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# "Life at Lake Home": An Ethnographic Performance in Six Voices; An Essay on Method, in Two

**Christopher Wellin**

*Debates about representational forms in qualitative research have tended either to celebrate or to condemn particular forms. Such an approach reifies the differences between various means of expression and diverts attention from the interpretive, political and pedagogic issues which, in my view, lend importance to representational choices. Here, I offer an experiential account of performing ethnography, based on my own field work. I discuss performance both as process and product, and find points of convergence between my goals as an ethnographer and the resources of performance. As process, performance encourages participants — performers and audience members alike — to articulate and reflect critically on cultural contexts and meanings; as product, performance models (in ways more difficult through writing) episodes of social life which, often, are the object of naturalistic inquiry.*

**KEY WORDS:** performance; method; ethnography; gerontology; total institutions.

## METHOD VERSUS EXPERIENCE?

Discussions of method in social research are often abstract and programmatic. This is understandable. Though concerned most directly with justifications for research practices, method, broadly speaking, also encompasses aspirations about the kinds of knowledge researchers want to create and its potential relevance for various audiences. For example, many ethnographers have questioned conventions of academic writing which translate experience into stilted theoretical terms, seeking a language that is both more expressive and accessible. However, the practical implications

Direct correspondence to Christopher Wellin, Department of Sociology, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208-1330.

of such concerns for choices in doing and sharing research can be hard to trace. As Kaplan (1964) points out, researchers' "logic in use" may be largely independent of their "reconstructed logic," especially so, perhaps, in qualitative inquiry. As a result, the literature on method has had trouble reconciling concrete accounts with broader debates.

I hope in this paper to narrow this gap by recounting a collaborative attempt to interpret and present field research in an unconventional way. I offer a practical account of *performing ethnography*. Following Reinharz ([1984]1988), I will try to be informative by discussing, in turn, the substance of the research, the process of constructing the performance, and my reflections on the experience as method. The interplay between ethnographic account and reflection on method is implied in the title's "two voices." This seems appropriate for dealing with innovations in ethnographic representation; because they reflect a negotiated, rather than a conventional, order, it seems to me as important to identify, as to resolve, points of controversy.[1] To do so requires that I alternate between theoretical goals of the performance, the construction of the script, the performance itself — as process and event — and some broader issues arising from what Geertz (1983) calls blurring genres. The public nature of performance generates new questions and responses, from audiences as well as practitioners, and as an *ethnographer of this process of performing ethnography* I treat these in detail. Throughout the essay, especially in the conclusion, I discuss performance in terms of sociological tenets and goals.

## CONTEXT AND SPIRIT OF INNOVATION

This project was part of a seminar on "Performance and Social Science" organized in 1991 by sociologist Howard Becker and Dwight Conquergood, professor of communication and performance studies, at Northwestern University.[2] Forty students enrolled in the seminar, in which, as the syllabus read, we would

> . . . [S]tudy performance as a method as well as a subject of social science research . . . [and] explore the problems and possibilities of performing social science texts through discussion of readings, actual performances, and especially discussion of classroom performances.[3]

At first, seminar members talked about the norms and boundaries of our respective disciplines. I recall, and Becker's notes of an earlier seminar confirm, that initial discussions included what he saw as "predictably ritualized arguments" about "truth," "personal bias," the futility and arrogance of claiming to "know" another's perspective, the ethics of "adding" emotion to texts, and how to define and justify "acting" in relation to cultural accounts. These issues were vigorously thrashed out, until the first performances began. At that point, doctrinal disputes gave way to overcoming self-consciousness, and also to a spirit of satire. Conquergood writes (1989:83) that "play" — with its connotations of "improvisation . . . reflection, agitation, irony, parody, jest, clowning, and carnival" — is among the essential impulses in the "performative turn" in ethnography.[4] These impulses were anchored however by an approach to culture, not as static realism, but as contested and multi-perspectival (in Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, as *dialogic*). The writings of Victor Turner, Bakhtin, and the seminar organizers provided us with rationales for exploring cultural relations and rituals through performance.

Many of the first performances were quasi-satirical skits, based on published monographs. I still laugh when recalling one group's literal staging of a bowling scene from *Street Corner Society* (Whyte 1943[1993]); another trio enacted, with mock solemnity, an interview with a working class couple in *Worlds of Pain* (Rubin 1976), the husband unshaven and swilling beer. These skits were cathartic yet pointed, aimed more at narrative conventions of "realist ethnography" (Van Maanen 1988) and interpersonal politics of research than at particular "findings" per se. I would conclude, though, that satiric license is taken more cautiously with the words and lives of one's own field informants than when the "text" is remote from personal experience.

Unlike some of the performance groups who convened without any clear direction, or with only a text to guide them, our group[5] began with a provisional understanding of the ethnographic sense we wanted to make in the performance; we thus used performance more to enact, than to explore, the meaning of a cultural episode (see Turner 1987:139-155). As source material we chose my undergraduate thesis, based on fieldwork which I and a colleague did in a residential group home for old women diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease (Wellin 1989). The focus of the research is how the deterioration of identity among institutionalized old people is influenced by organizational and interactional, as well as by organic, processes.

