



Lynette Hunter

***Politics of Practice: A Rhetoric of Performativity* (2019)**

Where does the energy for performance come from, and how might performance teach us to talk of what is outside of discourse? How is the work of performance similar to the work of criticism? What kinds of relationships occur between performers and audience, and in what ways are those relationships political?

In this short oral introduction, Lynette Hunter talks to us about her *Politics of Practice: A Rhetoric of Performativity* (London: Palgrave, 2019), which departs from the author's background in rhetoric and philosophy to recast both the performer and the audience member. The volume is divided into two sections: the first part phenomenologically repositions Performance Studies as a discipline made from 'materials that are not-known'; the second part is structured around four case studies – Keith Hennessy, Ilya Noé, Caro Novella, and duskin drum – through which Hunter grounds her theorisations in practical examples.

Lynette Hunter is Professor of the History of Rhetoric and Performance at UC Davis, and has a background in rhetoric, philosophy and political theory. She has researched women's history and feminism, the history of science and medicine, decolonialism and Canadian Studies, and, more recently, performance and practice. Writer, co-writer and co-editor of 30 books, her work is significantly informed by learning from daoist epistemology and indigenous ways of knowing.

[00:00:15] WHAT IS THE BOOK'S TITLE?

The title of the book is *Politics of Practice: A Rhetoric of Performativity*.

[00:00:24] HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITING THIS BOOK? / WHERE DOES IT SIT IN RELATION TO YOUR PREVIOUS WORK AND INTERESTS?

I started writing this really in the way that I normally start writing, which is that I started writing on particular issues and particular people and the work by particular people, and then realised that there was something there that I wanted to put together in terms of a larger work.

Where does it sit in relation to my previous work and interests? Well, I guess you could say that I spent a lot of my earlier critical life working on the socio-cultural side of various different kinds of performance. I work a lot in rhetoric and I'm an historian of rhetoric and over the last say 15/20 years I've been moving further and further away from the socio-cultural into the socio-situated. Even to the point of getting into something that I would call 'presencing'. And thinking about where the energy for performance comes from in the first place, because I think it's very tightly connected to where the energy for any kind of political activism comes from.

In a funny way, I see performance as a crucible where you can study why people get interested in various different kinds of activism or agency and what impels them to do it. One of the things I'm constantly saying is I can't understand why performers and actors and artists of various different kinds do what they do. Because it's very little recognised, it's underpaid, it's often without an audience or an extremely small audience. It's nothing like what the general public thinks it is, and yet people continue to do it – and that energy has to come from somewhere. So I'm quite interested in that, and I'm very interested in the relationships, the different kinds of relationships that the performer has with an audience. And that's something that I suppose I have – when you say previous work, long-term I'm very interested in the political activism of text and words and verbal performances. But in the shorter term, I'm very interested in how the critical world tends to communicate what it understands of that performance in really quite formal and coded, and often almost stifled genres. And some of my previous work has been performative criticism, both in person and on the page, typographically. And so this is a kind of extension of that as well.



[00:03:27] WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AND WHAT IS THE MAIN OVERARCHING THESIS OR ARGUMENT?

Well, this is something that I thought I knew – I thought I knew what the book was doing until I started talking to other people about it and I realised that they were getting something completely different out of it. So I think that the main overarching thesis or argument is really up to the reader to deduce, or experience, or decide for themselves. I'll give some directions but they're definitely not authoritative directions.

The book is about the background that we are living in right now in terms of Western Euro-American criticism and how that is trying to deal with things that don't fit neatly inside socio-cultural discourse. So it looks a little bit at a kind of standard history of critical work; it looks at what's happening in decolonisation and decolonisation theory; it looks at what's happening in environmental theory, a little bit; it looks at what's happening in Native American and First Nations and Aboriginal theory; and it looks quite a lot of what's happening in feminist theory, especially women who are working in studies – or not women, but people who are working in studies of science and technology.

