ABSTRACT

Dr. Ronald Shields, Advisor

The relationship between community-based performance and the academy has long been tenuous. Recently, an increase in publication and writing on community-based performance has indicated a growing respect for that field as a location for scholarly study and analysis. In order to understand what successful scholarship in this field looks like, this study looks at three recent and diverse publications on community-based performance.

In Chapter 1, I begin with Sonja Kufﬁncec’s Staging America, a close scholarly study of the community-based performance company Cornerstone. I examine her work for how she justiﬁes and positions the scholar’s presence. Next, in Chapter 2, I engage with Performing Communities, a survey of eight companies written by Robert H. Leonard and Anne Kilkelly, in order to discuss the scholars’ responsibilities in critiquing community-based performance. Then, in Chapter 3, I explore Petra Kuppers’ textbook Community Performance, and I examine the ways in which it models instruction for community-based performance within the academy.

Finally, in my Conclusion, I read across these texts, summarizing the pitfalls and successes that can inform scholars in future attempts to write about community-based performance from a scholarly perspective.
For my husband, Jonathan,

who is my constant encourager

and my most trusted critic.
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INTRODUCTION

This study grows out of the intersection of two beliefs to which I hold with equal fervor: I believe that performance can be created and produced in ways that activate individuals and their communities, and I also believe that scholarship has the power and responsibility to call cultural practice to its highest potential. I seek to champion for the conscientious development of the relationship between such activating performance and its accompanying scholarship so that both may attain, or at least come closer to, the high standards which they set for themselves. The type of performance I refer to is generally called community-based performance, and since the 1980s, when the term was first widely applied, it has become a wide-spread and quickly growing field. This is evidenced by the large number of companies, performance artists, and performances that can be grouped under that heading (Kuftinec 23). However, this growing number of performances and practitioners has not been adequately reflected in the scholarly realm. Sonja Kuftinec, one of the foremost scholars in community-based performance, notes:

There remains a gap between firsthand accounts of twentieth-century practices and interpretive assessment, though scholarship on contemporary and recent historical practices is increasing through journal articles and anthologies as well as oral history transcriptions, surveys, and artistic gatherings. (26)

This observation was made five years ago and, though literature describing the processes and products of various community-based performance companies and practitioners is becoming available, evaluative literature remains scarce. I believe that the barriers standing in the way of scholarly interaction with this field are multiple, including what Susan C. Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus call the “groundedness” and “pragmatism” of community-based performance, which results from often politically centered motives (6). I agree with these authors that this
characteristic focus on practicality resists theorization and outside evaluation (6). Also, the conflation of community-based performance with community theatre causes the former to inherit the “image problem,” as Kuftinec terms it, of the latter, causing evaluators to term community-based performance amateurish and bad without investigating the deeper meanings of the performance (23). Such treatment by scholars and critics has made community-based performance practitioners wary of evaluation that does not come from an inside perspective. Additionally, community-based performance has proven consistently difficult to evaluate because of the multiple, and often contradictory, practices, ideologies, and goals within the field. This is further complicated by differences in motivation from traditional theatrical performance. These factors have led to a field that is written about with a limited variety of styles and perspectives. No leading methodology or method has emerged to which those wanting scholarly interaction with community-based performance can look for guidance.

In this study, I examine three writing forms that attempt to disseminate practices and ideologies of community-based performance through the form of book-length publications. I do this in order to understand the strengths and weaknesses of current writing styles. As with any writing, I bring with me to this study my preferences and biases, and, therefore, my positions as a scholar rather than as a practitioner, as a supporter of community-based performance rather than as a detractor, as a relative newcomer to the field rather than as an experienced evaluator, and many other characteristics all influence my interaction with these texts. Additionally, I value analysis over description and desire the popularizing of community-based performance, so I will offer both criticism and compliments that others may think undeserved. While perhaps full support of any and all publications about community-based performance may seem to be the

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1 I do not mean to imply that community theatre deserves such a poor reputation, merely that community-based performance, like community theatre, has been ignored, in part, because of the negative connotations that accompany non-paid performance practices.
stance that will best propagate the field, I believe that critical evaluation of dissemination techniques are necessary as this field continues to grow.

LIMITATIONS

Before I continue with my study of writing practices, it is necessary to set some limits and definitions for this study. The texts with which I will primarily interact for this project will be Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-based Theatre (2003) by Sonja Kustinec, Performing Communities (2006) by Robert H. Leonard and Anne Kilkelly, and Petra Kuppers Community Performance: An Introduction (2007), and I pull many of my definitions from these writers. Also helpful to my understanding and definitions will be Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-based Performance (2001), edited by Susan C. Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus, and Local Acts by Jan Cohen-Cruz (2005).

I work primarily with the aforementioned publications by and about community-based performance companies and practitioners rather than basing my evaluations on interviews or interactions with the process of community-based performance for a particular company. While much of the important and groundbreaking work in community-based performance has yet to be documented and evaluated, the goal of this particular project is not to reveal the particularities of an individual community-based performance group. Rather, my goal is to take careful stock of how community-based performance as a mode of practice is written about and defined by the scholarly writing community through looking at what is widely published and distributed on this topic. The earliest publishing date I will be looking at is 2003, though the performances described in the material I am considering dates back to the Little Theatre Movement of the 1910s and ’20s, and some argue that community-based performance has always existed in some form. These texts focus primarily on community-based performance practices beginning in the
1980s and continuing through 2007. Also, it bears mentioning that while community-based performance has international articulations, as pointed out by Haedicke and Nellhaus, in this study I will be focusing on the writing about forms and practices within the United States (4).

When writing about this field, I choose to use the term “community-based performance.” While Kuftinec uses the term “community-based theater,” Kuppers prefers “community performance,” and Leonard and Kilkelly use a variety of terms, including “grassroots ensemble theater,” “ensemble theatre,” and “community-based theatre.” While my terminology is not identical to any of these other scholars, I draw upon their varying ideologies in order to select my words. I use “community-based” rather than “community,” because, as Kuftinec points out, community theatre has negative connotation, and I do not wish to estrange readers because of such bias, and also because I believe that community theatre deserves recognition as a distinct form of performance meriting its own course of scholarship (23). I choose to use “performance” rather than “theatre” because it encompasses traditional theatre as well as the additional performance styles which Kuppers addresses in Community Performance, such as dance. Also, the term “theatre” carries with it ideas of traditional theatre hierarchies and values of individual artistry, dramatic structure, and plot-driven narrative. Conversely, many of the performances within community-based performance require a different evaluation system, closer to that of Performance Studies rather than Theatre Studies, and so I choose to call them performances rather than theatre.

DEFINITIONS

While the above limitations are helpful, they still leave room for any group claiming community as an important part of its performance style to call for inclusion, such as regional theatres, community theatres, or ensemble companies. While I do not dispute the value of the
work done in such groups, I wish to focus more tightly on what the scholarly community has termed community-based performance, though even these definitions vary. I will form a broad definition in order to create a unifying frame in which to investigate how the contents of each text stretch the limits of the field. I fully acknowledge that no single definition of community-based performance can ever fully encompass the actions and values of those within it. However, a definition from which to start is necessary, even if that definition is only created to be illustrated as incomplete. To form this incomplete definition of community-based performance, I will investigate the descriptions and definitions of community-based performance in the above noted sources.

First, I will explore the power structure of the field. When comparing community-based performance to hierarchical mainstream theatre in the introduction to *Performing Communities*, Jan Cohen-Cruz notes, “Community-based ensembles strive for a more egalitarian ideal [than traditional theatre]. They do not embrace the star system. Everyone has some creative in-put” (Leonard 6). As she traces the history of community-based performance, Cohen-Cruz finds that “woven amidst all these threads is an emphasis on participation and access” (Leonard 11). This goes beyond merely including all members of the production team in decisions as community-performance “introduces techniques that blur the boundaries between actor and spectator in order to maximize the participants’ agency” (Haedicke 3). Based on these observations, the structure of the community-based performance ensemble is egalitarian and inclusive.

However, while Cohen-Cruz promotes inclusivity, she also privileges self-contained communities over communities formed around “outsiders” (Leonard 14). Cohen-Cruz differentiates between what she considers “community-based theatre” and what she calls “grass-roots theater” (Leonard 14). Grass-roots theater is instigated by artists who “share a core identity
with the people in the contexts in which they work” while community-based performance is begun by “outsiders” who engage with a community (Leonard 14). While contrasting these as two separate entities was helpful for Cohen-Cruz’s work, it creates a binary in which grass-roots theatre is essential and authentic but community-based performance is fake and imposed. I prefer to consider grass-roots theatre one way in which community-based performance can be done, no more or less legitimate than other forms. Kuppers also claims that the presence of an outside artist is not necessarily limiting, because the product “is not predetermined by an artist […] the outcome is (relatively) open, maybe within a thematic field opened up by the facilitator, but full of spaces and times for people to create their own expressive material” (4). I should also note that, in her later publication Local Acts, Cohen-Cruz seems to find a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between artist/facilitators and the communities they work with. In this later publication, she acknowledges that most community-based performance involves such a leader and that “Over time, community-based performance has become less about homogenous communities and more about different participants exploring a common concern together” (Local 3). Unfortunately, community-based performance scholars and practitioners seem to continue to feel the need to prove the “authenticity” of a particular community, often based on unifying identity markers or political interests. The problems resulting from this pressure will be addressed later in this introduction and throughout my thesis.

I am not the only scholar to recognize the problems presented by these limitations on acceptable communities. Like Cohen-Cruz’s introduction to Performing Communities, editors Haedicke and Nellhaus emphasize the political nature of community-based performance, but Kuftinec resists the “conflation of community-based theater with theater for social change” (18). In her opinion, “Community-based theater and its affiliations encompass a rich and complex
tradition of grounding identity through group building and mythmaking” (Kuftinec 6). Haedicke and Nellhaus, as well as Cohen-Cruz, emphasize the politically questioning nature of community-based performance, while Kuftinec recognizes its ability to reinforce group and individual identity. Kuppers foregrounds both these characteristics, saying that such work “facilitates creative expression of a diverse group of people, for aims of self-expression and political change” (3). Cohen-Cruz’s later writing acknowledges the complexity of the field, including “performance committed to social change along with those whose purpose is the conservation of local cultures, sometimes both at once” (Local 1). These are not mutually exclusive goals and can both be served with Cohen-Cruz’s broader definition of community-based performance: “art that expresses, generates and challenges meaning in a specific community” (Leonard 24). This phrase avoids the limitations of explicitly political theatre or theatre for social change while still illustrating the meaning-making and meaning-expressing purpose of community-based performance.

Achieving these goals requires that community-based performance be created with a high awareness of the time and place in which it is being performed. Haedicke and Nellhaus report that “[t]he projects almost invariably seek to explore issues of immediate concern to the residents of a specific locale […] or at the very least, adapt preexisting materials to the particular community” (Haedicke 4). Kuftinec finds that “Contemporary community-based performance tends to […] the representation of the local,” and Cohen-Cruz also acknowledges the “primacy of place” in community-based performance (Kuftinec 6, Leonard 3). The mission statements of several companies working in the field also focus on the importance of place in community-based performance. The Dell’Arte Company in northern California aims for performances “created by, for and about the area in which you live” (Leonard 7). The Carpetbag Theatre of
Knoxville is “rooted in the desire to have a voice that is uniquely from this community” (Leonard 6). Roadside Theater in Appalachia is “made from the history and cultural traditions of this place, by ensemble members who grew up and remain in this place” (Leonard 7). In an echo of the Dell’Arte Company, the community-based performance company Cornerstone in Los Angeles, CA, wants to create theatre that is “by, for, and about the community” (Leonard 9).

In response to these many missions and descriptions, I will define community-based performance as *performance that makes and questions meaning and identity and is created by, for, and about the community of a specific time or place*. This can include material created specifically for a production or adaptations of traditional theatre plays or musicals. This definition is broad enough to encompass the diverse iterations of community-based performance while indicating its divergence from mainstream theatre.

**QUESTIONINGS**

In order to illustrate my relationship to this topic and in order to give an example of the need for scholarly evaluations, I will describe the experience that first led me to question the values and practices of community-based performance. While attending a recent Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference (PTO), I had a chance to observe and evaluate the current course of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed in the United States. Boal’s models have been influential in community-based performance, not only internationally, as Haedicke and Nellhaus point out, but also within the United States (4, 8). Theatre of the Oppressed is a canonized form of community-based performance, and is often a theatre practitioner’s first exposure to community-based performance, as is true for both Kuftinec and myself, (Kuftinec 3-4). While at the conference, I participated in a Forum Theatre workshop led by Augusto and Julian Boal. The workshop attendees chose injustices around which to create Forum Theatre
pieces, and I chose to work with a group focusing on transgender issues. In the process of creating and performing that piece, I realized the limitations of Forum Theatre. In Forum Theatre, the protagonist of the performance must face a struggle experienced by a majority, if not all, of the “spect-actors,” the term which Boal uses to indicate the audience participants (25). In order to do this, the audience must be defined by a common oppression “experienced by the forum participants” (Boal 268). This leaves room in performance only for the problems of those who are in the majority. For Boal, this model makes sense because he believes “the struggles against an oppression to be indissociable from the struggle against all oppressions,” but for those interested in addressing the issues of the minority, the interconnectedness of all oppression is not enough (Games 268).

