Professing Performance

Disciplinary Genealogies

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In 1905, Professor George Lyman Kittredge, Chairman of the English department at Harvard University, dropped a note to his colleague Professor George Pierce Baker. The latter had been concerned that one of Kittredge’s new hires might have designs on the teaching of “the drama” and thus designs on Baker’s own curricular territory. Kittredge sought to mollify Baker’s anxiety. “You may feel quite secure,” he wrote, “as to any cutting into your special field” (in Baker, 19 March 1905). The sentence reproduced the content and form of an all-too-familiar interaction between empowered chairman and paranoid colleague. And, as is often true of such interactions, it also revealed a hint of intellectual condescension within its gesture of institutional assurance, one that left flexible whether the word “special” had the connotation of the extraordinary, the narrow, or the peripheral.

Lately, I have been looking at documents surrounding individuals like George Pierce Baker and other white academic American men—Hiram Corson at Cornell, Brander Matthews at Columbia, Thomas Dickinson at Wisconsin, Frederick Koch at North Carolina, Thomas Wood Stevens at Carnegie Tech—who figure prominently in the early institutionalization of “performance” in the United States. This is to trace something that most often called itself drama at that point, later dance, sometimes rhetoric, oratory, or speech. Spending so much time with such documents would have been inconceivable to me a few years ago and is still sometimes only barely sustainable. What does sustain me is an interest in understanding their implications for the institutionalization of performance studies now. My effort is a little different from others that have speculated on the future of our field. Rather than venturing into what the 1999 conference of Performance Studies International (PSi) called “the hinterlands,” this article is a return to areas already mapped—fortressed castles such as theatre departments, speech departments, and literature departments—seeing in them less stability and more cartographical complexity than it might always be expedient for performance studies scholars to acknowledge. Investigating issues of performance’s institutionalization is lamentably not always the same as investigating developments in performance scholarship. Indeed, this study came out of my naïve frustration in recognizing how little the institutional operations with which performance studies con-
tends seem to “know” what performance studies scholarship says it “knows.” Confronting mechanisms such as department divisions, school divisions, job placement, graduation requirements, building infrastructures, curricular breakdowns, and departmental divisions of labor have thus provoked my heretofore inconceivable research. Part of a larger project that will explore a number of institutional relationships among performance and other fields such as anthropology, folklore, classics, cultural studies, and more, these reflections will focus on only one historical network of relations between speech, theatre, and literature. I hope that my reasons for picking up this corner of the rug will become clear as I continue. Rather than defending or rejecting terms such as “drama” or “theatre” or “speech” or “literature,” I am most interested in thinking about how such concepts become discursive touchstones for certain kinds of principles that fare better or worse at different historical moments in the academy. Often this is about re-casting stories that we already know about past disciplinary history into a differently aimed kind of argument.

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What I have decided and will schematically argue is that such institutional questions and their very complicated histories turn out to unsettle the somewhat oppositional epistemology driving, for instance, the provocative title of the 1999 Performance Studies International conference: “‘Here be Dragons’: Mapping the Undiscovered Realms of Performance Studies.” I am neither the first nor the last person to deconstruct our “dragon” metaphor and the quest for the “undiscovered realms” that permeated that gathering. But consider in this light Baker’s paranoia and his concern about remaining “special.” It derived of course from a particular kind of marginality, one that wants recognition but not in a form that jeopardizes its self-constructed identity as an outsider. In our current discourse, there is a danger now of turning such an internally conflicted predicament into a jealously held position. There is a strange paradox in the attempt to position oneself as an inhabitant of unclaimed territory, for the gesture itself not only maps that territory but also stakes the claim. It simultaneously suggests that no one was there before, disavowing its relationship to the practices of earlier, colonial cartographers. Nevertheless, the divisions, buildings, maps, and curricular structures generated in the early professing of performance remain in altered forms today. Even though Baker and his like developed their special field into a highly mapped terrain from which many of us would say that we are departing, we still unevenly enjoy and endure its operations, discourses, and professional privileges. As such, a consideration of institutional history can, in Brechtian fashion, be an illuminating exercise in defamiliarization. It further demonstrates how saturated oppositional discourse is with what it claims not to be and how necessary the notion of the dragon-filled zone is to the idea of a dragon-free zone. At the same time, and even more pointedly for a field enamored of its renegade status, such institutional history illustrates how over-written (or over-mapped) the position of the dragon is by the castle it might claim to be storming.

