NAKEDNESS IN CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE:
THE NAKED BODY IN THREE WORKS BY
BILL T. JONES, ANN CARLSON, AND RON ATHEY

A Thesis

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* * * * *

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the naked body in three contemporary performance works: Bill T. Jones' *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* (1990), Ann Carlson's *Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat* (1988), and Ron Athey's *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1994). Using Richard Schechner's notion of nakedness as a "social condition" as a point of departure, this study considers (1) how nakedness engaged with aspects of the social the choreographer set out to address; (2) how, as a result of this engagement, the naked bodies were less objects on display than active subjects; and (3) how the naked bodies' subjectivity encouraged audiences to think of themselves as witnesses to rather than as consumers of the performance event. This study attempts to show that the naked body in performance is not only showing something but doing something in the larger social of which the performance is a part.

To examine the effectiveness of nakedness in these works, I apply three analytical schemes generated by ritual/performance theorists Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, and Ronald Grimes. Jones' work is analyzed using Turner's "social drama" model, considering nakedness as both a strategy of redress and as a solution to a present conflict. Carlson's work is analyzed using Schechner's "restored behavior" to consider how, performing naked, she engaged with Koko's story to comment on the signing gorilla's existence among humans. Athey's work is analyzed using Grimes' notion of "infelicitous performance." The notions of "contagion" and "violation" consider how the baring of the skin preceding Athey's ritual mutilations brings his body into the flow of information in the social.
The use of nakedness in each work joins with the others to present evidence of the social efficacy of the naked body in performance. Jones' use of nakedness provided a means to mobilize the community around conflict; Carlson's use articulated the necessity of entering the social and engaging with the other; and, Athey's use showed that, while sometimes rituals/performances fail to "work" in the social in an integrated way, they nonetheless do work.
Dedication

To my husband, Jon E. Erickson
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PREFACE

1. An “Innocent”

He will take you by the hand and lead you to another place
He will watch you and guide you
and catch you if you fall.
When you go to your knees, he will find you.

He will raise you and support you.
When you stray from his side, he will reach out for you.

When you pull and push against him
He will gather you in and embrace you.
If you slip through his arms, he will be there for you
and lift you up. (Cowles)

It was to these words that I, not unlike numerous other women across the
country, performed naked opposite actor John Cowles in the role of “the innocent” in
Bill T. Jones’ Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land at the Wexner
Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio in 1991. I wrote in my journal at the time:

I have been cast as “the innocent.” I am dancing a duet with a man in his
50s or 60s; he is dressed in a black suit with white shirt, and I am
completely naked. Just preceding the duet the entire cast of sixty
performed the raucous and noisy revival meeting sequence, where every
two people support one person in an ecstasy of spiritual possession. I
was one of the possessed, my body whipping from side to side between
my companions, alternately caught and thrown from one to the other.
Suddenly the action freezes, the music stops. My new partner appears
and reaches for my hand, inviting me to leave the meeting to join him.
Amidst an uncanny stillness on stage, we perform a strange and tender
duet that is at once comforting and disturbing to me. We walk slowly
together... he stops, and I move away from him... we look at each other
from a short distance... I repeat gestures from the “thirteen saint shapes”
(a series of movements inspired by religious iconography), and my partner
supports me or takes a complementary shape. My arms are in an exalted v-shape over the head, my chest lifted to the sky; my hands crossed low across the hips, hanging limply as if bound; praying hands nestled under my cheek, head tilted to one side. My arms are raised to one side as if fending off some foe from above or laid across my chest, face lowered—beautiful sculpted gestures. What does this duet mean? What do we represent to the audience looking on? Finally, my partner and I face each other; I have my back to the audience. I bring my hands together, slowly, up over my head and then pull them down in front of my chest, kneeling as if in prayer. After a moment my partner lifts me back up to my feet, and the duet ends.

What did it mean both within the context of the staged work as well as outside of it to have been cast as “the innocent”? Who or what was “the innocent”? I asked these questions when I performed in the piece in 1991, and still wonder about them today. Bill T. Jones described the duet as “oddly unsettling duet... part seduction, part confession” (Last Night 222). What is the relationship between these ideas, given the way the duet was cast? Who was confessing; who was seducing? And knowing as I did that the cast was selected to reflect difference—race, sex, gender, body-type, etc.—I wondered if I were chosen for the role because of my size or coloring, or perhaps it was my somewhat youthful looks. Although somewhat ambivalent at the time, I gave myself over to the experience of performing the duet as it was presented to me, as a sequence of movements to be learned. I didn’t think to ask many questions, though, in retrospect, perhaps I could have. I imagine, however, that my ambivalence about the duet must have shown, as I recall the rehearsal director coaching me to be less “postmodern.” Might I have been keeping myself at a critical distance from the choreographic concept, physically and emotionally, watching myself perform my questions?

This character of “the innocent” was then, and is still, fiction for me: a strange portrayal of a child-adult hybrid created by the circumstance of the duet and the larger piece. This child-adult character strikes me as, at once, feminized and vulnerable, so naked against her male partner’s clothed body, and yet, at the same time, somehow asexual. I agree with Jones that there was something “oddly unsettling” about the duet. It was just one of many unsettling images of bodies in the work at large, just another
character spewed forth from the action, and reabsorbed just as quickly as the piece pressed forward.

"The innocent" has become, as might be expected, one of my most distinct memories of the piece. "She" enables me to look back, through my own body, as I attempt to sort out the meanings of the piece, to take account of its many bodies, to grasp its flow and desire. If I felt even a little bit innocent performing the role in 1991, I feel completely un-innocent now as I write about the experience. Writing my naked body onto paper has drawn it out, has drawn out both my eagerness and my ambivalence, has brought my questions to the fore—all of which have fed my desire to write other naked performing bodies onto paper. What do our naked bodies have to say and what can be said about them? This is how my project came into being.

2. Not the First Time

Bill T. Jones’ Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land was the second time that I have been asked by a choreographer to perform naked. The first time was with the Wild Space Dance Company when I appeared, along with three other dancers, in the brief opening section (entitled Chiaroscuro) of a larger work entitled, Romantic Options (1988) by Debra Loewen. Last Supper and Romantic Options were very different works, and it wasn’t until I performed in Last Supper and began to compare the two experiences, that I was particularly compelled to think further about the use of nakedness in performance.

Romantic Options was an intimate dance-theater work: a collection of humorous and poignant scenes and vignettes exploring the idea of romance. The opening section showed four bodies sitting on the floor with their backs to the audience in a very dim, shadowy light. We moved casually and languidly from one seated position to another, the shadows cast by the lights playing on the surfaces of our bodies. When eventually the lights began to fade slowly to black, we lowered ourselves backward onto the floor, revealing the fronts of our bodies and, of course, our sexes, which, until now, were not
necessarily apparent to the audience. This confounding of sex identity was used at other points in the piece as well.

_Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land,_ was, by contrast, an epic work addressing complex and difficult issues of identity and difference. Unlike _Romantic Options_ which had a cast of ten or so, _Last Supper_ included, in addition to Jones' regular company, a supplementary local cast of approximately forty to fifty performers in each of the approximately forty communities where it was performed. Full and partial nudity was used throughout much of the third act of what was a very lengthy (three and half hours) and politically-engaging dance theater work. The culminating moment in the piece had all sixty (or so) performers, completely naked, assembled across the front of the stage facing the audience and singing.

As might be expected from my brief descriptions of the works, the two experiences were very different for me and, I imagine, for the audiences in attendance. _Romantic Options_ might be thought of as having observed the naked body being naked, while _Last Supper_ deployed the naked body to engage its audiences in certain difficult issues of representation and identity. With _Last Supper_, Jones attempted to engage performers and audiences very directly in how they are made by and make the social. He asked us to consider our relationship to how history has been written and understood, to explore our differences, and, I believe, to consider the relationship of performance to social change. The use of nakedness in _Romantic Options_ did not aspire to address the range of social and political issues that _Last Supper_ did, although I think that the presentation of naked bodies made its own subtle commentary about how the body can be ambiguous, multiple, and changing.

In considering the differences between the pieces, while the inclusion of naked bodies in _Romantic Options_ met with little or no criticism of which I am aware, _Last Supper_ was surrounded by much controversy in at least two or three of the cities where it was performed.* The differences in reception might be seen as a combination of the choreographer's approaches to and goals for their work as well as to the relative visibility of their two companies. Bill T. Jones—who by now has made the cover of
Time (10 October 1994)—is a well-known New York choreographer who set out to create a piece that would have an impact (controversial or not) on the communities where it was performed, if not on the country as a whole. In addition, the use of nakedness in Last Supper was one of many challenging images and ideas in the work. Loewen is not as well known on the national scene as Jones, nor is her work as obviously politically engaged. Clearly, the respective visibility of the companies was a factor in how the use of nakedness in each piece made its impact on the larger social.

Finally, regarding the articulation of social and political perspectives in performance, the two choreographers, in my view, took (and still take) two very different approaches. While both Loewen and Jones were very interested in what each individual performer could contribute to any given work (which in and of itself can be very political), Jones also wanted to examine how those individual voices came together (or not) to articulate certain social and political realities. It has often seemed to me that Loewen, working body by body, whispers, whereas Jones, recruiting whole communities of people, screams. But whatever their styles of communication, I think that both choreographers are making a contribution to a deeper and fuller understanding of the potency of the performing body to address social realities, raise questions, and provoke social change. I am glad to have worked with both choreographers as they exist at the two ends of the spectrum of possibilities ... perhaps, in terms more appropriate to this study, to have had both my back and front to the audiences for whom, finally, the work was made.

* Rather ironically, in two of the cities where Jones’ piece was co-commissioned, Minneapolis/St. Paul and Iowa City, controversy over the use of nakedness in the piece erupted. In both cities, where the local cast included university students, the respective institutions (University of Minnesota and the University of Iowa) forbade their students to appear nude onstage. In Iowa City, in particular, the debates were quite vigorous involving numerous newspaper critics, members of the clergy, arts presenters, private citizens, and politicians. Concerns ranged from whether or not the state obscenity statute would be violated to the moral and religious implications of public nudity under any circumstances. Because Last Supper was considered “art,” was the use of nudity more permissible than that in bars and clubs featuring all-nude or topless dancers? Expecting at least some resistance, arts presenters in both cities attempted to take a proactive stance on what they knew would likely cause some
controversy. John Killacky of the Walker Center for the Arts in Minneapolis pointed out that “controversy is no stranger to contemporary art... and should not be treated as such” (Berson 22). Rather than waiting for the press to decontextualize and sensationalize the use of nudity in the work, Killacky made sure that Jones had the first say. Besides being interviewed by newspapers and magazines, Jones appeared on radio and television to discuss the work; according to Killacky, the boost in communications made a big difference in terms of support for the work. Out of the almost 3,000 people who saw the work, only two requested a refund. Additionally, some of the students who were forbidden to appear nude ultimately chose to ignore the ruling of the university. In an interview (also in the Midwest), Jones discussed the anxiety engendered by the work: “I wish they had more anxiety about the themes of racism and homophobia that are in the piece than they do about the nudity” (Raabe 12). In one Iowa review, the newspaper critic at large attempted to address the use of nakedness as just one part, albeit an important part, of Jones’ work. “The partly nude, semi-nude and then nude-nude last portion of Jones’ raging cry against the domination and discrimination of one human being over another turned out to be a model of clear artistic communication... We are all alike and different, Jones’ seems to be saying, and it behooves us to care for each other, for both our similarities and our differences... The nude bodies were interesting as nude bodies for a few minutes. After that the audience could concentrate on Jones’ effort to make art of his central idea of the need for humankind to be both more human and more kind to each other” (Bunke). Still another critic remarked that the controversy wasn’t all bad and provided “a rare opportunity to educate and inform, and to stimulate public dialogue about the nature of artistic expression” (Berson 28). For more information about responses to the work in Iowa and Minnesota (both before and after the piece), see the following by Michael Fleming, Ken Fuszon, Nancy Raabe, Mike Steele, Heather Slodin Woodin: “Just Folks, Folks,” “Dance/Students Forbidden To Be Nude Onstage,” and the Wexner Center for the Arts Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land communication and press files.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Issues

1.1.1 Nakedness as a “Social Condition”

Nakedness implies a public event: To be naked with no one watching is to adumbrate a process that needs another’s acknowledgment. Nakedness is a social condition. (Schechner, Environmental 88)

In 1971 at the University of Rhode Island and in 1972 at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Richard Schechner and The Performance Group enacted, along with the willing participation of their audiences, a radical and adventurous new work entitled Clothes. Schechner reported on the improvisatory dance-drama in his book, Environmental Theater. He provided a scenario of the piece (originally derived from the Rhode Island performance and used as the script for the Vancouver performance) which sketched out its basic structure. I have summarized Schechner’s scenario (Environmental 106-9) of the event as follows:

The audience entered the theater space just after the group of performers (all naked) had finished certain “psychophysical” warm-up exercises and were lying on the floor, still and breathing quietly. After a while, with the audience looking on, the breathing became more pronounced and the performers began to vocalize, sounding individual rhythms to which they began to dance slowly; soon, they began singing their names one by one. Soon after, one of the performers began to gently manipulate some of the others’ bodies, shaping them into mannequin-like poses—an arm placed here, then there, the head adjusted just so, the torso coaxed into a bend—that could be held for awhile; after he finished moving them, he silenced them by touching their lips.
Eventually, the remaining performers rose up to dance slowly, once again vocalizing in a random way. This group eventually made its way to the audience and, without using verbal language, solicited the audience’s clothes, jewelry, and other personal belongings. This continued until everyone in the audience had been approached at least once. Some of the audience members gave their things voluntarily, while others gave them only when asked. Still others didn’t give up anything. The performers then took whatever the audience offered and draped it on the bodies of the posed performers still on stage or arranged it on the floor in patterns. At that point, audience members who had not given anything up were asked to choose to do so or to leave the space. The remaining audience was then invited to enter the stage space and freely tour the “set” of clothing and bodies, to form a procession, and to chant. After a while they were directed to climb to various locations in the theater to survey the scene: the piles of belongings and the bodies of the company members still on the stage. Soon after, these company members began to divest themselves of the belongings draped over their bodies, laying them in neat piles, i.e., shoes, sweaters, pants, jewelry, etc., displayed as they might be in a bazaar. The audience was again invited to walk through the space, to look at the piles but not to touch them.

Soon after, all of the participants (all performers and all audience members) were directed to climb once again to the highest places in the theater and, from that distance, look for their things and identify them by calling out their names: “my red sweater,” “my white sneakers,” “my gold watch,” and so on. When everything was named, everyone came down one at a time to get dressed, to say anything that they might want to say, or perform in any way they wished to before leaving the space. When everyone was gone, the performance was over. Schechner reported that, after the performance was over, audience participants behaved in an interesting variety of ways. While in Rhode Island most of the participants gathered up their bundles and, saying very little, took their belongings outside of the theater to get dressed, participants in Vancouver were reportedly very social, talking, joking, performing, and waxing philosophic as they got dressed.
Schechner described the work as one that “develops slowly in harmony with an audience that is drawn deeper into the action as time goes on” (Environmental 109). The audience is drawn in to the piece to such an extent that they are no longer spectators but performers. While Clothes was by no means the only of The Performance Group’s interactive and improvisatory dance-dramas to use nakedness, Schechner said it was “as close as I have yet come to invoking a sense of genuine community in the theater.” He pointed out that, while it may have seemed that the spectators became participants at the point when they began to disrobe, this was more the culminating moment of their involvement at large. However they participated in the piece (even if they were among those who chose not to give up any of their belongings and to leave the space), they were, according to Schechner, “ultimately [participating] in a drama that is made from them and their own attitudes toward their property” (110).

Schechner believed that Clothes originated less with him, his collaborators, or even the theater, than it derived from (and in turn contributed to) the “larger scheme of social nakedness” (Environmental 110). Once again, Schechner suggested that “... nakedness implies a public event: To be naked with no one watching is to adumbrate a process that needs another’s acknowledgment. Nakedness is a social condition.” Schechner meant that, in American society (and others), nakedness is in no way just another state of the body; it is a site of social exchange—the body is exposed to be seen as such.

Clothes, along with other works by The Performance Group, falls into the larger scheme of social nakedness prevalent at the time. It took its place alongside events such as the mass protest at Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC; against the invasion of Cambodia where “hundreds of naked youths [celebrated] in the pool to the delight of thousands and the cooler gaze of Washington cops” (Schechner, Environmental 110); and the large number of “unofficially authorized” nude beaches where hundreds, even thousands, of people (predominantly young) swam and sunbathed together. Social nakedness was, in Schechner’s view, one of many ways to join with others to resist what
many considered to be conservative if not utterly repressive standards for expression in both private and public life. He said:

If going naked is a rejection of the system, it is also an affirmation of the body. In public performances this affirmation is touched with exhibitionism. I don’t use the term clinically. I mean a delight in showing off, in displaying the body. Coupled with exhibitionism is a certain amount of voyeurism. The one who wants to be looked at is complemented by the one who wants to look. (114)

Like many others of his time, Schechner wanted to achieve a more open acceptance of the body in all of its manifestations and with all of its communicative complexities on the table. Nakedness in performance was one way to explore those desires for the larger social.¹ (Note that “social” in this study assumes the common usage of the word in the cultural studies field.)

1.1.2 Performing Naked in the 1990s

Schechner’s notion of nakedness as a “social condition” provides a point of departure for this examination of more recent presentations the naked body in performance. Not entirely unlike the opportunity provided to at least two communities by The Performance Group’s Clothes, Bill T Jones’ Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land (which is examined in this study) offered an opportunity for communities to perform naked both with and for each other. Although Schechner’s and Jones’ pieces are different works and took place in different social and political contexts, both foreground nakedness as a meaningful site of social exchange. Both works in their own ways suggest that the complementary acts of being naked and witnessing nakedness (in performance among other public expressions) are two halves of a process by which something significant might be articulated that is larger than the fact of the naked body by itself.

Looking specifically for a moment at Jones’ piece, I can say (having been a member of the community cast of Last Supper in Columbus, Ohio) that, while being naked was an extraordinary experience, it would not have been the same had the piece
not been as conceptually demanding as it was. Last Supper sought to address the long and complicated history of American race relations, issues concerning identity and difference, and the spirituality/sexuality relationship. Jones saw nakedness as a way to address these issues. The use of nakedness in the piece was embedded in and supported by the content of the work at large, content drawn from and directed toward the larger social. In a sense, Jones took Schechner's nakedness as a social condition and expanded it. The naked body is productive not only because it is seen but because it is seen (or witnessed) as actively addressing particular aspects of the larger social. While during the 1960-70s, just the appearance of the naked body was fairly radical, in the 1990s it is less so. Instead, we are looking at naked bodies for what they signify; to do that, we must look carefully at the context within which they are presented. I believe that this draws Schechner's notion of nakedness as a social condition toward a more full expression.

The three works examined here were able to make something of the naked body in performance: Bill T. Jones' Last Supper at Uncle Toms' Cabin/The Promised Land, Ann Carlson's Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat, Ron Athey's 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life. These three artists recognized that the use of nakedness could effectively advance their particular concerns in the larger social. How might that "larger social," the social of the late 1980s and early 1990s, be described? What were some of the particular social and political concerns around which dance, theater, and performance art pieces were being made? Although generalizations cannot and should not be made about why Jones, Carlson, and Athey made the works that they did when they did, at least two aspects of contemporary American cultural life seemingly had some influence on the three artists. The first issue dealt with identity, and the second with the ongoing controversy about public funding for the arts.

1.1.2.a Issues Concerning Identity

The first issue concerned the prevalence of work in many artistic genres dealing with matters of individual and group identity, the most discussed being how identity is
configured along such lines as race, class, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. In
dance performances of the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was emerging an interest in
making theatrically-based work, moving away from the more formalist preoccupations of
the Judson era (the 1960s). Autobiographically-based works were a large part of this
movement, in that they enabled an exploration of one’s particular cultural experience and
knowledge stemming from the attributes of one’s race, class, sexual orientation, and
religious affiliation ... or other aspects of self or group. Much of Jones’ work derived
from this interest, with Last Supper being perhaps the prime example. Always very
vocal about being black and gay (and later about being HIV positive), he discussed the
negative critical response to a piece that included two men kissing: “It’s beyond shock
value, it’s reality. This is our life style, it’s real, it’s an alternative life style; and this
community, the company, represents a community which operates under rules which are
sexual, racial, and class-stratified” (Jones, “Mainstream” 126). Jones has always had a
diverse company, chosen to represent the tapestry of American society. Underlying
Jones’ choices was the desire to build stronger communities based on an understanding
and acceptance of our differences. Jones’ use of nakedness in Last Supper works
toward this ideal.

In addition to the many autobiographically-based works that began to emerge
during this time period, works that responded to the AIDS crisis also became quite
prevalent. Artists in many genres created works that drew attention to the scourge that
had devastated their communities and allowed public mourning of the losses sustained by
this terrible disease. Much of this work was very political and was considered to be a
form of AIDS activism. To a degree, Jones’ Last Supper emerged out of this context, as
does Athey’s work (note that both are HIV positive). The particular community that
Athey presents to his audiences is the very “alternative” S&M scene. Unlike Jones, who
is interested in exploring how various groups come together to form community, Athey
wanted to find a place (even a use) in society for “deviant” sadomasochistic behaviors.
He exposed (literally and figuratively speaking) this community in his work, looking less
for acceptance or integration with the larger community than instilling within it a sense of group identification.

Carlson presented yet another option in terms of dealing with identity. While she has not been as politically engaged as others have been, an interest in identity is nonetheless clearly present in her work. Her “series works” examine the particular activities and behaviors of various “groups” such as lawyers, fly fisherman, and female basketball players. Unlike Jones and Athey, she is less interested in exploring identity along the lines of race or sexual orientation (differences with an intense political import) than in considering how activities and associated behaviors identify people. This means looking at people’s differences, including sex, gender, region, and class. In the work examined here, Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat from the Animal suite of dances, Carlson departs from the human sphere to explore the confounding of human and animal identities.

Why have issues concerning identity emerged so significantly in this late postmodern moment? Many contemporary artists are interested in exploring where they came from, where and how they fit in, and what, in particular, they have to contribute to this society. Albright stated, “Twenty years ago, the dancing body was seen as a wonderful source of movement possibilities. Today, however, more and more dancers and choreographers are asking that audience see their bodies as a source of cultural identity—a physical presence that moves with and through its gendered, racial, and social meanings” (Choreographing xxvi). In addition, questions abound about who has had a voice and who hasn’t ... in many fields, the arts included. Very often, the exploration of identity seems less concerned with erasing old (bad) representations and replacing them with new (good) representations than with keeping all (old and new) representations in motion, to offer a critique of the ways we have traditionally identified ourselves and others. It is with this goal of critiquing the field of representations and making room for new articulations that many contemporary choreographers and directors (including Jones, Carlson, and Athey) are deeply engaged. This means exploring issues around everything from what makes people who they are in their
everyday lives to the politics surrounding dominant and marginalized historical representations and narratives, and issues around class struggle, racism, and sexism.

1.1.2.b The NEA Controversy

Important, too, when considering the social climate in which these artists were working, is the ongoing battle over funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Although this battle seemingly started in 1985 with the Meese Commission hearings against the sex and pornography industries, visual and performance artists' use of materials considered blasphemous or obscene by those on the offensive did not come under direct fire until the latter part of the 1980s. In an article on the Meese Commission hearings (written in 1986), Carole Vance forewarned that “visual artists and arts groups need to be willing to enter public debate and activism, giving up the notion that art or photography is somehow exempt from right-wing crusades against images” (58). As Vance had all but predicted, it wasn’t long before the right-wing expanded its attack to include first the visual arts (with photography as its major culprit) and then the performing arts, with performance art at the top of its "hit list."

The attack on the arts was accomplished by attacking the funding policies and procedures of the NEA. The NEA was accused of brandishing taxpayer dollars to subsidize “morally-objectionable art”—at least according to the standards of right-wing conservatives, including Donald Wildmon (American Family Association), Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), and Senator Alphonse D’Amato (R-NY). While the real (unspoken) goal of the attack was to (rather obviously) suppress certain undesirable voices (thus the relationship between issues of identity and the NEA controversy), urges, and beliefs, the question was poised in terms of federal spending ... Should taxpayers be required to fund art they may find morally objectionable?

The attack began in June 1989 with an attack on NEA-supported visual artist Andrés Serrano for Piss Christ, a photograph showing a crucifix allegedly (from Serrano’s title) immersed in urine. Senator D’Amato found the work “shocking, abhorrent and completely undeserving of any recognition whatsoever” and, allegedly
speaking for millions of Americans, declared that the American public had every right to be “incensed that their hard-earned dollars were used to honor and support Serrano’s work” (qtd. in Steiner 13). Soon after the scandal surrounding Serrano’s work, another NEA-funded show containing “shocking” subject matter was discovered to be in progress. The Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania had received funding in 1987 to produce a retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe, a well-known, openly-gay photographer who was dying of AIDS at the time. The show entitled *The Perfect Moment*, which included among its many photos several nude and sadomasochistic images, had a successful run at several venues until the summer of 1989. After the uproar over Serrano’s work, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC cancelled the show so as to avoid focusing more attention on the NEA. Almost simultaneous with the Corcoran Gallery’s decision, Senator Dick Armey (R-TX) and 107 other congressmen sent a formal complaint to the NEA about its support of indecent art and threatened to put into severe jeopardy its $170 million budget if it did not “pay respect to public standards of taste and decency” (qtd. in Steiner 20).

One thing led to another until September 1989, at which time the NEA budget was cut (although only symbolically by $45,000), a commission was established to review standards for federal arts grants, and the NEA was barred from funding “obscene” artwork. Prohibited were “works depicting sadomasochism, homoeroticism, sexual exploitation of children or individuals engaged in sex acts.” In addition, to deny an artist funding, endowment officials must also find that a work lacks “serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.” Had Senator Helms’ original, much more restrictive, amendment been passed (Phelan, “Serrano” 7), the outcome would have been worse. As it was, the obscenity clause marked the first time in the history of American arts funding that aid would be limited according to content (qtd. in Steiner 24).

This brief discussion has addressed only the visual arts. But how were the performing arts affected by the controversy? In June 1990, four solo performance artists, Karen Finley, Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, and John Fleck (all recommended for funding from the NEA that year), were eventually denied grants. Right-wing
conservatives deemed their work controversial, according to the political realities surrounding the attack on the NEA. The point has been made concerning the "NEA four" that, because of the autobiographical nature of their work, they were being personally attacked for their sexual identities and politics (Harris, "Performance" 14). This may well be true. Three of the four are openly gay, as expressed in their autobiographical works. The fourth, Karen Finley, is known for her intense, angry monologues, accompanied by often rather sexually provocative images and actions degrading women and others in American society. The four artists filed a lawsuit against the NEA claiming that their 1st and 5th Amendment rights had been violated. They have subsequently won their suit—the NEA decency standards were deemed unconstitutional, and their rights to freedom of expression were deemed violated.

Of the artists featured in this examination (Jones, Athey, and Carlson), two were directly impacted by the controversy. On the eve of a performance run in Atlanta in the summer of 1990, Jones was approached by a police officer, who told him that, if he and his company performed naked the next night, they would be arrested. They performed the piece as planned, and, after the performance, Jones told the audience about the conversation with the police. The audience staged a protest, and the arrest never took place (Phelan, "Money" 136). In his press kit for Last Supper, Jones said of the use of nudity in that work, "it is a statement of the body, a poetic statement. In this day of impending censorship, this work is a gentle affirmation of our right to use our bodies in our art and to deal with subject matter that we choose" (Wexner). For Athey's part, as will be discussed later, his work 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life may have single-handedly tipped the scales in favor of a 2% cut to the 1994 NEA budget. For many, he became representative of the overwhelming presence of blasphemy and obscenity.

It would seem that, although social and political realities are different than they were in the 1960-70s, nakedness is still a means to respond to and provoke a repressive system. Richard Schechner's nakedness as a social condition is still relevant today. Perhaps the questions are more focused in the 1990s than they were 25 years ago, fused
as they are with issues concerning identity and other concerns in the social, such as AIDS.

1.1.3 Naked Bodies: Sexuality and Subjectivity

It is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss the naked body without discussing sexuality, especially regarding the body in a state of display, which, of course, is at least some of what performance is about. Is it important to consider to what end is the body being displayed in any given performance? Must it be assumed that “display” of the naked body is primarily a sexual expression? Is display always a good word to describe what is happening on stage with these bodies? For many, especially those staging the attack on the NEA, this is often the assumption. Schechner attempted to address the potential tension between the naked body as (1) primarily sexually expressive or (2) communicating something else or many other things, when he said:

If going naked is a rejection of the system, it is also an affirmation of the body. In public performances this affirmation is touched with exhibitionism. I don’t use the term clinically. I mean a delight in showing off, in displaying the body. Coupled with exhibitionism is a certain amount of voyeurism. The one who wants to be looked at is complemented by the one who wants to look (Environmental 114).

In a culture where there is much anxiety about bodies, perceived to be, in some way, “out of bounds,” presentations of naked bodies cannot but produce a reaction. In one sense, this author agrees with Schechner, who seems to be of the opinion that, ultimately, this is a good thing insofar as it makes the body a more productive site of exchange: the naked body is (and perhaps always has been) socially and politically relevant, and its sexuality is an important part of that. But, once again, what about the naked body “on display” for its audiences? Even if it is desirable to have the naked body express its sexuality, among the other things it may be expressing, how might it be limiting to think of it solely in these terms?

