



AN INTERVIEW WITH TONY PERUCCI

by Andrew Barbero

On May 2, 2014, I conducted a wide-ranging interview with Tony Perucci, who delivered the keynote presentation, “The Complex and the Rupture: Paul Robeson and Cold War Performance Culture,” at the Peace History Society’s 2013 conference. Our conversation went well beyond recapping Perucci’s intriguing analysis of Robeson’s theatrical “performances” to taking an in-depth look at Robeson as an agent of peace- and justice-making within the “Cold War Performance Complex.” In addition, Perucci describes how political theater interrupts systems of hegemonic power, and he offers reflections from his own experiences as a performer, director, writer, and academic on the transformational potential of strategically rendered activist art and rigorous, engaged scholarship.

AB: You wear many hats as a writer, director, scholar, teacher, performer, and activist. I was hoping you could speak a bit about who/what have been your major influences.

TP: Paul Robeson, whose work I have been living with since 1997, has been a major influence for me in terms of the connections between art, practice, and social justice. But going back further than that, I’d say there are two artists that have really animated my work both in art and scholarship: Bertolt Brecht, and the hip-hop group Public Enemy. For me, Brecht was so instrumental in not just bringing political subject matter to play in theater, but also in addressing the very form in how that art practice is engaged. His notion, for example, of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, which was his reinterpretation of the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s idea of de-familiarization, is as important as any of the subject matter in his plays. The role of art, as Shklovsky said, was to undo our habitual perceptions and thinking about the world, and to make those things appear unfamiliar to us.

For Brecht, this was what the estrangement effect, or *Verfremdungseffekt*, was all about. To take these things that we know as natural in the world, and for him that was most especially capitalism, and the concentration of capital in the hands of the few, and to then make it seem impossible to believe that we accept them on a daily basis.

I came in contact with both Public Enemy and Brecht as an undergraduate student. Public Enemy engaged, and continues to engage, issues of political justice, racial and economic especially. And did it with a sense of urgency, militancy, and as important as anything, funk. A review of one of their albums back in the early 1990s said that it teaches you the way the Black Panther Party can also be a “party.” That idea, I think, has animated a lot of activism in the twenty-first century—that recognizing of the way joy, fun, pleasure, and creativity are an instrumental part of political organizing for progressive social change.

Most important to me in recent years are artists with an anarchist streak—dada artists, the Surrealists, the Situationists, but also anarchists with an artistic streak. Here I mean people like Abbie Hoffman, or more contemporarily, the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico. So that back-and-forth of artists with an anarchist streak, and anarchists with an artistic streak, is really what has influenced me.

AB: The conference’s primary focus was on the links between art, activism, politics, and culture in peacemaking. As someone with a foot in all those worlds, how do you understand these connections?

TP: The first thing I want to bring up, which is obviously inherent in this journal, and particularly conceptualized by the Left over the last fifty years, is that peacemaking is also the practice of justice-making. This is something that Robeson articulated, and it means that peace is not simply an opposition to war, it’s a fight for rights, for equality, for justice, and we know that this fight requires a diversity of tactics. It requires legislative struggle [and] very mundane and soul-crushing tactics like folding and stuffing envelopes, but it also involves creative and embodied action that involves putting your body on the line. This is something that has been a continual part of activism forever. To me, this requires a broad conceptualization of both “art” and “politics.”

Engaging in politics includes things that are obviously political, like a specific issue-based protest, but it also involves other kinds of creatively engaging with a collective. It means cultural politics. Art

doesn't just mean something that happens in a designated art space, like at a theater or concert hall, or museum, but rather it can include things that happen on the streets. There are some very explicit ways we can think about this. With sit-down strikes and wildcat strikes, for example, we can think about how those function as performances. And this extends to things that are actually more explicitly creative in their employment of what we would identify as "art," whether it is the use of large-scale puppets and other "performing objects" to protest the Vietnam War, or . . . theater by the San Francisco Mime Troupe throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

Sometimes these artistic practices are self-consciously deployed acts that we would consider to be artistic tactics. But oftentimes these are practices that create a space that, while valuing skills and capacities that artists are required to give, are also about dispersing those abilities to amateurs. That way, art is no longer just the province of professional artists, but is actually the capacity of everybody. Thus, political activism is joined with an expanding of the creative capacities of everyone.