## ANALYTIC VOICE: SUBSTANCE AND META-THEORY OF THE PERFORMANCE

The performance was based on a four-year period (1986-1989) of paid employment and ethnographic field work, by myself and co-researcher Dale Jaffe, in a residential group home for older women diagnosed with

Alzheimer's Disease. With few exceptions — those, to enhance continuity of events depicted in "real time" — statements and interactions were taken directly from field experience and data. Substantively, we extended a tradition of research on organizational and interactional dynamics of "care" in total institutions (Goffman 1961:1-124), with particular attention to medical ideologies as bases of social control, and to the struggles residents mount in attempting to preserve autonomy and integrity of the self.

We saw the increasing entrepreneurial attention to Alzheimer's Disease (A.D.) as manifesting the bio-medicalization of aging (e.g., Lyman 1988). Gubrium (1986) writes of the ambiguous nature of A.D. as a distinct clinical and behavioral pathology. We went on to document the ways staff members discern and manage A.D. in the course of their daily routines, and residents' biographical work (Gubrium & Lynott 1985) of narrating a coherent and creditable identity. We noted the conflict between these divergent lines of action and analyzed daily interaction in "Lake Home" in terms of this conflict. Finally, we questioned the efficacy of small-scale, "community-based" settings, often presumed to be a more humane alternative to large, custodial institutions. Our experience undermines the aphorism that "small is beautiful," and suggests instead that the coercive dynamics of institutional life are less a function of bureaucratic scale than of medical ideologies and exploitative labor practices that produce "commodified" regimes of care (Diamond 1992). For us, performance was a vehicle for enacting these coercive relations, and their ongoing impact on residents.

## REFLEXIVE VOICE: PERFORMANCE AS PROCESS

First, our group of six met and discussed central ideas in the thesis. These included interactionist views of identity and of total institutions, ambiguities in distinguishing A.D. from "normal" aging, and the paradox of "care" as control. The others — only one of whom was a sociology student — welcomed this discussion, but granted no special place to my opinion about how the ideas might best be performed.

They had their own bases of interpretive authority. Two members had worked in nursing or convalescent homes, another had made many visits to a frail grandparent, and they drew on these experiences in making performance choices. It was gratifying to find their experiences to be consistent with the analysis Dale and I had developed in the field — a kind of "member validation" (Bloor 1983). So, we agreed on ethnographic themes, but differed about how best to organize and express them.

We talked at length about my "authority" as field researcher and our treatment of informants' actions and words as source material. As a co-researcher I was uncertain about the status of my interpretations. Dale and I had developed an understanding based on first-hand involvement in the setting and on long-standing relationships with residents, staff, and family members whose words were now being re-appropriated for the performance. What interpretive privilege, if any, should my field experience grant during the "workshop" process? Were my preferences rooted in the integrity of field realities, or merely defenses of my own interpretation of those realities?

Much of our early work in creating the performance arose from trying to balance "authenticity" versus "theatricality," but this tension was ultimately resolved as we clarified our interpretive goals. I can illustrate this with reference both to the selection of passages for the script and the performance decisions that followed. To begin, we needed principles for selecting relevant statements and events from the text. Those with theatrical training tended to invoke the primacy of characterization — their development of motivation through identification with a "character" — and so felt the need to cast roles before creating the script. Others argued that we should defer casting decisions and select material solely according to the interpretive goals of the performance. We decided that members would simply choose field episodes they felt to be important, discuss and justify those collectively, and that later we would mesh those choices in constructing our script.

An important implication of this process which Bernard Beck (a professional actor, as well as a sociologist) points out is that by suspending familiar methodological steps, such as we were by performing ethnography, one doesn't create any pristine or neutral interpretive space. Instead, one inherits conventions and motivational schemes from other genres. He had been a participant in an earlier performance seminar, and concluded that the relationship between the "actors" in a performance and their source material — here, field quotations — is "like a group of musicians who have the notes for a symphony, but lack a 'score' for their instrument" (Beck 1992). Their ethos and training leads actors to search for the "truth" of a performance by internalizing and connecting statements in the script, and infusing them with their own intellectual and emotional responses. This process, ironically known as "method acting," certainly shaped our collaboration, despite any efforts I made to impose motivation based on field experience or explicit theory. My point is that genre-blurring activities like performing ethnography are likely to involve contact with new groups and conventions, and that it is important to recognize their presence and effects on the products of collaboration.

