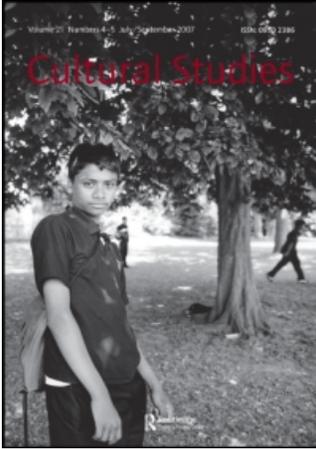


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## DWIGHT CONQUERGOOD, POLITICAL ECONOMY, PERFORMANCE STUDIES

At 10:00 a.m. on 16 August 1988, Bao Xing, a Hmong woman from Laos, stepped out the back door of her top-floor Big Red apartment and the rotting porch collapsed beneath her feet. All summer long I had swept away slivers of wood that had fallen from the Xiong's decrepit porch onto mine, one floor below. Six households were intimately affected by Bao Xing's calamity, because we shared the same front entrance and stairwell, and our respective back porches were structurally interlocked within a shaky wooden framework of open landings and sagging staircases that clung precariously to the red-brick exterior of the Chicago tenement. The six households included two Hmong, one Mexican, one Puerto Rican, one Mexican-Puerto Rican, and myself, a White male ethnographer from Northwestern University. Ethnically our wing represented much of the rest of Big Red, where other first-generation Hmong, Mexican, and Puerto Rican families were joined by refugees and migrants from Cambodia, Iraq, Lebanon, and Poland, as well as an elderly Jew and Appalachians and African Americans who had been displaced from gentrifying neighborhoods of the city, such as Uptown. Big Red mirrored the global forces of displacement and migration that had grouped such ethnically diverse working-class residents in one dilapidated building.

(Conquergood 1992)

I first read this ethnographic vignette, and the now-famous piece it introduced, 'Life In Big Red', in 1992, when the anthology in which it appeared was published. I had met Dwight at a small academic gathering in 1991, right after I arrived at Northwestern. People had been telling me about his amazing urban ethnography, that he had moved into a very poor, multi-ethnic neighborhood of Chicago, Albany Park, had lived for years in an absentee-landlord tenement building, suffering the conditions and the crime with his multi-racial, multinational neighbors, sharing all his possessions and resources. I heard that he had done extraordinary analysis of the overarching political economy of Chicago urban life and of the lives of those further impoverished by the actions of private capital, the federal government and the city. So I asked the reserved, soft-spoken man to let me see the in-press text. He agreed, but never sent it,

the first frustrating instance I was to experience of his overwrought modesty about his accomplishments.

But once I got my hands on 'Life in Big Red', I read it with the kind of emotional reaction people usually only have to great music – Dwight's prose was so lyrical, his analysis so thorough and hard-edged. I phoned him immediately, we spoke for two hours, and it was, as Humphrey Bogart said in another context, the beginning of a beautiful friendship. And collegueship: over the next twelve years, until his death in 2004, Dwight and I were to share teaching plans, committee work, academic gossip, and most importantly, the care and nurturing of literally dozens of graduate students across his and my departments of Performance Studies and Anthropology.

And more. At around the midpoint of this period, due to his deep commitment to the Albany Park neighborhood, and particularly the poor and often gang-member youth with whom he worked, Dwight became involved with the progressive, multi-racial and multinational – and now prize-winning – Albany Park Theater Project (APTP). APTP, founded by Laura Wiley and David Feiner, is open to any Albany Park teenager, without auditions, and collaboratively develops performances – including music and dance – based on the actual life narratives of the kids, their families and their neighbors. Dwight was an enthusiast, a natural 'green room' type, as I used to tease him, but his enthusiasm for APTP was of another order. He lavishly contributed money and time to the group, and dragged his friends along to performances – after which they were hooked, and went on their own.

As Dwight's commitment to APTP grew, he became close friends with Laura and David, began giving special workshops on particular topics for the kids, befriended individuals, and ended up writing college recommendation letters for them and even driving them to and from the nearer of the spectacular range of good schools to which these first-generation higher education students gained admittance and scholarships. But APTP is first and foremost a theater company, and Dwight's enthusiasm first developed, I believe, because of the progressive nature of the performances.

The original themes and stories arose from the players' own lives, and included alcoholism, wife battery, child sexual abuse, mental disorders and suicide, homelessness and doubling-up, war, refugee camps, illegal status – as well as love and senses of belonging of every sort, political organizing, religious commitment, spontaneous joy and general adolescent exuberance. But such themes could be and often have been treated as though they arise in human life *ex nihilo*, as if they have no larger context, as if their sources are purely psychological or characterological. Instead, the APTP method is to develop themes and narrative lines, then to research the contexts of the lives and experiences they dramatize – whether specific countries' economic, political, social histories, or the actualities of migrant day laborers' lives in Chicago. I know that Dwight happily helped with this process, and I have been

amused to be drawn in as well – once receiving an urgent email from David asking about the exact politics of a particular Bolivian leftist political party. The result, in performance, has been the powerful melding of the personal and the political, the careful contextualization of explosive experiences and emotions. What APTP performances have done, I think, at their best, is to theatricalize culture and political economy.

