



Performing Islands

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ABSTRACT

The pairing of the terms ‘islands’ and ‘commodities’ immediately raises the idea of islands both as sites of production and as markets -- or as places of cultivation, growing, harvesting, manufacturing, and trading of commodities. A top-of-mind understanding of these terms can thus be pegged on economic terms: islands as producers and consumers, islands as sites for trade and commerce. Not surprisingly, the term ‘performance’ comes up in relation to how commodities fare in the exchange processes, commonly referring to whether or how a particular commodity gets sold or bought, at what bulk or rate, at what price ranges, how fast or slow all these happen, and is it bringing in income for the island. But performance comes up also in terms of its aesthetic sense in the equation islands + commodities because producers of commodities have developed performance practices aimed ultimately at marketing their commodities even if the discourse around such performances is framed in terms that highlight other-than-economic concerns like ‘identity’ or ‘heritage’ or ‘devotion’. The economic thus becomes a condition in which performance arises and is sustained, becomes tradition, in the lives of island communities. Islands perform their commodities and in the process become commodities themselves – and thus the need to display and market themselves, as happens with tourism programs. The paper explores how this happens, adding a third term to the pairing: islands, commodities, and performance. It investigates how performance operates in the dynamics of flow and relations at work in the island trading in and of commodities and how performance used as a critical lens might reveal the social, political, and artistic/aesthetic dimensions operating in the triadic configuration.

Keywords: *performance, islands, cultural heritage, tradition, festivals, commodification*

1. INTRODUCTION

How does a third term, performance, in the equation ‘islands + commodities’ become a productive and critical lens with which to understand the relation of islands and commodities? The pairing of the terms ‘islands’ and ‘commodities’ immediately raises the idea of islands both as sites of production and as markets -- or as places of cultivation, growing, harvesting, manufacturing, and trading of commodities. A top-of-mind understanding of these terms can thus be pegged on economic terms: islands as producers and consumers, islands as sites for trade and commerce. Thus, one island is known for its mangoes, another as the top producer of corn, and another is known for its marble, or gold, etc. Such produce or product is the wealth upon which the economy is based and what they lack they import from other islands. In the old days, they bartered goods and commodities, and this happened even within one island — the people of the uplands bartered vegetables for fish, and the people of the coasts and rivers bartered their fish catch for wood products. Then markets or permanent physical locations of these exchanges emerged, and money was invented, while basic structures of island societies and the configuration of ownership and exchange relations among them changed. However, oversimplified I am putting it here, we know this story well. It is the story of how some islands acquired wealth and power and other islands were subdued and became impoverished. It is the story of conquest, of colonialism, of genocide. It is also the story of resistance, of resilience and endurance, of war and revolution. It is a tale of greed and domination, but it is also a narrative of how nations came to be, and, as I emphasize here, how cultures were forged. This story is not of the past; it is an ongoing one. The terms of engagement, of play, of negotiation, have changed in radical ways and it seems that on a planetary scale islands have disappeared—they have become only nodes of sameness in an international economic system where difference is seen as a commodity and cultivated for its capacity to produce affects that can bring in or translate into income.

2. OBJECTIVES

When we combine the terms "island" and "commodity," the idea that an island is both a place of production and a market - a place where goods are cultivated, cultivated, harvested, manufactured, and traded quickly emerges. A higher-level understanding of these terms can therefore be traced back to economic terms such as islands as producers and consumers, islands as places of trade and commerce. In the past, goods were exchanged, even within the islands, with

people in the highlands exchanging vegetables and fish, and people on the coast and rivers exchanging wooden products obtained from fishing. Later, as the basic structure of island societies and the configuration of property and exchange relations between them changed, markets, or permanent physical locations for these exchanges, emerged and money was invented. On the contrary, it will explore more about the story of how some islands gained wealth and power while others were conquered and reduced to poverty. This is a story of greed and domination, but it is also a story about how nations are formed and, as I emphasize here, how cultures are formed. In the international economic system, it has become a mere nexus of equality, where difference is commodified, cultivated, and the ability to influence society. It can bring you income or turn it into income.

3. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The term ‘performance’ comes up in relation to how commodities fare in the exchange processes, commonly referring to whether or how a particular commodity gets sold or bought, at what bulk or rate, at what price ranges, how fast or slow all these happen, and is it bringing in income for the island. This is performance in the sense elaborated by Jon McKenzie in the book *Perform or Else* (2001), which became a key reading in Performance Studies, the field of practice in and from which I speak here about islands and commodities. McKenzie talks about Technological Performance as one of three dominant paradigms in the understanding of performance (the two others being Organizational Performance and Cultural Performance). With the techno performance paradigm, we can understand that commodities and islands perform in the sense I am outlining here, similar to how McKenzie describes it, albeit in the context of the American experience, as a way ‘to market brands and products’ (McKenzie 11) —

What performs? Air fresheners, roofing insulation, bicycles, carpets and rugs, powerboats, wallcoverings, drain panels, cleansing towels, car-stereo equipment, bakeware, aquarium filters, tires, fabric, window film, woodworking knives, automotive timing chains, foil containers, audio antennae, deep-fat fryers, embossing tools, mop handles, music synthesizers, casement windows, and eyeliner—to name just a selection of those products marketed in the US with some form of the word “performance” actually appearing in their names. One industrial giant, Phillips Petroleum, even markets itself as “The Performance Company.”

The performance of a product becomes the draw for consumers to buy them, but techno performance carries with it other discourses —

When we talk about how a car performs, or when we ask about the performance specifications of a computer, we are citing a sense of performance used by engineers, technicians, and computer scientists. Concepts of technological performance help guide the design, testing, and manufacture of thousands upon thousands of industrial- and consumer-grade commodities. (10)

The first stages of Techno Performance that took shape after the Second World War were guided by the ‘military-industrial-academic complex’ and first became evident in the development of computers and missile systems of the arms race and the space race but soon expanded beyond these. ‘This expansion,’ McKenzie writes, ‘must be situated within the context of a complex and worldwide set of geopolitical, economic, technological, and cultural changes, changes that have come to be called “globalization”’ (13) — veering away from McKenzie, it is instructive for us to think with the Portuguese theorist on decolonization and the ‘epistemologies of the South’ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who identifies globalization as the new form of colonialism after the colonizers had physically left the colonies. The script of Techno Performance is the ‘bar code’, which was still quite novel (at least in the Philippines and other developing countries) at the time McKenzie’s book came out but which now, more than two decades later, is quite ordinary to and understandable by any twenty-first-century consumer anywhere in the world, buying any product or produce from vegetable, meat, or fish to computer hardware and software, and which one can even self-generate in transacting anything in the digital environment. In a very real sense, the new colonialism has triumphed unopposed. Each one of us everywhere has become a bar code of zeroes and ones, traceable as data, but also replicable and erasable, vulnerable to being made invisible and uncounted, indeed in many cases of small and remote islands: never counted, existing in the margins, and unable to demand what are supposed to be their social and ontological rights.

Jon McKenzie’s ‘Perform or Else’ proposed at the beginning of the twenty-first century what he calls a ‘general theory of performance’, drawing from the theories of Lyotard and Butler on performativity, Marcuse’s ‘performance principle’, and from readings of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and many others, which, as he says in the book, led him ‘to make this speculative forecast: [that] performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge’ (18). The ‘or else’ part of the statement ‘perform or else’ are challenges to perform or else: **or else** be made redundant, lose your job, or be demoted and earn less — ‘be fired, redeployed, or institutionally marginalized’ (7) in the case or organizational

performance (applied in industrial, professional, and even educational settings); and ‘Perform—or else: you’re obsolete’ or ‘outmoded’ (12) in the case of Technological performance. More than two decades later, now in 2023, people like us who are working in universities that operate like corporations in the neoliberal international economic system realize very well what this means: Perform or else lose your place in the global rankings, perform or else miss out on promotions and compensation benefits, perform or else forever work part time or as an adjunct lecturer under precarious terms. Even those of us who are senior and tenured are forever working on maintaining or raising our scorecards of teaching, research and publication performance – or else! Sorry, I can’t resist saying all these even if they are, strictly speaking, off the mark in this paper on performing islands. Anyhow, before going back on track, let me add that McKenzie’s ‘perform or else’ became a key analytic framework in Performance Studies and his projection of performance as the dominant critical lens for the twenty-first century found new articulations in later literature. An example is Chris Salter writing about ‘epistemes of performativity’ in a 2020 issue of *Performance Research*, the Routledge Journal of the Performing Arts:

As method, practice and worldview, it would not be an exaggeration to say that performance now is one of the central knowledge paradigms for the twenty-first century ... Disciplines now using this paradigm – ‘[are] as diverse as new media, management and organizational studies, human–computer interaction, architecture, science and technology studies (STS) [...] [The performance paradigm operates] across various epistemic and ontological registers and scales: from the microscopic ... to the operations of large-scale entities like organizations and techno- scientific infrastructures: the manipulation of atoms, genes, bacteria and instruments; the actions of human bodies, social colonies and political programmes that increasingly criss-cross sites and locales; the abstractions of mathematical models, the material apparatuses of laboratories and the social conglomeration of markets. Bacteria perform processes. Scientists perform experiments. Algorithms perform actions. Humans perform gender and sex. The question is who or what nowadays doesn’t perform?’ (Chris Salter in PR 25/3, p. 9).

Twenty-two years ago, McKenzie argued that performance was then already an emergent stratum of knowledge and power and observed that beyond the three paradigms he names, there is another level, another sense of performance at work in contemporary societies: how knowledge and power are themselves performative and contend with their own ‘or else’. Chris Salter’s 2020 description of performativity in the twenty-first century provides a vivid picture of how this has panned out.

Performance of and in islands comes up also in terms of its aesthetic sense because producers of commodities have developed performance practices aimed ultimately at marketing their commodities even if the discourse around such performances is framed in terms that highlight other-than-economic concerns like ‘identity’ or ‘heritage’ or ‘devotion’. The economic thus becomes a condition in which performance arises and is sustained, becomes tradition, in the lives of island communities. Here the paradigm of Cultural Performance is crucial in understanding how, for instance, tourism has shaped how islands present themselves to themselves and to others by their cultural performances, while attending to the very material need to survive and flourish. A case in point is the phenomenon of the cultural festivals, especially those invented in the push to market commodities, and thus are named after specific commodities: ‘tuna’ festival, ‘suman’ festival, ‘lechon festival’, etc. In the Philippines, a government program called OTOP — or one town one product — has given rise to many festivals across the country, events that are conceived and curated as performances of identity or as markers of heritage that the people can be proud of. Even long-running religious festivals have been recast or reframed within the market-oriented framework of contemporary touristic festivals in order to attract more visitors who will come to stay at hotels and lodging houses, buy the local fabrics, ceramics, keychains, mugs, t-shirts, and other forms of island souvenir items, sample the local cuisine, visit heritage sites, pay to view or participate in rituals and ceremonies, or don the traditional dress and get photographed for their Instagram posts.

That festivals are marketing strategies is a matter of course and is a non-issue to most people, who in fact see them as opportunities to flourish and be recognized by the world. Perhaps it is only the critics and cultural activists who protest because they question the hegemony of the neoliberal economic view that reduces everything and everyone to commodities and dictates the logic of market exchange. But, whether an issue or not, islands perform their commodities and, in the process, become commodities themselves. Islands perform — **or else:** the majority who depend on incomes from the festivals and other touristic activities will starve. In the festival, they sing and dance and use and deploy all the creative energies and resources they can muster to display their products, using performance to highlight their commodities and sell them — these are two senses of performance, techno and cultural, underpinned by a third one in McKenzie’s theory: organizational performance, in which the whole infrastructure made up of institutions and people involved in the making, distribution, and marketing of the commodities being sold, including the festival itself, become

subject to performance evaluation and performance management that put premium on efficiency and its expected outcome: profit. Arts management and festival management are examples of areas of practice that emerged as a response to the needs of the economic function and value of the arts and creativity, even as the arts and creativity themselves have become commodities, manufactured, sold, and bought in art fairs, art markets, auctions, and festivals.

4. CONCLUSION

‘So what?’ perhaps is the question, which is certainly not simple but is entangled in the central issues of our time. Performing islands is characterized by the same inequalities and violence against those whose knowledge and power do not count, however hard or however much they perform. Artists (and academics) struggle not to be complicit but fail most of the time. Thus, we should return to McKenzie’s ‘perform or else’ for cultural performance: perform or else be socially normalized and forget about resisting. Performance as radical and creative resistance. Performing islands outside of the normative and cooptive power of capitalism and the state. That’s the way being taken by some groups driven by a radical hope and commitment to discover and create real alternatives. It is hard but it’s the only way forward.

5. COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

This article is free from any conflict of interest regarding the data collection, analysis, and the publication process itself. Either replicate or modify the previous sentence for this part.

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