In moving from text to script, we decided to choose only verbatim quotes, excluding all theoretical exposition. Having settled on the frames of meaning in the performance, we decided that to engage in explicit narration was unnecessary and at odds with the maximal exploitation of performance. As in cinema verite, the prevailing ethic was not to tell the audience — e.g., about care-giving as instrumental — but to *show* them, by portraying the routines and rituals that bring the principal groups (residents and staff) together.[6] This placed a greater burden on the audience to discern what the performance was "about." But we knew, during the post-performance discussion, that we could identify and elaborate central themes.

The two sociologists in our group were more interested in making meaning explicit — in *instructing* the audience — than were the performance students. This tendency was clear, for example, on the issue of the "program" which I thought should be provided to the audience. They needed basic information about the setting and relations between "characters." How were we to provide it? I suggested we prepare a typical theater program to establish the time, place, and characters, as well as the research focus. Others objected that doing so would undercut the dramatic impact of the performance, that uncertainty was productive in heightening audience members' investment in solving disjunctures of meaning which are recurring features of daily interaction in the setting. In a compromise, we adapted language from the facility's promotional brochure which contained the rhetoric — at once domestic and custodial — advanced by "Lake Home" proprietors, and invited audience members to identify as potential clients when, in the future, they might face similar decisions about the care of ill or aging family members.

A thornier and more time-consuming task was how to select field episodes and attribute statements to "characters." I place the word in quotation marks because performers selected and combined narratives from various speakers according to what, at first, seemed like purely theatrical criteria. This was troubling to me. Central to the original research was that, through talk, residents create biographical and strategic accounts which organize the seemingly disjointed references they make in conversation. Did we violate their meaning by cutting them up?[7] On the other hand, the process of selecting and organizing field accounts and quotations is central to qualitative analysis generally. How else are researchers to discern and display patterns in field accounts? Perhaps my seminar colleagues' principles for selecting and arranging talk were no different than those invoked by a lone writer of ethnography. The distinction is that rather than assigning text fragments to an analytic category, we assigned them to characters, creating composites from the individual residents who had been the subjects of the research.[8] There seems to me no clear way to evaluate these choices. Nor can they be settled before any post-modern tribunal: from that standpoint, one finds advocacy for the value of particular, concretely-situated informants, yet a rejection of realism as a goal of cultural accounts. How can one solve this contradiction? Whether following conventions of performance or of writing, we can only present second-order tellings of social reality which rely upon, but distort or transcend, the surface meaning of field statements. Or, as Loizos concludes, about ethnographic film, "In the 'carbon-copy' sense, there are *no* 'slices of life,' but there are *life stories,* authored narratives about real lives" (1993:67 emphasis in original).

I finally agreed to the fragmentation of residents' field statements, so long as we indicated in performance that they were not engaged in a common conversation. I felt it important to convey the isolation of the residents from one another, and that they made their comments not in a social vacuum but in response to the questions of a researcher. We also used performance techniques to illustrate the absence of community among the residents. For example, while one resident was speaking, the others would be physically immobile — frozen — or in other ways demonstrate their indifference to interactional etiquette.

We had difficulty agreeing on the role of "the researcher." At first, several group members voted to exclude this "role" from the performance altogether. I strongly preferred to include the researcher, primarily to share something of the circumstances and relationships out of which my understanding had developed. Attention to particularity is true generally of the "performance paradigm" which, as Conquergood writes, "insists on face-to-face encounters instead of abstractions and reductions. It situates ethnography within the delicately negotiated and fragile 'face-work' [see Goffman 1967] that is part of the intricate and nuanced dramaturgy of everyday life" (1991:187).

Greater acceptance of this "character" followed our decision to locate the researcher in the audience, rather than onstage. Our intention was to make two points: that, however sympathetic, the researcher is buffered from subjects' realities (here, of institutional confinement); and that my questions were very like those which the lay person/audience member might pose were they to be present in the setting. "Scripting" this character also led me to self-criticism: though polite, perhaps my questions were upsetting, especially for the residents. Karner and Warren (1994) wonder whether questions which compel an informant to re-live painful events of their past or present lives — such as mine, about circumstances of residents' admission to "Lake Home" and their loss of control over daily life — may pose an "existential danger" to them and thus be exploitative of field relations.

Having selected the quotes to be used in the performance, we had only to incorporate them into a script. I took on the task of combining text fragments into a typical sequence of statements and events. We decided that the performance would be a *naturalist* portrayal of the setting — of "what it's like" to live or work in Lake Home — presented in real time. This naturalist approach (see Stucky 1993) was rare among the dozen or so final performances in the seminar, though it constitutes an important tradition in performance and theater more widely. Stucky (1993:169) writes that "the paradigmatic exemplar of natural performance is the dramatic re/performance of natural conversational interaction" which, he points out, has proceeded from such varied sources as oral histories, interview transcripts, and monographs. Of course, performer/interpreters of these sources presumably have little or no first-hand knowledge of the circumstances in which the words were originally spoken. In our case, the performance included talk I had experienced as embedded in routine organizational business, so expanding the range of empirical background at our disposal.[9]

