



Thicker States

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PSi #21: *Fluid States – Performances of UnKnowing*, both as a whole and as a collection of dispersed events, highlighted the broad academic project that is performance studies across regions and throughout time zones. The most recent and perhaps the most ambitious, *Fluid States* was the latest move towards the internationalization of performance studies (PS). The institutional history of performance studies has been extensively discussed and reiterated in key contributions like Shannon Jackson's *Professing Performance* (2004), TDR's "Is Performance Studies Imperialist?" Series (2006-7), McKenzie, Roms & Wee's *Contesting Performance* (2010), and Harding and Rosenthal's *The Rise of Performance Studies: Rethinking Richard Schechner's Broad Spectrum* (2011). In these contributions, the narrative that places the discipline's epicentre in New York University and Northwestern University is consistently affirmed, as is the discipline's subsequent phases of internationalization. There is a general consensus that the discipline has 'spread' outwardly to the rest of the world from its US bases. At the same time, a common thread in these contributions is the necessity to unsettle this narrative and shift the effort to historicize performance studies towards a local, genealogical orientation.

The success of such orientation remains under pressure. As Paul Rae argued in 2011, even in spite of the many sites of scholarly activity, "A properly international performance studies does not currently exist, and while a number of recent initiatives signal a shift in this direction, a quantitative change in who studies what, or in where such studies happen and how their outcomes are circulated, will not be sufficient to bring it about alone" (72-73). *Fluid States* was proposed as a way forward in response to such concerns and debates regarding the critical framework of internationalization that have shaped PSi and performance studies. As other pieces in this issue explain, *Fluid States*' "innovation" was to unsettle the usual practice of a centralized annual conference by way of hosting fifteen different events throughout the year. While connected under a shared name, these events were largely independent, a gesture that in turn worked towards dispersing PSi to various international locales. The goal, as McKenzie, Roms and Wee hoped in 2010, was to have relations forged that do not necessarily have to transit through or employ the usual perceived centers of knowledge production — the US and the UK.

Parallel to the execution of *Fluid States* in 2015, PSi initiated the pilot project of a Future Advisory Board (FAB). The project is consistent with the commitment to "decenter" PSi across various geographic locations, and in this sense it was also originally set up as a strategy to thicken the representation of graduate students and early career scholars on the organization's Board of Directors. The first set of correspondence of FAB took place online in November 2015, and included ten graduate students, early career, and independent scholars located in North and Southeast Asia, Eastern and Western Europe, South Africa, North America and Australasia. Eventually, the number of working members in FAB condensed to five. FAB was officially launched at PSi #22 Performance Climates at the University of Melbourne in Australia. In the course of a year and a half, FAB has grown out of its original model, and while it can be said that we loosely "represent" (or "misrepresent") the newer cohorts of the discipline, we are more invested in launching projects[1] that point towards and bring about the future of performance studies as envisioned and executed by the networks of performance scholars and artists that we might be able to gather — junior or senior alike.

To this end, we are particularly interested in critical frameworks of decentering PS: What are the specific strategies, logics and methods of "decentering" that can be deployed? What does the blueprint of a decentralized performance studies look like? From our vantage point as a scholarly collective emerging alongside such massive projects as *Fluid States*, we work in confluence with Diana Taylor's "investment" in performance studies as coming "less from what it *is*, but what it allows us to *do*" (16). We thus take fluid states as a method for the future, rather than as an event of the past. In the following, we think through fluid states, focusing on the scholarly relationality that a fluid methodology might enable. Or, as Taylor suggests, "taking performance seriously as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge" (16). We argue that while "fluidity" evokes the ability to flow, it might also highlight a presupposed capability to flow and thus risking to overlook any inherent resistances within the flowing materials themselves or the media through which they move. As an alternative to that, we propose to think through fluidity in terms of degrees of viscosity, that is, the ability of fluid phases of matter to resist deformation and flow.

Thinking through these thicker/stickier terms, we ask:

- What can "viscosity" mobilize in favour of decentering performance studies?
- How may "viscosity" help us think through issues of labor in the contexts of performance studies and of contemporary universities?
- What are the methodological possibilities that "stickiness" may offer?
- What criticalities arise from this perspective?
- Can we unknow or fail to know the fluidity of performance studies?

