

THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS OF PERFORMANCE

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- *Let me tell you about the weirdest experience I had the other day. I was mountain biking in Marin with my brother. We were in this very beautiful place. Near the end of the day, we're coming through these pastures, horse country, and we stop by this little stream. I'm sitting there and I'm watching the stream, kinda dreamy, and I had this incredible perceptual experience. OK, the stream is under these trees, there's these reflections on the water of many, many leaves, dark, with the white sky behind them. I'm focusing my attention on the reflections, all black and white, OK?*

- *Yeah, you're seeing the sky and the leaves reflected on the water.*

- *Yeah. Then, I shift the focus of my attention and start watching the surface of the water itself, the shape of it, the topography of the water, because it's quite placid, but it's running over a gentle little rapid, it's got these little ripples everywhere; they're steady even though they're moving, you know what I mean?*

- *Yeah – the surface is changing all the time with the flow of the water, but it's a steady pattern, and you're seeing the pattern, because there's something stable there.*

- *Yeah, from the rocks beneath. Now here's where it got really wild. First I saw the reflection, then I saw the pattern of the surface, but then I noticed there was rhythm to that shifting pattern, so I focused in on the rhythm itself. Suddenly it just jumped out at me. I was seeing the whole thing at once, I was seeing the rhythm. Not the reflection, not the surface, but the rhythm. It's like, my perception was of the whole area, all at once – I saw everything relating to everything else. And suddenly it got incredibly bright, like the light was just bursting through. I can't tell you how bright it was.*

- *You mean everything that you were seeing?*

- *No, just that area of water. Everything else – the banks, the trees, the rest of the water upstream – it was all kind of dark. Only this area of water was incredibly bright. It was all in total motion, and I could see every movement affecting every other movement. All of the leaves and the sky in little parts of black and white, all moving together. I've never seen anything like it! I felt like I was seeing real nature, disclosed, I was really in nature, whereas most of the time you're just there, even if it looks beautiful to you, you're not really in it. Everybody passes by that stream, but they just don't see it.*

- *You were seeing a disclosure from nature, a disclosure of the whole.*

- *Yeah.*

- *And it's always there, but we seldom see it.*

- *Yeah. And I'm asking, that kind of beauty, that kind of total beauty, in nature, disclosed like that, is there God in that?*

- *And I'm saying, yeah, God is right there, in the relationships that make it all go together. God is in the world, in the stuff.*

- And what I'm asking is, some people want to say, God is in humans, but not in the rest of nature – but I'm saying, humans are nature. If God is here in us, where did we come from?

- Nature! And God is there too, it's what we are, we're not separate from it.

- And God's firmly in nature too?

- Yeah, there can be no difference. What is this world, what is nature? It's all that we know. If you want to make God separate from that, we have no way of knowing God. It becomes all speculation.

- I'm with you. I think what we wanna call God is fully immanent in the world. The world and nature and ourselves, those are the points of access for what we wanna call God. There is no other way except in, deeper. But here's my question: if I can somehow get a disclosure of the totality from nature, of relationality itself, in action, and I want to say that points me to God, what about seeing the relations in human life, seeing the whole in human life? If God is meant to be more present here, among us humans, why is it so much harder to see the patterning of the totality, of the relationships we have? Why are we so blind among ourselves?

- That's the mystery of humanity. Who knows why, it just is way harder. We have to work to find that, and to the extent we can find that, we can find God in ourselves, in humanity. Maybe that's what we're evolving towards and that's what we're called to do...

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Interdependence means accepting the basic fact that any life situation, behavior, or even belief is always the fruit of all the interactions that make up our lives, our histories, and our wider earthly and cosmic realities. Our interdependence and relatedness do not stop with other human beings: They encompass nature, the powers of the earth and of the cosmos itself...Knowing is a human act... however, the animal, vegetable, and cosmic forms of consciousness are also part of our makeup. This other kind of interdependence does not come to full, conscious awareness, and so it is rarely considered. We do not recognize its importance because it seems obvious that we live in a given place and that in that place we breathe, eat, walk, and sit...Once we do recognize its importance...we will be able to care for the earth and all its inhabitants as if they were close relatives, as parts of our greater body, without which individual life and consciousness are impossible...It is not a matter of denying my individuality ...rather, it is an invitation to a deeper perception that includes our greater self...¹