In order to complete the script I had to provide additional statements and actions to lend continuity to the performance. For example, we wanted the performance to begin with casual conversation between staff members, during which the audience could learn about their backgrounds, work problems, relations with residents, and views of their "therapeutic" mission. This opening dialogue featured quotes from staff members (". . . bartenders make pretty good money" "I thought this would look better on my resume', with it being Alzheimer's") and paraphrase of many discussions and interviews which my colleague and I had had with staff members during the field period. The dialogue was meant to be both sociologically informative about, and empirically representative of, staff members' worlds. Similarly, in order to connect residents' narratives and provide continuity between my questions and their responses, I had to supplement the field record with additional language. Here again I was attentive to reproducing the tone and content of naturally occurring language. Next, I present part of the performance script, discuss reactions of audience members, and offer some conclusions.

## "LIFE AT LAKE HOME": AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PERFORMANCE SCRIPT

*The scene is the living room of "Lake Home," a group home claiming expertise in the treatment of Alzheimer's (AD) and other diseases of aging. Several women, elderly residents,*[10] *are seated; a radio playing old standards is heard faintly in the background. A large "Activities Board" hangs on the wall near a desk. The residents do not address one another. Some hum along with the music; others seem to be thinking aloud, one repeating the phrase ". . . Broken record"; Staff person Barb enters for her shift. A career-minded college student, she is on duty with Marie, a weary, middle-aged woman with long experience working in nursing homes. The two enter into a conversation. Their voices are clearly audible to the residents, though not directed to them.*

*The subjects of the performance are Barb and Marie (staff members); Emily, Grace, Jane, and Valerie (residents); and Chris (a volunteer and ethnographer).*

MARIE: . . . I've heard that bartenders make pretty good money — more than I'll ever make here. My girlfriend said she can make $40 a night in tips alone. I've signed up to take a bartender's course at City Tech, but I'll have to leave early on Wednesdays. Can you cover for me?

BARB: Sure. Hey, how much are you making here? Didn't you get your raise? You've been here four years, right?

MARIE: Yeah, but that raise was only 25 cents an hour so I'm at $6.50, and I got car payments to make. Oh well, at least the money's better here than at Elmwood Manor; they paid minimum, and I had to do meds and beds for two floors.

BARB: Yeah, school's expensive. The reason I asked you about AD is I'm trying to figure Valerie out. She refuses to eat for me, so I have to drag her out of her room. Otherwise she'll stay in there all day. Is she that way with you? Her disease is really progressing these days, though she was at a plateau for a long time.

MARIE: Well, Valerie never got the attention she needed from other people. You spend time with people and you get to tell what their problem is. Valerie worked in the business world and took care of other people, and now she needs attention. I'm sorry to sound like a know-it-all, but I've raised children and I know.

*At this point Chris enters the home for a weekly visit. He and the staff members exchange greetings.*

CHRIS: Look, you guys are busy; I'll just go and chat with people. (*He takes a seat in the audience, facing the stage.*)

CHRIS: Good to see you, Grace. Why did you first come to live at Lake Home?

GRACE: I'd gone to an office party, a Christmas party I think, and slipped on some ice getting out of the car. It was awful; I hit my head and I guess everything was kind of fuzzy for a while after that. But I'm feeling fine now, and I'd give anything just to get back home, back to where I was. I have an apartment downtown; I've no idea why they've kept me here for so long.

CHRIS: Has it been hard to adjust?

JANE: It's not like we have the run of the place; they have two locks on the doors, and there's an alarm. It's just like a prison — why you can't even go for a walk. I don't know about the others . . . . Well, let's just call them inmates.

CHRIS: Why do you use that term, "inmates?"

JANE: Well, that makes it easier; that way I don't have to explain why I do this or that or the other thing; you just do it 'cause everybody else does. Like if it's Valentine's Day, or there's something going on around here, where they have people in, they want you to look a certain way. Like with pants; sometimes they want everyone in pants, and I haven't got any that fit, so when they put 'em on me I look like the dickens.

CHRIS: Has that been hard, to lose control over those decisions?

GRACE: (*suddenly and with sharp anxiety*) . . . I think I'm dying . . . .

CHRIS: What's the matter, Grace?

GRACE: I'm so despondent, I don't know what's to become of me. I've been so upset lately that I can't even think straight; I want to be accepted for who I am. Really I'm a very lonely person — especially since my parents and brother died.

*Staff member Barb approaches with a glass of water and a pill in a small plastic cup. She gives it to Jane without explanation, interrupting Jane's conversation with Chris. Jane takes the pill with a look of annoyance. Barb says cheerily:*

BARB: Thanks honey. (*Turns to leave.*)

JANE: (*To Barb*) Do you have any children?

BARB: (*laughing affectionately*) No honey, you're what I have.

VALERIE: (*Stage whisper, to Chris*) This place doesn't have anything to do with me; I just want to go home; I want to be someplace where I'm known for being who I am. I don't want to brag, but I've always worked hard and was always seen by others as a good worker. But lately I've been here, and I haven't any idea of what to expect in the future. Yesterday they had us out in a car and I never felt so lost in all my days.