In short, we seek to enunciate how projects like *Fluid States* might inspire an ethos of viscosity for working through and in performance studies. Particularly, as a team, we envision this ethos of viscosity as the base on which to think through the topographies of performance studies. We posit that the ethos of viscosity can be understood through practices of "being singular plural" (Nancy 2000), where what is stressed are the flows of performance studies: the internal and external frictions that shape, expand and restrict its scope. By this, we mean that, through becoming more attuned to the viscosity of bodies (of scholars, of knowledge) and relations among ideas, paradigms, and institutions, we can think and enact an ethics of fluidity and flow that, rather than conceiving of movement as unrestrained and homogeneous or flatly dispersed, focuses instead on the resistances met by PS formations as they move through different disciplinary strata and processes. In the following, we elaborate upon the concept of viscosity as a way of coming together and what the thickness of viscous relations signify for working together and cultivating thick academic associations.

From Dispersion to Viscosity

Performance studies has built for itself — arguably in unique ways — tools and strategies for bringing together dispersed and yet related bodies of knowledge and modes of thinking. As junior members of the field we enter these conversations thinking of performance studies as neither inter- nor trans-disciplinary, but rather as an academic practice committed to an always-already deferred state of undisciplined plenitude. Perhaps in the face of what Jon McKenzie termed the "liminal-norm" (50), performance studies itself seems to proudly inhabit an unruly space of hybridity and permanent epistemic and methodological negotiations and compromises; an undisciplined, broader than broad perspective of the world where knowledge is produced by bringing together many streams of theory and practice from disparate geographical origins. Within this understanding, performance studies is assumed to be a fluid discipline: it moves more or less seamlessly through disciplinary paradigms and geographical borders.

However, assumptions of fluidity do not necessarily match the precise circumstances in which performance scholarship is produced. Moreover, different performance studies projects exemplify vastly different kinds of fluidity and meet differing kinds of resistance to flow. Attending to this resistance, this friction, this viscosity — we claim — is a more productive way to approach the discipline's ideal of fluidity and, therefore, to consider possible futures of the field and our places within it.

Viscosity is defined physically as the measure of a substance's resistance to deformation and flow. When used in relation to fluid states, it stresses the frictions produced in their enactment of dispersed PS flows: The frictions between different paradigms, between individuals and ideas, the frictions of the group or cohort with the individual, of the institution with its members, etc. This is a view of the field that *Fluid States* confirmed, for not all states of PS "mattered" or had the same degree of fluidity. *Fluid States* organizers were instead met with varying degrees of resistance stemming from local specificities, and a number of events scheduled to happen simply could not take place or did so in circumstances completely different to the ones originally planned.[2] In those locations, organizational problems, loss of funding, and complex political circumstances contributed to the "failure" of the initial objective of facilitating knowledge exchange in the form of a *Fluid States* event. Indeed, the inherent resistance to flow and dispersion, the obstructions met, and the strategies to deal with such resistances and obstacles highlight the varying degrees of fluidity and viscosity encountered across different geographies, their infrastructures, organizations, and conceptual apparatuses. How do these materialities reflect on the working assumption of performance studies as a fluid and associative discipline?

Crucial to the articulation of *Fluid States* were its tactics of decentralization and dispersion. That is, dispersing the annual conference meant the implementation of a larger

strategy to decenter the production of knowledge as much as its usual channels of circulation. Previously, in PS terms, streams of dispersion have mostly been enacted through an investment in the radial movement of English-speaking scholars-cum-seeds around the world, in an attempt to make their work germinate and proliferate in alien grounds. Consider, for example, Jon McKenzie's articulation of a "PS Empire," which effectively enacts a topography of the discipline as one that is largely defined by the paradigms that radiate from the usual centers in the US and the UK (7). McKenzie argues that inasmuch as English is the "lingua franca" of performance studies, the production and circulation of knowledge inevitably enhance a sense of its imperialistic attitudes[3]. These attitudes, in turn, highlight the uneven flows that are enabled, on the one hand, by anglophone scholars travelling outwards and, on the other, by non-English speaking scholars travelling inwards to the centers of the discipline, the US and the UK. In that sense, the stress on the fluidity in and of the processes through which performance studies is condensed and then dispersed as a discipline risks overlooking the specificities — material, political, cultural — of the grounds on which that dispersion takes place. Further, it is also ill-equipped to account for the ways in which what is dispersed will travel and land differently, depending on the viscosity of the medium through which it travels and the permeability of the surfaces on which it lands.