I have observed that oppression often comes in the form of identity oppression. An identity within the United States is usually defined primarily by markers including socioeconomic status, race, gender, ability, sexuality, and ethnicity. These markers must all fall within a slim spectrum of normative expectations for a person to be considered “normal.” When one of a person’s identity markers exists outside of that spectrum, all other identity markers are viewed in light of that marker. For example, a person with a disability becomes a disabled person, and any other characteristics or accomplishments are viewed as caused by or in spite of this marker. While Forum Theatre claims to empower the oppressed, I see the above type of identity oppression being reinforced through its structures. The spect-actors are defined by the common oppression that already inhabits every area of their lives. While I do not deny the validity and empowering nature of Forum Theatre in certain situations, I believe that, for many oppressed groups within the United States, the structure of Forum Theatre serves to reinforce the essentialist pressures of culture rather than empower.
While at first glance, Forum Theatre appears to invite everyone to participate, those whose stories are performed are also limited. In the first version for the Forum Theatre piece my team developed, several forms of oppression were present, including a lesbian couple who rejected a transgendered person from a younger generation. Julian Boal recommended we remove the lesbian couple and perhaps rethink the topic of transgender issues for our Forum piece because the majority of the spect-actors we were performing for would be straight. We did remove the lesbian subplot, but continued with the overall themes despite Julian’s disagreement. After the performance several spect-actors indicated to me that it was one of the most rewarding and challenging of the Forum Theatre pieces presented. However, under the strict Boalian ideal of Forum Theatre, this experience would not be possible because true participation is limited to those in the majority group.

The purpose of Forum Theatre is to “work on objective, visible, well-known oppressions” (Boal 10). Those three descriptive words, “objective,” “visible,” and “well-known” deny a place in Forum Theatre for the insidious oppressions of the United States such as identity oppression, not to mention the fact that they are based on a truly objective point of view is impossible (Boal 10). Boal himself acknowledges these limitations:

[In the beginning,] Forum Theatre [...] was very simple and clear: an oppressed protagonist, knowing what she or he wanted to do, facing a brutal enemy, an oppressor, who thwarted her/his desires [...] Later, we started to find situations where oppression was not so clear cut [...] Soon we understood that Forum was not enough to deal with those questions. (Boal 9-10)

While Boal has developed other forms of Theatre of the Oppressed to address these questions, his work continues to focus on Forum Theatre as the primary form of Theatre of the Oppressed.
Forum Theatre has two goals: “Its aim is always to stimulate debate (in the form of action, not just words), […] in order] to enable people ‘to become the protagonists of their own lives’ ” (Games xxiv). The ideal Forum Theatre piece will result in both dialogue within the performance as well as action in life after the performance. This aligns with Haedicke and Nellhaus’s summary that the goal of community-based theatre is to “maximize the participants’ agency” (3). Boal is concerned with addressing explicit political issues, which is admirable, but he ignores the way in which Forum Theatre reifies “identity through group building and mythmaking” in a limiting way (Kuftinec 6).

I also experienced some power structures during the Theatre of the Oppressed workshop that I found disturbing. The organizers of the PTO conference wanted to tape the workshops with Boal, and needed everyone who participated to agree to the use of their image in these videos. However, information about how this tape would be used and who it would be distributed to was not volunteered. Those who did not want to approve the videotaping without more information were informed that they were a very small minority of the participants, and that they would either be transported back home or they would have to observe the workshop rather than participate. The actions and attitudes of the organizers felt bullying at times, as they clearly indicated that no one had the power to stop them from videotaping the workshop.

Also, at the few moments when a challenging question was asked, an organizer would reference something Boal had published or in some other way illustrate how the question was clearly out of place within the practice of Forum Theatre. Perhaps this is because the context of the conference was a training ground for practitioners to learn about Forum Theatre rather than a workshop focused on interrogating the process or results. However, when community-based performance training takes on the form of a monologue rather than a conversation, the
privileging of a leader’s voice over the voice of the community is likely to play out in other areas of the process. Most suggestions that took the form of “what if…” or “would it be alright if we…” were responded to with a phrase similar to “You can do whatever you want when you take these practices home, but here we’re going to learn and do pure Forum Theatre.” These responses give a slight acknowledgement to the ability of those being trained to use their new tools in any way they wish, but it also privileges the structures being used at the workshop as the “right” way, while all other choices would be a less valid variation on the essential structure of Forum Theatre.²

However, the element of this story which I find most disturbing is my own eventual participation. More than a year later, after I had more experience with Theatre of the Oppressed techniques, I went to another conference unassociated with that group, but containing many of the same members. I attended a workshop which was promoted as using Boalian methods to overcome challenges in the classroom. Once the workshop began, it became immediately apparent that the teachers of the workshop were combining Theatre of the Oppressed with a variety of other perspectives on empowerment and psychology. After the workshop I found myself discussing the frustration of seeing Theatre of the Oppressed bastardized in a way that had ultimately left the workshop attendees confused and directionless. Included in this conversation were several other Forum Theatre practitioners, including a PTO conference organizer whom I had previously found to be overbearing and demeaning. In that moment I felt like a justified traitor: I was now on the other side, demanding the “pure” and “right” ways to use

² A close examination of Forum Theatre reveals some faults in a practice that is often used as a model for community-based performance. This should not be taken as a warning against all practice of Forum Theatre, but instead as a diagnosis of some of the ills that practitioners need to acknowledge and try to avoid. Some such evaluation does exist, including Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz’s Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism; however, such critique is rare.
For direction in how to answer my above questions, I will look to three publications in the field of community-based performance, dedicating a chapter to the examination of each text. To begin, I examine Kuftinec’s positioning of the scholar as potentially active in community-based performance in *Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theatre*. Following this, I will evaluate the scholarly strategies and perspectives used in the creation of the descriptive text of *Performing Communities*, written by Robert H. Leonard and Anne Kilkelly. My next chapter will focus on the position of the reader in *Community Performance* by Petra Kuppers, a textbook intended to train students in facilitation of community-based performance. I place these in chronological order by publication date not to indicate that they build upon each other but rather to indicate their lack of chronologically predictable improvement, as the books, in my opinion, are not necessarily influenced or even informed by their predecessors. In my writing, I attempt to diagnose the particular examples of writing on community-based performance, and in my concluding chapter I will synthesize these diagnoses into an overall evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary scholarly publication about community-based performance in the United States. I do this in order to imagine a future for
scholarship on community-based performance which negotiates the difficult ethical responsibilities of the scholar to both community-based performance practitioners as well as to the scholarly community.
CHAPTER ONE: COMPLEXITY AND CRITIQUE IN STAGING AMERICA

The relationship between practitioners and scholars of community-based performance is often tenuous, characterized by distrust, misunderstanding, and perceived compromise. In her book Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theatre, Sonja Kuftinec attempts to model a critical perspective on community-based performance that re-imagines the evaluative tools, perspective, and power structures used by the scholar, in order to heal this problematic relationship. She does this through a close examination of Cornerstone Theater Company, a community-based performance company currently residing in Los Angeles. This group is arguably the most well-known community-based performance company currently practicing within the United States. This book is unusual in that it is a close study of a single community-based performance company by someone who identifies primarily as a scholar.

Scholarship in this field usually focuses on a diversity of companies or upon surveying the field at large, such as Leonard and Kilkelly’s Performing Communities, Susan C. Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus’s Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance, and Jan Cohen-Cruz’s two publications Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United State and Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology. While some similar studies of a single community-based company exist, most, such as Richard Geer’s dissertation Community Performance, written about the community-based performance company Swamp Gravy of Colquitt, Georgia, are primarily descriptive and written by those intimately involved in the company. Kuftinec marks a step away from publication that pursues idea dissemination through insider description and a step toward scholarship that uses outsider

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3 I use the term “America” as Kuftinec does, that is, to indicate the United States of America. While, as Kuftinec acknowledges, such use can serve to erase South and Central America, as well as Canada, she uses it strategically, and I choose to maintain her terminology (Kuftinec 201).
analysis to seek a deeper understanding of the field. As such, this book warrants an examination of how it situates the relationship between such scholarship and community-based performance. Kuftinec lists ways in which such scholarship should be useful to this field as well as describing ways in which it can be or has been harmful. In order to understand how this style of scholarly writing is valuable to community-based performance, I will examine her demonstration of the tools, theories, methodologies, and positions that scholars can use in the exploration of community-based performance. I will also explore how Kuftinec exemplifies community-based performance scholarship, beginning with how she situates and justifies her study.

ROLES OF THE SCHOLAR

Given the historically tenuous relationship between scholars and practitioners in the field of community-based performance, Kuftinec navigates a treacherous path between rigorous scholarship and respect for the company about which she writes. Kuftinec cites Sara Brady’s infamous article “Welded to the Ladle: Steelbound and Non-Radicality in Community-Based Theatre” as one example of scholarship that causes practitioners to distrust those who want to write about them and their work (18). Brady participated in the development of Cornerstone’s community-based performance project Steelbound in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. After the process, she wrote and published the above article, criticizing Cornerstone for including the Bethlehem Steel Company, which she considered to be a censoring voice, in the development process. As with this example, community-based scholars often feel the need to criticize what they see as compromising work. This can leave the community-based practitioners, who generously opened up their work to the scholar in good faith, feeling attacked and betrayed. Practitioners then often refuse access to scholars, claiming the evaluative methods that scholars use do not fit the values of community-based performance and ignore the best efforts of
practitioners in difficult situations. This lack of trust and agreement goes back much further than Brady’s writing. I suggest it that can be traced to the disconnect between the values of traditional scholarship and those of community-based performance. The former emphasizes the perspective of the trained individual against those of the amateur group. Conversely, community-based work celebrates the subjective experience rather than the objective observer, and this process does not seem to require an outsider evaluating the work according to what appears to be an unrelated definition of what is good.

Kuftinec agrees that community-based performance diverges from mainstream theatre in terms of content and values, and she calls upon scholarly and critical examiners to make a “change of perspectives, a movement away from aesthetic critical analysis towards a spectrum of approaches rooted in performance studies, ethnography, and cultural studies” (8). This is an about face for theatre scholars and critics who have been trained to write about mainstream theatre according to a production’s ability to measure up to the evaluator’s standards; now the evaluator must measure according to the standards of the performing company. Kuftinec is calling not just for a shift in tools or perspective, but a shift in the location of power and knowledge. Instead of the elite, informed, and trained scholar deciding what is good and what is bad, good and bad as consistent and recognizable categories no longer exist. By using the methodologies of Performance Studies rather than traditional Theatre Studies, Kuftinec shifts the focus of scholarship from the aesthetic of the performance to the function of the performance, or in other words, to what the experience is like to those who participate. In this evaluative structure, no one can speak better to the experience than the participants, which empowers those whom mainstream theater studies might term “uninformed” by considering them the best source of knowledge.
With this shift in knowledge and power, the importance of having someone who performs the roles of critic and scholar is called into question:

Given the extent of communication among practitioners, the emphasis on documentation and self-evaluation, as well as on community inclusion in the entire process, one might well ask whether a role remains for community-based theater scholars beyond a kind of freeloading knowledge production. (16) Kuftinec answers this questioning with a list of roles which scholars can and should take, including participating as “documenters, historians, cultural critics, and interpreters and as artistic evaluators” (16). It bears mentioning that the roles Kuftinec envisions scholars playing within community-based performance can also be played by other participants. Much of her writing relies upon an archive that has been documented by those who are considered historians of particular processes. She includes many quotes spoken by participants who are critiquing their experiences cultural and artistically as well as interpreting their own and others words and actions. Kuftinec does not demand that she and other scholars be able to perform these roles exclusively, merely that participation be as open to scholars as to others, with an understanding that each perspective brings its own strengths and weaknesses.

Kuftinec does not clearly define how scholars should fill these roles, but instead she subtly gives examples of the ways in which she envisions scholars relating to community-based performance in her writings. I will examine how Kuftinec exemplifies the performance of these scholarly roles in Staging America for the purpose of understanding what kind of model she sets for future scholarly interaction with community-based performances. None of these roles are mutually exclusive and even in the moments where I identify her as primarily performing one role, she is usually performing several, if not all, of the roles she mentions. The most pervasive
is, of course, interpreter, because Kuftinec inhabits a particular subject position and everything she writes is an interpretation from her particular perspective. However, for the purpose of clarity, I will select moments in the text where I believe one role becomes prominent, and I will explore how Kuftinec’s scholarly ideal can be seen in those moments.

THE SCHOLAR AS INTERPRETER

In order to understand how Kuftinec defines the role of interpreter, I will examine the audience which she intends to interpret to as well as the language which she uses to communicate. Kuftinec focuses on making meaning from information contained within an archive and communicating that meaning to scholars interested in theatre, community-based performance, and American identity, while simultaneously attempting to keep her language accessible to non-scholars. Kuftinec positions her study as useful not only in informing current and potential future practitioners, but also in disseminating community-based performance’s impact to “a wider audience” than those already engaged in similar practices (1). This indicates that she is focused on interpreting to those who may be unfamiliar with, and perhaps uninterested in, the field. In order to attract and keep this audience, she needs to find an interpretive method that engages them by connecting to areas of their interest. She does this by using her study to explore larger questions about American identity:

In order to understand and complicate issues of identity fundamental to the ongoing negotiation of “America,” and to apprehend aspects of audience engagement crucial to the vitality of American theater, this field must be more explicitly surveyed. (1)

By using the community-based performance practices of Cornerstone to further understanding of broader cultural issues, Kuftinec models a scholarly interpretation method which opens up the
while Kuftinec establishes the relevance of her study to those outside the field of community-based performance, her audience is not all-inclusive. The specialized, theoretical, and sometimes dense language which allows other scholars to connect to Kuftinec’s topic may confuse, estrange, or bore others. A couple of staff members from the Cornerstone ensemble, including former artistic director Bill Rauch, expressed disappointment in Kuftinec’s theoretically-heavy language in an early draft, calling it “densely intellectual” (xvi). While Kuftinec took these thoughts into consideration in future drafts by balancing abstract language with the concrete examples and application, she was careful not to remove her scholastic perspective. She maintained a theoretical framework because she believes that “Scholars and practitioners of community-based theater work with concepts that deserve and demand a more sophisticated kind of thinking than that required by everyday life” (xvi). In her use of scholarly language and technique, Kuftinec models an interpretation that seeks to simultaneously respect the people and the work of community-based performance. She respects the work by acknowledging its complexity with scholarly language while simultaneously respecting the people through consciously making her writing more accessible rather than more esoteric. Given the problematic history between scholars and community-based performance practitioners, Kuftinec does well to attempt to make her writing available to non-academics as well as scholars. However, as will be seen in her performance of the rest of the scholarly roles, this does not mean that her interpretations are simple. She is not satisfied with merely describing events from Cornerstone’s past but, is always focused on the move from “archival interpretation to ethnography” (111).
THE SCHOLAR AS DOCUMENTER

This openness to complexity and desire for a deeper understanding can be seen in the ways in which Kuftinec exemplifies the role of documenter of Cornerstone’s work. When documenting in a young field which they wish to further, scholars can easily fall into the trap of presenting a single, celebratory, and unified vision of their subject. Kuftinec seeks to avoid such over-simplification through a “documentation and analysis of Cornerstone as a community-based theater” that explores the “complexities, compromises, and conundrums—as well as the pleasures—that undergird the practice of developing performance with nonprofessionals” (2). Kuftinec understands that she is presenting a company which “embodies several shifting identities,” so in order to do this, she interacts with several extremely different moments and voices from Cornerstone’s past (41). Kuftinec chooses to document three unique events in Cornerstone’s past; the national tour of *A Winter’s Tale*, the transition from being a traveling ensemble to settling permanently in Los Angeles, and two collaborations with the regional theatres the Arena Stage in Washington D.C. and the Long Warf Theatre of New Haven, Connecticut. Because none of these performances can be called characteristic activities of Cornerstone, Kuftinec may appear to be vulnerable to my critique of Leonard’s exploration of Los Angeles Poverty Department in *Performing Communities* which will appear later in this study; that is, the use of a non-characteristic performance to understand and summarize a company.

