation. I am reminded of my fourth-grade teacher, Miss Carlson, an image of frothing white hair and skeletal command, who seemed literally to *undertake* the roll. She stood at the front of the room, before the gridlock of our fixed, evenly spaced desks, calling out each name backwards, as it was written on her roll sheet. "Smith, Joe!" she would call out; "Pollock, Della!" She performed *print*, enacting our disciplinary subjection to its forms and expectations, but simultaneously inviting—despite herself—transgression. When the confirmation of presence was not quickly forthcoming, when "Smith, Joe" didn't immediately answer, "Here!" we all turned away from Miss Carlson to see who *wasn't there*. We turned toward absence, thrilling to the prospect of Joe's lateness, his possible punishment or truancy: where was he? what exotic, other thing was he doing elsewhere? Turning away from the stiff teacher at the front of the room, we crossed through the law of print-presence into the absent-Imaginary. What had Miss Carlson, despite herself, authorized but this turning away? this giggling, momentary trespass of absence on school territory? Joe (or, for that matter, me, here) was more present in his absence, in being present in name only than he ever was on other days when, careful, polite, looking straight ahead, he guaranteed the connection between word and referent with his bodily presence, with the appropriation of his body to smug confirmation of print's ability to name its object, "Here!"

Marking an absence, metonymic writing also marks itself an active, material signifying process that is neither a prison house nor a fun house, not a place even, but a boundary space, inviting laughter and transforma-



tion.<sup>28</sup> It is a space of absence made present in desire and imagination, through which readers may pass like shadows or fiends (or like the kids in my fourth-grade class): tentative, wild, demanding, almost always and never really free.

3. Performative writing is *subjective*. By which I don't mean subject-centered or circling back on the writer/subject in such a way as to enclose the "self" within either narrative or mirror-reflections, or ideologies of humanist individuality or selfhood. This is the aim of many conventional autobiographies whose express purpose is to write a coherent self across time.<sup>29</sup>

Thinking about writing as a material practice, I want to stipulate a more specific sense of the performative self or subjectivity as the performed relation between or among subjects, the dynamic engagement of a contingent and contiguous (rather than continuous) relation between the writer and his/her subject(s), subject-selves, and/or reader(s). Writing that embodies this kind of subjectivity tends to *subject* the reader to the writer's reflexivity, drawing their respective subject-selves reciprocally and simultaneously into critical "intimacy."<sup>30</sup> This process is performative precisely to the extent to which it defines the subject-self in/as the effect of a contingent, corporeal, shifting, situated relation—and so itself as shifting, contingent, contextual—rather than, say, as the end-object of a narrowly autobiographical account or the foundational identity to which "experience narratives" often refer.<sup>31</sup>

I think of this relation as having a particularly erotic dimension, especially as suggested by Susan Suleiman's rereading of Marguerite Duras's novel *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, through Lacan:

Reading Lacan with Duras, we see emerging the possibility of a psychoanalytic discourse that would not be a discourse of mastery but a discourse of mutual entanglement. . . . Who speaks, or writes, the ravishment of Lol V. Stein? Feminine discourse, which is not always where one expects to find it, reminds us that when it comes back to being human, we are all in a position of ravishment—call it lack, if you must; our only hope for survival—call it love—being, against all odds and through all our divisions, to keep on writing.<sup>32</sup>

Entanglement, ravishment, love, writing: what I want to call performative writing does not project a self, even a radically destabilized one, as much as a relation of being and knowing that cuts back and forth across multiple "divisions" among selves, contexts, affiliations such that, as Elspeth Pro-

byn notes, "the self is not simply put forward, but . . . is reworked in its enunciation."<sup>33</sup>

Reworking the self in its enunciation (as itself the enunciative context of self-making) requires two preliminary moves: first, shifting from *positioning* the self (and so potentially either spatializing and reifying identities or opening identity to Judith Butler's absurd "etc.")<sup>34</sup> to articulating the motive, shaping relations among selves in an ongoing process of (self-) production; and second, shifting from documenting "me" to reconstituting an operative, possible "we."<sup>35</sup> The self that emerges from these shifting perspectives is, then, a possibility rather than a fact, a figure of relation emerging from between lines of difference, moving inexorably "from her experience to mine, and mine to hers," reconstituting each in turn.<sup>36</sup> The performative self is not merely multiple; the multiple self is not in and of itself performative. As Probyn argues, the performative self "is not simply put forward"; it *moves* forward (into survival? democracy?) and between selves/structures, projecting in turn alternative figures of social relation.