EMILY: And you know they keep a report on everyone, over in the drawer. They write down when you go to the bathroom, when you don't go, if you have a headache, when you take a bath, if you get mad at someone . . . . Total strangers come in and look at those books (*with slight laugh*). Why you can look in that book and it'll tell you when I went to the bathroom.

CHRIS: Why do you think they write all of that down?

EMILY: I don't know, but that's all you are to them. Every five minutes they ask — from across the room — "Do you have to go to the bathroom? It's time to go to the bathroom."

GRACE: (*To no one in particular, with mounting anxiety.*) I think I'm dying. I don't know what it is, or what's come over me; I have a home, another place, but even if I knew how to get there I couldn't find it.

*Staff member Barb enters the living room with cleaning supplies. Grace addresses the staff member:*

GRACE: Excuse me ma'am, but could you please help me? It's really time I got home now; I have a brother in California — you could find his number from the operator — and he could help me make the arrangements. I would be so grateful . . . .

BARB: (*Patronizingly*) Now Grace, you are where you're supposed to be; this has been your home for a long time now. If you were to leave you wouldn't be safe, and your brother's thousands of miles away. Here, you have your own room and everything; don't you remember? *She continues cleaning.*

GRACE: No. This isn't my home; My home is at 420 East Jefferson Street, apartment number 12.

CHRIS: I didn't know you had a brother, Grace. Were you close growing up? Is he older or younger?

GRACE: (*With sharp anxiety and voice raised*) Please don't ask me all these questions today! I can't think and I won't be able to until I figure out what to do here. I'm so depressed I want to cry. This has been a horrible day for me here.

JANE: (*To Grace*) It's alright; don't rush it honey. We'll figure it out. (*To Chris*) She can't remember; why can't she remember?

GRACE: (*apologetically*) I don't know what happens to me; it's crazy. I'm so ashamed of myself for this. Thank you both for everything.

BARB (*to Chris*): They all go through that; it's part of the disease. She had a visit from a friend last week, and I think it reminds her of other friends who've passed on.

VALERIE: (*To no one in particular*) . . . . Broken record.

CHRIS: Pardon me Valerie?

VALERIE: Life here's just a broken record. You see, with me they've got the wrong girl; unlike these other people who are far gone, I still feel like I could do an awful lot. (*Whispering*) I'm hoping that you can help me; I don't care what it costs; I don't even care if it's a clean place or a dirty place — just a place where I can get back to where I was. Where do you live, sir?

CHRIS: I live on the east side. Do you spend a lot of time thinking about the past?

VALERIE: No, I really haven't time; I just think about getting out of here. Anyhow, memories aren't that great; anyone who comes to the door can change 'em.

CHRIS: Well, I've got to get going now. I see they're setting the table for dinner. I appreciate your spending this time with me, and I'll look forward to seeing you next week.

GRACE: That'll be fine. Thanks for coming.

*Chris bids the women good-bye, puts on his coat and walks out. At this point the subjects of the performance assume the same positions as at the beginning of the performance. After a final pause for dead time, the stage is darkened.*

## ETHNOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES OF PERFORMANCE

The performance focussed on the three types of interactions we felt it most important to portray: those among staff, between staff and residents, and between residents and the researcher. We showed that exploitation of care-givers' labor produces chronic turnover and, thus, alienated relations; that staff members categorize residents in terms of instrumental tasks and categories of record-keeping, selectively attributing their behavior to "disease"; and that residents offer vocabularies of motive (Mills 1940), both to deflect stigma and to integrate the present in their biographies.

Our performance was further structured by what Victor Turner calls "nested frames" (1986; also see Goffman 1974). The encompassing frame was pedagogical (a university seminar), which contained the "Lake Home" frame (an organizational milieu), which contained an interactional frame (staff/resident encounters), which contained individual narrative frames (remembrance and normalizing accounts). The audience's problem, then, was to discern the coherence of talk in these various frames. And any "solution" required them to relate the frames, one to another — to ask, for example, whether residents' statements betrayed "craziness," as staff members seemed to believe, or held meanings contingent on listeners' empathic "linkages" between residents' here-and-now, their pasts, and imagined futures (Gubrium 1993). Similarly for the staff members: questions arose, after the performance, of whether their behavior resulted from knowledge of a disease, from harsh and conflicting demands on them as workers, or simply from callous indifference.

As cultural critique, we exploited an ironic juxtaposition between the frame of benign domesticity ("Now Grace, you are where you're supposed to be; this has been your home for a long time now"), residents' solitary yet urgent appeals ("I'm so despondent, I don't know what's to become of me" "I'm hoping you can find a place for me; I don't care what it costs"), and the instrumental qualities of "caring" encounters ("I had some feeders at Elmwood"). And as Hunter (1990:111-128) points out is common in ethnographic accounts, we invoked the metaphorical power of microcosm, or *synecdoche,* to suggest a structural identity between our "social drama" and the larger quandary of loss and confinement among the aged.