Both events that Kuftinec extensively documents as well as Los Angeles Poverty Department’s “Agents and Assets” are departures from the usual work done by the respective companies, but while Leonard uses the performance to understand the essence of Los Angeles Poverty Department, Kuftinec uses the three unique events to illustrate Cornerstone’s identity as
“more dynamic than rooted, exemplified in movement rather than locality” (6). Because Cornerstone, its individual participants, the field of community-based performance, and American identity are fluid and ever-changing, they can only be understood when viewed through these characteristics. Because of this, it is necessary for Kuftinec to present multiple moments of Cornerstone’s past. She chose unique moments in her profiling of the company because these have the greatest ability to highlight values, conflicts, and changing identity. However, since Leonard and Kilkelly are seeking to present a stable and essential summary of Los Angeles Poverty Department, they should have been more careful about their points of investigation because if they examine the wrong moment or event, as I claim they did in this instance, their expression of the essence of that company will not be correct. Conversely, Kuftinec seeks to illustrate the fluid and ever-changing nature of Cornerstone in the stable media of a published book. By documenting diverse moments in Cornerstone’s past, she avoids the trap of presenting a single and consistent vision of Cornerstone’s identity.

Kuftinec continues this portrayal of a fluid Cornerstone by documenting a polyphonic response to community-based performance. She weaves together the voices of Cornerstone ensemble members, participants from collaborative communities, critical non-participants, theatre scholars, cultural theorists, with her own divided voices of scholarly critic and artistic participant. Not only do these voices come from various cultural positions, they also express vast differences of opinion that bring up tensions and contradictions within Cornerstone’s history. She quotes former company member David Reiffel’s remarks that despite the ostensible form of equal communal management, there were many “ unofficial sort of channels of power and influence that kept some ideas from fruition” (43). Though a dismissing response from Cornerstone leaders is also included, the inclusion of criticism that expresses the belief that this
company was flawed encourages the reader to use the company as a tool for understanding the field rather than as an ideal model for future companies to be built upon. This is just one way in which Kuftinec gears her documentation towards analysis and evaluation rather than merely reporting facts.

Additionally, Kuftinec includes many questioning statements about the temporary and potentially condescending nature of Cornerstone’s relationship with the communities with which they worked (51-52). She cites two newspaper reviews of Ghurba, expressing contradictory opinions of the show’s ability to reflect Arab culture (116, 117). Also, after describing how Cornerstone participants, Cornerstone leaders, and local leaders disagreed about the race-conscious adaptation of Romeo and Juliet in Port Gibson, Mississippi, Kuftinec notes “there may be no single authentic vision of the community. Given this multiplicity of visions and values, the question of how best to represent a community through locally situated adaptation remains thorny” (71). Kuftinec could have expressed belief in the authenticity of Cornerstone’s vision and dismissed the negative responses of local leaders as blind to segregation or the fears of participants as too traditional. However, instead of supporting only Cornerstone’s perspective, she acknowledges that others’ visions of the community could be as authentic as the official company stance. By including and respecting a polyphone of dissident voices, Kuftinec models a way in which scholarly documenters can avoid presenting a celebratory, uncritical, single-voiced view of a community-based performance company.

SCHOLAR AS HISTORIAN

Kuftinec faces similar challenges in illustrating the fluidity of community-based performance when she attempts to place Cornerstone within an historical context without falling back on positivist absolutes. Just as the practice of community-based performance calls for a
reimagining of traditional power structures and values, scholarship in this field should question standard histories. The past of community-based performance is as disparate as the present, and to position a single history in a way that claims to be all-encompassing is to reinforce ways of telling the past which privilege fame and further erases the controversies and contradictions of previous practice. Many writers deal with this tricky task by including a brief note that the historical genealogies enclosed are not all-encompassing but instead represent a relatively small percentage of community-based performance. While this attempt may mollify the author’s conscience, examining which ensembles or communities are included in the history indicates clearly to the reader that the author considers these movements to be significantly more important to the field as a whole than those not included. It is difficult to resist positivist leanings that indicate the legitimacy of the performances based upon being direct descendents and end results of previous (usually well-known) practices. This is not to say that community-based performance scholars are poor historians, merely that I have rarely met with a tracing of history that I feel adequately accomplishes the extremely difficult obligation of providing a historical context for community-based performance without a traditional privileging of famous companies and cause-and-effect patterns. Kuftinec, though not perfect, provides a model for the historian which steps away from these traditions towards a new way of finding history.

Kuftinec includes the obligatory advisory that she “does not offer a comprehensive historical account of community-based theater or an authoritatively complete chronicle of Cornerstone Theater,” but she also goes beyond this to indicate that the historical tracings she presents were picked for their particular relevance to her perspective rather than their importance to community-based performance as a whole (5). By positioning herself as “more mercenary than missionary,” Kuftinec is able to write a history which is obviously one scholar’s limited
selection of a few historical moments that inform a particular perspective on the field (24). By mercenary, Kuftinec means that she is neither the missionary championing community-based performance nor the objective scientist merely presenting facts about its past and present, but that she is instead picking through the archive and through her experience to find what moments in the history of community-based performance are pertinent to her particular areas of interest. In short, to be mercenary is to be in explicit service to a particular goal. In truth, all historians are always mercenary, selecting the information they present based on its relationship to their topic and point. Kuftinec is unusual in that she forefronts this subjectivity, and in doing so she models a scholarly historicism that is in keeping with community-based performance’s emphasis multiplicity and flexibility.

She selects four historical trends that relate directly to her consideration of Cornerstone as reflective of American identity formation: progressivism and pageantry; representation and grassroots theater; socialism, identity politics, and community-specific theaters; and radical coalition building and the American Festival Project (26). With the exception of the last, these moments center on ideas, feelings, and movements that accompanied times in theatre and America’s history rather than on specific companies or performances. This paints a picture of Cornerstone as emerging from trends that cannot entirely be pinned down rather than from solid genealogies and passed-down traditions. The threads that she finds in common between these trends and Cornerstone are issues of performance and “participatory representational practices, politics, and American identity” (26). Her history is not centered on understanding community-based performance; rather, it is centered on understanding how community-based performance is reflective (or not reflective) of American identity. By situating herself as a mercenary, Kuftinec shows ways in which a scholar can trace and use a history of community-based performance
while fighting against positivist and limiting views of progressive history. This also allows her to interact with the history of Cornerstone as a scholar and a cultural critic rather than as a reporter of solid facts from Cornerstone’s past.

THE SCHOLAR AS CULTURAL CRITIC

In her role as cultural critic, Kuftinec demonstrates how a scholar can do more than reflect community-based performance back to itself. That end in itself is respectable, but can easily fall into celebratory description devoid of the critical engagement that is vital for improvement. Cultural criticism may seem irrelevant to community-based performance because, while the former usually focuses on culture as a national, or at least regional, activity, the latter is about the specifics of a relatively small group of people coming together to create a performance. However, when Kuftinec explores the implications of Cornerstone’s work, she considers them on the national level, as reflective of all America, not just the communities directly involved. She acknowledges the specificity and lack of universality in Cornerstone’s development and production, but also finds ways in which these small communities can be seen as somewhat representative of the larger culture. American culture is full of such diversity and difference that no single definition of it can fully reflect its complexity. Kuftinec finds that “[t]he negotiation of individual identity and collective experience marks community and nation with more complexity and specificity than stabilizing definitions” (13). She considers the different communities with which Cornerstone engaged to be microcosms in which to view how Americans, in all their uniqueness, act out this personal and public negotiation of self. With this positioning, Kuftinec sets up community-based performance as important to study, write, and read about not because of what it teaches us about community-based performance, but because of what it tells us about ourselves as artists, as Americans, and as human beings. In this way, Kuftinec models a way in
which cultural critics can use community-based performance to explore issues that extend to the larger community. Kuftinec also exemplifies cultural criticism which welcomes complications and contradiction, never being satisfied with an easy summation. This can be seen in her exploration of community and Cornerstone.

Entire books have been dedicated to the act of defining community, and most community-based performance texts offer a preface full of limitations of and expansions upon this concept. Kuftinec includes her share of quotes about and analyses of what makes up community, but she is “less concerned with pinning down either ‘culture’ or ‘community’ than with looking at how they are enacted and negotiated through community-based practices” (10-11). Instead of confining explorations of community to the forward or introduction, her entire book plays with the idea of community as she explores the community of Cornerstone, the communities Cornerstone engages with, and the larger American community as seen through these interactions. She finds community to be ever-changing, characterized by negotiation and fluidity rather than by stability or permanence.

In order to illustrate the shifting nature of community, she interacts with the moments before, during, and after a group identifies themselves as a cohesive community. Community is often the starting place as well as the goal of community-based performance: such performances are developed around a shared experience or identity with the ideal goal of creating what Victor Turner calls “spontaneous communitas,” a temporary feeling of intense connectedness and equality (132). Kuftinec notes numerous moments of communitas created by Cornerstone performances, including at the Watts performance of Los Faustinos and at the Montgomery production of Three Sisters from West Virginia (81, 126, 181). However, she also acknowledges that these communities do not always identify as having commonality. Cornerstone often
worked with individuals that were brought together through Cornerstone’s efforts, such as public meetings, private conversations, and connections with local leaders (62-63). Even during the development process, the community is unstable, losing or gaining individuals based upon Cornerstone’s ability to live up to that individual’s standard. The moments in community life which Kuftinec seems most interested in are the ones which are usually talked about the least: the moments after *communitas*. A necessary part of Turner’s definition of spontaneous *communitas* is that the euphoric connections cannot last forever (132). Many describers and evaluators of community-based performance prefer to end in that moment of successful *communitas*, suspending the community forever in connection. However, Kuftinec critically engages with the changes, conflicts, and moving-ons that occur after these blissful moments. Rather than freezing the frame on the moment of success, Kuftinec explores “interactions that both animate and disrupt community in an ongoing process of reweaving” and finds that community-based performance “ultimately destabilizes community” (61, 62). She is not, however, condemning community-based performance for this destabilization because it occurs naturally in any community. Just as in her demonstration of documentation, Kuftinec models a cultural criticism which interacts with a concept at multiple moments in time, understanding that meaning and identity are not constant.

THE SCHOLAR AS ARTISTIC EVALUATOR

The final role that I will examine Kuftinec performing is that of the artistic evaluator. In Kuftinec’s description and performance of the role of the scholarly artistic evaluator within community-based performance, she exemplifies an “in-betweenness of the scholar-practitioner that respects the expressed goals of practitioners, asserts the responsibilities of the critic to express indignation, and attends to the voices of community participants” (17). This is an especially
tricky role to re-imagine, as artistic criticism is historically based upon an aesthetic of beauty, structure, and meaning that is claimed to be universal, though it is fraught with the power hierarchies of culture and personal preferences of the responder. By proposing “a more collaborative approach with practitioners and participants, one that acknowledges the multiple frames of interpretation that designate a project as ‘good’ or ‘successful’,” Kuftinec redefines what artistry means within community-based performance, placing value in ethical practice and community animation and in inclusion of community members rather than in the arbitrarily decided beauty of the performance (17).

She models such artistic evaluation through her in-depth exploration of the various moments of Cornerstone’s history which she selects. As described above, she attempts to create a polyphonic version of Cornerstone, one that includes both supportive and disapproving voices. However, some disapproving voices, such as a disappointed patron who attended the collaborative between Cornerstone and the Taper Theatre who called Cornerstone’s work “Sophomoric, amateur, insulting,” are included to highlight conventional artistic critique as less fit for evaluating community-based performance than Kuftinec’s more nuanced approach (23). However, Kuftinec herself accepts conventional measures of artistry in her personal evaluation of the first performance she witness by Cornerstone: “I had not expected the performance to be so moving and engaging, so ‘good’ ” (112). Though she includes quotation marks around the word “good”, indicating she is aware that she is accepting traditional standards of excellence, by including this response, Kuftinec evidences that she has not entirely done away with those standards. I doubt that Kuftinec would have written this study if she did not believe that Cornerstone meets conventional definitions of good art as well as often, if not always, meeting the additional requirements of inclusion and ethical practice that have are expected of
community-based performance. Perhaps an artistic evaluator of community-based performance must add additional questions to an evaluation of community-based performance, but the traditional emphasis on pleasing an audience still exists. In fact, if this were not the case, I would fail to see how Kuftinec differentiates between the roles of cultural critic and artistic evaluator. Why is an artistic evaluator needed to fill the role of asking questions about inclusion and ethics if these questions are already asked by a cultural critic? Perhaps the essence of her envisioning of the two roles is that artistic evaluators can never fill that role unless they also play the role of cultural critic. In short, an artistic evaluator is a cultural critic with the additional eye of an audience member who seeks to be moved by a performance. However, these differentiations are not clear in Kuftinec’s text, and this is certainly an area that would benefit from further exploration as the role of an artistic evaluator in community-based performance has historically been one of the most controversial.

