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The Work of Performativity: Staging Social Justice at the University of Southern California

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This chapter explores the connections between labor, community, and memory as they were imagined, performed, and articulated by low-wage service workers at the University of Southern California (USC). From 1996 to 2000, food service workers, represented by the Hotel Employees and the Restaurant Employees (HERE; Local 11), waged a protracted struggle against USC's unfair labor practices. The conflict centered on the university's desire to subcontract work, which would have a negative impact on an already highly marginalized workforce, including a reduction in wages, the loss of family health care, tuition remission, and a general exclusion from the "Trojan Family," the much-vaunted community of USC workers, students, and alumni. The workers' struggle at USC speaks directly to the ways in which difference is constructed through place, notions of justice, citizenship, community, and everyday social practices (Shields 1997, 95). We are particularly interested in how the workers used performative strategies as part of their struggle for better work conditions. Our analysis centers on two performances by HERE Local 11 workers, *The USC You Never See*, a street-theater skit performed at USC and in Pershing Square in downtown Los Angeles; and *The Hungry for Justice Campaign*, a rolling fast that traveled throughout California. The workers' performances contributed a great deal to their campaign in several important aspects. First, the performances revealed problematic and contradictory notions of "community" and "place" deployed by USC in its effort to represent and contain the labor conflict in particular ways. Second, they played a pivotal role in increasing workers' consciousness, organizing skills, and sense of efficacy. And finally, the performances were crucial to generating broad-based community support, which was instrumental in resolving the contract dispute.

The primary purpose of this chapter is to argue for the importance of collective politics within the realm of performativity in geography. In this regard, we question the ways in which social agency and political action have been articulated by contemporary geographic work on the role of performativity in everyday life (Bell, Binnie, Cream, and Valentine 1994; Nash 2000; Thrift 1997). Particularly influential in much contemporary research on performativity in geography and elsewhere, has been Judith Butler's groundbreaking work (1990, 1997, 1999) that revealed the extent to which identity formation is inscribed by the reiterative (performative) and regulatory power of discourses. Indeed, Butler's work on the compulsory performances of gendered identities has been both critiqued and extended by social theorists and has contributed significantly to the popularity of performativity across the humanities and social sciences, including geography (see work by Bell et al. 1994; Diamond 1996; Kondo 1997; Lott 1995).

While the trope of performativity has provided a necessary corrective to formulaic notions of identity and resistance, we also feel that there is an urgent need to reconnect performativity to historical materialism and collective social action. Indeed, despite providing many useful and imaginative insights, we argue that poststructural and postmodern theories of performativity, while often claiming to be about the everyday practices of ordinary people, has become increasingly abstract. It is in this context that we explore the performativity of the workers' struggle at USC and the ways in which theories of performativity in general might be resituated within the larger literature and politics of oppositional social movements, which are currently undergoing a resurgence in the United States and other parts of the world today. While we are cognizant that much contemporary work on performativity has little to do with theatrical performance in the conventional sense (see Thrift and Dewsbury 2000), we turn to the tradition of radical theater grounded in Marxist theory and practice, to help us make the connections between work and imagination outlined above. Research for this project was conducted over the course of several years, as one of the authors helped organize campus support for the workers. In addition to extensive ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, a survey and series of interviews were conducted with workers and activists regarding union participation (Pulido 1998). In the first part of the paper we discuss recent debates concerning performativity within human geography. In the second part, we describe the political and economic context of the workers' conflict and discuss how USC responded to it. In the third section, we analyze the workers' performance in terms of memory, identity, resistance, and collective social action.

Performing Resistance or Resisting Performance?

The trope of performativity in human geography has been used to understand the movement or "play" between bodies, texts, identities and space (see Bell et al. 1994; Nash 2000; Nelson 1999; "Performance" 2000; Rose 1997; Thrift 1997).



While there is no denying that understanding how the body inscribes and is inscribed with discourses, representations and practices is pivotal to an analysis of resistance. In this paper, we consider the continued relevance of performance as an oppositional, critical and collective form of political and social action. Instead of thinking of performativity in a postmodern sense as being “radically inclusive”—that is the idea that the self is constituted through compulsory social performances that can be either coercive or enabling—we think of performativity as a dialectical operative—that makes connections between labor, work and the practices associated with the material production of everyday life with imaginative work as a means of engaging in political action and resistance.

