
6.2: Critical/Ludic Performatives

Critical/Ludic Performatives: A Case Study in the Serious Play of Environmental Activism [1]

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Remember, Earth Police: One precinct, one planet!

Commissioner Leaf Myczack

The earth cop stands before a room of eager activists (mostly college students) in Southern Illinois; they are eager to hear his story, eager to learn his law enforcement tactics, and eager to be deputized. Part stand-up comedy routine, part training seminar in grassroots activism, the public presentations of Commissioner [Leaf Myczack](#) provide environmental activists with strategies for policing pollution and other environmental degradation. He presents himself as an officer for what, at first glance, appears to be a governmental “agency.” Of course, no president or governor or recognized social organization has given him his rank and title. He only *appears* to be a uniformed representative of such State-recognized authority. Carefully taking on “command presence” and dressing it up with the costumes and props of police authority, Myczack appropriates recognized symbols of power to do the work of protecting the earth, particularly the rivers of eastern Tennessee. His work carefully avoids fraudulent impersonation of existing law enforcement agencies and borrows heavily from the tactics and philosophies of hoax artists to perform the role of “Earth Cop.”

Behind the laughs and the borrowed barricade tape, several issues emerge from Myczack’s activism. His performance of “Earth Cop” troubles several category distinctions and binaries that permeate environmental communication and activism. For example, I see his work as providing an interesting answer to philosophical differences between environmental activists committed to the material reality of the natural resources they fight to protect on one hand, and discourse theorists who embrace social constructions of nature on the other. Similarly, his work seems to trouble distinctions between critical and ludic postmodernism, simultaneously insisting upon a playful interrogation of the slipperiness of symbolic meaning while assuming agency for social and environmental transformation. Although hardly a radical constructivist, Myczack nonetheless recognizes and deploys the power of discourse to co-construct reality. Ultimately, I believe that several of Myczack’s gestures move his work from an entertaining performance of police authority to a performative construction of social identity in relation to civil authority and environmental responsibility. In what follows, I detail several of these gestures and their implications, detailing Myczack instructions for becoming an earth cop, how his performance (a kind of hoax art) operates as critical as well as ludic activism, and how performativity theory helps explicate his disruptions of common binaries in environmental discourse and practice. Before moving into this territory, though, it is worth briefly reviewing why many environmentalists are wary of such social construction.

Debating the Social Construction of Nature

Some environmental activists have little regard for postmodern celebrations of the arbitrariness of language and representational schema. Although articulations of the social construction of nature are persuasive and certainly pervasive, many environmental activists and advocates find these arguments dangerous and potentially disempowering to the environmental movement(s). Broadly defined, the threat of social construction to nature is that it robs the imperatives of materiality—that is, a finite natural world of limited resources and carrying capacity. Conversely, social construction theorists critique the ways we essentialize concepts like “nature” and

“wilderness,” and point to the potentially damaging effects of such taken for granted essentialism.

Although there are plenty of examples of this conflict, I will point to one by way of example. In his edited anthology, *Uncommon Ground*, William Cronon details the perils of ignoring the social construction of wilderness: There is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny. . . . Wilderness is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made. . . . We mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture’s problematic relationships with the nonhuman world, for wilderness is itself no small part of the problem. . . . In its flight from history, in its reproduction of dangerous dualism that sets human beings outside of nature . . . wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the twentieth century. (70-81)

When it first appeared in 1996, this text was quite inflammatory for conservationists and wilderness advocates. It is chief among many works environmental activists have collectively labeled “postmodern deconstructionist” approaches to nature (Soulé and Lease).

Several books, essays, and a special issue of *Wild Earth* (winter 1996/7) respond to and refute the social construction arguments. In that issue of *Wild Earth*, Dave Foreman of *Earth First!* replies directly to Cronon’s charges.