CONCLUSION

In her description and demonstration of the roles scholars can perform as “documenters, historians, cultural critics, and interpreters and as artistic evaluators” within community-based performance, Kuftinec presents a positive model for future scholars of community-based performance to follow (16). As an interpreter, she presents information from the archive to a wider audience of scholars through theoretical language while attempting to make the language still accessible to other practitioners of community-based performance through concrete application of ideas. By documenting multiple moments and voices in the history of Cornerstone, Kuftinec creates a varied and shifting view of Cornerstone’s identity, which she then uses to create an complicated understanding of American identity. Her positioning of herself as mercenary is vital to this model of community-based scholarship because it enables her
to use her research to reach a more nuanced understanding rather than for promotion of the field. Never settling in simple definitions and answers, Kuftinec creates a complicated and nuanced cultural critique of Cornerstone’s interaction with communities. In all this, she calls for a new value system for artistic interpretation, one which values inclusion, community activation, and ethical practices. While presenting a model for the roles a scholar can play, she also demonstrates an attitude of humility toward her subject, a respectful questioning which future scholars would do well to follow. Her humility may best be exemplified in her “welcome [of] all ongoing revisions,” based on an understanding that her work is incomplete because the field, the company, and interpretive strategies are constantly changing (22).

With this book, Kuftinec demonstrates that scholarly interaction with community-based performance that is both rigorously scholastic and respectful of community-based values is possible. Six years have passed, however, since this publication, and few similar books have followed in its footsteps. Though publication in the field of community-based performance has increased, the tendency is towards surveys of current and past practice. I am unaware of any other extended study of a single company which connects the field to broader topics, but rather I find texts presenting diverse companies and techniques with the purpose of dissemination their practices and techniques rather than evaluating them. I believe such publication can be helpful in propagating the field, but I believe it should be accompanied by a more scholarly perspective in order to explore our actions more deeply for assurance that we are proceeding in a way that matches our values.
CHAPTER TWO: PRAISE AND SIMPLIFICATION IN PERFORMING COMMUNITIES

The book Performing Communities is acknowledged by all involved in its writing as a group effort, which Robert H. Leonard likens to the nature of community-based performance, which is created “through partnerships and mutual endeavor” (vii). Eight interviewers gathered commentary and writings from over fifty participants in eight community-based performance companies in the United States, diverse in size, longevity, organizational structure, and goal (viii). Primarily from reading this information, community-based performance practitioner-scholars Robert H. Leonard and Ann Kilkelley wrote short descriptions of the work done by these community-based performance companies, which were then paired with samples of performance texts. The collection is edited by Linda Frye Burnham and includes an introduction contributed by Jan Cohen-Cruz.

On the face of it, such a study would seem invaluable. However, rather than providing much needed evaluation and comparative analysis, the editors and authors of this book chose to present the diverse positions of community-based performance across the United States sans assessment. After my first reading of this book, I was left somewhat confused as to the goal the authors were trying to achieve and whom they intended as an audience for this writing. I suspect that what they wished to accomplish was to increase general knowledge about community-based performance companies to those who are relatively new to such practices. While I applaud this desire, I believe, as I detail below, that this goal could have been more fully accomplished if the creators of this book had focused more upon analysis rather than description. My intention is not to degrade the creators of this book. I enter into this critique in order to highlight what I consider to be the weaknesses of this book so that future authors may write with wariness toward these potential downfalls.
While the contributors avoid the common error of gathering behind a single explicit message about the shape and scope community-based performance within the United States, the contradictions and layers of meaning presented merely tell the reader several versions of what is going on without giving any evaluative tools. I appreciate the effort these writers put toward disseminating some practices of community-based performance, but I believe the study could have been much improved through comparative analysis, that is examining these various companies in a way which highlights not just the similarities, but also the differences and contradictions that exist between them. Several obstacles stood in the way of such activity, and in this chapter, I will explore what I identify as some of the short-comings in the methods and perspectives behind the writing of this study of the field.

DISCONNECT BETWEEN CREATORS

The multiple creators of this book do not connect with each other to explore contradictions in the field of community-based performance, as illustrated in the disconnect between Burnham’s short preface and the thoughts of the authors and the interviewees. Not only does her terminology differ from Leonard and KilKelly, but also her writing illustrates an acceptance of mainstream evaluation and power structures which contradicts values espoused by several interviewees. Burnham believes this study is parallel to the growing interest in “ensemble theater” in the United States as seen in festivals, funding, and education (2). She also justifies the existence of such a study by pointing to the “number of ensemble-theater leaders [who] have been honored with national awards” including the “so-called ‘Genius’ award” (2). Not only is Burnham’s conflation of ensemble theatre and community-based performance problematic, but her celebration of awards that focus on individual leaders contrasts with Cohen-Cruz’s comment in the same volume that “[c]ommunity-based ensembles strive for a more
egalitarian ideal [than mainstream theatre]. They do not embrace the star system” (6). I am left asking whether Burnham is correct in that geniuses are the lynch pin of community-based performance, or whether Cohen-Cruz’s egalitarian ideals are more reflective of most community-based performance practices. For the answer, I look to Leonard and Kilkelly’s writings in the same volume, and I find that both are true.

Community-based performance structures are often similar to the traditional theatrical hierarchy, in which a founding member or an artistic director holds more power than the rest of the company. One example of this can be found in Leonard’s writing on Cornerstone, the same company which Kuftinec explores in Staging America. Leonard uses a large majority of quotes from founding members Bill Rauch and Alison Carey, who at the time of this publication were the artistic director and resident writer, respectively, for Cornerstone (72, 69). In contrast to Carey’s comment that “The company’s aesthetic is to include the community’s dialogue with itself in the script, which calls for opposing voices and layers of meaning and a vital richness,” Leonard chooses to primarily include two agreeing voices (74). It appears that, at least at Cornerstone, geniuses are the impetus behind community-based performance. However, in Kilkelly’s essay, in the same volume, on Jump-Start Performance Co., conversations with and descriptions of the work of five different company members with various connections to the company are included. Now it appears that community-based performance is the result of the many working together in equality.

But upon returning to Leonard’s chapter on Cornerstone, I find that the emphasis is placed on an individual again, but on someone other than a founding company member. Founding member Rauch calls attention to the need for an advocate, which he describes as “one person in a community making the leap of faith” by committing their energies to moving a
project from thought to actuality (77). The advocate can come from either the performance company or the community he or she interacts with, and the need for such an advocate is, according to Rauch, “true in every project” (77). According to Rauch, many projects fail because of the lack of such an individual (77).

I find that both Burnham’s and Cohen-Cruz’s contradictory descriptions of the importance of the individual or the group in community-based performance are true, and in fact the roles of responsibility can be even more nuanced than either writer acknowledges. However, this difference between community-based performance practices, which illustrates that there is no single way to do community-based performance, is never emphasized in the text. The authors’ disagreement in terminology and the seeming contradictions in the values and practices of various companies can be confusing to readers. Future authors would do well to note that, when attempting to create a text that reflects multiple voices, cohesion is still an important element.

**LACK OF DEFINITIONS**

One way to find consistency between the different voices would be to present a solid definition of community-based performance, then explore how each company both fills the requirements of and challenges the limits of the definition. As I have stated earlier, no single definition would fully encompass the diversity represented by these eight companies, but by using such a frame, the authors would have the freedom to explore deeper complexities of each company.

For example, the Dell’Arte company in Blue Lake, California, tests the edges of common definitions of community-based performance. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, community-based performance is often described as performance “by, for, and about the
community” (9). However, a community member’s standard involvement with Dell’Arte is first as the object of an interview and then as an audience member, though community members have occasionally been asked to play themselves onstage. To claim a performance is “by” a community without involving them in the process of writing (other than by interviews) and without featuring them onstage may seem a bit disingenuous. However, many community members believe Dell’Arte is a more than adequate reflection of Blue Lake, because of, as Charlene Sanders puts it, “Dell’Arte kind of being the heart of Blue Lake” (95). This is true physically, with Dell’Arte being located downtown, but also spiritually. Co-artistic director Joan Schirle believes “It is basically a mirror image of this little town that we live in” (92). By a strict definition of authorship, Dell’Arte’s performances may not be “by” community members because they are not specifically included in the theatre ensemble, which is made up of trained theatre practitioners. However, they feel an ownership of and participation in the product that justifies calling Dell’Arte a community-based performance ensemble. Comparing this situation to a definition of community-based performance could have showed ways in which this company uniquely imagines connections to the community.

Another company that stretches, and maybe even breaks, definitions of community-based performance is the Jump-Start Performance Company that Kilkelly discusses. While most of the companies described within this publication make use of a group of obviously interdependent artists, Jump-Start is made up of “a powerful mélange of individual artists,” believing in the “individual imagination” (111). Their performers are often “deeply rooted in specific communities united by ethnicity, neighborhood, sexuality, art medium, political struggle, age, gender or collective vision,” but the ensemble members have little in common other than a passion to create theatre (112). To say that “Jump-Start’s definition of community is very broad
and inclusive” is an under-statement (111). When asked what image or descriptive words would best represent their company, ensemble member Lisa Suarez replied:

I was thinking this big old giant ANYTHING. Draw a sign on the wall. Sure, I mean there is anything, if you are willing to work at it and do it you can do it here. We’ve left it open to just about anything. If you believe in it. (127)

Jump-Start defines the boundaries of their community not by normalizing identity markers or by a geographical location, but instead by passion and willingness to work. They do not limit their performances to work about specific issues or including only specific people, but instead accept any piece into their canon “when it is created by a company member” (113).

In order to understand how such a diverse, seemingly unconnected, group of people can be considered a community, I will turn to Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities. According to Anderson’s definition, a community can be made up of a group of people who “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). According to this perspective, communities are made up of those who believe themselves to be a community, as the members of this company do. This diversity of performance and creators is held together by what company playwright Dianne Monroe refers to as “some kind of magic glue,” but what Anderson might call “a deep, horizontal comradeship” in which everyone is different but all are believed to be connected (Leonard 111, 7). While Kilkelly praises the members’ ability to stay together despite their diversity, she ignores how unique and potentially revolutionary this community is. By acknowledging that the community they take part in is entirely of their own making and is not a result of a natural bond, nor of commonly experienced identity markers, nor of a common physical location, they avoid many essentializing pitfalls, like those described in my Forum
Theatre experience in the introduction of this study. However, because no definition of community-based performance is presented by the authors, the uniqueness of this community is not fully acknowledged.

Teatre Pregones, a company described by Leonard, also challenges limiting definitions of community, but in a different way than Jump-Start. Many community-based theatre practitioners define community by physical location, as seen in Cohen-Cruz’s introduction to Performing Communities, or by non-normative identity markers. These practitioners assume that with these shared characteristics of place or identity-markers comes a shared history and perspective on the world. For Pregones, community goes beyond the concept of neighborhood to a “community of ideas, of the struggle for identity, of shared common interests that go beyond geographic terms” (151). One audience member noted that the connection they felt to the performers came not from a shared location but from shared cultural experience, including language and food (153). Leonard does well to note that

The art of Pregones is inseparable from its community. This does not mean its neighborhood. It does not strictly mean its lingual home. Rather it means the community from which its audience springs, the people who share with Pregones common trust, hope, and joy. (Kilkelly 156)

With this and other similar comments, Leonard hints that Pregones’ non-spatial definition of community is unusual, but he never directly addresses what I see as a need for an enlarged definition of the communities that can take part in community-based theatre. To define community exclusively upon place privileges groups who have remained in an area for an extended time, denying the possibility of community to those who have recently immigrated or to those who often move, perhaps due to financial instability. Leonard could have used Pregones
to call for slightly broader thinking on the part of community-based performance scholars and practitioners when defining community, but because no stable definition is used to contrast these companies against, this opportunity was lost.

Kilkelly’s presentation of Carpetbag Theatre of Knoxville, Tennessee, would also benefit from an explanation for its inclusion in this collection despite being admittedly “artist-centered” rather than open to participation from the community (47). In my reading of Carpetbag’s work based on Kilkelly’s writings, it appears that Carpetbag, though perhaps a good theatre company, may not be a community-based company. Though the theatre claims to reflect back themes and stories of the community, how these thoughts and concerns from the community make their way into the company is a never described (52). While many examples of Carpetbag’s attempts at “giving back” to the community are present, when asked how the community contributes to the company, a board member focused on the limitations placed by the community: “If the community was more pro-active, then Carpetbag could be more pro-active. But Carpetbag, to me, is limited like any other institution is limited by virtue of where they are and where the people are” (53, 55). With this statement, the board member draws a line between “the community” and Carpetbag, indicating that they are not the same.

The language of the artists reveals ideas about the duality and separation of their work, not only between the “out” (community) and the “in” (artists), but also between the work serving the community and work that satisfies and feeds the artist (56, 57). This company does not meet Anderson’s definition of community because they do not meet the requirement that “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Carpetbag is not a part of their community because they are “focused clearly on [a] mission of empowerment to specific groups” while believing that they are in some way separate from those groups (58). In short, Carpetbag is not
part of the community they attempt to empower because the ensemble identifies themselves as different from and outside of that community. I struggle, then, to see how Carpetbag fits into any definition of community-based performance because they deny their connection to the community. This is not to say that their work is bad, but merely that I cannot understand it as community-based.

