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### **Paper:**

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## **Material Migrations of Performance**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the multiple materialities of the performing arts and their transnational migration. In contrast to the majority of scholarship on the geographies of performance, which focuses on the space of the body, this paper provides an analysis of performance and materiality that encompasses, but also extends beyond, the corporeal through its attention to the material qualities of costumes, scripts and performance form. In conducting this analysis, the paper also draws attention to the differential movement of performance works more widely by focusing on their composite materialities. Such an approach extends our apprehension of what the geographies of performance, and the geographies of art more widely, might be, and draws attention to under-investigated spheres of creative activity.

**Key words:** performance, materiality, art, geography, transnationalism

### **Introduction**

Geographical research into creative practices has highlighted how materiality is central to an artwork's meaning and ability to engage people (Hawkins et al 2015). Although bodily spaces and encounters often spring to mind when thinking about

creative materialities, artworks are diverse in their material composition and form. Geographers have traced such dynamics, particularly in research that sees the geographies of creativity as distributed across different mediums and agencies (DeSilvey 2007; Dixon et al 2012). This paper develops such investigations in relation to geographical research on performance, which often focuses on embodiment at the expense of other modes of materiality (such as sets and costumes).

By viewing materiality as composed of, and emerging from, relations that co-constitute human and non-human entities the paper opens up the investigation of the spaces through which performance works are composed. It particularly illustrates how performative materialities work through, and re-produce, transnational geographies (see also author 1, author 2). Such a perspective dovetails with literatures on transnational commodity culture, where transnationalism is viewed as an everyday phenomenon that engages different entities in cross-border flows to varying degrees (Collins 2008; Jackson et al 2004). Extending these ideas to geographical research on performance, and to the geographies of art more widely, highlights that the material geographies of creative works have been seen as mutable but not necessarily differential. It is not simply that 'a work' migrates, but perhaps only parts of it do, or each material component expresses different transnational geographies, different degrees of mobility. The geographies of art and performance works can therefore be seen as constantly mutating as they are inserted into cross-border fields.

In what follows, I review existing literatures on materiality, art and performance before considering these in the light of geographical research on transnationalism. The paper then draws upon research into the connections between Asian performance scenes in the US, the UK and East/South East Asia to analyse the transnational material geographies of costumes, scripts, and the evolving form of

performance itself. In summary, it considers what might be gained by placing materials at the forefront of geographical analyses of art and performance.

### **Material Geographies of Art and Performance**

Recent research in human geography has paid increased attention to materiality, highlighting its role in mediating social and economic relations in a more-than-human world (Jackson 2000). Although such work initially advocated a focus on objects, geographical approaches to materiality have since proliferated in relation to wider theoretical currents. The result is a diverse field that includes the embodied phenomenological experience of materiality, the co-constitutive relationships between humans and objects within actor-network theory, and the more radical ahuman approaches occurring under the banner of ‘new materialisms’ where matter is seen to have a life of its own (see also Anderson and Tolia-Kelly 2004).

The field of creative and artistic geographies is no exception in displaying this heterogeneity but it coalesces around the idea that materiality is dynamic. Although the material geographies of art extend beyond a focus on the human body, geographers have, nevertheless, paid the greatest attention to creative materialities vis-à-vis embodied engagements. Taking their cue from phenomenological approaches to the material world in particular, accounts have emphasised the relationship between artistic practice and fleshy sensoria. This is evident in work that examines how installation art and performance works create immersive sensory environments (Hawkins 2010; Hawkins and Straughan 2014; Straughan 2014), or that views landscape as an environment that co-constitutes the performing body (Wylie 2003).

