

# Performative Writing as Scholarship: An Apology, an Argument, an Anecdote

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The article, divided into three sections, argues for the methodological power of performative writing. Part 1 borrows from the literary tradition by offering an apology on behalf of performative writing as it links the poetic and the performative. Part 2 continues the argument by structuring its claims in the form of a logical proof. Part 3 completes the case by offering a short story of how performative writing has functioned within the academy. The essay enacts the performative writing method as it calls for its use.

*Keywords:* performative writing; poetic scholarship; autoethnography

## Part 1: An Apology for Performative Writing, With Apologies to Marianne Moore

I, too, dislike it: there are things that tradition  
just won't permit, things that must be  
proven, things that are important beyond all this  
human passion.  
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,  
with a complete comfort in one's  
superiority, with a dismissive confidence  
that only our accepted academic positions could certify,  
one discovers  
in it after all, a place where lifeless abstractions might find  
human form, where the level of significance  
might slide off the page on a tear, where categories  
might crack and statistics shrink, and where reason is  
unruly. One discovers in  
it after all, a place for the genuine.  
Eyes that can analyze beyond variance, ears  
that can hear what others say, palms  
that know the sweat of joining another  
and of opening the fist. These things are  
important not because a  
  
high-sounding argument can be put around them but  
because they are  
useful: they evoke what seemed impossible to evoke, they say  
what seemed unsayable.

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When they become so derivative as to become  
uncommitted,  
the same thing may be said for all of us, that we  
do not admire what  
we cannot believe: the playing in pain  
for quick results, the telling of tales  
that point only to themselves, the sharing  
for sheer

shock, or turning the stage into a  
therapeutic session  
or criticizing without so much as a  
twitch, and all that ego, ego, ego,  
ergo, nothing else—  
nor is it valid  
to discriminate against standard monographs and

quarterlies: all these phenomena are important. One  
must make a distinction  
however: when convention programs abound with half-hearted  
or just too sincere performative writers  
when journals feature easy confessions or calculated  
controversy  
the result is not performative writing  
nor till the performative writers among us can be  
scholars of  
experience—above  
self-absorption and triviality and can present

for identification: real lives that shake the imagination  
connecting us to subjects that truly matter,  
connecting us to each other  
shall we have  
it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,  
the raw data of life in  
all its rawness and  
that which is on the other hand  
genuine, then you are interested in  
performative writing.

## Part 2: The Traditional Scholar's Game—An Argument

This section identifies several key arguments both for and against the works that cluster around such labels as performative writing, autoethnography, performative essay, ethnodrama, personal ethnography, autoperformance, and ethnographic poetics. The section uses the term *performative writing* to stand in for the many ongoing efforts for alternative modes of scholarly representation. It is necessary to note, however, that the work under these labels, although sharing many commonalities, cannot be reduced into a single logic. With that precaution in mind, the goal here is to make a case for such works within the

scholarly arena. In the end, the section shows what performative writing offers that more traditional forms of scholarly writing do not. Six claims are put forth for performative writing.

1. Performative writing expands the notions of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge. For some, that is just the problem. As Gingrich-Philbrook (1998) points out in his discussion of masculinity, fear of losing disciplinary control over sanctioned forms and content triggers a talk of legitimacy. Those who have been designated to legislate what counts had better stay ever vigilant or the very foundation of the academic enterprise might crack, letting in all sorts of pollutants. This, it seems clear, is the sentiment behind Parks's (1998) fearful claim, "No question is more central to our identity as scholars than the question of what counts as scholarship."
  - 1.1 Parks's (1998) fear cannot be easily dismissed, but in the case of performative writing, it is misplaced. Performative writing is not the wrecking ball swinging into the master's house.
    - 1.1.1 Although most would acknowledge that scholarship is contingent on historical, economic, ideological, and disciplinary patterns, few are ready to reject the considerable body of scholarly work in the name of relativism. Every time a paper is graded, an article for a journal is reviewed, or a scholarly essay is written, scholars are reflecting and affirming what they value. To argue contingency is not to argue for the utterly arbitrary: There are some good reasons for valuing what scholars have. In this sense, one might agree with Parks (1998).
    - 1.1.2 Parks (1998), however, need not fear performative writing. It is at most a hairline fracture in the academic foundation, a fracture that has been noticeable for years as scholars have attempted to force the scientific paradigm to answer all their questions. Despite the fact that many have declared the logical positivist house in ruins, scholars continue to reside there. Despite the fact that many have shown how building structures with the mind only is flawed architecture, scholars continue to do so. The performative writing fracture may help all academic houses settle into greater alignment with human experience. Performative writing fixes the fracture by adding some design features; it welcomes the body into the mind's dwellings.
  - 1.2 It is also useful to remember that formal argument based in and on the methods of scientific inquiry is not the mode for discovering truths; it is, like all modes of inquiry, nothing more than a rhetorical style. Scholars need not be tied to the belief or practice that their scholarship must look a particular way, particularly a paradigmatic way that has its uses but has limited power in accounting for human experience. Instead, scholars might embrace another rhetorical style, what Goodall (1991) calls "mys-