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This paper is primarily concerned with performing arts as a realm of theological aesthetics. But the route there is circuitous. The classical traditions of theological aesthetics have largely been concerned with beauty as revealed in form, proportion, harmony, rhythm, and so on. "Theological aesthetics" generally refers to the human response to art and beauty as phenomena having their source in, or indicative of, or leading to, spiritual reality or God. The traditional path of theological aesthetics has emphasized transcendence: in contemplating some exceptional

beauty, one is lifted up out of ordinary experience and brought closer to the divine. The reception of beauty is a transformation of consciousness, in effect directing the receiver's gaze or awareness towards God. Grasping this beauty is said to produce *anagogy* in the contemplator – that is, a *lifting up* of the creature, or an ascent of the soul toward a vision of God, an “orienting of the heart towards the source of the truly beautiful.”²

For this paper, these aspects will be sub-themes. Human performance, involving performer and audience, is much more concretely a realm of *horizontally relational* creativity: performance is much more closely interwoven with human *activity* than are objects of art or contemplation. The aesthetic themes mentioned above must come to life within the dynamics of human activity. If reflections on theological aesthetics have rarely engaged in the *performance* realms of human art, this may be because the concrete relationality of performance forces us to focus on the concrete experiences of persons-together, whereas discussions of theological aesthetics have had a tendency to enter into rarified levels of abstraction. In performance, then, we shall be looking for aesthetic cues for theology in the pathways *outward*, not *upward* – that is, between persons, and between persons and nature. Most of the theological-aesthetic signposts that we will find on this journey through performance will appear along the path of immanent, world-centered spirituality.

We saw a grasping of relatedness or interdependence rather distinctly revealed in the story of the leaf-water vision above. The basic question is I want to pursue is, *how do we encounter that relatedness in human interactions – specifically, in the art of performance?* But first I must explain why that question is a matter of theological aesthetics. In this paper, the main locus for theological aesthetics *is* relationality, interconnectedness, wholeness, and evolutionary openness. By some accounts, this places us in the realm of God's immanence. But the risk of gazing steadfastly at the horizon, and not up to the heavens, is that a lot of distractions come into view. It is less clear that we shall be “lifted up.” I am exploring the notion that finding a way through human interconnectedness to anagogy may be part of our evolutionary challenge, though what I can only offer here is only suggestive of that notion. Perhaps the insight of interconnectedness could prove as valuable to a theological aesthetics as the time-honored contemplations of beauty have been. Within that search is the potential for the emergence of a new paradigm for beauty. I am looking to performance *because* it is messy with relatedness, whereas art object can still be construed *as* objects. The complexity of human interactions makes a coherent vision of beauty within them tougher to grasp, but perhaps for that, richer in potential.

For some time now, theologians and thinkers have been moving in this direction. John Dewey delved deeply into the sensibility of experience, and with it, the experience of beauty. He developed an aesthetics of experience by making a distinction between unreflected, daily experience, which passes without coming to any fulfillment, and having *an* experience: an awareness of things as a distinct and integrated whole. To have *an* aesthetic experience, which passes the criterion of rising to the level of the wholeness of structure, gives us intimations of an even greater wholeness – cosmic unity, if you will. For Dewey, the heart of being is relatedness. As such, Dewey's aesthetic experience can be read as indicator of God.³

Alejandro García-Rivera makes further strides in this direction by presenting a metaphysics of relationality in *The Community of the Beautiful* and elsewhere, by attending to the role of community in the interpretation of signs. The act of interpreting *is* the experience of which Dewey spoke. Picking up on Charles Sanders Peirce's conception of “sign” as a triad of thing, mind, and the connection of the two in experience, he unveils the triadicity of person and world in the realization of the creative idea. This community of interpretation can gain shared

access to the beautiful as a sign of the universal. Such a sign, in opening up to other triadic sign-relations, points, ultimately, to the all-inclusiveness of the universe as the home of the love of God. For García-Rivera, the experience of a whole has redemptive potency, for it has the capacity to relate us to the larger, all-encompassing, cosmic whole, and everything within it. The whole is experienced as an expansion of ourselves; and we are carried out beyond ourselves in order to find ourselves.⁴

Ivone Gebara puts flesh on conceptions of community, by affirming the “collective dimension of ‘person’” and the understanding that *relatedness* is the most fundamental aspect of humanness, in both anthropological and cosmic senses. Relatedness is the “constitutive relationship of communion we have with all beings.” A person’s affective knowing and sensibility is fundamentally relational, growing out of one’s first experience, as she says, “with the earth on which I took my first steps.” Relatedness requires communication and exchange. This is possible because we have a basic character of openness. “Human beings are in the midst of an ongoing evolutionary process,” and “It is on the basis of this evolutionary openness, of this growth process, that we open ourselves to the mystery that envelops us and within which we have our being.” It is within this context that we are confronted with the challenge of becoming creators of ourselves.⁵

Performance, more than other art forms, is a realm in which human openness comes boldly to life. I shall explore the experiences of the wholeness or completeness that emerges in performance, with the hypothesis that they may be equivalent to Dewey’s “complete experience”; that they may have affinities to García-Rivera’s conception of the community’s act of interpreting the beautiful; and that, as aesthetic experiences, they may have the potential of pointing to the cosmic whole of which we are a part.