Cronon’s complaints are based in ignorance of biology, a misunderstanding of the conservation movement, and a carelessness about the consequences of his critique of wilderness. He spins his high-falutin’ theories far from the real world of Grizzly Bears and Gila Chubs, and far from the other (opposed) real world of timber corporation boardrooms and congressional committees—far, indeed from the frightening reality of chainsaws ripping through thousand-year-old forests, from the D-9 blade stopped by brave souls buried to their necks in a rough roadway, from the rallies, letter-writing, and scientific reports of all manner of conservationists. What Cronon criticizes is a straw-philosophy and straw-movement, which exists only in the windowless, climate-controlled conference rooms of his *Uncommon Ground* ivory tower. . . . The irony is that he is the kind of intellectual the anti-wilderness populists decry in their red-faced anti-intellectualism, yet he gives these people arguments to use against the wilderness (and they are using Cronon’s arguments). (4)

The difference these two positions express should be as familiar as a Socratic Dialogue. For one side, language is a powerful constructor of reality, and concepts like “nature” and “wilderness” are constituted by the culture that speaks them. For the other side, there is a real nature and wilderness “out there;” to ignore them for the sake of language games is ultimately to do them a serious disservice. Environmental activism would seem to have no use for the implicit relativism of social construction theories of nature. Worse, activists like Foreman perceive a very real danger in the otherwise harmless, intellectually elite musings of theorists like Cronon.

The debate, therefore, can ill-afford to remain politely academic. On the one hand, discourse theorists need to acknowledge what has been accomplished in the name of these social constructions. As Phillip Gordon observes:

environmental struggles have largely been waged in the name of politically problematic conceptions of nature: frontierist, nationalist, romantic, and instrumental, to name just a few. But these corruptions (corrupt because they allegedly dream they are pure, and thus offer inauthentic authenticity) have also resulted in authentic progress. Species have been saved. Ecosystems have been protected. Human lives have been saved and enriched. Air quality has improved in many places. Harmful pesticides have been banned. Consciousness has been raised. Popular movements have taken root and spread. And nature has gained a few meager purchases upon which it has legal standing in United States law. (17)

On the other hand, environmental activists can ill-afford to ignore the power of discourse and informed critique of it as tools for doing the work of social change and constructing more sustainable human-environment relations.

Gordon's observations serve as a reminder that discourse and materiality are distinct concepts with overlapping territories of operation. As an earth cop, Myczack inhabits this territory quite comfortably. His objective is to police and protect the rivers of Eastern Tennessee. He is a tireless activist, holding corporate and political officials accountable for poor management of fragile river ecosystems. That he does so by "playing" a police officer for nature, though, demonstrates that he is well aware of the power of social construction, especially when that construction is about social power (as it always is).

How to be an Earth Cop

I first encountered Myczack in February of 2001 at an Illinois Student Environmental Network sponsored conference for empowering local activism. Myczack was on the program several times, both as evening entertainment and as an informed and experienced environmental activist. He is masterful, however, at blending these two roles, reminding listeners that the social activist "in it for the long haul" must maintain a good sense of humor. He drew from an incredibly long history of social activism to detail for us how he came to call himself an earth cop and, more importantly, how we could be one too.

Myczack comes to his enactment of earth cop after a long personal history of social activism and protest. As a veteran of several protests against the Vietnam War, he has experienced street actions that turned violent. Even when protests remained relatively peaceful, he noted the ubiquitous presence of police officers, often in riot gear, preserving order and peace. From this experience he began to question why the police have an automatic claim to authority in these situations, recognizing in their arsenal of crowd management strategies useful tactics for protestors to appropriate. As a result of these sorts of experiences, he developed his persona, ["Commissioner Leaf Myczack of the Office of the River Keepers."](#) and a willingness to teach others what he has learned about appropriating police authority for the purpose of social change and environmental advocacy. Speaking at various environmental conferences around the country, [Myczeck](#) frames his discussions as training seminars, simultaneously parodying such formats and seriously encouraging the audience to join him in policing natural resources. His presentations incorporate two main strategies in this work: providing instruction for how the audience can become environmental police and relating stories of his considerable experience in the field.

