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## TDR Comment

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### Performance As a “Formation of Power and Knowledge”

In this issue of *TDR*, Craig Latrell argues for a more complicated, nuanced response to intercultural borrowings—on both sides of these exchanges. Latrell notes that “[...]interculturalism is portrayed as something that can only be ‘explained’ by inequities of power between East and West [or North and South].” And he asks:

Why should we assume that intercultural transfer is primarily a politically based, one-way phenomenon—a cultural monologue rather than a dialogue? [...] Why not start with the assumption that other cultures are *not* just passive receivers of Western ideas and images, but active manipulators of such influences, and that intercultural borrowing is not simply a one-way process, but something far more interestingly dialogic.

Good observation, good questions.

To what degree are power imbalances in the process of being rectified? And do power balances reflect a parallel cultural imbalance of trade? Do artists have to pay as much attention these days as before to whom they borrow from, what use they make of the arts and rituals of other cultures, and how individual works might exacerbate or ease the imbalances? Ought there be different rules governing borrowings depending on whether one is a Western or non-Western artist? And what do these categories—“Western,” “non-Western”—mean in today’s globalized world?

There is a triple whammy of concerns. First, Western artists use non-Western performances as materials from which to make their own “original,” “innovative,” “avantgarde” works, which then in turn affect the world arts market, both economically and conceptually. In other words, the old colonial cycle: raw material from the colony at a cheap price, manufactured items back to the colony at a high price. Second, building on the colonial cycle, will Western arts—the “finished products”—appear so alluring that they are everywhere emulated, accepted as the standard of excellence and accomplishment? Third, and this goes beyond the arts, will sheer economic power result in the whole world becoming McDisney in taste, Microsoft in digitization, Mega-Merger in corporate structure, Nike in manufacturing, and Benetton in feel-good cover-up? Given the triple whammy, one can readily understand why Iranian clerics regard the U.S.A. as the Great Satan.

But the above argument is actually too simple. A core part of the complication is that West no longer equals West, South no longer equals South, East no longer equals East. Globalization is not only a system of dominance, it is a system of dissolving boundaries and mixing up populations. Significant pockets of “West” exist everywhere; and equally significant cultural presences of “non-West” exist in the West, especially in the great metropolises. Although most of the heat has been applied to white Western artists such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Philip Glass, Paul Simon, and so on, what ought one say to artists of color who are also Western? Can Bill T. Jones do what Mnouchkine cannot? Is Suzan Lori-Parks absolved from restrictions binding Brook? What about Guillermo Gómez-Peña whose work depends upon borrowing, parodic distortion, and making art in the interstices separating/joining Mexican, gringo, and Hispanic cultures?

And when we move offshore, the situation gets even more complex. What of artists hooked into various global circuits but residing in São Paulo, Mumbai, Johannesburg, Jakarta...and many elsewhere? To take but one example: Japan is culturally “Japan” at one level, but also very much part of the West, or the emergent “global culture” (if you prefer that term) at other levels—and I don’t mean just economically. In Japan, alongside traditional performing arts such as *kabuki*, *noh*, and *bunraku* exists a thriving generations-old avantgarde (*engura*, or underground theatre), a more than century old modern theatre (*shingeki*), and a tradition of combining the old, new, Western, Japanese—as in the work of Suzuki Tadashi, Min Tanaka, Ohno Kazuo (and other *butoh* performers), and Kawamura Takeshi (see T165, a special issue on Japanese performance).

Furthermore, maybe the cliché that the world is becoming Americanized (or globalized) is premature. As is the death of the nation-state or alliances of nation-states. I suspect that on the economic, political, and cultural fronts we have not heard the last of China, Russia, India, or Brazil as counterweights to U.S. hegemony. As with Japan, there are ways of taking and then turning the tables. Russia may appear supine at present, China just getting its chops, and Brazil and India still regarded as “developing.” But these four entities are each potentially comparable to the U.S.A. And what would happen if two or more of them were to team up?

Another cliché worth challenging is that there is such a thing as cultural purity. Historical research demonstrates that each and every performing art is actually a hybrid. Venerable *noh* drama emerged as a courtly refinement of farcical “monkey dances,” rice harvesting festivities, and Shinto and Buddhist beliefs and rituals. Buddhism itself was introduced to Japan from China and into China from India. And in India, Buddhist thought and practices synthesized existing tendencies. But at each stage of the development of any of these practices, innovation also occurred. Innovation took place on several levels simultaneously. That is, as the contribution of gifted individuals and as the result of collective “cultural” influences.

But time erases the seams, the sources, the sense of something being “foreign.” It takes only a few generations, for performances to “belong here,” to become typical or representative. One could, I suppose, find a few cultures that are relatively isolated, say those of the interior of Australia before the coming of the European settlers. But even here, I suspect, a careful examination of linguistic and performance evidence would show influences trading in from the coast where Australian cultures encountered Indonesians, Polynesians, and Micronesians.

The point I am driving at, and it is one in keeping with Latrell’s, is that cultural purity is itself a construction, and a dangerous one at that. Dangerous because in its extreme form it abets various kinds of racism, jingoism, and xe-

nophobia. The “natural” practice of humankind is individual and cultural promiscuity. Ironically, this promiscuity leads to an always-changing diversity.

None of this, however, ends the question of power imbalance. Those who will want to attack me will say that I am indifferent to McDisney and the unfettered operation of the “free market” (free only to those with money, electronic mobility, and the knowledge of how to use that money and mobility). I am not indifferent to these excesses and distortions. Nor am I happy that at present capitalism appears to be the only economic-social system available. But neither am I blind to the failure of Soviet socialism, the limitations of whatever you want to call the Chinese system, and the stresses on European social democracy.

If alternatives to what we have had and what we are at present being offered are to be developed, it seems to me that the boldest kinds of experimenting in the arts are called for. Experiments that challenge all kinds of separations. This is what is implied in Jon McKenzie’s important new book, *Perform Or Else*. McKenzie asserts that “*Performance will be to the 20th and 21st centuries what discipline was to the 18th and 19th, namely, a formation of power and knowledge*” (italics in the original; forthcoming, Routledge). This knowledge and power come from the integration of three different kinds of performance: the economic, the cybernetic, and the aesthetic. McKenzie considers this one bundle of relations. If McKenzie is right, and I think he is, then this is what all the fuss is about. Arguing about performance, about who takes what from whom under what circumstance, and so on, is really about “power and knowledge,” about how the world is going to be run.

This is a *TDR* Comment. I owe my readers an opinion. But because the questions are so complex, conclusions don’t come easy. One thing is sure, the borrowings and the impositions are not going to stop. The open question is—can there be, ought there to be, rules governing this interplay? If so, what might the rules be? Who would enforce them? Is enforcement something artists and intellectuals want to get into? How does the proliferation of web sites, individual home pages, .coms, and .orgs play into all this?

I invite *TDR* readers to weigh in on these questions. We will publish your opinions.

—Richard Schechner