According to the traditional “theory of the gaze,” the female body has long been the body being looked at. The gaze, referred to as the “male gaze,” is seen to objectify
her. Laura Mulvey’s seminal article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” suggests that the female body, subject to the male gaze, is reduced to an object of male desire and pleasure. Since the publication of Mulvey’s article, there have been many applications of her ideas as well as many reactions, both positive and negative. At least two, important to this study, come out of dance scholarship.

It certainly can be said that dance (and sometimes performance art and theater) is, more often than not, a nonverbal expression whose practitioners want to communicate with their audiences body to body, to communicate in the realms of the kinetic and the sensual. This is true even when choreographers employ texts or narratives in their work, as is true of many dance-theater pieces. In a recent roundtable discussion published in Women and Performance, choreographer Pooh Kaye, contemplating the emphasis on the visual aspect in theorizing about performance, suggested that “audiences respond to life-force more than [to] the ‘object’ out there and what it looks like. In its best sense the audience-performer relationship reinforces a sense of being or living” (Goldberg and Albright 146). Kaye is responding to the prevalence of using traditional ‘gaze’ theory to discuss the body (especially the female body) in performance. The problem for Kaye is that the theory, which posits an active subject and a passive object along visual lines, does not really address the performer-audience relationship in dance performance very well. As might be expected, dancers (and, I think, other performers) want to think of themselves as performing not only in a visual space but in a highly subjective, kinetic, multi-sensory space as well, in which the performing bodies are experienced more completely by their audiences. They want to be witnessed, not consumed, by their audiences.

Similarly, Ann Cooper Albright (one of the individuals interviewing Kaye) explored in another article how the moving subject disrupts the visual “frame” of objectification, effectively expanding or redirecting the ‘gaze’ of the spectator—in watching the dance, the spectator is continually forced to look “elsewhere” (39). What these two artists/scholars communicate here is that, while dance performance is a visual medium, it is not a visual medium alone. The “life-force” or “sense of being or living”
which Kaye suggested that audiences are responding to, describes a more full type of experience for audiences. While the visual provides many valuable clues, an audience has much further to go ... to follow the movement of dancing bodies into the elsewhere—everywhere of the social that they embody.

Once again, it seems as if nakedness as a social condition needs to be expanded. In the first instance, I elaborated on Schechner’s original idea, that the naked body is productive not only because it is seen but because, embedded in and supported by the content of a work at large, it is seen as actively engaged in addressing particular aspects of the larger social. A further expansion, not unrelated to the first, concerns Schechner’s notion of the display of the naked body. Rather than discussing the body as being solely on “display,” which seems to objectify it or to limit it to the realm of the visual, I would like to suggest that the naked body is witnessed by its audiences as an acting subject, a subject engaged in addressing particular aspects of the social. This seems to draw the idea of nakedness as a social condition toward its full potential, a potential that perhaps Schechner imagined and hoped for but took 25 years of performance practice to fulfill. It is true that the naked body must be seen to be understood to be naked, but what is perhaps more interesting are the other ways that might it be understood based on what action it is taking in any given work.²

1.2 Nakedness in Contemporary Performance: Components of the Project

As has been previously indicated, this investigation of the use of nakedness in contemporary performance will study the work of three artists: Bill T. Jones (creator of Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land), whose work was introduced at some length in the preface; Ann Carlson (creator of and performer in Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat); and Ron Athey (creator of and performer in 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life). The three works offer a compelling variety of interests in and theatrical uses of the naked body. Besides having the use of nakedness in common, the three were created within the same ten-year span and so also share an overall social and political context. Despite these similarities, each work is also quite distinct from the others in
terms of the subject matters being dealt with and the approaches taken to those subject matters. This examination will in no way attempt to draw universal conclusions about the use of nakedness as a phenomenon of contemporary performance. Rather, it will strive to look at how each work, with its own concerns and ways of communicating them, contributes to an better understanding of the potential of the naked body to address the larger social. In turn, how can the naked body in each work be seen as an important component in the relationship between the work as a whole and the larger social of which it is a part.

There are three important components to this relationship among the naked bodies, the work as a whole, and the larger social, all of which derive from Schechner's notion of nakedness as a social condition. To summarize these components, I aim to make a case for the effectiveness of these naked bodies in addressing particular aspects of the social, those aspects which each artist chose to consider in their work. Additionally, I would like to suggest that, because of their effectiveness in engaging with the social, these naked bodies are less objects on display for their audiences than they are acting subjects whose presence in the pieces they occupy invites audiences to imagine themselves as witnesses to the event rather than as consumers of it. I see these three components as interdependent; each supports the existence of the others in the creation of a certain kind of theatrical event, an event that sees itself as a site of social exchange dependent upon the subjects engaged in and with it.

1.2.1 Artists Bill T. Jones, Ann Carlson, and Ron Athey

The first work to be considered in this examination will be Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land, a profound dance-theater work of epic proportions with which choreographer/director Jones set out to examine differences in race, gender, faith, and sexuality. The piece toured to over thirty-five cities throughout the United States and included in its cast some fifty or sixty performers, at least forty of whom lived in each of the local communities where it was presented. The section for which the piece eventually became quite well known, occurred, at the end of the long and involved work,
when the entire cast assembled across the length of the stage, naked and singing together. Emerging out of Jones’ own personal “crisis of faith” (Wexner) after the death of his lover and partner, Arnie Zane, the piece sought an answer to the question: Is there an answer to the conflict of difference in America today? Over three hours long, the piece moved through an extraordinary assemblage of images, narratives, movement, and sound culled from the spiritual and literary traditions of African Americans and from the history of race relations in America. Jones asked both the performers and the audience to journey with him through the turbulent history of race relations in America to find the body—in and of knowledge, conflicted and vulnerable—but which is our “ultimate commonality” (Jones, “Moving” 36).

The second work to be examined is Ann Carlson’s extraordinary solo, Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat, the final work of the Animals suite of dances. Animals was one part of her “series works” (collections of short dances), in which she choreographs on all manner of people and animals, from lawyers and fly fishermen to dogs and goats, to examine our everyday activities and behaviors in work and play. In Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat, Carlson performed the story of Koko, a gorilla living in captivity (who has been taught to communicate with American Sign Language), and the kitten she befriended. Performing naked, Carlson was so convincingly transformed into her subject that her audiences were left stunned, prompting one critic to call Animals “a holy dance” (Anderson).

The final work of this investigation is Ron Athey’s 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life, originally presented in 1994. In this performance art work which combines elements of dance and theater, Athey puts bodily and psychological pain on display for his audiences through sadomasochistic acts of self-mutilation and the mutilation of others. He described the work as “ritualistic, [a kind of] public sacrifice [akin to] doing penance” (“Interview” 61). As an ex drug-addict, now HIV positive, Athey presents subject matters few want to know about. His performance of 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life (a somewhat autobiographical piece) almost single-handedly re-awakened the then somewhat subdued NEA controversy, leading the U.S. House of Representatives to vote
in support of a further 2% cut to the NEA budget in June of that year (Schimke 14). In this examination of Athey’s work, I look less at particular instances of nakedness than at the provocative baring of the skin, which preceded his mutilations.

1.2.2 Ritual Theory

1.2.2.a Ritual Theory and the Body

In a recent essay entitled “On Ritual Knowledge,” Theodore Jennings argued against the notion that ritual is a simple enactment of belief and argued for a theory of knowledge based on ritual action. He said, “Ritual is a way of gaining knowledge, ... serves to transmit knowledge, [and is a means by which we] receive knowledge” (331). He suggested that ritual is an engaged, bodily way of coming to know “who we are” and “how it is” with the world. Jennings is just one of many ritual theorists and practitioners interested in foregrounding the body and the action it takes as primary, a more recent development in the field.

Another scholar doing important work in this area is Catherine Bell, who suggested that ritual can be seen as a form of social practice. We need to shift our thinking about ritual away from the notion that it is “a distinct and autonomous set of activities” toward the notion that it as a “way of acting” that works to differentiate itself from other ways of acting. Bell suggested that shifting the emphasis from “activities” to “ways of acting” might be more effectively termed “ritualization” rather than ritual. In her view, “ritualization,” connoting a process more than a product, more accurately describes the action orientation of the ritual event than the word ritual does (“Ritual Body” 302).

Perhaps more important for this investigation is Bell’s view that the body—as that which “mediates’ all action” in social practice—is central to ritual or “ritualization.” In short, it might be said that ritual, imbued as it is by the processes of ritualization, foregrounds the action taken as well as the agent of that action. Bell further suggested that both “the ends and means of ritualization are specifically the production of a “ritualized body” (“Ritual Body” 304). Bell discussed the “ritualized body” as a body
imbued with a “sense of ritual.” The “sense of ritual” is acquired, like many others of our senses, through the processes of acculturation. In addition to the five senses identified with the physical body (which, Bell pointed out, in themselves can never escape the structuring action of the social), we are engaged in multiple and complex interactions and negotiations with the “sense of necessity and the sense of duty, the sense of direction and the sense of reality, the sense of beauty...” (Ritual Theory 80). It is this “sense of ritual” that compels humans to engage in the actions long thought of as rituals: celebration, worship, and performance among others.

Thus, there is Jennings’ notion of ritual as an engaged, bodily way of coming to know “who we are” and “how it is” with the world ... or ritual as an embodied means for the transmission of knowledge. In addition, there is Bell’s notion that the processes of ritualization produce a “ritualized body,” a body that “mediates” ritual action. These perspectives on the body in ritual correspond to the notion (suggested earlier) that the theatrical event is often an event that views itself as a site of social exchange, dependent upon the subjects engaged in it and with it. It is this sort of event that Jones, Carlson, and Athey are interested in creating—and have indeed created—with the three works examined here.

While considering theatrical performance as ritual is not necessarily a novel idea, talking about ritual, with performance as one of many different types, as a kind of human activity that emerges from the body, is a more recent development in the field. This development seems to me to bring ritual and theatrical performance together in a very productive way. In considering these new developments, I intend to use ritual theory as a framework for analysis of the use of nakedness in the work of the three artists selected for this study.

Although Jennings and Bell effectively bring the body into focus in the study of ritual and thus start this investigation, neither really provides an interpretive framework for analysis of the pieces. In addition, neither has engaged with theatrical performance. There are others, however, who do foreground the body in ritual, can provide interpretive frameworks for analysis, and who have also been engaged with theatrical
performance in their work with ritual, i.e., Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, and Ronald Grimes.

1.2.2.b Theorists Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, and Ronald Grimes

Turner, Schechner, and Grimes have all made important contributions to the burgeoning fields of ritual studies and performance studies. Although they differ in many ways, they have in common an interest in ritual as a highly productive social activity, a key component of which is the engagement of active ritual subjects. In their respective works, each has developed various ways of considering how the ritual of theatrical performance takes its place in the social. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that Schechner and Grimes have not only theorized about performance but have been actively involved with it as a practice. Perhaps it is for this reason that their theoretical work seems appropriate for this study, imbued as it is with a sense of having been on the inside of the processes of ritual and performance.

Performance scholar Marvin Carlson cites Schechner and Turner as having made important contributions to the formation of performance studies by “making important connections across the boundaries of traditional theater studies, anthropology, and sociology” (13). Schechner was engaged with performance for many years before focusing on more scholarly work later in his career. By then, he had accumulated an extraordinary wealth of experience, having traveled worldwide to study the different performative practices of various cultures. For his part, it was Turner’s work with ritual process and liminality that began to recognize ritual as a process and not an object, a process productive in its own right. His focus on the liminal stage of ritual, a reality “betwixt and between,” changed the focus in ritual studies, from looking primarily at the ritual event to looking at the experiences of the ritual subject within that event. As colleagues, Turner and Schechner frequently referred to and drew on each other’s work.

Compared to Turner and Schechner, Grimes is a newcomer to the scene, although he has wasted no time making his mark. His work, postmodern in character, effectively moves the study of ritual away from its moorings as traditional, collective,
pre-critical, and meaningful toward a recognition that it can also be inventive, individual, self-conscious/critical, and evocative. For Grimes, ritual is as much about subverting structure as it is about reinforcing it. His work implies the presence of many bodies engaged in many different types of rituals, all in the process of negotiating new formations. Interestingly, experimental performance since the 1960s has been a part of all of these scholars’ work. In Beginnings in Ritual Studies, one of Grimes earlier books, he engaged in a long analysis of the work of Polish director Jerzy Grotowski and his Actor’s Lab, exploring the relationship between drama (especially the experimental performance of the late 1960s and early 1970s) and ritual.

1.2.3 General Overview of Chapters

Chapter two provides an explication of the theoretical schemes of Turner, Schechner, Grimes. A brief introduction continues the discussion begun here of how ritual (and performance) theory is increasingly interested in discussing the body as the primary means by which we communicate our concerns in these live participatory events. First discussed is Turner’s groundbreaking development of the notion of liminality, then his formulation of the “social drama” scheme, and then the relationship between social drama and theatrical performance. Next discussed is Schechner’s notion of performance as restored behavior, which was one of his most enduring contributions to performance theory. Last is Grimes’ notion of ritual as an inherently critical practice and his notion that ritual can and does indeed “fail,” an idea that (following from the work of J.L. Austin) he calls “infelicitous performance.”

In the analysis chapters three, four, and five, the theoretical schemes generated by Turner, Schechner, and Grimes are applied to works by Jones, Carlson, and Athey, to consider how the use of nakedness worked in the pieces. Chapter three discusses Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land as the “redressive phase” of Turner’s social drama, a model developed to examine conflict in various social formations: how it develops, the ways it is addressed, and how order is restored (or not) to the social formation being considered. The Last Supper in its entirety is considered the phase of
redress in the social drama unfolding around Jones. The use of nakedness in the piece is considered as both an element of redress and resolution. Chapter four examines Carlson’s solo, Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat from the Animals suite, using Schechner’s notion of restored behavior to consider how, performing naked, Carlson was able to engage with Koko’s life and story. Chapter five analyzes Athey’s 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life as an instance of Grimes’ notion of infelicitous performance, utilizing, in particular, Grimes’ notions of contagion and violation to examine the baring of the skin that precedes Athey’s ritual mutilations in his piece. The notion of infelicitous performance will enable us to consider, in interesting and provocative ways, both Athey’s body at the center of the work, as well as the dynamics around the work. Each of the analysis chapters provides an introduction to the artist and a synopsis and examination of how nakedness worked in each piece. The goals of this study are: (1) to consider how the naked bodies were able to effectively address the particular aspects of the social to which each artist addressed himself or herself; (2) to understand how the naked bodies were less objects on display for their audiences than they were acting subjects; and (3), how this status as subjects made it possible for audiences to consider themselves more as witnesses to rather than consumers of the event. These three goals, although stated separately, are part of one whole that suggests that the bodies performing and the bodies witnessing make it possible for the ritual or theatrical event to function as an important site of social exchange.

After considering my own role as critic/author of this investigation, chapter six discusses how the use of nakedness in each work joined with the others to present evidence of the social efficacy of the naked body in performance. First considered is which element of each piece made it a particularly compelling example of the social efficacy of the naked body in performance. Did Jones’ use of nakedness (as a means to mobilize community to deal with a present conflict) bear some relationship to Carlson’s use of nakedness (as it articulated the necessity of entering the social and engaging with the other), or with Athey’s use of nakedness (which showed that, while rituals and performances sometimes fail to “work” in the social in an integrated way, they
nonetheless do work)? Are these pieces, each engaged in its own concerns, comparable? What were the theorists' contributions to this investigation? How did their particular approaches to thinking about the body in ritual and performance join with the pieces and the bodies in them to produce certain outcomes?
CHAPTER 2
THEORIES OF RITUAL AND PERFORMANCE: TURNER, SCHECHNER, AND GRIMES

2.1 Introduction
The study of ritual, formerly a sub-discipline of anthropology and religious studies (and more recently of performance studies), has, in the past twenty years or so, come into its own as a field of study. Beginning with Turner’s The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (1969), through Grimes’ edited volume, Readings in Ritual Studies (a 1996 collection of both formative and contemporary essays in the study of ritual), ritual studies has emerged as an area of inquiry with its own rich vocabulary of terms and diversity of interests.

Grimes’ introduction states that ritual’s reputation has undergone dramatic change since the 1960s: “No longer the exemplar of dull routine, ritual was launched into prominence as a celebrated cause. No longer the glue of society and guardian of the status quo, it became subversive and creative” (xiii). While this statement captures some of the drama of change rather well, ritual could be considered both the glue of society and a creative force within it, even simultaneously; it is this array of functions and ways of working that makes ritual such a compelling study. True, its range as a mode of human action makes ritual difficult to define; even though, as Grimes points out, most of us, when asked, are able to cite examples of ritual from our own life experiences. With or without a working definition, we seem to know when we are ritual-engaged.

Attempting to articulate what is and is not ritual was a concern of many. While the effort of trying to define ritual has been ultimately informative, it effectively put boundaries around ritual as a very particular sort of human activity. The project of
defining ritual is much less important among ritual theorists today and has been replaced by a lively discussion around the matter of what it is that ritual can do for us and how it does what it does. The growing interest in discussing ritual as a broad and inclusive category of human activity combined with a new focus on what ritual does and how is a fairly recent development in the field.

Beginning with Emile Durkheim and including Turner, to some degree, ritual has traditionally been viewed as a very specific kind of event, whose form was recognizable and whose qualities were distinguishable. Ritual was enacted for particular reasons, usually within the realms of religion or the exercise of authority. Generally, this view of ritual—as only the action taken—succeeded in relegating it to a dependent position to belief, symbol, and myth. Rather than considering the action of ritual as important by itself, ritual has been viewed largely as an enactment of the thought or “text” that preceded it. In this dependent position, ritual can only be “thoughtless action—routinized, habitual, obsessive, or mimetic—and therefore regarded as the purely formal, secondary, and mere physical expression of logically prior ideas” (Bell, Ritual Theory 19).

With the gradual undoing of the mind-body duality, ideas about human activity are undergoing change. Clearly, the body is no longer just an instrument or vehicle for the work of the mind. Previously discussed (see introduction) was the work of Bell, a ritual scholar whose notion of “ritualization” considered how ritual provides an important means by which individuals and groups act to “engage authority, self and society” (Ritual Theory 8).

Shifting the focus away from ritual as the enactment of a text that precedes it to ritual as a way to take action, makes explicit the centrality in ritual of the ritually-engaged body. Although Bell stated this change of focus quite well, it is apparent even in Turner’s early work, when he discussed the state of the ritual subject in the liminal phase of the ritual process. Later, with his development of the social drama scheme, the individual liminal subject of his earlier work was multiplied, inasmuch as now the entire group moves through the most liminal of the phase of the social drama, the repressive
phase. Besides Turner, Schechner’s theoretical work, long addressing theater as ritual, was engaged with the social efficacy of theater and the theatrically- or ritually-engaged body. Grimes was interested in moving ideas about ritual away from the notion that rituals are necessarily traditional, collective, pre-critical, and meaningful to consider how they can be, and very often are, inventive, individual, self-conscious/critical and evocative. He turned the discussion to how the actions humans take are capable of “engaging authority, self and society.” Grimes and Schechner (in particular) and Turner (to some degree in his later work) have made the important contributions to considering ritual as a highly variable process whose goals may be as much about critiquing, subverting, and even creating new structures as with reinforcing existing structures. These theorists have theorized ritual into its own right as a highly relevant social act, by resisting the idea that ritual is primarily an enactment of a preexisting “text,” therefore secondary and dependent upon that text. They replaced it with the idea that ritual is an “activity that reproduces and manipulates its own contextual ground” (Bell, Ritual Theory 8).

2.2 The Theory of Victor Turner

2.2.1 On “Liminality”

In his essay, “On Ritual Knowledge,” Jennings explored how knowledge can be gained through participation in ritual. Turner’s work made it possible to imagine that the transition from knowing to not knowing in ritual (i.e., whatever it is that one learns about ritual and the world from acting ritually) is intrinsic to ritual. Jennings stated, “Turner... located the transitional or liminal state within the ritual itself. This liminality... is not accidental to, but is constitutive of, the ritual process. The generative mode of ritual knowledge is inscribed in the ritual process through this liminal and transitional moment” (326). Grimes, summarizing Turner’s theory of social drama in Ritual Criticism, suggested that “liminality in ritual is a cultural mode of reflexivity” (176). Together, Jennings and Grimes capture the heart of the ritual process as configured by Turner (especially later in his career), i.e., it is both generative and reflexive; something
is created and something is learned, as the action of ritual reflects on and adds to the larger context of the social, of which the ritual was a part.

Turner’s *The Ritual Process* (1969) marked an important change in the study of ritual, setting the stage for considering ritual as a highly relevant social act, not necessarily secondary to prior systems of belief or preexisting texts. Instead, ritual was imagined to be meaningful and productive in its own right. In beginning to form his ideas about the ritual process, Turner worked from Arnold van Gennep’s notion of “rites de passage,” which enumerated the three parts or stages of ritual: “separation (preliminal), transition (liminal), incorporation (postliminal)” (“Territorial” 529). He focused on the second stage of the triad, “limen” (Latin for “passage”), which described a threshold situation for the ritual subject, a state of being neither here nor there, a state in which one’s status is highly ambiguous. He stated, the subject “passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state,” and thus is wont to “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate state and positions in cultural space” (*Ritual Process* 94-5). Liminal subjects are often without the insignias which identify them and their rank or role within a social or kinship system, such as personal possessions, property, social status, clothing, and other sorts of bodily decoration. In addition, liminal subjects are treated without attention to their social status during the ritual process, regardless of the rank held by them prior to the rite. Turner suggested that, often, emerging out of this lack of individual control and imposed uniformity there arises an “intense comradeship and egalitarianism” among initiates (“Ritual” 95). Stripped of worldly belongings and associations in the social, ritual subjects in the liminal stage are completely reframed by their participation in the ritual. “Rituals separated specified members of a group from everyday life, placed them in a limbo that was not any place they were in before and not yet any place they would be in, then returned them, changed in some way, to mundane life... the whole ritual process constitutes a threshold between secular living and sacred living” (*Anthropology* 25). The liminal phase of the ritual process (from structure to anti-structure and back to structure), the time neither here nor there, eventually became, for Turner, more than a
space lacking structure, but rather a space of potential. In the earlier stages of his career, Turner tended to think of the ritual process as ultimately reinforcing the existing social order. Later, especially with the formation of the social drama scheme, Turner had come to think that the ritual process, and in particular the liminal stage of that process, was as much a reflexive and generative force in society as it was a stabilizing one.

It has been suggested that, by the 1970s, with Turner's growing interest in the application of his ideas to modern industrial society (his designation), he increasingly viewed ritual as a means of altering "both society itself and the places of humans in both society and the cosmos" (Segal 144). Rather than always supporting structure, ritual might be a means of openly challenging it. Robert Segal suggested that, even in the earliest stages of his work (1950s through the 1960s), Turner preferred to think of the dynamic of society as "an endless series of dramas in which clashes produce crises requiring resolution" (144). Rather than taking the more traditional structuralist view of society as a "perfectly integrated, smoothly operating body," (144) he planted the seeds for his development of the social drama scheme. Another ritual scholar, Don Handelman, pointed out that Turner's "radical insight" was that the liminal, while it often reproduced the existing social order, also generated potential for its destruction (118). By the time that Turner became interested in performance in the late 1970s to 1980s, he had added to his work on ritual process and social change, the experiential dimension and reflexivity of performance, thus establishing in Handelman's words "the skeleton of his conceptual armature" (119). By theorizing ritual as a potentially critical practice, a means by which individuals could look at and even change aspects of the social, Turner had taken ritual studies into a new realm and set the stage for projects like Schechner's and Grimes'.

2.2.2 On "Social Drama"

The aspect of Turner's work for purposes of this investigation, which relies heavily on his ideas about liminality, is his notion of social drama. Social drama is described in one text as "a minimal unit of social processes... [an analytical tool used] to
analyze how people handle conflict and restore order” to family, community, or other social group. The social drama arises out of situations of conflict or crisis, and it is only through a series of “conventionalized and repetitive patterns of social action” taking place in the public sphere that the conflict is resolved, making of social drama an occasion “marked by a high level of ritual activity” (Stern and Henderson 107).

Although, as Turner pointed out, social dramas tend to take place in emotional climates “full of thunder and lightning and choppy air currents” (From Ritual, 10), he nonetheless conceived of the social drama as a fairly orderly and linear process that progresses through four distinct stages: breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or recognition of schism. The first stage, breach, indicates the occurrence of something that has upset the usual workings of some social formation, ranging from some sort of transgression of the social code to an act of violence. Whether accidental or calculated, the breach tends to widen until it “coincides with some dominant cleavage in the widest set of social relations to which the parties in conflict belong” (70). In most cases, the breach phase leads to the crisis phase, during which a variety of things might happen. Individuals and groups may take sides, factions may form, and leaders and critics may emerge eager to restore order (or not), depending on their respective interests in the conflict at hand. It is very often the leaders and critics most interested in preserving the status quo who are eager to restore peace and who attempt to apply what he calls “redressive machinery” (i.e., courts of law and religious ritual being the two most prominent) to limit the crisis. Thus, we have the third phase, the phase of redress. The redressive phase is the most liminal of the phases of the social drama when those involved are especially drawn to ritual activity as they look for ways to resolve the conflict that has arisen. The final stage of the social drama (if, as Turner pointed out “the social drama “may be said to have a ‘last act,’””) is either reintegration/reconciliation, or recognition of irreparable schism which often leads to altogether new social formations. Turner pointed out that, whatever the final solution to the original conflict, “the scope and range of its relational field will have altered” (71) as a result of the social drama.
Although, at first glance, the social drama model may seem rather orderly and linear, Turner pointed out that it doesn’t always run a completely predictable course. On the surface of things, redressive procedures may break down with a reversion to crisis, or may take so long to examine the problem as to seem as if they are breaking down. At times, redressive procedures may come from a rebellious faction of society and lead to more upheaval rather than to resolve. In addition, social dramas, especially in the crisis phase, often expose “patterns of current factional struggle,” revealing the gradually changing basic social structure that underlies the crisis (From Ritual 70). The fourth phase of reintegration/reconciliation may be more superficial than actual with conflicts glossed over and left unresolved. Also considered must be the redressive phase of the social drama, which doesn’t take place only on the surface of things but has a liminal time and space, thus providing for a departure from the linearity of the social drama, if only temporarily. With Turner’s formation of the social drama scheme, he thought of the liminal redressive phase of the social drama as intensely reflexive and generative, its outcomes characterized by a certain amount of indeterminacy.

### 2.2.3 On the Relationship Between Performance & “Social Drama”

In one of his later books, From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play (1982), Turner made very explicit his belief that the arts in modern society have become one of the most important cultural modes for “confronting, understanding, assigning meaning to, and sometimes coping with crisis” (11). The redressive phase of the social drama, seen formerly by Turner as taking place primarily within the domains of law and religion, now also takes place in various artistic expressions. Theatrical performance is a form of redress that has emerged in the contemporary world as a particularly potent means of engaging in “social reflexivity,” a means by which a group can “scrutinize, portray, understand, and then act on itself” (75). His interest in what he came to see as the potential of performance to “arouse consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves” (75), recognizes its inherent self-reflexivity. He began to see the ritual of theatrical performance as more than an aspect of leisure (i.e., following from his
The liminal/liminoid distinction) to offer both its participants and audiences an important experience of meaning in the world.³

Turner drew on the work of hermeneutic philosopher William Dilthey to develop and support his notion that the reflexive redressive phase of the social drama is when we come to experience meaning in relation to the social drama unfolding around us. He said, “meaning arises in memory, in cognition of the past, and is concerned about the ‘fit’ between past and present” (From Ritual 75). He believed that, to gain perspective on any given crisis in the present, consciousness must move backward into the past, best achieved during the most liminal of the phases of the social drama, the redressive phase. While the redressive phase of the social drama enables retrospection, a look back to see where we came from, its inherent reflexivity, also tends to produce an excess of meaning that moves the ritual subject and the current crisis away from that which is known and into the future where a solution to the problem can be found. Thus, the redressive phase of the social drama, at its best, could effectively address the past, present, and future of the social drama, something (he came to realize) the theater was particularly well-equipped to do. Turner’s interest in the theatrical helped him to see that the redressive phase could be quite open-ended, changeable, and creative and might be best understood as somewhat indeterminate: a process of solutions rather than a solution.

In his preface to The Anthropology of Performance, essays by Turner published posthumously in 1987, Schechner discussed Turner’s “emerging understanding” of the relationship between social drama and aesthetic drama. Schechner said, “Performance is central to Turner’s thinking because the performance genres are living examples of ritual in/as action” (Turner, “Anthropology” 7). Schechner characterized Turner as a passionate “networker” eager to “integrate,... include,... make the links” in seemingly related pursuits such as the study of ritual and the study of performance. In short, he sought to “specify the ways in which experience and liminality, ritual process and artistic ecstasy coincided” (8). In From Ritual to Theater (1982), probably his most definitive text on the relationship between ritual and performance, Turner said, “There is... in theatre something of the investigative, judgmental, and even punitive character of law-in-
action, and something of the sacred, mythic, numinous, even 'supernatural' character of religious action" (12). With the demise of ritual as a "dominant genre" (that is, ritual as a complex and multi-layered aspect of "simpler" societies), it has given birth to "a multipara" of progeny in modern, industrialized societies, progeny of which the performative arts are a part (79). The performing arts came to be understood by Turner as an important category of cultural production by which we both encounter and effect the larger processes of the social drama of modern society. Theatre, dance-dramas, professional story-telling and puppetry are all included in Turner's list of the performative genres, which enable us to "probe a community's weaknesses, call its leaders to account, desacralize its most cherished values and beliefs, portray its characteristic conflicts and suggest remedies for them, and generally take stock of its current situation in the known 'world'" (11). These were all aspects of the redressive phase of the social drama. Clearly, drama had gradually become, for Turner, not only a useful metaphor for social behavior and symbolic action, but a phenomenon interesting unto itself.

