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978-0-521-51922-9 - Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance

D. Soyini Madison

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

You can study everything *as* performance, but it doesn't mean everything *is* performance.

Richard Schechner

The aim is not to claim all human behavior as performance but to illuminate what new insights can be gained from a performance analytic.

Della Pollock

Meaning is always in-between structures, at the interstices of systems, institutions, State and law.

Dwight Conquergood

The focus of this book is to address the relationship between performance and local activism in the service of human rights and social justice.<sup>1</sup> The purpose is to present the often neglected yet compelling and important story of local activism in Africa, specifically Ghana, West Africa, and how particular individuals who take up the charge of activists are making notable and lasting contributions for equity and rights in their home country. The philosophical expressions of these men and women, their body-to-body activities on the ground, and how performance becomes integral to their work are presented in three case studies or three *acts of activism*.

Since 1998, I have witnessed courageous interventions by men and women who have faced great risks in the defense of human rights and social justice. I have also witnessed how they employ performance as a means of communication and as a subversive tactic to win hearts and minds in their efforts toward a more humane and democratic society. I have, in turn, adapted these interventions and tactical performances for the stage, in the United States and Ghana, while also staging the implications of my own positionality – my own split identity and gendered body – as an African American and as a woman living and teaching in Ghana. As I examine ethnographic inquiry and local rights activism through performances

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onstage *and* in the field, the role of performance is also theorized in (as) public discourse within larger local and transnational structures of economic globalization.

By applying a performance analytic to acts of activism, we enter a poetics of understanding and an embodied epistemology concerning how activism is constituted, its dimensions of imagination and creativity, and its rhetoric and politics. There are central questions that animate the three case studies or acts of activism: How do activists utilize performance as a *tactic* in their work for human rights and social justice? How do these tactical performances of public protests *emerge* into varied modes of performative gestures and actions? How do *advocacy* and *ethics* become inseparable factors in ethnographic, transnational performances? What makes *radical* performances radical? How is *political economy* implicated in radical performance? In addressing these questions, the relevant terms become: “tactics and emergence,” “advocacy and ethics,” and “radicalism and political economy.”

TACTICS AND EMERGENCE<sup>2</sup>

Performance, as a tactic and as emergent, in the service of human rights and social justice is variously effective and affective. By tactic, in this instance, I mean *creating a means and a space from whatever elements or resources are available in order to resist or subvert the strategies of more powerful institutions, ideologies, or processes*.<sup>3</sup> The activists in this study develop tactics under the formidable backdrop of national and international forces (and the strategies that sustain them) in order to ennoble and establish gender equity, water rights and public health, and economic justice. These tactical performances often come into being through a communal yearning, an inventive spontaneity, and through improvisational meanings that evolve and emerge. One such emergent performance during my fieldwork comprised a political rally that became a tactic toward the promise of a new vision for Ghanaian politics.

His name is Nasser Adam. The car stops in the midst of a crowd of cheering supporters. The joyful crowd circles the car, and they lead Nasser up a few steps to an outdoor platform in public view. I follow him from the car and we sit in two chairs that resemble large thrones above the crowd. Nasser seems uncomfortable. He does not believe he should be positioned above the people and does not favor royalty or its appearances in any form in Africa or anywhere else in the world. But he is warm and gracious to his supporters and respectfully adheres to tradition. He introduces me as his friend from the United States who has come to learn about Ghana and her

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people and who is visiting Tamale to support his campaign for Parliament. He tells them this is also an election year in Professor Madison's home country – George Bush and Al Gore are running for president – he reminds them of the importance of voting and the value of free and fair elections.

Nasser is a practicing Muslim and he was born in Northern Ghana. He is head of the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Ghana. He teaches Russian and French and is a scholar of Russian and French literature. He received his Ph.D. from the Pushkin Institute. He reads Arabic and speaks about six local languages. I asked him how he felt about placing his teaching and intellectual activities on hold to run for Parliament. He said, "I am an activist, what is most important to me is that the poorest of the poor in Ghana have opportunities to live a full and productive life. Government is supposed to dedicate itself to the betterment of its citizens, not exploit them. If the money government officials spent on big cars was all returned to the people for health care, education, infrastructure, and to care for our old, then government would be doing what it should. Members of parliament should be trading their big cars for bicycles."

