

***Contesting Performance: Global Sites of Research*, edited by Jon McKenzie, Heike Roms, and C. J. W.-L. Wee (Palgrave MacMillan, London 2010)**

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In a student unit-of-study-experience questionnaire some years ago, in response to my introductory course in performance studies, a student remarked that the course's focus upon the origins of the discipline itself was, in her words, 'singular' in her experience. Leaving aside the scope of her experience (which I am unable to assess), this student's take on the syllabus gave me pause. The material to which he or she was responding included a review of Richard Schechner's work with Victor Turner, framing a broader inquiry into the chiasmatic twining of anthropology and theatre studies, that being the fundamental interdisciplinary underpinning of Performance Studies as we teach it at my particular university.

My own staging—and, arguably, contesting—of disciplinary provenance betrays a certain anxiety. How am I speak of (let alone for) a discipline which sometimes feels characterized less by a discrete object of inquiry or a way of looking at things than by a series of running battles or skirmishes? I find myself asking whether other disciplines are similarly afflicted, whether the struggles through which performance studies constitutes itself are of a different order to the kinds of contests that take place within other fields—that our struggles are ontological, rather than merely epistemological (as well as being epistemological)—and that sets our project, insofar as we can speak of “project” and “our-ness”, apart, as my undergraduate interlocutor wanted to claim.

Contesting Performance: Global Sites of Research organizes itself through this very trope: that of struggle, of agonistics. Interestingly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the trope is refracted through another, increasingly familiar poetics, that of place. The field of performance studies becomes a literal landscape, over and through which the tussle for the heart and mind of Performance Studies takes place. Where sometimes this is something of a cartographic enterprise—the editors note one of their aims as being ‘to foreground diverse locations of research’ (2)—elsewhere the focus is more, perhaps, geo-

political: the editors wish to read the map they are assembling in terms of the globalization of what was, in their words, a field of study 'first . . . institutionalized in the United States' (3). Here the anxiety being played out is that which we recognize in the branding of Performance Studies international itself—that organization through which the discipline, in all its contested complexity—performs itself annually: I refer of course to the persistent lower case 'i' in/of PSi. Nowhere is the anxiety more marked than in the sub-heading on page 4 of the editor's introduction to this collection: 'Is Performance Studies imperialist?' The answer they provide is (of course) that it 'depends both on one's perspective . . . and on how one defines or understands "performance studies"' (6).

The first two sections canvas these issues. In the first section, key players offer accounts of the processes through which the discipline of performance studies gained institutional traction in the United States (Shannon Jackson), Australia (Gay McAuley), the United Kingdom (Heike Roms) and Japan (Uchino Tadashi and Takahashi Yuichiro), these narratives framed by Diana Taylor's brief overview of the New York-based Hemispheric Institute—this offering an interesting paradigm of a centre-to-periphery model for the globalization of the discipline.

The second section pushes the question of contest further: here we see the ways in which performance studies, as it has moved beyond the Anglophone world, has constituted a critique of academic disciplinarity itself. Ray Langenbach and Paul Rae demonstrate compellingly how the political strictures of Singaporean governmentality add a decided pungence to research-based practice; their reading of the political ecology of Singapore in terms of state performativity lends their models for performance research a certain traction and urgency, re-alerting us all to the potential of performance studies, by its disciplinary open-ness, to atune to context, and to a broadening of perspectives.

The question of perspective, then, is taken up as the third area of concerns to which the editors direct our attention: the possibility of a kind of post-colonialist attention to local sites in which the discipline of performance studies (a rubric properly to be understood *sous rature*) is unfolding. Here we read contributions from Khalid Amine, detailing work on post-colonial performance being undertaken through the newly founded International

Centre for Performance Studies based in Tangiers; from Sal Murgiyanto negotiating the tension between contemporary and classical dance in South East Asia; Loren Kruger offers readings of the contested spaces of theatre in post-apartheid South Africa. Together, these four contributions genuinely break the field wide open—the discussion is no longer simply a matter of reflections on the field from the perspective of a (destabilized, anxious) centre, but rather an excited, polyvocal conversation. There is a wonderful sense of things moving beyond familiar territories and certainties.

This is the great strength of the collection: an assembling of voices and perspectives carefully solicited from, well, if not all corners of the globe, then at the very least a broad sampling: Morocco, Israel, Croatia, Australia, Slovenia, Taiwan, Japan, Singapore, the United Kingdom and of course, the United States. “Sampling” and “solicitation” are perhaps misleading: the collection has emerged from something of a rolling working party over a series of meetings and conferences, and reflects the very real disciplinary dynamics unfolding over several years, in several contexts, notably the challenges thrown out by the conference held in Singapore in 2004. This yields a sense of unfinished project/conversation to the collection, a coherence in diversity which bespeaks, notwithstanding all the contestation going on, something of a great strength.

This dynamism is the starting point for Heike Roms’ contribution: ‘although this chapter has not yet been written’, she muses, ‘I already know that it will have been published too late’. She is specifically referring to her anticipation of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise [RAE] in the UK, but captures more generally something of the anxiety (that word again) many of us feel in the face of both sprawling disciplinary reflexivity—the anxiety of identifying, contesting, securing and defending a place in a field—and of institutional and bureaucratic pressures that increasingly present us with pragmatic challenges and, perhaps most distressingly, tax our capacity to turn our minds, bodies and spirits to what we might consider to be our core business: the discovery, sharing and nurturing of knowledge (in all its multifariousness). Things in the UK, I suspect, have become exponentially more challenging in the past 12 months than Roms might have expected when confronting (only) the RAE. And if the tenor of the times is so hostile to humanities

and arts disciplines in the privileged contexts of the Anglophone academy, what of all those other locals that do not share the privileges of wealth and tradition?

I am very aware that I have written only in the most general terms about this collection. Rather than recapitulate the direction and content of each of those contributions, I would prefer to simply recommend that anyone with an interest in the discipline/field take the time to both work through the essays and, more, to consider how to engage their own, local practice with the conversation to which the collection affords the reader an access. The excitement of recent P*Si* conferences—and particularly the flavour, ambition and willingness to contest the conventions of academic conferencing that characterized the Zagreb conference in 2009—suggests that it is a conversation worth being part of, and that in the face of so much anxiety, turning towards difference rather than fighting rearguard actions to defend old models of (institutional and disciplinary) practice make the game worth contesting at all.

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