The resources of performance allowed us to express — more fully than through writing — the embodied and emotionally-charged nature of interaction in the setting. Rather than isolate themes, such as objectification or narratives of selfhood, we were better able to convey the dynamic interplay of these processes. We could present simultaneous speakers, para-linguistic information, and nuances of physical contact — along with the surface meanings of speech. And, because of the ostensibly domestic scene (a living room) and close physical proximity between the residents, their accomplished inattention to one another was unsettling for audience members. In sum, the performance aesthetic is more amenable to experiential ambiguities than has generally been true in the tradition of academic sociology (see Levine 1985).

We discovered too that purely theatrical conventions could be exploited to illustrate sociological points. An actor in the group suggested that we begin and conclude our performance with "dead time" — during which no speech or action is presented onstage — as the most effective way to convey the awkwardness of interaction at "Lake Home." Our aim, to make audience members uncomfortable, was achieved more easily through our violation of their expectation that no such lulls will occur. Similarly, our desire to show relations of deference between staff and residents was well-served by performance; conversational interruptions and insolent forms of address by staff members (Resident: "Do you have any children?" Staff: "No honey, you're what I have.") are sharply apparent for audiences to performance, attentive to status and tone in verbal exchanges.

Another set of choices revolved around the use of costumes and props. Although reluctant to rely on overtly theatrical techniques, we decided to suggest residents' advanced age through subtle costumes, including long skirts, cardigan sweaters, and compact hair styles. To the costumes we added props, such as purses (containing the resident's few, personal effects, clutched for security), knitting (to convey residents' need to occupy their hands as an antidote to boredom), and name tags (to signal the tension between the domestic and the institutional).

A controversial choice was whether to present a replica of the "Activities Board" which rhetorically signifies (especially for family members and other visitors) the "structured environment" claimed by management and staff to be central to a therapeutic treatment milieu. I believed the Activities Board to be important for a host of reasons: it contained appliques from children's books, a reflection of the infantilization of elderly in institutions; it symbolized the monotony of life in the home; and it sharpened the irony between institutional ideologies versus residents' perspectives. So we violated the minimalist approach on the grounds that the Activities Board was a significant cultural artifact.

## PERFORMANCE AFTERMATH

A common criticism of "Lake Home," by seminar members after the performance, was that we had failed to portray the staff members as fully as we had the residents. This criticism was well-taken; the stance of the performance was admittedly sympathetic to residents. However, the performance pursued, rather than concocted, their problems, and required that we invert the conventional hierarchy of credibility in which underlings' or "inmates" claims are invalidated (Becker 1970:123-134). In this connection, Paget explains her own stance, and what it revealed, in a performance based on a medical encounter which led to a fatal misdiagnosis:

> The performance was not morally neutral . . . I had done the analysis from her point of view. When I listened to their exchanges, I kept noticing that he missed information that I heard. I believed there was something medically wrong. I sensed her fear. I began to focus on his discourse and his diagnosis. He controlled their talk, just as he controlled the diagnosis, had the power to name it "depression." Had I done the work from his point of view I would not have suspected that she was a cancer patient. I would have taken for granted his diagnosis of "depression." I would not have begun the intense, troubling investigation of their talk (1990:142).[11]

That audience members raised alternative positions to account for staff members' views and treatment of residents suggests, first, that they had "read" our stance in the performance and its relation to particular words and events; and second, that they were able to move beyond the immediate story and engage with value-laden and policy issues invoked by the performance. Among our reservations, as performers *of ethnography,* was that the interpersonal scope of "Lake Home" might limit or obscure the audiences' recognition of what Smith has called "extra-local determinants of experience" (1987) — issues such as medical control and exploitative labor practices to which the performance only alluded. Instead, departing from and challenging the "theory" of the performance, audience members probed what they perceived as a myopic indictment of staff members. Some questioned whether our stance was utopian, inasmuch as group home settings like "Lake Home" appear to be more humane than overtly institutional nursing homes; others asked whether our "anti-medical" position led us to deny "the reality" of cognitive illness and, thus, the burdens it may impose on family and care-givers; still others drew comparisons between "Lake Home" and similar settings, informing us of how other institutional classifications such as juvenile delinquency produce and justify similarly coercive practices. We were gratified by these reactions, pleased that, for the audience, the performance was provocative as well as evocative.

A distinctive virtue, then, of performing ethnography is that it elicits close interpretive attention: as Stucky observes, "Placed in a theatrical context . . . ordinary activities invoke the introspection typically focussed on formal (aesthetic) performance" (1993:172). Yet ethnographic performance rejects the ideal of naive realism (Hammersley 1992, Bittner 1983) in favor of stimulating critical discourse. We conceived of "Lake Home" as a "social drama." Turner writes "Since social dramas suspend normal everyday role playing, they interrupt the flow of social life and force a group to take cognizance of its own behavior in relation to its own values . . . . In other words, dramas induce and contain reflexive processes and generate cultural frames in which reflexivity can find a legitimate place" (1982:92; see also Turner 1986).