Nasser is speaking to his supporters in Dagbani; I can only make out a few words and phrases. His message is about Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, and Nkrumah's vision for Africa and her people: "Nkrumah gave us a sense of African identity ... a national identity, but most important an African identity. Nkrumah debunked the whole idea of inferiority and that Africans should accept subjugation without question. He debunked the idea that God created some people to rule and others to be ruled by them." His voice rises to a higher pitch. The quiet reserved man that I know has transformed before my eyes, enlivened and animated by this scene of oration and jubilation. His body and gestures are in sync with the motion and excitement of the crowd:

The only way that we can extricate ourselves is by developing our own technology – getting our own technologies and embarking on an industrial revolution. We must produce our most basic needs. We are not talking about going to space. We are just talking about industrialization where we can produce our most basic needs ... So no child will go to bed hungry, and so that anyone who wants to work is given the opportunity to work. It is not too much to ask for. Here in the North, it is the breadbasket of the country. The soil is productive for rice and agriculture, but with this import liberalization program, it hurts our local farmers. The big agricultural businesses dump their imports like rice and so the people suffer ...

Nasser talks more about government accountability and promises to fight against the big agro-businesses and neoliberal policies, and he promises to

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work, in the best interest, for all of them. The people begin to chant. It is a chant that is more than a repetition of words or a rhythmic incantation of a political trope. The chant is a combination of traditional forms – remembered and rehearsed – alongside an alternative vocabulary, a different lexicon of politics. This chant is a collective performance that swells into a chorus of tones and pitches that underscore the message and the messenger. The people chant with a deep comprehension of the promises, but more, translating each promise into an embodied response that is musical and improvisational because bare words and silent listening cannot contain the enormous possibilities the man sitting above in the chair has inspired. In the midst of the volume and lyricism of these chanting voices, the timing and beat created through their collective bodies in motion, the crowd is generating a performance that names and reclaims a new beginning of politics and their future in its process. The musicality and rhetorical force of the chant, in turn, inspires the messenger:

Life in Ghana has become unbearable  
 Life in Ghana has become unbearable  
 Brother Nasser, come rescue us!  
 Brother Nasser, come rescue us!  
 Life in Ghana has become so-so unbearable

This public meeting, now transformed into an emergent performance, has become a theatrics of high stakes and profoundly serious expectations. This enactment of thrones, chant, song, and dance is a spirited reclamation of local political power. We step down from the platform to return to the car in which we will drive to a nearby village and Nasser will continue the second part of his speech. The crowd follows us to the car. The chanting is now reaching a peak. I look out over the crowd and there is a woman with her children holding a sign for the Convention People's Party (CPP) the political party of Nasser and of Kwame Nkrumah. The symbol for the CPP is the rooster, and there are rooster signs everywhere gliding up and down above the heads of the crowd in rhythm and sync with their enthusiasm. The woman takes hold of the sign and, with a grand sweep, symbolically places the sign on her head and makes a gesture as though she is crowing like a rooster to bring in the new day, the sign simulating a rooster's head. The children mimic her, and others in the crowd adopt her movements, enlarging and punctuating them with added hand gestures, hips and feet synchronizing a collaborative dance of the rooster – the quintessential symbol for second chances and each new day. If it were not for the rooster, each new beginning and each new possibility could not come into being.

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The rooster is the continuing new start – a beckoning and a pronounce-ment. The dance invoked by the emergent theatrics of the chanting crowd reminds us that we must all be roosters and we must all be CPP.

Kokolayi K-o-o-o-o-o  
 B(ə) (ŷ)u Neiya<sup>4</sup>  
 Kokolayi K-o-o-o-o

Nasser speaks of a new politics and a new vision for Ghana and her people that is built on economic independence, radical democracy, social justice, and human rights.

As we pull off, everyone follows the car, dancing and singing down the road and through village pathways, in partnership with Nasser and in anticipation of more to come.