His first strategy in transforming oneself into an earth cop involves parodying bureaucratic identification practices. Myczack's primary concern here is a subversion of social conventions for identifying oneself as a member of a recognized organization. Since he frequently gives these talks at environmental conferences, he playfully links the practice of wearing conference badges to the badges that confer police authority. He refers to such badges as "fake identification" and calls for sympathetic audience members to replace them with "real" documentation of authoritative identity. By starting his presentation with a critique of ID badges, he privileges such practices as easily manipulated insignia of authority. There are specific material conditions of such symbolic practice that automatically convey authority in our culture; these conditions can be easily appropriated and mimicked without counterfeiting actual state sanctioned documents. For him, a "real" ID badge is laminated and contains a photograph, one's name, the name of an organization for which the badge represents membership (e.g., "Office of the River Keeper"), and a number. He spends a significant amount of time contemplating what this number should be, identifying many of the ways in which our society identifies us by numbers. He rejects phone-numbers, social security numbers and the like in favor of one's birth date, numerically represented (for example, someone born on 24 February 1965 would hand the number 2241965). His identification practices provide an initial destabilization of consensus reality by asserting that one's birth date is "real" while these other numbers are about state control of the individual.

That he privileges the seeming minutia of an identification badge at the start of his presentation is significant. This tactic of subversion recognizes mundane ways that we perform identity on a regular basis and targets a particular practice associated with agents of state authority. Name badges contain various pieces of information that are meant to simultaneously identify such agents as members of an empowered group and to do

so in fairly arcane ways, fully meaningful only to members of that group. It is the concurrently recognizable form but often unrecognizable content of the id badge that makes it a practice vulnerable to appropriation and subversion. Importantly, he cautions that such appropriations should in no way break any laws by falsely representing either one's identity or membership in an existing state sanctioned group. His lessons consistently mark this boundary of law while at the same time exploring a territory open for playful and serious subversion within those boundaries.

Moving beyond the badge, Myczeck makes several recommendations for creating uniforms. He often shares with the audience the catalogues that he has collected for ordering various kinds of uniforms. He stresses that the uniform one constructs should not mimic too closely existing law enforcement protocols, but that the recognizable tropes of "uniform" dress are an open fashion for manipulation. For example, he recommends stripes on pants legs, caps with patches, and always and especially the American flag sewn somewhere prominently on the outfit. This featuring of the American flag is not so much a call for patriotism as recognition of a symbol of authority that carries weight and cannot be exclusively claimed by any one enforcement agency. Ultimately he cautions that, "A uniform is not so much the cloth it is made out of as the character of the person that is in it" ("Regaining Civil Authority"). He elaborates this point in a discussion of "command presence" that points to an embodiment of civil authority, augmented by but ultimately more than the costume and badge.

Rounding out the uniform that supports his persona construction, Myczeck briefly discusses his collection of "crime-fighting tools." First among these is a large cell phone that he claims, "doesn't even have to work." With great comedic effect, he demonstrates how to talk into the inoperative cell phone while displaying facial expressions of deep concern. Similarly, he recommends having both a bullhorn and a whistle for "projecting authoritative command presence over a great distance" ("Are Environmental"). Latex gloves and plastic bags also play an important part in his cop performance, as it is necessary to gather evidence—evidence that will not actually be analyzed but the gathering of which itself serves as a powerful and usually intimidating enactment of authority. Finally, Myczeck turns from imitating police equipment to important transformations of it. Rounding out his crime fighting gear is a staple gun, a tool that replaces weapons most often associated with police authority. The staple gun is a non-threatening tool of peaceful protest, used to post warnings and citations. Again, Myczeck is carefully marking his difference from actual police and proposing actions that "safely" appropriate authority without going so far as to create paramilitary opposition or to court violent exchange in the field.

