

**Performance Midrash:  
Returning the Body to Biblical Interpretation  
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**Abstract**

In this paper I argue for a performance hermeneutics as a way to restore subjectivity and agency to the body as a locus for thought and interpretation. I begin with a discussion of the interdisciplinary and integrative character of a performance hermeneutics, and then trace some neurophysiological reasons for claiming that the body thinks. A performance hermeneutics is shown to be a form of the bodily-kinesthetic intelligence described by Howard Gardner, and is derived from the rehearsal techniques and "What if" questions which guide the work of actors and other performers. A performance hermeneutics functions by placing the bodies of the interpreters in the imaginal landscape of the text being interpreted. The interpreters engage the text from a variety of angles, and provide body and voice not only for that which is voiced in the text, but also for what might lie behind the text or what remains without voice. This process presents possibilities for social and personal transformation and change. In addition to theoretical arguments, an actual example of a performance hermeneutics session in Germany is described as an illustration of the process and principles in action.

**The Return of the Body**

If the recent increase in the number of books, articles, conferences and panels at conferences is any indication, it is quite possible to say the body is now "in." In the introductory essay of the book entitled *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, Kathy Davis, the volume's editor, quickly reviews the recent upsurge in books and conferences on the body. She states, "conferences on the body abound and no annual meeting in the social sciences, cultural studies or humanities would be complete without at least one session devoted to the body."<sup>1</sup> She traces three possible explanations for this recent scholarly fascination with the body: one explanation is that it is a reflection of the culture at large; a second explanation is that it is simply a theoretical development, especially influenced by the work of Foucault and others; a third explanation credits the work of feminist scholars and activists. Curiously, or perhaps expectedly, in the midst of all

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<sup>1</sup> Kathy Davis, "Embodiment Theory: Beyond Modernist and Postmodernist Readings of the Body," in Kathy Davis, ed., *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, (London: SAGE Publications, 1997): 1.

this scholarly and academic discourse, feminist and otherwise, concerning the body, the body still remains an object - it remains that which is talked about. The body as subject, as that which speaks rather than is spoken about, is conspicuously absent.

What I propose to describe in this paper is an interpretive process or method that returns subjectivity to the body, one which takes the bald fact of human embodiedness seriously and advantageously. I call this process "performance hermeneutics." "Performance" because it is based in the insights and particular embodied practices of the performing arts, especially theater and acting. "Hermeneutics" because it is an interpretive activity that is both deconstructive and constructive.

### **Interdisciplinarity as Integrative and Embodied**

At its core, a performance hermeneutics is interdisciplinary. Of course, interdisciplinary scholarship is also all the rage in academic circles these days. However, at academic conferences, interdisciplinary work is usually considered only between academic disciplines. The project of a Performance Hermeneutics stresses a true interdisciplinarity: a movement between academic and performing disciplines. What a Performance Hermeneutics offers is a way for persons to be inter-disciplined - to act out of their integrity as persons who move and think within an embodied milieu rather than in a strictly intellectual or rationally intellectual milieu.

To speak of an embodied milieu means that all aspects of bodily existence impinge upon human experience, and thus upon human knowing and understanding - which, of course, is the task of hermeneutics. Much of hermeneutical theory since Friedrich Schleiermacher has granted significance to the interaction between a text and its author and/or its reader. Whether stated in the psychologicist terminology of Schleiermacher, and his predecessors, Friedrich Ast and Friedrich August Wolf, or in terms of the spokenness of language (*Sprache*) by Hans Georg Gadamer, the fundamental requirement for interpretation is the presence of a person as a somatic entity. In other words, interpretation requires bodies.