Taking part in social dramas can affect participants as strongly as it does audiences. Turner recounts, for example, how with students at the University of Virginia he enacted a contemporary American wedding day. He reports that ". . . most participants told us that they understood the cultural structure and psychology of normative American marriage much better for having taken part in an event that combined flow [traditional rituals of behavior] with reflexivity" (1986:144). Paget concurs, adding, with respect to the performance of existing texts, that "The multiple interpretive acts of performance enhance, rather than diminish, the intelligibility of [texts] . . . because these . . . enhance our understanding of the complexity of the reality to which the text and the science of the text alludes" (Paget 1990:152).

## ETHNOGRAPHY, PERFORMANCE, AND UNITIES OF EXPERIENCE

Let me conclude by addressing how one might reconcile processes and goals of performance with those of ethnography. Though others (e.g., Conquergood 1995a, 1992, 1991; Strine, et al., 1990; Turner 1988) have lucidly discussed these connections in broad disciplinary, aesthetic, and political terms, my task has been to treat performance experientially, in relation to a particular cultural analysis. In recounting "Lake Home" as process and product, I want readers vicariously to appreciate some possibilities and problems which we found to be salient in this representational form.

Dealing with interpretive processes deemphasizes ostensibly inherent features of particular ways of "telling about society" (Becker 1986:121-136), and leads one instead to evaluate each according to researchers' various goals, responsibilities, and audiences. Michael Schwalbe clarifies and extends this approach in his critique of poetry as a form of sociological expression (1995; and see Richardson, e.g., 1993). Schwalbe grants that poetry is an evocative form, attuned to nuances of language. But, for him, bases of translating cultural analysis into poetry are too implicit and varied to constitute a method. And since he believes researchers have an obligation — to one another as well as to wider publics — to be candid about the grounds and implications of their claims, Schwalbe concludes that the virtues of poetry are ill-suited to the practice of sociology.

The distinctive value of this argument, I think, is that it deals concretely with issues which usually have been discussed abstractly: whether or how qualitative researchers should adopt a wider array of representational forms. Considering a particular form, poetry, allows Schwalbe to articulate and to distinguish between aesthetic and ethnographic standards. Though, as a sociologist, he advocates prose as an appropriate narrative form, this preference is rooted in a set of research goals and so leaves open the question of whether other forms might not be as responsive, or more so, to those goals. Of course, there are many different goals that animate social inquiry; I have devoted much of this essay to articulating those which animated "Lake Home."

My experience indicates three points of *congruence* between goals of ethnography and of performance: 1) performance makes easier the enactment of interactional and emotional dynamics which, important in ethnography, are harder to convey through linear narratives of text; 2) both are enhanced, ethically and pedagogically, when interpretive choices are explicitly voiced and justified; and 3) ethnography and performance share a concern with *episodes* of human interaction, as dynamic and contextualized unities of experience. Having spent much of the essay elaborating the first idea, I deal here with the second two.

Introducing this essay, I referred to recent criticisms of ethnographic authority. Though superficially aimed at writing conventions (e.g., Atkinson 1990), a deeper problem is scholars' excessive interpretive privilege and insularity from conflicting views of cultural meanings and processes. Implicit in the criticism is a sense of obligation, as Schwalbe writes, to create the widest possible access to our work (1995). In this light, performance, public and collaborative by definition, offers more reflexive ways to interpret and convey aspects of the social. Likewise, McCall and Becker (1990) point out that performance tends to displace an omniscient authorial voice; rather, it announces its collaborative and constructed qualities and so exposes arcane choices to critical discussion.

Though collaborative, performance does not "correct biases" in a written text. Neither, however, does its aesthetic power preclude critical reflection. Our experience does suggest that such stances are more apparent in a performance than they might be in a written text based on the same material. The collective nature of performance, its ephemeral yet public and quasi-ceremonial qualities — that, as Conquergood (1995b) argues, it "insists on its own disappearance" — appear to foster, rather than inhibit, the role of performance as catalyst for debate.

Finally, literary criticisms of ethnography have also rejected the overly cognitive and mechanistic versions of social life which tend to follow from positivist analyses. Implicit in this critique is a distinctive ontological view of culture, and of the merits of various expressive forms in allowing "truer" representations of social life. Bruner writes that, ironically, the defining goal of ethnography has been to achieve a nuanced, member's view of group life, yet

> our conceptual apparatus for interpreting field data . . . tend[s] to filter out experience. Most good ethnographers . . . reintroduce vitality in their descriptive accounts by including illustrative snatches of personal narrative, bits of biography, or vivid passages from their field notes. In effect, the experiential component returns to the account as a byproduct rather than as an explicit object of research (1986:9).