In every corner of the world, there are those heightened moments when public speech erupts into song, dance, poetry, chant, dramatic testimony, and a procession of symbolic acts. Sometimes these performances are planned but often they seem to surface from the passion and communion of public deliberation or dissent. What really accounts for this *emergence* as though in these moments we become possessed by performance? What inspires them? Could we argue these emergences are more than convention, habit, or tradition, but something that more organically and viscerally swells up, unleashed from human energy? We must necessarily be suspicious of claims toward natural inclination or biological determination, or ontology, as evidence to justify or to explain human behavior, but I still wonder about human energy and survival. Might the whirling energy and vitality of a common cause to survive under certain conditions (for ourselves and others) capture us – the (e)motions of this too grand a moment – and invoke emergent performances? Kelly Oliver states:

All human relationships are the result of the flow and circulation of energy – thermal energy, chemical energy, electrical energy, social energy. Social energy includes *affective energy* [emphasis mine], which can move between people. In our relationships, we constantly negotiate affective energy transfers. Just as we can train ourselves to be more attuned to photic, mechanical, or chemical energy in our environment, so too can we train ourselves to be more attuned to affective energy.<sup>5</sup>

Might we embrace a metaphysical vocabulary such as energy and affect to account for the collective emergence of a tactical performance charged by public, communal action? In these instances, feelings and emotions inspired by a shared cause – body to body and soul to soul – become palpable, viscerally pressing forth toward collective, symbolic, and enlivened (e)motions. These moments are reminiscent of what has been

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conceptualized as “flow,” that is, “the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement” that becomes a state where “action follows action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part.”<sup>6</sup> We live evocatively as moment transcends into moment where distinctions between self and act, stimulus and response, time and space, coalesce here in the possession of this moment – this moment being all there is.<sup>7</sup> This unifying act or “flow” for an individual is an experience of inspiration and deep involvement. When this *deep involvement* animates collective action, it rises in a temporal cohesion where individual identities come together in a kind of rapture, a transference of communal, affective energy. Flow moves to communion. These moments are spontaneous and improvisational, emergent and volatile; there is a deep, immediate, and interpersonal alchemy that “has something magical about it.”<sup>8</sup> These moments constitute affective energy that brings us semblances of pleasure even in our anger and distress. They are ubiquitous, profoundly human, and existentially *anatomical*. Ten billion or so neurons constitute the human neo-cortex,<sup>9</sup> with an estimate of ten trillion synaptic connections<sup>10</sup> that are formed among and between them. The cells in our body signal pleasure to the brain. Our cognitive system yearns for the pleasure of improvisation – this pleasure of new ideas, experiences, insights, and sensations.<sup>11</sup> Each emergence, each spontaneous sensation, becomes a culmination of affective energy and communion addressing the call from our cognitive system for pleasure and new performances, new ideas, new hopes to be lived and remembered.

The tactical and emergent performances in this book are thick with description and layered with purpose. Central to what binds them is that they all have the qualities of being embodied and public.

*Public.* In these tactical and emergent performances what was a localized problem is now cast forward for public deliberation and/or “incitement.”<sup>12</sup> Entering a public sphere enlivens scrutiny, enlarges responsibility, and cracks open into plain sight hidden wrongs. It is said that a dimension of our humanity emerges only when we engage in public discourse.<sup>13</sup> Public performance invokes public discourse by becoming a communicative instrument where the shared naming and marking of injustice can be realized; where multiple vocabularies for interrogation are formed; where ideology becomes enlarged due to the ways in which “performance can overrun ideology’s containment,”<sup>14</sup> where communal mourning or resistance becomes a platform “to reject not only what we see and how we see it, but how we can reject the reality of what we see and know to be true.”<sup>15</sup> What is public is open and made common. A public space is a promise of a democratic space, and a

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public performance becomes an open invitation to participate and (or) witness how democracy can be variously conjured and re-imagined.

