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Performance Studies without End?

Richard Schechner

Mostly, I agree with Jon McKenzie’s and Janelle Reinelt’s TDR Comments [TDR 50:4 (T192): 5–8; 51:3 (T195):7–14, respectively]. With one giant exception: the term “imperialist” (and its close derivatives). Imperialist means expanding an empire, enforcing its codes and values against and over the will and desire of subjugated peoples; it means paying homage and taxes—direct or indirect—to the imperial center; it means permanent economic, political, and social inequality enforced by armies “stationed” wherever. Imperialism is cognate with racism, both personal and institutional. To call performance studies imperialist is to disregard the discipline’s instrumental-ity in engaging and including performance practices, scholars, and theories from all over the world. Clearly, problems and challenges exist—but dealing with these, as in this series of Comments, is what PS does. To dub PS imperialist is to engage in a hyperbole of metaphor.

But what of the metaphor? Do those who practice and theorize performance studies intend to impose (by force of academic privilege, if not armed might) a set of “alien” or “outside” values on everyone else? What are these enforcers destroying with their “imperialist” agenda? Many different scholars practice many different kinds of PS in many different locations. As with art movements, what is “good” or “bad,” “right” or “wrong” varies with place, time, and the reputations of those putting forth the ideas. The approaches I discuss in Performance Studies: An Introduction (second edition, 2006) need to be read alongside what Shannon Jackson writes in Professing Performance (2004), what Dwight Conquergood (1995) advocated as the “caravan” what Diana Taylor (2003) investigates as the tension between the “archive and the repertoire,” and so on. The many varieties of PS developed by scholars and artists shape the field, inflecting a broad spectrum of interests and methods. Many of those defining/redefining PS are TDR contributing editors and authors. TDR for more than 20 years has been the venue for the multiple opinions, theories, and art practices of PS. Performance studies seeks adherents, coherence, and dissenting debate. As PS-ers propose methods and theories, others revise and refute them. PS is not centralized, but a discipline-in-process. The field is diverse and always changing as a consequence of the debates, histories, and methodologies it engages. Objective standards are neither entirely possible nor, if they were, advisable to follow in all cases.

Both McKenzie and Reinelt worry that English is the lingua franca of PS. This is a big problem, but not one invented by or solvable by performance studies. Ironically, because the sun never set on the British Empire, and because the USA is the current Colossus astride the globe, English still rules. Granted, as McKenzie notes, “English informs and deforms the very concept of ‘performance’ and, by extension, the very objects studied ‘as’ performance” (2006:). But English is as useful as it is deforming. The Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics is a trilingual (Spanish, English, and Portuguese) endeavor. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s International Center for Writing and Translation is an English plus other languages operation. PS and many other disciplines use English at their international conferences and, as Reinelt notes, English is the leading scholarly publishing language. Scholars from countries where English is a second language want their work published in English for greater circulation and interaction. When a Mandarin speaker, a Swahili speaker, and a German speaker talk to each other in the absence of translators, they are likely to converse in English, which even more than being the tongue of a particular set of nations has become the world’s “bridge language.”

English by now is both a local and global language. Indian, Trinidadian, Irish, Kenyan, American, Nigerian, Australian, Singaporean—artists and scholars of these and many other nationalities and cultures have transformed English into their own idioms while gaining from English’s global reach. This is an ongoing, creative, and positive development.

For several centuries, French was the language of diplomacy and still retains some of that luster—French and English are official languages of La Fédération internationale pour la recherche théâtrale (FIRT or IFTR in its English version) and the United Nations, for example.
Eugenio Barba, Kusuhara Tomoko, and Takahashi Yuichiro answer TDR’s three questions:

1. Has performance studies affected your thinking and your work? And if so, what is this affect or “influence”? Is it positive or negative?

EUGENIO BARBA: In qualifying my relationship with performance studies, I would never use verbs such as “influence” or “affect,” but rather “concern” or “regard,” which in French and Italian involve the extra nuance of “seeing again,” “distinguishing”—regarder, riguardare.

Our way of looking and therefore of thinking changes when a new field of study is circumscribed and named. It is not a question of influence or fidelity to a method or a theory. We are confronted with a different mental landscape that lets us glimpse connections between elements and phenomena that previously were mentally situated in compartments far from each other and in separate orbits. This way of embracing in a unitary view what traditionally belonged to separate subjects and fields of knowledge does not eliminate the opposition true/false, demonstrable/nondemonstrable (in reality everything is connected to everything, tout se tient). It has to do, instead, with convenience, with a cognitive “economy.” To orientate ourselves in the world that surrounds us we are forced to subdivide, to distinguish families of phenomena, categories, and different levels of organization, well knowing that these families, categories, and levels do not correspond to the foundations of so-called “reality,” but to the reality of our tools and our knowledge. The delimitation of a new field is useful when it helps to overcome mental automatisms and to adapt our virtual cognitive geography to the questions that historical circumstances confront us with.

In the 20th century, circumstances and events put different traditions and performative genres in close contact within the communicating zones between cultural practices. Misunderstandings, distortions, and useless obstacles may easily arise when these events are considered beyond the precincts separating theatre, dance, religion, cultural anthropology, traditions of European, Asian, African origin, different languages and mythologies, etc.

In a similar way, metissage and cultural hybridization seemed for a long time to be provocative, superficial, or to signify a lack of quality, and the same was the case when scholars and artists considered as a unitary field East and West, performance and liturgy, biomechanics and poetry.

Performance studies encompasses, within the system of academic disciplines, a single territory that allows us to include all the performative phenomena, independently from the different boxes in which they have been divided according to scholastic classifications. This way of looking sharpens awareness. It is the invention of a discipline’s “common sense,” corresponding to some fundamental changes in the history, thought, behavior, and experience of the past century. This experience does not only concern the so-called West but all cultures, no matter how we look at them and wish to characterize and subdivide them. From this point of view, Richard Schechner and Victor Turner’s coordinated action has been of capital importance to clear away many useless obstacles from our way of thinking, envisaging our work, defining it, and presenting it to the outside world.

The people who have fenced the field of performance studies have taught us to see the performative universe in the way Goethe told how the meteorologist Luke Howard—who classified and named the various types of clouds—taught us to look at the sky: to see differences, to distinguish.

