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Paper:

Rogers, A. (2017). Advancing the geographies of the performing arts. *Progress in Human Geography*, 030913251769205
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0309132517692056>

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Advancing the Geographies of the Performing Arts: Intercultural aesthetics, migratory mobility and geopolitics

Abstract

Performance has become an analytical lens for examining a range of geographical phenomena. However, research specifically on the geographies of the performing arts has not kept pace with this broader field. Here, I argue for a deeper engagement with the theories and practices of the performing arts, particularly as research on creativity and the geohumanities gathers momentum. The article focuses on three areas where literatures from theatre and performance studies can expand our understanding of what ‘the geographies of the performing arts’ might be: intercultural aesthetics, migrant mobilities, and geopolitics. It examines how these come together in contemporary Cambodian dance.

Keywords

geography, performance, Cambodia, intercultural, mobility, geopolitics

I. Introduction

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Thrift and Dewsbury (2000) identified a reignited engagement with the performative in human geography. Bringing together a long-standing concern in feminist geographies with Butlerian performativity, understandings of performance circulating in non-representational theory (particularly via the work of Gilles Deleuze), and an emerging interest in the discipline of performance studies, they argued that the theoretical, practical and creative domain of performance could resuscitate a 'dead' human geography and its modes of methodological inquiry. In the intervening years, an already varied field of geographical research has opened up further to tackle the performative in its theoretical and empirical complexity, particularly by mobilising performance as a metaphor for all manner of bodily practices, identities and encounters (for an overview, see Rose-Redwood and Glass 2014; see also Sullivan 2011 for an historical appreciation of performativity within geography). However, in this paper I want to be more specific and suggest that although non-representational theory signalled that the performing arts were a key arena of geographical inquiry, geographical engagements with research in theatre and performance studies have not kept pace with the broader field of performance and performativity. If human geographers are serious about establishing creativity and artistic practice as central disciplinary tenets, not least through the emergence of the geohumanities, then a deeper attention to the performing arts and their cognate disciplines should be a necessary component of our intellectual endeavours (Dear et al 2011; Hawkins 2014;

Wylie 2010). In this paper, I therefore examine how research in theatre and performance studies can extend geographical research on the performing arts.

In reviewing existing geographical engagements with the performing arts, it is possible to suggest that these have proceeded along specific fronts, with certain modes of praxis, academic figures, and spatialities repeatedly emerging. Most notably, the performing arts have become associated with experimental methods, particularly as geographers creatively re-engage with the practices and politics of making artworks (Hawkins 2015). Such approaches expand our horizons of what constitutes knowledge by directly utilising, and drawing inspiration from, theatre, dance and performance art (Dewsbury 2010; McCormack 2002; Thrift 1997, 2000; Veale 2015). Theatre, in particular, is also often used as a dissemination tool that can engage research subjects and wider publics in the research process (Pratt and Johnston 2013; Richardson, M. 2015). In the UK, the 'impact agenda' has intensified these dynamics (Gregson et al 2012; see also Rogers et al 2014) but these creative experiments are also indebted to the non-representational idea that performing bodies are 'instruments of research' (Longhurst et al 2008; see also Johnston and Lorimer 2014; Jones 2014).

In using the performing body as a methodological tool, geographers have been particularly drawn to Marxist forms of theatrical praxis. The techniques and games of Boalian and Brechtian theatres have been used to analyse how the performing arts might address issues of justice, fairness and equality in relation to climate change (Franks 2015), waged labour (Houston and Pulido 2002; Pratt and Kirby 2003), and welfare cuts (Pratt and Johnston

2007). Testimonial forms of theatre have equally offered a lens through which marginal voices can be heard and given a located, physical presence. The most notable example of such work is Gerry Pratt and Caleb Johnston's ongoing collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre of British Columbia in the production of the play *Nanay*. Here, theatre has been used to explore the geographies of transnational labour and trauma (Johnston and Pratt 2014a, 2014b; Pratt and Johnston 2014), but the possibility of creating shared or co-constituted spaces of empathy makes testimonial theatre appealing both ethically and politically as a means for exploring the lives of communities more generally. As such, research using testimonial theatre is emerging on a variety of fronts, examining, for instance, spaces of masculinity and Irishness (Richardson M. 2015) and the devastating effects of austerity on women (Raynor 2016).

Geographical research on the performing arts has also tended to engage with particular theorists within theatre and performance studies. The work of Richard Schechner (2003), for instance, has been influential in working across the spaces of theatre/performance and those of everyday life. His expansive definition of performance as a mode of vernacular practice has been central to the conceptualisation of a range of geographies as performatively constituted or enacted. Similarly, his idea that performance is restored or twice-behaved behaviour has been influential in geographical analyses of everyday life and routines that span both the performing arts, such as the circus (Terranova-Webb 2012), and more mundane activities, such as ferry commutes (Vannini 2011). His work has therefore contributed both to the wider proliferation of ideas around performativity and to

geographical analyses of the performing arts specifically. However, less well-known in geography is Schechner's work with the anthropologist Victor Turner on the study of non-western ritual. His experiments in bringing together ritual performance with theatre laid the foundations for the development of interculturalism, a field of theatrical inquiry I discuss below. In a different vein, non-representational approaches to landscape, and the idea of landscape as performance, have been particularly influenced in geography by the work of performance studies academic and practitioner Mike Pearson (see, in particular, the interdisciplinary special issue of *Performance Research* in December 2010). Pearson's site-specific or 'deep mapping' approach to landscape has offered new ways of capturing and enacting the ephemerality and interconnectedness of place. Equally, however, he has been inspired by techniques and ideas from within human geography, notably chorography, affect and emotion (Pearson 2006, 2013). As I have outlined elsewhere, (Rogers 2012a) these dominant figures also sit within a body of geographical work that creates an on-going dialogue with theatre and performance studies around the spatialities of landscapes, sites/places, and cities (see, for instance, Olsen 2016 and the related special issue section of *Cultural Geographies on Performing Urban Archives*).