In "Stabat Mater," Julia Kristeva emblemizes lines institutionally and materially dividing mother and father tongues, semiotic and symbolic discourses, suggesting typographically their difference and simultaneity:

Christianity is doubtless the most refined symbolic construct in which femininity, to the extent that it transpires through it—and it does so incessantly—is focused on *Maternity*. Let us call "maternal" the FLASH—instant of time or of dream without time; inordinately swollen atoms of a bond, a vision, a shiver, a yet formless, unnameable embryo. Epiphanies. Photos of what is not yet visible and that language necessarily skims over from afar, allusively. Words that are always too distant, too abstract for this underground swarming of seconds, folding in unimaginable spaces. Writing them down is an ordeal of discourse, like love. What is loving, for a woman, the same thing as writing. Laugh. Impossible. Flash on the unnameable, weavings of abstractions to be torn . . .

ambivalent principle that is bound to the species, on the one hand, and on the other stems from an identity catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the unnameable that no one imagines as femininity, non-language or body. Thus Christ, the Son of man, when all is said and done is "human" only through his mother—as if Christly or Christian humanism could only be a materialism (this is, besides, what some secularizing trends within its orbit do not cease claiming their esotericism). And yet, the humanity of the Virgin mother is not always obvious, and we shall see how, in her being cleared of sin, for instance, Mary distinguishes herself from mankind. . . .<sup>37</sup>



But as often as I've turned to this essay, especially for the provocative pleasures of its mother-words, I've also been frustrated by feeling that it tends to objectify rather than mobilize the differences it inscribes. I read it back and forth, up and down, crisscrossing in my reading performance the institutional, material, and discursive lines it draws. And yet I withdraw, tired, finally resting—as does the essay, I think—in the binarism it displays.

Others have tried to engage the double and multiple voices Kristeva invokes by writing past representation into relation through dialogue. But the dialogic form does not in and of itself guarantee performativity. It may or may not work. It may be bad or failed performativity. Indeed, it may backfire egregiously, as it does in the case of Hope Edelman's *Motherless Daughters*, a book I opened thinking about my sister-in-law's recent death and about her eight-year-old daughter, my niece, only to find a letter to the author: "Dear Hope," the book began.<sup>38</sup> I tried to read on, thinking this book has obviously been important to many people, making myself think, "how interesting that she begins with *others'* words"—but couldn't, finally realizing, of course, that where Edelman begins is with a salutation to herself. The gesture at dialogic return functions here as proof of the authority of the narrator. It confirms rather than in any way displaces authorial perspective, bringing the story back to its beginnings in "Hope."<sup>39</sup> I tried to believe that the inkling of a very bad pun here (one that celebrated identity—appropriating "hope" to "Hope" and irony to singularity—rather than difference) was mere projection on my part—until I saw ads for the sequel, a collection of similar letters, called *Letters to Hope*. Here was, it seemed to me, a worst-case per/version of monologue masking as dialogue.

One alternative is to engage dialogue as a drama or interaction among voices divided up into separate characters or selves. With significant exceptions, however, this approach tends to disentangle the multiple voices or subject-selves always already entangled in the production of a performative self.<sup>40</sup> It tends to divide and conquer the production of a performative self, favoring rational distinctions among voices over their erotic entanglement. To the contrary, Nancy Mairs hails a sensual synergy of selves living together in the writing self, calling the writing "self" to the "we" constituted in the pleasures of articulating with a "not-me": "I don't see how anyone engaged in self-representation can fail to recognize in the autobiographical self, constructed as it is in language, all the others whom the writing self shelters. The not-me dwells here in the me. We are one, and more-than-one. Our stories utter one another."<sup>41</sup>

There are few examples of one story folding into another, of one story uttering another, bypassing questions of appropriation altogether to perform the indwelling of Mairs's "not-me" as elegant as Carol Stack's recent book, *Call to Home*, an account of the return of African Americans to an impoverished, rural South in the late seventies and eighties. Stack notes that in early versions of the book she tried to maintain a clear distinction between the stories she heard and the stories she told about them, between her narrative voice and her interpretations of the people with whom she spoke. "But my voice today," she says, "is in part a voice taught to me by the Carolinians who told me their stories; they and I conspired to understand and communicate their experience."<sup>42</sup> Inhabited at once by the people with whom she spoke and the people-readers with whom she is now speaking, Stack's voice shifts unpredictably, almost imperceptibly from one story or narrative key into another.