In my opening anecdote of 1905, Chairman Kittredge and Professor Baker inhabited an English department that was in the midst of an intellectual transformation in the field of literary studies. As such, they were also negotiating
the interpersonal conflicts and interoffice paranoias that drive and derive from such intellectual changes. The late 19th to early 20th century was a period of debate, change, retrenchment, and more debate as U.S. colleges and universities grappled with their relationship to a changing American society. They argued over access to higher education for women, for newer immigrants, for African Americans, and for the children of both the industrial bourgeoisie and the working classes. As numerous historians of higher education have demonstrated, this period would also usher in the era of “professionalism,” an economic and discursive formation that differently but pervasively inflected both professors’ sense of their students’ educational goals and their own sense of their positions as “career academics.” The always conflicted position of the academic thereby came to inhabit another type of conflicted situation with which we are now quite familiar, though not necessarily reconciled. As the role of the U.S. university was increasingly positioned as preparation for entrance into the managerial classes, academics worked to maintain a separate social position outside the so-called professions while simultaneously legitimating themselves curricularly and institutionally within professionalizing terms. Humanities professors in particular tried to create and maintain a legitimating sphere of cultural capital, a realm that distinguished itself both from the manual training of vocational schools as well as the nonmanual technical training of preprofessional schools. At the same time, and noteworthy in various discussions about what the “i” in Psi might mean, U.S. bastions of higher education worked to figure out what it meant to be a specifically “American” university, alternately disavowing and reproducing the structures and intellectual movements developed in foreign lands (where of course “foreign” meant the ever so exotic countries of England, France, and Germany).

The story of the professionalization of literature within this situation is quite interesting and has already been told a few times, though I find the retelling of this story with an eye to a performance genealogy even more intriguing. Literature was in danger of not faring very well within professionalist modes of legitimation. As John Guillory and Gerald Graff (1993; 1987) have argued, it thus manifestly had to make itself “rigorous,” to become a science based in evidence, an object of knowledge with clear rules to replace nebulous belletrism. German philology entered and/or was imported precisely to lend the study of literature this necessary positivism, a specialist training in historical research, etymology, and the accumulation of facts that pushed to develop a science of the literary and thus to assure all involved that literature professors really had an object of study. To give this some contemporary institutional significance, Graff and Guillory both situate current training in “theory” on a historical plane with philology (with New Criticism in between). Thus, despite the fact that philology and most critical theory are very different in the content of their intellectual assumptions, they occupy a similar structural position from the perspective of professional history; they both serve a similar function in the mechanics of professionalization and scholarly “training” within the arts and humanities. Such manifest rigor also warded off feminizing discourses of delegitimation that derived from the university’s changing demographics of class, ethnicity, and gender. Philology kept literature from appearing to be a sentimental field that appealed only to coeds. At the same time, however, philology was criticized. It was accused of being too scientific, of being over-specialized, and of compromising the experience of literature. Occasionally, its American critics appealed to nationalist allegiances by accusing its followers of slavishly imitating the Europeans, more specifically the Germans. As such, philology anticipated many subsequent “theory” movements accused of being specialist, jargon-ridden, and ruinous to the humanities—or of being French. This kind of history certainly defamiliarizes 1999
New York Times debates on the role of “specialized language.” Indeed, such institutional and disciplinary genealogies expose a constant cycle of rotation and disavowal where one era’s “specialization” becomes the next era’s “common sense”; groundbreaking theoretical movements look like dunder-headed empiricism to subsequent generations.

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By 1905, George Lyman Kittredge had emerged as one of the foremost practitioners of literary philology in the United States. As such, the moment when Chairman Kittredge dropped his administrative note was also a moment when the promoter of a then “trendy” intellectual movement—philology—was in the midst of exercising a position of institutional power. As Susan Harris Smith (1997) has suggested, however, the position of “drama” (and its teachers) within this literary transformation was an ambivalent one. Dramatic literature, especially drama performed, risked associations with the feminine, the primitive, and the commercial in a way that threatened the profession of literature’s redefined story about itself. Something similar held true for Baker’s original field of rhetoric, whose emphasis on oral communication would, in English departments, increasingly transmogrify into the teaching of written communication. From there came the phenomenon of the composition class, a teaching responsibility increasingly placed on the lower rungs of the literature profession’s academic ladder. Indeed, in some institutions, the denigration or excision of “drama” and “speech” was fundamental to the intellectual redefinition and professional rise of the literary. The categories of drama, speech, and theatre thus functioned ambivalently, on the one hand heightening vulnerabilities over the cultural capital of literary studies while, on the other hand, threatening to derail the new scientific rigor of literature’s gendered professionalization. Whether theatre and rhetoric could transcend these associations and/or be recuperated along rigorous philological lines was still debatable in the early 20th century. Hence the condescending assurance and hedged institutional protectiveness of a trendy philologist like Kittredge vis-à-vis a rhetoric-cum-drama professor like Baker.