My knowledge is, of course, limited to what Kilkelly presents, and my understanding of Carpetbag’s inclusion in this collection might be improved by the presence of a definition and a positioning of each company in relationship to that definition. A clear definition would be particularly helpful in this case because, as I assume, Leonard and Kilkelly are writing for an audience who is unfamiliar with this sort of performance. Presenting a definition and using each company to further complicate that definition would assist readers toward a nuanced understanding of community-based performance.

LACK OF COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The creators of this book look for ways to make these diverse companies appear to be similar, and I believe this is a loss to the study. When the authors Kilkelly and Leonard comparatively explore the eight companies in the opening essay “Findings: Knowing the Secrets Behind the Laughter,” they look for commonalities rather than differences between the community-based performance companies. This chapter follows the introduction, and is intended to be read before the chapters describing the particular companies. Because of its placement, it sets the tone for how to view the information in the following chapters. By emphasizing commonalities and downplaying difference, the authors indicate that this book intends to find some essential truths about community-based performance that are consistent up from chapter to chapter and situation to situation. While I am not calling on the authors to
remove all references to similarities between the companies, I think it would behoove them to also analyze the differences that exist. This would create an appreciation of the variety of difference within community-based performance that could free the reader to imagine new and different practices of community-based performance.

As noted above, while claiming to be community-based, Carpetbag nonetheless seems out of step with its community. I do not deny the importance of theatre that challenges the assumptions and comfort zones of its audiences, but a company that is “very much on the edge,” to the point of alienating its audiences may not be most appropriately called community-based (55). Kilkelly acknowledges challenges that accompany a dedication to political engagement, but ends up praising Carpetbag’s continued “focus on direct impact and the empowerment of artists” (56). She also recognizes a direct connection between the empowerment of an artist and engagement with the community:

> For many artists, the discovery that political and social commitments can be addressed in art making [...] connects individual identity to a particular community and confers legitimation on the passion for art making. This passion for the art itself is a strong characteristic of Carpetbag’s work; the joy in the making, in the individual’s discovery that her/his own material has an interest for others. (48)

Unfortunately, Carpetbag’s work seems focused on the artists’ sense of legitimation through art for social change rather than on creating work that interests the community. Perhaps being a “Cheerleader for the Revolution,” as Kilkelly’s subtitle positions them, is too loud for “the community [that] whispers things,” as one board member describes (45, 55).
Though Carpetbag may appear to be focused on artists at the expense of the community, the loss is not one-sided. One long-term member mourns the individual artistic experiences that used to feed him:

It used to be you could get the empowerment rush through the organization, but still you could stop and get an individual grant to work on an individual project, and that would feed the other part of yourself. So now, that other part, the individual part, is sort of crippled in art so that you can fulfill the social part of your mission. (56)

According to Kilkelly’s summary, neither the community nor the company is experiencing the empowering and fulfilling artistic experience that is often the goal of community-based performance. Though Kilkelly does include these quotes, she does not fully acknowledge the seriousness of Carpetbag’s situation, in which they have artist who are burned out from their community-based work. Carpetbag is not alone in this situation, and rather than noting this issue in passing, Kilkelly would have done well to use comparative analysis to explore potential answers to this common problem.

In the chapter on Cornerstone, resident writer Alison Carey recognizes the danger of giving too much to community-based performance, warning that, “If you do this [work] for purely selfless reasons, you’re going to burn out soon” (70). A dangerous tendency of community-based theatre is embodied by the self-sacrificing artist who dedicates their art to serving others while it simultaneously empties the artist of energy and passion. Carey’s demand for a community art that feeds the individual is bold and rare, and it deserves further examination as to how this can be accomplished. Perhaps by comparing this philosophy to that of Carpetbag would have illuminated some pitfalls for community-based performance practitioners to avoid.
However, maybe that was not possible since different people wrote the two chapters. Perhaps dividing the writing of chapters between multiple people resulted in a lack of connection between companies and a loss of valuable comparative evaluation.

SIMPLIFICATION OF STRUGGLE AND SUCCESS

Even in the moments where the authors present a company’s problems or challenges, they are quickly hidden under a gloss of praise and faith. Kilkelly mentions a few of the struggles and frustrations of Carpetbag, including the ones previously noted, as well as funding frustration, difficulty in gaining public respect because of the political nature of their work, the additional pressures and stresses added by being “one of very few community-based ensembles directed by a woman of color,” and several others (54, 56, 58). This may at first appear to be an honest look at the struggles of community-based ensembles, but underneath this writing is the assumption that Carpetbag is essentially good and that the challenges they face are due entirely to weaknesses outside of their ensemble. While I have no reason to doubt that Carpetbag’s work has had a positive impact on their audience and their performers, Kilkelly’s praise-heavy description deprives readers of potential insights into problematic perspectives and applications of community-based performance.

However, I do not condemn Leonard and Kilkelly for this or the other oversights that I will describe below. While their perspective is generally one of idealizing the performance companies, they also have the handicap of working from interviews that other people conducted. Perhaps the authors are not able to delve more deeply into the contradictions or unique characteristics of these companies because the various “site visitors” who conducted the interviews did not pursue the topics to an understanding that is deeper than face value. While I
appreciate the communal effort behind the writing of this book, such a process may have hindered the ability of the authors to achieve depth and precision.

This style of celebratory, under-evaluative writing may be most evident in Performing Communities’ section on Cornerstone Theater Company, one of the most well-known and most written about community-based theatre companies within the United States. The version of Cornerstone that is present in this writing seems free from problems or inconsistencies. The description of Cornerstone is framed within the metaphors of falling in love with the community and the necessity of both “air” [art] and “oxygen” [diverse community] for survival (69, 72). In their interviews the leadership of the company focused on concepts that reflect the importance of relationship, such as desire, need, satisfaction, and respect (71). According to Leonard, through the application of these concepts Cornerstone succeeds in “build[ing] bridges between and within diverse communities” (80).

While Cornerstone is described as creating complex and sometimes controversial work, this chapter consistently presents only the positive perspective. I do not claim that Cornerstone is fraught with problems, but painting an entirely positive picture serves neither those reading about nor those participating in Cornerstone’s processes. For example, while this book was being written, Cornerstone was facing a leadership transition, as founding member Bill Rauch moved on to other projects. As is often the case with community-based performance groups, Cornerstone was seen by many as reliant on the passion and dedication of founding members, with the most visible one being Rauch. In 2004 Rauch had taken a short sabbatical to encourage the company to exist free of its founding members and during the writing of this book he was planning to leave Cornerstone permanently (Kuftinec 57). Leonard would have done well to acknowledge the challenge of losing this charismatic and dedicated leader and exploring how the
company was pursuing self-sustainability. Instead, Leonard quotes extensively from Rauch’s thoughtful and inspirational statements without exploring the potential gap left by his departure. Leonard does not take the opportunity to further investigate this and several other themes that could broaden the reader’s understanding of community-based theatre beyond the important but rather obvious themes of community and inter-dependence. Even as scholars of community-based performance seek to encourage the growth of the field, it is necessary that lay open its troubles and challenges. Praise and positive-spin may seem to be the best way to publicize a field, but the real work of the scholar is to reflect a more complicated picture of the successes and difficulties faced by these companies.

This lack of deep questioning not only glosses over any potential company flaws but also oversimplifies the success found in these companies. For example, the Dell’Arte Company creates what they call “Theatre of Place: theater created by, for and about the area in which you live” (92). As the name indicates, the company is heavily influenced by the tradition of commedia dell’arte with its use of exaggerated characterization, extreme physicalization, and humor, which allows them to explore the web of human relationships present in their location, usually by focusing on an issue that has been a recent hot topic locally or nationally (92). For thirty years, Dell’Arte has grown in Blue Lake, creating compelling theatre, starting an international school for training actors, and becoming an integral part of Blue Lake’s democratic processes (95, 100). However, Leonard presents a simplistic story of how this success was achieved.

When this ensemble was originally founded, it was made up entirely of “outsiders” who moved to Blue Lake from other locations, but since that time the group members have found a

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4 Since Rauch’s departure, Cornerstone has remained a respected leader in the area of community-based performance.
way to form a bond of trust with their community as a result of “lasting partnership” and “well-tried practice” (100). One community member believes Dell’Arte has succeeded “not only because they are good artists. I think that is secondary. They have become [pillars of the community] because they are good people” (98). From this telling, it seems as though all that is required to move from outsiders to insiders who “raised families” within the community and who are “loved, respected, and deeply appreciated” is patience, dedication, practice, and goodness (92). I would love to believe that this is all that is required for a successful community-based performance company to survive and thrive, but if that is true then companies who have a less utopian relationship with their community, such as Carpetbag, must be impatient, lazy, inexperienced, or bad.

While I agree with Leonard that Dell’Arte’s success was not a “coincidence,” I also believe that many more elements than those four qualities played a hand in their growth, including good luck and smart planning in the selection of location (97). While Leonard does not specify why this community was selected, he does describe that in 1977, when Dell’Arte was founded, the town of Blue Lake was facing the loss of their major industry and the potential demise of the town. The town was faced with major decisions, and, at that kind of moment, art which reflects a community to itself is helpful in forming solid community-identity through telling stories of itself and in releasing tension through humor. Factors such as this make Dell’Arte’s success much more complicated than merely having positive personality traits. Leonard and Kilkelley, as well as future scholars, would do better to look beyond the face value of the practices of these community-based performance companies in order to understand the complexities and potential contradictions of their successes.
UNQUESTIONING OF POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Leonard also does not fully question the implications of Los Angeles Poverty Department’s work. Los Angeles Poverty Department’s goal is “to create community where there was none, to create citizens where there were only survivors” (137). By creating art with homeless people from the area in downtown Los Angeles infamously called “Skid Row” (i.e., Central City East), Los Angeles Poverty Department seeks to empower marginalized homeless people in a creation of a self-identity as well as a communal identity (138-139). However, Leonard spends most of the chapter describing their most written about and publicized production, *Agents and Assassins*. I find this problematic in that the work is uncharacteristic of Los Angeles Poverty Department and in that Leonard fails to fully explore some of the political inconsistencies of the performance.

Unlike Los Angeles Poverty Department’s usual style of improvisation-based performance, this piece was lifted from a transcript of a Congressional hearing investigating CIA involvement in crack cocaine sales (135). Los Angeles Poverty Department hopes that through performance, member of the homeless community will be empowered to speak their voices in order to create and express their own identity, but in *Agents and Assassins* they are set up as victims to be pitied, a position which encourages the viewer to see them as objects rather than as subjects with agency. As described above, Leonard and Kilkelly seem to be trying to find well-tried best practices of community-based performance companies and disseminate them to others. Though *Agents and Assassins* may have met with approval from audiences, Los Angeles Poverty Department could probably be better understood if looked at through its traditional performance practices. However, this is a minor consideration compared to the unexplored political
implications I find in the performance. My negative response is in contrast to that of interviewer and praising audience member Ferdinand Lewis:

Text and context were clearly more important elements of the production than, say, performance technique. For the audience, it would be difficult to overlook the irony of hearing the words of educated, skilled politicians spoken by actors who at some point in their lives were casualties of the Wars on Drugs. I spoke with audience members who were moved by the production, and they all agreed that it was the act of witnessing an event so fraught with contextual weight that produced emotion in them, pathos for a plight, and not necessarily with the performer’s character. (135-136)

Leonard summarizes that the artistic director’s goal of “getting the voice of Skid Row out to the rest of Los Angeles and beyond was certainly achieved in the bitter irony Lewis describes” (136).

In my opinion, showcasing homeless people as a contrasting object to the education and power of CIA agents is objectifying rather than humanizing them. This performance seems to emphasize their helpless condition instead of presenting opportunity for individual and community empowerment. I expect that Los Angeles Poverty Department’s more common improvisation-based work is not as problematic, but I am disturbed that this performance would be highlighted when it is, in my opinion, fraught with unquestioned political inconsistencies. When summarizing this company, I believe Leonard’s responsibility is not to merely report the most well-known of their performances; instead, he has the obligation to question any performance’s efficacy in achieving the company’s goals.
Kilkelly’s summation of Roadside Theatre is similar in its lack of an examination of political implications. According to core ensemble member Dudley Cocke, the two most important characteristics of Roadside Theatre are its “accessibility and commitment to place” (179). He is, however, aware that “place” stands in for “the people here, the culture here, the heritage here” (179). Roadside is interested in the celebration and preservation of culture and identity of this stereotypically “backwards” region of Kentucky in contrast to “canned versions of Appalachian life that too often stand in as representations” (176). This celebration and preservation is achieved by the creation of new work that tries to “make that heritage new, to reinvent it. That’s what the fun of theater is” (179). The structure and practices of Roadside theatre offer no obvious inconsistencies with their political goals or with my definition of community-based theatre. However, looking at the history and changes the company has undergone reveals areas that warrant further examination.

Kilkelly recognizes the “gap between the work generated by communities and the original performance work generated by the company” (182). Earlier in their existence, Roadside focused on individual stories that came together to create ensemble experiences. Now, as the larger community has become the focus on and the number of performing artists has fallen substantially, personal story holds a less important place in Roadside’s work. Kilkelly briefly raises the question “is this a loss or a fulfillment of mission?” (182) She believes that many of the ensembles included in Performing Communities should be concerned with the same question, but she merely raises the question without exploring possible answers. She quickly dismisses this concern because of Roadside’s widespread impact on other community-based theatres, saying:
Roadside is a model for models – the dissemination of their methods and values seems to me assured beyond the present, in the seeding of many projects that are now growing their autonomous methods of using art and story. (183)

According to Kilkelly, Roadside must be good because everyone else is copying it. While Kilkelly considers Roadside’s long-term impact on community-based theatre a reason to be assured of the quality and longevity of the work, this widespread influence is precisely what makes it so important to evaluate whether Roadside’s goals are being achieved. Roadside’s journey from primarily artist- and individual-focused to communally focused offers the opportunity to evaluate the political implications and results of different approaches to community-based performance. These are the kinds of opportunities which scholars must seize and fully explore in order that we may come to a deeper understanding of community-based performance.