Turner's consideration of theatrical performance as an important of mode of redress in modern society provides an opportunity for examining Jones' Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land in relation to the social drama scheme. Jones' examination of the legacy of slavery, liberal political philosophy, and the conflict of difference in the United States engages in the strategies that Turner indicates for redress. He addresses our greatest weakness, i.e., the conflict around difference, especially as it relates to issues of race. He examines the contributions and sometimes failings of important spiritual and political leaders and the origins and value of our belief systems. Through the bodies of those performing in Last Supper, Jones displays and/or represents various of our social conflicts, all in order to take stock of our current situation in the world and to imagine how it might be different.

As a choreographer and social critic, Jones used the body as the primary means by which he engaged with various subject matters and staged his critiques of the social. Of the many powerful images and actions that Jones crafted into his piece, the fifty to
sixty naked bodies assembled before the audience at the end of work were by far the most provocative and certainly the most discussed. Interested in pursuing a sense of participation among both performers and members of the audience, Jones continually works to narrow the gap between “art” and “life” by bringing into his works people’s lives and struggles. Observing the narrowing of this gap, audiences are given an opportunity to consider how they, too, might fit into the picture being presented onstage, what their own contributions might be if they joined the action. Jones’ use of nakedness in the work is no different than other presentations of the body in this regard when, at the end of the work, the naked bodies assembled before the audience aren’t really performing but are simply (though profoundly) present for their communities. In this sense, the use of nakedness in Last Supper may go beyond being solely a strategy of redress in this social drama to being a type of resolution of it. Jones’ nationwide ritual of exposure may well have been the most important and powerful part of this important work.

2.3 The Theory of Schechner: Performance as “Restored Behavior”

The best way to... understand, enliven, investigate, get in touch with, outwit, contend with, defend oneself against, love... others, other cultures, the elusive and intimate ‘I-thou,’ the other in oneself, the other opposed to oneself, the feared, hated, envied, different other... is to perform and study performance and performative behaviors in all their various genres, contexts, expressions, and historical processes. (Future 1)

So begins Schechner’s most recent book, The Future of Ritual (1993). For Schechner, performance is a means (if not the means) to know and understand the other in all its possible psychological and physical manifestations. He alleged that performance has become what the book once was, “index and symbol, multiple truths and lies, arena of struggle.” What is performance for Schechner? It is “behavior heightened, if ever so slightly, and publicly displayed; twice-behaved behavior.” The subject of performance is transformation, i.e., “the startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become... what they ordinarily are not” (1). Schechner’s work with “twice-
behaved behavior,” or “restored behavior” as it is more often called, is one of his most important contributions to performance and ritual theory, although he, like Turner and Grimes, has made many contributions to the field.

Schechner introduced his idea of performance as restored behavior in Between Theater and Anthropology (1985), where it quickly became the cornerstone of his ideas about ritual and performance. “Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a director treats strips of film. The strips can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence” (“Restoration” 441). While these new “strips” may appear to be natural and coherent wholes, they are always ultimately reinventions based on some “pre-existing model, script, or pattern of action” (Carlson 15). Restored behaviors can never be completely divorced from their “origins,” calling into question the notion that any behavior/action/rite is really “original” or “authentic”—there is always another origin which, of course, is never really an origin, and so on. In restored behavior, then, there is both a sense of repetition (based on the knowledge of something preexisting to which the restored behavior refers) and a sense of invention (based on the desire or necessity to resist it the point of reference or go beyond it), to create a new formation of some sort.

Restored behavior, involved as it is with the distance between self and behavior, distinguishes itself from performance concerned primarily with the display of skill. Actions on stage may be much like actions elsewhere, but it is the fact of their being performed that calls attention to their signifying potential. Schechner described this kind of behavior as both “symbolic and reflexive” — it is never empty but always “loaded behavior multivocally broadcasting significance” (“Restoration” 442). Performance scholar Marvin Carlson made the observation that, for the operations of restoration to function in performances framed as such, there must necessarily be some consciousness on the part of both performers and audiences alike of “performing a social ‘role’ in everyday life” (52). This double consciousness that performance draws out is one of the reasons that restored behavior is so productive. The coexistence or overlap in the realms of “play” and “reality” enables us to exist, at least temporarily, in the domain of the
transitional or liminal. By virtue of being in a new, uncharted location among strange juxtapositions of elements, we might experience a new and altered sense of the “real” and the “imaginary.”

Schechner theorized that restored behavior can take many different forms, discussing three: “displacements,” “recreations,” and “restoration of a past that never was.” With “displacement,” which describes various projections and states of the self, people might behave as if they were “someone else,” or as if they were “beside” themselves, or “not” themselves (i.e., in a trance). Further, the “someone else” might be oneself “in another state of feeling/being,” a recognition of the multiple selves in each individual. Besides “displacement,” one might also engage in the “restoration of a historically verifiable past,” or a “recreation,” both relatively self-explanatory categories as well as typical approaches to performing in the Western theatrical tradition. Undeniably, however, it is the third and final demarcation of “restored behavior,” “restoration of a past that never was,” around which Schechner chose to develop his theory (“Restoration” 443).

It is this third category, a type of puzzle in time and space, in which Schechner is most interested. Whether a performance might be best described as a “displacement” or as a “recreation,” it is almost always “a restoration of a past that never was.” He said, “where the project-to-be governs what from the past is selected or invented (and projected backward into the past)—that is the most stable and prevalent performative circumstance. In a very real way the future—the project coming into existence through the process of rehearsal—determines the past: what will be kept from earlier rehearsals or from the ‘source materials’” (“Restoration” 443). The rehearsal or workshop process, then, or perhaps some other sort of engagement with source materials, can be described as liminal, i.e., this period of separation from the linear organization of time that enables the “play” foundational to Schechner’s formulation.

Schechner pointed out that restored behaviors of all types are “transitional.” He expressed this as a peculiar sort of negativity in relation to the self that is brought into play through the act of performing. He suggested that a necessary double negativity
characterizes symbolic actions. "Elements that are 'not me' become 'me' without losing their 'not me-ness,'" so that, while performing, a performer "experiences his own self not directly but through the medium of experiencing the others... he no longer has a 'not me' but has a 'not not me.'" The double negative relationship shows how simultaneously private and social performance is: "a person performing recovers his own self only by going out of himself and meeting the others—by entering the social field" ("Restoration" 455-6).

Finally, the liminal and transitional nature of restored behavior makes the performance event precarious because "it rests not on how things are but on how things are not" ("Restoration" 456). This precariousness of the performative situation, something to strive for in Scheckner's estimation, depends on an agreement between performers and spectators, an agreement to believe and disbelieve in it, to accept the reality and unreality of it as simultaneous. Scheckner said:

I propose a theory that includes the ontogenesis of individuals, the social action of ritual, and the symbolic, even fictive, action of art. Clearly, these overlap: their underlying process is identical. A performance 'takes place' in the 'not me... not not me' between performers; between performers and texts; between performers, texts, and environment; between performers, texts, environment and audience. The larger the field of 'between,' the stronger the performance. (456)

Although Scheckner and Turner held many perspectives in common, Scheckner was interested in the point at which it becomes difficult to know where the "real" begins and the liminal ends. This was unlike Turner, who was much more interested in knowing what performance could do for the real social. This is not to imply, however, that Scheckner is unconcerned about the social efficacy of ritual and performance. On the contrary, the social effects of performance very much underlie his work with restored behavior. As we have seen in even this brief discussion of his work, it is through the embodied experience of performance that we enter into the social field, that we encounter the other ... that we experience ourselves as other than who we are. Both the performer and the audience are given an opportunity to experience this encounter. It is this encounter with the other that makes Scheckner's notion of restored behavior such a
promising analytical tool for a discussion of Carlson’s intriguing solo. Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat, the final piece in the Animals suite of dances. Dancing naked, Carlson plays Koko, a gorilla in captivity being taught to communicate with American Sign Language.

According the scheme of restored behavior, Carlson’s performance of Koko is, in the most basic sense, a “displacement”; that is, she is “behaving as if she were someone else.” Given Carlson’s extraordinary abilities as a performer, this is interesting in and of itself. But of further interest (and where Schechner’s theory and Carlson’s performance meet even more productively) is to view the piece as “restoring a past that never was,” which enables us to consider how Carlson not only performed as Koko but how she performed the story of Koko. To reiterate, Schechner said, “Restoring a past that never was” enables us to consider how the “the future—the project coming into existence through the process of rehearsal—determines the past: what will be kept from earlier rehearsals or from the ‘source materials’” (“Restoration” 443). As is true of many dance and theater artists in the Western tradition who work with various sorts of preexisting source material to create original work, Carlson, in crafting the piece, selected the elements of Koko’s story that interested her. In performing her particular perspectives on those elements, Carlson expanded on or perhaps even altered the “original” story.

In addition to offering a means to consider Carlson’s performance of the story of Koko, “restored behavior” enables the consideration of a related concern, that of Carlson’s relationship to the character she performed. The double negativity of symbolic actions, the “not me” but “not not me,” has Carlson utterly merging with Koko; audiences cannot see Koko without seeing Carlson and vice versa. This double negativity was further enhanced (or, perhaps, complicated) by Carlson performing naked. Without clothing, one of the most distinctive markers of human culture, it was easy to be persuaded that Carlson really was “not Carlson” but Koko. But there were also times when Carlson’s nakedness seemed more her own, and her identity as a human female seemed to come to fore. The use of nakedness in the piece served to enlarge the “field of ‘between’ between performer and character, providing a very clear example of
Schechner’s notion of (and interest in) the seeping of the liminal into the “real” and vice versa.

2.4 The Theory of Grimes

2.4.1 On Ritual as Critical Practice

With his book Ritual Criticism (1990), Ronald Grimes set out to influence the course of ritual studies in at least two important ways. First, he worked to reorient the study of ritual away from its structuralist fixation with delineating “the sacred” from the secular toward an acknowledgment of the extremely multiple and diversified kind of cultural production that ritual is. While in some of his early work Grimes found it useful to attempt to define ritual, albeit in a very open-ended way, he has by now abandoned definitions, proposing instead what might be described as a notion of density or intensity of characteristics (my terms) for identifying ritual. He suggested that, when certain qualities and characteristics that we have come to associate with ritual multiply around an event, it becomes increasingly likely that the event might be productively discussed as “ritualized, if not a rite as such” (14).

The second of his major tasks, and perhaps the more important of the two, was to make more explicit the idea that, if we’ve come to imagine ritual as having a more critical function in society (as both Turner and Schechner suggested), ritual itself must be subject to criticism. For Grimes, ritual can be critical and it can be criticized. Simply put, to say that ritual can be criticized is to say that there is more to it than that it simply happens. For example, as we shall see with Grimes’ ideas about “infelicitous performance,” ritual doesn’t always work, it doesn’t always produce the expected outcomes. It may produce many outcomes (some known, others unknown) or none at all. For Grimes, ritual is a highly variable and changeable (ritual makes, unmakes and remakes itself continually) open-ended process, deserving of greater attention.

Grimes alleged that ritual has never really been outside of criticism; it simply hasn’t been discussed in these terms, due, in part, to the tendency so prevalent in Western society to separate mind and body, thought and action. Working from the
premise that, while the study of ritual includes the study of texts, it is primarily a study of "performance, enactment, and other forms of overt gestural activity" (Criticism 9). Grimes suggests that most ritual texts derive from and are meant to serve ritual actions, not the other way around. Ritual action can generate criticism as well as texts can ... and that criticism is an important part of the ritual's life in the social. He stated:

Ritual criticism is an important phase in the study of ritual. The practice of ritual criticism depends on the basic humanistic premise that rites, though they may be revealed by the gods, are also constructed by human beings and therefore imperfect and subject to political manipulation. However sacred, rites are not beyond the ken of mortals. Therefore, they are subject to ongoing assessment. They can be judged wanting. They can be improved upon. They can fail. (9)

Ritual criticism takes place alongside the rituals themselves, thus enabling us to construct or revise our rites to make them more effective, to recognize our ritual options, and to avoid ritual exploitation. The pairing of ritual with ritual criticism enables us to experience and communicate aesthetic, moral, and religious judgments in the "tangible stuff of ceremony" (Criticism 1-2). But how does ritual criticism take place?

Grimes suggested that ritual criticism is neither ethnography nor literary criticism, nor is it a well established, well-defined practice. Rather, it is an improvisatory performance by an actor whose role is at least to some degree defined by the ritual encountered. Grimes suggested that, rather than defining ritual and what can be achieved by engaging in it, we discuss instead the range of qualities identified as characteristic of ritual and concentrate on what the ritual did (or does) and how it did or (does it). For Grimes, much is to be gained from discussing ritual processes instead of ritual products. Concentrating on ritual processes rather than ritual products enables a broader exploration of all types of activities and how they together constitute (in all of their different aspects) a more complete view of human ritual activity.

Grimes was not interested in a universal theory of ritual or of ritual criticism but was interested in how ritual criticism shifts in relationship to different types of rituals. His book Ritual Criticism is a case in point: in each chapter, he addressed different ritual
events, bringing to bear on each case study different tools for each analysis. He described his approach as ritual critic as one of "assessment and interpretation rather than objective description or dispassionate explanation" (2), suggesting that, while theory strives to explain, criticism strives to assess. The goal is not so much to determine what the ritual means—as if that were really possible, although Turner might think it is—as to understand, through assessment, its practice. This is not to say that the ritual has no meaning(s) but that ritual criticism considers that there are many ways that the ritual might have been productive. Not unlike Turner in his later years, Grimes considered ritual as very open-ended, a type of cultural production that may have many meanings circulating around and through it.

Finally, although Grimes recommended an improvisatory approach for the critic of ritual, he advanced the following "tentative theses" for engaging in ritual criticism:

1. Describe all forms of action no matter how they are labeled.
2. Attend to the dissonance between intentions and functions.
3. Dissonance of intentions does not always imply ritual failure.
4. Attend to the basic social facts of enactment.
5. Don't presuppose that one sensory mode is more essential than another.
6. Attend to the hermeneutic circle operative between artistic genres.
(Criticism 224-25)

Perhaps the most important of these theses and a point to which Grimes returned frequently, is the matter of description. "In good ritual criticism one should describe fully, evocatively, contextually, and the descriptions should concentrate on action, movement, posture, and gesture" (226). Grimes clearly promoted a more involved subjective-experiential approach to description, an approach that is likely to lead a critic to assess and interpret the event rather than explain it or determine what it means. An additional concern (which is not included in the above list but is raised later in Grimes' discussion) is representing multiple responses to ritual, because different subjects inevitably experience the same event differently. This extends to the participants' perspectives or evaluations of their activities, which might also be taken into account and presented by the critic. Finally, the critic may have multiple identities in relation to the
ritual being criticized, all of which are subject to criticism as well. Grimes' roles while engaging in ritual criticism have been numerous, and many have been simultaneous. For example, along with being either a participant or an observer in all of the cases, Grimes has also played the roles of consultant, mediator, initiator, and supervisor in various instances. For Grimes, "reflexivity, the capacity for performed self-observation" is central to engaging in ritual criticism (232). As criticism is a practice with its own implied politics, ethics, aesthetics, and poetics, its power to recontextualize ritual or make value judgments on its subject is great. Grimes reminds us, however, that neither the ritual itself nor the criticisms of it are absolute.

2.4.2 On "Infelicitous Performance"

One of the most interesting ideas in Ritual Criticism (and the one applied to Athey's 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life) is "infelicitous performance," a concept which addresses the possibility that ritual can and often does in some sense, "fail."

Following from Austin's work with "performative utterances" (that is, speech acts that accomplish rather than describe something, i.e., an example being the "I do" of the wedding ceremony) and Austin's accompanying notion of "infelicitous performance," Grimes considered what it might mean to discuss ritual in terms of success and failure. "The practice of ritual criticism presupposes the possibility of ritual failure, which is seldom taken account of in theories of ritual. Engaging in ritual criticism presupposes that rites can exploit, denigrate, or simply not do what people claim they do" (Criticism 191). The resistance to ritual criticism in the field of ritual studies suggested to Grimes that there are many who find little value in knowing whether or not a ritual does what it is said to do. Questions about the validity of ritual failure, it seems, are endless: What does it mean to suggest that a rite has missed its mark, or failed? Who is in the position to make such a pronouncement? Can a rite fail on some levels and succeed on others? What kind of criteria do we use to make these determinations? What of the language of "success" and "failure"—are these words or ideas, ultimately, appropriate when discussing ritual practice? If a rite has been deemed a failure, is there a solution (outside
of its being performed again or performed differently next time) to its having failed (207)?

Some of these questions are raised by Grimes—(who points out that he has raised more questions than he is prepared to answer) and some are my own, formed in response to those of Grimes. He further stated that, because rites engage us on so many levels (ritual as the ultimate mixed-genre event), it may be difficult to assess a rite as completely failed or completely successful. If a rite fails empirically (i.e., the crops don’t grow), does it necessarily also fail socially? Grimes said, “Different kinds of ritual fail in different ways. And a rite need not fail on every level or from every point of view for it to be worth our while to consider the question of ritual infelicity” (Criticism 193). In other words, the goal of discussing the infelicity or infelicities of a ritual is less to determine whether it has failed in some universal sense of the word, than it is a means to engage in much a more varied and productive discussion of the event. As Grimes stated, “Ritual criticism is but one phase—and not a privileged one either—of the hermeneutics of ritual. So, if we are to speak of criteria at all, they are definitional, not moral. Their weight comes from their ability to articulate, not their ability to prove or coerce” (209).

Austin formulated examples of infelicitous performances which went far beyond the discussion of utterances toward instances wherein failure stems from action or attitudes. He identified two major types: misfires and abuses, both of which include various subtypes (Criticism 199-201). Grimes added several more to Austin’s list, including ineffectuality, opacity, defeat, omission, misframe, and two other types of infelicitous performance which can positively shed light on the work of performance artist, Athey, “contagion” and “violation” (201-05).

Ritual failure as “contagion” refers to “that which occurs when a rite spills over its own boundaries” (Criticism 202). Grimes pointed out that, while a ritual may be, in some manner, uncontained, it is not necessarily ineffective. Ritual contagion may be accidental, or it may be purposeful, and, while proponents of contagion may be pleased at its contaminating outcomes, others are likely to be very disturbed by them. Ritual “violation” was described by Grimes as “rites... that deliberately maim or inadvertently
degrade" (202). Like contagion, the rite may still effective, but it is also demeaning, making it difficult to deal with morally and, thus, analytically. Grimes cited the case of the practice of clitoridectomy, still a common practice in many places. Although we may recognize that the ritual is culturally relative, we still feel a moral responsibility to those whom we imagine to be negatively affected by its practices.

In Athey’s 4 Scenes from a Harsh Life, both contagion and violation could be considered significant elements of the work and were the reasons why the work proved so controversial when it premiered in 1994. Athey’s display of his certain aspects of his life clearly challenged his audiences’ sensibilities; many—present or not—wondered whether he had gone too far with his ritual mutilations and acts of sadomasochism, thereby putting the audience in danger. Still others must have wondered—whether they believed they were in danger or not—if they had the stomach for what was being presented or, in a slightly difference vein, if this was “good” or “legitimate” art. There were varying reactions to the work, but Athey’s baring of the skin and the acts that followed produced effects much beyond the performance itself.

As discussed later, Athey was very aware of the elements of contagion and violation in his work. Although he is not particularly confrontational with his material, it has been challenging to his audiences and has produced some negative consequences for him personally and for performance art at large. Given the presence of contagion and violation in the work, can it be effectively discussed as a failure? Perhaps it did fail, if it were considered (1) that the presence of such works, in an already censoring social climate, serve to further increase anxiety levels around artistic production, and (2) that its presence could lead to further cuts in funding for everyone (all of which describe a contagion of effects). In this scenario, a situation is created wherein the work so violates certain individuals’ sensibilities that its “uncontainedness” has negative consequences that exceed the point it may be trying to make.

In another vein and perhaps a more literal one, Athey is HIV positive; he is dangerously contagious and intentionally bleeds rather a lot during the piece. No matter what steps were taken to ensure that others did not come into contact with the blood,
many see that as a violation, and Athey's actions are seen by many as morally irresponsible. Athey apparently wanted to make a commentary on being HIV positive, and his intentional bleeding exposed his audiences to some shocking actions. The piece can also be seen as a reflection on his life and the community of which he has been a part. The piece, while it is shocking for some, might also be transformative or healing for others, as some (including Athey) have suggested.

Interestingly, one of Grimes' "tentative theses" for engaging in ritual criticism pointedly addressed ritual failure. "Dissonance of intentions does not always imply that a performance has failed, since ritual regularly exploits such dissonance. In postmodern North America, dissonance is increasingly being regarded as an achievement" (Criticism 225). Athey meant to be dissonant, or perhaps, stated differently, he could not help but be dissonant, given his desire to present in a public forum like performance, the particular habits and interests that have made up his life. Dissonance is an important aspect of 4 Scenes from a Harsh Life and is, perhaps, why the work proved so interesting to many. As they capture the dissonant element of Athey's work, Grimes' notions of contagion and violation are, together, a potentially very productive way to discuss 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life and what it might or might not be doing for us. Once again, ritual criticism is, above all else, a means to "articulate" whatever we can about a given ritual, whether in the end we see the event as having failed, succeeded, or fallen somewhere in between. To articulate ritual failure (or success) is to relativize ritual and to explore the dynamics of its working parts as they constitute a whole. I engage in ritual criticism, not to determine the worth of Athey's work but, rather, to explore how discussing it in terms of contagion and violation sheds light on the work and its reception.

* * * * *

This concludes the review of the particular contributions to ritual and performance theory of Turner, Schechner, Grimes used to examining nakedness in the performance works of this study. Each of the works by Jones, Carlson, Athey offers up their naked bodies for different reasons, each deals with different issues and each achieves different
results based on their own ideas about how their work exists in relationship to the larger social of which they are a part. Regardless of their differences, each strives to present the body with its subjectivity intact, subjects supported by the highly specific contexts that each piece provides. Turner, Schechner, and Grimes have invested a great deal in considering what the human activity we have come to call ritual—with theatrical performance as one of its many types—can do for us and how. These three theorists’ particular notions of how ritual and performance work (or don’t, as the case may be) make them especially well-suited to consider, in some very interesting ways, the complexity of the naked bodies at work in the pieces assembled for this study.
CHAPTER 3

LAST SUPPER AT UNCLE TOM’S CABIN/THE PROMISED LAND:
A “SOCIAL DRAMA” ANALYSIS

3.1 Introduction

The piece wants to be a summation, and it wants not to be an ironic title, but it wants to be a true vision of pulling together the disparate strains of the conflict we’re in right now. And, for me, the human body was our common denominator—and a grand one at that—and it is the place where we find our ultimate commonality. The body is what we all possess, and the body is in fact the thing that carries us through life and that will—that must—die. (Jones, “Moving” 36)

Jones’ Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land certainly qualifies as one of the most widely known and, in many ways, one the most successful pieces of American dance-theater in the latter part of this century. It was performed in over thirty cities in the United States and Europe over the course of almost two years, involving literally thousands of people. The piece was a wide ranging and powerful meditation on the nature of faith, the legacy of slavery, the liberal philosophical tradition, and the matter of difference in American society. Unique about Last Supper was that it dealt with these issues and themes in a very personal way, beginning with Jones and then radiating outward to the members of his company and beyond. What prompted Jones to create this work was his very profound “crisis of faith,” after the loss to AIDS of Arnie Zane, his lover and partner in artistic creation of eighteen years. “I reasoned that if my time was limited, that if I was to follow Arnie soon, I would make a work that articulated all the questions that I have lived with, all the questions that have shaped me. I would speak in a voice that was decidedly African-American” (Last Night 197).
The piece can be describe as a bodied storytelling,—an intervention into the history and conflict of difference in America that came into being by means of its vast number of performers, its audiences, and the many who, while they may not have attended, could not help but hear about it given its tremendous amount of press. The epic three-and-a-half-hour spectacle united a complex and powerful tapestry of movement and sound with a selection of historical texts, images, and icons relevant to race relations in America, including the late nineteenth century abolitionist novel, Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe; Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech (1963); an excerpt from Dutchman (1964), a play by Amiri Baraka (a/k/a Leroi Jones); and others (Last Supper). Performed by the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, several guest artists, and some forty or fifty performers from the local communities, the work was long and most often presented on the largest proscenium stages available, houses seating well over a thousand people. Moving though the dynamic and historically-evocative sets designed by Huck Snyder and accompanied by live music composed and played by the Julius Hemphill saxophone sextet, the performers brought the narratives and imagery to life so that audiences might consider the often conflicted and contradictory constructions of difference in American society.

While Last Supper was denounced by the Vatican, presumably for its very experimental approach to representing and interpreting religious texts and images, it was applauded by others for its creative process (i.e., how it engaged community), its scope, and its humanity (Jones, Last Night 223). Jones requested that each of the almost forty cities on tour enlist a demographically diverse group of people to participate in the final section, entitled “The Promised Land” (220). It was in this section that the entire cast of over fifty men and women—young and old, black and white, of all shapes, sizes, and colors—appeared together, at the end of the work, united in song and fully naked. Despite the many representations of racial unrest and conflicts around difference in the work at large, for many the use of nudity in the final section was the most controversial.
aspect of the work. But others (including the vast majority of the critics who reviewed the work) understood what Jones intended. One particularly insightful critic said:

Gradually, during the final act, the dancers disrobe. You notice it at first, and then you don’t see it anymore. I mean, fifty people, onstage, completely naked, and you can’t see them as naked because the story Jones is telling won’t let you. You do see the rainbow coalition of bodies—all ages, shapes colors, and sizes—and that, finally, is his message: History is our bodies moving through time, and this is what it looks like from God’s perspective. (Martin, “Liberation” 38)

Jones’ decision to include people from local communities and his request that they perform naked in front of their communities are the two points on which this analysis turns. Each person on the tour who agreed to participate in the work had to come to an understanding of what it meant for them to do so, what it meant for them to perform naked for their community in this piece. By involving each community in this nationwide ritual of exposure, Jones asked his audiences to consider the performance as not just another work on a stage but to see themselves and their communities at work in the piece. Once again, critic Guy Martin was correct when he said, “The core group of dancers belongs to the company, but the vast corps are local. It is most fitting. What it means is that Tucson gets to see Tucson on-stage, and Seattle gets to see Seattle. What it means is that Bill T. Jones, historian, is holding a mirror up to America itself” (38).

How is it that Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land came to arrive on the American arts scene in 1990, a time of incredible controversy over federal funding for the arts, which included state-administered anti-obscenity pledges and massive cuts to the federal budget? How were the co-commissioners and presenters persuaded to take on such a potentially controversial project? In one of the many interviews for the piece, Jones said, “In this day of impending censorship, this work is a gentle affirmation of our right to use our bodies in our art and to deal with subject matter that we choose. Can we as a group make a work that has controversy in it and all stand behind it?” (Letter). Jones created a work that challenged its audiences with images of racial unrest and oppressed bodies, in a way that would affirm the progress that had been made, and in a way that would inspire people to be hopeful for the future. Randy
Martin, in his essay “Overreading the Promised Land” (187), said, “Last Supper was an instance of what the right feared most, a good (and therefore politically ungovernable) example” of controversial performance.” The proactive stance of presenters (special sessions of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters were held around the work) made a work susceptible to “NEA bashers” the epitome of the positive social influence of the NEA (187).

Although the NEA controversy coincided with the creation and performance of Last Supper, Jones’ impetus to make the work had much less to do with censorship per se, than with his struggles with identity in his personal life. After the profound loss of his lover and partner, Arnie Zane to AIDS in 1988, Jones was left very much alone in his life and art. Jones’ work (even before Last Supper), whether alone or in collaboration with Zane, was very often issue-oriented and politically confrontational. He came to realize that working with Zane (who was white) in the largely white-dominated world of contemporary experimental dance made it possible to ignore (to a degree) what was perhaps the most important aspect of his identity, i.e., that he was black. In a 1993 interview, well after the final runs of Last Supper, he reflected on the change in his perception of his own identity after Zane’s death:

I felt very much how my world had changed when Arnie was no longer there: the work began to speak more as that of a black man. And of a gay man, too, because there was a reason to. Another element was anger, the urgency to refuse to be quiet, to pretend that we were not different when we were. I want to celebrate difference, and I think, oddly enough, that’s become a political stance. (Jones, “Sculpture” 194)

Brought to an understanding of the fusion of the personal with the political to a degree that he had not experienced it in his life or work before Zane’s death, Jones found that he needed to create work that could help him get in touch with his pain and his identity. His own struggles with his identity as a black man, the horrible scourge of AIDS in the gay community (by which he had often been impacted directly), and the blatant homophobia around the NEA controversy (Phelan “Serrano” 13) intersected, creating a climate ripe for a work like Last Supper. Jones was compelled to create a
piece that could address the long complicated conflict of difference in American society to find out who he was and who we all are.