AB: Both your book and keynote address at the PHS Conference examined the 1949 Peekskill riots in upstate New York where anti-communist mobs attacked concertgoers who went to see Paul Robeson perform. You linked the violence at Peekskill to a series of violent "spectacles" that went beyond those performed on African Americans through acts of lynching to include the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews. Could you speak to this larger phenomenon, for which you have coined the term "the Performance Complex"?

TP: When I was researching Peekskill one of the striking things was the way in which the violence was depicted as an anomaly. It would be described as the single outbreak of violence in what was mostly ideological repression of the Red Scare. We must look at the very things the rioters shouted in these attacks. It was not just because many of the concertgoers were Jewish or African American. It was not just about who they were. It was the very things that were said, combining anticommunist slogans with racist and anti-Semitic slogans that very clearly revealed to me the ways these two sentiments of anticommunism and racism are actually bound up together.

Another intervention that I wanted to make in writing this was to say these events were part of a larger array of violence, and rehearsals for violence, that animated American culture in the early Cold War

era. This includes the upsurge in backwoods lynching in the South, legal lynchings in the North and the South, as well as practicing responses to invasion, where in whole towns, such as Mosinee, Wisconsin, people would dress up and play out as if they were engaged in fighting a Soviet invasion. These were rehearsals for violence, rehearsed over and over again.

My whole project was to say that the things being articulated as anomalies are actually much more constitutive of an ongoing set of political violences. That is the network of relationships, systems, and practices that the Cold War Performance Complex attempts to describe. Events that are seemingly unrelated, like a lynching in the South, and an anticommunist riot in upstate New York, are actually connected through political interests.

These are not conspiracies in the sense that the organizers sat down together, but they function in a mutually enforcing structure that enables American capital supported by racism. A contemporary example of this that I have written about, where I first developed the concept of the Performance Complex, was in the reaction to the torture at Abu Ghraib prison. Even many of those who were outraged by it, as they were right to be, subscribed to the Bush administration's notion that it was just a few bad apples, and that "this is not who we are." On the Left, responses were largely that it exemplified the racial imperialism of the war—which I think is true. I take it even a step further and say the degree to which it was seen as an anomaly is a part of the violence at Abu Ghraib, which exports and masks the way that violence, that abuse, that humiliation through incarceration is actually a quotidian practice of the American prison system. It is when we see Abu Ghraib, and the towers of naked prisoners, as unusual rather than simply as an extreme version of what happens every day throughout the United States through the massive incarceration of people here. Part of what is necessary in contemporary political strategy now, for me, is to be able to connect these seemingly divergent practices—domestic policies, global actions, consumer capitalism, and mass killing in the form of war—and to understand these things as networked together rather than as individual issues.

AB: There have been several works on Robeson throughout the years. How do you understand him? How do you see your work reframing the debate surrounding him? Or, perhaps, reintroducing him to readers?

TP: Robeson was largely written out of history, and civil rights history in particular, because of his radical politics and his expressed sympathy for the Soviet Union. To have people like Harold Cruse describe him as a communist “dupe” really eliminated him from history. That began to change, however, with Martin Duberman’s fine biography of him. That and following the centennial of his birth in 1998 came a lot of scholarship about him. That’s how I came into this project. I was invited by D. Soyini Madison and Gerald Horne at the Institute of African American Research here at UNC to do a performance piece about him. So that became my introduction to him beyond *Show Boat*.

Even the other scholarship that has come out since 1998, some very great work by people like Hazel Carby, for example, tended to focus on what one of his biographers called, “his years of promise and achievement” when he was a movie star and popular singer. Robeson very consciously ended that phase of his life. Yes, his career was ended because of the Red Scare, which was connected to his agitation for civil rights. But he made a conscious decision in the 1940s to dedicate his life to fighting for the rights of workers, African Americans, current and recent colonial subjects from around the world—all for the possibility of small-“c” communism.