KUSUHARA TOMOKO: I studied at NYU first in 1967/68 as an MA graduate student in the Drama Department (later the Department of Performance Studies) and then from February to July 1983 as a visiting scholar in performance studies. Both my residences in New York were as a Fulbright grantee.
Spanish is spoken by hundreds of millions in Europe, the Americas, and the Philippines but hardly in Africa, the Middle East, or mainland Asia. More than a billion people read Chinese (while speaking one or more of China’s regional languages). In India, hundreds of millions read and speak Hindi, one of 22 official Indian languages, but many prefer to converse across language barriers in English, also recognized as an official Indian language. Globally, English has the most extensive reach, its popularity increasing over the past half-century. English was and is the language of empire, but it is also the language of anti-empire and post-empire.

Local knowledges and practices can and do coexist within a global system of values, practices, and laws. The physical sciences’ reliance on mathematics and their rules of experiment, proof, and corroboration are accepted across national and cultural borders. Mathematics as we know it today once was local knowledge. The global mathematical language of the sciences would be impossible without the Arabic numerals “1” through “9,” enriched by the Indian “0” enabling the decimal system. Today, few allude to math as Arabo-Indian. What keeps its cultural specificity are Roman numerals, useful only for numbering Superbowls. Other examples could be given in terms of food, dress, musics, and so on of something so useful and/or desired that the local becomes the global; or of phenomena that retain qualities of both in the “glocal.”

Creative and scholarly works need to be translated from and into many languages. This is an expensive and time-consuming activity. It will happen only if foundations, universities, and government agencies allocate more money for translating the arts and humanities. The Japanese Playwrights Association was able to commission translations of many post-WW II plays into English. As noted, the International Center for Writing and Translation directed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, a TDR contributing editor, “fosters writing, translation and criticism in multilingual and international contexts” (Helgeson 2003). Starting in the fall of 2007 there will be an annual TDR/China consisting of articles from the English language edition. TDR/China’s editors led by Sun Huizhu, vice president of the Shanghai Theatre Academy and a TDR contributing editor, will select what articles to translate from the whole 50+ years of TDR. Using TDR as a resource, the Chinese editors will shape a TDR/China to meet the needs of Chinese scholars, artists, and general readers. This plan has been in the works for two years. Mostly, English is the lynchpin. Non-English works are first translated into English and then translated from English into other languages. This is far from ideal, but preferable to non–mother tongue speakers not having access at all. For better or worse, at present and for the foreseeable future, English needs to be in the mix for a work to acquire a global audience.

Conveners of international conferences should work more aggressively to make sure that participants from non-Western and non-metropolitan centers attend. To remedy the imbalances will take effort, good intentions, and, above all and once again, money. FIRT and Performance Studies international (PSi) both meet in widespread locations. Even so, airfare for many scholars, especially from developing nations, is hard to come by. The choice of location must be carefully vetted because even the best intentions enthrone complications with people being excluded for financial, ideological, religious, and political reasons. When the day is over, conferences land where willing sponsors have the money to stage them. And we need to recognize that conferences themselves are a Western genre of academic exchange. Internationalizing them is a good idea but it still favors those trained in Western methods of scholarly discourse.

Reinelt argues for the term “international” and rejects “global” and “transnational” as descriptors of PS. I have long supported “intercultural” because this term acknowledges, even celebrates, the fact that nations are not culturally “pure” in terms of language, food, religion, or art. Nationalism when combined with intensely held exclusionary ethnic and/or religious beliefs does little for tolerance and peace. The term “intercultural” signals not only a tendency toward complexity and hybridity but also acknowledges that the process is lumpy, full of contradictions, and difficult. What Guillermo Gómez-Peña terms “living on the border,” always. It is this border experience that scholars of PS emphasize and explore.
The only reason I chose to study at the downtown NYU rather than at an uptown university such as Columbia University in 1967/68 is that I had been getting more involved in the so-called underground theatre than the modern (shingeki, new theatre) in Japan. I arrived at NYU with little knowledge of the program there. Then I found Schechner’s classes to be really stimulating and revolutionary to me. These classes introduced me to new perspectives of performing arts, especially a view of the relations of ritual with theatrical events and life, and the concept of so-called “environmental theatre.” Of course, these ideas were too new for me to wholly understand them at first. But then I met a Sri Lankan student, A.J. Gunawardana, in Schechner’s classes. We remained close friends until his death in 1998. In 1968, Gunawardana helped me to grasp what Schechner meant. We two Asians talked about our feelings about his American views of ritualistic events as well as his lectures about Grotowski and experimental Western practices.

What I learned from Schechner and his view of theatre and human acts—maybe “theatre” is not a proper word for many kinds of performing acts—has helped to construct the basic integral part of my concept of performance—though, of course, I interpreted Schechner’s concepts in my own way in my own language and developed them as my own. Today, even when I do not directly refer to anything about ritual or environmental theatre, these roots of my basic understanding always underlie my reviews of either modern or underground productions and my articles concerning theatrical theories or our contemporary practices. I really feel how much I owe, though in a very conservative way, to Richard Schechner, at least with regard to approaching cultural social performing acts in the world. (I believe A.J.’s [Gunawardana] approaches to Asian theatre owed a great deal to Schechner, too.)

In those days, Schechner did not use the term “performance studies,” but I am sure an essential part of what this term means now developed from what I got from him then.

What was new for me when I came back to NYU in 1983 was the idea of “performance studies,” which Schechner and Victor Turner used. And also to participate in Prometheus Project workshop and performance [Performing Garage] was an exciting and wonderful experience for me. Thus, the six months at NYU in 1983 stimulated me to further develop what I had started in 1967/68.

2. Do you consider performance studies “imperialistic,” and if so, why? And if not, why not?

BARBA: The field of performance studies suits historical circumstances, social and cultural changes that have imperialism among their causes. But learning to move about on the ground or in the panorama resulting from an earthquake doesn’t mean one welcomes earthquakes or takes advantage of them to loot collapsed houses. If we confuse the cartographers with the jackals who plan robberies, we are blind or a prey to fanaticism. We speak of our obsessions and fears while pretending to discuss science. Science is certainly not a world isolated from the history in which it is immersed, but builds its integrity upon the ability to resist bending totally to the fears and the superstitions in which it is immersed. It withstands them through distinguishing, splitting hairs, not running from one flag to another.