tery,” “to encourage us to see and to define situations by their unique human and spiritual poetic, the interpenetrations of self, Other, and context, by our complexity and interdependence rather than by some simpler linear or causal logic” (p. 125).

2. Performative writing features lived experience, telling, iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life. With lived experience, there is no separation between mind and body, objective and subjective, cognitive and affective. Human experience does not reduce to numbers, to arguments, to abstractions. As poet Stephen Dunn (1994) notes, “oh abstractions are just abstract // until they have an ache in them” (p. 212). Performative writing attempts to keep the complexities of human experience intact, to place the ache back in scholars’ abstractions.
  - 2.1 This is not to argue that experience equals scholarship. Performative writing does not indiscriminately record experience; it does not simply duplicate a cinema verite experiment. Instead, performative writing is a highly selective camera, aimed carefully to capture the most arresting angles. Each frame is studied and felt; each shot is significant. Much is left on the editing floor. Everyday experience, then, is not scholarship, but the shaping of everyday experience into telling and moving tales can be. The performative writer functions as States (1996) suggests the artist does, as “someone who says, ‘This is the way people behave *N* number of times,’ and knows how to put the *N* into expressive form” (p. 19).
  - 2.2 In this manner, performative writing makes its case, a case, to borrow from Fisher’s (1987) familiar argument, based in narrative plausibility and narrative fidelity. It is a case that is more interested in evoking than representing, in constructing a world than in positing this is the way the world is (e.g., Ellis, 1995; Tyler, 1986). It is a case that does not just rely on its descriptive portrayal, no matter how precise or poignant, but depends on its ability to create experience. Tyler’s (1986) assertion about postmodern ethnography holds for performative writing as well: “It is not a record of experience at all; it is the means of experience” (p. 138). Thus, performative writing offers both an evocation of human experience and an enabling fiction. Its power is in its ability to tell the story of human experience, a story that can be trusted and a story that can be used. It opens the doors to a place where the raw and the genuine find their articulation through form, through poetic expression, through art.
3. Performative writing rests on the belief that the world is not given but constructed, composed of multiple realities. All representations of human experience are partial and partisan (e.g., Goodall, 1989, 1991, 1996, 2000; Phelan, 1993, 1997). At best, scholars might achieve, to use Clifford’s (1986) phrase, a “rigorous partiality” (p. 25) and acknowledge, like all “standpoint epistemologist,”<sup>2</sup> that all our utterances are committed, positioned.
  - 3.1 Performative writing resists arguments that attempt to prove all other explanations inadequate or suspect. Performative writers do not believe

that the world is one particular way. They do not believe that argument is an opportunity to win, to impose their logic on others, to colonize. They do not believe that there should be only one house on the hill. They do not believe that they can speak without speaking themselves, without carrying their own vested interests, their own personal histories, their own philosophical and theoretical assumptions forward. They do not believe that they can write without loss, without mourning (Phelan, 1997), without metonymy (Pollock, 1998).