MISSING METHODS OF ANALYSIS

Perhaps the section that hints most at the shortcomings of Performing Communities is the chapter on Wagonburner Theatre, perhaps the most unique of the eight companies because “[t]hey have no single location, no building and no set organizational structure” (193). Wagonburner showcases the paradox and complexity that can exist within community-based performance as communities attempt to define their own, often counter-cultural, values while ultimately being unable to escape that same culture. While the company breaks out of the common community-based models in its lack of geographical identification and rejection of evaluation methods, Wagonburner believes it presents an “authentic voice” of “Indianness” in contrast to normative society (194). Even as the interviewers and authors of this book explore
Wagonburner, the interviewees reveal some potential issues within the evaluative structure and methods of the book.

Wagonburner director LeAnne Howe protested the evaluation surveys provided by interviewers, claiming “There is a subtraction process that takes place in the very act of accounting and quantifying, a process reflective of white culture” (194). This is the first mention that a survey was used to inform the text of Performing Communities. While forwards and introductions by editors and admired practitioners are pleasant and informative reading, I would prefer to be provided with the tools these writers used in evaluating these companies, such as the survey, question lists, and perhaps some verbatim interviews. This would open up the methods of evaluation to critique, which is especially important when evaluating organizations whose goal is often to reform the society that is evaluating it. While some explanation of the approach to the project is presented at the end of the book, if such a positioning were present at the beginning of the book, it would highlighting the viewpoints of the collectors and writers of the information as well their collection methods in order to give readers a fuller context.

CONCLUSION

Writing about community-based performance has many challenges, not the least of which is the demand on the part of readers that writing about the field reflect the often politically questioning nature of its practice and performance. Perhaps I demand too much when asking the creators of this book to write with an awareness of the traditional power structures and evaluative standards that have such a tight hold on writing and publication. However, I find the weaknesses in this book to be many, and because I believe that good scholarship is vital for the improvement of any young field, I point out these flaws in the hope that that such writing will improve. The disconnect between authors, the lack of comparative analysis from company to company, and the
belief that each company was inherently good all led to a book that rarely explored beyond
description and celebration. This is a deep loss to those wanting to know more about the
complexities and contradictions of community-based performance.

While I find this book lacking in various ways, as outlined above, I simultaneously
respect its creators and appreciating the effort that went into its creation, driven by the desire to
disseminate these ideas. However, I find that this writing format, with multiple writers
disconnected from each other and from their topics, does not allow for adequate examination of
community-based performance. I find myself asking whether the publication of this book,
incomplete as it was, is better than this book not being published. Even I, critical as I am,
learned about the existence of companies I did not know about before, and have a higher
awareness of the diversity of practice in community-based performance after reading this book.
I am sure that good has been done through the publication of this book in other ways that I
cannot fully know, such as an increasing respect, funding, or audiences for these companies, and
perhaps in raising awareness of community-based performance as a field. Perhaps I hold the bar
too high or do not fully understand the audience at which this book is targeted. The argument
could be made that this book serves as an excellent introduction to community-based
performance that anyone can access, including young students, experienced scholars, community
activists, and many others. Perhaps deeper exploration, comparative study, or contradictory
voices would have made this book inaccessible to those just beginning to learn about
community-based performance.

However, I argue that complication and exploration of problems are more engaging
topics than celebration, and that deeper exploration, which acknowledges the contradictions
inherent in community-based performance, would do more to earn supporters. Also, for those
interested in beginning their own community-based performance activities, I believe they would be better armed with a mixture of encouragement and warning, so they can avoid errors made by those who have gone this way before. Given the current amount and quality of publication and other material available on community-based performance, as indicated in my introduction and in the following two chapters, I believe current publication has the obligation to further the field in terms of quality rather than in terms of dissemination. It is my belief that scholars, readers, and practitioners in the field of community-based performance are prepared for deeper evaluation and more complicated analysis.
CHAPTER THREE: EMPOWERMENT AND HUMILITY IN COMMUNITY PERFORMANCE

Do you want to change the world through performance? Do you want to facilitate people so that more voices are heard, more moving bodies seen, more experiences felt? If so, this book can go on the journey with you. (Kuppers 2)

Petra Kuppers’s Community Performance: An Introduction is a book meant not for current practitioners or scholars with a general interest in community-based performance, as the earlier books I examined are, but is instead meant for students wanting to learn basic precepts of community-based performance that they can apply to their specific projects. In my earlier chapter, I position Kuftinec’s Staging America as evidence of the academic world’s acknowledgement of community-based performance as worthy of close scholarly study. Community Performance brings the academy and community-based performance into even closer relationship through structured training for the student within the academic setting. The reasons for this shift are probably multiple and ultimately unknowable: perhaps community-based performance has “proven” itself through its longevity and “effectiveness,” warranting canonization in the academy; perhaps, prompted by a zeitgeist which calls for a connection between scholarship and community, universities are seeking ways to train students and encourage faculty to engage with their communities; or perhaps this book is out of sync with the future of community-based performance and the academy and will quickly make its way to bargain bins.

Whatever the case may be, Community Performance is, as far as I am aware, the first example of a textbook focused on training people with little or no experience for facilitation of
community-based performance. While some books position themselves as training manuals, such as Michael Rohd’s *Theatre for Community, Conflict & Dialogue* and Boal’s *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, these books are not presented as textbooks for new students but rather as a collection of techniques that can improve and enlarge the practices of existing community-based performance practitioners. As the first example of what I believe to be the emerging texts on training students to be facilitators of community-based performance, *Community Performance* warrants a critical and thorough examination of what techniques are used to open up or close off understanding and participation in community-based performance. To accomplish this, I will examine how Kuppers positions the intended reader of this book as well as the reoccurring themes she presents within her text.

I begin by exploring a section of Kuppers’s epilogue in which she situates the texts, exercises, and meanings of this book in relationship to the community-based student-artist:

> Your map [of potential contacts and projects] and all this explanatory material can only ever be tools to help you as you actually engage the territory of community performance. Your main source of inspiration, knowledge and insight will be your own experience, and the generosity of the people you work with. And value your experience: share it, talk and write about your group’s work in your networks, so that our resource box of inspirations and exercises grows heavier and fuller. (228)

As shown in this epilogue as well as in the quote included at the beginning of this chapter, Kuppers assumes the reader to be an active “you” who contains a passion to create change without the knowledge of how to go about it.
EMPOWERMENT OF STUDENTS

This “you” has an interest in performance, but may or may not be a member of the community with which he or she wishes to work, and the first half of the book talks about how to find and organize a group, indicating that a majority of projects will involve a community of which “you” is not a member. Community Performance marks a move away from the emphasis on grass-roots theatre, which is developed and performed within a community, toward the model of external facilitators organizing community-based performance through interaction with a community with which they do not initially identify. Such performance is vulnerable to Cohen-Cruz’s concern that facilitators who attempt to engage with a community without a shared “core identity with the people in the context in which they work” may be able to “catalyze and support, but are less likely to sustain radicality because they constantly move on to other projects” (Leonard 14). I recognized the potential for such short-term impact as well as other issues of appropriation and abuse. Such concerns have paralyzed me in my own attempts to work alongside of communities, as I feared that my theatre training gave me too much inappropriate authority or that my relatively short membership to the community gave me too little “authentic” authority. While I value grass-roots performance, I appreciate the more open potential for participation offered by community-based performance as envisioned by Kuppers.

Students are often among those who could be denied participation in grass-roots performance because they are newcomers to many of their communities and because they are a member of the academy, a place of traditional power which grass-roots performance often seeks to contest. Kuppers does not blatantly address such concerns, but her text subtly gives agency, or at least the hope of agency, to college students by positioning them as potentially active in community engagement and performance. This contrasts not only with ideas about grass-roots
performance but also with the other two texts examined in this study. Where *Staging America* and *Performing Communities* tell of what others have done, *Community Performance* tells what “you” can do. The former two look backwards to synthesize meanings from previous practices, while the latter aims at shaping the practices of the future.

**THE MODEL READER AND EXTRA TEXT**

Moreover, this book expects action from “you” not only in future community-based projects, but also in the moment of reading. I will examine how Kuppers pursues this goal by shaping the intended reader of this book to be an active meaning maker. In my exploration, I will keep with Umberto Eco’s idea of the Model Reader, that is, the possible reader for whom the author codes his or her writing (Eco 7). Eco claims that this Model Reader has competence made up “from outside the text” but that the author also organizes a text so that it “works to build up, by merely textual means, such a competence” within the model reader (8). In short, Kuppers expects the Model Reader, hereafter referred to as “you,” to bring prior experience to the text, and she shapes her text in such a way that these experiences are vital to an understanding of the book and of community-based performance.

When Kuppers writes, “[t]his book attempts to engage you, and make you an active participant,” she is referring not only to community-based performance projects “you” will do in the future, but also to the research and reflection assignments that “you” is expected to engage with in the moment of reading in order to co-author the meaning of the book (16). Instead of setting up a solid definition of community-based performance, Kuppers invites “you to approach definitions as journeys, different paths, ways of moving” (3). She also presents her ideas of what community-based performance is and “way-marks in [her] journey of understanding the concept” (3). These definitions are not presented as absolute, but as shifting and open to
adjustments (3, 4). The closest she gets to a solid definition is led by the phrase “I understand community performance to be…” rather than “Community performance is…,” emphasizing the subjective nature of definitions and encouraging the students to compare her ideas and experiences to their own web of understanding (3). The accompanying reflection exercise asks “you” to write his or her own definitions of community based performance and compare these to definitions and perspectives presented throughout the book (4). Kuppers seems to be attempting a textbook in the tradition of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by presenting meaning as co-produced by teacher and student rather than as a set of monolithic catechisms to be deposited in the bank of the student (Freire 72, 81). Freire is often cited as an important influence on community-based performance, as is mentioned by both Kuftinec and Kuppers, and it seems only appropriate that his theories would be used not only in practice of but also in training for community-based performance.

Kuppers emphasizes the presence of “openness and dialogue” in meaning production not only by having “you” participate in meaning making, but by including the voices and experiences of practitioners other than herself (2). In so doing, she hopes to create a “sustaining web” of meaning that encourages “new thinking and experiencing” (2). Another way to understand this is to define Kuppers’s text as what Roland Barthes would call a “writerly text,” or a text which attempts to actively involve the reader in the creation and recreation of the text’s meaning, as opposed to a “readerly text,” or a text that imposes and limits meaning (Barthes 4). The ways in which Kuppers attempts to engage “you” in a writerly ways can be seen not only in the language she uses above, but also in the layout of the text, illustrations, and exercises within *Community Performance*. She uses a multiplicity of voices not only to reflect the polyphonic nature of community-based performance but also to encourage “you” to contribute “you” own
voice and previous experiences. The meaning of the book can only be found when all these voices come together.

I cannot describe a typical page layout in this book because each page is unique. In many theatre studies textbooks, for example, Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin Hildy’s *History of the Theatre*, the authors’ text dominates the page, with a few examples, pictures, or diagrams to illuminate and support the text and the authors’ argument. Perhaps a comparison to Brockett and Hildy’s textbook is not helpful because one might claim that a history textbook and a how-to-manual differ greatly in the pedagogical needs they are meeting. However, Francis Hodge and Michael McLain’s *Play Directing: Analysis, Communication, and Style*, which I believe is a how-to-manual of sorts, may contain more images than Brockett and Hildy’s, but the authors’ text and viewpoint still obviously dominates almost every page. In this comparison, I do not mean to indicate that Brockett and Hildy’s and Hodge and McLain’s textbooks are inferior to Kuppers’s, but merely that they are in a different style and that they employ different methods in order to attempt to stimulate a different type of learning. In *Community Performance*, Kuppers’s authorial text—that is the text that connects in an obvious teaching narrative and continues from page to page—is broken up by numerous pieces of information, some of which is primarily visual and some of which is textual.

While no typical page exists, I will describe one set of pages that illustrates that to which I am referring. When “you” opens up this textbook to pages eighty-four and eighty-five, “you” will see about fifty percent of page eighty-four filled with a boxed-off summary of a scientific study about the increase in neuron connection in people between the ages of fifty and seventy. Underneath this box are three sentences of Kuppers’s authorial text about access issues with children, followed by a picture of a community-based performance project in Houston and a gray
text box titled “The law and working with children” (84). On page eighty-five “you” sees about seventy percent of the page filled with a gray box with a “practice example” written by Anna Daly about a community-based dance project she organized. This is accompanied by a picture and Research Exercise 39 which asks “you” to research local children-oriented dance activities and compare them to Anna’s experience.

All together, less than thirty percent of the text in these two pages was written by Kuppers. While the other texts and images present are on a theme similar to that which Kuppers is tracing, they travel in a different direction than Kuppers, pointing to elements which she does not address and experiences she has not had. These various texts and images are intended to complicate and layer “your” understanding of the subject by interrupting the main narrative to illuminate a specific element or sometimes even calling into question the authority of other voices, for example in the coupling of Moises Kaufman’s comments on The Laramie Project and Theresa May’s ethical ponderings (140, 141). Conversely, the pictures, diagrams, and assignments found in Brockett and Hildy’s and Hodge and McLain’s text books clarify the text by repeating it in a different format (Brockett 294-295, Hodge 118-119). In short, the images in Brockett and Hildy’s and in Hodge and McLain’s books simplify the learning process because the brain does not have to translate the words into images, but instead the student can line up the words with the presented images and achieve a fuller understanding of the textual material written by the authors.