No doubt performance studies finds powerful stimulation and confronts pressing questions in the cultural premises of the United States. And no doubt the US’s politics exhibit the character of imperialism. Does this fact allow the transferal of the qualification “imperialistic” from the one to the other? There is a logic in this, and it is—until proved otherwise—the logic of superficiality and fanaticism.

Performance studies has spread to many countries as a perspective and a disciplinary field. No one can underestimate its presence. But it is just one way of fencing in, not a univocal way to explain, judge, and attribute value. Performance studies doesn’t deny, with its presence, other enclosures and other ways to arrange our thinking and studies. It doesn’t pretend to export its
Reinelt writes that “Schechner […] as the patriarchal figure in PS, […] is also an American who appears to appropriate the world and brand it with a U.S. brand: Performance Studies” (2007a:10). My intellectual and artistic life has been shaped by my work outside the USA and its cultural cognates. But rather than me appropriating the world, quite the opposite has happened. My intercultural experiences are part of a positive feedback process influencing those whose cultures have influenced me. Dubbing PS a brand implies that it is sponsored by big corporations and spread by advertising campaigns. But PS has no advertising budget, no marketing strategies. Perhaps the main way that PS has grown is by educating individuals who return home where many of them have become important professors, deans, authors, and artists. These people use their PS training often in combination with other scholarly and artistic practices drawn from home and abroad. PS has also been spread via PSi, the PS focus group at Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), other meetings and festivals, and by TDR and other publications.

But there is still a tendency to accept as normal that Western scholars study the “others” while the “others” are or ought to be mostly experts concerned with their own or closely related cultures. To be direct: many serious Western scholars roam the world, but few non-Westerners based in their home countries and writing in their mother tongues concentrate on foreign subjects (foreign to “them” not to “us”). This isolation at home need not be so. Ironically, because many non-Westerners know English well, fieldwork and detailed studies of Western performances (and other aspects of Western cultures) can increase exponentially if the will and opportunity are there. Western cultures need more of “them” studying “us.” Ameliorating this problem will go a long way toward leveling the intellectual playing field.

Let me now take up a key point of Reinelt’s proposals. She writes:

In our scholarly publications, through our journals and books and newly developed websites, more strenuous efforts must be made to include a range of polynational voices. This means finding lots more money for translation and also recognizing, in ways we Anglo-American scholars have not always done, that various scholarly traditions, for example from Eastern Europe and Russia, or from India, or from Egypt, will not necessarily conform to the style of argumentation and concept development that we practice or indeed teach. We will need strategies for developing scholarly literacy in other modes of thinking and expressing performance studies ideas. (2007a:14)

How can it be accomplished? This brings me to the question of “standards” which, as an editor and a professor, I face every day. Importantly, this is a question that I do not face in the same way as an artist. When articles are submitted to TDR—and I suppose when proposals and articles are submitted to FIRT or Theatre Journal or to any other scholarly organization or journal; when students from anywhere (non-Western or Western) seek admission to academic programs; when people apply for jobs in departments; and so forth and so forth—“we” who do the vetting, admitting, and hiring insist on certain standards of scholarship, writing ability (in whatever language, but often requiring English), and collegial participation that are, or have been, worked out by Western academia even if these criteria are often also used in non-Western venues and institutions. What happens when “our” standards are profoundly different from other standards? This is not only a question that pertains to international institutions. What should we do when truths collide? Isn’t “free speech” and “open debate” as culture specific as conforming to a strict Christian, Wahabist, or Communist code? Isn’t there an important struggle going on regarding which of these local value systems becomes global? If one or the other of these models becomes universal, it means one set of cultural values has won out, or been preferred, over the others. If diversity, relativity, and multiplicity prevail, that will be because, paradoxically, this cultural value has won general acceptance—the acceptance to disagree, even fundamentally. At the same time, history urges caution. Mao said “let 100 flowers bloom” and then unleashed the
cognitive categories. In no way does performance studies diminish the studies that don’t take into account the vastness of interconnections, but instead dig in depth into cultural areas that are narrow and precisely identifiable. In short, performance studies spreads in spite of itself, without imposing itself. This is possible in the world of academic studies and arts, unlike what happens in the world of political and economic relationships of power. Nevertheless, we should not forget the power struggles that exist in academia and artistic trends.

Can the practical and mental attitude that characterizes performance studies be associated with cultural imperialism? Yes, because performance studies opposes resistance to cultural imperialism. It represents one of its possible dissidences.

Takahashi Yuichiro: I would say that performance studies isn’t imperialist. But it can be. Its practitioners should therefore constantly be on the alert. Performances selling exoticized images are not things of the colonial past: from Geisha shows in Kyoto to Peter Brook’s Mahabharata to internet advertisements, they are multiplying and becoming ubiquitous. Those performances predicated on the imperialist gaze of domination cater to the growing number of global consumers, not necessarily from Europe or North America. They thrive on the forces of economic globalization that promote market liberalization and commercially viable multicultur- alism, which is often state-sponsored. There is also the danger that performance studies will become another fashionable commodity in the global academic market.

As an emerging scholar in Tokyo in the late ’80s, I started thinking about how power was mediated through cultural performances. I was attracted to performance studies because of what I thought then was its subversive potential. I admit I was a little naive. But I still think that this type of naïveté should be cherished. It was through the optics of performance studies that I came to better understand the postmodern formation of power-knowledge. It enabled me in more subtle ways to engage in, and to resist, the processes of performative iteration.

I translated a number of Schechner’s essays into Japanese and published them as a book in 1999. My own collection of essays came out in 2005. The books didn’t sell in great numbers, but reviews were generally favorable to both. What was encouraging to me was that reviewers with backgrounds not in theatre or performance emphasized the necessity of studying culture in terms of performance. In translating Schechner, my objective was not winning converts for a new discipline; I was more interested in the ways in which the methods of performance studies could be applied to local issues. I am now actively involved in the creation of a new department of tourism studies in my university [Dokkyo]. In the many discussions that we are having in this process, I am happy to see performance studies ideas taken up by Japanese sociologists and anthropologists doing research on tourism.