Myczack insists that the primary action of the earth cop is to serve notice and to witness. Much of the rest of Myczeck's "arsenal" of police tools involves paper citations, warnings, and cautions. Most of these forms are of his own creation with one notable exception—he recycles police barricade tape often left at crime scenes after "official" investigations are completed. He uses this tape (collected as a kind of litter) to mark locations of infraction and to symbolically transform sites of pollution into crime scenes. Similarly, he uses his staple gun to post warnings and citations, carefully constructed with simple word processing software to imitate "official" government paperwork. Again, the imitation does not go so far as to court fraud, but does make use of color, iconography, and syntax to mimic the recognized structure of these material representations of authority and control. These documents indicate to polluters—individual and industrial—that someone has witnessed their crimes and is bringing that infraction to public awareness.

With these strategies, Myczack details how to be an earth cop. Central to this project, though, is his sense of humor. That his audience laughs at his jokes is not incidental to his work and points to the centrality of the ludic in his activism.

Ludic Environmentalism

Myczack's activist work is related to various hoax artists who use the tactics of cons and deception to create performances that reveal and critique the power of representation. Examples of these types of work include [Joey Skaggs](#), whose media hoaxes illustrate the ways the news media construct and perpetuate false

reality, and [Beauvais Lyons](#) whose “Hokes Archives” gallery installations manipulate the knowledge formation structures of museums and educational display. Like Myczack, these hoax artists depend upon an ability to mimic structures of communication while inserting subversive and often humorous content into the misconstrued messages. However, Myczack’s work is also significantly different from the tradition of hoax art. A brief look at two representative hoaxes will help clarify the differences.

Joey Skaggs’s work, for example, focuses on duping the media, using hoaxes as tools to make both journalists and the public more critical of how issues gain media attention. In one example, he used fake advertisements to create a fictitious company, “[Kea So Joo](#)” (Korean for “Dog Meat Soup”), soliciting for stray dogs. He then watched as animal rights groups responded in outrage, readily finding media outlets for their concerns. Responding to the outrage, he noted, “These special interest groups are screamers, and the media listens to screamers. These groups have the resources to do a better con job on the media than I can. They’re the great performance artists” (qtd. in Tierney). Skaggs then followed up the hoax with a press release identifying the action as a hoax and detailing what he hoped the hoax would reveal: “to bring light to issues of cultural bias, intolerance and racism, as well as to demonstrate the media’s tendency to be reactionary, gullible and irresponsible” (Tierney). The explanation of the hoax is the most difficult part of his work; Skaggs notes, “Just doing the hoax is not the total performance. It’s not the end of the piece or the objective. What’s more important, and more difficult to do, is to get the media to come back to allow me to say why and what it means” (40).

The gallery installations of Beauvais Lyons are less concerned with duping the media but are still amazingly effective at fooling the public. Lyons creates sculptural artifacts and museum signage for nonexistent peoples. Originally, his Hokes Archives gave informational presentations about vanished civilizations, including the Aazudians and the Apasht. More recently, he has been touring a show titled, “The George and Helen Spelvin Folk Art Collection.” Lyons often provides guided tours of his installations, taking on an academic persona appropriate to the material. His performance and various aspects of the works indicate the presence of parody. Despite this, he often fools not only members of the general public but, in the case of the folk art installation, an art critic who wrote about the show (Proctor). Lyons discusses, in a lecture titled “The Politics of Parody,” how parody can make us more aware of taken-for-granted museum practices (Lyons). However, he tends to downplay this function in favor of the sheer artistic joy in creating new cultures: “Every five to seven years, I create a new culture” (Proctor).

Both Skaggs and Lyons provide apt examples of ludic postmodern art. By ludic, I mean two related aspects of their work. First, I simply mean that it is playful. Both artists (Skaggs more than Lyons, possibly) can point to serious, critical messages in their work, but these can easily be overshadowed by the humor involved. Second, I mean that their work fits into a kind of ludic postmodernism. As identified by theorists such as Mas’ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton, ludic postmodernity is a kind of “anti-theory theory” that “premise[s] the liberation of ‘difference’ on the abolition of systemic critique” (Wilkie, par. 3). The indeterminacy of these works—that is, the lack of a clear and focused critique, a clear and focused call for change—mark them as ludic rather than critical. Their focus on being critical of representational schema is not critical enough, and, according to Zavarzadeh and Morton, this criticism only destabilizes commitment to and awareness of the conditions of late capitalism (1).

