Neoliberalism, the Arts, and the Global University

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In recent years, US universities have been racing to set up satellite campuses in the Middle East and Asia that operate as neoliberal outposts for professionalization, chiefly for businessmen, engineers, and technocrats. Many of these outpost agreements or degree partnerships reward US universities with millions in gifts, research money, infrastructural support, tax incentives, and tuition revenue. For all kinds of pragmatic and rhetorical reasons, these developments fulfill the ubiquitous institutional imperative of US universities to globalize, but they have also intensified their corporatizing ethos. In fact, they have a profound impact on the form and flow of knowledge, especially the way higher education is structured around entrepreneurial exchange, innovation, and worldwide-tutelage-for-pay. The impact on the arts and humanities is immeasurable in terms of curricular offerings, funding, pedagogy, and the future philosophical environs of knowledge production. Are transnational configurations of the arts and humanities a programmatic foment or marketing ploy of this educative globalization?

In 2011 entire comprehensive liberal arts campuses such as NYU-Abu Dhabi (New York University) and Yale College-NUS (National University of Singapore) have been established. If the arrival of a US liberal arts curriculum with its emphasis on critical thinking appears to undercut critiques of neoliberal professionalization, it bears note that such a curriculum has its own marketing history in American higher education. To put it more bluntly, are satellite liberal arts campuses a space for the critical pursuit of knowledge or a place to sell a branded US degree? How are the arts and, in particular, theatre and performance studies implicated in this development? We know, for instance, that the professionalization of the theatre arts has been several decades in the making in the US academy in conjunction with what critics such as Harold Clurman have called its “Edifice Complex” (Clurman qtd. in Roach, 1999: 7). Are this complex, which manifests itself in physical, curricular and psychic forms, and its spectacle of
complicity with neoliberal capitalism being replicated in global satellite campuses where massive amounts of money are poured into vocational training and infrastructure?

For those of us situated in the US academy, part of the challenge is confronting the way departments implement “global” initiatives that seem uncritical of institutional neoliberal globalization, or even recognize that as a formation. The reinscription of Eurocentric epistemologies is particularly striking in these professedly global moves. In more than a few departments, this means designating knowledge and technique to the West, a way to justify “business as usual.” We might think this through a colonial scenario in which the rest of the world is seen as a necessary diversion but tokenized just the same as illegible or irrelevant entities. Meanwhile the logic of US and European (artistic) exceptionalism is internalized as an unquestioned epistemology. The “need to know” argument is actually a mandate for all students to learn the theatre history and vocabulary of Europe as their “own” culture. Excursions to the exotic non-West are often couched as exciting but non-essential supplements to core training. This rather dire state is left unchecked because knowing and producing “art” takes precedence over everything else. But what kind of “art” is being produced? Is the phantom “scholar-artist” a code term for the double bind of theory and practice that has plagued fine arts, and particularly theatre departments, all over the country? One of the enduring effects of this double bind is the way it pits (theatre) scholars against practitioners in two apparently oppositional zones: thinking and doing, content and form, writing and production.

Debates and power struggles around this bifurcation are common in visual, performing, and creative arts departments, particularly those that house professional training programs with terminal degrees. Moreover, these debates and struggles are often diagnosed as symptoms of disciplinary pain or reducible to a matter of reconciling the art of production with scholarship. But such explanations misrecognize the department’s epistemic recidivism and “will to institutionality” (Ferguson, 2008: 163). The issue is more than a quibble with one department’s parochialism, and the danger is precisely the tendency to view it simply as such. Rather, I argue that we have to link a critique of epistemic recidivism in disciplinary formations to an institutional critique of university neocolonialism in the corporate ventures and values of the global university. Recidivist modes of knowledge production tend toward an uncritical recourse to the bodies and texts of Western civilization as a repeatable justification for progress. This disciplinary “relapse,” as it were, has to be interrogated in relation to the civilizing mission or humanitarian intervention of academic outposts. The phenomenon of the global university is becoming a dominant, neoliberal formation of the new millennium, with satellite campuses sprouting up across the continents. It is, in effect, the logical extension of the university’s rabid corporatization, about which many critics have written. Is it possible