

Project supported by DisTanzen 2022

Temporal Singularities

Decolonial theories and Performing arts

Keywords: time, decolonial studies, Quantum Field Theory, activism, and performing arts;

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2022

SPONSORED BY:



Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung
für Kultur und Medien



Dachverband Tanz 
Deutschland

Funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media in the NEUSTART KULTUR program, relief program DIS-TANZEN of the Dachverband Tanz Deutschland.

Summary

Introduction	5
Body as phenomena	5
On temporal singularities and the end of contemporaneity	7
Bibliography	9

Abstract

I aim to discuss the ambiguous approach to neutrality and its relation to a traditional understanding of time through the lens of the performing arts. In this essay, I argue that in order to disrupt temporality, we need to revisit the emancipatory aspects of performance and politics and rethink how the body is understood in Western practices. My research question is elaborated as follows: how can the deconstruction of the linearity of time rethink how we understand the body within the performing arts? To answer this question, I suggest a reading of performance and the body as phenomena following various perspectives from theorists such as Karen Barad, Donna J. Haraway, Eduardo Miranda, Bojana Kuns, and Rolando Vázquez. I attempt to offer decolonial tools that can be applied within the performing arts highlighting their multiple singularities and relational perspectives.

Resumo

Meu objetivo é discutir a abordagem ambígua da neutralidade e sua relação com uma compreensão tradicional do tempo através das lentes das artes cênicas. Neste ensaio, defendo que para perturbar a temporalidade precisamos rever os aspectos emancipatórios da performance e da política, e repensar como o corpo é compreendido nas práticas ocidentais. Minha pergunta de pesquisa é elaborada da seguinte forma: como a desconstrução da linearidade do tempo pode repensar como entendemos o corpo dentro das artes cênicas? Para responder a esta pergunta, sugiro uma leitura da performance e do corpo como fenômenos seguindo várias perspectivas de teóricos como Karen Barad, Donna J. Haraway, Eduardo Miranda, Bojana Kuns e Rolando Vázquez. Tento oferecer ferramentas descoloniais que possam ser aplicadas dentro das artes performáticas destacando suas múltiplas singularidades e perspectivas relacionais.

Temporal singularities

Introduction

Time, space, and matter are conventional notions that remain unquestioned in the core definition of contemporaneity. However, what would happen with the concept of 'contemporary' if detached from the traditional idea of what is known as 'now'? What if time was not translated as a moment that happens after another? What if matter could not be mapped within spaces but understood as a play between existence and non-existence? I will argue that the problem with contemporaneity is that it does not recognize differences between contexts and political implications. Instead, it implies an idea of neutrality and universality imposed from Western perspectives on the rest of the globe, causing the erasing of 'other' histories, cultures, and aesthetics.

My research question is elaborated as follows: how can the deconstruction of the linearity of time rethink how we understand the body within the performing arts? To answer this question, I will discuss the notion of neutrality and its relation to the politics of time and suggests a reading of performance and the body as phenomena. Furthermore, this paper attempts to offer decolonial thoughts that can be applied within the performing arts to highlight its multiple singularities and relational perspectives.

This research begins with an agential understanding of the body (matter) proposed by physicist and philosopher Karen Barad, who, through the lens of Quantum Field Theory, offers us the concept of intra-action as an attempt to disrupt the linearity of time, the homogeneity of space, and the materiality and politics of the body. I bring to light two important principles that merge Barad's agential intra-actions, "situated knowledge" brought by Donna J. Haraway and "body-territory" developed by Brazilian professor Eduardo Miranda. Furthermore, I will introduce a dilemma presented by the philosopher Bojana Kunst to disturb the temporal aspects of the performing arts and defend the idea of a "dis-eventualization" of performance. Finally, I will present a decolonial shift offered by Rolando Vázquez, acknowledging the colonial influence of Euro-American aesthetics and claiming the 'end of the contemporary.'

Body as phenomena

The body, its spatio-temporal dis/continuity, and the perception of presence, void, and reality have been the focus of contemporary performance art discourse (Derrida, 1994; Greiner, 2005 and 2010; Gomez-Peña, 2015; Kunst, 2011 and 2015; Lepecki, 2006, 2012 and 2016; Sampaio & Simão, 2018;

Miranda, 2020). It is essential to highlight how aesthetics are commonly defined through a Euro-American perspective when bridging to performing arts. It is constantly (re)normalized concerning time (based on the Euro-American present) and space (imposed on non-Western countries), and it shapes the notions of the body (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003; Butler, 1988; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1995 & 2004; Grosfoguel, 2012; Mignolo & Vazquez, 2013; Miranda, 2020; Ribeiro, 2019; Barad, 2020). The problem starts when this imposed model is considered neutral, marginalizing/eliminating other identities and forms of expression. (Oyèyewúmi, 1997; Mignolo, 2003; Spivak, 1988 and 2012, Garcia-Olp, 2018). Hence, I conducted this research through a reading in which performance and the body are understood as phenomena.