However, these cross-disciplinary connections are not exhaustive and there are other areas where geographical research on the performing arts resonates with work in theatre and performance studies. In this article, I encourage geographers to further prise open these possibilities in order to expand our appreciation of the geographies of the performing arts. I take my cue from three areas of geographical research on the performing arts that are

traversing new ground, but which can push further by considering related work in theatre and performance studies: performance and identity (particularly interculturalism), migratory mobilities, and geopolitics. I then pull these avenues together by discussing some of my recent research on contemporary dance in Cambodia. In discussing each area of work I consider emerging directions in geographical research and expand on how these may be augmented by approaches from theatre and performance studies. In so doing, and without wishing to be prescriptive, the paper signals new avenues along which geographical research might proceed.

II. Intercultural Aesthetics

This section articulates how engaging with the field of intercultural performance can extend geographical analyses of the performing arts that focus on identity. The relationship between identity and the performing arts is a long-standing theme in geographical research (see Cresswell 2006; Nash 2000; Richardson 2013, 2015; Rogers 2010, 2012b) but as geographers focus their attention on how marginalised, precarious or vulnerable bodies are engaged in, and validated by, the performing arts, issues of identity are increasingly being recast through a concern with how performance facilitates socio-cultural interactions. As a result, the languages and practices of interculturalism are starting to appear (Noxolo 2016; Pratt et al forthcoming; Richardson 2013; Rogers 2014, 2015; Veal 2015). Here, I suggest that a deeper engagement with intercultural performance can provide a critical language through which to analyse spaces of cultural interaction. In so doing,

theatrical interculturalism also contributes to an emerging re-engagement with aesthetics in human geography (Hawkins and Straughan 2015).

Simply put, theatrical interculturalism is 'the meeting in the moment of performance or two or more cultural traditions, a temporary fusing of styles and/or techniques, and/or cultures' (Hollidge and Tompkins 2000: 7). There is no single way of doing or describing intercultural performance, and theorists in theatre studies have attempted to topologise a richly patterned field of activity (see Knowles 2010 for an excellent overview). Nevertheless, to give an example, Brechtian styles of theatre can be described as intercultural. This is because *Verfremdungseffekt* (the alienation effect), where audiences are encouraged to watch the on-stage action as critical observers, derived from Brecht watching Beijing Opera and noting that the actors performed in such a way as to inhibit emotional empathy. Interculturalism therefore associates specific types of performance with particular cultural-geographical locations (often the nation), but it simultaneously considers how the performing body negotiates and (re)forms culture, identity and difference across borders. Hollidge and Tompkins (2000), for instance, analyse how the international arts market shapes the distribution of women's intercultural performance, which in turn affects the voluntary and involuntary cultural exchanges undertaken by female bodies in the performing arts field. Elsewhere, Rogers and Thorpe (2014) examine how issues of authenticity, place and racial identity became problematically mired in the process of casting an intercultural production (a 'British' adaptation of a 'Chinese' play). Intercultural performance can therefore produce new creative forms and identities that

relate to specific geographies, but this is a politically and ethically charged terrain.

Such politics emerge because in negotiating cultural interaction through both imagination and embodied practice, intercultural performance raises concerns around cultural appropriation. At the turn of the twentieth century, practitioners such as Brecht were concerned with finding culturally different, 'exotic' performance traditions that could reinvigorate 'western' styles of theatre. Some contemporary theatre makers, such as Peter Brook, are still seen to be working in this Orientalist vein as they attempt to create a supposedly 'universal' theatre (Chaudhuri 1991; Bharucha 1993). As postcolonial, multicultural, cosmopolitan, diasporic and transnational perspectives have been brought to bear on analyses of interculturalism, research in theatre studies has paid particular attention to the power dynamics underpinning how these theatrical encounters proceed. This work focuses on issues such as the language used in collaborations between artists from different countries and the resulting politics of translation, the motivations and attitudes of practitioners, how particular sites for the consumption of such performance (notably international festivals) influences the work created, and the role of funding in shaping intercultural performances and their geographies, especially regarding who initiates an intercultural work, why particular countries and traditions/types of performance are engaged with, and the extent to which the creative process is dialogic (Bharucha 2001, 2004).

The terms of cross-cultural engagement are therefore at the forefront of analyses of intercultural theatre, highlighting the 'contested, unsettling and

often unequal spaces *between* cultures' (Knowles 2010: 4). In considering how to theorise these cultural politics, Lo and Gilbert's (2002) turn to relational spaces has been particularly influential. Drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the rhizome, they consider how cultural interconnection can proceed along myriad, unpredictable paths. These rhizomatic geographies are potentially resistant to dominant structures and representations that deny cultural modification by bounding or freezing culture, particularly to specific locations. Instead rhizomes develop new forms, relations, collaborations and solidarities that are forged across difference, imagining cultural production as a process that resists essentialism by being difficult to locate.