Our initial, immediate experience of all phenomena is physical. That is to say, all knowledge, every event which occurs, is mediated physically. Hearing, speaking, seeing, tasting, touching, thinking all occur as physical acts. Events which do not directly involve human beings are perceived by them through physical means (thus, in some sense, involving them physically, if indirectly). John W. Dixon, Jr. has phrased the matter succinctly:

The least we can grant . . . is the remorseless corporeality of the human enterprise. All thought is bodily thought. All metaphor is the body's metaphor. We think not in but with our bodies and the psychic life is a whole with the body.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Body Thinks**

However, a performance hermeneutic is not only based upon the existential givenness of human embodiment, it is also based upon the physiological commitment that the body thinks. When I speak here of the body thinking, I am not separating the brain out from the rest of the body, such as James B. Ashbrook and Carol Rausch Albright do in their recent book, *The Humanizing Brain*.<sup>3</sup>

In their book, Ashbrook and Albright "propose that the concept of 'mind' bridges the complexities of the physical universe and the complexities of the human world.... the brain of Homo

<sup>2</sup> John W. Dixon, Jr., "Prolegomena to a Christian Erotics: Reflections on Norman O. Brown's Love's Body," in *Christian Scholar*, 50, 1 (Spring, 1967), p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> James B. Ashbrook and Carol Rausch Albright, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet*, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1997).

sapiens reflects something basic to the setting in which it finds itself. It seems that, in an important sense, the humanizing brain mirrors the world that births it." They make the claim that the human brain evolved through the normal evolutionary process of interaction with our world, and that human responsiveness to the world, including the search for meaning, the perception of the world's "tangibleness, its wondrous order, its emotionality and directionality, even its unpredictability,"<sup>4</sup> are a reflection of those realities within the structure of physical existence itself.

There is not space here to develop any of their ideas further, except to point out one thing which I find to be problematic, and that is their insistence on situating mind, particularly its rational and imaginal aspects, within the physical confines of the brain alone. My contention, and there are neurophysiological reasons for this, is that the whole body thinks.

For instance, if you were to remove everything from a human body leaving behind only the intact nervous system, you would have a nearly identical human form. Nerves make contact with every organ, tissue system and living cell in our body. Neurotransmitters found in the brain are also found in our fingertips, viscera, skin and glands. There is evidence that the body remembers particular events somatically, and that emotional memories reside not only within the brain, but also within certain regions of the body. In fact, it may be that the brain's process of remembering functions in such a way as to bring into consciousness those memories that may be stored elsewhere in the body.

Howard Gardner, in his influential book, *Frames of Mind*, discusses what he calls bodily-kinesthetic intelligence. Referring to the alleged disjunction between the activities of reasoning and the activities of "the manifestly physical," Gardner states that "this divorce between the 'mental' and the 'physical' has not infrequently been coupled with a notion that what we do with our bodies is somehow less privileged, less special, than those problem-solving routines carried out chiefly through the use of language, logic, or some other relatively abstract symbolic system."<sup>5</sup>

Yet, as Roger Sperry, the doyen of American neuropsychologists, has shrewdly pointed out, one should

look upon mental activity as a means to the end of executing actions. Rather than motor activity as a subsidiary form designed to satisfy the demands of the higher centers, one should instead conceptualize cerebration as a means of bringing "into motor behavior additional refinement, increased direction toward distant, future goals and greater overall adaptiveness and survival value."<sup>6</sup>

It is possible to depict a continuum existing between the physical perception of a problem (such as through one of the senses), the abstract processing of the problem (including "naming" the problem, making value judgments, construction of a context of any sort for it, etc.), decision-making and the physical execution of the decision. According to current research, the postulated neurophysiological process involved is actually very similar to the continuum described. Impulses received from the sensory system travel to the brain wherein a series of electrochemical signals are distributed across a network of regions in the brain finally resulting in signals being sent back to the neurons embedded in muscle tissue which stimulate movement.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxii.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1983), pp. 207-208.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210. Roger Sperry is quoted in E. Evarts, "Brain Mechanisms in Movement," *Scientific American* 229, 1 (July 1973), p. 103.

Within the nervous system, large portions of the cerebral cortex, as well as the thalamus, the basal ganglia, and the cerebellum, all feed information to the spinal cord, the way station en route to the execution of action.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, Gardner adds this tantalizing observation:

Paradoxically, whereas the cortex serves as the "highest" center in most forms of human activity, it is the relatively lowly basal ganglia and the cerebellum that contain the most abstract and complex forms of "representation of movements"; the motor complex is more directly tied to the spinal cord and the actual execution of specific muscular movements.<sup>8</sup>

All of this simply serves to illustrate what I mean by saying "the body thinks." What a performance hermeneutics does is to think with the fullness of the body, of which the brain is an integral part.

