Performance and Global Transference

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In the Winter 2000 TDR Comment, Richard Schechner cited performance as a “‘Formation of Power and Knowledge.’” This notion of performance may trouble some readers, as its normative dimension runs counter to the values of resistance and efficacy associated with many of the performances studied in TDR. But since TDR’s gesture to the normativity of performance comes from a passage I wrote not so long ago, I would like to take this opportunity to respond. The published line reads: “Performance will be to the 20th and 21st centuries what discipline was the 18th and 19th, namely, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge” (McKenzie 2001:176).

While it is important to theorize the impact of globalization on cultural performance and to study how such performances may resist this impact, it is also crucial to recognize cultural performances’ contribution to contemporary processes of globalization. We can outline three eras of globalization: mercantilism (roughly the 16th and 17th centuries); colonialism (the 18th and 19th centuries); and postcolonialism (fully emerging in the 20th century). Malcolm Waters argues that at the forefront of each era are, respectively: economics (the establishment of global trade routes and trading companies); geopolitics (the creation of nation-states and colonial empires); and lastly and perhaps surprisingly, culture (the exchange and mixing of cultural traditions such as art and religion) (1995).

Obviously, it’s not that economics and geopolitics aren’t crucial to globalization today—quite the contrary—but cultural transference has become the sine qua non of contemporary business and politics. What else to think when the financial struggles of Chrysler-Daimler-Benz are attributed to cultural incompatibility? Or when one of the most visible signs of Korean rapprochement is the media image of two athletes—one from the North, one from the South—carrying a common flag at the Sydney Olympics? Or, more generally, when corporations and governments around the world officially embrace cultural diversity?

I agree with Craig Latrell (2000) who writes in the same TDR issue that “one way” transfer models are insufficient and that much more supple modes of analysis are needed, yet I wonder whether “two way” transference offers the best alternative, for as the TDR Comment suggests, cultural appropriation also occurs between non-Western cultures. And given the role that media
technologies (e.g., film, television, CDs, the Internet) play in accelerating the transmission of cultural productions worldwide, perhaps we need to think about distributed transference (with exaggerated psychoanalytic resonance): not a system with two poles (West/non-West, nor even self/other) but a non-linear network with a nonfinite number of nodes, each always already open to expropriation.

Perhaps, too, in addition to criticizing globalization, we might also theorize some of its positive aspects: the emergence of universal human rights, the establishment of the World Court, annual conferences on global warming and the AIDS crisis, organizations such as Doctors without Borders and, yes, Performance Studies international—all of these are also part of contemporary globalization, widely conceived.

For better or worse, I have come to think that we are entering an age of global performance. We can understand performance as a stratum of power/knowledge by extrapolating from Foucault’s well-known genealogy of discipline. While disciplinary mechanisms produce unified subjects through a series of institutions (school, factory, prison, hospital), each with its own discrete archive of statements and practices, performative power blurs the borders of social institutions by connecting and sharing digital archives. Financial information, criminal records, medical files, and school transcripts once stored in separate metal file cabinets are now being uploaded to silicon databases and electronically networked.

Bodies that used to pass neatly through a linear sequence of power mechanisms are learning to switch rapidly between conflicting evaluative grids; the resulting subjects tend to be fractured, multiple, and/or hybrid. In the U.S. workplace, for instance, we witness the rise of multitasking; in schools, attention deficit disorders; and in everyday life, “culture-surfing.”

From a wider historical perspective: while discipline functioned as the power matrix of the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, liberal capitalism, and European colonialism, performance currently operates as the matrix of post-Enlightenment, the information revolution, neoliberal capitalism, and postcolonialism. But let me stress that performative power/knowledge is really just coming in over the horizon; discipline wasn’t built in a day, nor has the performance stratum fully installed itself.

But why call this emergent formation of power/knowledge “performance”? While the intellectual history of cultural performance has received critical attention (Marvin Carlson’s Performance: A Critical Introduction [1996] remains the most comprehensive), cultural scholars remain largely unfamiliar with several other paradigms of performance research, including those of technological and organizational performance.

For example, while artists and cultural critics have stressed the social efficacy of performance, engineers and computer scientists have focused on the effectiveness of “high performance technical systems,” and managers have studied and sought to improve the efficiency of “peak performance organizations.” “Performance reviews” are among the most routine of normative forces in the contemporary workplace, and today “performance” is used to sell every kind of product in the marketplace, from carpets to computers to cosmetics.

Like performance studies, technological and organizational paradigms of performance have emerged over the last half-century, and they all entail very different semantic ranges and sites of pragmatic installation. Performance thus extends far beyond cultural production, with discourses and practices of performance extending from leisure to labor to infrastructures and beyond.

The extraordinary reach of performative power was recognized by Herbert Marcuse as far back as 1941, and in 1955 he coined the term “performance prin-
ciple” to name the reality principle of postindustrial societies. Yet another performance genealogy opens here, one whose philosophical tracks run from Marcuse’s performance principle and Austin’s “performative” to Lyotard’s “performativity,” Derrida’s “performative,” and Butler’s “punitive performatives.”

It is therefore through multiple genealogies—cultural, organizational, technological, philosophical—that we may understand performance as a formation of power and knowledge and even speculate that the “New World Order” constitutes an age of global performance, an age marked by multiculturalism, multimedia, and multinational corporations.

While the TDR Comment suggests that performative power results from the integration of cultural, technological, and organizational performances, it’s more accurate to say that this power operates through the embedded and ongoing competition among these different performances. In an age of global performance, the integration of diversity is being supplemented by the diversification of integration—in short, it may be not enough to champion difference over sameness, since difference can be put to normative as well as mutational ends. Such possibilities challenge us to experiment with our responsibility, our ability to respond to different performances, different differences, especially when these have worldwide implications.

References

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