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I have described the idea that our access to a theological aesthetics of relatedness is through experience. In what follows, I shall weave together two strands within which we can find this aesthetic experience. The first is in relating to nature, in whose disclosure we find belongingness. The second is performative art, wherein we encounter wholeness within *human* interaction. I shall not, at this point, address the forms of “theatrical” performance directly, but rather I shall try to locate human performing within the broader spectrum of relationality. When we think of performance, the more structured conventions of theatrical drama may come first to mind. As important as those formal elements are, it is important that we approach them by understanding how they fit within the dynamism of human activities in general, activities by which persons relate both to the natural world and to other persons. It is in these activities, first, that the human-aesthetic power of experience, which performance draws upon, is vivified. By embedding humanity’s interrelatedness within nature, I hope to show that our community-relations have deep commonalities with our nature-relations (That is not to say that they are the same thing: as one wag said, if culture was the same thing as nature, we’d all be naked now).

Imagine a continuum of relationships: God ↔ nature ↔ nature ↔ human ↔ human ↔ God. The experiential relationship of humans to nature has affinities to inter-human relationality by origins and by analogy. There is a continuity between these types of relationships, because nature is where we come from, and, while human culture is something truly distinct within nature, both nature-relationships and human relationships are, each in their own ways, subject to the same “laws.” To the extent that I am considering a God-relationship here, it is not direct or transcendent, as indicated by “God” at either end of the continuum above. Rather, it is as

mediated by and within all the double-arrows-of-relationship themselves. I would suggest that part of the character of that mediation is the love that is inherent in relationality.

Let us now consider our relationships with nature. Dewey points out that there existed nature, imbued with rhythms – cycles of seasons and moons and nightfalls – and there existed organic human rhythms, of hungering and sleeping and so on – before there was the rhythm of the “taut skin” of the drum.⁶ This is one of the many ways in which our aesthetic senses proceed out of, and inhere to, the aesthetic potential of nature.

Climbing upward, upward, into the deep-wooded ridge terrain, we turned our gazes upon a cascade of falling ferns, forming a waterfall of many fingers on many hands, tumbling down a trailside cliff-face, topped with the embracing reach of a live oak. Stopping there, we felt in ourselves the preternatural outward-kinesthesia of our own bodies in communication with local space – the looming presence of rock and leaf, the sloping ground under our feet, the grasping of the immediate-place-around, the proximate-sensorious feeling of ourselves at the base of rising, falling nature – and here we found ourselves in the psychic touching of place, our barest sense of the holistic movement of our locality, the rhythm of the moment.

How do animals – deer, foxes – experience the foot-trail they encounter through the woods? How do they connect it to their life-world? Trails have a power, they follow lines that mean something, they are purposive, they do not spring up without reason. Trails are terrains of shared experience, unfolding mappings of place. The purposiveness, referentiality, and sign-ificance of trails are experiences shared by ants, cattle, deer, and humans alike. Through trails, place becomes networked in minds. That which is significant in the earth is revealed and indicated by the trail. The stable points of reference that they provide through generations of beast and human, we may consider a kind of energy. These are hints to the senses of which we are only dimly aware – senses for place and situation, and senses for connecting and belonging.

Human beings relate outward, to their space/place, to the things and beings and people around them, grasping them, taking them in – even adjusting their personas to match. When we are embedded in nature, at rare moments of communion, we can get a feeling that our participation in the world goes beyond the five senses, beyond even an inner kinesthetic sense which gives us our balance and our feeling of being a body in the world. It is as if we have an openness, a communication, a belonging, a fittingness – and this too can be considered one of our senses – an aesthetic sense. Perhaps this intuition brings us a step closer to what those sages mean when they speak of “spiritual senses” – the spiritual-aesthetic feeling-knowing sense, the sense for participation in the whole.

There is something akin to art in nature, and it is more than just beauty to be beheld: the actual workings of life and “the forces of nature” upon land over time reveal to us our own vale of birth and evolution. This is an *aesthetic* knowing, for it is of integrity, of discovering the hidden unity. If nature in her disclosure is for us a communicator of relationality, this is also because we have the receptive tools for access, and in this mutual opening between person and

nature, beholder becomes participant. In this relationship, everyone and everything is simultaneously performer and audience.