The same can arguably be said of Myczack’s work. There are, however, significant differences between Myczack’s earth cop persona and these hoax artists. Skaggs, for instance, goes as far as he can with a project before revealing it to be a hoax; once the deception is discovered, the performance is dropped and the point of the exercise has been to demonstrate how readily the media participated in the circulation of disinformation. The result, hopefully, is a more critically skeptical media and public. Lyons’ art does similar work with the ways we attribute authenticity to museum display practices, but once his archeological shows are revealed as artificial constructions, the point is less about knowledge formation and more about transforming the practices of museum display into artistic subject and medium.

Myczack's performance is significantly different from these works in several ways. First, once revealed he does not drop his character and seems content to remain in some liminal space between self-conscious parody and full commitment to the earth cop persona. Second, realizing that he is not actually a representative of a recognized social organization does not seem to diffuse the effectiveness of his persona to witness and successfully embarrass polluters. Third, a significant portion of his project involves recruiting others to use his methods to police environmental degradation in their own communities. Finally, an important part of his project is to link a sense of humor with the serious work of environmental reform, a union that he sees as vital to the work of environmentalists.

When I first saw Myczack do his recruitment routine for the Illinois Student Environmentalist Network, he titled the presentation: "Are Environmental Activists Allowed to Laugh?" This question is central to his work since he worries that an exclusively serious attitude toward environmental advocacy leads to disappointment, depression, and burn-out. Lobbying, passing petitions, and creating phone trees and internet mailings are important but so slow in effecting change as to be deeply demoralizing. It is necessary work, but he worries that the slowness of results in grassroots mobilization is likely to be frustrating for many concerned citizen activists. One alternative that some people pursue takes the form of direct action (e.g. tree-sits and road blockades), which is often dangerous and illegal. However, he acknowledges that this work is often necessary and grants it its place in effective environmental activism. He offers his earth cop performance as a sort of "third way" alternative between traditional grassroots activism and more direct-action radical activism. It is also a form of activism that does not preclude either of those response strategies.

Central to his call for asserting one's civil authority is an awareness of the vulnerability of representational apparatus. As already indicated, part of the serious playfulness of his approach involves destabilizing representations. Although not college educated, he is well aware of the slipperiness of language and deploys puns in his work regularly (e.g., changing "recreation" vehicle to "wreck-creation" vehicle). He also polices the use of particular words, recognizing the deceptions perpetuated through dominant discourse. A favorite example is his critique of the word "plant" in designations such as "sewage plant" or "chemical plant;" he sees this term as a misleading use of "plant" to make industry sound more natural. He asserts that we need to police all such uses of the word plant, changing it back to "factory" or "facility" or better still "eyesore" ("Regaining Civil Authority"). He similarly makes an impassioned plea to change "environmentalists" to "keepers," because such a term gives concerned humans a more active role in protecting the lands and waters they value. It is hardly surprising that such a language turn would come from a man who makes a site of active *agency* for himself by inventing an *Agency* for which he is a representative.

Myczack, then, uses many of the same tools that other hoax artists do. From puns to parodies, he fashions a persona that challenges us to be critical of how we attribute and grant authority to authorities. If that was where his work stopped, he would be just another hoax artist urging critical awareness of representational mechanisms by playing with and subverting those mechanisms. However, Myczack's message goes beyond that; he is protecting rivers—all rivers, but particularly the rivers of eastern Tennessee. He protects them from *actual* polluters, and if the *actual* police are not going to help him police the polluters, then he will become the police. Moreover, he will recruit other police to help him. It is precisely at this moment of "becoming" and "recruiting," I think, that his performance makes an interesting slide into performativity.