To learn about different genealogies of performance studies creates a buffer against canonizing a single lineage. I found Ian Maxwell’s exposition of the development of performance studies at the University of Sydney [TDR 50, 1 (T189):33–45] illuminating in this respect. Issues that have been locally dealt with, in different historical and sociopolitical contexts, cannot be reduced to Jon McKenzie’s critical taxonomy of NYU PS, the US PS, and other PSs [TDR 50, 4 (T192):5–8]. I still prefer to think that performance is a contested concept and performance studies resists definition. Genealogies, when they crisscross one another, present intercultural interfaces that question what may seem to some a Euro-North American domination.

In Japan, especially in the humanities, there has always been a tendency to regard Anglo-American pragmatism with suspicion and to favor Continental sophistication. This may be one reason why it is taking so long for performance studies to be recognized in the Japanese academy. Yet, as Peggy Phelan remarked in The Ends of Performance (1998), institutionalization is hardly ever benign. Institutionalization postulates a single center with multiple peripheries. It results in a power imbalance that is likely to suppress peripheral voices. My concern is that those who work off-center are under-represented (if not underprivileged) in terms of publications and
Cultural Revolution. Rupert Murdoch’s version of “open debate” is built on media manipulation and naked capitalism.

And just how far should we work to bring about cultural relativism? In terms of performance studies, how can we admit “alternative scholarships” constructed according to different assumptions than what is taught at our “best” schools? TDR has not only an editor but also an associate editor, section editors, and contributing editors, each of whom brings to TDR ideas, scholarship, and kinds of writing different from what I might be thinking. Other journals as well may be open to different standards and styles; Performance Research, for example, has more instances of “performative writing” than does TDR. Overall, performance studies though initiated in the US is deeply informed by the artistic and scholarly practices of the Americas, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Oceania. TDR has published works by, about, and from scholars and artists in all these areas. Despite this range, because PS was formulated largely by Western or Western-educated scholars (whatever their homeland), PS’s diverse subjects are mostly treated according to Western models. So we have come the long way around to a somewhat unified set of standards expressing, if not wholly belonging to, the values of the heirs of modern imperialism.

When I shared a draft of my Comment with Reinelt, she replied in an email:

I know what you’re talking about when you raise the issue of standards, and yet I think it’s a huge problematic buzzword that needs to be carefully handled and unpacked because it so easily means “do it like we do it.” As a journal editor [Theatre Journal, 1991–1995] and now a series editor [Studies in International Performance, Palgrave Macmillan; with Brian Singleton, coeditor], I know the necessity of maintaining a scholarly style, fact checking, argument-building and all the rest. But consider these aspects:

Western Europeans (even) do not necessarily follow the thesis plus argumentation and examples that make up the standard Anglophone style—eastern Europeans even less. Sometimes they work inductively, building up examples; sometimes the pieces seem static or circular. Very interesting ideas are sometimes presented in very opaque packages. I particularly think of Russian colleagues whose talks and lectures are very hard to follow, and need huge amounts of editing when they are submitted for publication. Now note, yes, they need to be brought up to “standard” to appear in the Anglophone publications we control, so I concede that. But I don’t really consider it a question of “standards” as much as of “style” of scholarship. The reason is, I believe a number of these scholars are really smart—have insights that are valuable in themselves and will be valuable if they can be discerned and understood by the readers. If I say the problem is “standards,” I’m implying they aren’t good enough when in fact I think it’s a cultural difference. […] I’m saying that it takes time and investment to figure out which sort of ideas you’re dealing with, and making the effort to understand those different styles of scholarship and then to help “translate” them into “standard English.” In other words, conventional Anglo-American scholarship is tedious and takes lots of time, but we’ve got to do more of it. […] There needs to be a way to bring different styles of scholarly discourse into circulation within heretofore Anglo-American spheres. Interviews, dialogues, performative writing—scholarship is prose on the edge of art (I’m thinking of the way personal writing, poetic writing, idiosyncratic writing sometimes makes its way into serious scholarship). I begin to think we need to actively seek to foreground some of these different styles in our publishing practices. But I’m not sure how to do it or how far to go. (Reinelt 2007b)

“How far to go,” is key. It assumes that the “goer” is in charge; that “we” are the teachers/leaders and “they” are the students/followers. It also implies that “we” hold the levers of power determining what is appropriate and what is not. I am not so sure this is the way it is now. There are enormous culture wars going on within and beyond the USA. These struggles won’t be settled in a year or even half-a-century. Reinelt asserts, “Scholarship is prose on the edge of art.”
conference presentations. I simply wish for a greater space of articulation for all. Given the
antihegemonic spirit of performance studies, however, I remain cautiously optimistic.

KUSUHARA: I do not quite understand what you mean by “imperialistic.” If you mean in the
ways of approaching or studying, I do not think so at all. Fortunately or unfortunately, your
influences over our Asian (or, at least Japanese) societies, either academic or nonacademic, for all
kinds of theatrical studies, are not strong enough to control the ways of our thinking or the ways
of our studying; and I never felt you “forced” your way of thinking on us on any occasion
(maybe you just “emphasized”). There are no particularly noticeable differences between the
American and the Japanese economical conditions in the fields of studies for cultural sciences—
no room for economical imperialism. One’s good stock of knowledge, even up-to-date knowl-
dge, of any theories and practices in America, does not affect one’s getting a better academic
status in Japan today.

Of course, influences are better than non-influences, but they are better to be mutual so that
the one with the influence on and the one under the influence of can understand and respect
each other. If two people each have a different cultural background, their ways of thinking,
understanding, feeling, and so on are different; each understands the other’s culture in her or
his own way. I believe that one should recognize differences, understand differences, respect
differences, and learn from differences.

3. And if you do think PS is imperialistic, what should be done about it? Especially, what
should I as editor of TDR “the journal of performance studies” do about it?

BARBA: If the idea prevailed (which seems to me to be coarse and short-sighted) that the
performance studies to which you dedicate yourself were tainted by the qualification “imperialis-
tic,” I would propose that you move to our small house in the small town of Holstebro in the
Danish provinces, distant from the center of the Empire. We will find a space for your activities
and publishing enterprises. Do you think that if you spread your hypotheses and ideas from such
a small place, far away from the languages and seats of power, these would end in the cauldron of
cultural imperialism?

