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## Field Notes and Reading Notes

### Studying with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in the 1990s

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■ **ABSTRACT:** In this article, I reflect on the experience of attending Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's class *Performance Studies Issues and Methods* at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in the 1990s. Recalling the classes and field trips to events and sites in New York City, and the emphasis that she placed on reading texts and taking field notes, I consider the lessons I learned for performance studies, anthropology, and museums, and also for teaching, research, and scholarship in general. Why did this practice of taking notes from the field, from books in particular, and the note-taking practice in general, play such a central role in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's teaching? The steady and consistent focus both on theory and on the observation of social practices was a means of opening up new spaces for theoretical analysis or for a "performed theory," to use Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's term.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, field notes, fieldwork museums, performance studies, reading, teaching

"Attend and document at least one Halloween event during the next two weeks. Take field notes on the event. You may also use video, audio, and photographic techniques."<sup>1</sup> That was one of the requirements of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's class entitled *Performance Studies Issues and Methods. Unit III: Total Performance* (H42.2617) at New York University's (NYU) Tisch School of the Arts in the 1990s (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Buckland 1997). After attending Halloween events during the week of 22 October to 31 October, students were encouraged to bring their "field notes to class" on 3 November for an assignment. In another course, entitled *Tourist Productions* (H42.1041), which took place on Thursdays from 7:00 pm to 10:00 pm during the Spring semester of 1993, students were invited to "keep a portfolio" containing "reading notes, field notes (for required and recommended activities)." Why did this practice of taking notes from the field, from books in particular, and the note-taking practice in general play such a central role in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's teaching?

One possible answer might be related to the reframing of the field of performance studies, a task that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett undertook as the chair of the Department of Performance Studies at NYU between 1981 and 1992 (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in this issue). In 1980, the Graduate Department of Drama at the university officially changed its name to the Department of Performance Studies, a change that coincided with the arrival of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who,



according to Richard Schechner, “crafted a singular department out of what had been disparate and sometimes quirky interests and practices” (1998: 359). Emphasis on observation and theory were the main tenets of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s classes. Attending events, such as Halloween, was not sufficient in and of itself: it was also necessary to document events. In other words, the challenge was combining ethnographic approaches with careful historical documentation and theoretical readings. “You will be expected to read intensively,” was the advice given to the students of the course *Museum Theatre* (H42.2320) during the Fall 2001 semester, the goal of which was “to develop a performance theory of museums.” The steady and consistent focus both on theory and on the observation of social practices was a means of opening up new spaces for theoretical analysis or for a “performed theory,” to use Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s term. As she acknowledged in an interview conducted by Diana Taylor in 2001, “the kind of performance studies that I like to practice, that I like to teach, involves the integrating of theoretical concerns with concrete observations of actual behaviour” (Taylor 2001).

Observing and reading, far from distinct procedures, were intertwined in the courses, implying a constant back-and-forth interplay between the field and the books being studied. Conducting observation is undoubtedly central for doing fieldwork; yet in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s case, the use of adjectives such as “careful” and “closely”—“careful observation of live performance” and “to look closely and concretely at actual behaviour”—presupposed a focus on concentrated attention. Along with “paying attention to what people actually do” (Taylor 2001), it was important to take notes while observing, which was also a form of drawing attention to what people were doing. As the historian of science Lorraine Daston noted:

Taking notes entails taking note—that is, riveting the attention on this or that particularity. All scientific and scholarly training whetting their curiosity for certain domains of phenomena at the expense of others. (2004: 445)

But what kinds of notes are field notes? In his classic essay, Roger Sanjek (1990) suggested identifying three categories under the rubric of “field notes”: scribbled notes, field notes proper, and field note records. Yet the reference to the field does not mean necessarily that the notes were taken during fieldwork. As Sanjek noted, “fieldnotes are ‘of’ the field, if not always written ‘in’ the field” (1990: 95). Taking notes while observing, and bringing these notes to class, seems to pertain to Sanjek’s “scribbled notes” category. These notes taken about events that were observed by students in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s classes were articulated with theoretical readings in a very specific and distinctive way. It was her goal to study events regardless of their nature: Princess Diana’s funeral, Javanese shadow plays, toy theater, street life, circuses, and popular entertainment, to mention some examples, were all equally “performances . . . or thought about as performances” (Taylor 2001).