However, these accounts often bleed into new materialist perspectives that emphasise how matter is contingent and emerges from varied relations that exceed human intentions (Bennett 2010). This can be seen in research that examines how sensory stimuli create atmospheres (as in Straughan's (2014) account of producing smell in the gallery), in work that analyses how the embodied materialities of an installation become dispersed and re-assembled through vibratory nano-spaces (Hawkins and Straughan 2014), and in research addressing how performing arts praxis can reconfigure the affective capacities of bodies (McCormack 2013). Elsewhere, the radical potential of new materialist approaches and their focus on heterogeneous worlds of difference comes to the foreground, such as in Hawkins et al's (2015) research on how the material qualities of artworks are affected by the forces and atmospheres of the physical environment. These materialities help to produce new imaginaries of climate change and displace human-centric accounts of agency.

This paper, however, finds a greater affinity with analyses of material culture that stem from a focus on objects. It is inspired by Appadurai's (1986) account of 'the social life of things', which moves beyond simplistic 'object biographies' by examining how the meaning of things emerges not only from their intrinsic qualities, but also from their use, representation, and relationships to different entities, creating "entanglements of animate and inanimate bodies and matter" (Gibson 2016: 65). In such research, material worlds are active and co-constitute social worlds, transforming interactions, social groupings and the organisation of power, even as they also contain a potential that exists beyond human encounters (Latour 2004). In this respect, the paper sits within geographical research on creativity that attends to what the composition and qualities of material objects actually do. Such concerns can

be traced, for instance, in research on the geographies of craft that examines how materiality shapes the geographies of labour, work and manufacturing (Carr and Gibson 2015; Gibson 2016), or in participatory research where the use of pens and paint “suggest interactions, demand communications and enable conversations”, opening up new modes of connection and dialogue through their materiality (Askins and Pain 2011: 813). As with other approaches, materiality is thus seen as key to art’s creative and transformative capacities.

This paper applies these ideas to work on the geographies of performance, where embodied, human materialities are stubbornly persistent. Owing to the influence of ideas from non-representational theory, this field of research has often focused on the body and its affective capacities. As such, the multiple materialities of performance remain under-analysed by geographers. The paper develops these ideas by re-focusing our analysis of performance onto its material composition and by examining different types of art and performance works. In particular, I suggest that theatre or more theatrical modes of dance and live art can emphasize the materiality of scripts, costumes, sets, and multimedia, alongside their embodied interactions (see also Rogers 2010 on scripts). It is impossible to fully escape human interactions with material worlds when analysing the performing arts. Nevertheless, the ‘stuff’ of performance co-constitutes works alongside performing bodies and can come to the fore in driving the creation and circulation of performances in ways that escape their tethering to human creators. In tracing these material circulations it also becomes apparent that whilst material culture is often viewed as active and agentic, few accounts pay attention to the differential mobilities of materiality and material objects, to degrees of liveliness and dynamism. Here, I suggest that exploring the

heterogeneous materialities of performance also exposes the heterogeneous mobilities of materiality.

### **Transnational Geographies, Art and Performance**

Attending to the material components of performance extends our wider appreciation of the geographies from, and through which, creative works are produced. More specifically, I argue that these materialities ‘migrate’ through transnational geographies. Geographers working on transnationalism have particularly highlighted how material culture is involved in the creation, circulation and consumption of cross-border spaces (Collins 2008; Crang et al 2003; Tolia-Kelly 2004). Yet the relationship between materiality and transnational mobility is also an emerging feature of work in tourism studies, particularly regarding souvenirs (see, for instance, Gibson (2014) on cowboy boots). It has also long been a feature of research examining the cultures of empire, particularly regarding the reproduction of distinctly ‘British’ homes and their artefacts abroad (Blunt and Dowling 2006), the migration of landscape aesthetics through built forms such as the bungalow (King 1997), and the circulation of imperial commodities that created new fashions and tastes (Cheang 2010). Although there is a growing body of work that investigates the circulation of art and performance across different translocalities (Morris 2005; Neate 2012; Rogers 2011, 2015), such research has yet to focus on how the material artefacts of the arts are also embedded in, and create, cross-border geographies.