Like the creek Stack describes in the opening paragraphs of *Call to Home*, which "twists, doubles back and redoubles, and works itself almost into knots, wringing out the territory like anxious knuckles squeezing a sponge," Stack's view "swings out deep and wide, cutting a broad arc." We watch with her as "the ground lifts back and away from a fringe of cypress and gum trees up gently through all the acres of fields" and Pearl's house, "the house where Samuel was born in 1922, where he and Pearl lived their married life and raised their ten children," comes into focus. Moving slowly, Stack takes us along as she reviews the house's minor improvements. She observes, knowing what we will come to know, "There are still children in the house, grandchildren now," as we cross over the threshold and, taught well by Stack's own careful tone and demeanor, reach out a hand to greet our beckoning host: "Pearl," Stack says, "is still Miss Pearl."<sup>43</sup>

Performative subjectivities often begin small—in a daughter's question or a friend's comment.<sup>44</sup> Or simply in the desire to speak frankly, directly to a reader, implying a reader's presence in the evident anticipation of a reply. Beginning in the small, concrete gestures of answering back, performative subjectivities may also rise to the coursing, liturgical uncertainty with which Dick Hebdige remembers "america."

In Hebdige's montage United States, there are no stable selves. They have been evacuated, leaving the landscape, however, redolent with performative subjectivities. Abandoning cartography for memory, spatial analysis for the broken, wanton, post- (pre-?) narrative temporalities of life on the edges of Los Angeles, Hebdige writes an exile's nonstory. He appears in his/story as the author who finally makes himself at home in his own



prose, shifting into an "I"-frame, shifting down from "he" to "me," as he finally writes/drives his way past both individuality and alienation toward something like hope, something like love ("call it lack, if you must; our only hope for survival—call it love"):

He spent one Christmas alone, in self-inflicted solitary, detached at last after several years in exile from most of the moorings that had tied him to his old life in Britain, and like some latter-day Scrooge, he found himself assailed, of course, by all the ghosts and distant objects he'd mislaid or thrown away to escape to this place. On Christmas day he picked up the phone and called one of his oldest friends in London, the widow of his other oldest friend and he was shocked as always, thanks to fiber-optic technology, by the "fact" she sounded close enough to touch. . . .

. . . she takes the phone into another room so we can talk unimpeded without being overheard by her new family. Within minutes we're talking old times, . . . and it all feels so effortless leaning back two decades into old understandings. . . . It feels so comfortable and right to talk here and now in the present tense across 6,000 miles and an 8 hour time difference, then pause, to wait inside a silence, wait for it to break without having to worry about what's coming next, confident in the knowledge, perhaps fallacious, that the person on the other end is riding every nuance right alongside you and that everything is flowing unimpeded back and forth along the telepathic circuitry set up all those years ago in all those hours spent sitting together in the same apartment where she's sitting now, in the hours that passed as we sat there listening to music, smoking, making cups of tea, dissecting who said what to whom with what effect earlier that evening in the pub, watching the grey London dawn come up, slow and still, over the rain-wet rooftops of the houses opposite.

Suddenly it's time to leave home again and come back here to where I live and as I replace the receiver I catch myself, reflected in the mirror by the mantelpiece, face cracked open in the goofy, oafish, adolescent grin I recognise from ancient schoolboy portraits in the family photo album. Imperceptibly, old London wraps me in its foggy aura and I move about the sunlit California kitchen with the costermonger swagger of a juvenile extra in *Oliver!*, the musical. My accent has slipped so far back down towards its 1950's cockney origin that the attendant at the Arco station, where I stop several hours later to buy gas, cannot understand a single word I'm saying.<sup>45</sup>

4. Performative writing is *nervous*. It anxiously crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice, unable to settle into a

clear, linear course, neither willing nor able to stop moving, restless, transient and transitive, traversing spatial and temporal borders, linked as it is in what Michael Taussig calls "a chain of narratives sensuously feeding back into the reality thus (dis)enchained."<sup>46</sup> Rather than skittish in the sense of glancing or superficial (or even merely anxious), "nervous" writing follows the body's model: it operates by synaptic relay, drawing one charged moment into another, constituting knowledge in an ongoing process of transmission and transferal, finding in the wide-ranging play of textuality an urgency that keeps what amounts to textual travel from lapsing into tourism, and that binds the traveler to his/her surging course like an electrical charge to its conduit.

Nervous performativity differs from intertextuality generally in its genealogical imperative. It takes its pulse from a specifically Foucauldian sense of history as a discontinuous recurrence of disciplines and practices, of "interpretations" incorporated in history as events. Genealogy must, for Foucault, stage those interpretations. It must make them "appear as events on the stage of historical process." In this way, history introduces discontinuity into experience. Rather than drawing continuous lines or tracking origins, history as genealogy

divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself. [It] deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millennial ending. It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity.<sup>47</sup>

A Foucauldian genealogy historicizes the body. It records and explicates the history in "what we tend to feel is without history—in sentiments, love, conscience" as well as in their absence, in "the moment when they remain unrealized."<sup>48</sup>

Genealogy writes a body always already written by history. But centered in the body, it also writes that history in breaks and ruptures, not as a text per se but as the story of living bodies always already contesting, at both macro- and micro-political levels, the social texts to which they are otherwise indentured.