Conversely, Kuppers complicates her text by bringing in a variety of visual and textual side notes, thereby demanding that the reader actively engage with the text. While her practice examples and case studies, such as the ones on page eighty-five, may appear to be illustrations that simplify learning, she accompanies this with research exercises and cautions about laws that
require the student to connect the text to their own unique and potentially problematic situations. Kuppers’s positioning of this book as a “toolbox” that can take a journey alongside of “you” by providing questions to springboard “you” into an understanding of communities and projects that relate specifically to “you” (Kuppers 2). In his study on Model Readers and textbooks, Bente Aamotsbakken notes the challenges in creating textbooks which provide a student with opportunities to actively create “his or her own identity by interpreting culture and traditions” (100). By calling for the influence of “your” personal experiences on the meaning of the text, Kuppers encourages the active creation of a self-identity, unlike “positivistically oriented textbooks [which] have [...] neglected such reflections” (100).

By calling on “your” own experiences, Kuppers also creates an ideal situation for what Aamotsbakken calls “‘extra’ texts” or “text[s] created within the student’s mind, nourished by his imagination and accompanied by his various experiences with other texts or expressions of art” (103). While an “‘extra’ text” is present with any sort of reading, the style of the written words can encourage or discourage its importance relative to the authorial text. One way to describe the difference in intention between these two styles of textbook is that, with the former (exemplified by Brockett and Hildy and Hodge and McLain) the emphasis is on the information in the book that the student does not know before reading but does know after reading. With the latter, as seen with Kuppers’s writing, the emphasis is on information not contained within the text but instead contained within “your” experiences. This dichotomy is obviously an oversimplification because one can never know what a student (or “you”) will glean from reading; potentially, reading Brockett and Hildy could open unthought-of possibilities in the mind of the reader while a quick skim of Community Performance could not cause a neuron connection. As Eco warns, “Nobody can say what happens when the actual reader is different
from the ‘average’ one” (8). Having acknowledged the potential for agency on the part of the reader, I believe that Kuppers intentionally complicates her authorial text with accompanying images, texts, and exercises in ways that many textbooks, such as Brockett and Hildy’s and Hodge and McLain’s do not. According to Aamotsbakken, it is “the ‘unwritten’ parts of the text [that] will stimulate the reader’s creative mind. The unwritten parts are the same […] as an ‘extra’ text” (103). Kuppers brings together several voices, including that of the reader, to create a polyphonic layering of meaning that stimulates complicated interpretation resulting in an “extra” text that includes more than the written text.

MULTI-VOCAL

The multiplicity of voice in Kuppers’s text can be seen as a reflection of community-based performances which are “communally created. They are not individually authored” (Kuppers 4). However, unlike community-based performance in which “the end product, if it comes into existence, is not predetermined by an artist who directs people towards this goal,” this textbook does have a goal of informing students and is compiled by one individual (4).

Kuppers is faced with the challenge of presenting, in a single book, multi-faceted and complex processes that may apply to any other situation. In order to do this, she positions this textbook as a “toolbox: it offers different materials, voices, wisdoms, practices and experiences that hope to provide inspiration and ideas to people engaged in, or hoping to find out more about, community performance work” (2). She could have woven all of the accompanying texts into a single narrative about how to create community-based performance, but instead, she chose to include extended direct quotation from other sources. Her hope is that “[t]heir voices mix with my own to weave a sustaining web, a snapshot of ways of working and thinking that go beyond one single person’s imagination and ways of doing things” (2). However, being part of this web of
knowledge is not limited to Kuppers and other experienced practitioners of community-based performance. “You,” other students, and all the potential communities of these students are all a part of this complex weaving.

The multi-vocal nature of community-based performance is reflected not only in presentation as described above, but also in assignments. Many assignments, such as Reflection Exercise 2, ask “you” to “reflect with a colleague” on issues, possibilities, and experiences (5). The web of meaning becomes a collaboration between the book’s many voices within the text, “you” and another student. Reflection Exercise 26, asks “you” to begin a network map, as modeled in an accompanying photographic example (58, 60). This network map, which is assigned as a work-in-progress throughout the book, is supposed to show potential contacts and resources “you” has available to him or her. The web of meaning is enlarged to include the potential contributions of possible future communities and individuals. In this way, Kuppers encourages a complicated layering, tangling, and intersecting of meanings. As “you” creates these meanings “you” is simultaneously making a network map, or web, representing potential projects. With the tropes of maps and webs, Kuppers references physical concepts that reflect the non-traditional power structures that are often at play in community-based performance. Presenting these resources in map form, rather than in lists with a standard hierarchical structure of top and bottom, allows for complicated relationships between the elements and creates a visual representation of the many potential journeys “you” could take to a community-based performance.

INTERRELATIONSHIP

Kuppers continues her tropes of complicated interrelationship in her section on “Group Selection and Set-up” by using ecology, a science which studies the interdependent relationships
of organisms and their environment, as a way to understand a project’s relationship to a group and to the group’s physical environment: “Your project doesn’t happen in a vacuum, it is embedded in its social, cultural, and natural environment in many different ways” (62). “You” is prompted to think of a project not as a singular event which introduces art to a particular group but as a project which relates to an “ecology of art making” and artists that are already present within that group (62). Kuppers also uses the model of ecology to position community-based performance as interconnected with processes and situations that are larger than one particular project. The ecology of art making is also not self-contained, but has a mutually sustaining and influencing relationship with other ecologies, including “funding mechanisms and the wider national and international economies [...] family arrangements and time management partners, the physical structures of communal meeting spaces and their maintenance” (63). Through Kuppers’s use of ecology, community-based performance is placed in a context that seems to be unending and all encompassing, which is consistent with Kuppers’s earlier metaphors of maps of possibilities and webs of meaning. All of these metaphors explore and complicate relationships, including the relationship between meaning and the community-based performance, the relationship between “you” and the community group, and the relationship between the single project and the larger presence of art in the group members’ lives. All of these relationships are temporary and provisional, constantly vulnerable to change. However, this change is not to be feared; rather, it is a fundamental quality of this field.

FLEXIBILITY FOR POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

Flexibility plays heavily into Kuppers’s envisioning of community-based performance. This is visible in obvious ways, such as an aesthetic that “rests in process rather than product; in the act of working together, allowing different voices, bodies and experiences to emerge” (4).
Some projects may not even include a final product as a goal of the work, emphasizing instead the constant openness and possibility of the development process (4). Openness to change is not limited to creative expression but is also helpful in understanding ideas, such as community, which Kuppers positions as “a fluid process rather than a fixed identity” (10). Kuppers acknowledges that this is in contrast to historical notions of community which centered on identity markers:

Community arts have moved on from early conceptions. In particular, many contemporary community performance practitioners recognize that there are no ‘basic’ and given communities: most community projects will emerge through self-selection, through provisional and temporary identification with a specific groups aims. (14)

This quotation highlights that just as individuals and the communities they identify with are vulnerable to change, so are the accepted definitions agreed upon by community-based performance practioners. Ideas and definitions, even those as once foundational as the idea of constant and identifiable communities, can, and should, change through experience and reflection.

This demand for flexibility in relationship, art, identity, and knowledge could be related to the hope for political change that often causes or accompanies community-based performances. According to Kuppers, community-based performance “often aims to enable change both within individuals and within wider social structures” rather than reflecting the current state of affairs (5-6, 11). If community-based performance artists desire such changes within power structures, they should themselves be open to change in the above mentioned areas, which can often be sites of power for the artist.
THE BODY

Kuppers’s primary point of entry for discussing political change is the issue of access, particularly as it is embedded in the physical and material situation of the individual, the group, and the project. This interest in the body, rather than, for example, the mind or the soul, as the central component of community-based performance could be simply explained by looking to Kuppers’s dance background as training that causes her to think in physical terms rather than metaphysical. However, I believe this is tied up less in her practical training and more in her political beliefs, which locate the body’s experience in space as extremely political⁵:

Bodies in space, and the relationship between embodiment and environments are another core theme of contemporary art practice that lends itself to exploration in community performance settings. In particular, community performance can highlight the differences of embodiment within our social world. (120)

In her exploration of the relationship of access to physical disability, culture, age, and mental health, she uses the situation of the body as the key to opening up or locking down a project to potential participants. For example, in the section on mental health, Kuppers advises against working spaces that “echo power-relations very clearly (schools, […] etc.)” (75). For each issue that can block access, Kuppers suggests options relating to physical space or objects which “you” can utilize to open up participation to those often not granted agency within traditional power structures. While community-based performance is often considered to be primarily an emotional, spiritual, or mental exercise, Kuppers highlights the physical experience of the individual body.

⁵ For more on Kuppers’s perspectives on the political implications of bodies in performance, see her additional texts Disability and Performance: Bodies on the Edge, The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performance and Contemporary Art, and Cripple Poetics.
Her focus on the experiences of the lone individual rather than those of the group is another area in which Kuppers positions community-based performance in an unexpected way. When working with community-based performance, “you” might expect, as I did, that exercises and activities should focus on community experience, reflection, and expression rather than the experiences of the individual body. Even Kuppers agrees that “[t]hese [bodily] experiences are usually private, experienced as something specific to an individual,” which does not seem to recommend them for use in community-based development (108). However, Kuppers connects these private bodily experiences to larger political ecologies and, as the goal of political change is a vital element of her definition of community-based performance, these private yet political bodily experiences are a valid, and even necessary, point of exploration. In her imagining, the same exercise that can be used for exploring the individual body’s political relationship to space can also be used to create the feeling of community. When describing an exercise entitled “Finding Place,” Kuppers notes that “Depending on how you facilitate this warm-up, you can focus on the physical and sensual environment you are in, or on the people, bringing them into contact” (111). Kuppers then uses the political condition of the individual body to open up areas of communication and connect the multiple individual bodies and experiences within the group into a larger community.

The chapter in which she offers exercises and stories which “focus on bodily experiences and our senses” is titled “Finding Motivations” (108). This is followed by a section titled “Finding Inspirations,” which offers exercises and examples of material development techniques that can be used to connect the individual to the communal (132). In this construct, the previous experiences of the individual body gives the need to act, while the communal process of sharing and examining the stories of the body gives the ideas of how to act.
LIMINALITY

With the above connection, Kuppers disrupts the traditional binary between the personal and the public. Instead, she calls for a process which opens up the political implications of the private and individual experiences of bodies to communal exploration and activism. This is just one example of how Kuppers uses binaries (private/public) to illustrate the liminality of community-based performance. With this positioning, Kuppers illustrates the complexity of community-based performance, as it can never be nailed down into discrete categories. In fact, in her tracing of influences on community-based performance, Kuppers positions the field as always in between apparent binaries and contradictions. In her chapter titled “Remembering Histories,” she presents five historical storylines that feed community-based performances: re-discovery of folk practices, avant-garde practices, ‘art of the everyday’ movements, animator movements, and arts in service (16). These narratives are to be understood as “ways of making sense, not firm, exclusionary ‘facts’ that attempt to pinpoint specific ways in which history unfolded,” and Kuppers emphasizes this point by indicating that current community-based performance is not the culmination of these practices (15). Instead, Kuppers uses these historical examples to illustrate what traditions community-based performance pulls from but also how current methods are unique to this moment in time (15). For example, Kuppers acknowledges that community-based performance is not entirely new, and that the line between it and “vernacular older performance practices” is blurry, but she still claims that the differentiating line exists (16). Kuppers ties community-based performance into the modernist interest in archiving folk traditions but simultaneously calls it to be more than a revival of tradition (17). Instead, it should present “invented, reimagined, re-born” traditions that some might consider to be verging on the edge of “invented tradition” (20). Kuppers rejects the idea that “invented
traditions [...] are somehow ‘less valuable’ because they are ‘newly’ invented. [...] Because] from a different perspective, any form of transmission is a form of re-invention” (20). Community-based performance is made up of neither traditional practices nor new inventions, but is instead a combination of old and new that is particularly suited to that resources and needs of a particular community.

In her exploration of the influence of avant-garde performance practices on community-based performance, Kuppers problematizes the binary between “trained insider” and “natural outsider” art because such distinction “solidifies social disjunction” instead of “widening access to artistic expression” (26). The goal of community-based performance is to make art that is simultaneously insider and outsider art: insider in that it is accepted as art but outsider in that it is unique to its community rather than attempting universality and in that it challenges assumptions about the primacy of the individual artist (26). As she continues with weaving her histories, she also positions community-based performance as blurring the separation between the stage and real life, between the political and the quotidian, between the practical and the artistic, and between the personal and the public (as I explore above in her use of the body) (30, 49).

Kuppers does not seek to destroy the construct of these binaries, as they are necessary to illustrate the liminal locations in which community-based performance plays; instead, she uses them to indicate the impossibility of pinning down the influences on community-based performance into discrete categories. She also acknowledges that this liminality continues today and into the future as practitioners “hybridize, mix and match, and improvise their way to their own ever-changing practice” (57).
In Kuppers’s historical tracings, “you” sees that current community-based performance is unique to this moment, not only in contrast to the histories it pulls from, but also in contrast to the future, in which it will be re-imagined in ways we do not know. Given the difficult-to-achieve goals of community formation and expression that characterize community-based performance, this openness to and pursuit of change is necessary, not only in practice and definitions, but also in power structures:

In community performance projects, the aim of inclusion, openness and movement towards a mutually agreed goal can only ever be improvisational. To me, the point in community performance is in this improvisation, this balance: in allowing oneself to be part of something, giving up some autonomy in order to win a different kind of self-expression and empowerment. (14)

While, as discussed above, Kuppers empowers “you” to take an active part in meaning making during the reading of these book and also to participate in the facilitation of community-based performance, “your” authority is constantly subject to the ever-changing goals and needs of the group. In a field characterized by change, multiple voices and authorities, interconnectivity, and liminality, empowerment must be found through “alternative forms of understanding agency, selfhood, interconnection and interdependence” rather than through traditional positions of unquestioned authority (26).