Performative Activism

I contend that Myczack's earth cop actions ultimately move beyond the ludic to critical activism and beyond performance to the performative. The earth cop is not merely an act put on to entertain the assembled environmentalists at the various conferences he attends. He is quite serious about using these appropriations to regain civil authority and to personally police/protect his local river ways. By taking on the role of earth cop, Myczack has had a discernable effect on environmental activism in his community.

To make this point, it is necessary to review a some of the basic presuppositions of performativity scholarship. In this case, I am less concerned with the popularization of performative theory around issues of gender than in some of J.L. Austin's original theorizing about speech act theory and Lyotard's application of this to knowledge production. Austin begins his lectures in *How To Do Things With Words* by distinguishing "constatives" from "performatives," cautioning that this distinction is one he intends eventually to abandon (2-5). Austin's "performative" identifies the ways utterances, as interactions, "do things" in the world. He defines such utterances where "the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as, or as 'just', saying something" (5). He concentrates on vows and pledges as the principal examples performatives, identifying "felicity conditions" for creating effective performatives. While the main judgment of a constative is its validity (true or false), one judges a performative by its effectiveness. A significant portion of the effectiveness of a performative is its repetition—that it is not only enacted by the original utterance, but that it is subsequently available for re-enactment (Austin 51-52).

The important critical turn at the end of Austin's lectures is the collapse of this distinction between constatives and performatives. He wonders if any descriptive statement can be made without in some way being an action on/in the world, or if any performative can be committed without relying on description and validity. Both, he contends, are speech acts, with the constative focusing on the locutionary aspects of the act and the performative stressing the illocutionary force of the utterance. But speech acts, he concludes, have both locutionary and illocutionary (as well as perlocutionary) aspects. Elaborating on Austin, Searle defines locutionary acts as utterances that describe or use language's referencing ability. He defines illocutionary acts as utterances that perform, seeking to actively change social relations and affect the world. Finally, he identifies perlocutionary acts which, connected to the notion of illocutionary acts, define effects and responses (Searle 22-5). He then moves on to develop a typology of available speech acts, including verdictives, exercitives, behabitives, and so forth. (Austin 151-164). Much of the work of Speech Act Theory that grows out of Austin's initial lectures expands and develops further these typologies.

Austin's original description of performatives has inspired a wide array of theoretical interest in performativity. However, as Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick note in the introduction to *Performativity and Performance*, the use of the term "performativity" in philosophy and theater is often at cross purposes (2). Much of the current work with performativity tries to bridge these cross purposes, negotiating difficult combinations of the act-orientation of Austin's philosophy with the presentational and citational practices of the theatrical performative. The residue of theatrical performance in current theoretical applications of the performative gives some scholars cause for concern. By overlooking Austin's deconstruction of any stable distinction between constative and performative, contemporary theoretical applications of the performative often deploy it as a metaphor of the stage extended to everyday life. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook cautions that "this emphasis torques 'performativity' theory toward conspicuous performance (such as occurs on stage) as an explanatory metaphor for everyday performativity (such as occurs in conversation), rather than deconstructing the opposition, leaving no privileged term" (124). An application of the performative concept, therefore, should in significant ways resist bracketing off a "site" of performance in everyday life, emphasizing instead the ongoing and co-constitutive aspects of situated interactions in constructing shared realities.