Setting the material cultures of performance within the cultural, political and economic forces of transnationalism encourages a greater attention to their composition. As highlighted above, although artistic geographies view material

culture as fluid (DeSilvey 2007; Hawkins 2012), this research has yet to encompass the idea that a creative work may be constituted and transformed through *differential* cross-border movements. Such an insight becomes apparent when attending to the multiple materialities of theatrical styles of performance, as each component, from a script to a costume, potentially embodies its own physical or imaginative transnational geographies. As such, the materiality of performance is not only marked by multiplicity, but also by varying degrees of internal mobility. Transnational migration may also require that the material qualities of a performance work and its components shift, or that a work be re-composed as it travels, reflecting the geographies it is situated in and creates (see, for instance, Johnston and Pratt's (2014) discussion of producing their testimonial play, *Nanay*, in the Philippines). As illustrated below, these processes occur in relation to makers, funders and audiences, and entail a consideration of how a work is framed in an international festival, how much it costs to tour, and what cultural and political meanings it acquires.

This paper therefore suggests that a performance and its mode of expression cannot be divorced from its evolving material mobility. Ferrari (2008: 55) describes this as the 'trans' in transnationalism, to the ability of artworks to "transfer, transcend, trespass, transgress" linguistic, media, textual and embodied borders alongside those of the nation-state. Although such ideas perhaps over-valorise the long-standing association between transnationalism and transformation (Vertovec 2004), they can also encompass the politics and frictions that are embedded in any mobile phenomena. Attending to the materiality of theatrical performances therefore enables this paper to provide broader insights into the shifting geographical configuration of art and performance, whilst highlighting how materiality itself is rendered variously mobile in the process.



## **Methods**

The paper draws upon on-going research into the transnational geographies of performance. This work analyses the cross-border relationships between English-language theatre scenes in the US, the UK and East/South East Asia. The project comprises over 120 semi-structured interviews with participants who are involved in different aspects of theatrical production. This is combined with research on specific case studies of theatrical or multimedia performance that articulate transnational spatialities in content or form (see author 2). The examples used here reflect synergies among artists who work in very different contexts, who use and approach materiality differently, but who I found were nevertheless connected by the sense that the material components of performance, or their differential movement, were important to the creative production and circulation of performance works. Indeed, some of this recognition stemmed from my own encounters with the material objects of performance in interviews, from being surrounded by, and shown, the same kinds of ‘stuff’ in offices, studios and homes. My wider approach to the analysis of case study productions involves ‘following’ productions as they travel across different sites, illustrating how creative practices and objects can change in form and meaning – something that also drew attention to the differential composition of performance and its materialities through transnational migration. (Cook et al 2004; author 1).

## **Migratory Materialities**

In attending to ‘the social life’ of artworks, it is possible to trace the multiple materialities of performance and their transnational geographies (Appadurai 1986). However, transnationalism is an uneven phenomenon, creating degrees of migratory mobility (Crang et al 2003). This section applies these ideas to the materiality of performances to consider how the geographies of differential movement relate to creative expression.

### *Costumes*

I begin this discussion by focusing on *STELLA*, a biographical performance by the dancer and choreographer Muna Tseng about her mother that was performed in New York in May 2011. The dresses and personal artefacts that Tseng inherited from her mother whilst she was still alive inspired the performance and its movement. As a result, this piece focuses attention on what Monks (2010: 1) calls ‘costuming’ rather than simply ‘costume’, on how costume is an active socialised materiality that does more than dress the performer’s body.

The transnational trajectories of Stella’s tailor-made clothing, crockery and furniture were key to *STELLA*’s dramaturgical possibilities as they reflected Stella’s migration history. Tseng’s parents migrated from Shanghai to Hong Kong during the Communist Revolution in 1949, then in the 1950s Stella studied in London for a year before the family migrated from Hong Kong to Vancouver in 1966. In Canada, these objects represented Stella’s decline from a privileged, upper-class society hostess, carrying specific memories and acquiring unexpected meanings (see DeSilvey 2007;

Hoskins 2007). When Tseng inherited them, they moved to New York and took on a new creative role. The dresses, in particular, were so evocative of other times and places that they seemed to demand an artistic response from Tseng.