Genealogy becomes, in Joe Roach's work, for instance, performance genealogy.<sup>49</sup> Roach tracks the body in/as performance, as the dizzying, "vortical" force and effect of performance across the history of New Orleans race/class cultures. Considering how spectacular procedures are similarly engaged in slave markets, eighteenth-century brothel shows, and



contemporary football games, Roach jump-cuts one century and the next, street markets and the Astrodome, focusing, however, per Foucault, on the "singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality." He isolates rather than compresses the different scenes in which spectacle, display, and performance play out their respective power and appeal.<sup>50</sup> With insistent specificity, he splices events, at once displaying the condensation of culture in performance and enacting Foucault's claim that "knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting."<sup>51</sup>

With similarly cinematic intensity and more explicitly carnivalesque delight, Ruth Bowman crosses nineteenth-century circus and literary romance traditions with 1990s documentary filmmaking. She deposes conventional genre and period distinctions, performing in her own prose/documentary the instability of claims to authenticity and sincerity that have otherwise so often drawn the American imagination into pious complacency.<sup>52</sup> She crosscuts nineteenth- and twentieth-century performance traditions, historiographically performing the very doubleness and duplicity she finds in circus "humbug." Bowman substitutes the dis/continuous play of performance riddling American culture—from P. T. Barnum's American Museum through Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels and Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning*—for the seductions of authenticity and "experience." Like Roach, she decenters the body-self in the very form of her essay, reflecting in the broken continuities of her own text the genealogy of double-selves she writes.

5. Performative writing is *citational*. Operating again at the interstice of writing and performance, and perhaps more narrowly informed by discourses of textuality than other modes of performative writing, citational writing quotes a world that is always already performative—that is composed in and as repetition and reiteration. Citational writing figures writing as rewriting, as the repetition of given discursive forms that are exceeded in the "double-time" of performing writing and thereby expose the fragility of identity, history, and culture constituted in rites of textual recurrence.<sup>53</sup> Judith Butler has argued that performativity at best falls gendered/sexual identity by temporalizing it, by marking its origins in repetition policed to perfection.<sup>54</sup> Identity cannot escape its discursive construction in/as iteration but, through performance, it may exert a counterpressure. It may repeat with a vengeance, making repetition stumble, stutter, driving a wedge into the practices of re/turn (between turn and return), thus at least promising repetition with a *difference*.<sup>55</sup>

Echoing the quotational meta-drama of a Brecht play, citational writing

tends toward what Fredric Jameson calls "pastiche"—or parody without the punch, parody worn smooth by repetition, traced through with the failure of Brechtian/modernist irony to overcome postmodern conditions.<sup>56</sup> But staging Butler's failure against Brecht's, citational writing gains a kind of melancholy hopefulness. Repetition isn't all bad. Inevitably imperfect, it is the living sign that reproduction can never be total or absolute. In Judith Hamera's reflections on her reluctance to leave her field sites (in this case, a classical ballet studio) behind, moreover, it is the site of (re)turn, of something like a turn *en pointe*, spinning the disciplinary histories of ballet and scholarship into a unique alliance. Hamera recovers nostalgia (perhaps the ultimate trope of return) as the *excess* of history (its specter and low "other") in what may seem the excessive repetitions, quotations, and citations that constitute her argument:

Nostalgia has a bad name, admittedly often justifiably. Nostalgia's complicity in the projects of imperialism and salvage ethnography are well known and I will not review them here. But even outside these critiques the press is not good. . . . As those of us who contemplate leaving our [fieldwork] sites—to the extent that such leavetakings are subject to contemplation—as we look for our EXITS and think about getting busy, getting hurt, getting tired, getting out, can we not, instead, imagine an "embodied nostalgia" with a capacity to "engender its own ironies" (Battaglia 78), a slippery, ludic container of/for ethno-time, one in and through which memory and desire merge their backward glances into an affective alliance with stable limits but multiple, unstable possibilities (Sippl 25)? And could not such an affective alliance beget an ethnographic home place or home story, one thoughtfully, contingently, critically poised at the brink of "stay" and "go," a place or story where, in the words of Jori Graham: "( . . . The hurry [of Time] is stopped) (and held) (but not extinguished) (no)"?<sup>57</sup>

Hamera exemplifies the "embodied nostalgia" to which she appeals. In this passage, among others, quotations mix and overlap. They disappear and spiral, one into another. But who quotes? Who re-cites? Who says "EXITS"? " 'stay' and 'go' "? Who repeats "getting" to exhaustion ("getting busy, getting hurt, getting tired, getting out") and then appeals to the high discourses of "ethno-time," echoing bell hooks on "homeplace," slipping the "I" who wonders into the place of the "we" who imagines an "embodied nostalgia"? Hamera's voice is written over and shot through with quotation, with other voices clamoring to be heard, held in ready equipoise within the "ludic container" of her prose.

