

## Imagining Galaxies of Performance Studies

Felipe Cervera  
India Correspondent

Galaxy: *n.* A system of millions or billions of stars, together with gas and dust, held together by gravitational attraction; the Galaxy, the galaxy of which the solar system is a part, the Milky Way; in figurative usage, a large or impressive group of people.<sup>1</sup>

To Galaxy: *v.* To gather together into a brilliant assembly.<sup>2</sup>

Today our understanding of how objects are formed and interact in the universe has removed our planet, sun and galaxy from the centre of existence. We no longer perceive stars and galaxies as already-existing bodies but as processes in which dispersed materials are slowly assembled and held together by varying intensities of gravitational forces. Those processes of becoming are not necessarily fluid and continuous. What seems to be the stable and visible brilliance of galaxies is, in fact, a process of breaks, accelerations, recessions, interactions with visible and invisible forces and matter, etc. In my view, this process and the process of research apprenticeship seem similar. Like the galaxies out there, knowledge is formed in a dynamic that eventually forms brilliant entities – solid teachable moments that light the way forward. These happen in messy, broken, sometimes accelerated, sometimes slow, processes of learning.

*Rethinking Labor and The Creative Economy: Global Performative Perspectives* was inspiring because among the galaxy of established scholars that were delegates and speakers, there were some interventions about and by students – Jon McKenzie's mention of his students' work during his paper and the panel in which Janelle Reinelt was accompanied, among others, by her student Maria Estrada-Fuentes, who delivered an inspired paper on child labor in Colombia are, for me, important highlights of the event. However, perhaps the most student-centred moment of the conference was an *impromptu* intervention by Rustom Bharucha and his students right at the end of the third and last day. Of the papers read in that intervention, the work of Promona Segupta inspires my response.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.oxfordreference.com](http://www.oxfordreference.com) (last accessed 11 May 2015)

<sup>2</sup> [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com) (last accessed 11 May 2015)

Segupta's research, titled *The Campus Body*, focuses on university theatre at the University of Delhi and is concerned with the ways in which its production resists the normative construction of the campus-space. Segupta describes how 'the lack of infrastructure compels student theatreworkers to take over classrooms, lawns, foyers and other spaces and turn them into makeshift performance spaces' thereby 'giving rise to an ephemeral campus space.'<sup>3</sup> On a nostalgic note, Segupta's work reminds me of the way in which theatre is produced at the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), where I first studied theatre and performance. There too, the infrastructure is not enough to host all the work that is developed. Theatre students then roam through the building and its lawns looking for places where to rehearse and perform. As the students in Delhi, they produce spaces that overlap with the institutional space arrangement.

As a PhD student who is fortunate enough to have his studies fully funded, earlier in the conference I had been able to relate with what Sundar Sarukkai discussed in his intervention. In his paper, titled *The labour of thinking about labour*, Sarukkai described mental labour as being characterised 'by the fact that we do not know the end product of that work and we do not know the value of that production.' He argues that because of this, 'mental labour is always in the domain of possibilities and essentially belongs to an economy of futures.'<sup>4</sup> The economy of futures that Sarukkai mentions is intricately linked to the creative economy and by the same token graduate school can be taken as an important site where futures are created, both in theory and in practice. The value of a student's work is not only attached to the precedent expectations upon her performance as a mental labourer, but also to the expectation of being able to get a job in the future.

Perform or else, as Jon McKenzie might say. We have a field that is increasingly fluid and expansive, not only in its objects of study but in its geographical range and presence. This should give us, current graduate students in Performance Studies, some glimmer of hope. However, lectureships and professorships in our field tend to be far fewer than the number of graduate students getting their PhDs. Against the protocols of two-year contracts and conditional tenures that our advisors have to go through, generational relief is perhaps as scary to those teaching as it is to those learning. In this conundrum, what is often sacrificed is the promotion of research cultures within departments and, by the same token, the culture of research apprenticeship.

Following Segupta's work on the one hand, and the de-centralizing pull in *Fluid States* on the other, I wonder where are those spaces where graduate students and

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<sup>3</sup> Promona Sengupta (2015) "The Campus Body", PSi #21 Fluid States: Performances of UnKnowing LOG, ed. Marin Blazeovic, Bree Hadley and Nina Gojic, Performance Studies international (PSi), 1 January 2015-31 December 2015, available <http://www.fluidstates.org/page.php?id=10>

<sup>4</sup> I am deeply appreciative of the opportunity that Sundar gave me to read his presentation for the purposes of my writing.

their advisers can challenge the 'international' campus-body of Performance Studies and its alignments with the creative economy. I remember that the last panel at JNU was already battling against the exuding sense of intellectual overload that was perceptible in the many twists, turns, coughs and dreamy eyes all around the auditorium. It was in that mix of intense motivation and profound intellectual exhaustion, that Rustom Bharucha announced that last intervention by his students. Was that moment such a space of contestation? Perhaps. Right when everybody was tired and could barely perceive any more 'brilliance' coming from the podium, a break in the rhythm, a quick spark, and then *bang!* – three new scholars were visible for the first time.

Besides the rite of passage of speaking out their thoughts, what made them all the more visible was that their intervention performed a dialogue between themselves, their adviser, and the field at large. In a way, this dialogue satisfied the premise of answering to the investment done in their future as professional creative thinkers. But at the same time it broke the established order of the conference and it did so by having three students answer to the intellectual challenge, posed by their adviser, of speaking about their use of the field's established methodologies. For me, as much as this moment can be taken as a simple student intervention, it can also be appreciated as a bird's eye view of the field in the specific context of India. When framed into the larger dialogues of un-knowing in which we are currently submerged, it becomes all the more relevant because it was enabled less by showing *how the field is* and more by a dynamic of dialogical learning about *how the field could be*. Beyond the very compelling papers that were read by the already superstars in the field on those three days, it may be that in the future we will look back at JNU and be able to perceive the brilliance radiating from Delhi – the birth of one galaxy, an assembly of thinkers and the critical contestations of their site of research.

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