Ideas around interculturalism are present in geographical literatures on the performing arts but are not always framed in these terms, such as in Revill's (2004) embodied exploration of learning French folk dance. Yet interculturalism sharpens our conceptual language for, and political focus on, embodied cross-cultural encounters, and geographers are exploring these practices and vocabularies. For instance, Noxolo (2015, 2016) examines how African-Caribbean dance can be viewed as a form of embodied mapping that mitigates the insecurity of the black body. In discussing how dance can locate the black body and give it presence, she draws upon the idea of 'synerbridging' from the dancer and writer L'Antoinette Stines (2014). Synerbridging juxtaposes African, European and Asian aesthetics to create a modern form of Caribbean dance that reflects the mutating cultures of creolization, enabling the dancing body to traverse cultures without erasing their violent colonial contexts of production. It involves 'keeping an awareness of each cultural representation [...] noting that such ancestral roots are not

static [...] but over time co-mingle as an honest insider representation', highlighting how modern and traditional forms create cross-cultural bridges across the Caribbean (Stines 2014: 23). These ideas have underpinned Stines' development of L'Antech, an Anglophone Caribbean dance technique that embodies cultural memory through combining different repertoires of movement (see also Roach 1996). In another vein, Pratt et al (forthcoming) describe how producing their testimonial play *Nanay* in the Philippines entailed collaborations that challenged their positionality as well as the content and structure of the play. Through this process, new scenes and themes were added, and the style of performance shifted, striking a hyperbolic, melodramatic tone that can be read as a mode of resistance to colonial relations. The evolution of *Nanay* in the Philippines, and its appropriation for multiple uses independently from its creators, is, as the authors note, indicative of the rhizomatic interculturalism outlined by Lo and Gilbert (2002) above.

Central to these forays, and the field from which they derive, is that interculturalism is not solely concerned with socio-political encounters, but also with how these work through aesthetics. Aesthetics is often wrought by a duality between being focused on cognitive judgements about arts and cultural practices (such as in notions of taste or beauty), and being concerned with the sensory experience of bodies, spaces, and activities. As Hawkins and Straughan (2015) suggest, the interplay between these two understandings of aesthetics is both fruitful and politically charged. Intercultural theatre, I would suggest, critically traverses this tension, precisely because it entails negotiating culture through embodied practice (vis-à-vis particular theatrical

forms or techniques) whilst attending to how the contextual and representational politics of difference enables bodies to be 'read' or perceived in particular ways. The overt concern with questions of power in intercultural theory and praxis also speaks to calls for a stronger emphasis on the political within geographical debates around the aesthetic (Saldanha 2012).

More specifically, interculturalism opens up our understanding of how aesthetic encounters relate to spaces of cultural globalisation, contributing to a reignited concern with exploring 'geoaesthetic' domains (Matless 1997). Existing research on the aesthetic is concerned with geographies of distance, proximity, contact, entanglement and volume (Hawkins and Straughan 2015), as well as with spatial orderings and their relationship to the political (Dikeç 2015). A deeper engagement with the intercultural opens up these geographical analyses to encompass a wider set of spatial fields. It simultaneously builds upon an emerging concern with how aesthetics (particularly through performing arts practices such as singing, dancing, and costume-making) can negotiate social and cultural difference to promote tolerance and inclusiveness (Kingsbury 2015, 2016). Interculturalism therefore offers a rich vein for geographical research on the performing arts to consider the varied ways that aesthetics manifest, interact and intersect, whilst attending to the spatial politics of cross-cultural encounters.

III. Mobility and Migration

The embodiment of cross-cultural interaction in performance points to the second key arena in which the geographies of the performing arts might

further develop: mobility and migration. When considering mobility and the performing arts, dance is the most prominent medium that geographers have analysed, using its specific modes of expression to explore the ontology of moving bodies because it traverses the representational and the non-representational, movement and stillness, thinking and feeling, and different rhythms, temporalities and histories (Dewsbury 2011, 2014; McCormack 2002, 2008, 2013; Nash 2000). Analyses of dance have therefore led geographical understandings of embodied and affective spaces, particularly regarding the design (Merriman 2010, 2011), past histories (Somdahl-Sands 2008) and experience (Somdahl-Sands 2011) of urban environments, whilst also providing insights into the mobile body's physicality, training, representation and constitution (Narbed 2016; Nash 2000; Revill 2004; Cresswell 2006). However, much of this work has focused on the body itself, rather than the wider mobile and migratory geographies in which performing bodies are situated and to which they contribute. By bringing together research on the geographies of mobility and migration with literatures on performance and globalisation, this field of research can be extended by examining how artists imagine, create, and move through transnational geographies.

Geographers working on dance have indicated that the mobile performing body relates to migration. Migration classically asks "Who goes where, and why?" investigating the 'push' and 'pull' factors that encourage people to move between places (Champion and Fielding 1992: 1). Research on migration therefore examines the processes behind physical movement, rather than exploring the experiences, practices, and meanings of that

movement (as in mobility). Here, I both maintain that distinction and muddy it in order to capture the various approaches that geographers and others have deployed in their analyses of the performing arts. As Blunt (2007) suggests, the difference between migration and mobility is not absolute, and migration research increasingly explores the politics and materialities of migrant mobility (Conradson and McKay 2007; Dunn 2010; Faier 2013; Tolia-Kelly 2004, 2008). Geographical research on the performing arts often brings these fields together, such as in work on the tango which illustrates how modes of mobile embodiment are bound up in migratory practices of movement and displacement that render the body's composition, meaning and form unstable (Cresswell 2006). As a result, 'to dance is not necessarily to unthinkingly reproduce a given cultural identity: it is also a matter of actively reworking [...] the tangible corporeality of this identity' (McCormack 2008: 1827).

