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Book Review Symposium

Geraldine Pratt, *Families Apart: Migrant Mothers and the Conflicts of Labor and Love*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-8166-6999-8 (paper); ISBN 978-0-8166-6998-1 (cloth)

Performance Unsettled

My interest in performance as a recuperative and creative practice has led me to Gerry's previous collaborative work with the Philippine Women Centre of British Columbia. In *Families Apart* the complex meaning and value of performance is given more space to emerge. The book carefully negotiates a series of questions concerning what performance can do as both an analytical tool and an eventful practice that enacts and unsettles different spaces and times. This potential of performance has been useful in my own research in Bristol where the practices of theatre, spoken word, and carnival feature as a lens for considering processes of belonging. The disruptive yet often familiarly transporting action of performance in *Families Apart* resonates with the ways in which cultural productions in Bristol intervene in and reassemble the city, making and breaking different registers of attachment. Performance appears throughout the book as a means of framing the unmarked, a practice that (re)configures matter and meaning to show that all is not what it seems. Through the specific performance intervention of *Nanay*, but also in the performativity and reflexivity of the book's text, Gerry shows the value in - and difficulties of - making the disparate category of Filipino migrant mothers 'remarkable'. These are political and ethical dilemmas that navigate a challenging balancing act. The productive potential of performance to create the "conditions for different presents in the future" (p. 167) must be constantly weighed up against the uncertain implications of its instrumentalisation. The entangled processes of production of performance and the possibilities for its dissemination and/or dissipation demonstrate that performance is not obviously controlled. The question of

who is using or benefiting from it is shown to have no clear answer. In what follows I would like to briefly consider three ways in which this indeterminate political value of performance surfaces in the book. I think that each of these foreground this very uncertainty as key to the appeal of performance as a means for conceptual and practical intervention.

Firstly, the figurative use of performance as a way of destabilising subjectivity was at work more or less implicitly throughout the book. This is performance as an analytical means of throwing into relief a certain situated set of practices. Using Goffman's (1956) vocabulary of roles, a number of performed 'front stage' positions are taken up that could be construed to differ from the 'back stage' reality. For example, the Filipino mothers who assume the role of live-in carers or the researcher negotiating their position as activist. Yet applying performance in this way is problematic: it shows the difficulty of both defining a 'role' and tying it to a particular setting. Although separated from their families, the women on the Live-in Caregiver Programme remained mothers, enacting this relation through a range of more or less successful practices that attempted to work across this distancing. So an uncertain web of attachments were made and played out through the Live-in Caregiver Programme that displaced the normative position of the role of the mother. Thus, invoking performance both defines roles but simultaneously unsettles that very vocabulary: identity and recognition seem slippery. Performance becomes one figure for understanding the complex interaction of situated claims with structural conditions.

Secondly, performance appears as an eventful intervention in the book, particularly through *Nanay*. The play circulates unsettling testimonial stories of those involved in the Live-in Caregiver Programme that disjunctively bring together disparate audience members. The performances are recounted in the book with an attention to detail that makes clear that the event carries more weight than any single scene or narration. Instead there is an attempt to cultivate an awareness of what the coming-together of the performance event can do. Aesthetics, both as artistic style and as Ranciere's (1999) distribution of the sensible come into play. The performance engenders sensible attachments through the register of 'melancholic realism'. In employing this term, the suggestion seems to be that *Nanay* is neither a product of the external observation of the Live-in Caregiver Programme - a constitutive abstraction - nor to be externally consumed as a substituting representation. Instead, the performance is an encounter that creates multiple singular engagements; its force lies in the particular truths of these felt connections that work through separation. This realism infuses the manner in which *Nanay* is recounted in the

book. Details of eruptions, improvisations and things generally ‘going awry’ are provided. This is symptomatic of the consistent awareness of and attention to process in the book. In relation to performance, this manifested through the recognition and exposure of drawn out and divided spatio-temporal processes to show that performance is never a clearly bounded product. Its resonances beyond the event can only ever be partially traced.

Lastly, *Families Apart* raised questions concerning the practicalities of performance as a method, as a means of constructing and disseminating knowledge. If performance is understood as a collective act, it seems to be a good focal point for collaborative and activist research. Yet the book highlighted a tension between these acts of collaboration that necessitate degrees of agreement and their intended result, which was to open up dissensus. If one of the benefits of performance as method is that it is necessarily precarious - a “reasonable-unreasonable” space to use Ranciere’s (1999: 55) language - how are we to create the conditions for its occurrence? Equally the negotiation of potential conflicts and solutions in this space, with its multiple users and uses, is also a challenge. So the audience member who was unsure of the suitability of clapping provides an illustration of what makes performance simultaneously exciting and daunting. It involves arrangements and rearrangements in the moment, that seemingly cannot be legislated for and yet still emerge from or in spite of the weight of the appropriate. And then there is the question of what performance might leave. How stable or sedimented are the layers that accumulate in the moment of its occurrence? Such questions of the conditions of performance - the configurations it requires and those that it engenders - are central to my own research. This partly concerns understanding the distributed and partial nature of a successful and/or failed performance, a matter that *Families Apart* was perhaps frustratingly reticent to comment upon. Mirroring the unsettling work of performance throughout the book, these questions are left deliberately open.

References

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