

Carver, M. Heather, and Elaine J. Lawless. *Troubling Violence: A Performance Project*. Jackson, MS: U P of Mississippi, 2009. \$50.00 (hardcover)

Carver and Lawless' text focuses on the dynamic work of the Troubling Violence Performance Project, a performance troupe they formed in reaction to Lawless' gathering of the narratives of victims of domestic violence. This powerful book explores the interdisciplinary partnership of Carver and Lawless (Carver is a performance studies scholar and Lawless hails from folklore studies) and its effects on performing, ethnography, writing, and, most importantly, the lives of women affected by domestic violence. The writing of the book is modeled on a theatrical performance (there is a "Pre-show" chapter, along with Acts I and II) and is highly readable because of the performative, nonlinear narrative that follows the creation, experiences, and reflexivity about the troupe's work. As the authors acknowledge, "to tell the story of the troupe in linear fashion would be to deny the work's multiple and circular patterns" (4). In this spirit, I am inclined to move through the text thematically.

The authors utilized performative writing throughout the text, and relied heavily on the essays compiled in *The Green Window* collection to build a justification for it. Although Carver and Lawless are adding no new theoretical moments to the conversation they construct between *The Green Window's* authors, they offer a strong example of the viability of performative writing. Pulling it into conversation with contemporary ethnographic practices within the field, they mark interdisciplinary chasms; Lawless' critique is especially compelling. In response to a prominent communication ethnographic text, as she explains her unease:

but to even offer a *brief* history of the "ethnography of communication" and not mention sociolinguistics and anthropological and folklore studies that have emerged in full force over the past thirty-plus years seems to me to be a blatant example of the isolation of academic disciplines. (23)

Their critique of the isolationist behavior of scholars within communication is a point well taken. Carver and Lawless mark the crisis of representation as a turning point for the beginning of academic "[m]ine is better than yours!" insularity that is dominant within the discipline (61). Valuable in its call for continued progress and its demonstration of that progress in its own pages, *Troubling Violence* advocates a

re-imagination of a reflexive interdisciplinarity that relies on the work of performance studies and folklore scholars.

Along with an engagement with performative writing, Carver and Lawless also meticulously detail the process of creating the staged readings of the narratives. Anyone that has collaborated on a performance project will be reminded of the push-and-pull of the creative process that is detailed in the book. Carver, the more experienced performer, collected and edited the narratives in Lawless' previous work *Escaping Violence*. The authors struggle with an understanding of space and audience in relationship to the (at times) difficult-to-hear stories. The performers rise "out of the audience to tell her story and then returns to her seat when she finishes, both literally and figuratively being the 'girl next door'" (27). Carver and Lawless mark their performances in relationship to Conquergood's dialogical performances ("Performance Studies", "Rethinking Ethnography") in that they seek to "honor the women who trusted us with their stories" (68). However, the framing of the performance script would have benefited from a more substantial understanding of the history from which that type of audience/space relationship arose. After the detailed understanding of their performative writing roots, I was left wondering where in the performance spectrum this staging stood. Considering the authors' concerns with audience/space, it would have been especially helpful to see the connections with other types of theater, for example, playback theater as explored by Park-Fuller.

Although there are more thematic working parts within *Troubling Violence*, the most compelling is that of violence itself. Reading the authors' struggles with the performance process, the difficult conversations, the tough audiences, and their own personal ghosts kept me turning page after page. I was mesmerized by the strength of Carver and Lawless, and felt myself following them as the troupe grew and shifted. I cannot give away the most compelling moments of the troupe's journey but those moments were what made the text so engaging. The performative writing, coupled with those situations, pulled me into those challenges. In discussing their activist work to end violence against women, the authors are always quick to point out the limits of academia as a reason for creating the troupe and moving into other spaces (29). Their experiences in those spaces move the authors toward one of the most compelling moments of the text. Recounting the violence in her life, and the voices of other women affected by violence Lawless explains:

[i]t no longer suffices to talk about "domestic violence," because this violence in our midst is insidious and is occurring in the halls of our high schools, even junior high, when boys become excessively jealous, directing their girlfriends about whom they can hang out with, have lunch with, drive in cars with, be friends with, calling or texting them hundreds of times a day, checking on where they are and who they are with. (127)

Ending her description with, "[w]e should be worried. We should be very worried," (127), I am ready to pick up a voice recorder and begin looking to mark the narratives of women affected by violence. And this is the most powerful trace left by

*Troubling Violence*, the strength of the narrative compels the reader to reflexively engage her own life.

Considering the implicit call, this book would be a way to bring performance into the gender and communication undergraduate class as a supplementary text. Read in connection to theories of gender construction, *Troubling Violence* offers the lived experiences of women who are affected by how we construct masculinity and femininity. *Troubling Violence* would also serve well as a model for collaborative performance projects in an undergraduate performance studies classroom if buttressed by more complete understanding of performance studies. And finally, as those working within the field, it would benefit each of us to see how interdisciplinarity can enhance our scholarship and the way we move in the world.

## References

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