- 3.2 Performative writing, then, takes as its goal to dwell within multiple perspectives, to celebrate an interplay of voices, to privilege dialogue over monologue. It cherishes the fragmentary, the uncertain. It marks the place that poet Tess Gallagher (1982) wishes to locate, the “point of all possibilities” where “time collapses, drawing in the past, present and future” (p. 107).
4. Performative writing often evokes identification and empathic responses. It creates a space where others might see themselves. Although often written in the first person, it presents what Trinh Minh-ha (1991) calls a “plural I,” an “I” that has the potential to stand in for many “I’s.” It is an “I” that resonates, that resounds, that is familiar. Performative writing also often beckons empathy, allowing others to not only see what the writer might see but also to feel what the writer might feel. It is an invitation to take another’s perspective.
  - 4.1 Through identification and empathy, then, readers become implicated and human experience concretized. Readers may see more clearly how they and others constitute and are constituted by the world. They come to feel that they and others are written, given voice, a voice that they did not have prior to the reading. In this sense, the “I” of performative writing might best be seen as a geographical marker, a “here” rather than a “self.” In short, the self becomes a positional possibility (Garber, 1995).
  - 4.2 When performative writing does not point beyond the writer, it may appear self-indulgent, narcissistic, self-serving, or, to put it perhaps more kindly, therapeutic. This was one of the many attacks on the *Text and Performance Quarterly* (1997) special issue on performative writing.<sup>3</sup> The argument was simply “if an article had such qualities, surely it isn’t of any value.” No one, however, seemed to question why one might object to the self being indulged, reflexive, served, or cured within scholarly work. On occasion, some noted the history of legitimating practices as if that were proof enough (i.e., it hasn’t been allowed; therefore, it shouldn’t be allowed) (e.g., Wendt, 1998).
    - 4.2.1 Yet notions of self-indulgence, narcissism, self-serving, and therapeutic do seem to disturb, to rub against what scholars hope their research might achieve. For such scholarship is not just about the self, although the self can never be left behind. Such scholarship, even when based on the self, points outward. Its aim is to tell about human experience. It is for this reason that identification,

that space of recognition and resonance, is often an essential aspect of performative writing.

4.2.2 Moreover, the self can be a place where tensions are felt and uncovered, a place of discovery, a place of power, of political action and resistance. One often knows what matters by recognizing what the body feels. This is in part the lesson phenomenologists have been trying to teach for years (e.g., Leder, 1990; Sheets-Johnstone, 1990).

5. Performative writing turns the personal into the political and the political into the personal. It starts with the recognition that individual bodies provide a potent database for understanding the political and that hegemonic systems write on individual bodies. This is, of course, only to articulate what feminists have understood for years: The personal is political. It is to realize the potential in Benjamin's (1979) insight: "To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism, that we badly need" (p. 228). Yet too often research, even feminist and Marxist, does not call into play its own insights; it does not call on individual experience to make its case. It does its work behind closed doors. It does not show how politics matter to individual lives or how individual lives are evidence that social justice is absent. Performative writing insists on making such connections. It is, to use Pollock's (1998) word, "consequential." It offers, as Denzin (2003) puts it, "kernels of utopian hope, suggestions for how things might be different, and better" (p. xi).
6. Performative writing participates in relational and scholarly contexts. No writing occurs without context. In traditional work, the burden is to demonstrate how a particular argument advances current knowledge, a movement toward some all-encompassing explanation. The relationship between the writer and the reader is a distanced one, a relational positioning that demands that neither person become connected to the other. Performative writing, on the other hand, assumes that at given times, certain questions are of interest, not because their answers might be another step toward some final explanation but because of how they connect people within a scholarly community and locate them as individuals.
  - 6.1 Some questions are productive to embrace because they participate in the ongoing concerns of a scholarly community. Performative writing, when done well, understands its place within disciplinary history. As it participates in that tradition, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, it hopes to provide "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1983), "experiential particularity" (Baumeister & Newman, 1994), "deconstructive verisimilitude" (Denzin, 1997), and "theatrical narrativity" (Crapanzano, 1986). Any piece of performative writing is a story among many but a story about issues that matter or can be made to matter to the community.