What do I mean by this? ‘Political economy’ is the eighteenth-century term used to describe the whole-society but economically-based analytic writings of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, James Mill, and others. Marx so used the label, and famously envisioned his work turning political economy on its head. He meant that in the sense that the classic political economists assumed a priori that capital pre-existed labor—that societies sprung into being whole, with some owning land and/or other wealth, while others owned only their ability to work. Instead, he and other socialists assumed that over the course of human history, innately social humans cooperating with one another and acting on the environment in order to maintain and reproduce themselves had created various kinds of economies, with varying levels of private property and wealth, of power and powerlessness.

Nowadays the term ‘political economy’ refers, ironically, to a broad modern-day Marxist analysis that includes the analysis of shifting economies, politics, and states and other institutions. Many scholars add adjectives to indicate the development of interdisciplinary Marxist thought beyond the mid-century ahistorical economic reductionism with which many identify it – ‘historical political economy’ or ‘culture and political economy’ (di Leonardo 1991, 1998, Lancaster and di Leonardo 1997) The late anthropologist William Roseberry articulated the ‘culture and political economy’ vision well: it attempts to ‘place culture in time, to see a constant interplay between experience and meaning in a context in which both experience and meaning are shaped by inequality and domination’, and to understand ‘the emergence of particular peoples at the conjunction of local and global histories, to place local populations in the larger currents of world history’ (Roseberry 1990, p. 49).

This difficult, many-balls-in-the-air kind of cultural and economic analysis is precisely what Dwight’s magnificent work – his articles, his films, his teaching – so well instantiated. ‘Life in Big Red’, for example, simultaneously analyzes the global, national and local political-economic forces that brought impoverished people from elsewhere in Chicago and from the global South to one down-at-the heels neighborhood, how they make ends meet, how they relate to one another and inhabit space, and how they and others in Albany Park apprehend their presence and its meanings. Dwight was able to move seamlessly between the precise demographic and property history of Albany Park and Chicago (replete with statistics), and a deep ethnographic accounting of the quotidian insults experienced by Big Red residents:

While standing in line at the Perry Drugstore checkout line, one of my neighbors gave me an updated report on her finger, which had been bitten by a rat as she slept in Big Red. . . . The cashier, a white woman in her late fifties, treated my neighbor very curtly at the checkout. Before the Assyrian woman was out of earshot . . . she began talking to the neighboring cashier, also an older white woman . . .

Cashier 1: Can you believe it? If my father were alive to see what's happened in the neighborhood!

Cashier 2: I know. Don't get upset . . . They're not worth it. They're trash.

(Conquergood 1992, pp. 127–128)

*Heart Broken in Half*, Dwight's ethnographic film on Albany Park, also gives the viewer an excellent sense of contrasting senses of neighborhood, illuminating in particular what he labeled the local 'rhetoric of transgression and redevelopment' – the ways in which those whose interests lie with urban growth politics, of which gentrification is the most obvious contemporary example, discursively frame their realities (Conquergood and Siegel 1990). But in this film he also delves deeply into the life-worlds of kids who are or were members of the local Latin Kings gang. Dwight became so 'tight', in their parlance, with these kids that we see them taking him (a heart-breakingly young, healthy Dwight) to their primary graffiti sites, many of them memorializing murdered comrades, and explaining to him exactly the meanings of each symbol and their arrangements together. Dwight's 1997 piece, 'Street Literacy', simultaneously analyzes the semiotics of the practice and its political-economic context: "This outlawed literacy grotesquely mirrors and mocks the literate bureaucracy that administers licenses, receipts, badges, diplomas, ordinances, arrest warrants, green cards, and other deeds of power and possession" (1997, p. 355).

Many know how deeply committed Dwight was to the poor and disenfranchised, personally giving up time and money to aid individuals and families to navigate bureaucracy, to get into and stay in school, to find jobs and housing – even to detox from heroin addiction. But Dwight was also very politically active on a broader scale, and specifically in the light of his culture and political economy vision. Because of his expertise on gang youth, he lobbied and testified locally against loitering laws that essentially made it illegal to be young and of color in public. But Dwight's national work drew from his full understanding of the expanded criminalization of the poor and non-White in our neo-liberal era: he actively wrote, taught, and demonstrated against the death penalty, the stark endpoint of that criminalization process. His prize-winning 2002 essay, 'Lethal Theater: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty', is a tour-de-force analysis of both the profound unfairness and cruelty of the act, and of its larger semiotic role in American life (Conquergood

2002). Dwight also taught for years in the summer 'death penalty college' for public defenders, and would drive long distances to stand in vigil outside prisons during to countdown to killing. He would come back and report, 'It was me and the nuns, Micaela'.

My personal take, then, on the work that Dwight leaves us, on the making of his legacy, is the further development of this culture and political economy vision in Performance Studies, in anthropology, in our politics, in our lives. So doing will involve his level of hard work, of commitment. But it especially involves his consistent and fearless ability to see human lives broadly, their connections through the webs of political economy to one another. As E.M. Forster reminded us, Only Connect.

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