My work, from that very first performance piece (*Stand!: (Re)membering Paul Robeson*), was not only to reassert the significance of how he used his art to try and enact justice and fight for rights, but also to show the ways in which he was then attacked by press and the U.S. government for those stands. Those attacks even further radicalized him and deepened his understanding of global capitalism and racism, and inspired in him an incredible commitment throughout the rest of his life. Robeson disavowed the racist, paternalistic screenwriters and directors in charge of filmmaking in the United States. When he said he wasn’t going to make any more films in the United States, he said—and this I think is absolutely essential—that the reason was not just that Hollywood’s casting of him was always in stereotypical roles, but also because Hollywood was one of the biggest aggregates of capital and vertical integration in the United States. And, therefore, they were going to keep making the movies that way, and thus he decided he would not do any more films.

Robeson was one of the most celebrated American figures at that time, so for him to articulate the connections between capitalism,

colonialism, and racism was absolutely remarkable to me. So, that was the intervention I was hoping to make with this work.

I also see this work as part of a group of historians who have sought to reclaim not only Robeson's radical history but also the role radical political organization and culture has played in shaping American life.

AB: Can you give some examples of the historians to whom you are referring?

TP: Here, I am talking about people like Robbie Lieberman, Ellen Schrecker, Michael Denning, Robin Kelley, Penny Von Eschen, and Kate Baldwin, all of whose work was instrumental to me for this study.

AB: Like many of the people you just mentioned, your scholarship is very interdisciplinary. What led you to employ such a variety of theories and processes?

TP: My first thought is to ask if there is any other way to do scholarship. I believe in the importance and significance of the disciplinary traditions, specializations, and expertise that are developed by recognizing a lineage of practice and method, but I also feel that fundamentally whatever set of theories or practices speak to you is what you should take up. Some of this is essential to what the field of performance studies is all about, which is very interdisciplinary in and of itself. It connects, especially, anthropology and theater studies, cultural studies and critical race theory [and] [q]ueer studies; all of these are fundamental to understanding performance. Also getting my master's degree in the Communications Studies department at the University of North Carolina, where I teach now, was instrumental. Our department sees scholarship as problem-[based] or question-centered, rather than disciplinary.

AB: You are involved with various groups and projects in North Carolina, such as The Performance Collective and Little Green Pig Theatrical Concern, which perform self-described "provocative" works, often with a political message. Could you speak to your role with those groups as well as to how you characterize the state of political theater today?

TP: I'll start with the latter first. I would say the general perception of theater in this country is that it is dead. Actually, this is an incredibly vibrant time for theater—just not necessarily in the places it was normally thought to transpire, like large, well-funded, regional theaters. Instead, much of the most exciting performance work doesn't

happen in art spaces at all. It happens on the streets, in public spaces, and in corporate spaces. In some ways this has been exemplified by Reverend Billy & the Church of Stop Shopping, Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, Billionaires for Bush, the Yes Men, and the Russian group Voina and their more recent offshoot Pussy Riot. These groups have been reclaiming public and corporate spaces and using them to do really innovative theatrical actions that don't draw on the contemporary twentieth-century American idea of naturalistic theater that has been so normalized. Instead, the really exciting political work in theater is a new style that diverges from the usual agitprop form. [And] form in political theater is as important as subject matter.

I think the most exciting political work that I have tried to do with the groups that I work with is to make that moment of complexity, of startling, of incomprehensibility, into a politically provocative moment rather than an off-putting elitist moment. For me, this has been central to the evolution of The Performance Collective, which I helped to found in 2009 with current and former students at UNC. With that work, being a collective and engaging in collaborative devising was as important as the always-engaged political subject matter of our work. There was a piece called *The Activist*, for example, which was based on the cross-genre novel by Renee Gladman. It was about the challenge of being a twenty-first century activist when one wants to challenge not just political inequality but the forms of rationality with which we perceive them. But then we also depend on rationality as a way of making those very arguments.

So, all of the work that we have engaged in really goes back to the same thing that I mentioned about scholarship; the way we approach performance-making is not necessarily to try and transmit a coherent political message or position, but rather to present a problem and use the occasion of the performance as a way of saying, "we invite you, the audience, to engage with us in trying to think through this problem that does not have simple answers, and cannot be easily resolved by slogans." An example of this was in a recent piece that we did [that] was anchored by the book *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer. The goal of the work was not to persuade the audience to stop eating meat. It was, rather, to present it as a real problem—one beset with division and contradictions, as well as ongoing injustices, [by posing] the question, "how do we live with these inhumane practices?"