- 6.2 Some questions are productive to embrace because they connect individuals, not just as scholars, but as people who are willing to place themselves at personal risk. By confessing, by exposing, and by witnessing, performative writers pursue their scholarly interests. In doing so, what might have remained hidden is made public, what might have stayed buried is put under examination, what might have been kept as personal commitment becomes public testimony. Such efforts often ask readers to respond, not just at the level of idea but as one person who has become connected to another. Performative writers offer readers an interpersonal contract that they can elect to engage.

Part 2 finds its fitting end with the words of poet Philip Booth (1989): “I strongly feel that every poem, every work of art, everything that is well done, well made, well said, genuinely given, adds to our chances of survival by making the world and our lives more habitable” (p. 37). Performative writing participates in this spirit, in the hope that current research might become a place where all are welcome to reside and where all might come to recognize themselves in all their human complexity.

### Part 3: Performative Writing: A Personal Anecdote

Having reached the end, this is a story of beginnings. It tells of places to go; it tells of reasons for going.

A colleague, saying she thought he would find it of interest, gave him a copy of H. L. Goodall's (1989) *Casing a Promised Land*. He looked at it thinking that organizational communication isn't his area but was intrigued by the subtitle *The Autobiography of an Organizational Detective as Cultural Ethnographer*. He read a few pages, and it struck him: Scholarship could create the world it wants to examine, not as a list of abstractions or logical proofs but as a vibrant presence. With his proverbial hand slapped against his face, he slowly moved toward this form, a form that did not for him at that time have a name but a form that held promise for the central question he was struggling with: How can we write about performance in our reviews and essays that evokes the spirit of performance? He knew that to call for an exact representation was a fool's folly, but he wanted more than a record of what happened when. He wanted to be reminded of why we go see performances in the first place, that is, he wanted to encounter genuine renderings of human experience. What he is now most comfortable calling “performative writing” offered such a potential.

Since that time, he has been reading essay after essay that tries to weave mythos with logos, to evoke rather than duplicate experience, to elicit feelings along with thought. He continues because he believes in what these pieces are doing. He reads on because this work garners responses unlike any other work he has ever seen.

With his more traditional work, he might have a colleague congratulate him on his latest publication, might hear that a piece he had written led to a good class discussion, or might notice that his work was cited in someone else's essay. For the most part, though, his work seemed to disappear without comment, without any real impact. But with performative writing, reactions seem quite different.

He remembers what happens when he takes others' performative writing to his graduate classes. He does so with some fear that to encourage new scholars to embrace performative writing is to place those scholars in some disciplinary jeopardy. Even so, after all the cautions he gives, after all the fears he tries to instill in those who might be drawn to the form, student after student wants to do performative writing. When he asks them why they are so attracted to such writing, they simply note that it allows them to say with more eloquence, feeling, and insight what they want to say about a given topic. They claim that they can enter the disciplinary conversation without the fear that they might not get it right, by which they mean that speaking within the discipline does not have to come at the expense of someone else. He believes they are right.

He remembers conversations about performative writing, conversations that suggested pieces mattered. He thinks about the number of comments from readers who report being moved by what they had read or tell of how a piece made a difference in their life. He considers the classrooms where he heard this work is being used because "it seems to speak to students." He recalls those moments following convention presentations when audience members felt the most appropriate response was a hug. He returns to those intimate exchanges with others that never would have happened had a piece not been written. He notes the many times listeners claim that a writer has spoken for them, that the writer has put into words what they could not articulate. He thinks of those listeners he has seen cry and those he has seen become angry. He knows that performative writing places writers and readers in genuine dialogue with each other, a personal and political dialogue that matters to them, to the discipline and, he thinks, in his most grandiose moments, perhaps even to the world.

And so this ending is a beginning, an invitation, a place to go.

## Notes

1. My apologies to Marianne Moore derive from my shameful exploitation of her wonderful poem "Poetry." For her version, see Moore (1951).

2. For an excellent discussion of "standpoint epistemologies," see Denzin (1997). In the chapter titled "Standpoint Epistemologies," he examines the assumptions of standpoint texts by focusing on the work of Patrica Hill Collins, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Gloria Anzaldua.



3. The infamous *Text and Performance Quarterly* special issue (January 1997) produced a flurry of CRTNET NEWS postings, convention programs and fodder, and several published responses.

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