Tseng, alongside three dancers (David Thomson, Rebecca Warner and Isadora Wolfe), wore her mother's dresses to develop *STELLA*'s movement. Tseng's oeuvre is modern dance but she developed her abstract style to reflect the combination of westernised cosmopolitanism and Chinese cultural traditionalism in her mother's outlook, one that resulted from transnational migration:

“She was a London University educated woman living in Vancouver telling me to be all Confucius. [...] So I wanted this East/West bi-focused embodiment. Western bodies in Chinese dresses, how does that highlight how culturally we move in different ways? You cannot extend your legs very much in Chinese cheongsams, they are very sculptural, and immediately they made the dancers discover new vocabulary.” (Tseng, interview 2011)

Although some dresses were too small for the dancers, the size and shape of Stella's body, alongside the fashionable styles of 1960s Hong Kong, structured the dance created, reflecting how costuming can “shape identities and form bodies” (Monks 2010: 4). This creative ability of material objects to “act upon and inform its [sic] transactions with human interpreters” occurred through the layering of, and interaction between, different materialities (body to body, clothing to body) (Hoskins 2007: 441). The resulting movement did not convey a simplistic interculturalism or hybridity, where culturally ‘different’ performances are naively combined (Lo and

Gilbert 2002). Rather, the dancing body was framed by an interactive palimpsestual layering that shaped the expression of transnational cross-cultural experience.

The materiality of the dresses also evoked memories that inspired the movement's affective quality whilst further reflecting Stella's life:

“I made an inventory and described each dress with details like this [showing dress] was in ecru and black lace with velvet devoir embroidery. Then I started to build from that, what was my memory of her wearing this particular dress? I tried to remember what perfume she used, what it was like when she kissed me goodnight when she went out with my father.” (Tseng, interview 2011)

The fabric created sensory impressions that developed the movement, reflecting how artworks express or mediate memory (Till 2008). The dancers performed different versions of Stella, with Warner and Wolfe dancing during her life in Shanghai in a seductive and flirtatious way to express her glamorous and self-assured character. In her later years in Vancouver, they danced with a lethargic, drifting quality that reflected nostalgia for her past as well as her declining status. This movement and feeling originated from the dresses, but in performance it was juxtaposed against Stella's razor wit, as evidenced in the spoken and projected text, such as, 'You make me cough blood.' Some dresses were worn by the dancers, with ten others placed on mannequins around the edge of the performance space. Stella was therefore vicariously present on stage, such that dresses (as costumes, sets and inspiration) worked as a form of “re-memory” by “metonymically transport [sic] you to a place where you have never been, but which is recalled through the inscription left in the imagination” (Tolia-Kelly 2004: 316). The vividness of Stella's transnational life was

therefore stimulated by, and expressed through, the embodied materiality of her clothing.

### *Scripts*

*STELLA* highlights how the transnational migration of objects can inspire performances, but their material composition and form also enables performances to move across borders. This is evident with scripts which are materially fluid objects, something that allows them to become hypermobile compared to their authors. Existing literatures on creative transnational networks analyse the circulation of artistic discourse through articles and journals, yet as objects they are always secondary to the art or performance work in hand (see Morris 2005, Neate 2012). In contrast, the script is the keystone of theatrical production and is, perhaps, the component that migrates the most. Although name recognition often increases a script's potential for movement, particularly transnationally (where success in a regional or national venue increases the chance of a foreign production) this is not required. A script can shift its material composition and consequently its level of migratory mobility, turning from a printed object that comprises the whole or part of a play that is used and embodied in audition rooms, rehearsals and theatres, to being one play, or one scene, in an anthology that is distributed through commercial publishing networks, to being circulated electronically via email to reach literary managers, actors, directors and producers across the world.