“Naturalism in art,” says Dewey, “...means that all which can be expressed is some aspect of the relation of man and his environment, [which] attains its most perfect wedding with form when the basic rhythms that characterize the interaction of the two are...trusted with abandon.” “Ultimately the delight springs from the fact that such things are instances of the relationships that determine the course of life, natural and achieved.”⁷ In the *knowing* of nature, we find that we are able to bring together all the stuff we sense as the manifold of space-time. If the art and beauty of nature, and *human* art and beauty, both share in the same source – the same mold, the same form, the same rhythm – and if, indeed, the two are long accustomed to working together on the project we call beauty, then we will find that, when humans perform *for each other*, many of the same features will be apparent.

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Let us take this “horizontal” relationality and locate it within the human life. Performance theorist Richard Schechner places theater on a continuum of related activities – ritual, play, games, sports, dance, and music: “Together these seven comprise the public performance activities of humans.”⁸ Performance, as one distinct form of human activity and relating, both shares and heightens those relational aspects that already exist in the other activities. Other cultures have taken this dynamic much farther than our own. Ernst Cassirer describes the worldview of oral peoples as “a deep conviction of a fundamental and indelible *solidarity of life* that bridges over the multiplicity and variety of its single forms.”⁹ In this milieu of storytelling-defining-the-life-world, unlimited exchanges and transformations are possible. In such cultures, the cultural action that is our equivalent of theater *is* the web of participatory actions of living. Claude Lévi-Strauss saw in “savage” thought “both a consuming symbolic ambition such as humanity has never again seen rivaled, and scrupulous attention directed entirely towards the concrete, and...the implicit conviction that these two attitudes are but one.”¹⁰

While a long critical tradition seeks to locate the origins of theatrical performance in ritual, that is not my intent here. The point is that, as Schechner says, theatrical art, wherever it is performed, is not merely a way of imitating reality or expressing states of mind. Performing art is the enacting of an event – an “actual,” to use his term. Such artwork leads a double-life, in the Aristotelian sense: it is both imitative and itself. The relationship between formal theater and experience is that of analogy. Art “comes after”: life is raw and art is cooked. Making art is the process of transforming raw experience into palatable forms.¹¹ But none of this would be possible were it not for the fact that, we might say, life itself *is* dramatic, and that drama merely uses the same methods of interaction that already exist in our moment-to-moment existence.

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What follows is an examination of several aspects of performance which will flesh out the ways in which relationality is enacted. I begin with the audience perspective, which allows us to inquire how Dewey’s aesthetic experience of wholeness translates into the social event. I begin not with theatrical performance but with the rock ’n roll concert, which locates the totality of the experience less in a story unfolding on stage, and more on the whole panorama – a more unwieldy dynamic, to be sure. We will begin to see here some of the formal or structural factors which give an event what unity it has.

Next, I examine theatrical drama more properly. Performance is a transformation of reality, to a greater or lesser extent. It effects its transformation in ways that are continuous with the other activities of human living. For example, both theater and life rely on masking and performing. Rarely do we get the sense that “the true person” is revealed. Perhaps this is because there is no one identity for any one person, and perhaps as well because the very openness of individuality demands the flexibility of our identities, of our very faces. In that sense, a search for “disclosure,” such as I described earlier in encounters with nature, begs the question, what is it that we want revealed?

Finally, I consider the *formal* aspects of theatrical drama. There is a basic plot structure to any effective action, with phases of crisis and resolution. If this is the “form” of drama, does it have any resonance with the “form” of the artwork with which theological aesthetics has so often been preoccupied? To answer that question, I will look at both formal drama and other kinds of “happenings” that lack these structures.

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Enter the nightclub, dark and full of bodies, air dense with tobacco and incense, the light and liquid of the bar lending the bodies their fluidity, the stage drawing the attention of the many to the center, loudspeakers stacked high, broadcasting waves and crashes and grinding melodies and the singer’s call through the microphone, the cloud of light-color raising a nimbus around his body, the guitar-horns and the rattling of the drums, the people milling, swaying, congregating, wearing their clothing of the night-out, exchanging glances and touches, so close in proximity, sharing and amplifying the rhythms, the kisses, holding each other, and dance-movements, and mouths pressed to ears, shouting thoughts, the opening and closing channels of bodies shuffling to the front and to the back, the cups and bottles dropping on the floor, and the song ends, the applause rises, the lights change, the hush of delight and nodding heads, the affirmations and the familiarity, the music brought alive, cherished songs and delightful surprises, finally the house lights rising, the irreducible complexity of the collective motion toward the doors, the stumbling out under the streetlights, the sidewalk textured with the ringing in the ears, the scattered talk and dispersal and movement to the next place. Who’s to say what the songs mean and what the evening is all about?