You know, it is not easy to live as a dissident in New York, and at the same time not be
associated with the mask of the ugly American.
Sometimes, maybe. But scholarship is fundamentally different than art. Artistic expression, when not squelched by censors or squeezed by under-funding, is wide-open. Artists themselves try just about anything—and if people imitate or build on these practices, these new ways of doing change what art is. To cite just two well-known examples: the European artists at the turn of the 20th century drew on ways of looking and representing from Africa—ways that became known in Europe, and in Paris especially, under the aegis of imperialism and colonialism. These ways of looking formed a basis for what was to become “cubism” and all that followed from that. Ditto for the influence of African ways of making music, of thinking about what music is. Many of these “new” ways were first made clear by Africans in the USA as a consequence of what enslaved Africans brought to the Americas, strong people who refused to surrender their cultures. What resulted were hybrid arts (visual, theatrical, and musical) that changed the arts at a fundamental level; citing music only, consider jazz, rock, and rap. Today this music, or if you will, these musics, are developing with strong input from Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Hybridity—trying out new combinations, influences from anywhere to everywhere—has been for some time the norm, and will be only more commonplace in the future.

The same cannot be said concerning scholarship. The “standards” of thinking and writing have remained basically the same. What might new forms of scholarship contribute to the pursuit of knowledge? Does scholarship need to follow a linear and logical narrative? Is orature equal to literature? Do dissertations need to be written? What differentiates scholarship’s critical and analytical modes from art practices that are in their own ways critical and analytical? Why can’t scholarly writing be graphic or sonic, allowing for simultaneity rather than relying on sequentiality? Does insisting on standards of scholarship impose Western ways of thinking?

I stop here, but do not end. This is ongoing. There’s a ton of thinking and working ahead. One step TDR is taking: a special issue in 2009 devoted to different kinds of scholarships. Maybe we will include a CD along with the paper and electronic versions of TDR. I can’t promise that TDR will not continue on in its established ways after this special issue. I really don’t know what kind of material will show up or what its forms may take, or what will happen after. But please submit your work in whatever form. The future is an open book—or maybe not a book.

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Guard against “Red Guard Thinking”

William Huizhu Sun

Labeling an academic discipline or research field “imperialist,” or with some other pejorative political term, always reminds me of a kind of “Red Guard thinking”: after Chairman Mao shut down all universities, the Red Guards during China’s Cultural Revolution attacked almost all academic subjects from the West as bourgeois, counterrevolutionary, and/or imperialist. In the West, Edward Said’s Maoist-flavored wholesale criticism of “Orientalism” echoes these attitudes. Is the next target performance studies? How ironic because PS relies so heavily on non-Western cultures. In fact, this reliance seems to be a basis for calling PS imperialist.

I believe there might be some merit in pointing out the bourgeois, counterrevolutionary, and/or imperialist components in many academic fields. Yet by and large those disciplines are research fields where scholars of all political leanings can study and publicize their conflicting findings. The same can be said of performance studies. There could be imperialist PS scholars who impose PS on non-Western cultures without considering these cultures’ histories and needs. These scholars are just like imperialist physicists and engineers who in the past used their knowledge and skills to mine colonies for economic gains and political control. Large corporations and governments continue these practices under the shelter of the global market economy.

As for appropriating non-Western cultural heritages, this is different from taking physical materials. China’s Taoism and Kungfu may have been taken in the past to the West mainly by imperialists, but the Chinese will never ask to have these practices returned, or for Westerners to stop practicing them—even though we hope to regain numerous physical antiques often stolen or bought at ridiculously unfair prices and now owned and displayed by museums in Europe and America. Artifacts are cultural property and need to be repatriated; practices are different. In some instances, in some cultures, of course, Westerners appropriating cultural works could be considered offensive, or blasphemous, even more offensive than taking away natural resources. But other cultures are more open, even happy and eager to introduce their cultures to the West. China’s Confucius Institutes and Japan’s and Korea’s language and culture institutes have all been opened internationally in recent years, a strong manifestation of these people’s mindsets. China has also begun to offer scholarships to international students who want to study Chinese culture. When people from non-Western countries take performance studies—as they took Marx’s dialectical materialism, or Shakespeare’s plays—transforming it into something useful in and of their own cultures, who can call them or the discipline they are learning imperialist?

El Mad Mex responds to the question: Is the performance field racist?

Guillermo Gómez-Peña

A month ago, my padrino Richard Schechner asked me to respond to a very pertinent but loaded question: Is the performance field racist? To honor Richard’s petition in the most honest possible way, I asked my friend “X” to interview me on the subject. He chose not to be identified because he feared the repercussions of this text.

GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-Peña: Before we start this conversation, I just wish to clarify something: We will be talking about the specificities of the US performance field and my own perceptions of it. Other countries face other dilemmas. Estamos pues?

X: Estamos. First, how do you define the “performance field”? What is your relationship to it?
GÓMEZ-PEÑA: I have been dealing with the “performance field” since 1987, when my work first became visible to the US art world. By “performance field” I mean the sum of its visible operators—curators, producers, impresarios, theorists, critics, and artists; and its overlapping institutions and networks including university departments, theatres, museums, and art spaces that present performance, magazines, and publishing houses. For 20 years I have participated in the debates of “the field” through writing, lecturing, performing, and organizing events. Performance has been my primary identity and strategic location to speak from. My objective, like that of many of my colleagues, has been to help widen “the field” and make it more inclusive and accepting of difference.

X: What has changed during this time?

GÓMEZ-PEÑA: Throughout the years, I saw “the field” evolve slowly from a mostly white, exclusive, and rarified “bohemian club” to one that welcomes racial, cultural, gender, and linguistic diversity—I also saw it evolve from overt racism in the pre-multicultural era to unspoken racism in the much-touted “post-racist era.”