These degrees of material mobility were evident in talking to playwrights who often discussed sending scripts as email attachments in attempts to get their work

staged. High competition and limited production opportunities meant that playwrights cast their net as widely as possible, contacting literary managers at specific venues and submitting work for competitions, readings, festivals and development workshops, using authorial identities to target specific locations (such as a female playwright submitting to a festival of New Women's Writing or a Singaporean writer submitting to the Royal Court's International Playwrights Group). Generally, there was an inability to determine the geographical specificity or scope of a play's migratory journey owing to the difficulty of obtaining production opportunities. Scripts are therefore spatially promiscuous and unpredictable objects, they are "written to be performed elsewhere" and move around seeking a home, something increasingly enabled by their electronic form (Rebellato 2006: 99).

However, playwrights also described how they sometimes followed up an email submission with a paper copy as the presence of the script as a physical object was perceived as harder to ignore. This was particularly the case with competitive venues, whether at home or abroad. During interviews, the shelves and desks of literary managers, directors, and artistic directors were covered with scripts or anthologies as physical objects. Literary managers particularly highlighted the importance of published anthologies in looking for new plays to stage, rather than "trawling the internet" or relying on personal submissions (Cherbonnier, interview 2010). Such compendiums compile plays along thematic, place-based or company lines, but are also viewed as a filtering process that mark out significant works. This process occurred in tandem with looking for pieces that reflected the mission, agenda or artistic style of a specific company. The multiple mobile material forms of a script therefore allow it to traverse different spaces and to respond to their different creative practices and agendas.

Simultaneously, this material fluidity creates variability between the migration of a playwright and their work. When scripts are in development, playwrights often migrate with the work, some even self-finance such activity to “learn more about how the play is working [...] I can see the actors’ impulses and use them to refine the piece” (Rno, interview 2011). Here the script as an embodied, acted, imagined and written object draws together different materialities that evolve in a co-constitutive manner. Nevertheless once a play was finished, writers rarely travelled abroad to readings because “you keep having showings, but you don’t learn anything new” (Ting, interview 2011). At this point, the script’s material fluidity enables it to configure and create new social relations independently of its creator. For instance, Prince Gomolvilas’ 2003 acclaimed play, *Mysterious Skin*, addresses homosexual child abuse, and has been produced by Asian American and mainstream regional theatres in the US. A British director, Peter Darney, contacted Gomolvilas via his website, and Gomolvilas gave him permission to stage it in the London Fringe and Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2010, and the International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival in 2011. The themes, pedigree and electronic form of the play enabled it to traverse various types of international festival. However, unexpected encounters in its embodied form took it to new locations independently of Gomolvilas as Vertigo Theatre Productions saw it being performed and then produced it in another new incarnation in Manchester in 2013. Gomolvilas himself did not attend these stagings because they were “very nice, an added extra” for an already successful play (Gomolvilas, interview 2011). *Mysterious Skin* as a script was therefore constituted in and through multiple materialities that influenced its varied locations of production beyond its author, reflecting how objects contain the potential to make new relations in dialogue with human subjectivities (Appadurai 1986).

### *Performance form*

Scripts highlight the differential migration of artists and their works, as well as the role of material fluidity in promoting transnational migration. However, changes in the material form of an art or performance piece can also shift its content and aesthetic. When a script migrates, its basic content usually remains the same, even though it may be performed in multiple ways. However, in order for performances to migrate transnationally they sometimes need to be completely reworked, and this is particularly evident in international festivals. Practitioners with festival commissions often anticipate travel and build it into their design, such as by making sets from light or malleable materials that can be easily and cheaply transported. However, some performances need to change their material form and, as a result, their aesthetic content, to be inserted into such circuits, illustrating how works simultaneously cross territorial and artistic borders (Ferrari 2008). Attending to issues of form therefore further illustrates the material instability and emergent nature of performances circulating transnationally, but also provides insights into the economic and cultural processes underpinning their migration.