This tendency to "de-hydrate" experience (Turner 1982) in field accounts is perhaps strongest among sociologists, whose norms of validity create distance from those studied, and whose master metaphors of structure and status tend to obscure the emotional and embodied features of social life (Ellis & Flaherty 1992:1-16; Conquergood 1991).

Yet much qualitative research deals, like "Lake Home," with episodes of social life, rather than with isolated perspectives or actions. Meanings and consequences of "encounters" are central, for example, in Erving Goffman's sociology. As a representational form constructed around "scenes" (naturalist or otherwise), performance may provide new ways of modeling and analyzing social worlds. Said differently, it is truer of performance, than of writing, that the expressive "unity" takes the form of interactions unfolding in a synchronous present.[12] Where one's interpretive objective takes this form, the relevance of performance is especially clear.

I don't believe it possible to "capture" experience. We can only try, using expressive forms, to represent some of the complexity and drama of field encounters. Experience, though, cannot be apprehended or interpreted unless bounded in some way, either temporally or narratively. The philosopher Dilthey distinguishes between "experience" and "an experience": "The former is received by consciousness, it is individual experience, the temporal flow; the latter is the intersubjective articulation of experience, which has a beginning and an ending and thus becomes transformed into an expression" (Bruner 1986:6).

"Life at Lake Home," as an expression, contains a weekly visit like many I made during my years of involvement. Through performance I was able to see, tell, and learn things about my encounters there which deepened my sociological and personal understanding. Of course, since the performance extended an analysis which had first developed through writing, it may be that writing was essential in my ability to order and translate field experience into a coherent understanding; rather than displace writing, perhaps unorthodox representational forms stimulate ways to see writing as inquiry (Richardson 1994).

There are many sociological topics and styles for which performance may be irrelevant or inappropriate. The naturalist approach I describe may exaggerate interpersonal dynamics, to the exclusion of social-structural problems at the heart of the discipline. Still, performance should not be seen as any "safe retreat into aestheticism," but rather "as a way of intensifying the participative nature of field work, and as a corrective to foreshorten the textual distance that results from writing monographs about the people with whom one lives and studies" (Conquergood 1995:2).

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## ENDNOTES

1. I thank Sam Gilmore for this observation.
2. For other accounts of performances, growing out of an earlier version of this seminar, see Jackson (1993) and Olson (1992). General discussions of performing ethnography can be found in Turner (1992), McCall & Becker (1990), Becker, et al. (1989), and Conquergood (1995; 1992).
3. For this, the second offering of the joint seminar, the books chosen were Whyte's *Street Corner Society* and Rubin's *Worlds of Pain.* Few participants relied on these texts; most used personal field documents or adapted sources such as letters, essays, and public archives.
4. These impulses have historically been seen as subversive of social order and account in part for what Barish (1981) argues is a persisting *Antitheatrical Prejudice.*
5. This group of six, including myself and five women, consisted of two sociology students, three students of performance studies, and one from the department of communications. I am grateful for the vital contributions of Joanne Engelhart, Abby Epstein, Laura Forbes, Krista Smith, and Jean Williams.
6. Here we followed Frederick Wiseman, maker of such documentary films as *High School* and *Titicut Follies.* He eliminates narration, preferring that "the viewer think through their own relationship to the events before them, and think through my logic in arranging the images" (Wiseman 1995).
7. Pollock (1990) discusses this issue in relation to performing oral histories. Krieger (1983:173-199) examines distinctions in the writing of fiction and of social science.
8. This practice has been used in community studies and elsewhere (Krieger 1983). Howard Becker pointed out, in personal correspondence, that in Warner and Lunt's *Yankee City Series,* composite profiles are presented to discuss class and status groups (1941:127-201).

Similarly, playwright Arthur Miller constructed composites — from primary historical sources — for his play *The Crucible,* based on the Salem Witch Trials.

9. Performance of speech as "embedded" does not require depiction of conversation or of multiple speakers. For example, Dwight Conquergood has performed narratives of "gang members" speaking in court proceedings. They are powerful, in part, because the audience recognizes the context in which the words are being spoken — one which Garfinkel (1956) has called a "degradation ceremony."
10. I dislike the term "residents" but use it for clarity in this essay. "Women" is less descriptive, since all concerned at "Lake Home," except for me, were women. The term "older women," however, tends to reify the importance of chronological age.
11. Since deceased, Paget's presentation of "Performing the Text" at the 1989 meetings of the American Sociological Convention, and its later publication (1990) led many to re-think issues of representation.
12. Arthur Stinchcombe provided me this metaphor. It is adapted from Michel Foucault's treatment, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* of unities of discourse: conventional modes for organizing facts and statements (1972:21-30). For example, when art critics discuss a particular painting, in contrast to an artist's entire oeuvre', they draw on shared perceptions that the two constitute distinct unities in the art world.

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