One sense in which any performance event is transformational is that it creates or incarnates a distinct place, in which time, place, and persons are augmented or altered. Within that location, “geography itself is socialized.” Performance spaces are “organized so that a large group can watch a small group – and become aware of itself at the same time.” This dynamic between performer and audience, and between audience and audience, “fosters celebratory and ceremonial feelings....”¹² Attending a rock ’n roll concert is as much about the sense of *being there*, in the moment, being a part of the spectacle, as it is about the performance of music on the stage – of course, the character of the two are entirely intertwined. Unlike theater, in which the audience is stably seated, in rock ’n roll, the audience is involved, *in* it, moving to it, responding and giving their energy back to the performer. It is clear who is the performer and who is the audience, but the participant’s reference points include those who attend with her – and those unknown persons in her immediate proximity. You find yourself in a room, in an odd kind of

communion with like-minded others, who have been similarly moved by the same songs, the same person and the same creative imagination.

Such concerts reproduce the basic structure of any performance: gathering → performing → dispersing. This order provides a “frame” within which any particular dramatic structure is nested. The bottom line for any such ordering is solidarity, not conflict: it brings people together. Any presentation of dramatic conflict is supportable only inside this nest of agreement concerning the function or meaning of performance.¹³

The experience is galvanized by the fact that it is *this* artist, whose songs you know from countless listenings, who is before you now, picking out the notes and singing the words, for *you*, *now*. You are enjoying it together. The songs performed are events which wash over you one by one, never to return, but only to be remembered in a swimming recollection. But the songs of any artist will tell a variety of stories, which usually hang together only loosely. It is not a plot that is being conveyed through the songs as a collectivity, only a collection of fragmentary plots at most. Yet, at times “the scene” is bigger than the music itself, which, in its aimlessness, cannot on its own support all the meanings and significances that are poured into by the beholders. The beholders will leave with far more than the music; they will have the memories of a temporary community.

Meanwhile, such a concert is the kind of event that is continually fraying at the edges, with people coming and going, melting in and out of presence and attention. There is a reason why we tend to classify such events as “entertainment” more than as “art.” And yet, undoubtedly, for some people in some cases, such an event *does* deliver Dewey’s experience of the whole. Dewey locates the aesthetic between the non-aesthetic states of humdrum experience and the machine-like enclosure of self-consciousness. The fact that the event is memorable – or that the collectivity is able to tap into something together – gives the event the potential to be “an” aesthetic experience. If the music is good, and you feel it in your bones, you have been moved beyond humdrum experience. And if you “lose yourself in the music” for a while, you cannot be locked into machine-like self-consciousness. Such experience may well deliver intimations of wholeness. You *feel* different. You have gone some way out of yourself. Cassirer said “Whoever has brought any part of a whole into his power has thereby acquired power in the magical sense, over the whole itself... The very nature of this magic shows that the concept in question is not one of mere analogy, but of real identification.”¹⁴ Yet we must ask, is the “wholeness” encountered in such venues of a kind that brings us into greater communion with a spiritual or cosmic reality of unity? It might be, but the fact that the “wholeness” is referential to a *human* collectivity, rather than, say the unity-with-otherness that an encounter with nature can deliver, tends, perhaps mistakenly, to dispose us to doubt its worth.

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Plato regarded art, and theater especially, as imitative of reality, and thus merely a shadowy mirror, inferior to real life (which itself is, of course, but a shadow of his “ideal forms”). But theater is more than artifice; it *does* relate intrinsically to real life. In fact, the concept of masking shows that the relationship runs in both directions, for it is

at the root of our terminology for personhood: the Latin “persona,” from the Greek “prosopon,” means mask. The persona was the mask used by actors in the Greek and Roman theater. It not only allowed actors to hide their faces; it also helped them reveal the individual personality of the character being

played....Classical theater showed that each person is really a multitude of persons....The ‘person,’ the mask that is worn, invites spectators to ponder what lies behind it.”¹⁵

In interacting with each other, people enact drama. In ordinary life, performing and beholding occur simultaneously. What we have here is the intertwining of theatrical language with our understanding of social intercourse. At given moments, our actions become more explicitly performative. Victor Turner describes “social dramas” – especially moments of crisis such as arguments and rites of passage – as inherently dramatic. This is because, as Richard Schechner describes Turner’s insight, when people interact, they “not only do things, they *show themselves and others what they are doing or have done*; actions take on a reflexive and performed-for-an-audience aspect.”¹⁶ Erving Goffman describes all of human living and interacting as “staged”: people prepare their roles “backstage” before interacting – preparing masks or personae and role-playing techniques, so as to enter the “main stage” “in order to play out key social interactions.” People perform moments of social intercourse in the role of themselves that is most suitable to the situation at hand.¹⁷