** * * * *

Last Supper is a long and complex work, difficult to describe in the space of a few pages. My synopsis will attempt to reveal basic themes, actions, and ambiance from its many sections, in an attempt to communicate a sense of how each contributed to the whole of the work. Included will be the casting of some of the main characters, brief descriptions of movement and some basic information about staging, and a review of how some of the texts and certain key images were presented. In this synopsis, commentary and analysis will be kept to a minimum, as it will be followed by an examination of the work in relationship to Turner’s notion of the social drama. Specifically, Last Supper will be viewed as the phase of redress in the social drama brought into being as a result of the death of Jones’ lover and partner, Arnie Zane.

In Turner’s view, the redressive processes of performance offer a means for “confronting, understanding, assigning meaning to, and sometimes coping with crisis” (Turner, From Ritual 11). Jones’ “crisis of faith” prompted him to create Last Supper to examine, in a public space and by means of the body, the social and political realities that surrounded his identity as a gay, black HIV positive male in America—issues which on a global basis are relevant to all of us. Last Supper engaged in the strategies that Turner has indicated for the redressive phase of the social drama: (1) he addressed our greatest weakness, the conflict around difference, especially as it relates to issues of race; (2) he examined the contributions and sometimes the failings of important spiritual and political leaders; (3) he examined the origins and value of our belief systems; and, (4) through the bodies of those performing in Last Supper, he displayed and/or represented various social conflicts—all to take stock of our current situation in the world and to imagine how it might be different.

As both a social critic and choreographer, Jones used the body as the primary means by which he engaged with various subject matters, staged his critiques of the social, and (in the case of Last Supper) offered up a solution to the conflict of difference
in society. Of the many powerful images and actions that Jones crafted into his piece, the fifty to sixty naked bodies assembled before the audience at the end of work were by far the most provocative and certainly the most discussed. The analysis of the piece as the reflexive redressive phase of the social drama will consider the use of nakedness as one of three interrelated reflexive strategies employed in the work. The other two were choices made around casting the piece and his use (manipulation and reconfiguration) of various historical texts. Interested in pursuing a sense of participation among both performers and audience members, Jones continually strove to narrow the gap between “art” and “life” by bringing into his pieces people’s lives and the issues with which they struggled. Observing this narrowing of the gap, audiences were given an opportunity to consider how they, too, might fit into the picture being presented onstage and what their own contributions might be if they joined the action. Jones’ use of nakedness was no different than other presentations of the body in this regard when, at the end of the work, the naked bodies assembled before the audience weren’t really performing but were simply (though profoundly) present for their communities. In this sense, the use of nakedness in Last Supper may go beyond being solely a strategy of redress in this social drama to being a kind of resolution of it as well. By involving each community in this nationwide ritual of exposure, Jones asked his audiences to look at the performance to see not just another work on a stage but to see themselves and their community at work in the piece.

3.2 A Synopsis of Last Supper

Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land was a three-and-a-half-hour work divided into four sections/acts, with three shorter sections or “entr’actes” that took place between the larger sections/acts. The four main sections were “The Cabin,” “Eliza on the Ice,” “The Supper,” and “The Promised Land.” The entr’actes were “The Dogs,” “The Prayer,” and “Faith.”

The first section, “The Cabin,” begins with a recorded recitation of excerpts from Abraham Lincoln’s 2nd Inaugural Address:
One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. (Last Supper)

The stage is bathed in deep blue light that reveals just the silhouettes of several figures arranged in a V-formation and holding long oars, evoking the prow of a ship, which the audience assumes to be a slave ship, given the text that accompanies the image. But the figures are not standing still, they are marching: their movement, steady and strong, seems to foreshadow their future emancipation (Martin, “Overreading” 179).

This spare image of the slave ship dissolves as the scenery changes for “The Cabin,” a minstrel-type rendition of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852). An elaborate gingham drape runs around the entire proscenium, and at the front of the stage hangs a two-dimensional representation of a log cabin. Actor R. Justice Allen, a black man in his late thirties or early forties (In the last section, “The Promised Land,” Allen played the character Clay in Jones’ staging of an excerpt from Dutchman,), co-narrates the telling of Uncle Tom’s Cabin with actress Sage Cowles as Harriet Beecher Stowe (Cowles is an older white woman who later plays opposite Allen again as the character Lulu in Dutchman). Cowles as Stowe begins to tell the story of Uncle Tom’s Cabin but soon diverts from the story into a rhetoric-heavy sermon: “Yes, [I am] Lyman Beecher’s daughter. Because of him I am compelled to speak of the sin that is slavery; yet because of him, I am compelled to speak of the moral niggardliness of Christians who allow it” (Last Supper). She is promptly interrupted by Allen, telling the story more directly and objectively according to the basic plot. Cowles/Stowe continues to make contributions to the narration, but Allen sets the tone and pacing of the telling of this tale. In his essay, “Overreading the Promised Land,” Martin suggested that the de-privileging of Stowe as the storyteller “interrupts the historical authorial representation of black by white” (179), a strategy Jones uses frequently throughout the course of the work. Thus, it is with Allen’s interruption of Stowe that the play begins.

With the exception of the narrators and Uncle Tom, all of the characters are masked, including Master Shelby, Aunt Chloe, Eliza, Eliza’s son, Little Eva, Master St.
Clare, and the evil Simon Legree (also played by R. Justice Allen, who temporarily leaves his role as narrator to play this character). Additionally, all of the performers play several characters, most of which are cast cross-gendered. Uncle Tom, played solely by Andrea Smith, is introduced (by Cowles/Stowe as narrator) as a “Christian” and a “spiritual leader” who keeps the faith in exchange for his freedom (Last Supper). Besides verbal narration, the story is told through movement, which includes a panoply of styles including jigs, ballet, and virtuosi gymnastics, giving it, overall, a distinctly minstrel feel. The story is told more than once by the players. The first time, consistent with Stowe’s novel, the play ends tragically with the whipping to death of Uncle Tom. The second time, (beginning at the end, at the point of Uncle Tom’s death), the entire proceedings are played rather frantically in reverse ... back to the beginning and then forward once again to the point where Uncle Tom is about to be whipped to death. At this point, a new ending is inserted (once again deprivileging Stowe’s authorship) as Uncle Tom and all of the other slaves stand up to their aggressors with the result that Uncle Tom lives. Jones’ new ending to the story saves Uncle Tom from his literary martyrdom. During this first scene, “The Cabin,” the first instance of nudity in the work-at-large takes place with the stripping and ravaging of a young slave woman by Simon Legree (played by Allen) during the whipping scene.

Between Parts I and II is the first entr’acte, “The Dogs,” presenting one of the more sinister images of the piece: eight male performers in black dance belts and muscle shirts, combat boots, and dog muzzles play a pack of crazed canines. Ushered in by an upbeat burlesque beat, the dogs spread out in a line in front of the drop curtain at the change of scenery, to perform on command an unnerving, exhausting routine of gestures drawn from football calisthenics and military-drills. Growling and snapping at the audience, they eventually run through the audience to exit at the back of the theater. In the section that follows, “Eliza on the Ice,” this small but vicious army of dog men symbolize the slaveholders, abusive and cruel in their relentless pursuit of the Eliza characters.
“Eliza on the Ice” tells the story of Eliza’s escape from slaveholders across the icy Ohio River. Jones fractures the role into five different personifications of the character, which are performed as five solos by five different people—four female soloists and one male soloist. Three of the solos are accompanied by excerpts from Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” address: “The little man back there, he says women can’t have as much rights as Men because Christ wasn’t a woman—Where did Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him” (Last Supper). Truth’s address is read by Sage Cowles who, still costumed as Harriet Beecher Stowe, is present on stage throughout the entire section.

Created by Jones with and for the women in the company, this section represents Eliza as a “multidimensional polemic” (Last Night 211). For the first Eliza, Cowles recites the “Ain’t I a Woman?” address to the dance of Jones’ “historical Eliza,” a personification approximating the strong, lyrical movement qualities and character of Jones’ mother, grandmother, and other strong black women in his life. The second Eliza seems more contemporary somehow, reciting a monologue about betrayal as she thrashes and stomps about the stage. Her movement is convoluted and turned inward as she dances a powerful and emotional solo of a troubled woman. Cowles follows her around the stage (not a simple task), holding the microphone close to her so that we hear her words and labored breath. The third Eliza is modeled on the character of Joan of Arc, a commanding presence, able to keep the pursuing dogs at bay. This is much in contrast to the fourth Eliza, the most manipulated of the group of five soloists, who is tossed about by the dogs until rescued by the other three Elizas at the end of her solo. It is during this desperate and chaotic fourth solo that Truth’s address is frantically recited in reverse by Cowles. As she recites the address, the four women dance wildly and expansively across the stage, fending off the dogs. Finally, having outsmarted the “dogs,” the women and Stowe safely exit stage left, and a tall black man in a white mini-skirt and white pumps appears stage right. The man performs a sexy solo of “grasping arms, jabbing fingers, wobbling knees and extended tongue” before slinking off after the women (215). Although the section was created with and for the women in the
company, Jones included the male Eliza as a metaphor for the many gay males "on neither shore, masculine or feminine..." (Dancing).

The second entr’acte, "The Prayer," is a duet performed by Jones and his mother, Estella Jones. After he escorts his mother in, he places himself at some distance from her and dances an improvised solo to her words: a song or a prayer addressed to the audience. Jones soon joins her to sing a hymn. He says of the duet, "I dance beside her as she prays. Moved by the rhythm and the meaning of her words, my solo is based on a shudder and a shout that originates somewhere in my hips and like two claps of thunder moves down my thighs and up my back" (Last Night 216).

Following "The Prayer," the curtain rises on a scene depicting The Last Supper, the cast gathered around a long table posed like Christ and his disciples. Jones remarked that he was inspired to create the third major section, "The Supper," by reproductions of Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of "The Last Supper" in many Christians’ homes when he was a child. Although a primary symbol for many Christians, for Jones the image of the table and the shared meal came to represent not inclusion and harmony but repressed violence, sexual yearning, and exclusion (Wexner).

Sage Cowles is now in the position occupied by Christ in the painting, and later, when he joins the rest of the cast at the table, R. Justice Allen takes the place of Judas—once again the two performers are cast in opposition to each other. Initially, Allen is separate from the group. Alone, downstage of the table, he mimes in slow motion the dribbling of a basketball to a recording of the same. Eventually he tosses the imaginary ball into an imaginary hoop above the supper scene. It seems that he misses, as we hear the ball bouncing off in the distance. After a few moments he takes his place at the table.

Suddenly, the silence and stillness of the supper break as the cast moves into a frenzied state of activity away from the table. The movement is a chaotic and energetic blend of dance and sport (which to some degree previews the final section of the work, "The Promised Land, although there, with the community cast onstage with the company, the cast is five times as large). Similar to the movement for the first section, "The Cabin," Jones choreographs into the scene a sampling of black vernacular dance
forms (both historical and contemporary), this time performed for an on-stage crowd (a theme repeated again in the last section). Moving through a series of provocative sexual encounters and rejections, the members of the cast are engaged with each other, through loving and passionate partnering, alternating with more aggressive power plays—. The layering of movement and bodies is dense; there is much happening at once. At one point during the section, the performers break from the frenzied activity to march (in a somewhat military formation) back to the table. They place the chairs in a long diagonal line across the stage. Accompanied by the counting voice of a leader/commander, they engage in a rather staunch variation of the familiar children's game of musical chairs. The movement is somewhat mechanical, repetitive, and quite rigorous (it doesn't look like fun), reminiscent of the disciplined and incessant calisthenics of "The Dogs." Occasionally two dancers break formation to embrace and are simply passed by the others. At the end of the long line of chairs, closest to the audience, Sage Cowles and her husband, John Cowles (also a cast member), embrace and kiss passionately throughout the entire sequence.

"The Supper," built on various images, choreographies, and characterizations of the preceding sections, presented the most multi-layered section of the work. The action was overlaid with several texts, including Ezekial's Lamentations; the black soldiers' version of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" ("We have done with hoeing cotton, we have done with hoeing corn, We are colored Yankee soldiers now, as sure as we are born; When the masters hear us yelling, they'll think it's Gabriel's horn, As it went sounding on") (Last Supper); and an auto-historical rap piece entitled "Sumthin' Ta Think About" (They call me Justice), written and performed by R. Justice Allen. The rap traced Allen's life journey from the streets to the stage, offering us a view of a black man, who, once completely disenfranchised, is now being offered a "seat at the table."

Following are excerpts from the rap:

Trip to the past, you know before to my younger years, the days of yore black power, peace and freedom now I sang we shall overcome, but I didn't learn how... / Young, gifted and black was my identity, but I was deaf, dumb and blind no I couldn't see from Vietnam came dope in body
bags I started hangin’, and bangin’, and got hooked on skag /I lost regard for life through my forgotten tears picked up a gun, stick ‘em up, cost me fifteen years hardtime is whatcha call it, a ward of the state in legal slave system full of death, and hate... I walked amongst the civil dead in society’s tombs/Out of sight, out of mind, a forgotten man, victimized, and taunted by the Ku Klux Klan, herded, and prodded from block to block I was just another Nigger in a cracker-box. / A new day dawned the day I got out. I had no fears, I had no doubts my house is glass so I throw no stones now I’m rockin’ around the world with Bill T. Jones.

The rest of the cast joined in the chorus, yelling out key words: “SLAVE—three fifths of a man / BIAS—it’s the law of the land... etc. / PAIN—the core of this confusion... etc.” (Allen). The rap ended with Justice shouting, “They call me Justice, Justice, Justice,” at which point all of the performers, who had been standing on their chairs around the table, jumped to the floor, and the curtain fell on “The Supper.”

The last and longest of the entr’actes, “Faith,” features Jones as the biblical character, Job (in an enactment of the story of the “Man of Perfect Faith”), and a member of the local clergy with whom he engages in a largely unrehearsed interview. The curtain rises on a view of the table from the previous section. At one end is seated the member of the clergy, and in the middle sits Jones with his back to the audience and flanked by two other men from the company. As the member of the clergy tells (in his own words) the story of Job, the story of a man “tested again and again by God in his wager with Satan,” Jones dances Job’s suffering—. In the background we hear the lush strains of “Round Midnight” played by the saxophone sextet (Jones, Last Night 219).

The solo is powerful and ecstatic. Jones’ feet are quick and articulate; his back arches and shudders as he struggles physically and emotionally with his faith. (As the story goes, after God and the Devil have had their wager, Job is reinstated in the faith, and his property returned to him.) In Jones’ solo, this reinstatement is symbolized by his being given a new white shirt (previously, during the telling/dancing of the story, his shirt had been literally cut off his back with a knife by one of the men attending him) and his black jacket.
Composed now, Jones interviews the clergyman (who did not know in advance exactly what questions would be asked): “What is faith? Is Christianity a slave religion? What is evil? Does God punish us? Does hell exist? Is homosexuality a sin? Is AIDS a punishment from God?” (Jones reports that “the dialogue was modeled after a conversation I had with my mother at the Black Choreographers’ Festival in Los Angeles in 1989. The one where she had said, “If you believe, if you really believe, then your faith will take you anywhere” (Jones, Last Night 220).

Although he had designed the dialogue to take place between himself and a black Fundamentalist of strong faith who would not be afraid to answer his questions in a politically “incorrect” or non-liberal manner, more often than not on the tour he could find only fairly well-intentioned and liberal people of faith to participate in the piece. He said, “I was not afraid of being hurt. I wanted to conjure this ephemeral, unquantifiable, potentially deadly thing called Faith” (Last Night 220) In the thirty-five or so locations on the tour, Jones reports that most of the members of the clergy were, almost without exception, “unflappable, beyond the reach of debate and any sort of objective discourse” (220).

The piece arrives at the final section of the work, “The Promised Land,” which, besides including the enlarged cast of approximately forty to fifty performers from the local community, presents two powerfully staged texts: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech (1963), and an excerpt of Amiri Baraka’s (a/k/a Leroi Jones) The Dutchman (1964). The curtain opens to reveal a dimly lit stage filled to capacity with a crowd of people listening intently to a strange but eerily familiar “conversation” between two men. The “conversation” is, in fact, Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream,” scripted in reverse and organized as a dialogue. The two men, Andrea Woods (who played Uncle Tom in “The Cabin”) and R. Justice Allen (who played several roles since the beginning of the piece) are off to one side of the stage, illuminated by a rather bright white light. The “conversation” begins relatively calmly but grows more argumentative, as did Dr. King’s original speech, which began rather subtly and poetically (to instill a new vision of the world in its listeners) and worked its way toward
making serious political statements about the state of the union. As staged by Jones, Woods begins and Allen responds:

Last at Free are we! Almighty God thank! Last at Free! Last at Free! Spiritual Negro old the of words the in sing, and hands join to able be will, Catholics and Protestants, Gentiles and Jews, Men white and men black, children God’s of all when day that up speed to able be will we...

Segregation of manacles the by crippled sadly still is Negro the of life the, later years hundred one. Freed not still is Negro the that fact tragic the face must we later years hundred one but...
(Last Supper)

Woods’ voice is full and resonant as he attempts to persuade Allen, whose tone is, by contrast, more skeptical, even angry, that there is hope. As the dialogue winds down, Allen has the last word: “Dream a Have I,” a phrase which is then picked up by the crowd as the lights become brighter and the stage comes to life. Rather astoundingly, the number of people onstage has increased to well over fifty with the addition of the community cast. When the crowd (fully dressed at this point) begins to march in a procession (carrying huge body-size masks inspired by African deities), it is a powerful sight. Before long the procession breaks down into a chaotic “arena-inspired” sequence where the dancers of Jones’ company divide into groups and run toward and through each other aggressively, urged on by the noisy and raucous crowd. There are individual displays of dancing amid the confusion: an image of “darkies dancing around the campfire” and a barefoot tap routine emerge from the action (Jones, Last Night 221). During this sequence, the first fully naked body is seen, that of company member Arthur Aviles, who, having exited the stage after a duet with another man, returns to the stage to repeat the same duet but this time naked. After the second run of the duet, Aviles climbs onto the “Last Supper” table (still on stage) and, surrounded by a number of performers, moves from one saint shape to another (see Preface) in the midst of a series of softly suspended falls. With each fall, arms reach out to catch him and gently push him back up, back into his dance, as the lights fade to black one last time before the final sequences of the piece.
When the lights fade up, it is quiet again onstage, the cast assembled this time on the floor in the shape of two giant crosses (one of the crosses faces the audience and the other faces the back wall of the stage space). Everyone is naked or almost naked, but the stage is very dim, and this is not yet obvious. Sage Cowles and R. Justice Allen (as the characters Lulu and Clay) step onto the table and begin a powerfully staged excerpt from Leroi Jones’ *Dutchman* (1964) (Andrea Woods, the actor who earlier played Uncle Tom, cites all of the stage directions).

In the play, set in a subway car, a well-dressed, well-educated black man is alternately seduced and angered by a white woman, who eventually turns on him, calling him “Ol’ Thomas Woolly-Head and “Uncle Tom-Big-Lip.” In a rage Allen/Clay slaps Cowles/Lulu, and the forty performers assembled in the shadows slap the floor with their open palms (this kind of slapping also accompanied the whipping of Uncle Tom in “The Cabin”). Then there is silence. As Allen/Clay turns his back to Cowles/Lulu, saying, “I’m sorry Baby, I don’t think we’re going to make it,” she plunges an imaginary knife into his chest saying, “Sorry is right. Sorry is the rightest thing you’ve said” (*Last Supper*). Allen/Clay falls off of the table into the arms of a small crowd of onlookers (reminiscent of Aviles’ body falling and being caught in the scene before) and is carried off, accompanied by a steady rhythm now being pounded out on the floor.

The violence of the play’s ending launches the stage into a frenzy once again. “Slap, whirl, slap—the double cross disintegrates, re-forms, and disintegrates again, a whirlwind of human flesh; the double cross sequence is danced in silence, everyone having to sense the rhythm of the group to stay together” (Wallach 56). Soon the powerful image of the crosses explodes, and the cast of more than fifty flurry on and off the stage alternately engaged in confrontational struggles and love-making. The movement is dense and iconographic, depicting the poses of saints, attitudes of prayer, and a revival meeting. Dance formations seen before are brought back in new arrangements with more bodies and are layered with more complicated partnering. The stage is a complex and momentous swirl of activity that literally moves the piece toward its final image. Throughout the action, the cast has been disrobing in the wings between
exits and entrances, with each newly exposed body joining those exposed before it for a gradual, cumulative effect on the audience. In what appears to be utter chaos on stage, the piece revels in a kind of spiritual and emotional release after a long, hard journey. Where will it all end?

During this final thirty minutes of Last Supper, there is almost no spoken text except for the prayer-like instructions accompanying “the Innocent” duet (see Preface) read by Sage Cowles. Finally, after one last flurry of movement in and out of the wings, comes a running, jumping, and spinning sequence choreographed in such a way that the stage looks to be filled with literally hundreds of bodies, the final image. More than fifty naked bodies are assembled across the full length and depth of the stage, bathed in a warm golden light, face the audience, singing. Bodies old, young, male, female, gay, straight, black, white, and of every imaginable size and shape bring the piece to its final image: Jones’ “promised land.” It is no accident that the scene of calm and peaceful bodies at the end of the piece contrasts with the many images of struggle—emotional, spiritual, and physical—that proceeded it, as Jones says, “We are not saints. We are not one big happy family. But we have arrived at a commonalty, a recognition of who we are, and it is symbolized by the body being exposed... I would like the audience at this moment to see themselves in that picture and ask themselves: Could I also step into this picture naked, too... they have to bring themselves to it... It stops being art, maybe, at that point, and it is an act of faith” (Dancing).

* * * * *

Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land was an extraordinarily ambitious piece. Jones commented that it “was the largest work I ever made and a work that came out of my desire to sum up everything I believed. It was impossible for it to succeed, but it did not fail” (Last Night 223). What does Jones mean? That it was “impossible for it to succeed” or that it “didn’t fail” seems of little consequence. Last Supper was an experience that Jones needed and wanted to have and thought that others might benefit from having as well. More important than its relative success or failure was its ability to engage people very directly in considering where we’ve been and where
we’re going in relationship to the complex and conflicted issues around difference in our society. From “The Cabin,” with its masked caricatures of slaves and slavery, to “The Promised Land,” with its fifty naked bodies assembled across the length of the proscenium, Last Supper posed the question, “Can we recognize our differences and live with them and each other?” The image of approximately fifty to sixty naked bodies facing the audience—who in their turn stood to face them—truly had the feeling of a solution in the making. But Jones made the point several times in rehearsals that the naked bodies assembled across the stage at the end of the work made its powerful statement only because it was the culmination of a long and involved process of traveling through the narratives and images that lead up to it. Everyone stood together, face to face, body to body, at the end of the work only because we had spent some time together on a journey through our collective history. Together we looked and moved back, and reflected on where we had been, considered and reconsidered what it meant and means, and all in order to grasp what must be done to make our society more accepting of difference in the future.

3.3 A “Social Drama” Analysis

Turner developed the social drama scheme to analyze how societies handle conflict. Arising out of conflict and crisis in various social formations, a breach (first phase of the social drama) of the present social contract occurs and generally leads to the crisis phase, in which there is some level of disintegration in the relevant structures. The third phase, redress, attempts to address with the crisis at hand through some sort of ritual activity, usually within the domains of law, religion, or artistic production. The liminal reflexive phase of redress was, in Turner’s view, particularly suited to moving our consciousness into the past, so as to gain perspective on what is happening in the present”. “Meaning arises in memory, in cognition of the past, and is concerned about the ‘fit’ between past and present” (From Ritual 75). In addition, he believed that the processes of looking back in order to gain perspective in the present would move the current crisis away from that which is known and into the future where a solution to the
problem could be found. For Turner, the capacity to work in the past, present, and future to resolve conflict—something that he believed performance was especially well equipped to do—was redress at its best.

To reiterate the parameters of this analysis, I will consider Last Supper as the phase of redress in the social drama brought into being as a result of the death of Jones' lover and partner, Arnie Zane. Although Zane's death was the major catalyst for the unfolding of this social drama, it intersected with his struggles surrounding his identity as a gay and black (and now HIV positive male) in America. Jones addressed those realities, with the support and participation of others, in the public space of performance. Thus, Last Supper came into being. Of the various reflexive strategies Jones employed in the work, the strategy of most interest was his invitation to the American public to join his company onstage, naked, in “The Promised Land.” This invitation to join him onstage and thus to narrow the gap between “art” and “life” was supported by two related strategies: choices made around casting the piece and the use (manipulation and reconfiguration) of various historical texts. After reviewing what constitutes the phases of breach and crisis in the social drama, I will consider how these strategies of redress enabled Jones to look back (to gain perspective on the conflict of difference) and to move forward (where some sort of resolution to this conflict may be found).

3.3.1 Breach and Crisis

Jones was driven to make Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land after the death of his lover and partner of many years, Arnie Zane, from AIDS. Jones and Zane, who were co-directors of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and who had been working together for seventeen years, were well-known in the United States and around the world. As has tended to be true of many artists who have died from AIDS, Zane’s death was very public. With his decision to create Last Supper, his first major work after Zane’s passing, Jones took public his mourning. For this analysis, Zane’s untimely death from AIDS can be seen as the breach that set this particular social drama in motion.
Breach led very quickly to crisis for Jones. As homophobia intensified along with the AIDS epidemic, Jones' anger about the intolerance of difference in American society deepened. Where could he mourn his loss when the Christian faith that he grew up with condemned homosexuality and talked about AIDS as God's vengeance against homosexuals? Zane's death left him alone both professionally and personally, alone with his identity as a gay, black man. He found himself deeply conflicted. As a member of the New York avant-garde dance scene, he had been presenting his work to largely liberal white audiences for years, and he began to wonder how this had affected his artistic choices. What about his African American heritage—how could he communicate this aspect of his identity to these audiences? In the press about Last Supper, he described the work as emerging out of a profound "crisis of faith," both spiritual and social. Where could he turn in his grief for support? He was full of doubts about his mother's Christian faith, the same faith in which he had been raised, and doubted that there was room for him as a homosexual black man. If there were, did he want to be a part of what he considered a "slave" religion? In his book Last Night on Earth, Jones constructed a personal chronology that "charted the origins" of his African-American voice. He said:

My history is a fragmented chronology that divides me from my past, from my mother's faith, from the hopeful naiveté of the sixties counterculture. I decided that Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land would acknowledge this division and attempt to go past it. This work, with its fragmented black voice, would strive to speak to the broadest, most varied audience. (206)

Jones turned to his work as a way of dealing with his loss and coming to terms with his identity. The crisis phase of this social drama comes with Jones' recognition that his crisis (his feelings of fragmentation and alienation) was no less than the crisis of an entire culture, its roots old and deep and its expressions complex. As a cultural critic and emerging community leader, he decided to mobilize his resources as a maker of dance and theater pieces to create a work that could address the diversity of the United States in terms of race, class, sexual preference, and faith. He determined that, while the
piece would be full of conflict and challenge participants and audiences alike with its subject matters and imagery, it would work to bring new and better solutions to the conflict of difference in our society.

3.3.2 Redressive Strategies: Casting and Use of Texts

The first of the three redressive strategies is casting, a strategy that begins the process of looking at the assembled bodies to bring Last Supper into being. To reiterate, Jones assembled a cast for Last Supper that would enable him to examine questions of difference in American society. In addition to his company (which in and of itself represents ethnic, racial, gender, sexual orientation, and body type diversity), Jones invited four guest artists and the forty to fifty people from every city where the piece was performed, to participate in the work. Intensely interested in the people behind the work, he selected his cast for their skills as performance, especially his guest artists, R. Justice Allen, Andrea Smith, Sage Cowles, and John Cowles. His selections incorporated who the artists were in their lives outside of the piece and what they could bring to or represent in the piece.

For example, Jones cast Allen in many roles to draw attention to how he managed to survive, probably because of his ability to keep shifting his identity (in real life). (To review, Allen was the narrator for “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” was Judas in “The Supper,” was Clay from Dutchman, was one of the two men conversing in Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, and performed his rap, “Sumthin’ Ta Think About.”) In Allen, the man and the performer, Jones found a means to “reach and address my grieving for an identity that is ravaged by history and misinformation, by economics and a social order that exploits a man wholesale while keeping him on the fringes of opportunity” (Last Night 207). Watching the piece, audiences observe Allen moving through the various identities with which Jones challenges him. First, he is the narrator telling the story of Uncle Tom’s Cabin simply (without rhetoricizing around it), continually interrupting Stowe to tell the story as he would like it told (i.e., along the lines of Jones’ reconfiguration of the story so that Uncle Tom does not end up a martyr). Interestingly,
Allen, temporarily departing from the role of narrator, also plays the slave master who whips Uncle Tom to death in Stowe’s version of the story. Jones seems to ask what the role of the black man was in this master-slave relation. (Jones often confounds roles throughout the piece so that there are no clear distinctions between the “good” and the “bad” according to identifying features such as ones’ sex or race.) Then, in what can be seen as a more stereotypically black male role, he plays Judas, the disciple who cannot be trusted. When he performs his rap during “The Supper,” audiences get a glimpse of the man outside of the work, a man who has somehow negotiated an existence amid the trauma of being assigned and reassigned his identity by a racially conflicted society. He has “made” it, and now he’s “rockin’ round the world with Bill T. Jones.” At this point, audiences realize that Allen is always himself regardless of who else he might be throughout the course of the evening. This is true of all the company members and guest artists as they put on and take off various personas and characters throughout the piece.