One area of geographical research that investigates the performing arts in relation to migration is that on the creative economy, particularly regarding Florida's (2002) creative class thesis. This is because artists, actors and entertainers partly comprise his 'super-creative core' of innovative workers who produce new cultural and economic forms (Bennett 2010; Verdich 2010). Migration here is predominantly viewed in terms of the dynamics surrounding place attraction and place retention in order to elucidate if and why the creative class remain in place, and whether or not they drive economic growth. This migratory perspective is similarly taken in Johansson and Bell's (2014) study of how specific place dynamics influence the touring itineraries of musicians (see also Gibson et al 2010 on proximity and creative cities). Elsewhere, however, a more mobility-inspired

understanding of the performing arts and migration has been adopted, such as in geographical analyses of how memories and experiences of touring can direct the set-up, routines, and embodied staging of circuses (Terranova-Webb 2012), or in accounts that consider the impact of touring mobilities on the identities and creative desires of musicians (Nóvoa 2012; see Ng 2005 in theatre studies). Geographers have also analysed the transnational migration of performers, investigating the resulting embodied negotiations around identity, culture and belonging (Dickinson 2014; Rogers 2015).

This emerging research can be developed by engaging with theatre and performance studies which has examined the varied negotiations faced by migrating practitioners and their works (Cohen and Noszlopy 2010). Here, a range of influences have been examined for how they lead performers and performances to create specific geographies of migration, particularly in work on itinerant or nomadic performers (Cohen 2010). Such influences include networks of friendship, the desire for prestige or recognition, patronage, funding, the politics of censorship, cultural nationalism, foreign policy and diplomacy relations – including the role of cultural institutes such as The British Council – celebrity status, capitalism in international art festivals, the demands of elite or urban consumers, and affective or emotional belonging (see Kiwan and Meinhof 2011; Lei 2011; Peterson 2009). This research has also attended to the contestations and contradictions that surround transnational migration, such as when migrant artists navigate essentialism for particular creative ends, trading different transnational networks and forms of capital against one another in order to sustain their careers (Kiwan and Meinhof 2011). The transnational migration of practitioners also illustrates

asymmetries of finance and creative development that reveal particular interests, especially those of the state (Steen 2010).

Focusing on performance praxis, experience and meaning furthers our understanding of the mobile migratory geographies underpinning the performing arts whilst attending to their embodied work. For instance, the migratory geographies of the performing arts can affect the development of creative praxis and identity (as in Srinivasan's 2011 study of the labour of Indian dancers). Because the migration of performers is often linked to the migration of performances as cultural products (notably through the solo performer), it is possible to examine what creative skills and actions achieve, what work they *do*, as much as what they signify. In this regard, theatre and performance studies has attended more concretely to how the performing arts are forms of 'travelling culture' that acquire multiple meanings, both reflecting and disrupting wider cultural expectations (Clifford 1997; Ferrari 2010).

Geographers have yet to fully examine these issues, despite increased disciplinary interest in art and performance. A small field of work is beginning to analyse the migrant mobility of performances as cultural-political products, addressing the complex circulations of affect they produce and are structured by, and the resulting insights they provide into subjectivity under economic neoliberalism (Johnston and Pratt 2014a, 2014b, Rogers 2011, 2015). This research also attends to how mobility can forge new aesthetic styles and spaces of cultural interaction, investigating the politics underpinning these exchanges (Dickinson 2014; Rogers 2014). However, there is scope for developing this work, particularly in relation to a wider cultural and creative field. Advancing research on the geographies of the performing arts along

these lines therefore entails examining the mobile migratory geographies in which the various materialities of the performing arts (bodies, techniques, scripts, costumes, sets, whole performances) are imaginatively and physically situated, and through which they are constituted.

IV. Geopolitics

Finally, in developing the spatial scope for research on the geographies of the performing arts, it is possible to consider their relationship to geopolitical issues. There are strong resonances between contemporary research on geopolitics and that in theatre and performance studies, particularly in war zones and post-conflict societies (Taylor 1997; Thompson 2009, 2014; Thompson et al 2009). Such an approach develops geopolitical engagements with non-representational theory that have made geopolitical research lively, sensorial and emotive/affective (Dittmer and Gray 2010). It further illustrates how different agents and agencies contest the production of geopolitical space, as the performing arts shift in type and tenor as they work in and across different spatial domains.

Existing geopolitical research deploys the broader language of performance and performativity in order to expose the practical enactment of power by the state and other agencies, and to critically interrogate the production and circulation of narratives around violence, war and peace (Bialasiewicz et al 2007; Gregory 2010; Jeffrey 2013; McConnell et al 2012; McConnell 2016). Despite an increased interest in how visual and installation art can create dialogues on geopolitical issues, particularly through aesthetics

(Ingram 2011, 2012; Williams 2014), the performing arts are rarely the medium for such critical reflection (although see Amoore and Hall 2010 regarding the geopolitics of the border and Pratt and Johnston 2014 regarding geopolitics and violence). Instead, as Ingram (2011) implicitly identifies, an everyday understanding of performance as embodied practice permeates this research, with the role of the body, the practice of security, and the enactment of imaginary geographies operating as key tropes. As a result, there is room to consider what the performing arts specifically might bring to these discussions.

In particular, it is in the domain of affect, particularly its interchanges with the practice, discourse and dramaturgy of statehood, where geographical and theatrical agendas converge. There is a common concern with exploring the affective ambiguity of the state in situations of conflict and post-conflict, highlighting its complex, unstable relationship to political geographies of violence (Anderson 2010). Research in the performing arts has embraced this ambiguity, especially in the field of applied theatre, where creative practices have been used to address national reconciliation (Breed 2014) and demands for social justice in the wake of conflict (Thompson 2009). Such research highlights that theatre occupies a 'grey' zone, one that belies the binaristic description of performances as 'resistant' or 'propaganda' as they work to (re)gain control over chaotic situations (Balfour 2007: np). The performing arts thus complicate the 'cheery rhetoric of community-building and conflict resolution' whilst literally acting out alternative modes of social formation (Kuftinec 2009: xiv).