Baker’s background was similar to many of his contemporary pro-performance colleagues at other universities. Though 20 years later Baker would become the founder of the oft-renowned Yale School of Drama, at the turn of the century he was a teacher of rhetoric in an English department. He was a professor whose interests in oral pedagogy had transmogrified from a respectable focus on argumentation to a curious fixation on the oral performance of the drama, proceeding down a slippery slope that went from the oral performance of Shakespeare to the oral performance of “drama other than Shakespeare,” to the promotion of campus play production, to the fostered creation of so-called “original” plays by the students themselves. He was something of a dragon at Harvard’s gate. As most of us teaching in the United States know at least indirectly, Baker was one of a cohort of individuals—often couched as heroic in the departmental chronicles of theatre—who broke from English to form separate departments. What is less incorporated, however, is under what principles that disciplinary break happened and, more to
the point, how that history situates and so defamiliarizes the disciplinary reunions performance studies is attempting to effect now.

While the stories of particular persons and institutions vary enormously, Baker’s location paralleled that of a number of his pro-performance colleagues and serves as an index of a larger epistemological and institutional fallout around the professing of performance. Arguing for drama and performance against and yet within the already conflicted field of the English department produced multiple ambivalences. I will consolidate a few issues under three conundra in order to give a sense of their contemporary relevance: (1) the institutional tension around the “interdisciplinarity” of performance, (2) the hypercontextuality of the performed event as an object of knowledge, and (3) the legitimation of oral and theatrical “practice” as a valued educational activity. Without being able to recount fully the professional histories of “generalism” and “specialization” in the space of the present article, it is perhaps generally understood that the principles behind departmentalization, curriculum reform, funding, and resource allocation do not always keep step with the heterogenous models, methods, and bibliographic citations that appear in interdisciplinary scholarship. This is something we all know and can knee-jerkedly critique The Institution for inhibiting. But the disconnect between institutional structure and interdisciplinary rhetoric is particularly stark and, I think, a little bit chastening in light of Baker’s concern about his “special field.” Of course, it came out of a fear of Chairman Kittredge’s brand of interdisciplinary engagement, one that rationalized disciplinary takeover in the name of interdisciplinary expansion. Though they didn’t use the word “interdisciplinary” at the time, this colonialist model—the “every field shall become (like) mine” model of interdisciplinarity—is perhaps somewhat familiar to theatre scholars such as Jill Dolan (1992) who critique other fields for “the midnight raiding” of theatre studies. However, the direction of such a critique shifts with an awareness of academic theatre’s various stages of institutionalization. Baker was still somewhat traumatized by his experience at Harvard when he founded the Yale School of Drama, one whose model other universities would replicate. There, he would fend off fears of colonialist interdisciplinarity with his own paradoxical brand of isolationist interdisciplinarity, constantly celebrating the theatre for being a form that integrated literature, art history, and the study of human behavior while simultaneously creating a structure that short-circuited interaction with the university departments that specialized in the study of literature, art history, and human behavior. Thus, the rhetoric of disciplinary multiplicity coexisted surprisingly easily with a practice of institutional singularity, a fact that should stall any easy assumptions about what “interdisciplinarity” means to theatre and performance studies now.