Important is that company members were not always assigned roles by Jones but were invited to make choices about who or what they were interested in, or willing to represent. They brought their own lives (as thinking and moving bodies) into the work. The contributions made by company members is made clear by how Jones organized the five solos for the “Eliza on the Ice” section. By fracturing one role into five, Jones enabled the women who dance Eliza to offer their own unique interpretations of the character according to their understanding of the text (Uncle Tom’s Cabin) and their particular perspectives on it.

The changes of character and persona that Jones choreographed with and for Allen and the other members of the company were fairly obvious because these individuals were playing major roles. He also choreographed various sorts of shifts and changes of character for the local community cast members. Throughout the final section of the piece, “The Promised Land, the cast of more than fifty was distributed across an intriguing field of characters (everyone putting on and taking off different identities at a rather extraordinary speed), including images of church-goers and saints to rebel rousers and lovers. Jones created a veritable sea of humanity that pulled and
surged like waves across the stage, an effect impossible to achieve without the numbers of people available to him. With such a large number of people, Jones was able to organize multiple realities or versions of reality on stage at one time; at any given moment there might be any number of different actions or groupings to take in. The shifting and changing from one persona or identity to another, executed through the flow of movement, had the effect of producing a distinctly liminal space on stage, through which the performers could “elude or slip through the network of classifications” (Turner, *Ritual Process* 94-5). Mixed in with this changing of persona and character was the ongoing cumulative process of disrobing. In addition to observing the changes in character, the audience is simultaneously observing a type of disappearance of character (at least in terms of the outward signs via costume). This disappearance of character has its culminating moment at the end of the work when the naked bodies assembled before the audience aren’t really performing but are very simply present for their communities. As is true of Allen earlier in the piece, it becomes clear that the community cast also exists on both the inside and the outside of the work simultaneously.

The participation of the local community cast helps take the piece beyond the goal of portraying the idea of community. Although masses of people on stage will very likely always be a very powerful image, that the people in Jones’ work were from the community and recognizable as such made it possible for audiences to become involved in a different way. If the community is represented onstage, then it is already engaged in the process of “acting on itself,” making the fact of local involvement, perhaps, the best example from the piece as a whole, of the workings of redress (Turner, *From Ritual* 75).

* * * * *

Another of Jones’ reflexive redressive strategies—the manipulation and reconfiguration of texts—should be considered. In Turner’s view, the search for meaning in performance is achieved by a combination of living through and looking back [my emphasis], of having experiences and assigning them meaning by virtue of retrospection, a delving into history. In *Last Supper*, Jones assembled a plenitude of historical texts relevant to the discussion of race relations in America and moved the
performers' bodies through them. In the process of investigating these intersections, Jones and company variously reconfigure these texts so that they might be considered anew. Two of the texts with which he engaged are Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. As with his casting, Jones' work with texts was an important redressive strategy. Jones suggested that Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolition-era novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, was a starting place for him, an "origin story" that set the stage for the larger work. He said:

'The Cabin is an attempt to bring our audiences up to date on what the book Uncle Tom's Cabin really is. The book is a touchstone; it is the thing that reacting to as so many people have... I am attempting to tell the story in an interesting way... so that we can get on to some understanding of the ramifications of the story as a kind of meditation on liberalism, on hope, on the philosophy and theology of liberation ("Moving" 35).

Later in the piece, Jones presented a reconfiguration of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, another text from the mix of Christianity and liberation philosophy. Jones wondered about the relationship between these texts, politically and socially speaking, and about our relationship to them now. One opened the first section of Last Supper, and the other opened the last section, "The Promised Land." In both cases, the way that he presented the texts intervened in their meaning-making capacity with Jones' attempts to add new layers of meaning onto those already understood to be present in them.

In the context of the Last Supper, performers and audiences live through and look back at these two texts quite differently. For Jones, Uncle Tom's Cabin is just one more form of black "memorabilia" (which include such oddities as Aunt Jemima cookie jars) that represent stereotypes of blacks long held by whites but now formally taboo in liberal society. He said:

'I've seen these memorabilia in the homes of very chic, young, upwardly mobile black people. There's something we recognize in them, something bitter, funny, horrible. I've thought we should be collecting them. They're our Masada: 'Never Again'... [Uncle Tom's Cabin] is a testament to where we've been. The real question is, were we ever really
there, or is that where a well-meaning, white liberal Christian woman said we were? In a way, isn’t that what makes the black memorabilia so painfully intriguing? (Wexner)

As an important reminder of where African Americans have been, these “memorabilia,” “in Jones view, should be subject to greater scrutiny, not hidden away. Jones alleges that Uncle Tom’s Cabin is as important to the telling of history as Dr. King’s speech and so chose to start his journey there.

Jones reenacted the story as a highly stylized minstrel show and as a play within a play (it was almost as if Jones’ piece hadn’t yet begun). The way that he organized the scene de-privileges Stowe as the story’s author and changes the ending so that Uncle Tom does not end up a martyr but is victorious, along with the other slaves, over his assailants. Although he rewrote the story, he actually accomplished his intervention in the text through the bodies of the performers. Donned in masks and colorful costumes, performing exaggerated gestures and exaggerated postures, and, in a sense, “trapped” within the frame of the set, the performers are made to look like life-size puppets without a will of their own. By costuming and moving the players as he does, Jones effectively draws attention to the minstrel aspect of Stowe’s original story and in the process reveals its limitations as a historical document.

By contrast, Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, recited in reverse and staged by Jones as an argument between two black men in the opening sequence of “The Promised Land,” is configured to deepen the sense of its original meaning rather than to call its meanings into question. In response to why he presented it backwards and as an argument, he said:

People ask me why I do that... and I tell them that you can’t think of a more eloquent and poetic and hopeful bit of oration. To take it and turn it around backwards, so that the meaning becomes fragmented and obtuse [and] yet you recognize it as something you once knew and loved, but now it’s being delivered by two men in an angry fashion. So what was once a message of unity from one positive voice is now an argument—an angry one at that—in two voices. In a nutshell, that’s the overview of the piece, on one level. (Raabe 12)
Jones drew his audiences’ attention to ambivalence about or outright distrust of what was happening concerning race relations. Can the world listen as intently as it once did to Kings’ words (even backward) and really care about what they mean? Jones attempts to answer that question in the staging of the speech, which once again depends on the participation of the local community cast. Although he sets the two men off to the side in a rather harsh bright light, the audience can see that they are surrounded by a silent and attentive crowd, a virtual landscape of humanity (much in contrast to “The Cabin”). Everyone onstage (and hopefully offstage, as well, Jones must hope) is in earnest listening to the speech/argument. Jones uses the community cast to create a receptive space for King’s important message and, in that receptive space, opens the possibility that people might need to again become angry if they want things to change.

_Last Supper_ was a vehicle by which Jones sought to recuperate the racist and (especially) sexist iconography that has defined our relationships to each other, in order that it may be put to a very different kind of use. He presents his ambivalence (and sometimes ours) in relation to the meanings of the various texts in the piece, meanings with which we all live all of the time. Cultural critic Kobena Mercer discussed ambivalence as a political strategy that played off the mobility of subject and object positions. Reappropriation and reconstruction of images, along with readings that effectively deconstruct texts, served to increase the range of readings that can be produced from the same text. Mercer suggested “an approach to ambivalence... as something that is experienced across the relations between authors, texts, and readers, relations that are always contingent, context-bound, and historically specific” (170). Jones’ theatrical reconfigurations of texts and his thoughtful and inventive embodiments of them attempted to negotiate new meanings in the face of the old. He seemingly suggested that ambivalence around these texts was a necessary component in staging any kind of intervention that called history and meaning into account. Our ambivalence may help us to articulate our relationship to these texts so that, to some degree, through them we might find clues to solving our conflict of difference.
3.3.3 50 Naked Bodies: Redress and Resolution

Jones wanted to make a dance that could become “part of the larger world” (Wallach 58), but he also wanted a voice in what that world might be. This desire led to the most compelling aspect of his project: his invitation to each community on the tour to participate in the piece, to expose themselves to and for their community in a massive nationwide ritual of recognition and acceptance of difference. In this way, he hoped to go beyond a symbolic representation of community and difference to a live, embodied presentation of community and difference. In one interview about the piece, he said:

The concept of nudity derives from the same commonality shared by the other issues confronted in [the piece]. It’s an honest notion, but it’s different from that in the ‘60’s, in that back then I don’t think people had done the work to have this world view of us all united. And that’s why there’s such fighting in [the piece], that’s why there’s such an angry voice that propels it—because I don’t think we have really tried to earn this “Let’s all stand up and buy everyone a Coke mentality” until we’ve done a lot of work on our differences. (Raabe 12)

The work on these differences took place in Last Supper. In discussions with the local casts who performed the work in each of the cities on tour, Jones made the point that the presence of naked bodies at the end of the work is the “light at the end of the tunnel after a long and difficult journey.” The contents of the piece—its various actions, narratives, and images—provided a world (of work) for the performers to move through. Without the reflexive strategies already discussed—the particulars of casting and the inclusion and subsequent reconfigurations of Jones’ various texts—the naked bodies moving through the last section of the work may not have had the impact that they did. While the naked bodies in the work were supported by the choices Jones made around casting and the reconfiguration of texts which provided various subject matters for the both the performers (and the audiences) to work through, the naked bodies are not necessarily preceded by them. The naked bodies gave the piece an edge that it would not have otherwise had. The profundity of their difference and their sameness was an exquisite match for the messages of Jones’ work “Who are the naked people—is it a
black woman, a gay man, someone who has AIDS, an old person?” (Jones, Letter). We know and we don’t know, but ultimately it doesn’t matter.

Like choices made about casting and the reconfiguration of texts, the naked bodies in Last Supper are also a reflexive redressive strategy in the piece. The involvement of members from each local community in Last Supper is probably the most important of Jones’ various reflexive strategies, in that the community is both performing and watching the performance. Dance critic Carol Martin has said of Jones’ work that “Jones... privileges experience over pretense... in displaying the real, Jones seems to be insisting on a connection between those on one side of the proscenium with those on the other [Martin’s emphasis]” (332). For my own part as a performer in this work, while my nakedness in the work at large was framed as theater, I felt projected outside of the proscenium into the real social, when I, exposed, faced the audience at the end of the work, and the audience, in turn, faced me, also exposed in their own way. The simultaneous aspect of the theatrical and the “real” was especially true at the end of the work when the naked bodies weren’t really performing but were just present for their communities. They were in two places at once, on the stage and with their community.

It is at this point in the work that the naked bodies assembled across the length of the stage begin to move the piece from being a form of redress toward beginning the process of resolution in this social drama. Turner discussed the performance as a means by which a society can “scrutinize, portray, understand, and then act on itself” (From Ritual 75). By including “act on itself,” he apparently believed that performance might be at least one form of redress wherein the final stage of the social drama (a “resolution” or “reintegration of schism”) might begin to take place inside of redress as opposed to after it. He also pointed out that, whatever the final solution to the original conflict, “the scope and range of its relational field will have been altered” (71) as a result of the social drama. With the final image in Last Supper, Jones moved from the use of nakedness as a form of redress to a resolution in the hope that there will be some alteration of Turner’s “relational field.” Returning to the quote that opened this investigation of Last Supper, Jones said:
The piece wants to be a summation, and it wants not to be an ironic title, but it wants to be a true vision of pulling together the disparate strains of the conflict we’re in right now. And, for me, the human body was our common denominator—and a grand one at that—and it is the place where we find our ultimate commonality. The body is what we all possess, and the body is in fact the thing that carries us through life and that will—that must—die. (Jones, “Moving” 36)

Assembled across the stage at the end of the work was Jones’ solution to the conflict of difference in society, the conflict that brought him to a state of profound crisis in his life. The solution was the fifty or sixty naked bodies of all races, ages, and interests, and every one of them unique—an ode to difference. Jones himself admitted that his solution was idealistic, more an act of faith. Wasn’t that what his crisis was about? He said, “only the zealous pursuit of an ideal could deliver us to a place that transcends our racial, sexual, and historical differences. I chose the commonalty we share through our bodies as the ideal for that work” (Last Night, 250).

I believe that Jones challenges our perceptions in an interesting way. What is the “commonalty” that we share through our bodies? I believe that what he refers to is the body faced with and informed by the ongoing struggle against destructive stereotypes and other abuses—our bodies as sites of history defined by and defining of the social. Important is how we struggle with these conflicts and how we resolve them. Seen in this sense, commonalty is a potential of bodies, not a given—there always has been and always will be a struggle. That we all have bodies isn’t enough and clearly never has been. Rather than abandoning the corporeal body, Jones suggested that we work through it toward an acceptance of its diverse experiences and life processes. Last Supper is an example of that kind of work taking place.
CHAPTER 4

CARLSON’S VISIT WOMAN MOVE STORY CAT CAT CAT
ANALYZED AS “RESTORED BEHAVIOR”

4.1 Introduction

Carlson addresses her audience with the following note in the Animals program:

The involvement of animals in this performance has been an intrinsic part of the development of the works. They are well-loved and cared for. Please refrain from any calls, whistles or gesture of distraction to the animals. If any animal or human performer should become disoriented, the performance will be immediately altered to accommodate or offer support. Thank You. Ann Carlson (Animals)

In 1988, choreographer Ann Carlson premiered a suite of five dances entitled Animals, an evening-length work, which featured, among its cast of human performers, several goats, a dog, a goldfish, and a kitten. The program note cited above indicated to her audience that, without question, the performance would be interrupted, even stopped if necessary, to offer support to any performer in distress. Although this note was a relatively simple gesture—nor particularly strange as directors and choreographers write all manner of notes to their audiences in programs—it served to “edge into [the audience’s] consciousness... the experience of the performers” [my italics] (Albright 40). It suggested to the audience that the animals and their human counterparts were to be treated, first and foremost, as subjects and not as objects. Ann Cooper Albright remarked that the program note was only Carlson’s first address to the audience as she continued during the work to address her audience vocally. Her various addresses, delivered in the spirit of “revisioning the conventional relationship between performer and spectator” (40) continued to encourage a greater awareness of what was occurring
on stage, of theatrical convention, and of the particular experiences of the performers. In her attempt to increase her audiences' awareness of the performers' experience, Carlson was asking the audience to consider the quality of their attention toward the action taking place on stage and to consider that their attention had a very real bearing on the outcomes of that action. Carlson's major concerns in her "series" works (mid-1980s to the time of this writing) was the type of experience that performance is and her attempt to bridge the gap between performers and audience members.

**Animals** was the second of Carlson's "series" works, multiple studies sharing a common impetus or theme but choreographed separately and, in most cases, eventually linked together and presented in suite form. Preceding **Animals**, Carlson created a series entitled **Real People**, which included security guards, lawyers, a mother and daughter, and basketball players. She was attempting "to get to the center of what draws people to an activity... what impassions people" in their work and play (Gardner 12). She distilled, from different activities and professions, their gestural and large motor movements, their modes of behavior, and the particularities of how they have us relating to each other in order to form simple yet compelling movement snapshots of people in their lives. After **Animals**, she developed **White**, which examined the "icons and influences of American dominant culture," and included pieces made with blind adults, nuns, children, ballet and modern dancers, and Carlson herself as an auctioneer (Kisselgoff).

Most of Carlson's works are multi-media, combining movement, text, voice, and sound and visual elements (set pieces, video, etc.) and were made very much with the individuals or groups with whom she chose to work. **Real People**, **Animals**, and **White** included both trained and untrained performers whose particular interests and abilities became the focus for each piece. She was most interested in making work that explored peoples' everyday lives, their activities, and their relationships with others, so as to investigate how people expressed different aspects of their identities without really thinking about it. Overall, her work has been praised for its "honesty [and] directness" and its "unsentimental eloquence" (Dunning), and for its ability to "to expose and illuminate the truth and beauty of her subject matter" (Lee).
4.2 **A Synopsis of the Work**

The critically acclaimed *Animals* toured throughout the United States and abroad for several years after its premiere in New York (1988). I saw the work when it was presented in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in June 1990. As the title suggests, besides a large cast of singers, dancers, and actors, *Animals* featured a rather more unusual cast of characters, including several goats, a dog, a goldfish, and a kitten—all assembled to explore “the presence of animals in our lives: as symbols, as pets, and as reflections of our own animal instincts” (White).

For this analysis, I am concerned mainly with Carlson’s culminating solo, *Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat*, in which Carlson performed naked as the signing gorilla, Koko. In terms of Schechner’s notion of restored behavior, I will consider (1) how the solo might have expanded or even altered the “original” story of Koko, (2) what part Carlson’s nakedness played in making the merging between herself and her subject (Koko) so productive, and (3) how it contributed to Carlson’s overall project of expanding on and even critiquing the “original” story of Koko. Before entering into this analysis, I will offer a synopsis of the *Animals* suite of dances to give a fuller sense of Carlson’s investigations with animals as well as providing a larger context for understanding the solo. The four sections that preceded it were: *Scared Goats Faint, The Dog Inside The Man Inside, Duck, Baby, and Sarah*.

* * * * *

As the audience enters the theater, the performance is already underway. The set for the first section, *Scared Goats Faint*, is in place, complete with two goats. The theater is an intimate black box (rather than a proscenium stage), seating about a hundred people, none of whom are seated more than twenty-five or thirty feet from the stage. In a small, mall-style petting zoo/corrail (complete with a white picket fence and Astroturf), the goats placidly browse, munch on hay, and occasionally nip at each other. An animal keeper/stage hand casually strolls on and off the stage to check on the goats and make various adjustments to the set, while members of the audience take their seats,
talk to each other, and observe the goats. The scene is very casual, and Carlson even appears once in her warm-up clothes to discuss something with the animal keeper.

The more formal beginning occurs when the house lights are dimmed and the stage lights brought up. A chorus of ten to fifteen singers/speakers, clad in long red robes, files in along the back fence and begins to chant and sing an incessant and noisy multi-lingual accompaniment to the movement trio to follow. With the chanting well underway, a woman, dressed in a white costume that covers her whole body up to just under her nose, enters the stage space, passes along the back of the corral, and enters it through a tiny gate. The goats seem relatively uninterested as she executes inside the corral a fairly minimal dance sequence, consisting of dramatic spiraling falls and slow winding recoveries. The goats scattered and reared only once as the stranger did her strange dance in their midst. When the dancer falls and doesn’t get up (interestingly, the goats didn’t faint—only the dancer did), the goats gather around her and nip at her clothing, a bit more interested now that she is quiet. The chorus, unrelenting throughout the trio, exits, and eventually the dancer gets up and exits. Finally, the animal keeper and assistants come in. The goats are led away, and the scene is changed for the next piece.

For The Dog Inside The Man Inside, the corral that is so efficiently cleared away (except for the fence, which was moved to the back of the stage) is just as efficiently replaced by a rather minimalist representation of a living room: a TV set and easy chair. In this section, Carlson shares a duet with a big, friendly black dog. Dressed in a man’s shirt and tie, boxer shorts, socks, and shoes, she briskly leads the dog along the fence and into the living room, commanding the dog to sit next to the chair, which it does. Returning to the fence at the back of the stage, Carlson, who had seemed fairly normal until that point, begins to pace compulsively along the perimeter, reciting letters written to various friends and lovers, and making comments about her present state of health and the immediate performance situation. Her monologue is interspersed with dog commands such as “Down girl, down” barked at an invisible dog (which at one point was her left leg which she patted and rubbed vigorously, “Good dog, good dog”) or to no one in particular. Meanwhile, the real dog, quite obedient, lowers its head to the
floor to watch her human counterpart’s anxious maneuverings, patiently (it seems) awaiting her return.

At one point, Carlson returns to the living room still quite distracted, to sit in the chair and watch the television, jumping up now and then to take her place in the football play presumably taking place on the screen in front of her. Simultaneous to all of this (and in marked contrast to Carlson’s frenetic antics), a man stands on a chair just to the right of the living room simply counting, “1, 2”, etc. Eventually, Carlson’s agitation proves too much for the dog, and it stands up, tail wagging furiously, and begins to bark at her. It seems to want to join her in this strange game, but, after a few pats on the head and Carlson’s command to stay, it seems content to remain in the living room. Eventually Carlson breaks out of her character and returns to the dog; they exit together as the scene changes for the next piece, Duck, Baby.

In Duck, Baby, a Down’s syndrome girl, less than eight years old, skips onto the now almost empty stage (except for a little blow-up wading pool in the upstage left corner), runs a short distance around the stage, stops, and then starts again. She seems to be playing a game, the rules of which only she is aware. Occasionally, she stops and looks toward the audience (one time bending over to look at them upside down, and at another point looking around her as if trying to decide—or remember—what to do next). Eventually, she climbs into the little blow-up wading pool, where she sits quietly tearing pieces of paper into little bits and scattering them around her. Meanwhile, a rowdy duet gets underway as a man and a woman, both clad in camouflage shirts and men’s underwear, appear on the scene. They set several duck decoys around the stage. Doing all manner of imaginable duck-inspired moves, they wildly roll over and into each other and waddle along to taped instructions on how to blow a metal reed duck call. The little girl eventually joins them, and they toss her back and forth between them (accompanied by her screams of sheer delight) through the air. Finally, all three fall to the ground, laughing and rolling into a heap, making for a playful ending. The section ends with a rendition of The Beatles’ “Happiness is a Warm Gun.”
In the fourth piece of the five-part suite, a solo entitled Sarah, Carlson’s exploration of human-animal relationship moves in a slightly different direction as she goes beyond various juxtapositions of animals and humans (or ideas of animals and humans), to transform herself into a type of human-animal hybrid. In Sarah, a tale of a whale, Carlson, now a sexy and seductive femme fatale in strapless black satin party dress and black heels, stands center stage in front of a tall black rectangular pedestal. On top of the pedestal is perched a large fishbowl, complete with big beautiful goldfish. Over the speaker system an announcer’s voice, (from a Sea World type of place) commands silence from the audience so that Sarah will “surface to perform.” The tension mounts as he informs the audience, in dubious tones, of her enormous killer whale appetite. Carlson/Sarah, who had been “underwater” (under the cover of her arm/fin), suddenly winks one grand whale’s eye at the audience, spits and blows into the air, “dives” into the depths of the floor, and swoops up to the announcer’s excited narration of her antics and comments about her character. Singing her whale song—an extraordinary series of shrill whale-like shrieks and rumblings coming from some unknown depth of her body—Carlson/Sarah plunges into the floor repeatedly, once even “breeching” the surface, her legs and black heel clad feet making a convincing whale’s tail as she rose up feet-first into the air. Carlson/Sarah seems both ecstatic and a little desperate as she alternately dives and poses for her audience, sometimes vigorously, sometimes half-heartedly. The musical accompaniment informs the audience that Sarah/Carlson is a “man-eater,” a comment that seems funny one moment but strikes a deeper chord the next. As the whale is trained to perform, so is the woman, Carlson seemed to suggest. One critic commented that Sarah “dramatizes the human tendency to anthropomorphize animals—training them to “perform” in human-like ways, as a narcissistic reflection of the human species and its “desires” (Erickson 118). Merging with the whale in this remarkable solo, Carlson leads us into “seeing a woman, a whale, a whalewoman, a womanwhale” (Albright 39). We observe her transformation and follow her critique as she moves from woman to whale and back again throughout the piece.
The final piece in the *Animals* suite, *Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat*, is a riveting solo by Carlson and the focus of this chapter. In the second piece, *The Dog Inside The Man Inside*, and with greater complexity in *Sarah*, Carlson moved like her animal subject and even occasionally merged with it. But she managed to keep a critical distance from her animal subjects. While audiences may have been entertained and provoked when human subject and animal subject came together, the role-playing was, for the most part, quite clear. Various elements helped keep the audience from forgetting that Carlson was not the animal she was portraying, such as the accompanying text and/or music, and costuming—elements that had one or another aspect of the performance continually referring back on other aspects. This reflexive, referential strategy helped to undermine a complete absorption, on the part of the audience, in any one image or action taking place in front of them. In the first four pieces, the audience was encouraged to attend to the play of the “real” and the theatrical and to engage in the process of decoding the various elements to understand what they referenced and how. But in *Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat*, the energy in the theater changed as Carlson ventured to take her exploration of the animal subject beyond an ironic or reflexive commentary on the relationship between human and animal subject. This allowed a greater degree of merging between herself and her character, a merging made that much more effective by her performing the solo naked. While Carlson maintained her criticality in relation to her subject, that criticality was much less obvious than in the other four pieces embedded, as it was, in her transformation into her subject, Koko.

*Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat* tells the story of Koko, a gorilla in captivity, who was taught to communicate with sign-language, and the kitten that she befriended. The piece commences with Beethoven’s *Quartet #15 Opus 132 for String Quartet*, a sublime adagio considered by many to be a “pinnacle of Western culture and achievement” (Rosenberg 38-9). The lights fade up to reveal a very simply constructed metal jungle gym in the down stage left quadrant of an otherwise empty stage. The stage is dim and shadowy, with a well-lit backdrop, which allows Carlson/Koko to be seen, at times, in silhouette. The mood of the lighting matches the mood of the opening bars of

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music with both having a somewhat somber, even lonely quality. After several bars, a distinctly simian figure with back stooped, knees bent, and arms swinging, lopes in on all fours across the back of the stage. The audience sees the figure first in silhouette before it turns and heads downstage toward them. When eventually it arrives just at the edge of the performing space to sit directly in front of them, they look and see more clearly now what they thought they’d seen—this creature/character is indeed Carlson, and, yes, she is completely naked.

Poised at the edge of the stage, Carlson/Koko looks at the audience looking at her, a somewhat quizzical expression on her face. Although this encounter of human and “primate” is not unlike encounters between humans and primates in zoos, for example, the looking seems somehow more interested than usual, imbued, if you will, with a very real communicative intent. Carlson/Koko’s looking at the audience seemed to bridge the gap between her and the audience, so much so that the boundary between the audience and the stage seemed much less distinct. Shortly, this strange creature turns her back to the audience, sits on her haunches, and begins to groom herself, picking at her hair and scratching her side, aware of the audience watching her but apparently unconcerned about it. Not too much later, she lumbers off to frolic and play on her jungle gym.

Throughout the solo, Carlson/Koko occasionally returns to the edge of the stage in just this manner to pay her audience a visit. Sometimes she just looks at them looking at her, and other times signed to them amid other more “typically primate” gestures. If this looking back and forth between Carlson/Koko and her audience had already seemed somewhat unusual, the addition of signing was uncanny. How it could be that this primate figure was signing led quickly to wondering what she was saying.

Besides these very direct more communicative encounters with the audience, Carlson/Koko tumbled and rolled on the floor with a playful ease, executing a sequence of jumping turns, moving from the ground into the air with the grace and precision of a ballet dancer, and leaping and swinging on and off her jungle gym all in rhythmic synch with the now more lively sound of the string quartet. The extraordinarily eclectic movement vocabulary performed by Carlson/Koko—which included a very convincing
imitation of ape locomotion and self-involved gesture, ballet-type jumps, turns, and port de bras (arm movements), rather noble-looking stillnesses and poses, and sign language—was performed with incredible fluidity. Her transitions from one kind of movement to another were so smooth and flawless that audiences were confounded by this uncanny merging of primate and human being. Watching Carlson/Koko was awe-inspiring.

After much activity during the first third of the piece (all of which had established the character of Carlson/Koko for the audience), Carlson/Koko falls asleep perched high on her jungle gym. In the now dim light of “night,” the animal keeper, who audiences saw before, walks onto the stage with a small animal carrier and places it on the floor in the downstage corner. When Carlson/Koko wakes up not long after and discovers the carrier, she becomes joyous, even ecstatic. Looking alternately inside the carrier and at the audience, she enthusiastically signs “cat” (miming a set of whiskers, the sign for “cat”). Carlson/Koko had signed “cat” to the audience before and now it becomes clear why: she either wanted or anticipated getting a kitten. To the delight of the audience, Carlson/Koko gently coaxes a tiny gray kitten from the carrier. In a full-bodied expression of joy, she rolls about on the floor and scoops up the kitten in her arms, cradling it like a baby. She places it on her belly, looks through its fur, and then carries it in her mouth by the scruff of the neck like a mother cat. She places it on the floor and pounces at it playfully. Then, becoming suddenly possessive of her new friend/ pet/”baby,” she gathers it up and heads off to the back of the stage, holding it close to her all the while and throwing somewhat threatening glances in the audiences’ direction. As she played with and cuddled the kitten, she signed happily to herself and occasionally to the audience, adding two more signs (fairly obvious ones) to her repertoire: “me” and “love,” suggesting “me love cat” and “cat love me.” After a time, she reluctantly put the kitten back in the carrier and climbed onto her jungle gym to sleep. While she slept, the audience watched as the animal trainer returned and took the carrier and kitten away.
The audience watches knowingly as Carlson/Koko awakens to find her kitten gone. She searches frantically about the stage, looks longingly into the wings, and signs "cat" repeatedly and desperately to the audience as she paces back and forth across the bottom of the stage. After a while, her movement slows down and, seeming utterly bereaved, she hangs despondently from her monkey bars or sits huddled near her jungle gym. Her signs are now half interested empty gestures. At one point, she slowly climbs up onto the highest bar of the jungle gym but, unable to swing like before, her body simply unfolds to hang heavy with sorrow. During this last moody section of the piece (the music has also become more moody), Carlson/Koko lopes heavily about the stage, stares blankly left and right into the wings, and sits close to the audience but with her back to them. When finally she begins to move about again toward the end of the piece, she makes a perfunctory circle of the stage and heads toward the back of the stage to the wing from which she had originally entered.