### **Performance Hermeneutics and the Performing Arts**

A performance hermeneutics is derived from the work of performing artists, more specifically that of theater and acting. Of particular relevance to performance hermeneutics are the problem-solving tactics employed in rehearsals by theater performers and stage actors, particularly as they come out of the European and North American theater tradition. There is nothing magical, mystical, esoteric or earth-shatteringly novel about these tactics. What is useful about them is the manner in which they take the embodiedness of the performer seriously and the way in which the subjectivity of the performer is central to the interpretive process. In addition, the collaborative process which is characteristic of rehearsal and performance is essential to a performance hermeneutics.

One of the central questions which governs the exploratory phase of a play rehearsal is "What if." In improvisationally-based rehearsals, the actors are given a scenario, which is a bare outline of characters and situation. The actors then create a scene and story on the spot, *de novo*, as it were. Then a director or "outside eye" may then ask them a series of "what if" questions, such as "What if you were to play it this way," or "what if you were to use this intention," or "What if this were your past relationship," etc. The scene is then played and replayed and replayed again until the various possible or relevant "What if" questions are exhausted. Asking "What if" questions sets up a situation in which a scene or problem or phenomenon is scrutinized from several vantage points, much like viewing a precious gem from the standpoint of all its various facets.

The "What if" question is ontogenetically related to the young child's "Let's pretend" in that it involves an imaginative leap into playing with possibilities, and then bringing those possibilities into some form of actualization. The imagination constructs a virtual world, and the act of pretending or improvising in rehearsal serves to place the body of the performer in that virtual world, causing that which is virtual to become actual, or nearly actual, or at least actual during the timeframe of the improvisation. This, of course, is how any performance, theatrical and otherwise, functions: by creating a virtual world or landscape, placing the bodies of performers and audience members within that world, and then returning performers and audience to the world from which they came. Always, however, the landscape to which one returns is not entirely the same, because the memory of the landscape or world visited in performance impinges upon consciousness, and reminds one of the ease with which the imagination slips between worlds.

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<sup>7</sup> Gardner, *ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

### Imagination and Political Action

In rehearsals and performance, the performer works with the imagination in its fully embodied form. Performance can be thus thought of as embodied imagination, and the body itself is the vehicle of movement between worlds, virtual and actual. It is this very process of moving between virtual and actual worlds that provides for the possibility of transformative and revolutionary change personally and socially. Once a person experiences in their body another way of being or another world, that memory lingers somatically and can provide the impetus to bring into being and into actuality a world different from the one presently inhabited. Randy Martin, in his book, *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self*, makes connections between the performative body and the politically engaged body:

I contend that consciousness, while undeniably critical, is not enough to move people into the political arena. There is a political heart, more than that, a political body, that must be conjoined with mind to turn social arrest to unrest and move people to the center stage of history. It has been the neglect of this body that has made worldly drama so frightening and kept people in the role of spectator rather than political actor.<sup>9</sup>

It is this aspect of performance that Martin, himself a dancer, finds problematic: that society has become dichotomized between performers/actors and spectators. He draws the parallel with the split between mind and body, and suggests the political consequences of such a division:

Spectator and actor are parts played by some more familiar characters, mind and body. The division between the former two as roles is the split between the latter two as a social organization of our being. This schism between mind and body is social in its origins. The body fails to become the key to political activity, not because it is inherently more suited to oppose domination but because that domination is, above all, a control of mind.... Within our society, the mind is the thing that watches but also that which is watched. The body neither sees nor is seen. It has become the action itself. As with the actor on the stage, the body, as a site of resistance, exists only in performance.<sup>10</sup>

The process of performing moves a person from the role of spectator into the role of actor, speaking aesthetically as well as politically. The experience of finding one's body in a different set of relationships and in a different imaginative and cognitive landscape provides a powerful impetus for acting politically as well as aesthetically.

The medium of the performing arts is the human body itself. This body is not poised to receive meanings, as is the reader, but to produce physical expressions. It does not lie passive as an object but has the capacity to act.... The study of dance and theater is the study of how a particular group of people overcome stage fright, how the distance between spectator and actor is traversed, and, ultimately, how a world of meanings becomes a world of desire.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Randy Martin, *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self*, (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Performance hermeneutics operates with this understanding of the power of the embodied imagination to engage people fully in such a way as to affect changes personally and socially. But because as a society we are not used to this function of hermeneutics, it is necessary to make this link explicit.