In this context, an affective approach offers a way of thinking about people's capacity to cope in situations of state violence, with the performing arts working as a mechanism for viewing culture as part of the 'matrix, rather than a simple reflection of, or response to, war' (Thompson et al 2009: 12). Affect offers a different 'end' to performance, one where politics does not automatically lead to social change but is muddier in its effects (Thompson 2009: 9). The performing arts encompass entertainment and escape, blurred ethics and allegiances, and practices of testimony and accusation, that both complement and contradict the thorny work of negotiation and peace-building (Breed 2014; Kuflinec 2009). Here, research in theatre and performance studies has reached further than that in political geography in addressing the relationship between the space of the gallery and the world beyond it, primarily because such work literally renegotiates the socio-cultural realm through creative practices and aesthetics. In addition, although political geographers have examined the influence of NGOs, humanitarianism, diasporic communities and the media on the constitution of power in settings of conflict and post-conflict, more can be done in addressing how cultural forms such as the performing arts are part of these chains of connection and how they are impacted by, and help to reconfigure, the different space-times of war and peace.

The performing arts are thus fundamentally embroiled in competing politics, working as one site that curates and conceptualises geopolitical orders through particular narratives and actions. Such a perspective also begins to answer the thorny questions raised within human geography around how a politics of affect relates to concerns around legal justice, human rights,

civil liberties and the international order (Campbell 2012). Yet simultaneously, a geographical perspective, in its attention to specific cultural spaces, also helps mitigate the dangers associated with how trauma and violence can render contexts reducible to one another. As Thompson (2009) notes, humanitarian narratives designed to garner political or popular support about specific conflicts often end up stripping geography out altogether, overlooking local artistic and creative forms of performance that offer responses to trauma and violence in ways that can enhance the capacity for reconciliation or resilience (see also Breed 2014 on how discourses of nationhood can have a similar effect). A combined geographical/theatrical perspective can therefore further our analysis of the ethics of representation, whilst examining how their performed embodiment relates to the heterogeneous spaces associated with war, terror and violence.

V. Contemporary Cambodian Dance

In this section I use the example of contemporary Cambodian dance to work through these three engagements with theatre and performance studies. I illustrate how the dual aesthetics of a mode of performance, alongside its transnational circulation, are tied to geopolitical concerns around the politics of nationality. In so doing, this section argues for a greater attention to how the geographies of the performing arts comprise multiple interweaving concerns. In turn, this emphasises the profound cultural and political effects of performing arts praxis. I discuss a showcase event, hosted by the NGO Amrita Performing Arts on 9 May 2014, combining this with semi-structured

interviews with those involved. The research comes from a project investigating the geopolitical role of NGOs in Cambodian dance, entailing over 30 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with dancers, choreographers, and executive directors, conducted in Khmer (in translation) and English with the author, alongside performance analysis of rehearsals and archives.

Cambodian dance is a politically invested site of activity. It has been synonymous with national culture and identity since the mid-twentieth century, when King Norodom Sihanouk and his mother, Queen Sisowath Kossamak, used classical dance to represent the Cambodian nation at home and abroad (Cravath 1985). However, under the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979), nearly all of Cambodia's dancers were executed because they represented the monarchy and an urban, educated elite. The Cambodian arts scene has therefore focused on revival and reconstruction in order to document dances before surviving masters die. However, the arts and cultural sector are not a government priority because as a developing country Cambodia faces a range of challenges, such as poverty, poor healthcare, and environmental degradation. The Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts thus receives less than 0.5% of the government budget (Kuch and Vachon 2014). Cambodian dance, and contemporary Cambodian dance in particular, is therefore often associated with the international NGO sector, embedding the performing arts in transnational relationships that produce opportunities for creative experimentation. Here, I focus on a young generation of dancers who have trained since childhood in classical dance, folk dance or the male dance

drama *lakhon khol*, but who bring these together with contemporary forms such as modern dance, ballet and hip-hop.

Everyone interviewed felt responsible for preserving 'traditional' Cambodian dance, and they all empathised with, and understood, the reasons behind preservation. However, having not lived through the Khmer Rouge, these dancers did not always view their own relationship to their art in terms of preservation. Instead, they wanted to explore new ways of moving and being. NGOs such as Amrita recognise this appetite and provide opportunities for creative development and international collaboration. However, the Cambodian government has historically investigated artists undertaking such activity (Shapiro 2010). This situation has shifted with the new Minister of Culture and Fine Arts, Phoeurng Sackona, as the government begins to recognise that dancers want to develop their performance practice. There are, therefore, emerging attempts to understand, and reluctantly accept, new forms of dance. Nevertheless, there remains a continuous negotiation between the NGO sector, the state, and individual artistic desires.

The showcase

Such negotiations came to the forefront in the Amrita showcase which presented three works by dancers interested in developing a contemporary dance vocabulary: *Brother* by Chansithyka Khon; *Complicated* by Vanthy Khen; and *Religion* by Noun Sovitou. Visually, the pieces looked like international festival circuit presentations: slick and clean, with dancers often wearing lycra vests and shorts, sometimes with flowing tunics, in simple

colours such as white and black, combining moody lighting with abstract music. Khon's piece explored his past, present and future relationship with his brother, with the two men dancing together onstage accompanied by a bass guitar soundtrack. *Complicated* drew upon folk dance movement, rhythms and sounds in an energetic, rolling performance by six dancers. During the showcase, Khen described how the piece was partly inspired by her experience of studying choreography at the Korean National University of Arts, which made her question 'am I a Cambodian dancer or am I a foreign dancer? When I create this work I focus on my own interpretation and it allows me to explore that' (Khen, showcase). Sovitou's expansive piece expressed people's relationship to religion and the ability of religion to 'teach people how to lead a good life', combining classical movements, shadow play and hip-hop (Sovitou, showcase).