Part of art's role here is to ask the question, "How do we go through this process of closing our eyes to things we know to be true?" I think some of the best political theater was, in part, the artistic work that protested the Vietnam War [asking Americans how they allowed the distancing of their] individual ethics from geographically distant actions. Whether through having our representatives kill masses of people in Iraq or Vietnam or whether it is torturing animals on farms, or torturing individuals who have been sentenced to be killed by the state, art becomes a way of connecting the micro-level of daily experience with the macro-level of global political economy and the violence that is necessary to sustain capitalism.

It becomes the question, "How do we allow for these things to happen?" Especially in the era of "silo"-ed news, Fox, MSNBC, people hold their positions very strongly. But, I think when you approach folks based on a question, or problem, we can come at it with a certain degree of honesty. For example, "I'm not telling you to stop eating meat—but you know that's torture, I know that's torture. How do we allow that to happen?"

That challenge also came up as I did a piece on Donald Rumsfeld for *Little Green Pig*. It was adapted from a novel by Eric Martin and Stephen Elliott. In the book, and in our piece, *Donald Rumsfeld* is abducted and taken to a Guantanamo-like place and subjected to some of the policies he endorsed.

AB: Are you referring to harsh interrogation methods?

TP: It was less focused on the particular physical acts of violence than the practices of mind de-patterning, like sound torture and sleep deprivation. What was strange was that at the start of creating the piece, we already knew there were going to be very few people in the audience that we were going to have to persuade that these torture policies were wrong, but the question became for us, "how do we allow them to continue?" And in this case, one of the things that you really come to see is that even when the architect of these policies is subjected to them you do not feel (for very long anyway) revenge pleasure. You actually see the humanity of Rumsfeld by watching him undergo the very dehumanizing policies that he enacted. And by humanizing Rumsfeld, I don't think it means he became a good person. I don't think that is possible.

AB: Your work also deals with the complexities of race and its various connections to everyday life. Would you like to speak to any current events [spring 2014], such as the comments made by Nevada

rancher Cliven Bundy or Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling? Do you see these bringing about any constructive dialogue on race?

TP: I think you do hear some of it, thus far anyway, from cultural commentators such as *The Nation's* Dave Zirin, as well as Michael Eric Dyson and Kareem Abdul Jabbar. All of them have been very vocal about this and are making the point about the pleasure of white indignation that has emerged out of this moment. It is quite amazing and wonderful that the NBA acted so quickly, but let's be real, they did it because of the bottom line. The players, in a way, felt empowered. They were going to refuse to play. During playoff games, that would not just have the short-term effect of losing immediate revenue, it would also have tarnished the NBA brand. It is true that one of the unintended consequences of capitalism is that progressive social change can happen because of it, and that is what I think happened here. Otherwise, the other revelations that were uncovered about him years ago, the discrimination against Blacks and Latinos in the housing projects he owned, would have caused him to be sanctioned long ago.

AB: How do you connect figures such as Bundy and Sterling with the Performance Complex?

TP: To do so you must make some connections. You must see Bundy and Sterling in relation to the recent Supreme Court rulings on voting rights legislation and the dismantling of Affirmative Action in Michigan universities. At the same time as these events are publicly taking place, the Supreme Court of the United States is declaring racism over. [Bundy and Sterling] are public evidence it is just not so.

We can also see the connections between the study of history and current events through W.E.B. DuBois's influential book *Black Reconstruction*. When you read that book, you discover that within ten years of the Civil War, Congressmen were saying, "Haven't we given them enough?" and "Can't they get themselves together by now?" This was to say that they, African Americans, are becoming too dependent on the federal government. So the sentiments that are today voiced by politicians and the general public are the same kinds of comments that have been said since the nineteenth century. I think it helps to understand the degree to which these sorts of claims that racism has ended, and the belief that these folks [Bundy and Sterling] are anomalies, has a very long history, and can clearly be seen a bit more transparently.

AB: I understand you are at work on some new projects, particularly on “critical paranoia and the work of artist Mark Lombardi.” Could you talk about your new work? What are some of the similarities and divergences between your research on Lombardi and your work on Robeson?