*Embodiment.* These tactical and emergent performances encourage an embodied epistemology.<sup>16</sup> They become a transformation of knowledge that literally *moves* our musculature and the rhythms of our breath and heart, as corporeal knowledge conjoins cognition through enfleshment knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Elyse Lamm Pineau states that “from the moment of birth, cultural associations regarding ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, and so on are imprinted into our very musculature.”<sup>18</sup> Tactical/emergent performances embellish this organic musculature as it can embellish identity, seizing it in the call to re-perform itself, exaggerated, in heightened reiterations of itself through the “magic” of communal dissent. Or, it can usurp us, seizing our identity imprints, unlearning our organic musculature (at least in this moment) for other and different musculatures invoked through the reverie or flow of other bodies in motion. But, however our bodies over-learn or un-learn in the temporality of tactical/emergent, public performance, the body is still a learning body. Performance “combines full body engagement with critical reflexivity,” where information is “engaged somatically as well as intellectually.” This becomes a “dialectical process of doing and reflecting, experiencing and interpreting.”<sup>19</sup> A tactical/emergent performance, as embodied and public, is illustrated by Kwesi Pratt, whom a Ghanaian friend described as “having no fear.”

Kwesi Pratt is a controversial media commentator, a grassroots organizer, a renowned social justice activist, and former president of the Private Newspaper Publishers Association of Ghana (PRINPAG). He is a member of the Ghana Socialist Forum and founding editor of the independent newspaper, *The Insight*, which is noted as a bold voice against local corruption and corporate greed. Kwesi was imprisoned as a result of his political activism and for, in his words, “striving everyday to be a socialist.” When I asked him what that meant, he said: “It is the unwavering belief and practice that no one on this planet should be starving for food and in want of shelter and that every human being is worthy of respect and dignity.” I asked Kwesi if there was one incident in his long career as an activist that he could never forget. Kwesi recounted a public protest (while under a military regime and before multiple political parties were established in Ghana) that he led in 1986 at the Old Ghana House in Accra against the system of military rule.

We called him Choirmaster. He was inspiring. He was a performer. He composed songs but many of the songs were spontaneous. Choirmaster had been with us for a long, long time. He was an activist and he liked to express himself through songs.

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He would break into a song in a meeting and people would sing. He was the son of one of the most prominent religious leaders in the country. And he, I think, was a Socialist. He had rejected everything that his family stood for. His family was very wealthy. The father owned the church and owned everything that the church owned ... it was a huge property. Choirmaster rejected all of that. He went into exile to Holland and he has never returned. He was with us singing and inspiring the crowd on this particular day. There must have been about 100 to 150 of us. When we arrived at the Old Ghana House in Accra the policemen far outnumbered us. We were surprised. We didn't expect so many. They were lined up waiting for us. When there became the possibility of violence, we asked our comrades to sit in the street and block the traffic. So everybody sat down. One of the police officers spoke through a megaphone and said they were giving us a count of three to leave. If we did not leave on the count of three, we would all be under fire. And then the policeman started counting. We were all face-to-face with the guns as he started counting. But something happened. I don't know how it happened. He counted one, and by the time he counted two, I started walking toward the police. I don't know what made me stand up and start walking. I didn't think about it. It just happened. I just walked towards the police. I spoke to the policeman who was in charge of the rest. I don't really remember what I said. I think I told him the people there could be their brothers, their fathers, their mothers, their sisters. I think I told him they have nothing in common with the people in power. I think I told him that if he gave the orders to shoot, he would bear full responsibility for their deaths. I walked back to the crowd and sat down with my comrades. Then, the police officer gave the order ... and I heard him shout "Charge." But, not one policeman moved. Not one moved. Not one policeman fired a gun. I cannot explain it to this day. I have no words for it. I will never forget it. It was incredible.

Could it be that "it was incredible" because the police yielded to the theatricality of their countrymen sitting down, quiet and still, in the middle of one of the busiest, most crowded streets in Accra and this act of peaceful defiance moved them to pity or empathy or fear? Could it be that the police yielded to the theatricality of Kwesi Pratt, the man known in Ghana for "having no fear," walking alone toward them – their guns pointing – because too great an affective energy, too poignant a bodily presence stopped them and their own musculature from advancing upon this man and his comrades to pull the triggers of their guns? Kwesi said he heard the head policeman shout "Charge." To "charge" is very significant here because to "charge" operates through the disciplinary command of the head policeman as well as the inspired performance led by the choirmaster. To "charge" is to "go forth," "authorize," "enable," and "empower." Kwesi places the "Choirmaster" at the beginning of the narrative and characterizes his songs as being a source of inspiration. Protest songs and protest