Such an activity is more than mere artifice. It is both acting and reality. And that dualness is likewise at play *in* theater. Aristotle followed Plato by agreeing that art is mimetic, but he pursued the matter further, asking, *what and how* does art imitate? His insight was that it is not *things* that art embodies, but “action.” With “action,” says Schechner, we are less inclined to speak of subjects and objects, and more concerned with patterns, rhythms, and developments.¹⁸ If form is crystalline in Plato, in Aristotle form is fluid. If we are to speak of form in performance, we may note that, just as in nature, events are things that are born, grow, flourish, decline, and die. I have spoken of the openness of persons, indeed of all living beings to their environments and to unfolding time. Masking is more than the evolved defense mechanism of the chameleon; it is the way we encounter newness; and thus it is the way we evolve, both as individuals and as collectivity.

Yet I spoke at the outset of the desire to have something *revealed* in us through performance. If it is not an essence, such as true personality or self, or a transcendental truth, then it is that human relationality itself: we want to see the fact and character of it; we want to see the *form* of it. Perhaps its true character is only revealed in acts of love. I would agree with García-Rivera that when we pursue the beautiful, we are experiencing a movement of the heart.¹⁹ We might find that movement and that character revealed in acts of reconciliation, or solidarity, or in the bonds of love, or simply in the endlessly expansive community of life – but do we find it so revealed in the enacting of drama itself? Or in the participating community of performers and beholders? We shall further consider the question of theatrical *form* before we get to an answer.

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The notion of form takes on a different character in the various arts. In visual and plastic arts, one can point to an object or a collection of objects, and begin with the fact that these objects have a fairly stable physical mass and shape. The form of music is more evanescent, carried along in the flow of time, but at least one can conceptualize music in terms of the forms of melodies, harmonies, and sound vibrations. Because performance is an act or an action by humans, its form is a matter of enactment-in-time, of the employment of bodies and minds in space. Form in performance, then, is a dynamic, unfolding *transformation* of reality.

With respect to the structure of drama itself, certain generalizations can be made, although it is obvious that they do not fit *all* performances, and indeed many creative minds have attempted to do away with such structures. In any case, the typical essence of theatrical drama is a matter of conflict and its resolution. For Schechner, the basic human plot is as follows: someone or some group begins to move to a new place in the social order; this move is acceded to or blocked; in either case a crisis occurs because the change in status involves a readjustment of the entire scheme; this readjustment is effected performatively. Within this scheme, crisis or conflict is a disharmonic process with four phases: 1. There is a breach of regular norms; 2. The crisis widens, and a liminal threshold between more or less stable phases of the social process is crossed; 3. Redressive action is applied (advice, mediation, judging, public ritual) – this phase is also liminal, betwixt and between, and it is replicative of the crisis; 4. Resolution occurs either through reintegration or through the legitimization of an irreparable schism. Often endings include a journey or some other gesture that says, life goes on. Bateson calls this process of advancing through disruption “schismogenesis” – and he sees it as major agency of human cultural growth.²⁰

Schechner describes a classic triangular scheme for the progression of plot. Two points on the triangle are comprised of forces or individuals in a state of conflict, representing opposing ideas and undertaking mutually exclusive actions. The progress of these two forces converges at the third point, which represents a resolution of the conflict. The drama proceeds until they reach that point of resolution, at which time the conflict is either mediated or removed through compromise, struggle, victory, reconciliation, defeat, or death. The situation is thereby resolved into a new situation or institution. Theoretically, one may draw a plumb line, a “line of reason” through the triangle: if the action were to proceed along this line, the characters would pursue a rational set of actions that would peacefully resolve the conflict – but then there would be no drama! Instead, they pursue their uncertain ways towards victory or defeat, and herein is the drama.²¹

Another way of understanding the form of dramatic roles is Schechner’s concept of “careers”: a career is a humanly organized plan of action, which may be blocked by others, or prematurely ended. Effective drama demands the completion of a career, for this allows the audience to experience the workings of destiny, fate, or fortune. The actions of heroes demand resolutions, by which completedness and focus are achieved. Langer describes how tragic drama employs a method of heightening its affective power by foreshortening and intensifying events:

Tragic drama is so designed that the protagonist grows mentally, emotionally, or morally, by the demand of the action, which he himself initiated, to the complete exhaustion of his powers, the limit of his possible development. He spends himself in the course of one dramatic action. This is, of course, a tremendous foreshortening of life; instead of undergoing the physical and psychical, many-sided, long process of an actual biography, the tragic hero lives and matures in some particular respect; his entire being is concentrated in one aim, one passion, one conflict and ultimate defeat. For this reason the prime agent of tragedy is heroic; his character, the unfolding situation, the scene, even though ostensibly familiar and humble, are all exaggerated, charged with more feeling than comparable actualities would possess.²²

All of these schemes share an overarching concern with completion. In proceeding to the finishing point, they imbue the performance with a satisfying wholeness. But the forms of effective drama are hardly exhausted with the traditional structures of opening and completion. There are other models, which exploit human openness to change, as human principle and action/event principle. They are more playlike, less linear, more open-ended.