Performance studies' dreams of fluidity must take into account measures of viscosity. While many of those "dispersed" scholars have contributed largely to the scholarly development of regional focuses and to the education of younger cohorts of local performance scholars, we must not overlook the expansionist methodologies those types of scholarly dispersion might be seen to enact and therefore ask whether this is not a gesture that continues to affirm a single-origin myth of performance studies. Furthermore, we might want to consider the varying degrees of freedom afforded to the bodies of those willing to travel and "sow" their knowledge; consider who among us can do so, is allowed to do so, and those who find themselves instead blocked by walls, fences, and other impermeable material, political, linguistic, economic, or cultural borders. And we might want to do so not because of the recent political upheavals in the US, UK, and Europe, but for the longer histories of socioeconomic blockages, inequality, segregation, and otherwise imperialist politics that continue to have an impact around the world.

As an alternative to the above logics of fluidity and dispersion, an ethics of viscosity is more open to the contingencies of encounters between bodies as they are enacted in the negotiation of powers, affects, affordances, and the time and space formations created in and through their movement, rest, and possible collision. Through thinking viscosity, we become more aware of the attrition and materiality of the media through which we flow — of their power — and of the impossibility of thinking the fluidity of a body without considering its degree of resistance to flow and deformation, as well as what might stick to it along the way. In a nod to both Lucretius and Spinoza, we claim that all things move, but always at different speeds and according to their own affordances and volition.

The radial, center-to-periphery logics of dispersion that, despite our best efforts, can still be found in a more or less latent state in the strategies for internationalization that PS and PSi might intend to challenge and mark much of academic exchange. As an alternative to that, we attempt to proceed with an ethics of movement organized around viscosity and the ways in which it allows us to move from a geography of radial dispersion towards a topography of stickiness. We attempt here to think through (and enact) an ethics of flow that, rather than conceiving of movement as unidirectional, unrestrained, and homogeneous, focuses instead on mapping PS according to the ability of its material, conceptual, and practical bodies to stick together, to stick to it, to get stuck, to get stuck on, and to have others stick to them.

Sticky Labor

In the forceful manifesto on "The University and the Undercommons" (2004), Fred Moten and Stefano Harney elaborate upon what they call "maroon community of the university" (104), where those who belong to the undercommons of academic work, occupying the precarious positions of being queer, black, marginalized minorities who do not fit into the normative halls of academia. For researchers who are somewhat situated "outside" of the core academic order of Anglo-American and European circuits of performance studies, their positions have always already been "marooned," or easily sectioned off as local knowledges that have little place in the more or less "universal" canon of performance theory.[4] Moten and Harney argue that these maroon communities are often considered "less professional," but the real issue is that their knowledge and practice simply exceed the profession and therefore cannot be easily assimilated into the system and the knowledge order (104). What is at stake here for us and other performance studies collectives is precisely how to become sticky, stick together, and stick to it so that such knowledges and practice become thicker, more present, and dense, thus strengthening the plane of co-labor-ation.

In some sense, one could argue that the project of Fluid States taps into the potentiality of the undercommons within the performance studies community. By encouraging scholars and artists to create at and visit sites outside of major performance studies institutions, new working relations across these multiple sites may be forged. These events provide fertile ground for continuing dialogue and discussion, dissensus, and critique, and we are able to see how scholars from various academic traditions and trainings bring multi-faceted approaches to performance studies. The online log and correspondence, together with the launch of *GPS*, also bring visibility to ideas emerging from such engagements, providing sticky points of contact that could be taken up beyond the timeframe of *Fluid States* and outside of the groups of conference attendees.

Co-labor-ation comes into relief amongst the current cohort of scholars working in the humanities and other parts of the academy that face worrying conditions of labor within the academy as it is broadly construed. Of course, these worries are not new even if an endemic problem of the 21st-century university and its processes of adaptation to neoliberal policies that attach the relevance of knowledge directly to economic valorization (Bousquet; Collini). There is an evident politics of laboring here, one that guarantees the moral wellbeing of performance scholarship while at the same time compromises the face values of the discipline to the institutional mechanisms of validation and reward. These movements require a certain detachment from such institutional rewards, creating an opening towards other possibilities of generating scholarship. PSi is already poised with this desire to challenge the community with new projects, combined with the self-reflexive attitude in asking the hard questions what it means to internationalize and to be "global" today.