After the dances, there was a 30-minute Q&A that was dominated by the Minister, with Amrita's Executive Director, Rithisal Kang, translating the discussion. This was the first time a government Minister had attended such an event, and it signalled a desire to engage, understand, but also query, the work presented. The Minister posed a series of questions to the dancers/choreographers, such as 'what is the concept behind contemporary dance? What are the concepts that inspire you? I see some Cambodian movements but I also see some foreign movements in it as well. What is Cambodian contemporary dance? What is the philosophy?' But also, 'Are you copying [non-Cambodian dancers]?' (Sackona, showcase).

When responding to these questions, the dancers/choreographers emphasised creative exploration as part of their evolving practice. Sovitou

described how his exposure to contemporary dance technique ‘inspired me as a *tool* for me to explore further in my own dance movement. [...] To read and create contemporary Cambodian dance, we use the knowledge that we get internationally to explore our dancing vocabulary’ (Sovitou, showcase). Similarly, Khen articulated how ‘we certainly learn very well about Cambodian gestures [...] but we are young artists and we like to experiment and try new ideas, the identity is something that is not really there yet, but it’s something we can pursue on’ (Khen, showcase). The dancers also accepted that they ‘might make mistakes but we will find the right way to do it’, implicitly agreeing with, and respecting, the Minister’s comments (Khen, showcase).

The audience enthusiastically applauded each individual response. Then, after 25 minutes of discussion with the Minister, other audience members were allowed to voice their emphatic statements of appreciation for what they had seen, with further clapping and standing ovations. This was a young Cambodian audience who clearly related to what they saw on stage, and who created an atmosphere of support after an intense discussion.

Interweaving Performance Trajectories

This short event illustrates the stakes involved in the performing arts. Firstly, focusing on intercultural geographies of performance illustrates the aesthetic duality of dance - its ability to represent an essentialist national-cultural identity whilst producing sensate ways of being and moving that are inspired by, but exceed, ‘being Cambodian’. Interculturalism does not simply offer a culturalised language for navigating this well-known tension around identity,

but also focuses us on its political implications. If aesthetics provide 'prompts to, and space for thought in the midst of these tensions' then what becomes apparent is how the dual aesthetic of contemporary Cambodian dance is the result of this performance form being situated in transnational geographies that potentially conflict with the agenda of the state (Hawkins and Straughan 2015: 3). As a result, focusing on interculturalism extends emerging research on geographical aesthetics by investigating how the performing arts draw upon, and produce, intersecting spaces of cultural activity. However, rather than difference being negotiated to promote harmony and tolerance, here engagements with difference through the performing arts are deeply contested (cf. Kingsbury 2015, 2016).

In analysing contemporary Cambodian dances, their aesthetic tensions map onto different geographical readings of intercultural praxis. In watching the dances, there was a tendency to invoke aesthetics as a series of artistic judgements based upon distance from the performing body. This was evidenced in the simplistic ascription of cultural locations to specific movements by identifying what was 'Cambodian' and what was generically 'foreign'. The Minister was also concerned about the politics of this cultural engagement and the potential for Cambodia's unique cultural form to be degraded or, indeed, erased. The language of 'mistakes' also suggests a fixed 'authentic' way of performing Cambodian identity through dance, something that obscures how what is often perceived as 'traditional' is often more historically recent (Grant 2016). However, the conventional East-West imperialist imaginary underpinning this aesthetic understanding jostled against the dancers' experience of learning contemporary dance through complex

cultural fields, and their resulting attempts to grapple with an evolving, embodied Cambodian subjectivity (what Khen called 'pursuing on'). Dancers learned contemporary techniques through training programmes and workshops with artists from a range of countries both in Cambodia and abroad. Such encounters complicate the representation of binaristic spaces on the performing body, and are instead linked to interculturalism as a theatrical mode of aesthetic praxis that engages the sensory body (Bharucha 2000). As Sovitou described in interview:

'A classical hand movement has a slow speed, but if the same hand movement is fast, it becomes modern dance. It looks different but it has the same meaning [...] In hip-hop they have a similar leg movement: they call it fan movement; we call it flying flower. You test it but the bodies are different, the energy we put in and out is different. [...] So it becomes same same but different.'

Although dances may appear visually similar, the embodied performance of intercultural encounters is more complex, with decades of encultured training in a specific form rendering a dance movement from another genre more geographically fluid. In addition, dancers are often working with already hybridised dance forms. Many of Amrita's workshops and collaborations have involved contemporary Asian dancers such as Pichet Klunchun who have formed their own unique dance vocabulary based upon (in his instance) an exploration of traditional Thai mask dance and contemporary American dance. This, in itself, orients Cambodian intercultural encounters towards Asia

and, without suggesting a simplistic narrative of harmonious fusion, makes contemporary dance styles more difficult to culturally locate (Burrige 2015).