Disjunctures among disciplines and institutions appear in other places. Writing in 1903 as the first professor of dramatic literature in the United States, Brander Matthews of Columbia University published treatises such as A Study of the Drama (1910) that exemplify performance’s epistemological predicament and that laid the foundations for the antitradi tional break that would eventually become the tradition of theatre studies methodology. In assuring their colleagues that theatre had a right to separate institutional status, scholars reproduced turn-of-the-century conventions of historical singularity and progressive continuity, mapping new principles of similarity and difference on which the “itself” of theatre could rest securely. It was in such a professionalizing university climate, by extension, that the evolutionary paradigm of “from ritual to theatre” became invoked and later routinized. As performance studies scholars seek to undo the ideological, national, and global consequences of such a construct, it is probably equally important to remember its institutional expediency; knowledge was made more teachable, useful, and justifiable to a professional-
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From another direction, this genealogy also stalls the easy alignments and differentiations that are sometimes drawn in current self-labeled progressive contexts of cultural study. This is to ask what it means for performance studies scholars to meet cultural theorists, many of whom were originally trained as literary theorists and whose institutional predecessors once found it necessary to excise performance from a self-legitimating equation. What does it mean for all of these disconnected or disavowedly connected scholars to form contemporary connections? Whether gathered under the banner of structuralism or poststructuralism, materialism or new historicism, reader-response or speech act theory, such cultural studies arenas generally argue against the notion of a pure aesthetic form, knowable outside of a context of production. The methodological direction of this kind of cultural critique means something particular for a performance genealogy. What one realizes is that, as individuals trained in different disciplines, we also enter with different historic institutional privileges. As such, we might have different notions of what the
hinterland is. One person’s discovery turns out to be another’s disciplinary home. One would-be dragon may look, from another’s angle of vision, like the occupant of a historically well-appointed castle. All may be embedded in histories with different assumptions about who they are fighting. There is not, for instance, an unproblematic equivalence between cultural theory’s critique of New Criticism’s conservatism and performance studies’ critique of theatre history’s conservatism. Besides enduring a retroactive ahistoricism in the conservative appellation, theatre history cannot be adequately critiqued for ignoring the “new” methodological dicta of cultural studies. Indeed, theatre has long been a form where text was less easily sliced from something like context and where the apparatus of production was all-too frustratingly difficult to disavow. Matthews was theorizing the importance of audience response long before Wolfgang Iser (1980, 1989; to say nothing of John Fiske 1987, 1989) elaborated on reception theory. This does not mean that there is not a great deal to critique in theatre studies but rather that the direction of the critique—one that homogenizes and assumes equal solidity in all that is already mapped—can sometimes be misplaced. This disciplinary complexity is thus another moment when it is not quite clear who is playing rebellious dragon to whose fortressed castle. As certain contemporary strains of performance studies seek alliances with certain strains of literary studies—in theoretical models, in progressive politics, in journals, in curricula, conferences, bibliographies, hirings, and graduate placements—it will be important to investigate such blind spots and to be careful not to perpetuate the disabling institutional structures from which they derive.

Cultural pedagogy occurs in that nebulous space that is not manual training and that it is not nonmanual technical training; as such, its critique of preprofessional “vocationalism” needs also to reckon with its own unique class and institutional location—as well as its own imbrication in a discourse of professionalism.

Other genealogical investigations produce different kinds of defamiliarizing moments. Consider briefly two different kinds of arguments for the legitimation of oral performance or performance “practice” in the academy. On the one hand, one can look at someone like Hiram Corson at Cornell for whom the oral performance of literature was synonomous with a nearly spiritualized encounter (Graff and Warner 1989:90). Mapping his interest in this pedagogical mode to prevailing binaries of the day, Corson ended up arguing for oral performance by opposing it to philology, riding an antispecialist and antitheoretical sentiment (at a time of course when historical research was “theoretical”), casting performance as the realm of the unmediated and the unrigorous. The success of Corson’s argument produced new institutional structures whose limits—as we debate the legacy of oral interpretation in performance studies—we now face in current debates over the institutional future of performance studies. Meanwhile, a second strain of academic performance studies came as part of the break of drama/theatre from English departments. As pro-performance theatre professors argued for new buildings and the apparati of theatremaking, it is quite clear in retrospect how much the pro-performance discourse threatened the shaky class politics of redefining universities. When Baker and Thomas Wood Stevens—who started a theatre department within the engineering-oriented environment of Carnegie Tech—argued for performance “practice,” they employed a language of work-
shops, labs, and industrial “plants,” of workmanlike ingenuity, of craft, trade, and daily labor that came dangerously close to a discourse of manual training (Stevens 1913–1925). As such, they tread closely to the realm of the vocational school from which many a university was eager to distance itself and even farther from the humanist discourse of cultural capital that would have ensured that theatre was, after all, a “humanity.” Breaking free from literature meant that speech and theatre gained the success of institutional autonomy, but it also short-circuited their connection to the literature and humanities departments’ claims of “cultural capital” in rationalizing their role in the academy.

This transformation was one of many reasons why the discourse of nonacademic professionalization—the claim of a somewhat shaky bridge to economic capital rather than to cultural capital—became part of how speech and theatre departments began to talk about themselves. Theatre came to include courses on audition techniques. Speech communication departments began to teach organizational communication and tips for on-camera broadcasting. Such departments became places where the teaching faculty were engaged in different spheres of professionalization, many of them outside of the academy. In such departments, issues of interdisciplinarity are often erroneously elided with issues of interprofessionality—and they, I would submit, turn out not to be the same thing. A union between an artist and a scholar turns out not be entirely equivalent to a union between a literature scholar and a philosopher, for the interdisciplinary encounter of the latter is compounded by further differences in professionalization, standards of career success, and models of productivity that underpin the former. However, it would be disingenuous for arts and humanities academics to distance themselves self-righteously from such “preprofessional” developments without recognizing how imbricated such arguments for their alternative are in a notion of cultural capital—even cultural capital that calls itself progressive in content. Such cultural pedagogy occurs in that nebulous space that is not manual training and not nonmanual technical training; as such, its critique of preprofessional “vocationalism” also needs to reckon with its own unique class and institutional location—as well as its own imbrication in a discourse of professionalism.

