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Reviewing Conquergood's "Performing as a Moral Act"

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Through our unique behaviors in society, no matter how ostensibly mundane, we display our core beliefs, our culture (Neuman, 2006, p. 381). These behaviors are performances we present to the world to convey a message of who we are (Goffman, 1959; Neuman, 2006). They define our roles in society – roles which the ethnographer seeks to understand by observing a specific culture from the native point of view.

If we all present our unique selves through performances and an ethnographer is tasked with conveying the significance of these performances through detailed descriptions after the completion of intense observation, accurately and sincerely reproducing what was witnessed in front of an audience seems an effective method for the ethnographer to convey the defining behavior of a studied culture.

In "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," Dwight Conquergood (1985) tackles the idea and value of ethnographic performance. He states he has performed stories of an observed subculture for "dozens of audiences" (p. 3) and that these performances can "pull an audience into a sense of the other in a rhetorically compelling way" (p. 3).

This paper will provide a detailed analysis of Conquergood's article and its merits as well as pitfalls.

#### **"Performing as a Moral Act": A Synopsis**

For more than three years, Conquergood conducted ethnographic fieldwork among Lao and Hmong refugees in Chicago (Conquergood, 1985, p. 2). During this time, he observed many "ancient rituals" (p. 3) that likely do not fit the conduct of popular society, such as the Lao legend that explains a lunar eclipse as "a frog in the sky who swallows the moon" (p. 3) or the "theatrical shaman chants of Hmong healers" (p. 6).

In an effort to bring "the enormously distant enormously close without becoming any less far away" (Geertz, 1973, as cited by Conquergood, 1985, p. 2), Conquergood performed many of the oral narratives of the observed refugees for both academic and non-academic audiences, calling these performances "an integral part of [his] research project" (p. 2). The feedback from these performances was both positive and negative, the former expressed mostly by fellow scholars, the latter by laypeople. Criticisms ranged from religious groups calling his

performances “the work of the devil” (p. 3) to “white guilt accusations” (p. 4) that Conquergood, as a middle-class white man, had no right performing a different race’s rituals (p. 4).

Seeking to defend his strong feelings on the value of ethnographic performance as well as address legitimate moral and ethical concerns, Conquergood (1985) sketched four “ethical pitfalls” (p. 4) of performative stances toward the observed culture. He states an ethnographic performance that conforms to any of these stances is morally problematic, and that the key to genuinely conveying a culture is through a “dialogical performance” (p. 5), or a perfect balance of all four stances.

Conquergood’s (1985) four problematic stances are: *The Custodian’s Rip-Off*, or a stance of “strong attraction toward the other coupled with extreme detachment” (p. 5); *The Enthusiast’s Infatuation*, or the realm of the “quick-fix, pick-up artist” that is unethical because it “trivializes the other” (p. 6); *The Curator’s Exhibitionism*, or the practice of astonishing the audience rather than understanding in which the manifest sin is sensationalism (p. 7); and *The Skeptic’s Cop-Out*, or the refuge of “cowards and cynics” who refuse to face up and struggle with the ethical tensions of performing culturally sensitive materials (p. 8).

He ends the article asserting that ethnographers of performance must recognize and respect their responsibility to “make performance texts derived from fieldwork that are accessible...for responsible interpreters of texts who have callings other than fieldwork” (p. 11).

### **“Performing as a Moral Act”: A Critique**

Conquergood’s article has both merits and pitfalls. While there is much of value to learn from his insights, arrogance, naivety and issues of reliability dampen its usefulness.

#### **Merits**

According to Geertz (1973) a critical part of ethnography is “thick description,” or “a rich, detailed description of specifics” (as cited by Neuman, 2006, p. 382). It could be argued that sincere and well-executed ethnographic performances are the ultimate example of such a criterion, as they not only attempt to capture “what occurred and the drama of events” (p. 382), but seek to do so in a significantly more captivating and immersive means for the audience than the mere reading of words on a page. The passionate reactions Conquergood received in response to his performances – both positive and negative – underscore this idea, as well as highlight the important “moral implications of this kind of work” (Conquergood, 1985, p. 4).

Performances of cultural behaviors also seem to promote the ethnomethodological idea that meaning is “constantly being created and re-created in an ongoing process” (Neuman, 2006, p. 382). Acting out a ritual for an audience prompts an immediate reaction from those in attendance, much like that felt as the credits roll at the end of a film. On the journey home and during discussion with other attendees, however, this initial reaction might shift, and a new meaning or insight revealed. In this way, ethnographic performances do indeed allow for “more voices [to] join the human dialogue” (Conquergood, 1985, p. 11).

Also valuable are the four problematic stances Conquergood outlines. It is clear he respects the practice of ethnographic performance and, in delineating these unethical fields, seeks to assist others who wish to join his camp – even those seeking to perform a culture’s verbal art who haven’t contributed years of fieldwork (Conquergood, 1985, p. 10).

### **Pitfalls**

Most ironic about Conquergood’s attempt to identify four ethically problematic stances of ethnographical performance is the arrogance he employs doing so.

For example, while chastising those who too readily employ enthusiasm when identifying with the other during a performance, Conquergood is all too enthused himself, making broad generalizations about those who stumble into this trap as being “secure in...protective solipsism” and superficially suffocating (Conquergood, 1985, p. 9). He particularly berates those who constitute *The Skeptic’s Cop-Out* corner, stating that these individuals have “no sense of the other” and “[sit] alone in an echo-chamber of [their] own making, with only the sound of [their] own scoffing laughter ringing in [their] ears” (p. 9).

*The Skeptic’s Cop-Out* also speaks to Conquergood’s naivety, as it is here where perhaps the most controversial arguments in his article are made. He claims that there is no room for concern when a white man attempts to perform scripts that arise from a minority’s subculture (Conquergood, 1985, p. 8). He calls limiting sensitive performances of cultural acts to those within the culture as “cowardice” (p. 8). His lack of sensitivity to this issue is alarming. Surely some minorities would take great exception to a Caucasian man attempting to recreate a sacred African-American ritual, no matter how genuine and studied the ethnographic performer is. To not only discount this concern but label those who voice it as “naïve” (p. 8) is naïve itself.

Finally, the possibility of an ethnographic performer falling into one of Conquergood’s four ethically precarious stances questions the reliability of the performance. If an act has the

ability to stray so far off base, to not meet the ideal “dialogical performance” (Conquergood, 1985, p. 5), does this not affect its dependability or consistency (Neuman, 2006, p. 188)? As such, how is the audience to truly know if it is a sincere representation of the cultural ritual? Making this possibility even more likely is Conquergood’s surprising encouragement of those who have not spent significant time studying a culture to engage in ethnographic performance, going so far as to call it “selfish” to think one needs to be among the culture to understand it (Conquergood, 1985, p. 11).

### **Conclusion**

Conquergood does well in conveying ethnographic performance as valuable in communicating attributes of a culture to an audience. However, the range of ethical issues that could arise in this type of reporting makes this writer believe it prudent to reserve ethnographic performance as an addendum to detailed and well-documented written review.

### References

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