Contemporary Cambodian dance as a felt mode of aesthetics thus emerges through multidirectional networks rather than a west-other binary, such that performances exceed the sum of their parts. Engaging with contemporary dance expands the toolkit for expression among Cambodian dancers in ways that point towards more rhizomatic geographies of interculturalism, creating connections to a range of contexts, people and ideas (Lo and Gilbert 2002). In interview, Sovitou described how contemporary dance allowed him to look outwards and connect with other artists in order to develop his dancing vocabulary. The dancers were interested in exploring what their bodies could do in a contemporary frame, in dance's affectual, non-representational possibilities, but they were simultaneously exploring Cambodian cultural identity in a non-prescriptive way. In interview, Khen described how *Complicated* used different movements for male and female dancers to reflect how Cambodian women negotiated complex social roles. Similarly, Sovitou visited Seam Reap to research Hinduism and Buddhism in Cambodian religion and architecture. In creating 'Cambodian' expressions, the dancers therefore drew the different spaces and identities of Cambodian life into a multidirectional intercultural geography.

Geographers have highlighted how dance can rework corporeal spaces of identity (Nash 2000; McCormack 2008) but interculturalism emphasises the variegated cultural spaces that they connect, and the politics of their aesthetics. As becomes apparent below, cross-cultural interaction is how the political potential of aesthetics manifests. As Rancière (2004)

suggests, aesthetics, as a mode of embodied experience, can work as a form of 'ruptural politics' that interrupts the established order of things (Dikeç 2015, 4). These ruptures occur because Cambodian dance is situated within transnational geographies of physical and imaginative mobility, the second theme of this paper. Research in theatre and performance studies emphasises how performers create by traversing heterogeneous cultural fields that extend transnationally (Cohen and Noszlopy 2010). These migratory mobilities remain relatively unexamined by geographers, but attending to their dynamics can extend our understanding of the spaces through which the performing arts proceed. Artists have long associated travel with discovery and creative development (Haerdter 2005) and Cambodian dancers are no exception. Amrita initially presented classical Cambodian dance at international festivals, yet as they did so, 'the dancers were talking about how to further develop beyond their traditional boundaries [...] the young Cambodian artists saw things that were inspirational to them' (Kang, interview). As Khen and Sovitou indicated in the showcase, travelling encouraged artists to explore their own dance practice, something Amrita has facilitated through transnational workshops and collaborations.

In considering the geographies through which these encounters proceed, circular migrations are key, as individuals regularly move 'to-and-fro between their homelands and foreign places of work' (Vertovec 2007: 2; see also Rogers 2011). In this context, these short-term geographies are strongly underpinned by networks based upon artistic and interpersonal friendship, as well as cultural respect (Kiwani and Meinhof 2011). Amrita's founder, Fred Frumberg, regularly attended IETM (International Network for Contemporary

Performing Arts) and TPAM (Performing Arts Meeting in Yokohama), in order to network and meet a range of creative practitioners. Although interpersonal relationships are central to facilitating creative migration (Bennett 2010), when tapping into international and regional performance networks, a key concern for Amrita has been developing sustained collaborations that are culturally and creatively sensitive, and that work, politically-speaking, on a level playing field. For instance, Kang emphasised how the Belgian-German choreographer Arco Renz repeatedly visited Cambodia for two weeks at a time, exploring Phnom Penh but 'spending a lot of time getting to know us and our culture' (Kang, interview). Cambodian dancers similarly move in these repetitive short-term patterns as they encounter, learn, and create contemporary dance by collaborating with artists from a range of countries.

As interest in contemporary dance grows, the length of these migrations extends and their motivations shift. Dancers such as Khen seek long-term training in order to deepen their practice, but also to create the opportunity to develop a choreographic career that will outlast the demands made by Cambodian dance on the body. Formal training in contemporary dance can only be obtained abroad because Cambodian training focuses exclusively on classical or traditional forms. As Cambodia continues to globalise and neoliberalise, young people are also exposed to cultural influences that further ignite the desire to travel (Smith 2005, Springer 2015). Indeed, Khen's own career points to how performance is embedded in the cultural geographies of Asian globalisation, particularly South Korea's regional dominance (Otmazgin 2016). Dancers want to expand their range of personal experiences and be inspired to develop contemporary Cambodian dance as a

genre (which, to reiterate, entails reworking Cambodian subjectivity). As Grant (2016) highlights regarding traditional Cambodian music, engaging with contemporary forms can also help traditional ones to survive by attracting new audiences. As a result, both short- and long-term migratory mobilities allow new modes of cultural and professional being to develop.

Finally, the intercultural aesthetics and affective resonances that emerge through creative migrations are intimately related to the theme of geopolitics. Drawing upon cognate research in theatre and performance studies extends research on the geographies of performance by conceptualising practitioners as geopolitical agents. It also develops geopolitical research on the arts, which, as Ingram (2016) identifies, has been slow to consider aesthetic questions. In situations of conflict and post-conflict, research in the performing arts has attended to how 'the affective is effective' (Taylor 2014: 338). Contemporary Cambodian dance particularly highlights how different affects relate to contestations around national identity. In turn, these affects emerged through the experience of intercultural aesthetics among the audience.