And from there, it kind of moves into a background of how people in Performance Studies have generated one strand, which I think is super important – and it's the one that I work in, needless to say I think it's super important – which is much more about where the practice of a performer starts, how it is learned, how it is trained, how it is developed, how it moves into a rehearsal with other people who are also trained in similar ways, if not in similar media. And then from rehearsal into different kinds of performance. Most of those stages have political implications, not necessarily in terms of big 'P' political discourse but certainly in terms of how we perceive the concept of self, or of agency, or of distributed self. Indeed of morphed self, where you kind of lose yourself completely. Anyway, that's really where I go in the next section, the next chapter of the first part of the book. The third chapter in that part – and that first part is really about theory and criticism and history of criticism – is looking at the critical environment for talking about performance. Because a lot of people are doing – many people, most people are doing very important work in looking at the discursive structure of performance and performers – and I'm not really that interested in that. I'm interested in what happens before it gets into the discursive world. In other words, I'm kind of interested in what happens before it becomes what we think of generically as a performance. I'm much more interested in performances that have different kinds of audiences, or that relate to a generic audience in ways that are not generic. So that's that section, and there's a little transitional section where I point out that what we do in criticism is not much different from what we do in performance. In fact, obviously criticism is a kind of performance, and if you take that seriously, then what you do with criticism becomes really quite different from what you're asked for in the normal academic, scholarly settings in the Euro-American West. And can we negotiate those or do we have to abide by them? And how far do we compromise in them, and how far can we upset them? Because I have found that in my own work when I have upset those kinds of generic expectations, people are faced with something that is far more – it requires far more from them as readers to the extent that they may just give up. And those that stick with it have a variety of different reactions: some of them really enjoy it. I had one book review from my previous book which said that, given that I was using video and typographic experiment as well as essay, it did make you wonder about the author's stability – mental stability. So yeah, clearly there are some people who find this personally challenging to the point where they have to project it back onto the writer as something that is insane. But it's not insane. It's just a different way of thinking about it as a performance.

So if that's the first half of the book, the second half of the book is very easy. The second half of the book is four case studies of four performers, each of whom I have spent quite a long time with – anywhere between, I don't know, five to ten years if not longer – following their work, trying to understand what it is that they're doing. And I ended up focusing on Keith Hennessy and festival audiences – Keith Hennessy is a Bay Area artist originally from Canada – and on Ilya Noé who's a visual artist working with communities, well actually a town in Portugal, where she was invited to do a biennial exhibition. A different kind of audience because the town becomes very involved in that, but it is a civic space, still. The work of Caro Novella, who works in a whole range of different communities, but she is very definitely a kind of community performer who is encouraging people in quite specific performance, communities, rather, to use performance as a way of engaging with the troubles in their lives, or maybe the joys in their lives, or the difficulties, or the possibilities and the



potential in their lives. This particular chapter focuses on her work with breast cancer: 'breast cancer people' whether they be carers, or medical practitioners, or people who are experiencing some form of cancer or recovering from it, which you never do. Those kinds of audiences and, in fact, those audiences are public, but only public within their own remit. And the fourth performer is a street artist-cum-activist performer who focuses on ecological and environmental work called duskin drum. And again, his audiences are extremely random – who is passing him on the street.

So the main overarching thesis or argument is, I suppose, that if you look at a lot of critical theory and practice over the last 50 years you'll see that it's reaching out to things that a lot of critical discourse doesn't touch, but is things that are sensed, things that people would like to be able to refer to, but don't quite know how to, and how performance can address that. And if that's the critical argument, then in terms of Performance Studies I suppose the argument would be that, as a performer – and as an audience member, and as a critic but as a performer primarily – when you move to the stage of performance you have a variety of different political options that are often inflected by the kind of audience you choose to address. And that the key thing in any performance is how do you keep the audience engaged? How do you keep them with you? How do you keep them on the edge of their seats, or standing up and working with you? And that is very often something that they have to supply themselves. It's a classic allegorical stance and what I do, through the latter chapters, is I look at a series of rhetorical figures like enthymeme and hendiadys, anecdote, allegory itself, paradox. Looking at how if you take these classical terms and the kind of work that they do with an audience, you can see that emerging from the performances that these performers encourage, or create, or initiate with their audiences.