One theorist who has been particularly successful at deploying the performative without privileging the theatrical metaphor is Jean-Francois Lyotard. Lyotard's use and description of performatives are fleeting and suggestive in his description of the postmodern condition. Lyotard focuses on the performative as the principal way society develops knowledge in the postmodern world. Borrowing loosely from Austin, he defines a performative as an utterance whose "effect on the referent coincides with its enunciation" (Lyotard 9). In his systems theory approach to cultural relations, he replaces the felicity conditions of Austin's "effectiveness" judgment of performatives with an evaluation of "efficiency." "The true goal of the system, the reason it programs itself like a computer, is the optimization of the global relationship between input and output—in other words,

performativity” (Lyotard 11). Lyotard’s formulation of performativity is curious, indeed, but his focus is primarily on knowledge and its production and dissemination. He turns to performativity as a way to destabilize knowledge, cautioning that “it is impossible to know what the state of knowledge is—in other words, the problems its development and distribution are facing today—without knowing something of the society within which it is situated” (Lyotard 13). Lyotard’s liberal use of performative in this context, while clearly drawn from Austin, focuses more on performance as a significant aspect of the operating procedures of culture.

Borrowing from Derrida, Lyotard shifts the emphasis of speech “acts” in performatives to language “games.” His interest is in how the discourse and practices of scientific and technological research become performatives for constructing knowledge. Scientific “research” is legitimized not through hard facts, as we might traditionally believe, but through the performatives of science and technology (Lyotard 46-7). What is at the heart of these games is a controlling of “reality”—not a discovery or description of it through observation but a performative construction of it through a series of language games we have come to recognize as science.

This destabilization of science is disturbing enough but only possible through another set of important cultural performatives, collectively identified as education. Rather than view education as the transmission of a pre-existing body of knowledge, Lyotard sees education as a significant site of the performative construction of knowledge. According to Lyotard, “the desired goal becomes the optimal contribution of higher education to the best performativity of the social system” (48). The details of this goal come down to reproducing “players capable of acceptably fulfilling their roles at the pragmatic posts required by [a nation’s] institutions” (Lyotard 48). And, of course, part of the role one may then take on is engaging in the performative construction of knowledge or social reality.

Central to Lyotard’s “optimal input and output” conception of performativity is the idea of reiteration. The performative is a language game that depends on being restated or re-performed. The success of a performative in Lyotard’s system is that it will be a behavior or action that leads to the production of social knowledge, and that production depends on the performance’s repetition. In other words, the success of the performative is found in the student reproducing the behaviors that constitute knowledge development and distribution that she learned from her teacher—behaviors that are always already enmeshed in the smooth operations of the dominant culture.

Although Lyotard leaves open the possibility of imagination and change within the system, his ultimate conception of performance concerns the smooth operation of the system by reproducing knowledge, which is to say reproducing the roles and institutions in a society that reproduces knowledge. We are trained, at various levels of our culture, to repeat the necessary gestures and language games that constitute our reality. As cultural theorists, we might then recognize a successful performative by the ways in which it is taken up by others. To “recognize,” however, is a difficult accomplishment in this sense because it is in the direct interests of the social system to keep such performatives unrecognizable as performatives. Yet, according to Lyotard, it is the reliance on and growing recognition of the performative construction of knowledge, even as the grand narratives that once supported such activity dissolve, that make up the postmodern condition.

If Lyotard emphasizes the significance of the repetition of performatives in the construction of social knowledge, then Judith Butler points to the far reaching implications of what might be included in such knowledge.

If knowledge is what we take for granted as true or proven, then what could be more basic to knowledge than identity claims, particularly those having to do with gender and sexuality? Butler is a key figure in both gender and queer theory for positing that gender and sexuality are best understood as performatives. However, though important, I am less interested with these ontological deployments of performativity theory than Lyotard’s epistemological claims about it as I return to Myczack’s activism.

In 1993, Myczack was instrumental in arousing media interest in pollution in the Tennessee River. He appeared in Channel 48’s coverage the problem several times, serving as an expert from the Office of River Keepers. As reporters asked him questions about the pollution, he made allegations against the businesses involved and generally used all of the strategies already detailed to hold media attention for his cause. He

comments about this experience, “You don’t have to be an expert or scientist to protest raw sewage being dumped in the earth . . . you can be a command presence speaking a moral truth” (“Are Environmental”). His command presence dressed up in the uniform of authority makes him an appealing talking head for the media.