The audience's response indicates how young Cambodians were animated by, and invested in, the dances they watched. An atmosphere of joy, celebration and inspiration coexisted with an intense seriousness throughout the Q&A with the Minister. This partly created the sense that the audience implicitly challenged the Minister's point of view, but it also signalled the enjoyment found in experiencing contemporary Cambodian culture. Nevertheless, this affective tension illustrates how intercultural aesthetics as both represented on the body, and experienced through and beyond it, create

contested affective atmospheres that strike at the heart of what Cambodian identities can be (see also Closs-Stephens 2016). Although the Minister wanted to understand contemporary Cambodian dance, she also reiterated the established idea that performances of dance are performances of nationality, and thus also of state-ness. As Wolfarth (2016: 424) notes, ‘the recovery of art and a recovery of national identity have been critical components of all artistic practice in Cambodia.’ Yet the interplay between the dancers, their works, and the audience, re-worked the conventional image of the classical dancer that this position evokes, and thus the performance of nationality. The performances offered an alternative and evolving image of Cambodian identity grounded in everyday concerns and spaces, but expressed through cross-cultural encounter. The felt aesthetics of contemporary Cambodian dance, in the space between the bodies of the dancers and those of audience members, thus re-ordered the ‘distribution of the sensible’ to pose a series of political questions (Rancière 2004: 7). The experience of performing and watching these dances was characterised by a deep enjoyment, but in considering this affective resonance, a question for the state is what does it do? Is it simply enjoyment? Does it “loosen the grip of the language of identity, essence and belonging” in ways that destabilise the recuperation of dance, and by extension, nationality? (Closs-Stephens 2016: 12). Can enjoyment be harnessed to political ends that challenge the status quo?

Such questions are pertinent as the cultural and creative evolutions represented by contemporary dance, and the affects that they create, are occurring through NGOs operating in transnational spaces over which the

state has less control. Although NGOs raise problems of dependency, neo-colonialism and inefficacy, Cambodia's controversial 2015 Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations has been seen as an attempt by the government to reclaim this ground by restricting the freedom of expression within civil society and by requiring political neutrality from NGOs (icnl.org). Although conflict in the arts field is rarely explicit at present, the aesthetics under debate in the showcase are developing from intercultural encounters and spaces opened up by these organisations. Contemporary dance offers creative and social possibilities for individual expression, but its abstract opaqueness potentially makes it politically suspect. In saying this, I do not want to suggest that dance is inherently subversive, or that contemporary Cambodian dancers are necessarily engaged in creating political works that criticise the state, but the potential for dance to be read as such remains latent. Indeed, Sovitou described in interview how he was part of a contemporary dance group that was initially (and incorrectly) perceived by the government as a group of 'inciters' because they were doing something that could not be easily read or understood. As Nelson (2014:123) argues, in Cambodia, the ephemerality of artistic genres of performance means they contain less political purchase than the fact that authorities find them difficult to decipher. Here, I build upon this to suggest that contemporary dance can express both direct and indirect messages through aesthetic qualities that pull together different spaces, producing a contested ground for negotiating geopolitical issues.

VI. Conclusion

Contemporary Cambodian dance therefore offers a way to consider a range of interweaving geographies that remain hidden from view in existing geographical accounts of the performing arts. By connecting with relevant areas of research in theatre and performance studies, it is possible to explore different ways of analysing the performing arts to develop a fuller appreciation of what their geographies might be. In beginning to undertake such an activity, this paper has opened up three new avenues of inquiry under the auspices of a broader argument that calls for geographers to deepen their engagement with the theories and practices of the performing arts, particularly as research develops in the fields of creative geographies and the geohumanities (Daniels et al 2011; Dear et al 2011; Hawkins 2014).

The paper has particularly explored resonances between geography and theatre and performance studies in relation to interculturalism, creative migration, and contemporary geopolitics. Each of these areas of research in theatre and performance studies can extend existing approaches to the geographies of the performing arts, whether through a focus on the cultural identities and aesthetics of the body, the impact of transnational circulations on the development of performance praxis, or the affective production of statehood in the wake of violent conflict. In so doing, the paper has also knitted together different areas of research within human geography, with such connections strengthening our appreciation of the performing arts as central to a range of geographical concerns. Indeed, the performing arts can extend our apprehension of geographical phenomena more widely, such that

they need not be limited to the field of the performing arts *per se* (see also Rogers 2012a). Here, for instance, focusing on the performing arts widened the interactive scope of geographical research on aesthetics by focusing on the contested cultural interactions produced by transnationalism, it illustrated how migration entails performing new modes of subjectivity and identity that are constantly emerging, thereby building on wider debates around the fluid and performative production of migrant subjectivity (see Collins et al 2014; Halfacree and Merriman 2015), and it developed an understanding of how the performing arts and their affective qualities can be seen as geopolitical agents. The performing arts can therefore work as platforms for furthering geographical appreciations of performance and performativity more widely. Nevertheless, such developments proceed through cross-disciplinary connections, much in the same way that Hawkins (2012: 66) identifies in relation to the geographies of art, producing a perspective that 'blends the critical and creative, the conceptual, aesthetic and stylistic.'

My aim here, then, has been to encourage geographers to find a more complex and expansive appreciation, indeed theorisation, of 'the geographies of the performing arts.' At the very least, the challenge posed by the example of contemporary Cambodian dance is for geographers to develop an interweaving sensibility, an appreciation of how the different spatialities of the performing arts are interconnected, and through this, become politically and culturally invested. It is to recognise that practitioners imagine, create and perform in ways that move far beyond a focus on a specific body and its representational and/or affective capacities. By considering how the performing arts are situated in, and connected with, much bigger geographical

questions around, for instance, the constitution of culture in a globalised world, or the rehabilitation of civil society during and after war, it is possible to broaden the horizons of what constitutes research on the geographies of the performing arts, and thus the geographies of performance more broadly. As a result, the performing arts do not simply illustrate geographical phenomena but ultimately constitute and contest them.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all those who were interviewed for this project, to Bertrand Porte at L'École Française d'Extrême Orient in Phnom Penh, and to Chorlida Leng for her assistance with various elements of this research. Thanks to the reviewers for their insightful comments that helped me to sharpen this paper, and to Chris Philo for his editorial guidance.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This research was funded by an ASEASUK-British Academy-ECAF fellowship.

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