Ultimately, Kuppers calls for leadership that is characterized by simultaneous empowerment and humility. The themes explored in Community Performance, as well as her positioning of the reader in that exploration, have opened up the opportunity for participation where previously fear of inadequacy and inauthenticity may have prevented activity. The reader
is given agency in many ways, including through synthesizing meaning from the complicated
text and illustrations and through drawing upon his or her own experiences to create meaning
and knowledge. However, as Kuppers explores community-based performance’s
interdependence, liminality, and fluidity, the reader is subtly called to humility in this leadership.
Through the use of the troupes of maps, webs, networks, and ecologies, Kuppers illustrates
community-based performance as interdependent, forcing the facilitator of such performance to
think beyond himself or herself to the wider influences on communities. This leader must also
be open to instability, including the instability of his or her own power and leadership, because
community-based performance is fluid and liminal, as can be seen in its ever-changing needs and
its position in-between apparent binaries. In these ways, the empowerment of the facilitator is
always subject to the unpredictable needs of the community members and the performance being
created.

CONCLUSION

How soon, or even whether, facilitators trained with this book will appear on the scene of
community-based performance is unknowable. However, if this book is successful, community-
based performance is likely to change, both in ways we can predict and in ways we do not yet
know. Kuppers has shown the possibility of training for community-based performance
facilitation from within the university, which I believe will change both the academy and the
larger field of community-based performance. The largest change, I believe, will be a greater
connection between community-based performance and the academy. As community-based
performance facilitators that have been trained in the academy demonstrate humble leadership
with their field, I hope that mutual respect will increase, healing old wounds and contentions that
have existed between this field and the academy. Having been trained in the academy, more
practitioners will maintain a connection to it, resulting in more scholarly writing in the field. Theatre and Performance Studies programs will develop concentrations in community-based performance, and perhaps new programs dedicated entire to the study and practice of this field may develop. Given the current trends toward an emphasis on community involvement within universities, I think that community-based performance is likely to find more and more of a home within the academy. Perhaps even, as Doug Patterson called for in his 2008 Association for Theatre in Higher Education manifesto, community-based performance will become the central activity of all college and university theatre departments. While I do not champion such an extreme dedication to community-based performance by all theatre programs, if it is to become a major activity of the academy, scholars of the field need to be conscientious about our participation, ensuring that we avoid the common errors of scholars of the past. In Community Performance, Kuppers calling for simultaneous empowerment and humility sets a healthy tone for how the academy should continue in its participation in community-based performance.
CONCLUSION

In this study I evaluate three books which approach the same topic, but use vastly different contexts and approaches. I do this in order to understand the current relationship between the academy and community-based performance and also in order to dream about what their future together could be. Based in a firm belief of community-based performance as an instigator of community-building, dialogue, self-identity development, political change, and joy, I seek to call scholarship in this field to achieve all that it can. For the purpose of understanding what these achievements could be and what hinders such productivity, I examined both the faults and the successes of three books representing different categories: evaluative, descriptive, and instructive. I based my valuing of each book primarily upon my own interactions with the texts, but also called upon other scholars for tools with which to evaluate. Each text carries its own strengths and flaws, and it is my desire that through an understanding of these characteristics, future scholars can seek improvement in their own work. I hope for this not only so that future writing will improve, but also so that the practice of community-based performance will be communicated, evaluated, and taught in ways that challenges it to meet its own high expectations of ethical practice and political empowerment.

FINDINGS

In Sonja Kustinec’s Staging America, I find evaluative methods and techniques which set an example for future scholarship that both respects and critiques community-based performance in ways that will disseminate general knowledge of community-based performance as well as call the field toward work which accurately reflects its goals. By positioning scholars as having potential roles in community-based performance, though not the exclusive right to execute those roles, Kustinec exemplifies a critical humility. Using a balance of concrete example and
theoretical language, Kuftinec paints pictures of Cornerstone as a community-based performance company which is both successful and flawed. By using a polyphone of dissident voices, she presents an identity which can never be nailed down but is fluid in the type of work done and in the voices present. Particularly admirable is her claiming of the status of mercenary rather than missionary, enabling her to draw on histories and form evaluations that are clearly influenced by her particular position and goals. In all these, she demonstrates how artistic evaluators and scholars can boldly claim a place in community-based performance while humbling their own value systems by basing evaluation of community-based performance upon ethical practices of inclusion and community animation, thereby reflecting the values of community-based performance rather than traditional theatre.

I find that the descriptive text I examined, Leonard and Kilkelly’s *Performing Communities*, fell short of many of my expectations. While the creators of this book should be respected for their efforts to further community-based performance through dissemination and praise, such writing will not be particularly useful in honing the field because it lacks a critical perspective. Many of the flaws I identify could be results of the presence of multiple authors, leading to a lack of comparative analysis and solid definitions, which could have illustrated the described companies more fully. This, combined with a celebratory, rather than critical, perspective, resulted in an over-simplification of companies’ successes and potential failures. Perhaps most problematic for me is absence of a description of the methods of analysis used by the authors to evaluate the companies or even to select inclusion in the publication. While this writing may be beneficial to community-based performance in many ways, in my opinion, it is not a form of scholarship that will prompt this field toward improvement.
Conversely, I believe Kuppers’s instructive text sets a healthy model for future community-based performance by training for facilitation of that field within the academy. She manages to explore the field in ways that are both accessible to students and reflective of the complicated nature of community-based performance. She uses tropes that emphasize the interdependent nature of community-based performance, such as maps, webs, and ecologies. In explaining where community-based performance stands in relationship to historic and current performance practices, she positions it between binaries. In her writing, she presents multiple voices with equal authority, and encourages the student to add his or her voice and the voices of colleagues. As with Kuftinec’s publication, humility is also a key theme in Kuppers’s instructional text. She empowers students by positioning the reader as active in meaning-making through exercises and layout of the text, but she also positions their leadership as subject to the needs of the larger group. In these ways, I find that instructive scholarship which trains for community-based performance from within the academy can be written.

REFLECTION

I will now read across these texts to suggest ways in which they should be followed and locations where new techniques need to be forged. I will examine how they attempt to overcome some of the challenges scholarship faces in community-based performance, such as representing its multi-vocal nature and reflecting the diversity of the field. Also of interest is the different ways in which they position and justify the scholar in relationship to this field.

Within each of these texts can be seen various efforts to represent the polyphonic nature of community-based performance. Leonard and Kilkelly’s Performing Communities calls upon creation by multiple authors to reflect this multi-vocalness. Kuftinec includes diverse and contradictory quotes which she filters through her own primary evaluative voice. Kuppers is
somewhere between the two, including extensive textual material by other authors, but also acting somewhat like an editor in her shaping of these voices in relationship to her contribution of approximately fifty percent of the text. Her ideas are the impetus behind the book and her theories directed the placement and inclusion of each word. These three differing techniques did not all meet with equal success in my evaluation. The creators of Performing Communities are the most conscientious about linking their developmental methods to values of community-based performance because both are created “through partnerships and mutual endeavor” (vii). However, this is the book with which I found the most fault with because of a lack of cohesiveness, while in Kuftinec and Kuppers I found simultaneous cohesion and respect for multiple voices. This is not to say that collaborative writing will necessarily lack in the areas in which I find Performing Communities to be weak. Rather, it is my opinion that this study would have benefited from a comparative analysis and first-hand interaction between the writers and the communities they described. In the future, perhaps authors who practice this type of collaborative writing style will develop methods which will include multi-vocal techniques that are also cohesive.

While Kuftinec’s writing style cannot be considered directly reflective of the communal processes of community-based performance, she manages to illustrate and respect the multiplicity of perspectives on field despite the presence of her solid authorial voice. In her writing, Kuftinec has shown that traditional scholarship can be carried out in a way that reflects the communal and multi-vocal values of community-based performance. Kuppers’s techniques rests somewhere between the two described above: She includes extensive writing by other authors and practitioners, but also maintains the position of primary author. Perhaps she would be better termed the editor or complier of this book than the author, as all of the writings
included are given equal weight. However, this semiotic differentiation may not be necessary, as Kuppers deserves an acknowledgement of the work she has done in connecting these many writings through the use of a through-line. Despite the presence of this through-line, she is able to maintain the feeling of many voices coming together because of the prominent position the voices of others hold in the book because of her respect for the voice of the reader. None of these writing formats are inherently better than any of the others, but the ways in which the authors work within the formats determines their usefulness of the scholarship to community-based performance.

In a field so complex, scholars are faced with the challenge of reflecting its diversity while maintain the cohesiveness I have discussed above. In these three books I found several varying attempts to adequately represent multiple practices and ways of understanding in community-based performance. In Staging America, Kuftinec explores a single company at various points in its history and practices, showing that even one group does not maintain a stable vision of community-based performance or its own identity. Both Performing Communities and Community Performance inform the reader of the practices of several different companies, but their methods are not the same. Kuppers gives small snapshots of hundreds of companies and performances, and uses them to illustrate or contrast particular points in her text about practices of community-based performance. Leonard and Kilkelley attempt to give an extended summary of eight companies which are not explicitly contrasted against each other. The major difference is that Kuppers positions her descriptions as being small bits of information about particular moments of performance which the reader is to use as a tool for his or her own practices, while Leonard and Kilkelley appear to be explaining these companies a way that lets the reader know everything that is essential to that company. This positioning gives Kuppers the
freedom to write about only the moments that are most helpful to her study without being accused of incomplete documentation. Leonard and Kilkelly do not explicitly claim that their descriptions are comprehensive, but the underlying message is that these companies can be neatly summarized and understood in ten or so pages. I would argue that this latter type of writing is more likely to shut down potential meanings than the strategies used by Kuftinec or Kuppers because, rather than demonstrating that these companies can never be fully understood, this type of summary gives the feeling that the values and essence of the described companies can be so easily and simply identified. Perhaps the major difference between Leonard and Kilkelly on the one hand and Kuftinec and Kuppers on the other is that, while the latter are explicit about their goals and clearly position the information they provide as a tool to understand the authors’ points, the goal of the former is unclear, leaving information to be applied in any way the reader wishes to understand it.

Another way in which I contrast these books is their various positions of the scholar’s relationship to community-based performance in a different way. In Performing Communities, the scholar almost disappears in the layer of voices, having nothing to say, and instead merely reporting what others have said. Though multiple voices are included and respected, Kuftinec forefronts her own voice within her study, placing importance upon her summations and observations of Cornerstone. Within Kuppers’s text, the scholar and the practitioner become one within the identity of “you.” The two roles are never separated, as Kuppers and the other voices within the book not only present their work, but also critique it. With the former book, scholars are invisible, while with the latter two, scholars are empowered by example. However, this empowerment is always tempered with a humility that contrasts with previous writing that privileged the perspective of the scholar and scorned the input of participants.
However, this humility does not mean that the scholar is without the right to criticize. In fact, both criticism and praise are necessary to call this field to meet its values. Kuftinec demonstrates ways in which scholars can ask troubling questions without threatening the organizations they are writing about. Perhaps her most successful technique is pulling these problematic experiences and thoughts from the voices of participants and those close to the process. She then uses the established values of community-based performance and the mission of the particular company to evaluate practices. Often, she does not rest upon a solid answer of whether Cornerstone was right or wrong, but instead points up the potential issues and displays the validity of multiple points of view. This encourages the reader to open up his or her own considerations of proper community-based performance practices and to think toward solutions for difficult situations. This is, perhaps, where Performing Communities falls most short. With little questioning of the sometimes confusing or problematic actions and value systems of the eight included companies, this book does not make an effort toward shaping a future that improves upon or re-imagines current practices. By sweeping any questioning away with faith in longevity and fame, it sets up a structure which values community-based performance companies upon the ability to last rather than upon their current ethical practice, which would be more reflective of the values of the field at large.

In Community Performance, Kuppers does not position herself as writing a scholarly critique of community-based performance, but she instructs in a way that encourages students to question the political repercussions of choices. Her presentation of tools for community-based performance does not just celebrate useful methods, but also shows sometimes problematic applications. However, her main critical structure is not in how she critiques examples from the past, but is in how she imagines possibilities for the future. Decisions of what makes up good or
poor practices is left to “you,” the reader, as he or she explores the descriptions and theories present in Community Performance and adds his or her own experiences and thoughts. Through the questions asked in the exercise and reflection tasks, Kuppers prompts the reader toward scholarly thinking that considers both the positives and negatives. In both Kuppers and Kuftinec we see the right, even the necessity, for critical thinking on the part of the scholar in order to understand the shortcomings and potentials of community-based performance practices.

CLOSING

As I describe above, not all writing techniques are equally efficacious in disseminating community-based performance. It is vital that scholars be held to high standards in their writing so that the field may continue not only to increase in quantity but also in quality. Based on this, I believe that both practitioners and scholars of community-based performance need to demand texts which use methods that will instigate further development within the field. I demand texts that communicate the multiplicity, fluidity, and multi-vocal nature of community-based performance while maintaining a cohesive meaning-making narrative. I demand texts in which the authors clearly state their goals and communicate the selectiveness of their own narratives. I demand texts which give scholars the right to voice critical opinions and ask troubling questions while simultaneously respecting the unique milieu in which each performance is conceived, developed, and performed. Ultimately, I demand texts that value the work of community-based performance enough to both praise those who undertake such difficult work and to call for greater attention to ethical practice and artistic creation. In the balancing of this praising and demanding, future writers can develop ways in which their writing can both celebrate and criticize community-based performance in order to exhort and encourage its practitioners to methods which are fully reflective of their values.