Once there, she pauses, her naked body in silhouette, the mystery of the merging of human woman and gorilla still uncanny, still a mystery. She seems to be looking at the audience although they cannot see her eyes in the shadows; her body says it all. Suddenly (or not so suddenly as time seems irrelevant) the string quartet strains into its last notes and Carlson/Koko rises up from all fours onto her legs, arms raised with hands slightly limp at the wrists, her back arched, her face up to the ceiling—her whole body making a kind of last desperate (and human-looking) appeal—before galloping offstage and out of sight. Of the five times that I have seen the work, the audience, at this moment, let out a collective gasp, and, as I recall, many cried.

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One critic called Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat Cat Cat "a holy dance" (Anderson), while yet another called it "exquisite" and marveled at "how a sturdy, bare-breasted woman with short blond hair performing to a Beethoven quartet can make you not only identify her with Koko, the sign-making gorilla, but move you deeply." This critic decided that the dance was "one of those mysteries that [she would] rather be grateful for than probe" (Jowitt "Fine Grays" 87). It was a truly a remarkable
performance. Carlson's transformation into the gorilla Koko was quite astonishing, and the impact she was had on her audiences as a result of that transformation was quite profound. Carlson relied as much on her audiences to bring the gorilla Koko and her story into being as anything. In particular, she drew on the likelihood that they, like herself, were very likely to become imaginatively and emotionally involved in the story. Her audiences did not necessarily need to know about the real-life Koko, on whose particular life experiences Carlson had based the solo (I, for one, did not know the story at the time I saw the work). They had only to tap into their own reservoir of life experiences with primates in the many places and contexts that they exist in our lives—zoos, circuses, space programs, television shows, magazines, etc.—to connect to the piece. For quite some time, primates have occupied a special place in our study of ourselves. As cultural critic Donna Haraway stated:

... monkeys, apes and human beings emerge in primatology inside elaborate narratives about origins, natures and possibilities. Primatology is about the life history of a taxonomic order that includes people. Especially western people produce stories about primates while simultaneously telling stories about the relations of nature and culture, animal and human, body and mind, origin and future. (5)

Although not a primatologist, by performing one of the many stories of Koko, Carlson entered into the world of storytelling around the complex imaginative relationship between humans and primates. As a contemporary choreographer and performer, what contribution has she made to that world with Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat? Surely it is a unique contribution. What was she hoping to accomplish? With Animals as a whole, Carlson "was trying to provoke questions about the position animals have in our culture as pets, as love objects, as symbols of love objects, but it's really more about symbolism" (Strini). Carlson's performance of Koko differed from the other pieces in the suite, in that she allowed a greater degree of merging between her self and her subject. Perhaps it was fitting to end with the story of a gorilla whose existence is circumscribed by human culture, a gorilla who occupies "the border zones between [the] potent mythic poles" of nature and culture (Haraway 1), in order to consider (or
reconsider) how we define the boundaries of our humanness. As Carlson showed us with her dance, Koko’s presence in our lives as a communicating primate confounds our sense of those boundaries and thus, stirs our imaginations deeply.

4.3 The Matter of “Restored Behavior”

Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat is complex and includes the gorilla Koko as the real-world referent for the piece and Carlson as both creator of the piece/story and performer of Koko (as well as any stories or images of Koko to which Carlson may have referred so as to create her piece)—all of which factor into this analysis in terms of Schechner’s notion of restored behavior. Like any choreographer or director who draws on preexisting materials to create an original work, Carlson, in conceptualizing and crafting her piece, selected the elements of Koko’s story which interested her. What she included and did not include, along with how the information was presented, revealed her particular perspectives on her subject and her subject’s story. As Carlson’s perspectives move into circulation among all the images and stories of Koko, they somehow expand or alter the “original(s).”

“Restoration of a past that never was,” as a subset of restored behavior, addresses this tendency or likelihood of performance to, in essence, ‘look forward to look back to look forward.’ Schechner said:

Where the project-to-be governs what from the past is selected or invented (and projected backward into the past)—that is the most stable and prevalent performative circumstance. In a very real way the future—the project coming into existence through the process of rehearsal—determines the past: what will be kept from earlier rehearsals or from the ‘source materials.’ (“Restoration” 443)

The engagement with source materials (through the rehearsal process or some other process) takes place in the present but is a liminal time, a period of separation from the linear organization of time that enables the play with materials that leads to new formations. This liminality continues in performance but shifts from the relationship between the choreographer and character/text to the relationship between performer
(who, in this case, by now embodies character and text) and environment/audience. As both the choreographer and the performer of Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat, Carlson’s experience takes place in the liminal (in the “between”) for much of the time that she is engaged with the piece. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the work and her performance were so extraordinary. As Schechner indicated, “The larger the field of ‘between,’ the stronger the performance” (“Restoration” 456).

How might we look more closely at Carlson as the performer of the piece? How might we discuss the particulars of her relationship to her subject Koko? Schechner’s “restoring a past that never was” helps us look at Carlson’s engagement with the piece as its creator/choreographer quite well, offering us the opportunity to consider how she crafted it to offer yet another version of Koko’s story, but, can it effectively address her relationship to Koko as performer? In many pieces, it might not be able to do both, especially if the choreographer and dancer are two different individuals. That is not the case here. In this piece, Carlson not only presents her perspectives on Koko and her story (as choreographer), she also performs those perspectives, making it difficult to discuss the choreographer and structure of the work separate from the performer and content of the work. Given that one aspect of Carlson’s experience flows into and intersects with the other, “restoration of a past that never was” can be applied to the whole of Carlson’s experience with the work.

We must also consider what Carlson’s nakedness did for the work overall and how it impacted on her relationship with her subject. Schechner said that the subject of performance is transformation: “the startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become... what they ordinarily are not” (Future 1). Carlson underwent a particularly astonishing transformation in her performance of Koko, but what sort of transformation was it exactly? Even though Carlson played at Koko, she continued to signify to her audiences as a human female, thus making this transformation more a merging of identities than succumbing one identity to another. I believe that Carlson’s nakedness may have made the crucial difference here.
Schechner suggested that restored behaviors of all kinds are transitional, expressing this as a double negativity brought into play through performance. "Elements that are ‘not me’ become ‘me’ without losing their ‘not me-ness.’" While performing, a performer experiences his own self not directly but through the medium of experiencing the others... He no longer has a ‘not me’ but has a ‘not not me’ ("Restoration" 455-56). In Carlson’s solo, we have ‘not Carlson’ but ‘not not Carlson.’ This double negativity helps us to see how, by performing Koko, Carlson merges with her subject to such an extent that audiences cannot see Koko without seeing Carlson and vice versa. This double negativity was further enhanced (or complicated) by Carlson performing the solo naked. Without clothing, one of the most distinctive markers of human culture, it was easy to be persuaded while watching Carlson’s performance that she really was “not Carlson” but Koko. And yet, there were times when Carlson’s nakedness drew attention to her identity as a human female and Koko disappeared momentarily. The liminal, transitional nature of restored behavior makes the performance precarious because “it rests not on how things are but on how things are not” ("Restoration" 456). In Schechner’s view, this precariousness was something to strive for, as it depends on an agreement (albeit unspoken) between performers and spectators to accept the reality and unreality of it as simultaneous, to enjoy the seeping of the liminal into the “real” and vice versa.

In the first part of this analysis, "Woman Visits and Moves Story," I discuss Carlson’s piece in terms of “restoration of a past that never was” to consider how she engaged with Koko’s story. Her dual role as creator and performer offers her perspectives on the story in terms of contextual and structural choices, as well as what she actually does in the work and how she does it. The second part of this analysis, “Of Naked Women and Civilized Beasts,” discusses what Carlson’s nakedness did for the overall work and how it impacted on the relationship she had with her subject. This exploration will refer back to the first part of this analysis.
4.4 **Woman Visits and Moves Story**

It is appropriate to review Schechner’s discussion of restored behavior as somewhat analogous to the film editing. Behaviors, not unlike strips of film, can be variously rearranged or reconstructed independent of the causal systems that may have brought them into existence ("Restoration" 441). Performance scholar Marvin Carlson added to the discussion that, while these new strips (or other formations) may appear to be natural and coherent wholes, they are always ultimately reinventions based on some preexisting model and can never be completely divorced from their origins (15). Thus, restored behavior engages simultaneously in repetition (which has the audience referring back to something preexisting) and invention (which has the audience moving forward to something new). This combination is ultimately productive as the tension between the "original" and the new formation (whether a variation on a theme, a new reading, or an in-depth critique) enables the audience to see things it hadn’t seen before, to challenge existing interpretations, and to offer new perspectives on the material.

* * * * *

What prompted Carlson to create *Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat Cat*? In a post-performance discussion when she toured to Milwaukee in 1990 to set *Animals* on a local cast, Carlson stated that she first heard of Koko from an article in *Reader’s Digest* entitled, “The Gorilla Who’s Smitten with Kittens” (1985). She was immediately drawn to the idea of creating a work about the gorilla. The first version of the piece was presented, by itself, in 1986 (*Animals*). The idea to make work with live animals was, however, much older (Carlson conceptualized it in 1979, during her undergraduate years). Gradually, piece by piece, *Animals* (the suite of dances) was assembled. In an 1990 article, Carlson commented that all of the dances in the suite evolved out of “a desire to work around the presence of a live, sentient being that isn’t human... The idea is to set up an air of unpredictability—well, not an air, a reality... to put something [in a piece] that I really couldn’t control” (Strini). She continued, “Often that’s at the center of these works, the animal as the embodiment of innocence. The animal doesn’t know, in the way we call knowing, that it’s on a stage or in a show.” These comments are very
interesting in relationship to Carlson’s final solo. Koko (the real gorilla) is not in the
dance, but Carlson is. Thus, the situation is basically under control in the ways to which
Carlson is referring. Also, Koko (both in real life and as portrayed onstage by Carlson)
is not innocent in the same ways that the goats or kitten are. Koko lives among humans,
has a language for communication with humans, and, from appearances, also has some
sense of human conventions and habits. I think that Carlson used Visit Woman Move
Story Cat Cat Cat as a means to confound the notions we have of how we are different
from animals (especially primates) and to engage critically (albeit in a very subtle way)
with the reality of Koko’s situation among humans.

What picture did the Reader’s Digest piece paint of Koko and her life among
humans? Titled as it was, “The Gorilla Who’s Smitten with Kittens,” one would think
that it was mainly about the gorilla’s relationship with kittens. In one sense, it is, but it
also concerns Koko’s life as a major figure in the primate communications project in
which she was involved since infancy. This is very likely the reason why Koko and her
interest in kittens even made it into the press.4

As the story goes, in response to what she wanted for her twelfth birthday, Koko
supposedly requested a kitten by signing the word “cat” (drawing her fingers across her
cheeks, miming a set of whiskers, the sign for “cat”). (Evidently, some of Koko’s
favorite books featured cats and kittens, so this request came as no surprise to her
caretaker.) As a test, Koko was given a concrete statue of a kitten and reportedly
treated it with such affection that she was allowed to have a real kitten (Fadiman,
“Gorilla” 202).

Koko chose a kitten from a litter of Manx kittens. The article reported that
gorilla and kitten “spent six idyllic months together” until All Ball (named by Koko)
escaped from Koko’s trailer and was hit by a car (Fadiman, “Gorilla” 206). When
psychologist Penny Patterson (Koko’s primary caretaker and teacher) told Koko about
the incident, Koko reportedly was devastated and depressed for two months, crying
herself to sleep at night. Koko had a strong attachment to the kitten—(which the article
inferred was somewhere between enjoying him as a companion and caring for him as a
surrogate infant). They played together, slept together, and purred together. In addition, Koko reportedly rocked the kitten, carried him around on her back, and held him to her nipple, signing, “You mouth nipple” (202).

All Ball was the first in a series of kittens in Koko’s life. Koko’s relationship with the kittens offered Fadiman and Koko’s caretakers an opportunity to express to the public the work and goals of the gorilla communications project in which Koko was involved. Koko’s ability to use language to articulate her desire for a kitten, followed by her affectionate and responsible treatment of the kitten, encourage us to understand her (and, by extension, other primates) as a thoughtful, communicative, and emotional and moral being, not unlike humans. The article suggested that the definitional boundary between apes and humans is more permeable than previously thought ... so, too, are the boundaries between one species and another. (Fadiman started her article by evoking the saga of the “peaceable kingdom where the lion lies down with the lamb” [“Gorilla” 201].) For her part, Haraway characterized Koko as a gorilla whose knowledge of sign language has “propelled her across species barriers, making her an important participant in building the bridge across the divide of nature and culture” (144).

But all is not necessarily well in this liminal zone. Haraway pointed out that, in spite of the exalted claims about Koko’s abilities, most stories tried to reassure their readers that Koko has not been totally isolated from her own species. Indeed, Koko is not completely isolated. She has a signing male gorilla companion (who lives in a neighboring trailer). But, the fact remains that Koko lives in a trailer at a university, has learned (over the course of her 20+ years) approximately 1,000 signs, and communicates with humans far more than she does with other gorillas.

The article stated that “the cat experiment has a larger purpose: to prepare Koko for nurturing an infant of her own” (“Gorilla” 206). Indeed, it is hoped that Koko and Michael will eventually mate and communicate with their offspring in sign language. In another development of this cross-species communications, compulsory reproductive-sexuality complex, Fadiman stated that Patterson and her partner fantasized about having a baby of their own and raising it alongside Koko’s (should she have one). Fadiman
further revealed that Patterson really wanted not a human baby but a baby gorilla ("Loquacious" 28). It appears, even from this very short article, that Koko has led a rather complicated life which is unlikely to get less complicated any time soon.

Carlson organized her piece similar to Fadiman’s article, by not presenting the complicated subtext of Koko’s life, but Koko’s relationship with “All Ball,” including its unfortunate demise. Fadiman added that Koko was given other kittens after All Ball, a detail which Carlson omitted. The story of Koko and Ali Ball offers itself up as the perfect distillation of some of the most important (and complicated) aspects of the gorilla’s existence among humans. Both Fadiman’s and Carlson’s pieces revealed much about Koko’s existence, but Carlson’s piece was qualitative rather than quantitative, leaving audiences more with an impression (rather than details) of Koko’s life among humans. How was Carlson able to expand on Koko’s story, offer a critique of it, or even alter it with Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat?

To begin the examination of Carlson’s solo in terms of restored behavior, interest turns to the title itself. While Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat might seem a peculiar title at first, it’s actually quite an interesting choice. When using the sign language she has been taught, Koko structures her sentences in a way similar to that of very young children in the earliest stages of language development. In general, the sentences are relatively short, (using only two or three words at a time), use only words that are most effective in getting a point across, and repeat those words to create emphasis. One article reported that Koko signed “soft good cat cat” and “Koko love visit Ball” (Vessels, 110-13). Another article cited that Koko signed “Koko love love visit” and “cat cat tiger cat” (Fadiman, “Loquacious” 28). Carlson adopted this use of language to construct her title, a title which seemingly described her entry into Koko’s world. Thus, Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat seemed to communicate the following: Carlson is a visitor to the story of Koko; the way she visits it is by moving it; thus, moving is the way Carlson gets on the inside of the piece, the way that she embodied her subject. Also of interest here is that the name/word Koko does not appear in the title. Is this because, in the piece, Carlson is Koko? Because she is Koko, she
doesn’t visit Koko ... she visits Koko’s story. Carlson thus sets herself up immediately for her audiences as Koko and as the visiting woman—she plays at being both the subject of the story and its interpreter/creator. From this dual location on both the inside (as performer or mover) and the outside (as creator or visitor) of the work, Carlson effectively staged and performed her perspectives on Koko’s story.

The two ways that Carlson seemed to work from both the inside and the outside of the performance are related in that they both dealt with communication: the fact of communication and the type of communication. In the first case, by performing as Koko (while remaining a human woman), Carlson seemingly transformed herself into a cross-species communicator not entirely unlike Koko (although for Carlson this transformation was, of course, by choice and only temporary). The merging of identities (made much more effective by Carlson’s nakedness) offered audiences a unique access to Koko (the real gorilla) and an opportunity to wonder about Koko’s situation. Through her physical presence and her movement, Carlson brought Koko to her audiences ... through her physical presence and choices made about what to include in the work, Carlson presents herself to the audience as interpreter (or even critic) of Koko’s story. If audiences were able to enter into the liminal with Carlson—to believe not in how things are but in how things are not—they would have been able to believe, at times, that Carlson was Koko and that they were privy to the communications of the gorilla ... only to be reminded, at still other times, that this was not true and they were really only privy to Carlson’s communications. I believe that Carlson’s entry into a liminal space similar to Koko’s served to make her audiences wonder about the strangeness of it all—why should a gorilla speak our language and live in our world, and what do we want from her?

To provide an example of this liminality at work in the piece, consider those instances when Carlson/Koko (to express the merging of the two) would occasionally come to the bottom of the stage and look at her audience looking at her, or to sign to them in an attempt to communicate with them. The audience could not but take in both woman and gorilla simultaneously. Who was trying to “speak” here, Carlson or Koko? What was being communicated? Carlson’s embodiment of the gorilla in terms of posture
and gesture, combined with her persistent presence as a human female, made the particularly communication-oriented moments truly liminal, drawing her audiences' attention to the peculiarity of Koko's cross-species existence, to her life neither here nor there, in the borderlands between constructions of "nature" and "culture." In determining (whether consciously or unconsciously) where Carlson ended and Koko began and who was speaking, audiences were very likely moved to consider the isolation which such a creature might experience in spite of her "expanded" communicative potential. Koko's ability to communicate in a human language becomes questionable when, in fact, she can never really be a part of humanity. Perhaps most unfortunate of all, she can't (or won't) be integrated into gorilla culture either, even in a zoo. According to Haraway, the ethics of placing a language-using gorilla in a zoo, where she would be considered an object and not treated as a subject, aroused the public early in Koko's life and training. For that reason and others, she was never returned to a zoo. Koko is permanently in the liminal zone.

Besides the fact of communication, the second means by which Carlson worked from both the inside and outside of the piece is the type of communication taking place between the various members of the different species involved: gorillas, cats, and humans. At the beginning of Fadiman's Reader's Digest article is the following statement: "Koko can talk in sign language and even read some words, but it's her emotions that seem most human" (201). Fadiman's article contains descriptive adjectives that characterize Koko as an emotional being. For example, her first encounter with the kittens is, "Tenderly the gorilla picked up each one and blew on its face," and Koko, reacting to the delivery of a litter of kittens from which she was to choose, signed "Love that" (202). In Fadiman's story of Koko, it was this fact of her "emotions that seem most human" and which Carlson considered significant. Carlson's choice of music and the moody and evocative lighting were emotionally charged. Similarly, Carlson's decision to focus solely on Koko's relationship with All Ball had the narrative developing along lines that tended to be emotionally charged. But perhaps
most important was Carlson/Koko's movement, which was, among other things, a study in emotional expressivity.

As evidenced by Fadiman, the story of Koko and All Ball (and very likely any other kittens that followed) was circumscribed by the desire of her caretakers to prepare the gorilla to nurture an infant of her own. Fadiman's article, though it didn't necessarily deny that Koko's motivations were different from her caretakers, tended to weigh more heavily toward an interpretation of Koko's behavior with All Ball as maternal over other possible interpretations. Carlson attempted to counter this agenda or at least to balance it with other possible readings of Koko's behavior with her kitten. Rather than focusing on just one particular interpretation of Koko's interactions with All Ball (i.e., that Koko's interactions with the kitten were largely maternal), Carlson presented, through a kind of collage of movement motifs, several possibilities. While Carlson carried and rocked the kitten as if it were a baby, she also played with it and signed to it as if it were a playmate. She moved around the space with the kitten in her mouth (as a mother cat would) and placed it on her belly and groomed it. She coveted it, running away from the audience with the kitten in hand, protective or possessive as if she feared something might happen to it or that it would be taken from her. Was the kitten her pet, her baby, or simply a much-desired animal companion? Do we read Carlson/Koko as maternal, or as animal rejoined to animal world? The variety of movement motifs and the fluidity of her transitions from one motif/image to another had the effect of overriding a single interpretation on the interaction between Koko and All Ball. Instead, the audience is given the opportunity to take all of the possibilities in and, if they so desire, develop their own impression of what was happening. Remarkably, in spite of her nakedness, Carlson somehow managed not to present her interactions with the kitten as solely maternal; she was able to override her signifying as a female by her varied movements and attitudes toward the kitten.

Overall, I think that Carlson's presentation and performance of Koko engaged with the gorilla as, above all, an emotional being, who—whatever the humans around her may have wanted from her—felt (and still feels) something in relationship to and in
communication with other beings. The difference between Carlson’s story and the “original” was that she refused to place an interpretation on the gorilla’s behaviors or try to convince her audience of what one thing or another meant. Carlson tried to refer to the essence of a being’s need to communicate with others and to have an emotional rapport with other beings, without trying to interpret, according to one agenda or desire or another, what it all meant.

A rather revealing moment in Carlson’s solo was when, devastated by the loss of her kitten, Carlson/Koko not only seemed unhappy in a general way but seemed to be angry with the audience. Carlson threw troubled and angry glances toward the audience which could not help her and who might even have been responsible for her plight. Regardless of her acquisition of language, Koko could not achieve true communicative and emotional rapport with humans because, to a very strong degree, her desires are not her own.

Interestingly, Carlson provided no additional context for *Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat*. Beyond the title of the work, no program notes or other material informed the audience that she was performing Koko’s story. I had not known Koko’s story and yet got the message that this creature was located in some sort of irreconcilable “between.” Also worth noting is that, although in her real life Koko is accompanied by Patterson or another caretaker almost all of the time, there is no caretaker in Carlson’s work. Koko is alone throughout the piece. Could Carlson be seen as Koko’s caretaker, conceptually speaking? Similar to Patterson who has created a narrative into which Koko could fit, Carlson has also created a narrative (or, more accurately, contributed to the one that exists) for the gorilla. An important difference is that Carlson, besides creating the narrative, performed it (as its subject), enabling her to experience more directly the borderlands occupied by her subject and to communicate the precariousness of those borderlands to her audiences. Whether from Carlson’s perspective as creator of the work or as performer in it (or even from the perspective of the audience), Carlson’s *Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat* gives credence to
Schechner's notion that performance is the best way to "get in touch with" the other (Future 1).

4.5 Of Naked Women and Civilized Beasts

Once there, she pauses, her naked body in silhouette, the mystery of the merging of human woman and gorilla still uncanny, still a mystery. She seems to be looking at the audience although they cannot see her eyes in the shadows; her body says it all. Suddenly (or not so suddenly as time seems irrelevant) the string quartet strains into its last notes and Carlson/Koko rises up from all fours onto her legs, arms raised with hands slightly limp at the wrists, her back arched, her face up to the ceiling—her whole body making a kind of last desperate (and human-looking) appeal—before galloping offstage and out of sight. Of the five times that I have seen the work, the audience, at this moment, let out a collective gasp, and, as I recall, many cried. (Excerpt from the brief synopsis of the work presented earlier on page 81 of this thesis.)

When Carlson/Koko appeared on stage, audiences tended to be both confounded and moved by her performance. Dancing naked as the signing gorilla, Carlson moved (quite literally) between animal and human, deeply involved in an uncanny transformation in which her identity as a human female merged with rather than succumbed to her subject's. She told her story of Koko from deep inside that transformation, drawing her audiences in and holding them there as she moved through and—in some sense—lived through, Koko's experience in the borderlands. What was this all about? For Carlson, it was about no less than the experience of meeting the other—an experience that she believed could best be had by meeting the other (Koko) where she existed—in the liminal and imaginative space between constructions of "nature" and "culture."

What exactly are these borderlands that Koko occupied in her life and that Carlson (as Koko) visited in her solo? Haraway discussed the "border zone" (or the borderlands) as both the real and conceptual space between the "mythic poles" of nature and culture. In this zone, "the commercial and scientific traffic in monkeys and apes is a traffic in meanings, as well as in animal lives." These creatures, whose relation to nature and culture for Westerners is a privileged one, have been "subjected to sustained,
culturally specific interrogations of what it means to be ‘almost human.’" (1-2). As such, they are some of its most important occupants. Koko, of course, is one of these occupants, fated to be forever in the “between,” her life given over to the ongoing process of defining (and “undefining”) the boundaries of our humanness.

Carlson found the liminal, transitional space of performance to be a good place to meet Koko. In that space, she could undergo the degree of transformation required to really encounter this other without losing herself in the process. Schechner’s notion (following from his restored behavior schemata) of the double negativity of symbolic actions indicated that, “while performing, a performer experiences his own self not directly but through the medium experiencing the others,” and thus no longer has a ‘not me’ but has a ‘not not me’ (“Restoration” 455-56). Playing Koko as ‘not not Carlson’ kept Carlson in play in the piece even while she role-played as Koko. Most important about this merging between Koko and Carlson is that audiences encounter the story of Koko and experience, through Carlson’s performance, Koko’s experience in the liminal “between.” It is only at the intersection between the borderlands within which Koko exists and the liminal space of performance that Carlson can truly communicate Koko’s experience in the liminal.

The intersection of the borderlands and performance in Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat was as much a physical, material reality as it was a conceptual reality. The productively precarious “no longer... ‘not me’ but ‘not not me’” of restored behavior was not (and usually is not) just a conceptual construct of what transpired in the piece, but was an actuality. The material aspect of that intersection was Carlson’s (naked) body, without which there could have been no experience of Koko or the social field she occupied.

How did performing naked intensify or deepen Carlson’s experience (and thus the audiences’ experience) of Koko and her life? Without clothing—one of the most distinctive markers of human culture—Carlson (allegedly more neutral now, a tabula rasa of sorts) was more available to become Koko. This view of her nakedness is supported by Turner’s notion that liminal subjects, stripped of worldly belongings (such as personal
possessions, property, clothing and other sorts of bodily decoration that identify them and their rank or role within the social system), were symbolically (if not actually) reframed by their participation in the ritual event. To a strong degree, Turner suggested that the ritual subject was no longer encumbered by the structuring tendencies of the social. They were essentially ‘freed up’ to become someone or something else entirely, “placed in a limbo that was not any place they were in before and not yet any place they would be in” (Anthropology 25). For Turner, liminal subjects could “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate state and positions in cultural space” (Ritual 94-5). Applying this concept to Carlson would suggest that performing Koko naked meant much more than her being unclothed; she was without some of the most important insignia that identified her location in the social. Does this view of what happens to the liminal subject correspond with Schechner’s view? Is it really possible that Carlson could “elude or slip through the network of classifications” that located her in the social? Would she have wanted this to be the basis of her transformation?

Schechner’s view of what happens to the liminal subject differs somewhat from Turner’s view. Schechner’s notion of restored behavior, involved as it is with the distance between self and behavior (as opposed to the display of skill) in performance, keeps all possible points of reference for the performing self in play. His notion of the double negativity (the ‘not me’ ... ‘not not me’) of symbolic actions makes it impossible to think of the “limbo” that Carlson was in by playing Koko as a realm separate from the “network of classifications” that locates us in cultural space. Although Schechner acknowledged that there was some separation, he articulated that we could never really escape the structuring action of the social. For Schechner, the intrigue of Carlson’s naked body performing Koko was that it could not stop signifying to her audiences as a naked human female, even while she was so deeply engaged in the transformation into her subject. She is not so much neither here nor there (Turner’s view) as she is here and there. We see at work Schechner’s interest in the seeping of the liminal into the “real” (and vice versa), or the difficulty of knowing where the performance ends and the “real” begins. In his view, this was where the audience comes into the play; their willingness to
agree to the terms of the theatrical. To believe and disbelieve, to accept the reality and unreality of it as simultaneous, further enlarged the “field of between” around the work. Given that the audience had a role in the enlarging of the “field of between,” is it important to consider what the audience may have wanted (or came to want) from Carlson’s solo? I think it is important—what they may have wanted played an important role in the effectiveness of the piece.

But what did Carlson want from the piece, and how did she go about accomplishing it? I believe that what Carlson wanted most from her encounter with Koko was to meet the ‘other,’ to experience the liminality of her subject’s life in the borderlands. This was crucial from the perspective of her engagement as storyteller and as performer. For the audience to be engaged in what she believed was important about Koko’s existence, she had to travel there, too. In short, by performing naked at the intersection of the liminality of performance and the liminality of the borderlands, Carlson was able to experience (for herself and her audience)—at least for the length of the piece—some of what Koko’s life is like in the borderlands. She was able to meet her subject—a gorilla who had always been subjected to interrogations about what it meant to be “almost human.” Carlson became “almost gorilla.” As she moved her naked body through Koko’s story, she offered audiences her particular perspective on that story. Of what (if anything) did she persuade them? How did Carlson’s desires in and for the work help to shape the audiences’ desires?

Now considering what the audience may have wanted from the piece, we must refer to Turner’s notion that the liminal subject of ritual (separated from everyday life, stripped of her worldly possessions and, thus, her associations in the social) is able to “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate state and positions in cultural space.” Turner believed that the liminal made it possible to depart from the “real” social fully and completely for a time. By stripping away all references to the social, the body is allegedly made more neutral, a kind of a tabula rasa upon which new markings can be made, an innocent unencumbered by cultural associations. Allegedly separate from culture, is this unencumbered body nature for us? Given that
nature and culture have been constructed as existing apart from and in opposition to each other in the West, and that this opposition characterizes nature as having its authenticity outside of discourse, perhaps the unencumbered (in this case, naked) body is, indeed, nature for us. Even in the most liminal states and spaces, we can never really exist outside of the social. It is always working on us and through us. Although we may seek this "authenticity" in nature, we can never have it; we must inevitably continue to create it.