This is what Desert Siteworks was about! We spent two weeks installing the artworks at the hot springs, and we performed rituals that proceeded through the entire cycle of life, from birth to death. It was just a hundred of us, out in the desert, making art that grows out of the surroundings, being there in it, experiencing it, letting it all go, completely participating. At times, there were people who couldn't handle the overload, they'd completely lose it, be balled up on the ground, crying – and then, an hour later, they'd be up, and beating with life and joy and discovery – and they'd be changed, deeply changed, they found something out there among each other and the big space that you can't get anywhere else, because the space is so vast....Every plant has its place in the bare sand, and every scale is in tune with the next, and the human being, after a while, enters that space and becomes its own part in it...²³

In following the open and nonlinear or cyclical structure of life-rhythms, such theater emphasizes, as Schechner says, “horizontal relationships among related forms rather than a searching vertically for unprovable origins.” If such forms produce off-base effects, they tend to do so quite self-consciously in rejection of what people tend to look for as the “natural” outcome. Tensions within the situation may increase until they explode, and the result is a return to the original situation. In this way, tensions are released, but the underlying conditions have not changed. Such an unresolving circumstance is more akin to something game-like, as in child’s play, in which one activity follows upon another, but the entirety is not obviously purposive.²⁴ Such events may lack the intrinsic wholeness to which I have been referring, but they open themselves up to a wider circle of relations into nature or cosmic wholeness. In this generous casting-about, such performances may generate a different sense of wholeness through immanent relationality.

If it seems a stretch to call the forgoing dramatic formulations “form” in the classical theological-aesthetic sense, I would caution that resistance to that analogy arises, at least in part, from our habitual failure to find the aesthetics of our own interactivity. Schechner says that, as with each life-form, each performance conceals a determining pattern-factor that governs its development. “Everything imaginable has this living, intrinsic, and dynamic participation in creating, being, becoming, and ceasing....This DNA-like factor determines the growth rate, shape, rhythm and life-span of each individual.” Every thing has its own life-plan, the shape of its inner determination in dynamic relation to the world in which it is embedded. It is this *fluid* form, then, that performance embodies as well as imitates. Somehow, that dual action of reproducing and being-in-itself is rejuvenating. It brings the community together by allowing us to look for *something more*, and, if we find it, to report it and interpret it within our community. In this activity, there can be, in those spaces where “reality is being performed,” “an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community.”²⁵

Performance is the art of being in the stream. It is the art of openness to possibility and to evolution as an aesthetic way of being *par excellence*. Artistic creativity, like scientific practice,

also conforms to the basic method, orientation, and form of all successfully living and evolving creatures and species: it is *open*, incomplete and oriented to finding completion outside of itself. It responds to the fact that *change* is a cosmic fundamental. This is a description of the practical functioning of our creaturely openness, and as such, I hold the hypothesis that it is a description of our evolutionary “purpose” and challenge.

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A large part of what we are open to is the community around us, to whom we deliver up our experiences. The idea of interpretive community is important to the way we frame experiences of the whole. Charles Taylor considers such interpretation in the context of the making of the modern self or identity:

Of course, there are experiences in which we are carried away in rapture and may believe ourselves spoken to by angels; or less exaltedly, in which we sense for a minute the incredible fullness and intense meaning of life; or in which we feel a great surge of power and mastery over the difficulties that usually drag us down. But there is always an issue of what to make of these instants, how much illusion or mere ‘tripping’ is involved in them, how genuinely they reflect real growth or goodness. We can only answer this kind of question by seeing how they fit into our surrounding life, that is, what part they play in a narrative of this life. We have to move forward and back to make a real assessment.²⁶

This process of assessment, if it to go anywhere, is going to occur in the embrace of an interpretive community. You have an aesthetic experience. Its deep relationality gives you intimations of the whole. The experience of the whole is a sign. You interpret the sign/experience in contact with your community. We saw this process at work with the visions in nature. But that is also what performance is all about – ideally, performance is a working-out of such an experience – first by a community (actors). The whole range of fluid “forms” in performance is a collection of tools for dynamic relational transformation. They are also functional signs, which are related to, and support, the core experience, or sign, of wholeness. In reproducing, or playing off of, the original experience for a wider community (audience), the performers also delivers variations on the same experience, or new experiences related to it. Then the community of beholders – the audience – also enters the interpretive process. The community of relational experience is expansive – relations expand within it.