X: Let’s get more specific…

GÓMEZ-PEÑA: During the pre-multicultural days it was assumed that formal experimentation was a first world, bohemian sport, and that the “third world” and its artistic communities of color within the so called “first world” were mostly interested in enacting our own traditional art forms. As a Mexican performance artist I was perceived as both a rarity and a pioneer. The obligatory question was: Do your people understand your work? The subtext being, Aren’t you kind of a freak in an ocean of muralists, altar-makers, magic realists, and angry protest poets? I answered politely and humorously through my work.

X: Did multiculturalism change that attitude?

GÓMEZ-PEÑA: Yes—and no. During the multicultural era—1985 to 1993—diversity became the lingua franca, and all artists and operators who saw ourselves as “others” functioned as a sector. Our oppositional identities and voices clashed against a mostly white mainstream and, in the process, we developed alliances, networks, and long-term friendships and collaborations. We even conquered some spaces in the art world and academia. All this gave us an illusion of empowerment.

X: But you weren’t exactly a multiculturalist.

GÓMEZ-PEÑA: Well, among the multiculturalists from all races and cultures, there were the nationalists and the antinationalists. I belonged to the second camp. Because of this, my own ethnic community saw me as a threat. And I paid for that. But that’s another story.

X: What happened next?

GÓMEZ-PEÑA: During the ’90s we witnessed two parallel phenomena: On the one hand, the consolidation and institutionalization of the performance field in academia. And at the same time, a virulent reaction to multiculturalism. Those were intense times.

X: Elaborate.

GÓMEZ-PEÑA: As this consolidation process was taking place, those mostly white males who felt excluded from the multicultural debates and threatened by our perceived gains eventually became empowered and expressed their resentment. A new era had begun, remember? It was called “the backlash”—1993 to 2001—and it was roughly defined by the continuous attacks of a new more boisterous intellectual right who perceived us “multiculturalists,” feminists, gays, and in-betweeneries as “the liberal mainstream” trying to destroy a mythical monocultural America. The backlashers eventually teamed up with conservative theorists of color. It was a bizarre time. Our run-ins with them were labeled the “culture wars.” And the performance field, due to its highly politicized nature, became one of the main stages of those wars.

X: How did you feel about the “consolidation” of the performance field in academia?
GÓMEZ-PEÑA: I celebrated it wholeheartedly, because I thought it would translate into many jobs for artists and intellectuals of color. And it happened to a certain extent. However, with the institutionalization of the performance field, a bizarre phenomenon took place: we began to draw borders. A field that began as a reaction against the borders between art, theatre, dance, media, cultural studies, anthropology, etc., ended up drafting a highly specialized and highly contested territory. Perhaps it was inevitable for its survival. But there was a major contradiction there: A field that started as a reaction against essentialist milieus and essentialist notions of art and culture, ended up breeding microcartels, clicas, and mafias. Suddenly, brilliant women, gays, Chicanos, and African Americans began delineating their own specific areas of study and protecting them with their teeth. They also began favoring their own, getting jobs for their kind. Perhaps all this was inevitable as well. Human beings are territorial and favor those who look and behave like them.

X: Let’s talk about labor issues in the field. Is it still hard for a Chicano to get a job in academia or the art world?

GÓMEZ-PEÑA: A menial or secondary job? No. An important and well-paid job? Yes. The operators with the best jobs are not always the most qualified but rather those who know how to work the system and therefore help perpetuate the system. A lot of extremely talented and politicized Latino artists and intellectuals are still underemployed, misemployed, or unemployed, including half of the members of my troupe. Breaks my heart.

X: Isn’t this a serious form of racism?

GÓMEZ-PEÑA: It certainly is. You know, my compadre James Luna is finally quitting his college at 57. He can finally make a living as the only Native American performance artist in the US who can make a decent living doing his thing. He shared with me his fears as it is still a big risk for him but he couldn’t handle any more the balancing act of being an artist and an academic. This makes me angry. He shouldn’t be worrying about these things at this point in his life.

X: Let’s talk about you. How do you make your living?

GÓMEZ-PEÑA: I’d rather not talk about that. It’s not appropriate for this discussion. All I can say is that since 9/11, more than half of my troupe’s income comes from foreign sources. These are tough times for artists in the US. While I am quite aware that the US economy is burdened by the fueling of the war in Iraq and that essential services and infrastructure are disappearing from the US social landscape, I can’t help but notice that it also serves as a form of economic censorship. Here, there is no need to round up dissenting artists and academics to silence them: simply don’t hire them, don’t fund them. And if they are contemporary artists of color and conscience it is the perfect misdirection for that economic sleight of hand, “The budget’s been cut.” I see it all around me. My Chicano colleagues are working twice as hard for half the money—and that is when they are working at all. My colleagues in other countries can’t believe that Gómez-Peña’s phone line and electricity gets shut off every now and then. And that my wife and I drive around in an ‘Toyota. But I don’t complain since I may be one of a handful of US-based Latino performance artists who can actually survive from my work.

X: You once told me that some US producers say that you charge too much.

GÓMEZ-PEÑA: Yes, and that is a bit upsetting because the implication is, How dare a Mexican artist charge as much as an Anglo or a European artist of his caliber? Would they ask the same question to Marina Abramović or Stelarc? I guess they wish I charged mariachi rates. I have to keep cool and explain to them that for me getting paid properly is a political issue. It’s a form of fighting racism.

X: Can we effectively say that nowadays performance art is a much less exclusive field than…?

GÓMEZ-PEÑA: In the alternative space network it is, but in the higher leagues it isn’t. I mean, how many Latino, Native, and black performance artists did you see in Performa05?
X: With all these challenges, why are you still choosing performance artist as your primary identity? Wouldn’t it be easier for you to survive as an art professor or a cultural journalist or a critic writing more populist books?

GÓMEZ-PEÑA: I love my life as a nomadic performance artist and I still believe that the performance field is my main home. It is more permeable, fluid, and open than those fields that preceded it and those that currently surround it. And, like many of us, I am still engaged in the endemic fight for inclusion, openness, and tolerance. In other territories I’d say it is already a lost fight. But in the performance field, it is still possible. Discussions like this one are allowed and even encouraged in spaces like TDR or the Hemispheric Institute.

Who in the World Are We Talking To?