Our emphasis on performance as dialectical practice demonstrates the importance of thinking about cultural politics and performance from a radical materialist perspective. As we demonstrate in the third part of this paper, the workers’ performances of *The USC You Never See* and the *Hungry for Justice Campaign*, demonstrate the work of performativity in its historical, geographical, social and imaginative contexts. The workers at USC engaged the performative not only to expose the ruptures and contradictions of the university’s unfair labor practices, but also to enact social justice as the work of collective action and imaginative intervention by intentional social agents. Consequently, we understand performativity as a dialectical set of practices, which are enacted in specific historical and geographical contexts, and that expose the dynamics of power and exploitation while at the same time producing and rehearsing strategies for social and personal transformation.

As such, we are somewhat critical of postmodern theories of performativity that tend to locate both identity formation and resistance on either a discursive or a “nonrepresentational” terrain, where subjects are inscribed by regulatory discourses and normative power relations, or, governed by a set of contingent localized practices (see for example Butler 1990; Thrift 1997). To be fair, Judith Butler and Nigel Thrift’s theorizations of performativity differ substantially in that Thrift sees nonrepresentational theory as a means of grasping “performative ‘presentations,’ ‘showings’ and ‘manifestations of everyday life’” that extend well beyond the realm of discourse and which are clearly enacted within specific spatial contexts (Thrift 1997). However, Butler and Thrift, despite their differences, do share a certain debt to a Foucauldian analytics of power, which maintains that since discourses are fundamentally unstable, so too are the power-knowledge regimes, networks and practices that give rise to them.

Resistance, in this sense, becomes an increasingly slippery concept to grasp since political action arises at moments of indeterminacy and through nonintentional everyday practices (no matter how insignificant or small) that carry the potential to disrupt normative geographies (Hennessy 1995). In Butler’s work, this mode of theorizing is indebted to an uneasy linking of Derrida’s deconstructive textual strategies (1976) with Foucault’s discursive materialism (1976).¹ Such a reading maintains that since discourses are constantly repeated and performed, they can always be undermined, exposed, and/or subverted. As Foucault suggests

“discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (101). Moreover, resistance not only arises from what is inadvertently exposed through the reiterative performance of power, but also by what remains hidden in the gaps of, or supplemental to, the dominant cultural logic. What is important here, is that postmodern theories of performativity offer a nonintentionalist account of the world where identity formation and modes of resistance are decentered and rendered intelligible through multiple networks of power, signification and embodiment.

Thus from a postmodern perspective, it is precisely “the unstable improvisations within our deep cultural performances,” that, “can expose the fissures, ruptures and revisions that have settled into continuous reenactment” (Diamond 1996, 2). John-David Dewsbury (2000, 472) also takes up this notion of performativity when he argues that, “the performative is the gap, the rupture, the spacing that unfolds the next moment allowing change to happen.” In this regard, performativity is not about what one is (especially in a radical humanist or empirical sense), but rather, what one does, or more specifically, by what is rendered visible in the act of doing (Dewsbury 2000, Thrift 1997). The continual movement or play between discourses, bodies, identities and places registered by the performative gesture, continually troubles hegemonic social and spatial relations which appear to us as “natural,” by threatening to expose the performance of power as a performance. For human geographers, particularly Daniel Bell and colleagues (1994), Dewsbury (2000), Longhurst (2000), Thrift (1997), and the performative provides an important connective between identity, power and the construction of normative geographies, what Catherine Nash (2000, 656) calls “microgeographies of habitual practices,” in which the body becomes a performative site upon which multiple social identities are continually encoded and potentially resisted.²

Positing subjectivity, or more specifically, the processes of subject formation as performative, however, is not without its difficulties. As we have already suggested, the emphasis on nonintentionality in postmodern accounts of performativity, whether they are inspired by Butler, Thrift, or Foucault, mark the move towards a conception of human agency as the product of the compulsory “play” of discourses and practices. In line with this, moments seized for resistance emerge when ruptures in deeply embedded cultural performances appear at times of uncertainty or indeterminacy. Since resistance can only take place when the fiction of identity is exposed as a fiction, this implies a notion of human agency that is the product of cultural inscriptions and habitual practices increasingly abstracted from social, spatial and economic production. This has the effect of mystifying material relations and radically reduces the scale of resistance to the site of the individual body, and thereby diminishing the power and viability of collective political and social action.

The resulting reification of discursive representations as a form of materialism, which is particularly evident in Butler’s work, has been well documented (Ebert 1996; Hennessy 1995; Nelson 1999). However, nonrepresentational ac-