Similarly, his adoption of the earth cop persona has gained him access to City Hall in Chattanooga where he has been a frequent whistle blower and thorn in the mayor’s side. Of these experiences, he states “no one was questioning us [about our presence there] because we were doing the questioning” (“Regaining Civil Authority”). City officials have more than once taken the citations he issues as serious business if for no other reason than for their ability to generate negative publicity. On at least one occasion, he has been called as an expert witness in a civil law case due to his adopted role as earth cop (*Earth Cop*). Finally, on numerous occasions he has stopped individuals from polluting rivers and streams by his direct intervention as an agent of environmental protection. He reports that typically these people submit to his authority, promising to clean up their mess and never pollute again. Taken together, these actions demonstrate the degree to which adopting the attributes of authority create the conditions whereby one’s authority is first recognized and then acted upon.

His performance continues at conferences where he is often called by his title “Commissioner” even long after his presentations are over. Similarly, throughout the conference he continues to wear his uniform. While one might expect other conference attendees to find this a little strange, the general response to him throughout the conferences I’ve attended has been one of respect for the quality of his work. These repeated (iterative) gestures of authority—in clothing and titles and nuances of expression connected to his elusive sense of “command presence”—all contribute to a performative commitment to his identity as a protector and keeper of the earth.

Myczack’s presentations end with a more traditional example of J.L. Austin’s performative. Audiences are encouraged to take a pledge to join the earth police. Recall that this sort of speech act was Austin’s principal example of the performative whereby an utterance constitutes an action that changes social relations and social reality. Myczack leads the audience in the following pledge:

I, _____, being a person of good heart and high moral standards, take note in front of my colleagues and friends to support them and support myself in the work of defending mother earth. (“Are Environmental”)

The performative transformation called for in this oath and Myczack’s entire presentation of self is an advocacy of “civil authority.” His project calls for a transformation whereby we, the people, do not simply petition other authorities to correct the wrongs of environmental contamination but take responsibility and authority to do so ourselves. He takes seriously the assertion that the planet should be our only boss in this work. In doing so, he offers a radical reorganization of our relationship to social authority. That he does so by a careful manipulation of discursive forces is no small accomplishment given the trend among many environmentalists to resist social construction ideas and the dubious benefits of discourse theory.

Conclusion

In this light, I see Myczack’s performance of earth cop as an important demonstration of the usefulness of ludic *and* critical postmodernism as theoretical sites for effective activist intervention. His approach to recasting identity, policing language, and playfully subverting representational systems without too overtly destabilizing their established authority demonstrate some of the useful strategies implicit in deconstruction and discourse theory. At the same time, his protection of the rivers of Eastern Tennessee is grounded in material critique bound up in a rallying call to citizens of all economic levels to protect “the commons” from capitalist exploitation.

Without undercutting or over-theorizing the value of Myczack’s work in Tennessee, and without situating his “success” in quantifiable terms such as how many students take up his call to don the uniform of earth cop, I think there is something else important about his work. Myczack as earth cop reminds us that our debates (critical vs. ludic, materiality vs. discursivity, etc.) are not between isolated and distinct positions; rather, the true and the good tends to lie in the complex territories between them. For discourse theorists, it might be the always already interdependency and collapsibility of binaries. For wilderness advocates, it might be the

interconnectedness of all living beings and ecosystems. For Leaf Myczack, it means pretending to be a cop until you actually are one, policing the use and abuse of a resource we've all become too used to pretending is invulnerable and inexhaustible.

It is not too difficult to see in his traveling workshops the ancient Sophist come to town to teach the eager citizens how to get what they want through skillful manipulation of discourse. However, at the heart of Sophistry was an appeal to doxa, the common sense and communal wisdom of a community. For him, this doxa includes a nature worthy of protection from pollution, degradation, and exploitation. Is this nature a construct of the community's discourse about it? Yes and no, but that seems less important. Having decided to preserve and protect environmental resources, the community is now searching for the most effective tools to do so.

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