[00:12:40] WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND WHY?

Well, briefly, I think a lot of people don't accept the fact that you can talk about things that lie outside of discourse. And I think that that's what performers do. I think that's the primary difference between Cultural Studies and Performance Studies, and yet in order to be able to argue that – as somebody who has a background in Rhetoric and Philosophy – I figured I needed to do the philosophical work first. And I don't do it all: I mean, I only cover really the non-phenomenological and when I do look at a little bit of some of the early phenomenology in the second chapter, it's very brief. It could be much, much more, I could have done a lot more work on Whitehead and Bergson. So that's the first part. The second part is there because I actually think you need to have practical examples. You know, you can't just talk about it, you've got to be able to find some kind of material to get your critical engagement going with. So that's why it's structured the way it is. It's got the theory because I feel that the position I'm taking has to be argued: the position that argues for an alongside-area to discourse which contains so much that various different people are approaching from different angles and all of which can come to performance. And then the second part, which is practical material studies.

[00:14:19] WHAT DOES THE BOOK CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXISTING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE IN ITS FIELD?

Well, I think it's going to annoy a lot of people, because I don't talk about the discursive very much. Because I spent years doing that, you know? I spent 20 years of my earlier career doing that! I think what it contributes is a perspective on what is variously often called 'presencing' or felt sense or scoring or rehearsal practice or – oh, there are so many people working on these rather nebulous and vague things that they're drawing on. Because they really want to be able to articulate something in a critical vocabulary that they know is going on in performance and that they don't have the appropriate vocabulary for. And I've taken a rhetorical approach to that, because of my background, and I'm saying that there are rhetorical tools that you could use to begin to think about that kind of work, much of which is to do with not being able to articulate. So, those figures that I mentioned – hendiadys, enthymeme, anecdote, allegory, paradox – they're all things that leave something out in a different way, that the audience, in a sense, is expected either to supply or sense or feel. And, as a critic, I know what I feel somatically. But in order to be able to articulate that there's always got to be a compromise, there is probably going to be something that's lost something, that is reduced. And rhetoric, because it's been around for so long and there's an understanding that it



cannot articulate precisely what it is talking about, is one way of contributing terms that might be useful to people.

[00:16:18] HOW ENJOYABLE/DIFFICULT WAS IT TO WRITE THE BOOK?

It was really enjoyable to write case studies. It was kind of enjoyable, but rather predictable, writing the first part of the critical work because the first part of the critical work is about what people are doing in criticism, so it's all articulated. Second part, where I'm kind of looking at performativity more, that was really, really, really difficult. And that is the real theorising. I mean, most people who do theory, it's difficult to read because the theorists don't know what they're talking about. They're out on the edge of some kind of conceptual or critical or articulatory boundary – it may not even be a boundary, it may be more like a marsh, and you're trying to pick your way through it as best you can. You're trying to pull things into articulation and you know there are going to be compromises, you know they are going to be reductive and so you keep sort of looping round and thinking: 'Ahh, you know, maybe, maybe I should have said it this way', 'Maybe I shouldn't have said it at all', 'Maybe it should be left, maybe it should not be-', 'Maybe we should not attempt to say these things.' And that's difficult. And that's where theory and practice and poetics come together, I think.

[00:17:40] WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PASSAGE, CHAPTER OR IDEA FROM THIS BOOK?

Okay well, having said what I've just said, I would say that my favourite bits of the book are the places where I find a paragraph that actually does what I want it to do: that brings the theory, the practice and the poetics together. And okay, I can analyse it rhetorically and there'd always be something missing. But I turned – in the chapters on case studies – I turned quite specifically to experiences I have had with my own practices. And I have two primary practices, apart from criticism: one of them is a movement practice, which is a Chinese embodied culture practice; and one of them is obviously my writing practice, which isn't always critical. And when I thought about how those worked in the various different situations that I was trying to think through, with the specific performers that I was interested in in the case studies, I realised that there were elements in my own practices that I could draw on. And so there are about four or five paragraphs, that I really, really like in this book, that do that.

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Video available at www.auralia.space/library1-lynettehunter/.

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