Diana Taylor

The discussion in TDR’s current commentary about whether “performance studies is imperialist” (McKenzie), and whether we (performance studies and theatre scholars) “must […] truly internationalize our research” (Reinelt), followed by Richard Schechner’s response in defense of English as a lingua franca and his objection to thinking of performance studies as a “brand” demonstrates a conflation of several interrelated issues regarding the field of performance studies. Is imperialism the same as internationalism the same as corporate? Does the debate implicate both theatre and performance studies, or is one pitted against the other? If the latter, the question seems to be, Which of the two is more imperialist—theatre, the instrument of cultural and spiritual conquest in the Americas; or performance studies, envisioned as a breakaway colony? Is the concern that performance studies, as a field, has taken over the world (McKenzie’s “PS Empire”—and if we believe that, who in the world are we talking to?), or do the anxieties actually come down to one department (PS, NYU) or to one individual (Schechner)?

For some, apparently, PS equals the US and the UK, and scholars become personally responsible for decisions made by national governments. McKenzie tries to unravel some of the knots of what he calls the “nested structure” of the debate. Part of the problem, however, is that the structure—from local (NYU-PS) to global (Anglophone-PS)—builds on assumptions that foreclose other frameworks. A different frame might allow for other considerations. Without engaging all of these critiques, or repeating what I have written elsewhere, I will briefly separate the imperialist charge from what I consider a far more serious threat—self-referential academic practice—and end by inviting you to a performance.

Performance studies, as a trans- or post-disciplinary academic field, came into being (though not into institutional existence) during the 1960s and early 1970s—a period of intense political and intellectual upheaval throughout much of the world upturned by events such as the Cuban revolution, the war in Vietnam, the massacre of students in Mexico, May ’68 in France, and the civil rights movement in the US, to name a few. It was also, of course, a moment of profound academic and artistic reconfiguration. The border-crossing trans prefix signals a break from the traditional disciplinary boundaries that had dominated Western academies since the 18th century. For many scholars, the inter- and post-disciplinary arenas proved welcoming and liberating: gender studies, Marxist criticism, race theory, comparative literature, cultural studies, and performance studies are only some of the fields and approaches to emerge from that turbulent period. This way of telling the PS origin story captures the widely felt intellectual, artistic, and political exuberance of the time. These fields materialized because students and scholars demanded consideration of “content” or “subject matter” such as gender, race, economies, intertextualities, and embodied practices that could not be productively engaged given the rigid and biased nature of existing disciplines. True, it was Richard Schechner who ran upstairs to tell NYU School of the Arts Dean David Oppenheim that the scholars who were the Graduate Drama Department wanted to rename their department so that the title fit the work. Without a doubt, Schechner has been a pivotal figure in the field and has brought his own
expansive and generative vision to trans-, cross-, and interdisciplinary performance (studies). But to reduce the emergence of performance studies to a story of a great man (Schechner, or two great men if we include Victor Turner) is a disservice not only to PS and to Schechner, but to all of us working in the field. The critique that the trans signals PS’s “rapacious” and imperialist border-crossing nature would have to extend to all the trans-disciplines. If race theory and gender studies and Marxist criticism are also deemed “imperialist” and “rapacious” then we have to wonder what to call Halliburton and Murdoch. So how the debate is framed, and the way the story gets told, influences the ways we can think about the issues.

Much of the best PS scholarship to date has come from scholars based in the US, the UK, and Australia, many of whom are not, and never have been, in performance studies departments. Scholars in other parts of the world (including some trained in performance studies departments in the Anglophone world) have created performance studies departments or concentrations in their home institutions—Brazil, Korea, and Mexico, to name a few. Does this mean PS is taking over the world, or that scholars find the analytical lens useful in addressing issues they grapple with? As a young theatre scholar training in Mexico, I was drawn to performance studies before I knew there was such a thing. As I have written elsewhere, I wanted to understand the seemingly coexistent yet separate and impenetrable spheres of highly codified social practices that were publicly enacted every time the Tarahumara came into the town where I grew up—not as one might observe anthropological subjects, not as characters in a drama, but as practices of everyday life in which I played a part that I did not understand.

For me, there is nothing inherently imperialist about performance studies either in content or methodology. On the contrary, by recognizing that embodied practice transmits cultural knowledge, memory, and identity, performance studies methodology challenges writing as the predominant form of transmission. This methodological move alone proves anti-imperialist insofar as writing has long served as the handmaiden of empire. There are other methodological characteristics—performance studies scholars often locate themselves as part of the scenario they are examining rather than as objective observers outside of it—that differentiate this practice from disciplines generated in and through colonialist histories. These are just two of the many characteristics that for me make performance studies a necessary, and profoundly anti-imperialist, analytical lens.

That said, none of us exists or thinks outside of the political and economic structures that frame us. Most of the scholars involved in this discussion work in and with imperialism—McKenzie, Reinelt, Schechner, and me for starters—and face the problems that result from historical inequalities. The circulation of knowledge, which like all else is deeply bound up with imperialist politics, usually goes one-way. Academic and editorial practices often replicate dominant politics of exchange. As Reinelt points out, non–English speaking countries translate works written in English, but mostly not the other way around. So while excellent performance studies scholarship may be produced in Brazil, Korea, or Mexico, it will too rarely be available in English. There is not enough dialogue. That is one major problem. To expect other scholars to speak English only aggravates the issue. An invitation to have a dialogue, on “our” terms, in “our” language, hardly constitutes an openness to exchange. Translation for lectures, discussions, and responses is non-negotiable. It is not a “political correctness” issue—it is a communication issue. People by and large seem to accept the non-PC position that we might have to limit ourselves to translating some of the major colonial languages rather than all the participants’ languages. So the language issue is another problem. Another version of a related problem cuts along a different axis—the “first” world of scholarship versus the “third.” Scholars in France, Germany, and Japan who work in theatre and performance studies might belong to IFTR (aka FIRT) and hold conferences in different parts of the “underdeveloped” world without establishing any meaningful engagement with their hosts. Organizers may protest: “We invited them!” But invited them to what? To participate in an organization that the organizers established and run, where they give the keynotes, invite the guest speakers, and plan the
plenaries? Where they conduct discussions in English? These problems, however, are not exclusive to performance studies—they plague all interactions in which power differentials (in terms of money, access, travel and so forth) are part of the equation.