TP: I’m working on two books. One, indeed, is on paranoia. It is called *Everything Is Connected: Critical Paranoia in Radical Performance*. It actually has a direct lineage to the work I have done on Robeson. I have written about paranoia as a critical strategy in Robeson’s speeches and in his thinking. The Performance Complex is basically a paranoid construction, which is to say its goal is to articulate disavowed connections among different institutions that work along similar interests. I am interested in the way paranoia, which is sometimes referred to as “critical” or “creative” paranoia, can function as a political strategy.

The visual artist Mark Lombardi did a set of drawings in a series called Global Networks. He made these massive ink and paper drawings where he wrote the names of events such as the BCCI Banking Scandal and the Iraq armaments-for-hostages actions, and then listed the players involved in these events, and they always involved some connection between corruption, politics, and finance. He would put circles around these names and then draw lines connecting the players to the events. Each line was also coded to mean what kind of connection they had. One, for example, would indicate the flowing of money in one direction. Another would describe a specific influence on a regulation or policy. These are massive drawings, and they allow you to see the whole network in one instance. Also, the drawings themselves, because of these looping lines that curve, are aesthetically stunning objects which move back and forth in this relationship of beauty, both in art and in its complexity of information. It is almost overwhelming.

One of Lombardi’s most famous pieces, *BCCI-ICIC & FIB, 1972-91* (4th version), features the name Osama Bin Laden and was done in the late 1990s. Lombardi actually committed suicide in 2001, and in 2003 the piece was on display at the Whitney Museum in New York. The FBI actually went to go look at this drawing so that they could understand how the financing of 9-11 worked. So, I want to think about this system in relationship to the 2008 banking crisis, and the criminal actions and corruption that took place in the preceding years, and the failure to repair them.

Another site on which I am engaging with this material is through the hip-hop group The Coup. They have been around since 1993 and are based in Oakland. Boots Riley, their MC, was a major organizer of Occupy Oakland. They do a lot of the same kind of work I am trying to do in uncovering the disavowed connections of racism with the embracement of capital.

I'm very excited about that work. I am also writing another book about theatrical practice called *The New Thing: Foundations for Materialist Theater*. The term *the new thing* comes from free jazz. The book is for avid practitioners as well as scholars and teachers. Its goal is to look at how horizontalism, material engagement with time and space, and collaboration in creating original theater work can function as an important means of creative engagement with a political issue.

AB: One last question: Do you have any advice for others attempting to use their art and/or scholarship as a tool for social transformation?

TP: Yes, three things. First, the performance artist, philosopher, and professor Adrian Piper said that people and audiences have developed "ways of averting one's gaze." Which is to say that a lot of political injustices, in this era anyway, are not things of which we are unaware. We all know [that] our clothes, unless they are handmade, are almost always made by children in sweatshops. We know these things to be true. We know that given the disproportionate imprisoning of African American and Latino men, it means there are continuing racial discriminatory practices, structural practices that allow unequal sentencing, as well as arrests that are based on race. These are all possible because we have developed a way of "averting one's gaze." So, whether it is doing scholarship or teaching, part of your responsibility is to interrupt that practice of averting one's gaze. This often means making people uncomfortable.

The second thing has as much to do with political action as it does art practice, or scholarship, or teaching. This will sound corny, but it is to dream big, and to work to do the impossible. It goes back to our discussion before about freedom. When abolitionists and enslaved people were articulating what Robin Kelley called "Freedom Dreams," they always meant that in both achievable and unachievable ways. Achievable was to not be enslaved. The unachievable way, which is to reach a condition that is impossible to achieve, is an existential condition of freedom. I believe this is

part of what Martin Luther King Jr. was referring to when he said, “I might not get there with you.” In its impossibility remains struggle. The goal line will always be moving, but you must recognize that the possibility of achieving one’s grand goals is actually what produces continual imagining of notions of justice and freedom. So, recognizing that one is aiming for equality and justice, which are impossible tasks, and recognizing that impossibility is part of what makes doing scholarship, art, or activism very necessary, is a visionary thing to do.

Third—and this is when I become an avowed Marxist—always follow the money.