We wonder how new performance studies projects might call for a different relation to "professionalism" as we currently understand it. Becoming "professional" connotes assimilation into and acceptance of the existing hierarchies and orders of knowledges and an exclusionary attitude towards those who do not immediately fit:

Indeed terms like serious and rigorous tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that conforms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy. (Halberstam 6)

How can PS projects further actualise the aspirations of the undercommons through the constitution of "an unprofessional force of fugitive knowers" (Halberstam 8)? How can the "unprofessional" and the "fugitive" work together to forge alliances of subversion under the conditions of academic labour? Can we claim that PS already refuses to aim for career advancement or that it holds the possibility to boycott the university even as doing so would hold the "for and against the university" logic in place?

Like *Fluid States*' focus on "unknowing" rather than "knowing," the labor of unknowing is about seeking knowledges that are subjugated, marginalized, or suppressed and about unlearning the assumptions of one's epistemic positions. Here, we argue that practices of viscous labor may stand in contrast to the more "commonly" established practices of academic professionalization that shape how the academy is disciplined. Viscous labor in and through performance studies is to stick together and co-perform; it is to enact a thicker way of co-laboring that welcomes friction and attrition not as hindrances to measurable productivity but as the forces that bind bodies together.

To stick together, to labor together in scholarship and performance is to create possibilities outside of institutional hierarchies of knowledge, degrees, promotion, and tenure, to build thick networks of solidarity while being attuned to the different viscosities of knowledge production and being aware of the fits and misfits of bodies, theories, and ideas as they run up against one another. Although becoming "truly international" may not actually be fully attainable (something acknowledged in the lower-case "i" of PSi), it takes scholars working both in and outside of major PS institutions to turn towards one another and work with and from within the inherent resistance of their own bodies and the existing bodies of theory and practice. Especially for us and our junior colleagues, co-laboring in and across performance studies is then not only to stick to many of the assertions of performance studies, but also to stick with many of its uncertainties and to embody performance studies' often fraught relationship with institutionality and the universities that sustain its tenured faculty and produce its graduates.

In the following section, we reflect on our own experience as a team of collaborators, suggesting, where possible, relevant questions about the sticky intersections of friendship, academia and labor as seen from the perspective of our viscous framework.

Thicker Relations

The articulation of labor in a viscous environment in academia implies different practices of friendship. We think of these intellectual friendships and associations as thick relations and experience FAB as a sort of laboratory. Considering fluid states as a methodology, we experiment through the practical implications of working together for an extended period of time, thickening our relations and associations both laborious and friendly. In our project, as in many collaborative performance projects, friendship becomes the very substance through which we experience viscosity. It robustly absorbs the stress and resistance that stretches a dynamic collective to dependent and independent trajectories. Here, friendship becomes the very condition of possibility for forging dense, sticky affinities across traditional lines of discipline, geopolitical spaces, and heterogeneous velocities. It is a friendship that congeals through the performative practice of laboring together, which, in turn, thickens its consistency.

This is not to valorize such arrangements: practices of co-laboring that involve friendly environments have been increasingly normalized as the worksite of the 21st century. These practices blur the modern division of life according to distinct spheres of labor and leisure, effectively combining both spheres so as to maximize the productivity of an individual and of the working group. Friendship, malleability, and creativity are now indexed as ideal skills for the workplace.^[5] At the same time, the productivity of friendship and collaboration is proportionally disciplined. In this sense we might ask: what are the disciplinary axioms of performance studies that define what scholars are allowed to do when they stick together?

Working through thick relations creates structures of support that bring together different intellectual, physical and personal capacities. Projects like *Fluid States* would simply not be possible without a level of friendship. These relations and friendships are viscous structures that grow thicker, stronger, and smarter through interaction. As much as an academic friendship involves the coming together of several intelligences to address the ideas in coordination — a multiple entry point into the world — it also involves establishing lasting support systems that are located at the intersection of the personal and the professional. The commitment to be a professional uncommon (and an unprofessional common) weighs in here. As we were writing this section, one of us fell behind. *He: I am contritely aware of having failed to adhere to the rhythm of writing we had set out, especially as I am conscious of the burden of accommodation that my friends would inevitably bear. Even though I trust the thickness of this friendship that has developed over the course of a year is robust enough to absorb the stresses of occasional crises and failures, I do not take for granted the undercurrent and labor of care that is expressed in these moments. In my failure to stick, my friend flowed in to offer a scaffold to which I agglutinate and through which I enunciate and disarticulate in this entangled labor.*