Hamera is, it seems, ravished by writing and yet, writing on, quoting



on, rewriting, she ravishes writing in turn. You can almost hear her rifling the pages of books beside her as she writes them into her writing, as the surrounding stacks of books threaten to fall. But you don't, they don't. Hamera tunes them all to the rhythm of her own run on/at the keyboard. There is something of a supra-personal, Laurie Anderson performance here; something of an ancient ritual of collective memory. "Hamera" is the one who remembers and desires, through whose body and words are coded the "affective alliance with stable limits but multiple, unstable possibilities" she imagines. "She" becomes the performativity of her prose, becoming her-self in turn in "affective alliance"—in love—with the field subjects/friends she leaves behind.

Citational writing underscores the double movement of quotation. It stages its own citationality, *re-sighting* citation, displaying it in an accumulation of quotations or self-quotation or quotation from beyond the borders of academic prose (such as the Jorie Graham poem Hamera quotes here or the long poem that concludes Linda Alcoff's important reflection on "The Problem of Speaking for Others"),<sup>58</sup> with the primary effect of reclaiming citation for affiliation.

Umberto Eco argues that it is impossible in the postmodern era even to say "I love you" without sounding like you're quoting a Harlequin romance. Quotation is, for Eco, the defining figure of postmodernity. Within its folds, love itself is pre-written. The best we can do is simulate its expression by quoting the quote, double-quoting the romance.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, as Barthes noted in the late seventies, the language of love is itself a transgression, suggesting (nostalgia for) a time when *eros* wasn't driven out of the marketplace by commodity exchange.<sup>60</sup> At once caught in a web of quotations and pulling at the fine threads in which it is caught, "love" moves through writing as pleasure. It is the urgency with which Hamera remembers both her field subjects and the texts through and against which their relationship is articulated. It is the drama of quoted and quotational texts wrapping themselves around each other in conflict, need, passion, necessity. It is the performance of writing writing, pressing on through hyper-aesthetics and the enclosure of writing within writing, into "affective alliance" with writing itself. In citational performativities, love comes home to language, and language to desire, each renewing itself in the other-texts and other-bodies without which it is nothing.

6. Performative writing is *consequential*. It not only dramatizes J. L. Austin's early distinction between constative and performative utter-

ances—between words that report what other words and people do and words that *do* what other words report (exemplified for Austin—as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has made painfully clear—in the difference between the wedding announcement and the wedding vow)—but subsumes the constative into the performative, articulating language generally as an operational means of action and effects.<sup>61</sup> Writing that takes up the performativity in language is meant to make a difference, "to make things happen."<sup>62</sup> Or, as Tania Modleski has argued in defense of Virginia Woolf's beautiful prose, it is rhetorical—although not rhetorical as opposed to beautiful or in the sense of rhetoric as "a suppressive force." It is rhetorical, rather, in the sense of rhetoric "as a *productive* force, and, most definitely and performatively, as *force*."<sup>63</sup>

But just as performative evocation is not mimetic, and nervous performativities are not only intertextual, so performative writing that is consequential is not broadly rhetorical. It is not the same thing as rhetoric. It recasts rhetoric as a constitutive aesthetic, leading Maurice Charland, for instance, to wonder, "Perhaps critical rhetoric . . . requires a performative moment which seeks to name a new audience and constitute a new *sensus communis*."<sup>64</sup> Rather than appealing to given audiences or speaking, as Adorno claims Brecht does, in the language of established discursive communities, performative rhetoric names a new public. At least in part through the kind of evocative processes described earlier, it projects new modes of being and relating through its forms, constituting the very norms by which it will be read.<sup>65</sup>

Performative rhetorics are performative to the extent that they operate from within circuitries of reader response. The realities they project assume negotiation. They involve the reader not as the subject/object of persuasion of a given reality claim but as a cowriter, co-constituent of an uncertain, provisional, normative practice. In this light, I think of border-works like bell hooks's *Black Looks* and Simon Watney's *Practices of Freedom*, works that call their readers to perform at the boundary of at least two worlds.<sup>66</sup> I think also of the invitations to risk and conviction that permeate Peggy Phelan's work and of the bardic force with which Dwight Conquergood speaks the past into the future.