### **Performance Midrash: An Example of a Performance Hermeneutic**

So, how does a performance hermeneutic operate, how does it utilize performance and rehearsal techniques, and how does it make explicit the connection between the performed world and the lived world? The best way to answer these questions is to give a concrete example of a performance Midrash seminar I recently led at the Evangelisches Studienwerk at Villigst, Germany. I refer to this as Performance Midrash in honor of the Jewish hermeneutic tradition of Midrash in which a story, usually Biblical, is interpreted by means of homily and exegesis, often in the form of other stories which expound upon the particular text being interpreted.<sup>12</sup>

The seminar consisted of seven participants and myself. Of the participants, one was North American, the others German. Two were pastors serving churches, and the others were theological students at various points in their programs. Of the seven one was male and the rest were female. The design of the class was to explore a particular biblical passage using a performance hermeneutics over a period of several days, in two daily three-hour sessions, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

The morning sessions each began with a period of body warm-up and movement exercises derived from the Integral Transformative Practice Kata designed by George Leonard and Michael Murphy in their book, *The Life We Are Given*.<sup>13</sup> This served to awaken their bodies and to sink their consciousness fully in their bodies. We then turned our attention to the particular biblical text we had chosen to investigate, exegete and darash. The text was Genesis 16:1-6, the story of Hagar and Sarai, the birth of Ishmael, and Hagar's flight into the desert.

The passage was read in German and English, since we had a bilingual class, with varying language proficiencies being represented. Then the story was retold by the group, and there was some discussion about the various translations. The next step was to list all the various feelings that members of the group perceived and detected in the story. We then proceeded with improvisatory work aimed at playing out those feelings along with the story line. The story was broken into "french scenes," or scenes involving a certain set of characters. When a character exits or a new character enters the scene, it is a different "french scene." For each scene, we listed the various feelings perceived, and then asked the question, "What do these feelings look like?" People then moved about the space making sounds, vocalizing pertinent lines, making bodily gestures and displaying various bodily attitudes and representations of emotions. Then the group made sculptures of the feelings by standing in relationship with other members of the group. I then went around and asked each person what feeling they were portraying and then had them interact with other members of the group, all the while still acting as the feeling they had chosen to portray. They could use lines from the text or whatever they felt arise for them out of their portrayal. We then discussed whatever insights people had concerning the text. This process was repeated for each scene of the biblical story.

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<sup>12</sup> For a thorough bibliography of Midrash, see the Hebrew Union College Midrash Bibliography website at <http://www.huc.edu/midrash/>. Accessed January 4, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> George Leonard and Michael Murphy, *The Life We Are Given: A Long-Term Program for Realizing the Potential of Body, Mind, Heart and Soul*, (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam Books, 1995).

The story of Hagar and Sarai is problematic on many levels, and has been the source of probing analysis by various feminist scholars. Our group found it no less problematic after working at this first level of improvisation with the feeling level of the story. When faced with enacting the story and probing the emotions, feelings, motivations and intentions of the characters, as any actor does in the theater, it became clear to the group that the story of Hagar and Sarai left much out. For instance, Hagar is portrayed as being relatively passive in the face of the abuse she receives from Sarai, and again as she is told by the angel in the desert to return to Sarai. Several participants expressed objections concerning the angel telling Hagar to return and submit to Sarai.

In order to delve even deeper, we continued our improvisational work again, looking at different angles of the conversation between the angel and Hagar. For example, at one point, the group was split in two, with three people playing Hagar (together) and four people playing the angel. The groups were each given the task to decide what feelings they would play from within their character, and how they would relate to the other group, say, as individuals or as a group. In addition, the angel group was given the task of physically moving the Hagar group from one location to another. Interesting things arose out of this improvisation. The Hagar group sat huddled together with arms interlinked. The angel group came over with arms gently outstretched, but then had to sit down at the same level as Hagar. A long negotiation ensued. What happened in these improvisations was that Hagar was given a voice - the voice which is denied her or is hidden in the text.