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performances – as throughout the history of civil disobedience they both generate and are generated by acts of activism all over the world – function as a “charge” of inspiration, of motivation, and of energy. Could it be that the choirmaster’s inspired performances, and the affective energy they helped to generate, were a factor in why the police did not shoot? The choirmaster and the head policeman both enacted “charge.”<sup>20</sup> By examining the notion of “charge,” the force of the choirmaster’s inspirational action against the “incredible” non-action of the police comes into focus, especially as it relates to the significance of performance. The choirmaster inspired and therefore contributed to the determination of the dissenters to sit in the middle of the street and of Kwesi Pratt to walk alone toward rows of armed officers. The charge resulting in the inspiring performances directed by the choirmaster for his comrades became a greater force than the charge commanded by the head policeman to his armed officers. When the head policeman shouted “Charge” to the armed men, the dissenters were already charged by a force of determination and purpose that seemed to usurp the charge of a punishing authority and a disciplinary power. Kwesi’s narrative illustrates another form of performance, punctuating and circling, through the manners and modes of social protests that raise the question of human-kind being naturally wired to perform. Could it be that the choirmaster tapped into both inspiration and biology? Whether it was from his standard repertoire and/or created within that improvisational moment, whether it was neurological and/or philosophical, the Choirmaster became a source of energy and motivation by keeping bodies and souls in step and on the move until it was time to sit still in the street. The Choirmaster and inspired performance charged justice and justice charged inspired performance, evolving into an act that was “incredible” and leaving us under its ineffable wonder: “I cannot explain it to this day,” “I have no words for it.”

The following example of justice charging performance and performance charging justice is of a different time and space:

A death camp in Treblinka. A dancer stands naked in line waiting for her turn to enter the gas chamber. We see a human being with a natural power to command space reduced to a body taking up space, passively submitting to the prospect of death. A guard tells her to step out of line and dance. She does, and carried away by her *authoritative action* and by her *repossession of a self and a world* she dances up to the guard – now within the compass of *her* space – takes his gun and shoots him. What a surprise a zombie-like creature can spring back to life by means of a performance.<sup>21</sup>

Although different, the two events are comparable: the woman who turns the gun on her persecutor and shoots him; the man who faces the guns of his

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persecutors who do not shoot. In both instances, life and death hang in the balance and the outcomes defy expectation. In both instances, the protagonists are “carried away” by their “authoritative action” and their “repossession of a self and a world.” Both are charged by the *embodiment* of the interpenetrating forces of performance and justice to enact and invoke the unimaginable. Judith Hamera writes: “Transcendence has always, ironically, required embodiment ... yet even as the body speaks in the special case of mystical discourse, or when characterizing the inter-subjectivity of transcendence more generally, it also ‘unsays’; it exposes the ineffable resistance to language.”<sup>22</sup> Could it be that performance emerges ubiquitously within acts of justice because it embraces thinking, feeling, imagining, and survival from the immediate and inextricable home of our own bodies? In the example of Kwesi Pratt, perhaps it is the quality of performance to transcend words that will ironically call words back again through the body with a force and motivation that ultimately in time must speak and defy silence.

## ADVOCACY AND ETHICS

Ethics ... defines a distance between what is and what ought to be. This distance designates a space where we have something to do.<sup>23</sup> (Michel de Certeau)

Advocacy and ethics require that the “I” of my personal responsibility to fieldwork be explicitly stated in order to address what is for me a fundamental question, “What do I do now?” In moving from Tactics and Emergence to Advocacy and Ethics, the challenge of having “something to do,” of defining “a distance between what is and what ought to be,” requires a turning inward toward self-reflection and my own positionality in the field. The acts of activism I witnessed in the field were performances of intervention that were political and efficacious, and they were performances where people were putting their bodies on the line, where they were creating a “changing script”<sup>24</sup> envisioning another way of being by challenging threatening traditions as well as working against the macro forces of a neoliberal global economy. Advocacy and ethics were interconnected, responding to the question: “What should I do with what I have witnessed?” I had strong responses to what I witnessed during my fieldwork. These responses demanded that I be responsible for providing an opportunity for others to also gain the *ability* to respond in some form.<sup>25</sup> I bear witness and in bearing witness I do not have the singular response-ability for what I witness but the responsibility of invoking a response-ability in