One example of these processes is the multimedia production *Piccadilly Revisited* directed by David Tse in London in 2010. The performance reflected on the life of the Asian American (and international) film star Anna May Wong and screened her 1929 British silent film *Piccadilly* with a new score played by a British Chinese orchestra. Acting, contemporary dance and video installations were added at key points to critically reimagine the film's narrative. The performance received good reviews but Tse struggled to tour *Piccadilly Revisited* across the UK owing to the



expense of employing, housing, and paying travel costs for musicians, actors, dancers and technical staff. However, international festivals are events with the resources to stage such work and so Tse drew upon his connections with members of the Hong Kong Arts Festival to seek production opportunities. When So Kwok-wan, the Associate Programme Director, visited London, Tse showed him a DVD of the production:

“He said, ‘Absolutely love it, we want it for a new music slot and for budgetary reasons as well, we’d rather it was simpler. So are you able to not have dance, are you able not to have theatre in it?’” (Tse, interview 2010)

Immediately, the performance crossed from ‘multimedia’ to ‘music’ in order to fit the festival. Tse removed the dancing and the live actors (illustrating the differential movement of different materialities) but in order to retain a theatrical element and the conceptual idea of the film being revisited, he pre-recorded a voice-over of Calita Rainford performing as Anna May Wong. The video was re-edited and the score was finalised for musicians from the Hong Kong Sinfonietta. This process altered the material accents of *Piccadilly Revisited*. Live, moving bodies onstage were either removed or digitised so that they no longer demanded the audience’s attention. Instead, viewers were focussed on the sonic and visual materialities of film, score and voice (see Kanngieser 2012). Such shifts reflect the demands of the festival context and its imbrication in economic relations where works need to be mobile, but the key point is that the material qualities of performance, and performance form, are also subject to change. Peterson (2009: 114) describes the resulting impact as ‘globalisation’, that is, works are “sleek, recognisable” but devoid of local cultural

content. Here, the performance's British origins and locations complicate such ideas, but its materiality can be considered in this manner.

Tse felt that this process of material re-working through transnational migration made the piece "really strong" (Tse, interview 2010). Such shifts lessened as the performance became a successful, portable product, with its performance in Hong Kong leading to interest from the Macau Arts Festival and plans for a European and North American tour. *Piccadilly Revisited* was also performed in Beijing in 2012 as part of the UK Now Festival, a British Council showcase that promoted cultural cooperation between China and the UK. The changes in the performance's materiality contributes to its success but this does not make it stable as it has acquired different cultural and political inflections: in London it created resonances between Asian Americans and British East Asians by arguing against racial discrimination; in China it became a 'British' piece created by and about *huaren*, or overseas ethnic Chinese, that was used as part of the UK government's cultural diplomacy efforts; it also illustrated how *huaren* are claimed as part of a rich Chinese culture that reflects a desire for cultural influence abroad (see Lai and Lu 2012). *Piccadilly Revisited* therefore expressed the transformatory dynamism of performance as it migrates across artistic, territorial and cultural borders.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the varied materialities of performance and their transnational migration. Specifically, it has examined how the material qualities of costumes produce creative expressions through their transnational histories, even as they interact with fleshy bodies. It has also considered how a theatrical object such as

a script has different modes of materiality with degrees of mobility that influence the spaces of its production trajectory. Performances may also morph in their material content and form as they migrate transnationally on the international festival circuit. A work may appear finished, but its resonances continue to evolve according to its context of production and reception (see also Rogers 2011).

Through this analysis, the paper contributes to research on the geographies of performance by examining their multiple materialities. Considering different forms of materiality provides insights into both the processes behind performance works and the different relations in which they become embroiled. For instance, thinking about materiality and form draws attention to the role of economic globalization, geographies that remain under-examined in cultural geographical literatures on both art and performance. In addition, the paper has viewed the multiple materialities of performance not simply as fluid or mobile, but as differentially so. As a result, so too are their geographies, such that artistic works more widely can be seen as being forged from training, exchanges, materials and ideas that embody transnational geographies to different degrees. Such an insight therefore challenges the idea that art and performance works ‘migrate’ as singular entities and opens up new avenues for considering the multiple geographies that they articulate and create.

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