Karen Barad recognizes that distinct entities, agencies, and events emerge from/through their intra-actions. Moreover, she suggests that the responsibility to unfix the line between 'self' and 'other,' 'past,' 'present' and 'future,' 'here' and 'now,' and 'cause' and 'effect' is taken by not seeing them as the intertwining of separate entities but instead put them in relation to each other.¹ This relationality is based on what Donna J. Haraway once called 'situated knowledge'. Within Feminist standpoint theories, Haraway recognizes the importance of acknowledging different contexts and political-epistemological-ethical implications, highlighting the multiplicities - the so-called pluriversality - in our existence.²

Following this understanding, neither a model nor a universalized definition of the body is possible. According to Quantum Field Theory, matter (body) is understood in its infinite layers of im/possibilities and in/determined dynamics of nothingness, in which nothingness is the dynamism of in/determinacy of time-being, non/presence, non/existence.³ The notion of intra-actions consists of "[an] infinite set of possibilities or infinite sum of histories." Moreover, it "entails a particle touching itself, and then that touch touching itself, and transforming, and touching other particles that make up the vacuum, and so on, ad infinitum."⁴

¹ (Barad 2010, pp. 264-6)

² (Haraway 1988)

³ Karen Barad once explained her use of '/' (as an example of im/possibilities), by which she means more than just both (possibilities and impossibilities) but rather that a superposition represents an indeterminacy between the two. In this paper, I will use it similarly, differentiating from her terms using quotation marks.

⁴ (Barad 2010, 2017 and 2020)

The looping in which matter touches itself, transforms, and touches other particles, is what Eduardo Miranda illustrates as a body in constant change of skin.⁵ He proposes a reading in which one can only be defined by its own experiences, marked by time, space, and memory. What Miranda will address as 'body-territory' is the reaffirmation of socio-historical constructions, cultural baggage, and experiences concerning time and space. The body acts simultaneously in several spatialities, affected by different forces within what he calls the 'territory of passage.'⁶

The constant change of skin and the infinite territories of the body is what Barad establishes as the moment of 'returning' - a touch of the self and the touch of others, which troubles the ruling conceptions of space-time, matter, causality, and nothingness.⁷ It counterpoints Newtonian physics, a formative and enabling part of American-European modernity that pursues the 'renormalization' of matter to subtract all infinite possibilities, pre-supposing a 'common neutral essence' of existence.⁸ All these scholars teach us that an infinite number of possibilities exist, and the moment of self-intra-actions represents the encounter with the infinite alterity of the self. Thus, contesting the 'renormalization' and the neutralization of an aesthetic model, imposed by American Eurocentrism and its contemporaneity, is fundamental to perceiving body and performance as phenomena.

On temporal singularities and the end of contemporaneity

"Performance today is fighting against a chain of ghostly apprehensions that often transform the performance as a material practice into the continuous abstraction of procedures, dividing it from its spatial, situational, and micropolitical dynamic, and abstracting it from its contradictory and always partial embodiment."⁹

Drawing from Žižek's concept of 'dis-eventualization,' in the article "The Troubles with Temporality," Bojana Kunst frames performance by showing how its materiality is constitutive of the temporality of its own event. The misleading factor, as she argues, is when performance is narrowed to its macropolitical context, as universalized emancipatory histories, rather than empowered by its micropolitical aspects (as many sensory, spatial, and temporal forces). Kunst perceives a temporal dilemma in performance when using the notions of present as its political force while being haunted

⁵ This expression is a reference to the Afro-Brazilian orixá Oxumaré. (Miranda 2020)

⁶ (Miranda 2020)

⁷ (Barad 2017, p. 81)

⁸ (Barad 2019 and 2020)

⁹ (Kunst 2015, p. 6)

by its past through its own process. For her, the temporality of performance should not be universalized but addressed in its 'temporal singularity.'¹⁰

To delve deeper into this dilemma, we must not only untangle our understanding of temporality but also undo contemporaneity itself. As an attempt to bring into the present the responsibility of revisiting the past and assuming the indeterminacy of its ongoing narratives, Karen Barad claims the 'noncontemporaneity of the present,' as she explains:

“The past is never closed, never finished once and for all, but there is no taking back, setting time aright, putting the world back on its axis. There is no erasure [of past violence] finally. The traces of all reconfigurings are written into the [iterative] enfolded materializations of what was/is/to-come. Time can't be fixed. To address the past (and the future), to speak with ghosts is not to entertain or reconstruct some narrative of the way it was, but to respond, to be responsible, to take responsibility for that which we inherit (from the past and the future), for the entangled relationalities of inheritance that 'we' are, to acknowledge and be responsive to the noncontemporaneity of the present, to put oneself at risk, to risk oneself (which is never one or self), to open oneself up to indeterminacy in moving towards what is to come ... Only in this ongoing responsibility to the entangled other...is there the possibility of justice-to-come.”¹¹ (emphasis by the author)

The way we generally understand 'contemporary' perpetuates modernity's politics of time. It reproduces the colonial difference by exercising power over the definition and regulation of the 'now,' as an aesthetic standard, creating a separation between those who belong to the now of contemporaneity and those that are relegated to its pastness. From a decolonial perspective, Rolando Vázquez reminds us that not all aesthetics are considered to be contemporary. So, whoever narrates contemporaneity holds power to colonize the conditions for belonging to the 'now' and which aesthetics are taken as 'others.' Contemporary, as Vázquez suggests, perform two movements of erasure, one of classification and the other of exclusion. In other words, contemporary can only exist through the simultaneous production of its alterity. As a response to the wester-centric contemporaneity, Vázquez brings to light a non westernized movement that works on a denial of contemporaneity, not wanting to be included or recognized as such, seeking emancipation and autonomy from the aesthetic standards and regulation of time, space, and body, which is, in his words, 'the end of the contemporary.'¹²

¹⁰ (Kunst 2015, p. 9)

¹¹ (Barad 2020, p. 105) and (Barad 2010, pp. 264-265)

¹² (Vázquez 2020 pp. 57-62)

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