Carlson plays at this edge. Even though it is quite clear that Carlson's body can never be outside of the social and that her merger with Koko keeps both her real self and her role-playing at Koko in play, her naked body moving so convincingly as Koko nonetheless hearkens us (imaginatively) back to "nature." Then Carlson/Koko signs to the audience (in short, to enter into discursivity) and risks, at that point, losing her "authenticity" in nature. As she moves between what her nakedness can signify and what her attempts to communicate with the audience can signify, Carlson addresses that, although Koko's existence has been overdetermined by human culture, there really is no "nature" from which she originated or to which she could be returned. Although Carlson and her audiences may both want to imagine that such an outcome is possible, by becoming aware of the construction of the nature-culture opposition, they are simultaneously made aware that such an outcome is not possible.

By performing Koko as she did, Carlson critiqued the complexity of Koko's overdetermined existence among humans. By performing naked, by becoming herself more "authentic," she performed our desire, however misled, to return Koko to "nature." But, of course, there is no "nature" outside of us ... there is only a discourse productive to those who would hope to use it to deliver their version of the "truth," of the "original," or of the "authentic." This desire to return Koko to "nature" was continually revealed as problematic every time Carlson/Koko signed to the audience. Poised in front of them, ready to speak was a "civilized" beast who could never go back, wherever that might be. Performing Koko naked, Carlson highlighted that the degree to which Koko has acquired language is the degree to which she has become isolated and alienated from
her natural state while never effectively transcending it. Koko is caught in the “between,” and so are we—her condition is, in fact, our condition.

* * * * *

Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat Cat differed from the other four pieces in the Animals suite of dances because Carlson moved beyond metaphor, and beyond an ironic or reflexive commentary on the relationship between man and beast, to fully and convincingly become her subject. In the first four pieces, referential and reflexive strategies helped to undermine a complete absorption, on the part of the audience, in any one image or action taking place in front of them. They engaged with the pieces critically, attempting to analyze and even decode the relationships between their parts. But the final solo was different. In Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat, Carlson invited her audiences to become absorbed in the work, to believe and disbelieve in her transformation into Koko (to enter into the liminal with her), and to empathize with her subject. Rather than observing her critical preoccupations with the representations of the bodies of humans and animals, we are brought into an intense and deep dialogue with our own preoccupations. I believe that she succeeded.
CHAPTER 5

ATHEY’S 4 SCENES IN A HARSH LIFE
AND “INFELICITOUS PERFORMANCE”

5.1 Introduction

Altering the skin, like all deformations of the flesh, smacks of what
Bakhtin calls the carnivalesque. The inscription is incorporated, taken
into, made into, the body. The body becomes a discourse of apertures:
punctures, cuts, slices, not made to enter an interior, but to proliferate
surface. The grotesque body is an open body, a body of parts, of slits and
bumps: rude, improper, coarse, vulgar, profane. (Young, xx)

Athey is mapping his life by tattooing and scarring his body. Covered in warrior
markings derived from various tribes (New Zealand, the Philippines), he has performed
macabre rituals of pain and mutilation for fascinated and fearful audiences in the United
States and Europe. Even after the press scandal emerging out of Minneapolis after his
presentation in March 1994 of 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life (and the subsequent vote in the
House of Representatives for a further 2% cut to the NEA budget), experimental
performance venues continued to present his work. For example, P.S. 122 in New York
City presented the work in the autumn of 1994. In an attempt to avoid the kind of
scandal that occurred in Minneapolis, P.S. 122 raised private funds to pay for the show
and asked audience members to sign a release acknowledging that they had been
informed of the particular nature of the work before entering the theater (Harris,
“Demonized” 31).6

What is the nature of Athey’s work to have caused such an upset in Minneapolis
and to require that audiences sign a release to experience it, even in an experimental
venue such as P.S. 122 in New York City? Mark Russell, Executive Director of P.S
122, suggested that Athey’s work, when described, sounds “gory and sensational, but
experiencing it is an entirely different matter," indicating that in his own experience of the work he was "very moved... You watch a man deal with his own suffering and mortality, without artifice. It makes an audience ask questions of themselves: about the relationship to pain, to disease, to taboos" (Harris, "Demonized" 31). Athey concurred with this view. He was not intending to shock and horrify his audiences but to deal with issues of "self-loathing, suffering, healing and redemption" (31). He described his work as "inherently spiritual... a public sacrifice... parallel to doing penance" (Athey "Interview" 61). The piece, 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life, and others in his repertoire, are a means to exorcise and transcend his demons, among which are (1) his fundamentalist upbringing by Pentecostal relatives in which the young Athey was prophesied (and therefore raised) to be a minister, (2) childhood valium addiction, (3) homelessness, suicidal urges, and heroin addiction as an adult, and (4) HIV positive status. As of this writing, Athey has lived through it all and is here to tell the tale.

4 Scenes in a Harsh Life is an evening-length multi-disciplinary work that presents a view of Athey's troubled life, containing sadomasochistic rituals of self mutilation and mutilation of others, references to his drug addiction, and the scourge of AIDS. There is blood, coming from real, bleeding bodies. The work is dark work (literally and figuratively-speaking). The stage is very dim throughout. What light there is tends to be harsh and shadowy, and the music is deafeningly loud and incessant, a combination of industrial and neo-primitive sounds, wrenching and primal at the same time. The cast of characters that moved through Athey's underworld seemed alternately tough and desperate—at times unified and at times utterly alienated from each other. While 4 Scenes From a Harsh Life may have been "moving" to some, it is not surprising that it was quite disturbing to others, a point which brought the Minneapolis scandal to the fore.

Apparently an individual who attended one of the March 1994 performances at Patrick's Cabaret in the Walker Center for the Arts in Minneapolis found himself disturbed about some sections in the piece. Of concern was the section when Athey made markings on the back of a man with a surgical implement, blotted the markings
with paper towels, and hung them on a clothesline which was attached to a pulley system that effectively extended the line with the towels on it over the audience. Knowing that Athey was HIV positive and frightened that the bleeding man might also be HIV positive (it was clarified later that he was not), the individual became very concerned and called the Minnesota Department of Health to ask if he and others had been put at risk. Somehow, a journalist from the Star Tribune picked up the story and wrote a frantic piece, describing Athey as a "knife-wielding performer" and the blood-mopped towels as "winging" over the audience (Abbe 1A). In what the Walker Center believed was largely a media-manufactured moment, the story found its way through the Associated Press to finally arrive in Washington, where apparently Athey became the newest poster child in the controversy over federal funding for the arts. According to one critic, "Athey became this year's [1994] Robert Mapplethorpe, a darkly lit poster boy in the burgeoning culture war" (Schimke 14). Athey became the newest target for right-wing ideologues whose greatest desire still is to control how the "American people" are represented, whether in the arts or any other cultural production (Dolan 179). "Does a bloody towel represent the ideals of the American people?" pronounced one Representative, Republican Clifford Stearns (qtd. in Schimke 14). The House of Representatives eventually voted in favor of a further 2% cut to the NEA's budget in June 1994.

The section that caused such concern in Minneapolis (from the scene entitled "Working Class Hell") is my point of departure for discussing Athey's work as part of this investigation into the use of nakedness in contemporary performance. There are two factors that make this analysis of Athey's work different than the analysis of the work of Jones and Carlson. First, unlike Jones' and Carlson's work, I have never seen Athey's work live. Having performed in Last Supper and seeing Animals several times were very important to the analysis of those works, inasmuch as my engagement with them, before writing about them, was a bodily one. By contrast, I had only heard of or read about Athey's 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life before finally seeing it on videotape. Given the way that I want to discuss Athey's work, my encounter with the piece through the
proliferation of information about the piece adds an interesting component to this investigation of the naked body in performance. While Jones’ and Carlson’s works relied very much on the persuasiveness of the tangible, material body to make their points, the “contagion” of the body in Athey’s 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life expanded the reach of that tangible, material body into an effect. Fear and repulsion of Athey’s body rather than interest and intrigue brought it into play in the larger social.

The second factor making this analysis different from that of Jones’ and Carlson’s work is that, rather than discussing nakedness as an action taken by the artist that is recognized as such, as nakedness, I consider the nakedness in Athey’s work as the baring of the skin that necessarily precedes the manipulation of the surface of the body, whether by tattooing, piercing, or blood-letting. The emphasis, therefore, is on the skin. The skin in Athey’s work is a surface that can be written upon, cut, or scarred. In addition, the skin provides an important barrier between inside and outside which, when broken, can become a threat to other bodies. Athey’s baring of the skin exposes his audience to both a real and an imagined threat; we never know what will follow from that moment of exposure.

5.2 The Matter of “Infelicitous Performance”

The scene from “Working Class Hell” that caused such concern might be effectively discussed in terms of Grimes’ notion (after J.L. Austin) of infelicitous performance, or the idea that ritual can and does, at times, fail. However, as Grimes pointed out, “It need not fail on every level or from every point of view for it to be worth while to consider the question of ritual infelicity” (Criticism 193). Ritual infelicity does not aim to determine the worth of an event but to articulate the relationship between its parts and to consider its effects in the social. The two categories of ritual criticism that seem particularly relevant to a discussion of 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life are “contagion” and “violation.”

“Contagion” refers to that which occurs when a rite “spills over its own boundaries.” In his discussion of contagion, Grimes draws on the work of Edward
Norbeck who suggested that "rituals of conflict" were contagious in the sense that they often spread like diseases. While “from the point of view of rebels and proponents of social change this is as it should be... from the point of view of the established elite, contamination is tantamount to failure” (Criticism 202). Norbeck’s presentation of the idea is particularly compelling for thinking about Athey’s work, which, in its contagion contaminates the notion that art should be, in some universal sense, uplifting. Athey presented conflict in his work, and his work produced conflict in the larger social, an outcome that he saw as valuable, although clearly there are many who held quite the opposite view. The element of contagion is why Athey’s work is being discussed so much. It is the element of 4 Scenes that asked people to confront their fears of AIDS and of difference. In these senses, Athey’s work is truly contagious; its excess, or its spilling over its own boundaries (with the body as the primary site of this excess), makes it difficult to track and difficult to assess.

Contagion, as interesting as it may be in terms of how 4 Scenes works, is also quite problematic in at least one very specific way. The presence of Athey’s body in contemporary performance has provoked further cuts in federal funding, and that affects anyone doing any kind of performance. Clearly, if the “established elite” that Norbeck mentions are allowed to have a say in the matter, in this particular sense, Athey will fail. In the case of P.S. 122, some in the arts community wanted to find ways to keep artists like Athey in the flow. P.S. 122 used private sources of funding to produce Athey’s work. In doing so, they (1) acknowledged the value of his work and (2) were not forced to edit the work to appease the public. P.S. 122’s solution wasn’t bad, but it also surrendered to the narrow-mindedness in relation to the role of the arts in American society. Privatizing everything in order to say or think what you want exists in direct relation to an ever-diminishing public sphere. What is the result? Athey keeps performing, but we don’t have to struggle with it anymore.

Besides contagion, Athey's work engages in "violation," rites that “deliberately maim or inadvertently degrade.” That violation demeans makes it difficult to assess both analytically and morally. Did Athey go too far with his theater of pain and mutilation? Is
it socially irresponsible to cause yourself to bleed in public, knowing that you are HIV positive? Whatever else his work might accomplish, that Athey and others bleed in performances is a reason for concern. In addition, although sadomasochistic rituals of pain and pleasure are presumably consensual between partners and groups, they may seem quite violent and demeaning to those who are not involved with them or have no context for them. Grimes suggested that “judging actions to be moral violations may be culturally relative, but this does not relieve us of moral responsibility” (Criticism 202). While audiences may acknowledge that they are seeing what they are seeing in the context of performance and may be attempting to be tolerant, they may also be repulsed or shocked by these acts and nonetheless consider them to be a violation. The boundaries in Athey’s work are, on many levels, fluid. Certainly, this is part of the tension of the work, and, like other aspects of 4 Scenes, it is difficult to assess the piece or to know how one thinks about it.

Whatever Grimes’ notions of contagion and violation bring to light about Athey’s 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life, they are clearly a very productive means of looking at the work. True to Grimes’ notion of the usefulness of ritual criticism, I am not so much interested in determining whether the work succeeded or failed but rather how contagion and violation shed light on the work and its reception. Ritual criticism is, above all else, a means to articulate whatever we can about a given ritual, whether in the end we see the event as failing, succeeding, or falling somewhere in between. Below is a synopsis of the work for a more complete view of how Athey shaped his product. Inasmuch as I have not seen the work live, the following synopsis is based largely on a video (Four Scenes) made of the work, supported by notes written for TheatreForum (Shank).

5.3 A Synopsis of the Work

The video opened with the following written statement by Athey:

My performance techniques are not intended to be viewed as a proper piercing or cutting demonstration, nor are they to be taken literally as spiritual rituals. I see the current interest in tribal and cultural rituals as a scream for grounding by their participants, for a more organic aesthetic to
balance complicated inner city life. As deep and meaningful as I can get about my theatre of pain, it is also apparent that feats of the body hold a certain sideshow, even burlesque appeal. (Four Scenes)

The piece opens with “Working Class Hell.” A worker/painter called “Steakhouse Motherfucker” (Athey) is painting what appears to be a tall stretch of fabric hanging from a scaffold. The set is very dark, and the music (by a group called Drance) is repetitive, pounding, and loud. Soon, “Burlesque Object,” (a role sometimes played by a drag queen but this time played by a woman) adorned in balloons, struts in and dances provocatively around Athey. In an action reminiscent of one of Claes Oldenberg’s fluxus performances, Athey takes the cigar he has been smoking and begins to pop the balloons, revealing the woman’s naked body; she shrieks (giddily?) with each pop. When all of the balloons are popped, he puts his cigar out on her behind and proceeds to grab at and bite her naked body. He roughly shoves her against the painted fabric and paints her body front and back as she writhes, much like a dancer in a strip joint. He then makes prints of her naked body (reminiscent of Yves Klein’s Anthropometry prints) and hangs them on a clothesline.

In Part II of “Working Class Hell,” the most well publicized section of the work, Athey repeatedly marks and scars a fellow performer with a surgical implement. In the TheatreForum notes, the description of the scene said, “Back to work in the factory, The Human Printing Press goes back to Africa” (Shank 62). The scene opens on a view of Athey standing behind a table, under a bright spotlight, looking toward the audience, his face shadowy, an assistant at his side. A large half-clothed black man enters the space and drapes himself over the table in front of Athey. Athey swabs the man’s back with rubbing alcohol and then proceeds to make markings/incisions into his flesh which were, according to Athey, African scarification patterns. After each marking, Athey blots the bleeding marks with “absorbent medical paper towels” (63) and hands them to his assistant who hangs them up on a clothesline rigged to a pulley that sends the towels out over the audience. The process of making and hanging the prints is very efficient and mechanical, giving the whole process a distinctly industrial assembly-line feel. In
addition, the staging of the scene under a spotlight in combination with the industrial sounds evoke a sense of working in a factory. The incisions bled for quite some time, and many prints were made from them. As Athey works his “press,” blotting the wounds, making his “prints,” he seems to go into a trance. Eventually the lights fade out on the scene.

Scene 2, “Tattoo Salvation/Self Destruction,” opens on a view of a man (Athey) in bed, restless and distraught. In the background is a taped monologue about a troubled youth, several attempted suicides, and drug addiction. He puts a tourniquet on his arm and after swabbing it down with rubbing alcohol, places some twenty hypodermic needles in it and then, just as methodically, removes them. Growing more desperate, he sticks needles into his scalp; the needles draw a lot of blood which drips down all over his face. Soon after, the light fades slowly to black. When the lights come back up, Athey is completely naked and hanging from a rope ladder, his elaborately tattooed body strange in the dim light. In the background is a taped monologue about meeting a dark man who (like himself) is covered in tattoos. The monologue suggests that Athey has found solace or comfort in his tattoos, an alternative ritual of pain to suicide or drugs. The scene ends with Athey just hanging on, swinging softly back and forth on the ladder, a kind of ease (innocence even) in his body that wasn’t there at the beginning of the scene.

The third scene, “Leather Daddy Bootshine,” is a sadomasochistic memorial to a leather fetishist named Butch, who died of AIDS. The Leather Daddies seated high in their chairs (bikers on thrones) are attended to by the “Daddy Boys,” men and women sparsely dressed who offer them various (not particularly explicit) sexual favors. A naked man seated near the ground and with an IV hooked up to his scrotum reads a memorial to Butch in which he describes and comments on Butch’s fetishistic behaviors. (Throughout the scene the man’s scrotum filled with liquid to become quite enlarged.) Once again in the background is the persistent score of industrial sounds. The scene ends when the man with the IV finishes his memorial remembrances and exits alone stage left, looking very much like an ill person himself walking down a hospital hallway.
Seemingly following the man’s lead, everyone on the stage exits—rather ceremoniously—in a line, stage right.

The last scene, “Reinterpretation of False Prophecies,” opens with Athey dressed in a black suit giving a sermon on “the many ways to say ‘Hallelujah.’” He is accompanied in the background by haunting organ music. To one side are three individuals, the Dagger Brides, wrapped up together in tulle—suggesting the back-room-of-a-bridal-shop sculptural monstrosity. Athey unwraps them to reveal their almost naked bodies (they were wearing loincloths only), hung with little bells attached to their flesh with pins and fish hooks. They stand in a line facing the audience looking drawn, anxious, and submissive. After swabbing their cheeks with rubbing alcohol (as much a part of the various ritual mutilations as anything by now), he pierces each bride’s cheeks with long needles from one side of the jaw to the other, making it difficult for them to close their mouths. After the three are pierced by Athey, the organ music fades out, and several percussionists and drummers appear and begin to play. Athey and the brides dance in a pogo-stick manner, which causes the bells to bounce, eventually tearing their flesh and causing them to bleed. The dancers occasionally release ecstatic screams although their bodies reveal little in the way of ecstasy or loss of control. The dancing goes on for quite some time until one by one the drums fade out and there is only the sound of two sticks banging together.

Among the acknowledgments on the video were some unusual credits. Besides the directors, producers, and cast, there were: Africa, S&M, Working Class America, Chicana Brides, and St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Store, most of which conjure up images and characters of poor urban America (Four Scenes).

5.4 “4 Scenes in a Harsh Life” and “Contagion”

What can be discovered by discussing Athey’s rituals of pain and mutilation in 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life as “infelicitous performance”? Grimes pointed out that rites are “multiphased” and “multileveled,” elements that make ritual one of the most difficult of human behaviors to evaluate. Ritual is not a “single kind of action”; rather, “it is a
convergence of several kinds [of action] we normally think of as distinct” (Criticism 192). Because so many actions may be occurring and different criteria may apply, the notion of infelicitous performance or failed ritual is best used to enhance the discussion of the work—to discuss its various parts and consider its overall dynamic or effects—rather than to determine whether the ritual did or didn’t work. It is with this kind of open-endedness that I enter into this investigation, attempting to show that, regarding contagion and violation, Athey’s piece can be seen as working or not working, depending on what aspect of the product or process is being discussed.

Grimes’ notion of contagion is an extremely important and productive dynamic in and around 4 Scenes, effective in two ways. The first concerns how Athey’s performance and body are themselves sites of contagion. 4 Scenes, as a whole, has a feeling of excess about it, and Athey’s body, a body that is truly contagious, is the primary site of this excess. If Athey hadn’t chosen to bare the skin and break through it, the element of contagion would not be as effective a means to discuss the work. Contagion also functions in relations to the work in that it is the means by which it entered into the flow and exchange of information. Its bodily excesses had the work spilling out of its boundaries into the wider public sphere, where it made visible to a wider public activities previously less visible (i.e., the rituals of sadomasochism), provoked a media scandal, led to a further cut to the NEA, and stimulated dialogue in performance circles. Contagion made it possible to see how these two issues, Athey’s body and the distribution of his work into the larger social, are interdependent parts of one whole. Given this, they will be considered simultaneously in this analysis.

I first learned of and then became part of the flow of information surrounding Athey and 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life at the First Annual Performance Studies Conference held at New York University in spring 1995. At a crowded plenary session where more than three hundred people gathered to talk for several hours about various subjects, it seemed that the body, as it is constructed (and deconstructed) by Western medical practices and, perhaps, more generally, the body in pain, seemed to be of particular interest. The number of paper sessions and panel discussions dedicated to these two
related themes was rather extraordinary. Athey, whose body and performance work had recently gained extraordinary visibility after its run in Minneapolis, was being written about and discussed. His work was of interest in several contexts, among them the performative aspects of sadomasochism, performance as a form of AIDS activism, healing rituals, spirituality and the body, and the aesthetics of pain.

The plenary session was long and intense, and everyone seemed to be very engaged in trying to determine why these subjects were so fascinating. One idea that began to circulate was the idea that our bodily existence is overly determined and contained by various institutions, with medicine as a primary example. With its emphasis on disease (versus health), its interest in surgical solutions and alterations (which are increasingly high tech), its pharmaceutical orientation (for a pain-free unconscious existence), medicine contains and controls the body. Athey’s excesses in performance might be considered a means of resisting the containment of the body by various institutions—including but not limited to medicine—as he also addresses the containment of family, organized religion, and even certain approaches to theatrical performance in our culture.

To counter the containment, to find a way to speak back to the institutions (family, religion, medical, and judicial, to name a few) that have come to define our existence, Athey turns to real physical and emotional extremes with his own body and the bodies of others. In an exploration of the relationship between performance and issues of identity, performance theorist Marvin Carlson suggested that extreme spectacles of the body have always been a part of performance art, and that Athey’s work expressed the current performance world, much like artists Chris Burden and Vito Acconci expressed their own performance worlds twenty years ago. He said:

Body art was calculatedly decontextualized, and physical mutilation used to emphasize the power and presentness of the moment, the experience of pain removing the body from the abstractions of representation. Athey... uses the performance of pain and mutilation to express and control autobiographical demons. (158)
Athey reveals the containers even as he works to resist them. He doesn’t attempt to decontextualize the mutilations of his body and the bodies of others but instead reveals their origins to his audiences. His pain has a history, a past; to deal with that past he goes into the center of the containment, into the center of the pain, attempting to gain some measure of control.

The element of contagion in Athey’s work could make it impossible to gain control. The excesses of his 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life, from the exposure of his and others’ bodies, to the mutilations performed (which, of course, led to the flow of blood), had his performances literally flowing beyond the boundaries of the performance event itself. His life, uncontained, entered into the stream of information circulation, an entry that, I suggest, began with the baring of the skin and the naked vulnerability of Athey’s and others’ bodies.

Athey entered into the flow of information exchange, first and foremost, by baring his skin, a baring that in 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life almost always preceded some ritual mutilation, whether scarring, piercing, or some other act. One author remarked that, “Athey takes the boundary, the skin, which is meant to separate us from death, us from him, and makes that the site of his activity” (McGraff 36). Because of the tattoos which cover almost his entire body, the audience could see that the baring of the skin and the mutilations that followed were not isolated acts done for their benefit only. Athey had been engaged in mapping out his life on the surface of this skin for some time. Of tattoos, author Katherine Young said:

Art inscribed on the skin is suspect. The artistic surface becomes indistinguishable from the corporeal one. Nothing separates itself off as a work of art. Instead the boundary of the self is re-articulated. Tattoo is at once a dissolution of the symbolic boundaries of the body and a reconstitution of the body as an aesthetic object. (xx-xxi)

On one hand, Athey, covered from head to foot in tattoos is the aesthetic object to which Young refers. On the other hand, the man suffering before his audiences, blood pouring down from his head over his face, brings him back into the corporeal, back to the man with a sorted history to which audiences may or may not want to be exposed.
Interestingly, with the breaking of the barrier of the skin, the skin itself (and the aesthetic object it may have been) seems to disappear. The boundary that separated Athey from his audiences (his skin) becomes fluid, and his audiences cannot but be re-situated in relation to the performance. There is a loss of control, and some may find themselves in a panic.

The presence of Athey's blood (and the blood of others), in a sense, stops the clock. It simultaneously takes us back into Athey's history to some unknown moment when he became HIV positive, and freezes us in our tracks in the present as, with our exposure to him, panic sets in. The panic then carries us forward into the future in fear and anticipation of the consequences of his contagion. Ultimately, it is Athey's blood and the fear of contagion that make his audiences most vulnerable. In a panel discussion about his work, Athey said that the negative responses of many people in the United States had less to do with homophobia per se than with “disease phobia” or “body phobia,” both of which he believed were, ultimately, at the root of homophobia (Shank 66). The body is unleashed by disease, and, in these days of AIDS, this is more true than usual. With the breaking down of the protective barriers of the body, the comfortable containment of its private, individual existence becomes lost. Athey's freely flowing blood threatens many individuals' sense of boundaries (whether they were present in the theater or not), and our comfortable sense of being separate from others. In short, it confounded our sense of difference.

The "Working Class Hell" scene in 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life brought Athey and his work very directly into the flow and exchange of information. Athey's stated that the concern around the section described as the Human Printing Press was a "manipulating of the facts" on the part of the press which led to a wave of AIDS phobia around his work. Athey claimed that, when the audience member who was disturbed by this scene called the Health Department to inquire whether he had been potentially exposed to AIDS, the Health Department, after hearing what precautions had been taken, determined that there was no cause for alarm (Schimke 17). Allegedly dissatisfied with this answer, the individual reportedly went to the press, who seemed quite enthusiastic
about the news worthiness of such a story, given the ongoing debate over whether or not the arts should be federally funded.

Athey's response was angry and bitter. He said, "as soon as the religious right got hold of it through the press, they used me as a target. They're using me for fund raising... They probably got more money in a week than I'll get in my whole fucking life." Athey admitted, however, that he, like many of the other artists targeted by the far right, had benefited from the publicity around the controversy of his work (Shank 66). Athey's journey from the Human Printing Press into the real press effectively brought his process of mapping his body into direct relationship with contagion. By mapping his life on the surfaces of his body, surfaces that could not but proliferate with every open wound, he effectively began the process of writing his body into public discourse surrounding AIDS.

Although Athey and the Walker Center for the Arts in Minneapolis took precautions to ensure that no one would be exposed to his blood, Athey may (or may not) have underestimated the power of his images and the effect they might have. Following Simon Watney's notion of the person with AIDS as a "polluting person," Butler said, "That the disease is transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids suggests within the sensationalist graphics of homophobic signifying systems the dangers that permeable bodily boundaries present to the social order as such" (132). I believe that Athey was fully aware of his status as an "polluting person" and meant to make something of this status. For example, Athey described the blotted paper towels moving over the audiences' heads in "Working Class Hell" as "evidence of the wound coming by," an extraordinarily rational statement for what proved to be one of the most extreme actions of the work ("Interview" 61).

In this section and others, he used his blood (as well as the blood of his fellow performers) to resignify himself, to speak back to a society in the very terms by which he was constructed as a "polluter" of society by them. By bleeding for his audiences, he quite literally made his insides his outsides. In transgressing the boundaries of his own body, he called attention to the construction imposed upon him by a "disease-phobic,"
“body-phobic,” and, ultimately, homophobic society. His “polluted” blood communicated to his audiences that a crisis is upon us, all of us. Perhaps the accuracy of the reporting was secondary to Athey’s goals: whether or not the paper towels were dripping blood on the audience, the specter of AIDS and homosexuality were nonetheless symbolically and, for those who were the most frightened and angry, literally, hanging over their heads.

Ultimately, Athey’s crossing over into the space of the audience was fluid, his identity unleashed in a way that couldn’t be contained and whose contaminating power was very real. The tangible substance of his body, once made bare and bleeding, allowed him to flow into our imaginations differently. By means of contagion he exploited the cultural hysteria over the diseased body (whether just homosexual, or homosexual and AIDS-afflicted) by flowing past and through the boundaries set up for his allegedly dangerous and deviant body. For Athey and his audiences, 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life may have worked too well for what it brought to light in the larger social by means of contagion.

5.5 “Violation” Keeps Us Safe From Harm

Considering 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life in terms of violation is a natural extension of considering it as contagion. In fact, contagion comes into play by means of violation. The many instances of sadomasochistic scarring and piercing that occur in the piece can be discussed in term of violation, and it is by these means that the body is unleashed into a kind of “boundarylessness” (i.e., contagion). Grimes defined ritual “violation” as a rite that “deliberately maims or inadvertently degrades” (Criticism 202) and pointed out that discussing an act in terms of ritual violation inevitably has us judging it morally. In addition, although ritual violation is difficult to assess from an outsider’s perspective, we still find ourselves wanting to analyze it and even remedy it, if possible. This difficulty, precisely, presents itself in relation to 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life. Many of its actions and images emerge out of sadomasochistic practices, practices that maim, degrade, and demean; even though these practices are consensual, they are difficult to watch. Putting
such acts as these in front of a more general theater-going audience whose knowledge of such acts might be minimal, or who may be unaware of Athey’s general themes, may be rather problematic.

In some important ways, contagion served Athey well. The Human Printing Press section expanded the reach of the work, offering him a means to write back, by means of the body, to those who wanted to contain him and determine his role in society. Violation precedes contagion, breaking through the surface of the skin to unleash the fluids within. It is the literal nature of this move that makes it so powerful, stirs the imagination, and opens new avenues of communication.