As the effect of a social relation and as a mode of cultural, historical action, performative writing throws off the norms of conventional scholarship for an explicit, alternative normativity. It operates by a code of reflexive engagement that makes writing subject to its own critique, that *makes writing* a visible subject, at once making it vulnerable to displacement by the very text/performance it invokes and shoring up its capacity for politi-



cal, ethical agency. As performance, as writing that stipulates its own performativity, performative writing enters into the arena of contest to which it appeals with the affective investment of one who has been there and will be there at the end, who has a stake in the outcome of the exchange. The writing/subject puts his/her own status on the line not in the debased-Derridean sense of reveling in absence, in the winking spectacle of nakedness to which the emperor is now invited, but in the name of mobilizing *praxis*, breaking the discursive limits of the emperor's stage, and invigorating the dynamics of democratic contest in which the emperor and his new clothes (or lack thereof) are now continually refigured.

In these pages, I have only crossed into the terrain of performative writing, a terrain that seems larger with each step. Writing performatively opens the field of writing to incursion, permeation, multiplicity. It expands the very possibilities for writing to sometimes terrifying proportions. But perhaps more frightening than its size and range is the extent to which performative writing requires its reading, writing, and written subjects to negotiate the claims of its respective forms. Metonymic and consequential currents within performative writing, for instance, may seem incompatible, the former carrying its subject(s) into effacement by time, the latter into action in time. Together they articulate an asymmetry, even a contradiction at the heart of performative writing, a tension—whether construed as oppositional, hierarchical, erotic, practical, or differential—between the reflexive instabilities of poststructural language use and its ethical, political commitments. Critics of poststructuralism have repeatedly wondered where instability stops and commitment begins. Their arguments tend to assume a radical difference between the figural turns of metonymic and directive speech, a difference that implies a necessary, free, and arbitrary choice between endless hermeneutic deferral and material politics. But I would argue—and here, only in the most preliminary terms—that questions of performativity divert the tension between (even the binary/textualist opposition that maintains the distance between) these claims toward *materializing possibility* in and through a kind of writing that is distinctly performative: writing that recognizes its delays and displacements while proceeding as writing toward engaged, embodied, material ends. It is in thus spinning off textuality that I see the mark of a genuinely new politics, a politics that not only refuses to choose between affirmation and reflexivity (or to yield to charges of either rank positivism or wound-licking narcissism) but also refuses to identify writing with either reflexivity or referen-

tial affirmation, pursuing it instead as a critical means of bypassing both the siren's song of textual self-reference and the equally dangerous, whorling drain of unreflexive commitment. Performative writing takes its energy from that refusal, and from the moment when such apparent contradictions surge into productivity.

I do not mean to suggest that the tensions between affirmation and reflexivity, speaking and writing, writing and doing, are false or easily resolved. But to give up not only on doing versus writing but on making writing *do* seems to me cynical at best. Much recent literary and cultural critique founders on the corollary assumption that since politics is impossible anyway, then what we are doing anyway is politics.<sup>67</sup> Which has led me to ask in this essay, what are we doing anyway? The struggle to write performance seems to me to give performative writing its depth and value, ethically, politically, and aesthetically. In this struggle at least, performative writing seems one way not only to make meaning but to make writing meaningful.

*But what is it? the student asks again. I repeat, perhaps all too easily, all too pedantically, That's the wrong question: "it" refuses ontological inscription; "it" is a subject formation; "it" won't bear noun-modifiers. But what is it? she comes back, the repetition now, finally, proving its excess: she hasn't been asking as much as I've been hearing the wrong question. The question, I realize, echoed through many other forms and places, has less to do with definition than with desire, less to do with wanting to resolve performative writing under the usual rubrics of autobiography (and self-presence), narrative (and closure), reflexivity (and "indulgence"), and rhetoric (or persuasion) than with the palpable appeal of its difference, its aberrant relation to norms of just " 'good writing.' "*<sup>68</sup> Performative writing is queer, even in the old, now twisted, now queered sense of "queer" as oddly familiar, strange even in its bent similarity to what's common and known or to what common sense calls "good." Performative writing is an itinerant in the land of good writing. It travels side by side with normative performances of textuality, sometimes even passing for the "same," but always drawing its energy from a critical difference, from the possibility that it may always be otherwise than what it seems.

