Performance and performativity

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PERFORMANCE/PERFORMATIVITY

Performance is, of course, fundamental to reenactment; to reenact is to perform (again). Notions of performativity are thus crucial to examining the many practices that can be considered reenactment. 'Performance' and 'performativity' are, however, equivocal words and concepts, with diverse denotations and connotations in different fields and contexts. Perceptions of reenactment's performativity (both within the practice and in academic and news media representations of it) thus vary considerably. Although perhaps most commonly associated with costumed history buffs restaging a historic battle or playfully competing in a tourney, reenactment actually encompasses a range of performance styles and methods, facilitating different ways of engaging with history.

So, with all these variations of perspective and approach, what exactly is meant by 'performance' and 'performativity', in this context? Performance and theater (and their adjective forms) are often used interchangeably; indeed, reenactment has more frequently been discussed in relation to 'theatricality' than 'performativity'. In theater and performance studies and the cultural industries, however, the term theater usually refers to script-based productions that centre around (verbal) dialogue, narrative and a character or characters. Also, while efforts to widen theater's accessibility are slowly changing the convention, it is generally still performed in purpose-built venues. 'Performance', on the other hand, can include theater but also encompasses devised performance, physical theater, live art, performance art, movement-based practices and post-dramatic theater. The term can also be used as a demarcation from theater, framing work as beyond the conventions of the theatrical form. This distinction is important, for while all forms of reenactment can be productively analysed as performance, many reenactments are not theater, in the above sense of the word.

Furthermore, the word performativity carries additional significance that theatricality does not. Performativity (literally, the quality of being performative), has been used in different and at times very particular ways – most notably by Judith Butler (1988) to assert that gender is constructed by the imposition of social norms through verbal and physical acts. Underpinning this is John L. Austin's (1962) widely-utilized understanding of the performativity of language i.e. the capacity of some forms of language to 'act' – to not only describe but also to effect social action. As will be discussed here, the terms performance/performativity and their synonyms have been used both in their broader sense – to explore reenactment's creative (re)doing of the past – and, less commonly, in the more

specific sense of performativity above, to consider the way historical experience, custom and culture might be embodied, literally, by the reenactor (Johnson 2016; Schneider 2011).

The most prevalent form of performance used in museum and heritage-site/event reenactment is first-person interpretation. Essentially, this involves the reenactor acting the part of a historical character (real or imagined), through whom they impart information and answer questions. This is usually performed in period attire and sometimes in period language (with varying degrees of accuracy). The interpreter might focus on a particular topic, occupation or object featured in the exhibition or might take a broader approach, discussing what life was like (for someone of their class, gender, race) in that period. A similar approach is used by some hobby reenactors, who adopt a historical persona, which they perform (often playfully or even ironically) whilst participating in some activities and events.

First-person interpretation, in both professional and leisure reenactment, can be understood as a form of roleplay (Agnew 2004; Handler and Saxton 1998; Snow 1993). Or, rather, different styles of first-person interpretation can be understood as different forms of roleplay. For example, non-professional persona-based medieval and Viking reenactments, such as those performed by the globally popular Society for Creative Anachronism, converge closely with LARPing (live-action roleplay gaming). LARPers also assume a persona or character, whose actions they perform (rather than describe, as they do in tabletop gaming), in settings and scenarios that are often pseudo-historical. Crossover membership and events are not uncommon among some groups, and many reenactor-larpers express appreciation for the escapism they experience whilst performing historically-inspired personas and/or pastimes (Erisman 1998). First-person interpretation at living history museums has been understood by Richard Schechner (1985) and Stephen Eddy Snow (1993) as a form of ethnohistorical roleplay i.e. a representation of (selected aspects of) a historical culture through performing research ‘in role’. In a similar vein, Jay Anderson (1982, 1991) suggests that, in many living history museums, ‘simulation’ functions as an interpretive tool to not only represent but also research history.

Such character-based reenactments often draw on techniques from naturalistic acting (the most prevalent form of acting in Western performance, pioneered by Constantin Stanislavski and developed into ‘method acting’ by, amongst others, Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler). In both professional and hobby varieties, it is not uncommon to create a character profile and develop a backstory, based on both research and imagination.

Reflecting on his own and others' practice at the Plimoth Plantation living history museum in Massachusetts, USA, Snow (1993) discusses the use of units and objectives (components of script analysis widely used by naturalistic actors) and Chekhov's psychological gesture (a movement that encapsulates the character's psyche). This merging of performance and history is encapsulated by the term 'actor-historian' (a self-descriptor used by some professional reenactors, sometimes written 'actor/historian'). Actor-historians deliver performative lectures as a character derived from the period and setting on which they speak, often working in a freelance capacity across museums, schools and heritage sites and festivals. At the Jane Austen Festival in Bath, UK, for example, actor-historian John White gave a talk on Georgian dining and entertaining as Georgian butler Mr Adams. These performers often complement their primarily naturalistic approach with more Brechtian acknowledgement of the performance construct. Some reenactors move in and out of role to enable comment from a 'period' and present perspective; others utilise what Magellsen (2006) terms the 'my time-your time' technique. For example, Georgian butler Mr Adams said of hosting and visiting friends and family: 'in your time, you might be a guest for a weekend; in my time, the year of 1812, you would be a guest for several weeks.' This technique enables the reenactor to remain in-character yet still discuss similarities and differences between then and now.