But violation is violation, and contagion is contagion; while both have communicative potential, they are also risky and dangerous. Is it possible that Athey went too far with his theater of pain and mutilation? In spite of what may have been gained by Athey’s work, is it socially irresponsible to cause yourself to bleed in public knowing that you are HIV positive? I am tempted to say that, of course, it is irresponsible. How could it not be? What does Athey do to make this possible—to cause panic in his audiences as he does—and, yet, in the most important senses, ensure that they are safe from physical harm? Perhaps while contagion in its various guises helps Athey deliver his message and helps him to move out and away from the space of the performance, violation nonetheless remains with the body of the performer who has been violated.

Although Athey doesn’t speak much about his audiences’ responses to his work, when asked in one interview if he had a cult following, he said, “I’m not a shaman. I’m not recruiting people to be in the blood sports. That’s not the point of [my work]” (“Interview” 60). Although Athey performed at a leather club in Los Angeles, where he did rituals and demonstrations with people for several years before taking his work “on the road,” he didn’t claim that his work was about forming community. His work emerged out of his “private play,” as he put it, out of a fascination, from a very early age, with the physiology of the body and with cutting himself and others. When asked how he imagined himself in relationship to the history of performance art or ritual, he claimed
that his work was "like a public sacrifice... parallel to doing penance" (61). This statement refers us back to Athey himself; although the public is present in his statement, his sense of himself as a sacrificial figure is much stronger. Ultimately, Athey is working out his own life in his performances. It is his body (and, by extension the bodies of those who perform with him) that he performs upon for his audiences.

The second scene of 4 Scenes, "Tattoo Salvation/Self Destruction," is a good example of how Athey’s violation remains with the performers and in this case, with him, rather than posing a direct threat to the audience. The scene opens with Athey on his bed at a fair distance from the audience, tossing and turning with a bad dream or in pain—it would be difficult to know which. His restlessness is accompanied by a taped text of his drug addiction and suicide attempts—information from his past, a past that the audience is only just discovering. In preparation for the syringes, he bathes his skin with alcohol, a cleansing ritual that precedes all of the sadomasochistic mutilations in the piece. His bare skin shimmers for a moment in the light, a canvas upon which he will very shortly perform his ritual of pain. He places the syringes in one by one, his arm swollen from the tourniquet tied above the elbow. His face shows no signs of pain, and one gets the feeling that the act is an obsessive repetition of earlier drug use. Strangely, it seems to have no visible effect on Athey in the present. He removes the syringes rather quickly in bunches and, seemingly more desperate now, begins to put other, larger needles into his scalp. The blood pours forth from these wounds, and Athey is clearly in physical and psychological pain.

The specter of contagion hovers nearer the audience, but, because of Athey’s distance from them, they are very likely more absorbed in the mutilation of his own body than the possible danger to their own. Throughout the scene, wrapped up in his own small world, Athey never once looked toward the audience or referred to them in any way. After a while, the lights faded to black and then up again to reveal him naked on a rope ladder, climbing and swinging softly back and forth, his back to the audience while a taped monologue discusses his "tattoo salvation." Once again, he returns to the idea that he is "mapping his life" on the surface of his body by scarring, piercing, and
tattooing. Athey seems very vulnerable, almost childlike, suspended naked from the ladder on an otherwise empty stage. At this point he is hardly threatening, and one feels more sympathy toward him than anything else.

Athey's "mapping," which at times seems like a violation (especially, of course, when it is done to another performer), is Athey's way of having some control over his body and his life. This has the interesting effect of moving him backward into the past and forward into the future. As his violation becomes contagion, he enters, both physically and conceptually, into the flow and exchange of information; his work becomes more questionable on moral grounds and thus difficult to evaluate. Athey made an interesting comment while discussing the scandal that arose concerning the Human Printing Press in Minneapolis": "they could have cared less that ["Divinity Fudge"] was cut, but [they were upset] that his blood was sent out over the aisles to the audience. It's because of the mass AIDS phobia" (Shank 66). For Athey, the "violation" of Divinity Fudge's body seemed to matter to the audience and, perhaps, to the press and others, only because it could have been potentially dangerous to them—not because it may have been demeaning to Divinity. Does Divinity Fudge, as a kind of deviant character in our society, matter to us? Does Athey do anything in his performance to ensure that we feel compassion for those participating in these ritual mutilations? Interestingly, violation is only brought into play, to any real degree, by how it leads to contagion, a typical "they can do whatever they like as long as I don't have to know about it" attitude toward those occupying more marginal spaces in our society. Athey's violation may keep our bodies safe from harm, but his contagion fills our minds with subjects we may not want to consider.

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"Violation" and "contagion" in 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life are the two halves of the whole that is Athey's continual state of fragmentation. One keeps him folding back on himself, dredging up a history that requires yet one more marking on the limited surface of his body; the other distributes him in sound bites and statements into the flow and exchange of information concerning the body in performance, AIDS and its
representations, deviant and marginalized sexualities, the theatrics of sadomasochism, and more. Violation and contagion are the means by which the piece both works (succeeds) and doesn’t work (fails) simultaneously. To make its point, it deliberately spills over its boundaries and degrades. But it also alienates.

What happens to the cause then? Athey wants to explore social repression, inner conflict, disease, suffering, and death in a very literal way, and Grimes’ notions of violation and contagion provide a means by which to consider how effective or ineffective Athey’s project was. Would the work have made any kind of impression at all—if Athey hadn’t pushed at the edges of what could be experienced in the live theater, if he hadn’t led his audiences to believe that there was a real threat to their safety? It made its impression through violation and contagion. There are some who, even at a distance, weren’t ready or willing to have the kinds of experiences Athey suggested for the transformation and healing of the self or the social. Some want no part in being at risk, in suffering more to get to the other side of fear and pain, even if (or, perhaps, especially if) that fear and pain are mainly in their minds. Although it seems impossible to determine whether the piece succeeded or failed (as Grimes, to a degree forewarns his readers), Grimes’ notion of infelicitous performance keeps us talking and thinking and moving about it. It keeps us in a critical space in relation, even, to very difficult work.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This investigation with my own naked body, and I now return to that naked body. My naked body not only preceded this investigation, but prompted it. I remember the extraordinarily powerful experience of performing naked with and for my community in Jones’ Last Supper, an experience unlike any I ever had or imagined I would have. I remember also, sitting in the audience night after night for five nights in a row, I was completely mesmerized, watching Carlson perform as Koko in Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat Cat. I remember being at a conference and hearing (again and again) about Athey’s 4 Scenes and thinking that what he was trying to communicate (however desperately) from his insides ... moving his body into the social by means of his blood. Whether from the vantage point of performer, audience member, or critic, I was deeply engaged with each piece and compelled by the use of nakedness in them. Of the three, the piece that set the present study in motion was Last Supper, in which I had the opportunity to embody that potential of the body in the public space of performance. Although Last Supper convinced me of the social efficacy of the naked body in performance, the other two works—(one preceding Last Supper, the other following it) prepared me to think about that efficacy differently than I might have, had I only performed and not been an audience member nor critic. Being witness to Carlson’s performance and being drawn into the flow of critical response surrounding Athey’s work allowed me to experience nakedness in performance from various perspectives. The naked body can address the social best when it is witnessed by an audience. From there, the audience brings it into the flow and exchange of information in the larger
social of which performance is a part. Of course, Schechner attempted to capture this combination of factors with his notion of nakedness as a social condition. “Nakedness implies a public event. To be naked with someone watching is to adumbrate a process that needs another’s acknowledgment. Nakedness is a social condition” (Schechner, Environmental 88).

Grimes suggested that the most important element of ritual criticism is reflexivity—. The critic must always “make explicit the grounds of [his] criticism. Criticism is always from a point of view and for a purpose, both of which should be specified” (Criticism 229). Where have I stood in relation to this project? What has been my point of view? What has been my purpose? Why have I engaged with these naked bodies in this way? What have I hoped to achieve? I occupied several roles in this study, roles which have offered me an opportunity to more closely examine the use of nakedness in each work. The purpose of this investigation was to provide evidence (if not proof) of the capacity of the naked body in performance to address the social as well as any other representation of the body. Understood to be a subject rather than an object, the naked body in performance is not just showing its audiences something that they otherwise could not have seen if it were clothed, is also doing something (or many things) in a performance as a whole. I believe Jones’, Carlson’s, and Athey’s pieces epitomized this viewpoint.

Pushing reflexivity into the realm of the self-critical, before embarking on this investigation, I was already quite convinced of the social efficacy of the naked body in the three works. This study examined how the naked bodies in each piece did the work that they did—not merely that they did it. Relevant questions included the following. How did each choreographer/director proceed? What did they hope to achieve by using nakedness in their works? What were the outcomes? I attempted (following from Grimes’ recommendations for ritual criticism) to “assess” and “interpret” rather than “objectively describe” or attempt to “explain” the works (Criticism 2). Rather than trying to explain the works or to determine what they meant (which was, in fact, Turner’s interest), I attempted to understand their practice, through assessment and
interpretation. It is no simple matter to cease the search for meaning. Interpretation often finds itself on that slippery slope, sliding into the processes of wondering “what it all meant” and what would be the final analysis. Although I share Grimes’ commitment to leave matters open-ended so as to not engage in a theoretical completion of an event, I am interested in the persistent desire to complete an analysis. Having taken the trouble to engage with a piece, perhaps I have earned a right to speculate about its meaning. Along with my sincere hope that I have persuaded someone of something with my analysis, my comments about these performances are nonetheless speculative, although drawn from an educated perspective.

Grimes suggested that, if the goal is to broaden the notion of what ritual is (including more types of activities than in the past), ritual criticism must also necessarily broaden to accommodate this expansion. Therefore, there can be no universal or standard set of tools for analysis—. Different rituals require different analytical tools, each appropriate to its particular practice and goals. This applied to the pieces in this investigation. Although each utilized the naked body, they were otherwise quite distinct in terms of the subject matters and the approaches taken to those subject matters. The pieces (as expected of any ritual) were engaged in their own internal theorizing, making the choice of analytical tools important. The analysis, in and of itself, should not overpower or overdetermine . It followed, then, that Turner’s social drama model was most appropriate to Jones’ work, Schechner’s restored behavior was most appropriate to Carlson’s work, and Grimes’ infelicitous performance was most appropriate to Athey’s work.

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Under consideration were: (1) how each piece was a particularly compelling example of the social efficacy of the naked body in performance, and (2) how the use of nakedness in each might be seen in relation to the others. For example, did Jones’ use of nakedness (as a means to mobilize community to deal with a present conflict) bear some relationship to Carlson’s use of nakedness (as it articulated the necessity of entering the social and engaging with the other), or with Athey’s use of nakedness (which showed
that, while rituals and performances sometimes fail to "work" in the social in an integrated way, they nonetheless do work)? Are these pieces, each engaged in its own concerns, comparable? What were the theorists' contributions to this investigation? How did their particular approaches to thinking about the body in ritual and performance join with the pieces and the bodies in them to produce certain outcomes?

The most compelling evidence for the social efficacy of the naked body in Jones' *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* were the approximately forty individuals from each local community who joined the company cast for the last section of the work, "The Promised Land." Dancing through the long and complex final section of the work to end assembled naked across the stage, these community members brought the piece "home" for their communities, with all of its historical, textual, and imagistic complexities. Standing still, no longer performing but simply present for their audiences, these individuals' naked bodies effectively bridged the gap between the theatrical and the "real" at that moment. Their naked bodies, all of them recognized and witnessed a friend or relative in the audience, compelled the crowd to rise to its feet and to imagine themselves also on stage, working for a better world for all of us. According to Turner's social drama model, the seeds of resolution or reintegration (the final phase of the social drama) are often planted during the redressive phase when groups are engaged in examining itself in the midst of its current conflict. In *Last Supper*, those seeds (of faith? of hope?) were planted among the bodies of the performers who would stand together naked to begin the process of cultivating a different future.

In *Visit Woman Move Story Cat Cat Cat*, the most compelling evidence of the social efficacy of the naked body is Carlson's performance/critique of the story of Koko. Performing naked, she effectively drew her audiences' attention to the fact that, the degree to which Koko has acquired language is the degree to which she has become isolated and alienated from her natural state, while never effectively transcending it. Regardless of Koko's signing abilities, she cannot achieve true communicative and emotional rapport with humans, because, ultimately, her desires are not her own. Through her transformative merging with the gorilla, Carlson entered into the liminal
"between" of performance, so she could effectively present Koko's experience to her audiences. She invited her audiences to become absorbed in the work, to believe and disbelieve in her transformation into Koko (to enter into the liminal with her), and to empathize with her subject. Rather than observing her critical preoccupations with the representations of the bodies of humans and animals, audiences were brought into an intense and deep dialogue with their own preoccupations. Analyzing the piece as restored behavior showed that, not only Koko is caught in the "between," so are we. Her condition is, in fact, our condition.

In 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life, Athey challenged his audiences (present or not) with his ritual mutilations. Although many of his actions and images were difficult to witness, one instance in which his work offered compelling evidence of the social efficacy of the naked body. In the Human Printing Press, Athey used his status as a "polluting person" (Butler 132) to re-signify himself, to speak back to a society in the same terms by which he had been construed as a "polluter". In transgressing the boundaries of the body, he called attention to the stigma imposed upon him and others by a "disease-phobic," "body-phobic," and, ultimately, homophobic society. His and others' "polluted" blood communicated to his audiences (and meant to communicate) that a crisis is upon all of us. Crossing into the space of the audience, his identity was fluid, unleashed in a way that could not be contained, and whose contaminating power was real. His body, bare and bleeding, allowed him to flow into the audiences' imaginations. By contagion, he exploited the cultural hysteria over the diseased body (whether just homosexual, or homosexual and AIDS-afflicted) by flowing past and through the barriers set up for his allegedly dangerous and deviant body.

These three performances are perhaps linked by the ways in which they address the relation of nakedness to the construction of the other. To reintegrate itself in Jones' work, the community must address the social construction of otherness. This denies basic humanity to specific groups (such as African-Americans or homosexuals). The nakedness of the community-performers increased the level of empathy in the audience.

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This, in turn, helped the audience recognize the basic humanity of the different groups assembled onstage.

By contrast, Carlson’s use of nakedness placed the audience, as witnesses, in a liminal state where it empathized with Koko’s condition and noted the impossibility of Koko’s full integration into human society. At the same time, we recognize the specific nature of our own uniqueness as humans with bodies, whose experiences can’t be fully translated into those of others. As users of language, we are always “in-between” our own bodily knowledge and that of others. Finally, Athey’s abject body operates at the lowest degree of empathy and at the highest degree of otherness. This manifests our own worst fears of the other within the social. As an image of contagion, it demonstrates certain limits of society’s ability to deal adequately with threats to its stability and health.

Live performance affords an opportunity to see thought transformed into action and action transformed into thought. Live performance is the thought of action taking place in front of us. This complex intersection of action and thought requires everyone’s involvement, either onstage or in the audience. Performers initiate the action, and the audience witnesses that action. The audience’s physical and mental presence makes the action more meaningful. This relation led Schechner to his notion of nakedness as a social condition. The stage is an arena of representations that requires the presence of others to perform various tasks, some of which are highly intellect-driven (analyze and criticize), others which are more embodied (empathize or identify with), and others which are a complex combination of the two (such as interpretation). As audiences “take in” a performance in all of these ways, its thought-action is inevitably cast into the social where, by means of the bodies by which it travels, it must do something. What is being done, however subtle, is at once a transformation of how we understand our own social system; in the same process, it becomes a transformation of that system itself.

The analysis suggests that all of the pieces and the naked bodies in them exist in relationship to the social in distinct but complementary ways, lending themselves to a type of ecological systems formation. To set up this field of social relations (brought
into play by means of the works, their naked bodies, and the analytical tools applied to
them), I imagine the naked bodies plotted on a circular spiral. Turner’s social drama
presents community functioning as an integrated whole, capable of mobilizing to deal
with conflict. From this, I imagine Jones’ mass of naked bodies (and the audiences that
witnessed them) scrambling over and under the lines and spaces of the spiral to finally
arrive at the end of the piece, assembled on the line and focused on each other.
Schechner’s restored behavior examines the relationship between self and
other (understood to be located in the social). From this, I imagine Carlson/Koko at the
bottom center of the spiral, looking (from within herself and without), to self, to other
and back again, attempting to negotiate between the two. Grimes’ notion of infelicitous
performance engages with the notion that rituals can “fail.” From this, I imagine Athey
and his deviant behaviors in the spaces between the lines (which I think of as the liminal),
trying to gain access to the “real,” his scarred and tattooed body navigating to join others
“on the line” but usually without much success.

* * * * *

The ‘Promised Land’... bodies flurried on and off the stage alternately
engaged in confrontational struggles here, and love-making there. We
moved through the ‘thirteen saint shapes’—gestural movements culled
from religious iconography—in a long, continuous line across the back of
the stage: a representation of the middle passage; after that came the
raucous revival meeting, the ‘innocent duet,’ and the ‘kiss line.’ Who
was found to be desirable? Who was rejected? In the wings we began to
remove our clothing. (My own disrobing strategy by sections: masks and
‘kneeling saint shapes’: fully dressed; leaping across stage and ‘power
saint shapes’: underwear only; individual ‘saint shapes’ and male-female
stand-off: underclothes; ecstatic revival meeting trios and the ‘innocent’
duet: fully nude; ‘double cross’/Dutchman and spinning/partnering
section: underwear back on; final image: fully nude.) The activity on
and offstage became increasingly more intense throughout: there were
bodies everywhere, busy and in all states of dress and undress. Finally,
with one last surge in and out of the wings we arrived at the final image:
all completely nude, bathed in a very warm, golden light, facing the
audience, singing. I was unable to remember the song, and even if I could
have remembered it I was unable to sing it very well. My mouth opened
and closed but very little sound issued forth. I felt like I would float
away; I felt the sensation of a wind moving though me; I felt strangely
invisible except for the lump in my throat. But I also knew at that moment that being on that stage, naked for all to see was very important: Bill's "crisis of faith" isn't just his crisis, it's all of our crisis. As I brushed against the flesh of my fellow performers as we changed lines—everyone must get to the front at least once—I took in this strange community, aglow with the profundity of it all. At the very end I ended up in the front. Suddenly, I couldn't believe that I was standing there naked on the stage, that we were all standing there naked. I felt exhilarated. The audience was like an ocean wave ready to come crashing down on us, on their feet, applauding madly, cheering, whistling and yelling out to us. As we stood facing each other I realized that I had never faced anyone as fully as I did on that stage that night. We stood witnessing to and for each other—the audience drawn in, exposed... all of us on stage drawn out, exposed. Finally, the curtain came down and stayed down. Some people embraced, smiling and crying, others simply strolled off stage, while yet others seemed kind of lost, unsure of what to do next. I found myself amused. Our discarded garments lay all around us, all over the backstage area where the stage hands were already busy striking the set; I watched them step gingerly over and around the piles of clothes as they worked. Finally, breathless, exhilarated, amused, naked, I began the search for my underwear. (Journal entry.)

Where is "the innocent" now? Performing, she was absorbed into the masses of bodies dancing. Writing, she has been pulled along by the flow of ideas that came with the desire to know more, to find a way to tell the story better. "The innocent" is simultaneously more and less mystified by the experience of performing naked; she is both "bathed in a golden light" and "searching for her underwear," always seeking out a better understanding of the performing body, and yet, realizing that no matter what she finds, there is always something inexplicable about it. One critic found "the innocent" to be multiplied among the entire cast of over fifty. She said:

... by the end they're all naked—an army of innocents ready to start the world over. And the last text we hear sounds like a prayer: 'If you slip through his arms, he will be there for you and lit you up,' but there's no capital letter to that he. And no more turning that other cheek, that back to the lash. (Jowitt, World 119)

Naked, exposed en masse, our collective innocence must have made us a strange army: an army without weapons, almost without words ... only a prayer. Finally, it was
just our bodies, unadorned, skin shimmering beneath the lights. Whatever role we had played—whether an innocent, a rogue, a lover, or a victim—our respective journeys brought us to Jones’ *Promised Land* where we could just be a for a moment, frozen in time and space. No one was really innocent or violent or anything else—we were just playing at it ... or were we? Performance is like that ... we never can be really sure of what went on and so must consider the possibility that we didn’t (and maybe don’t) always know who we were. In this, we were truly vulnerable, each of us stripped bare, unsure of our identities, but standing before our audiences nonetheless united, ready to take on the world.
NOTES

1 Of course, Richard Schechner wasn’t the only performing artist to explore nakedness in performance in the 1960s-70s. There were many others working in both experimental theater, dance, and performance art who used nudity in their work, including notables such as Robert Morris, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Carollee Schneeman, and Anna Halprin, among others. Critic Sally Banes characterized the use of nudity by choreographers such as Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer as yet one more aspect of the interest in stripping movement down to the basics. These “analytic” choreographers were interested in simply presented, functional, more ordinary bodies and movements and often created very formally abstract work that might be seen as “revealing the essential characteristics of the medium” (Banes Writing 305). While this may be partially true, Paxton and Rainer were also interested in the social and political import of their naked bodies. For example, in her piece for the Judson Flag Show in 1970 (an event protesting the arrests of individuals accused of flag desecration in protests against the Vietnam war), Rainer asked performers to perform naked except for the American flags draped around their necks like big bibs drawing attention to the infantilizing aspects of propagandistic nationalism (Rainer 71). For his part, Steve Paxton often explored social and political themes in his work as in his Intravenous Lecture (1970). After being forbidden by his sponsor (a University) to present his work, Satisfyin’ Lover, which was to include forty naked red-haired people, he instead talked to the audience about censorship while a doctor installed an IV in his arm. Rather than give in to the sponsor and clothe the naked bodies, Paxton chose to keep them alive in the imaginations of his audience by talking about them (Banes, Terpsichore 60-61). On the West Coast, Anna Halprin, like Richard Schechner on the East Coast, was interested in improvisation as a means to create events of “extreme authenticity” (Schechner, Environmental 87). Nakedness in the midst of these improvisations as well as in her other pieces, was, for Halprin, both “a natural outgrowth of...communing with nature [but also] just another barrier to be broken [socially]” (Lawrence). Both Halprin and Schechner found in nakedness a means to enter into the complicated dynamics of social formations and relationships to express not only their own political viewpoints on the body but the viewpoints of all those participating. For more information on artists’ use of nudity in the 1960s-70s, see also Carolee Schneeman’s More Than Meat Joy (1979), Anna Halprin’s Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance (1995), and Deborah Jowitt’s Time and the Dancing Image (1988).

2 Are naked bodies the same as nude bodies? According to art historian Sir Kenneth Clark, they are not. In his famous treatise, The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form (1956), he said, “To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, the work implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word “nude” on the other hand, carries in its educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, confident body” (3). For Clark, the nude is
the human body configured (by the artist) into a proportionate, harmonious, and eternal whole. The naked body, though it may be a predecessor of the nude of painting and sculpture, is not the nude. "We do not wish to imitate; we wish to perfect" (26). John Berger, author of Ways of Seeing (1972), challenges Clark's notion that the nude is the starting point of the painting suggesting instead that the nude represents a "way of seeing that the painting achieves." Seeing nakedness, regardless of the genre, whether painting or live bodies posing, is "always conventionalized—and the authority for its conventions derives from a certain tradition of art" (53). To unravel these conventions, Berger discussed how the nude of painting relates to lived sexuality, a move that Clark, so invested in the "expressive" and "civilizing" aspects cannot fathom. He said, "To be naked is to be oneself," whereas "to be nude is to be seen by others and yet not recognized for oneself" (54). It is precisely this sort of understanding of nakedness that I am trying to draw out of Schechner's "nakedness as a social condition," the idea that the naked subject maintains something of itself even when it is seen to be naked by others. Berger further suggested that the total disclosure of nakedness acts as a kind of confirmation for us and that we are relieved at the sight of the other, a kind of productive banality that serves to ground us in the reality and subjectivity of the other. Not idealized but instead grounded in reality with its subjectivity intact, Berger's naked body would seem to have more options for what it might communicate to its audiences, the matter to which this investigation addresses itself. Thus, the bodies of this study are more often described as naked bodies rather than as nudes in order to encourage thinking about them less as formed objects than as acting (whatever the risks of that) subjects.

3 In the essay, "Variations on a Theme of Liminality," in Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff's Secular Ritual (1977), Turner makes a distinction between ritual formations in tribal societies from those of modern industrial societies. He suggests that, while there are similarities between these formations, the differences between them are significant enough to choose a different (although related) term. Turner believed tribal ritual to be "embedded in the total round of activities" (39), to be part of the work/play of society forming itself; thus, participation in ritual was obligatory. By contrast, in the fragmentation and specialization of modern, industrial society, we are not obligated to participate in ritual, and our engagement with it is largely individualized and voluntary. It is not part of the work/play of tribal society but exists apart from work and is described by Turner as leisure. Leisure brings a formation symptomatic of the division of labor in modern urban societies. Individuals can choose their various engagements from a vast marketplace of art, sport, entertainment, and other social events. It is important to mention, however, that the liminal and the liminoid were not at all times opposed by Turner. He described the presence of the liminoid in tribal societies (i.e., artisans whose productions are more aesthetic than sacred) and the frequent "relinformation" of the liminoid in modern society (i.e., groups of artists who create their own exclusive rites of membership)—qualifiers that effectively put the entire distinction in question. It has been argued that, although Turner made much of the liminal v. liminoid seem very important at the time he wrote the essay, he rarely if ever employed the distinction in his own writing (Driver 232).

4 Donna Haraway included a discussion of Koko in her book, Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science (1989). In the chapter, "Apes in Eden, Apes in Space: Mothering as a Scientist for National Geographic" (subsection "Dream of a Common Language"), Haraway described a "post-war Western world obsessed with communication"
Koko was one of several apes taught to converse in American Sign Language (AMESLAN). Beginning at the San Francisco Zoo in 1972 and then in a private trailer on the Stanford University campus, Koko and eventually another gorilla named Michael became participants in building the bridge across what Haraway termed “the divide of nature and culture.” Patterson, who had taken care of and worked with Koko since she was an infant, had moved her away from the zoo. In 1976-77, the zoo requested that Patterson return Koko so Koko could bond with other gorillas to perhaps reproduce (as well as be on display for the public). The mayor of San Francisco intervened, as did an aroused public which expressed concern about the ethics of placing a “language-using gorilla in the zoo, to be watched as an object and not conversed with as a subject” (144). Patterson eventually was allowed to buy Koko from the zoo and continues her work today. For more information about Patterson’s work with Koko, see The Education of Koko and an article entitled, “Conversations with a Gorilla.”

When I first saw Carlson’s solo in Milwaukee in 1990, I was so affected by her physical presence that I wondered if she could be anything but naked in the work. I was convinced then (and am still convinced) that her nakedness was the crucial feature of the work—the best choice really, for a piece in which the goal was to investigate the existence of a gorilla whose capacity for language learning has her living in the border zones between the “mythic poles” of nature and culture. When I viewed the work on video several years later—a version of the piece made in 1986, very likely one of Carlson’s first performances of the solo—she was wearing underwear. My response to this was largely negative. I believed that the underwear interfered with my experience of the work, because it was, for the most part, distracting. By determining for me what I should and shouldn’t see when looking at Carlson’s body, her performance of Koko was much less convincing. Adding underwear suggested that the body needs to be regulated (a potential source of shame or embarrassment). This was a particularly human (not primate) notion, making me wonder why Carlson wore underwear. Being affected by Carlson’s transformation in the piece, it was difficult not to wonder why this gorilla was wearing underwear. In short, the underwear not only regulated Carlson’s body (which is problematic enough) but interfered with the liminality of the performance, so crucial to its success.

Athey ran into trouble abroad as well. Much to the dismay of his presenters at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, Athey was forced to alter his performance of 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life performed there in July 1994. Lois Keidan, Director of Live Arts at the Institute, reported that, in spite of all of their efforts to deal with the controversial aspects of Athey’s work, including taking special precautions with the disposal of surgical implements and spilled blood, it was the ritualistic acts of scarification and piercing themselves that in the end proved too much. ICA lawyers (who were consulted about the piece in the planning stages—not atypical for ICA as it frequently presents radical work that may prove offensive to some) deemed that certain aspects of Athey’s performance might, in fact, violate measures recently introduced into British law. In the late 1980s, a series of covert police operations under the umbrella name Spanner “accidentally stumbled” upon a group of middle-aged men engaging in sadomasochistic activities while in pursuit of an international pedophile ring. The men were arrested and eventually imprisoned for committing “malicious acts of grievous bodily harm.” The court did not accept the defense of engaging in consensual behavior in the privacy of ones’ home. It ruled that “one person deliberately inflicting any physical injury on
another person, even with that person's desire and consent, was committing a criminal assault" and could be imprisoned for up to five years" (Keidan 64). Needless to say, the ICA didn't believe that they could risk such an outcome, and Athey agreed to alter his work, including showing "The Human Printing Press" on video rather than performing it live. Keidan added that the program and all pre-publicity materials clearly stated the reasons for the various adaptations made in light of the current British legislation in order to make patrons fully aware of what she believed were the limitations placed on freedom of expression.

7 The title of the piece performed in Minneapolis in the spring 1994 was Excerpted Rites of Transformation and not 4 Scenes in a Harsh Life. Although there are some differences between the two pieces, for the purposes of this analysis the differences are not significant (i.e., the Human Printing Press vignette was performed much the same way in both pieces). For more information on Excerpted Rites of Transformation, see David Schimke's article, "A Little Blood Can Leave a Lasting Stain" (1994).
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