Once again, who is the dragon here?

Finally, I think that we can find help in sorting through these conundra by testing them next to related arguments on the role of technical and practical training in humanist fields. In The Employment of English (1998), Michael Berubé has joined and advanced a larger conversation on the status of composition within the English department, asking us to consider the class politics of literary professionalization and to reconceive courses in writing technique so that they become central to the cultural work of a progressive literary education. Similarly, in a 1997 issue of MLA’s publication Profession, Russell Berman echoes others by asking colleagues to question the denigrated position of language teaching in foreign literature departments—“the line of class division, corresponding precisely to the distribution of rewards by the university, that runs through all our departments”—and to argue against a conception of second language proficiency as a “merely technical skill” (63–64). Faculty and graduate students in theatre and performance studies can make use of these arguments, it seems to me, appropriating them to think through with more complexity the much-beleaguered theory/practice division that undergirds our field and to consider the class politics that this division reifies. Furthermore, the kinship among composition, language teaching, and theatre training suggests that we might want to be more vigilant about our uses of the word “practice”—another unstably referential term—and to track instead the discontinuous histories of labor, professionalism, technical training, vocation, and cultural and economic capital in which such a materialist term is embedded.
Finally, since many humanists can be found revising the very structure of humanities education and research, it may be that theatre’s historic ill-fit as a humanistic field could now provide an intriguing site for conducting this revision. In a 1999 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, once English professor now Vice Provost Cathy Davidson asks the provocative question “What if Scholars in the Humanities Worked Together, in a Lab?” It occurs to me that theatre faculty have been approaching something like this lab-based model for quite some time. While the fact that we did so contributed to our status as not-quite-humanists, such current creative rethinking about the nature and function of the humanities might realign our connection to the term.

Institutional history suggests that there are several maps operating simultaneously and, moreover, that there might be a more unacknowledged interdependence between castles and hinterlands than a homogenized oppositional discourse allows. Disciplinary genealogy is neither a celebratory search for origins nor a self-satisfied rejection of the stodgy. It is, after Foucault, a means of approaching the past to unsettle the heretofore stable. Writing such a genealogy often means revisiting categories that performance studies itself resists or de-centers—words such as “drama,” “theatre,” “speech,” or “literature.” If we think of such labels—and others such as “theory,” “practice,” “interdisciplinary”—less as stably referential terms than as discursive sites on which a number of agendas, alliances, and anxieties collect, then I think that the institutionalization of performance studies and the institutionalization of something like “theatre” or “speech” or “literature” turn out to have more to do with each other than current conversations let on. Such terms function inconsistently at different times and at different places; they are invoked out of convenience at moments when knowledges need reorganization or when vague institutional developments require some discursive support. As such, they also sustain a network of disavowed connection and disavowed difference, an array of blind spots, synecdochic fallacies, and reinvented wheels. In such a complicated space, one scholar’s experiment turns out to be another’s tradition; one scholar’s core comes back as another’s periphery. One field finds it too expedient to cast a dominant form as marginal in order to prop up its own centrality; another finds it too expedient to cast a marginal form as dominant in order to better stage its own rebellion. Rather than wholly succumbing to the language of the new, it seems to me at least as interesting theoretically and secure institutionally for performance studies to expose the historical entanglements of the already-was and thus still-still-kind-of-is. It seems important to show how disciplinary breaks were saturated with the terms of the field that they were fleeing and to suggest that contemporary innovations sometimes derive from arenas that once devalued that which they now celebrate. Institutional history also suggests that assumptions of the “special” status of performance studies, enticing as they are, could do with a genealogical jolt.

Notes

1. After the journal Philosophy and Literature awarded its Bad Writing Award to Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha in December 1998, articles and editorials debated the function of theory and specialist language. See, for instance, the New York Times articles in the Arts and Ideas section of 27 February 1999 and on the editorial page of 3 March 1999 and 20 March 1999.

2. Theatre’s gendered association received institutional reinforcement from the fact that it was Radcliffe women’s college rather than Harvard that initially supported George Pierce Baker’s courses in playwriting. Baker’s efforts to disentangle himself from this association was partially successful (he eventually taught playwriting at Harvard) but only after producing a self-defensive, masculinist argument for theatre’s legitimacy.
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