The “troubling risks” that McKenzie and Reinelt refer to are the constant and inevitable challenges that stem from participating in systems of unequal power and exchange that affect everything we do. When the organizations we belong to—be they our universities, or associations such as PSI, IFTR, or others—inadvertently replicate the imperialism we challenge as a field (by being expensive, in English, self-referential, or whatever) then we need to make a commitment to change that—by reconstituting our organizations, creating visiting scholar and artist positions at our universities, by being willing to go and teach or lecture at “third world” universities, by encouraging institutional memberships for our associations that will pay for translation or offer fellowships for those who could not otherwise attend, and so forth. In short, the goal is to establish real relationships and dialogues along academic and artistic lines.

Here, I will repeat something that I have said (again and again): performance is not a thing but a practice. I find performance studies important not because of what it is, but what it allows us to do. Among the things it allows us to do as a post-discipline, of course, is to envision different, more complex objects of analysis that exceed disciplinary boundaries, however expansive they might be. It also enables trans-disciplinary work—such as the wonderful collaborations we’ve seen between scholars and artists. But more important for this discussion, it allows us to engage each other in ways that exceed the boundaries of conventional institutional and academic behavior. If, as this TDR discussion indicates, scholars are reacting to charges of imperialism, one option might be to ask if the apparatus of exchange—the conferences, lectures, courses, access to materials—“work,” and if so, for whom? Rather than continue down the “self-criticism” path, I would propose a discussion on “best practices.” Some institutions and organizations do very well both financially and in creating what Nestor García Canclini calls “translocal” interaction. There are several practical (and partial) correctives for a situation that, admittedly, has no “solution.”

As one example of “best practices” that offer a forceful theoretical and practical intervention, I invite you to participate in a performance developed by Lois Weaver, cofounder of Split Britches. She has designed and staged an event, a Long Table, that offers a banquet not of food but of discussion. The Long Table is set up like a banquet table, although with important modifications. The tablecloth is made of paper; the markers laying on the tabletop invite us to write on it. There are several microphones. When the Hemispheric Institute invited Weaver to host Long Tables at its 2007 Encuentro, a 10-day gathering in Buenos Aires, trilingual simultaneous translation was of course part of the menu (Spanish, Portuguese, English). Weaver has rules or “etiquette” for participants: “There is no beginning / It is a performance of a breakfast, lunch, or dinner / Those seated at the table are the performers / The menu is up to you / Talk is the only course / There is no hostess / It is a democracy / To participate take an empty seat at the table / If the table is full you can request a seat / Once you leave the table you can come back / There can be silence / You can break the silence with a question / You can write your questions on the table / There can be laughter / There is no conclusion.” This performance, it seems to me, enacts a very promising politics of engagement. The banquet, often the conventional happy ending for comedy, can in fact initiate us into a long, ongoing trans-local discussion and practice.

When Weaver staged the Long Table in Buenos Aires it was interesting to see people approach the table and talk—at first they were formal, scholarly, speaking in full paragraphs, referring to their intervention as a “presentation,” and thanking their “audience” for listening. While there were people from over a dozen countries seated at the table speaking in Spanish, English, and Portuguese, disciplinary, linguistic, and geographical boundaries seemed to be maintained. As time went on, people relaxed and spoke of the far more intimate details of transnational (in this case) engagement. A young Mexican musician spoke of how he had come
to the Encuentro by bus through Bolivia and had been detained, threatened, robbed, and beaten by the Argentinean border police. We spoke, too, about the ethics of accepting money from foundations that, in the past (50 years or more) had been tied to imperialist corporations. The *Long Table* is not a performative (as many of our scholarly exchanges are), which have the discursive power and authority to enact the hierarchies and exclusions that they pronounce. Rather, the *Long Table* is what I call the “animative”—the unruly, embodied, lived, contradictory, vexed behaviors, experiences, and relationships “on the ground.” Seated at the *Long Table* participants stage the potentials and difficulties of trans-local dialogue. As we sat around the table in Buenos Aires, looking and listening across all our divides (linguistic, national, and disciplinary, to name a few), people became aware that they spoke from a place of clear investment, partial understanding, and limited expertise. No one imagined that they could speak for anyone else. It was uncomfortable and even painful at moments—did I really just hear him say that? What do we do about that? Discussions are intense and take place in real time. Areas of miscommunication or misunderstanding become evident immediately and people can respond. The *Long Table* offers a space for interaction that is both durational and time-bound. Durational because the interaction and the discussion will never end. Time-bound because, as for any banquet or performance, each person only has a certain amount of time at the table. We know as we get up that there will always be more to say. The event does not promote a utopian vision of intelligibility—interactions are incomplete and messy: there is no conclusion.

But, I would argue, behaviors can be modified by the *Long Table*, a performance that like all others has its own conventions and correctives. It requires that we listen to each other, speak into the microphone, look into people’s faces to see if we’ve made our point, and give up our seat at the table if someone asks for it. I think it’s a great exercise in trans-local performance, both as theory and as practice. But much depends, of course, on who can actually take a seat at the table.

1. Challenges to the ethics of the Hemispheric Institute accepting Ford Foundation support (because the Ford Motor Company actively supported the violent dictatorship by turning in the social rights "activists" in their company to be tortured and disappeared and providing the Ford Falcon vehicles that became the car of choice of the abductions) calmed down when I explained that the Ford Foundation separated from the Ford Motor Company in 1953 and has spent a good deal of its capital fighting against the works of the FMC by supporting many projects—such as *Memoria Abierta* in Argentina that funds projects by Mothers and Grandmothers of the disappeared.

2. In “Remapping Genre through Performance: From American to Hemispheric Studies” (forthcoming *PMLA*, October, 2007), I define “animatives” (in relation to Austin’s performatives) as “part movement as in animation, part identity, being, or soul as in *anima* or life—the term captures the fundamental movement that is life (breathe life into) of embodied practice. Also [like performatives] pertaining to the repertoire, animatives refer to actions taking place ‘on the ground’ as it were, in the messy and often less-structured interactions among individuals. *Performative*, then, might index the referee’s declaration of the winner in a sport, while *animative* points to the ruckus that breaks out in the stadium.”