What is it that we want when we ask, insistently, over and over, "What is it"? What is it, moreover, that I have deferred until the after-text of this text? A definition, a complete demonstration, maybe. More likely, finally, the same-but-different body of performative writing, slipping now from the evidentiary platform of "examples" to the corridors of an ongoing intermission. Between acts,



among inter-acts, I let myself now ask the question the student asked; I perform the student, colleague, friend's question, "What is it?" and find myself now reading writing, writing reading, touching pages touching me, drawing me into mutual desire for—what? what is it for? The question moves as does the writing, forward, into exigency. Performative writing is what it is not in itself but for . . . for what? Turning the page, turning the corner, I have to say, to the extent that it is, it is for relatives, not identities;<sup>69</sup> it is for space and time; it is for a truly good laugh, for the boundary, banal pleasures that twine bodies in action; it is for writing, for writing ourselves out of our-selves, for writing our-selves into what (never) was and may (never) be. It is/is it for love?

#### NOTES

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1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 202; Homi K. Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 3.

2. See, e.g., Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

3. Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. Francis McDonagh, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. and ed. Ronald Taylor (London: NLB, 1977), 188.

4. Sue-Ellen Case, "Performing Lesbian in the Space of Technology: Part I," *Theatre Journal* 47.1 (1995): 8.

5. As opposed, for instance, to style as tactical resistance per, e.g., Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen, 1979).

6. See Henry M. Sayre, "Critical Performance: The Example of Roland Barthes," in *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 246–64.

7. It is not within the scope of this essay to review the complexities of new history writing. I would, however, cite two compelling examples: Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986); and Mary Lowenthal Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life: Charlotte Salomon in the Nazi Era* (New York: Harper, 1994).

8. Carolina Seminar on Gender and History: Workshop on Writing and Re-

sponsibility, National Humanities Center, Research Triangle Park, NC, 7 May 1993.

9. Henry A. Giroux, "Language, Power, and Clarity or 'Does Plain Prose Cheat?'" in *Living Dangerously: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Difference* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993) 166.

10. Giroux, 168, citing bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

11. Giroux, 167.

12. Note alternative models in Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 220–38.

13. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 22; cited in Giroux, 160.

14. Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 3.

15. See Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146–66; and on performance as scholarly representation, see Dwight Conquergood, "Poetics, Play, Process, and Power: The Performative Turn in Anthropology," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 9.1 (1989): 82–88.

16. Per Victor Turner on the liminal moment, *From Ritual to Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 44.

17. See Robert Scholes, "The English Apparatus," in *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 1–17.

18. On the "subjunctive mood" of ritual, see Turner, 82–84.

19. Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 7.

20. Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 89–90.

21. Mavor, 91–92.

22. See Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259–422.

23. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathon Cape, 1975); Judith A. Hamera, "'Bye Bunheads, Little Feet and Big Red': Leaving Le Studio," paper presented at the national meeting of the Speech Communication Association, 18 November 1995; Bruce Henderson, "Call Me Neely: David Trinidad 'V.O.D.' and the Poetics of Patty Duke," paper presented at the national meeting of the Speech Communication Association, 20 November 1995.

24. Jane Blocker, untitled paper presented at the Performance Studies Conference, New York University, New York, 25 March 1995.

25. Blocker, untitled paper.



26. Blocker, untitled paper; see also Blocker, "Conclusion: Writing toward Disappearance," in *Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

27. See Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

28. This is the space of Cixous's Medusa and Bhabha's "nation." See Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1 (1976): 875-93; Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation"; and Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 145-46.

29. Per, for instance, Homi Bhabha's sense of the performative as a "repetitious, recursive" narrative strategy that operates in tandem with the continuist project of the "pedagogical" not only to constitute the "nation" but to redeem and reiterate it "as a reproductive process." The conventional auto/biography or story of a single life may, like the story of a nation, constitute the self in the "double-time" of (narrative) performance and (historical) pedagogy. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 145.

30. See Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar, eds., *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

31. See Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17.4 (1991): 773-97. See also Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 183-201.

32. Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 117-18; note Suleiman's sense that her reading of Lacan is "unorthodox," especially as confirmed and developed by Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Suleiman, 231.

33. Elspeth Probyn, *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2. Probyn takes the pulse of her argument from Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 157.

34. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 143; on discourses of positionality, see Adrienne Rich, "Notes toward a Politics of Location (1984)," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), 210-31.

35. See Probyn, 4: "the possibility of the self rests within a filigree of institutional, material, discursive lines that either erase or can be used to enable spaces in which 'we' can be differently spoken." See also Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathon Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990).

36. Probyn, 4.

37. Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 161-62.

38. Hope Edelman, *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss* (New York: Delta, 1994).

39. See Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," esp. 272-75.

40. These include Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon's dialogic encounter in "Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little-Understood Emotion," which triangulates the reader in desire that ripples through Moon and Sedgwick's exchange as both comic lack and excess, in Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). See also D. Soyini Madison's performative essay "That Was My Occupation": Oral Narrative, Black Feminist Theory, and Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 13.3 (1993): 213-32.