All of these interrelated causes and effects – experiences, signs, communities – point to the deeper meanings of the relationality, and the experience of wholeness, as a unity: they point to the character of relationality as containing a basic orientation of love. Love is like gravitational attraction in relationality, except that it is not motivated by a passive “law of nature,” but by, as Ada María Isasi-Díaz says, “the *active involvement* of those who are in relationship” (italics mine).²⁷ Love, then, is an active principle; it falls on human beings, as God’s image, to love as God loves, not merely to receive love. Alejandro García-Rivera follows Josiah Royce in seeing this fullness of the relational act of union as *redemptive*: to incorporate one from outside of one’s community into that community requires that we interpret one to another – first, to walk with the other, in their shoes, to understand from within, and then to communicate the experience to other in *our* community.

We may find that this love-arrow of the world, and the expansiveness of relations that it causes, is inexorably related to cosmic wholeness, the love of God. To the extent that we can experience the love of relationality through performances, we gain both a deeper recognition of our interdependence and a greater sense of belongingness. This heightened understanding will allow us to better *care* for every being. I suspect that the way that we feel the love is something distinctively human. As a mark of inter-human interactivity, it is most easily revealed in distinctively lovable others such as lovers, family, and so on; but it is not nearly so apparent – so easy to feel – in a more generalized context such as group, community, or humanity generally. There the love-vector is mixed with other manifestations such as attractions and repulsions and interests and obligations. Performance is one of the activities that helps us access these deeper meanings of our human relationality – at times, it makes them more apparent to us.

In our relationship with nature, we can find some of the resources to generate our human theological-aesthetic art, because nature is an endless realm of field upon field, individually and together presenting us with the forms and rhythms that, in their limitless relationality, *are* the immanence of divinity that we seek to create in our art. To the extent that we participate in nature, and really *see*, we also participate in, and see, the forms and rhythms of divine beauty so fittingly evolved for human eyes and senses in this sway of this earthly place. If we sometimes do find the aesthetic-eye-opening experience in nature, we crave it in communion with community; and this is what performance promises. We look for structures and contexts that can stretch it out for us, *together*. There is, in this, an opportunity to build love. Our works matter because of the love they build between us and that which is not-us. Can performance, with its powerful affectiveness, be the medium for deep change? Deep thought and spiritual practice benefit from finding their expression in art and performance. New creativity is the breaking of the constraint of prejudgement, perceptual freight, and pre-discernment of perceptions. In a time of world-destruction, performance can help us to overcome cultural deficits of wisdom and compassion, the basic qualities of ultimate reality. When we use performance-relatedness to highlight and vivify human-human-nature relatedness, we unite love and wisdom with the concrete community. To the extent that we build experiences that allow us to approach that unification of love and wisdom, we begin to see something like nature's disclosure of unity, only this time it is mediated through *ourselves together*.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 52.

² Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999) 30, 88, 186.

³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 35-38.

⁴ García-Rivera, 155, 156, and lectures, Graduate Theological Union, 2000.

⁵ Gebara, 67, 83, 89, 93-94.

⁶ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Perigee Books, 1934), 147-148.

⁷ *Ibid*, 150-151.

⁸ Schechner, 6.

⁹ Quoted by Schechner, 43. In Rothenberg, Jerome, *Technicians of the Sacred* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968).

¹⁰ Quoted by Schechner, 43. In Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

¹¹ Schechner, 38.

¹² *Ibid*, 13, 166.

¹³ *Ibid*, 168-170.

¹⁴ Quoted by Schechner, 58. In Cassirer, Ernst, *Language and Myth* (New York: Dover, 1946).

¹⁵ Gebara, 76-77.

¹⁶ Quoted by Schechner, 166. In Turner, Victor, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

¹⁷ Quoted by Schechner, 166. In Goffman, Erving, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959).

¹⁸ Schechner, 36-37.

¹⁹ García-Rivera, 180.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 11, 167-168.

²¹ *Ibid*, 16-18, 20.

²² Quoted by Schechner, 20-21. In Langer, Susanne, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner's, 1953).

²³ William Binzen, Jr. Interview with author, 2000.

²⁴ Schechner, 22.

²⁵ Schechner, 13, 37

²⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 48

²⁷ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 90.