Such fusions of performance and history are prevalent not only in museums and the heritage industry, but also school education programmes, documentaries and historically-themed reality television, such as *Victorian Slum House* (2016) and *The Ship* (2002). Historical reenactment has also been utilised in other forms of performance, particularly performance art, often to revisit or reconsider events and issues in society or the arts. In *The Battle of Orgreave*, artist Jeremy Deller engaged approximately two-hundred former miners and eight-hundred historical reenactors in a site-specific reenactment of the iconic 1984 confrontation between strikers and police. The multidisciplinary nature and use of reenactment seem to reflect a wider blurring of disciplinary boundaries in the arts, humanities and social sciences (Snow 1993).

In many forms of reenactment, performance functions as both methodology and record: an embodied archive of historical skills, trades, arts and culture (Johnson 2015, 2016; Schneider 2011). Dancing with the performed nature of history, Diana Taylor asserts the importance of what she refers to as the repertoire – history in and as performance, performance as an alternative (or complementary) form of archive (2003). Prefiguring

Taylor's notion of the repertoire, Connerton (1989) frames bodies as vehicles for memory and remembrance, participating in and absorbing what he terms 'bodily practices' – performative embodied histories that resist and refute what would otherwise be the dominion of the written record. The reenacting body can function as a mode of historical inquiry and representation, exploring and extending archival research through the embodied, experiential nature of performance.

Re-enactors have described intense moments of felt historical connection – moments when they feel almost as if they were in the past or as if they really were, for a moment, the historically-inspired persona they perform. In such moments, the performativity of re-enactment evokes a poignant but transitory affective response in the reenactor. Actors, too, prize such occasions, when self and character fuse. But, they are temporary; in such performative moments, the (reen)actor is, to borrow from Schechner (1981), temporarily transported, but not transformed. Of stronger epistemological and ontological significance is the corporeal inscribing of culture which can gradually occur when reenactment is participated in as an ongoing regular practice, molding present bodies with materials, movements and mannerisms of past bodies. Here, we return to Butler's concept of performativity, which asserts that cultural values and expectations accumulate on, in and through the body. This 'sedimentation' of cultural mores is produced by, and produces, a 'set of repeated acts', which inflict a 'repeated stylization of the body' and embodied identity (Butler 1999, 43). Working in correlation with the (re)production of gender 'enacted on a large, political scale', sedimentation occurs as part of a 'more mundane reproduction of gendered identity [that] takes place through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence' (1988, 524). While Butler focuses on gender and sexuality, social constitution extends to other categories of socio-cultural identity and experience. I have discussed elsewhere, in more detail, how hobby reenactors – through the regular repetition of historical martial and creative arts, crafts, trades and other activities and skills – (re)create some of the 'repeated, stylized acts' of past cultures, somatically (re)membering the historical customs, values and practices which instituted these ways of doing (Johnson 2016). This is enhanced by the framing and shaping of their bodily presentation, movement and experience through the making and wearing of historically-accurate 'period' clothing and accoutrement. In this way, the reenactor's body becomes a (partial and far less

politically significant) microcosm of Butler's understanding of body as 'a manner of doing, dramatizing and reproducing a historical situation' (1988, 521).

Recognizing the capacity of performance to function historiographically – to record and relate (aspects of) the past in, on and through the body – carries significance for and beyond reenactment. Reenactment potentially enables more active engagement in the historiographic process and questioning of dominant ideologies and identities, facilitating a more dialogic critical engagement amongst a larger and broader sector of society. This feeds into larger, more significant socio-historical issues. With so much of history (re)written by a Western male elite, the performed histories of Indigenous and other minority groups and cultures are a vital platform for voices, stories and insights that might go unheard, or be silenced, if performance is not acknowledged as a valid way to share and stimulate knowledge (Taylor 2003). The centrality of performance is not particular to reenactment or even public history; it is at the core of all historical inquiry. If, as historian and philosopher R. G. Collingwood (2005, 282) asserted, the 'task of the historian is to reenact the past in his [sic] own mind', then we might say that the product of the historian's work is a performance of the past. History is not simply a text to be read or written; it is a production that retells – and refashions – selected, pieced-together stories of selected periods, places and people. As ethnohistorian Greg Dening argues:

> History – the past transformed into words or paint or dance or play – is always a performance. An everyday performance as we present our selective narratives about what has happened at the kitchen table, to the courts, to the taxman, at the graveside. A quite staged performance when we present it to our examiners, to the collegiality of our disciplines, whenever we play the role of "historian." History is theater. (2002, 1)

In short, performance, history and reenactment are interrelated, inextricably. Which begs the question, is reenactment's performative methodology really so marked a departure from – or so detrimental to – historical inquiry?

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