41. Nancy Mairs, *Remembering the Bone House: An Erotics of Place and Space* (Boston: Beacon, [1989], 1995), 11.

42. Carol Stack, *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), xix. As an anthropologist, Stack perhaps represents the best in a long tradition of anthropological contributions to reflexivity in published research, figured most notably in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) and its recent rejoinder, Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, eds., *Women Writing Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). See also Elizabeth Enslin, "Beyond Writing: Feminist Practice and the Limitations of Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 9.4 (1994): 537-68.

43. Stack, 1-2.

44. See Henry Louis Gates's prefatory letter to his daughters in *Colored People* (New York: Knopf, 1994), xi-xvi; and Phelan, "The Golden Apple: Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning*," in *Unmarked*, 104.

45. Dick Hebdige, "On Tumbleweeds and Body Bags: Remembering America," *Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby* [an International exhibition curated for the site Santa Fe] Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.

46. Taussig, *The Nervous System*, 7.

47. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 154. See also Scott, esp. 796-97, on historicizing experience per Foucault.

48. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 139-40.

49. Joseph R. Roach, "Slave Spectacles and Tragic Octoroons: A Cultural Genealogy of Antebellum Performance," *Theatre Survey* 33.2 (1992): 167-87.

50. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 140.



51. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 154.

52. Ruth Laurion Bowman, "Performing Social Rubbish: Humbug and Romance in the American Marketplace," in *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*, ed. Della Pollock (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); see also Shannon Jackson, "Performance at Hull-House: Museum, Microfiche, Historiography," in *Exceptional Spaces*.

53. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 145.

54. See Judith Butler, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions," in *Gender Trouble*, 128–41, and Butler's qualification in *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

55. Following Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 70: "To put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off."

56. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 111–25.

57. See Hamera, who cites Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Debora Battaglia, "On Practical Nostalgia: Self-Prospect-ing among Urban Trobrianders," in *Rhetorics of Self-Making*, ed. Debora Battaglia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

58. See also Michael S. Bowman, "Performing Southern History for the Tourist Gaze: Antebellum Home Tour Guide Performance," in *Exceptional Spaces*, ed. Pollock; Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* (winter 1991): 5–32.

59. Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt, 1984), 67–68.

60. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), 65–66:

Political liberation of sexuality: this is a double transgression, of politics by the sexual, and conversely. But this is nothing at all: let us now imagine reintroducing into the politico-sexual field thus discovered, recognized, traversed, and liberated . . . a touch of sentimentality: would that not be the ultimate transgression? the transgression of transgression itself? For, after all, that would be love: which would return: but in another place.

See also Bertolt Brecht, "Preface to *Drums in the Night*," in *Collected Plays*, ed. Ralph Mannheim and John Willett (New York: Vintage, 1971), 1:376–77, on "sex that gives rise to associations."

61. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University

Press, 1962). See also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critique of Austin's heterosexual presumption in "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," *GLQ* 1 (1993): 2, rehearsed in her introduction, with Andrew Parker, to *Performance and Performativity*, ed. with Andrew Parker (New York: Routledge, 1995).

62. Marianna Torgovnick, introduction to *Eloquent Obsessions: Writing Cultural Criticism*, ed. Marianna Torgovnick (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 4.

63. Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Post-feminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 54. See in general Modleski's discussion in "At the Crossroads: On the Performative Aspect of Feminist Criticism," 45–58.

64. Maurice Charland, "Finding a Horizon and *Telos*: The Challenge to Critical Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991): 77–78.

65. In this way, performative writing remains closely bound up with historical, material traditions of performance, despite, for instance, Sue-Ellen Case's important concern:

It is confounding to observe how a lesbian/gay movement about sexual, bodily practices and the lethal effects of a virus, which has issued an agit-prop activist tradition from its loins, as well as a Pulitzer-prize winning Broadway play (*Angels in America*), would have, as its critical operation, a notion of performativity that circles back to written texts, abandoning historical traditions of performance for the print modes of literary and philosophical scrutiny. (Case, 8)

66. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Simon Watney, *Practices of Freedom: Selected Writings on HIV/AIDS* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

67. I am grateful to Jacquelyn Hall for this succinct formulation.

68. See the e-mail exchange that followed the Performance Studies Conference at New York University, reprinted as "From Perform-I: The Future in Retrospect," *Drama Review* 39.4 (1995): 142–63, esp. Jenny Spencer's questions of 8 April 1995, 158.

69. I was particularly inspired in this regard by Beth Mauldin, unpublished paper for Art 369/Communication Studies 257, spring 1996.