Readings were central in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s teaching. The exhaustive bibliography referred to in the syllabi contained 170 citations “for most of the required and recommended readings” and “656 articles published in periodicals between 1989 and 1992” for the *Tourist Productions* course. This was not a mere exercise in erudition. Reading and taking notes from books were not only intermingled, they complemented the observation and the taking of notes from the field. As Daston has pointed out, taking notes “binds together the practices of observing and reading” (2004: 444). The note-taking practice was, for Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a means for developing sensorial and cognitive skills. For Daston, “in both reading and observing, note taking fortified the selective and focused exercise of attention—and closed the circle connecting

reading to observing to reading again” (2004: 445–446). Yet for Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the circle was an endless one; as she put it:

We will pay close attention to events that we actually experience. We will extrapolate issues from them, read theory through them, and explore methods for documenting, analyzing, interpreting, and writing about them. Readings will contextualize the performances we experience as well as offer models for how they might be studied. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Buckland 1997)

Theoretical readings were not merely intellectual tools providing intelligibility to observed events/performances; the latter should be understood as the basis for theory. In other words, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett believed that “performances can be a source of theory and not only a site for the use of theory” (Taylor 2001).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s emphasis on carefully and minutely distinguishing the understandings of performance, performativity, and performance studies went side by side with the extension of the very notion of performance. Watchful of every event taking place in New York City, she constantly updated and incorporated notes on current performances in the syllabus of *Performance Studies Issues and Methods. Unit IV: Diasporic Performance*. For example, on Thursday, 13 November 1997, she invited me to attend “Bring in da Noise, Bring in da Funk” at the Ambassador Theatre on Broadway, a musical revue that chronicled African American history. Students were requested to read Marshall and Jean Stearns’s *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (1968) before attending this performance; similarly, the classes taking place on 17 and 24 November 1997 were devoted to discussing this show “in its own terms and in relation to Riverdance.”

I attended Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s classes as Visiting Scholar at NYU first in 1993 and then in 1997. From the time I first met her personally in 1993 and throughout the years since, I have always been struck by her dynamic teaching and engaging public speaking. The seminars were marked by spirited, vibrant, and lively discussions with students. She had this particular gift of articulating participants’ comments and suggestions with theoretical issues; ideas spiraled in her mind while she was developing lines of argument and/or debating case studies. Though the classes were crowded and there were almost no vacant chairs, everyone had the opportunity to express their point of view. After three hours of intense and vivid debates, and in spite of the lateness of the hour, there was a feeling of excitement and of longing for the next session. She used to arrive at the seminars leaning a little bit due to the weight of her backpack containing lots of books to be circulated among the students. The main characteristics of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s writing style were also expressed in her oral performances—the use of long lists of adjectives,<sup>2</sup> the clarity of her texts free of jargon, the choice of incisive and trenchant words, and the art of combining words that apparently have no correspondence and of creating new and apparently intriguing meanings (e.g., “tourist productions” or “objects of ethnography”). The eloquence and expressiveness of her verbal communication style along with the vivid and energetic way in which she revealed arguments contributed greatly to the success of her seminars. This “artfulness of story-telling” that imbued her childhood was echoed in her later spoken presentations.<sup>3</sup>

Generous with her time and blessed with an extraordinary capacity to listen to others, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett used to end the semester with a dinner in her loft apartment in the Bowery,<sup>4</sup> which was also graced by the gentle and discreet presence of her husband, the painter Max Gimblett. Here, another facet of hers was unveiled—the extraordinary cook armed with a huge library of cookbooks. Yet, that side of her was probably not so surprising; for someone who

has worked on food in performance, on “food as a performance medium” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999), and who loves eating, cooking was the inevitable outcome.

The academy is only one of the dimensions of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s life. She has always been concerned with working in the public field, notably in museums, organizing several exhibits during her career and recently serving as Chief Curator of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. Writing about museums and working in museums were two inseparable tasks. For someone who has always emphasized the centrality of experience, *being* a tourist was as important as *studying* tourists. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s (1977) long-held passion for textiles, their history, and their materiality, is significant. Weaving requires patience, minute labor, and attention, just like writing texts and taking notes.

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## ■ NOTES

1. All course materials cited in this article from Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s classes at NYU in the 1990s, unless otherwise stated, are from my collection.
2. For one, among many other examples, of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s memorable phrases—“distinctive, unique, distinct, different, separate”—see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1997).
3. See American Folklife Center (2019).
4. It is Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s particular skill to convert each apparently mundane and trivial aspect of everyday life into a questioning. “When specifying ‘where’ in the Bowery I live, I must orient the visitor in terms of the adjoining neighbourhoods. Do I live between Riving-con and Stanton (the Lower East Side cross streets to the east of Bowery) or do I live on the Bowery at Prince (the Little Italy/Soho cross streets)? The answer depends on whether my guest is an older Jewish New Yorker or an artist from out of town” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983: 190).

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