The next phase of the work was to retell the story from a variety of vantage points. In the first retelling exercise, the group was split three ways. Three people replayed the story very close to the Biblical text. Two were allowed to interrupt the story at any point, make comments, play the scene differently, or whatever, utilizing insights from the preceding improvisations. Two people sat outside the performance space and observed, in order to offer a final retelling. In the discussion following this exercise, the two people who followed the biblical story closely expressed dissatisfaction with their task, and the observers offered some additional alternatives to the scenes portrayed by the other two groups.

The final session of the class devoted to Hagar and Sarai was spent retelling the story from the viewpoints of each of the characters, as well as a final grand retelling. Two people portrayed Sarai, one person portrayed Abram, two portrayed Hagar and two portrayed the angel. Each group was allowed to present the story in any way they wished. For example, the two people portraying Sarai sat back to back and each gave voice to different internal conversations within Sarai. The person portraying Abram showed his emotion and anger. The Hagar pair traded roles, one being the storyteller while the other pantomimed the story being told. The angel group broke up into an angel in charge and a junior angel, who was given the task of talking with Hagar. It brought a humorous element to the story. What emerged most clearly in these sessions was the element of performed midrash. The collections of midrash and legends of the Jews begin in the biblical story and proceed to spin out humorous and serious stories and elaborations, often providing dialogue where none exists in the biblical text. Precisely the same thing occurred through the act of performance in this workshop.

The final retelling returned the group to the presumed oral character of the stories, told supposedly around campfires, or at feasts and celebrations. We all sat in a circle, a story-telling circle. I began to retell the story as if we were at a campfire and someone asked me, "Tell us again the story about Hagar and Sarai." As I told the story, I would ask questions of people, or ask them to fill in the details, or they would interrupt and jump in the middle of the story and retell a section, enact it and return to the circle. If others in the group disagreed with the telling, or had more to tell, they

would jump in and do their enactment. A variety of interpretations and perspectives were given voice, and new ideas and understandings arose even in this session.

In the discussion following the final retelling, it was agreed that most of our work in the preceding sessions had been brought together successfully in the storytelling circle, and that even new insights were achieved. Everything we had done had found a place within our bodies' memories. Some indicated that it was okay with them that they were still dissatisfied with this story, and that it was good to leave this story unresolved. We had probed its injustices, its themes of abuse, its problems and untold stories. We had given voice to the voiceless, and had enacted, in essence, a hermeneutics of suspicion.

### **Concluding Observations**

In this paper, I have argued for the place of a performance hermeneutics in returning subjectivity to the body in the process of interpretation. I have argued that a performance hermeneutics is interdisciplinary not only because it moves between academic and aesthetic disciplines, but because it requires for its practitioners to be interdisciplined themselves: to act out of their integrity as embodied persons. This interdisciplining is reflected in the fact that the body in its entirety thinks. In interpreting a text, a performance hermeneutics works with this integrity by placing the bodies of performer-interpreters within the imaginal landscape of the text being interpreted and allowing them to "play" with the text in order to examine the text from various vantage points.

I then gave a particular example of a performance hermeneutic in action, relating how a performance midrash was used with a group of people in Germany as the group interpreted the story in Genesis 16:1-16 of Sarai and Hagar. The performance hermeneutic process used by the group resulted in a form of midrash in which the story was retold in such a way that agency and subjectivity were returned to those dispossessed in the text (such as Hagar). Thus, a hermeneutics of suspicion was practiced bodily, as were a feminist and liberationist analysis. Yet, these were never a part of the specific agenda of the class. Rather, they arose in the process of performing the text.

From this, I offer the following additional conclusions concerning a performance hermeneutic. The process of embodying a text changes the nature of our relationship with that text, and the act of embodying the text in the collaboration of improvisatory performance removes any single experience from the center of interpretation. Interpretation becomes the province of the community, and hegemonies of interpretation can be challenged. A performance hermeneutic can be used in a variety of settings with a variety of adaptations, and it does not require sophistication with hermeneutical theory, biblical or literary criticism, nor does it even require performance experience. Rather, it takes advantage of the human propensity to pretend, to imagine and to play. At the same time, while playing, the embodied person gains powerful insights - insights which are powerfully experienced, and powerfully stored within the body's reservoir of memory. From that reservoir transformation of self and society is possible.