The process of writing this is and has been a performance of avowal of this viscous friendship. This emptying of self, or selflessness, must be taken up in writing as a collective endeavor. It is very difficult to write, to work collaboratively and remain selfish, but this does not simply gesture towards an easy relinquishing of the self. Commitment to one's individual articulation is necessary, even as one finds that articulation through another's language and idiom. We are not a collective predicated on the equivalence of identification or similarity but on sticky differences that engender an approximation, a tending towards and for one another, a generative gesturing towards the other, a movement of flow that does not seek to replace emptiness with plenitude. Stickiness, then, also becomes a critical quality that buttresses against the many failures that the precariousness of coming together is subject to.

As we systematically see the psychological and physical health strains that academic labor causes for the sake of productivity, we are increasingly convinced of the imperative to promote an academic culture that, in the future, disavows the taboo of “sharing” that is entrenched in today's academe. In other words, even when friendship is being rendered as a capitalistic skill in the current moment of the information economies, and paradoxically also condemned when it does not conform to those indexes of production, we contend that sticking together in academia is already a productive strategy to alleviate the imperative on the individual and on the collective to perform, or else.

Conclusion

Thinking academic work through thicker states places the professional scholar in a position where learning is pivotal and distances intellectual work from the myth of consecrated erudition. Viscous friendships in academia, as we see it, are foregrounded by the extent to which scholars are able to “unknow” their know-it-all habitus. Certainly, having thicker friendships is not enough. At the time of writing, we identify a growing trend in collaborative scholarship among junior and emerging performance academics, researchers, and artists. This growing trend, as much as it is indicative of new ways of practicing the field, nevertheless calls for a critical effort in order to flesh out the nuances of its possibilities. We understand, as many academic and artistic collectives do, that this work hinges on a willingness to be educated by sticking with someone else's work as an ethics of co-labor-ation.

As a collective, we are committed to speaking in the singular plural, for diverging opinions are as important as, if not more important than, converging interests. We experience internal frictions and resistance as we get to know one another's theoretical stances and pressure points, and they become moments of dissensus which hold a mirror up to the convictions of our individual selves. Discussions go back and forth while focus points bifurcate and multiply. Writing cannot flow in a singular voice, but is intensified through personal quirks and stylistic idiosyncrasies. Our work experience resembles much more the slow sludge of coming-together, of finding rhythms of co-laboring and spaces of connection.

If anything, what *Fluid States* and other projects can invite us to ponder in the context of the larger agenda for the internationalization of performance studies and of PSi is that viscosity is a value to keep if one is to remain wary of the “global” in all its forms and iterations. We contend that performance studies is perhaps not as fluid as it might wish to be. However, it is this resistance to flow — viscosity — that allows the field to “stick together.” And from the sticky viscousness of such coming together, some new future formations and orientations might emerge.

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Endnotes

[1] For instance, in PSi#22 Melbourne, FAB set up an installation and hosted a roundtable session for conversations about the future of performance studies. In PSi#23 Hamburg, FAB initiates the first PSi Summer School #0.5 to facilitate a space of exchange for emerging scholars, artists, and junior faculty.

[2] Symptomatically, FAB experienced similar challenges like *Fluid States* in terms of dispersing and coming together: For example, the group faced difficulties at the time of recruitment because some prospective members were not able to access the digital interfaces for online communication due to the online security protocols of their country of residence, or encountered barriers to scheduling in the time differences intrinsic to transcontinental online meetings.

[3] See also Delgado 2014 on the centrality of English as the language for performance studies where she critiques the assumptions and structures which hold language hierarchies in place and privileges particular disseminations of knowledge. Delgado and Covich 2008 details the difficulties in translating the word 'performance' for Spanish scholarship.

[4] The citational network that this article uses is already indicative of this problem, as the dissemination of performance-based and performance-oriented knowledge that is produced at other scholarly epicentres remains somewhat opaque and detached from the usual canon of English-speaking performance theory.

[5] See P21: Partnership for 21st Century Learning.

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