CULTURAL PERFORMANCE AND TRANSNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES

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Concepts and crossroads

On August 1, 1848, roughly 400–500 white abolitionists and African Americans celebrated Emancipation Day in Rochester, New York, and commemorated not only the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies in 1838 but also staged an abolitionist protest in the United States. On April 23, 2017, the German Flossenbueorg Concentration Camp Memorial celebrated its liberation from the Nazi regime of terror by U.S. Army troops in 1945; later that year, a German-American entertainment fair in nearby Grafenwoehr enacted German-American friendship in the former, post-1945 American occupation zone. These “events”—at first sight centuries and continents apart—share conceptual elements of interest to American Studies and Performance Studies. They reverberate transnational mobilities and trajectories. As cultural performances, they bring together human bodies in particular time frames and particular spaces and thus constitute contact zones. These examples demonstrate the potential of site-specific cultural performances to negotiate and enact the social and political realities of their (transnational) sites and contexts. Ultimately, they elucidate the potential of cultural performance as a scholarly method and epistemology for the study of past and present transnational mobilities and their manifestations in concrete, local sites.

First introduced by Milton Singer in the 1950s, “cultural performance” became an important concept in anthropological and ethnographic research. For Singer, “cultural performances,” i.e., festivities and rituals, were “the most concrete observable units of the cultural structure” (1972, xiii; emphasis added). Set off from everyday behavior and interaction (Guss 2000, 9), they had “a beginning and an end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance” (Singer 1972, xiii). Recent scholarship has come to define “cultural performance” more broadly as “the embodied enactment of cultural forces” (McKenzie 2001, 8) to include any kind of corporeal on- and off-stage, consciously and not-consciously executed action such as theater, musical performances, protest actions, sports events, festivities and celebrations, or everyday social behavior. These diverse cultural performances share the characteristics of being culturally constitutive and of being defined by immediacy, liveness, transience, community, corporeality, encounter, eventfulness, and by their site-specificity. Contemporary scholars from diverse fields continue to develop and adapt the concept to current interdisciplinary research trends.

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2005, Diana Taylor highlighted the power of cultural performance to create embodied cultural memory in her idea of the “repertoire.” Judith Butler took a decidedly political perspective when she discussed the performative character of public gatherings in her 2015 *Performative Theory of Assembly*.

For American Studies, cultural performance is a suitable object and matrix of inquiry to investigate political, social, and cultural negotiations and power struggles triggered by transnational processes. The pathways of transnational mobilities meet and become manifest in concrete, local places, i.e., in contact zones, where they produce cultural encounters and generate likewise localized, concrete, and non-textual cultural practices that debate these encounters. Thus, cultural performances can be meeting grounds of diverse cultures and players; they can function as a public arena within which these encounters are acted out; and they can negotiate the power dynamics informing these encounters.

In methodological terms, the study of transnational processes via cultural performance offers a different and enriching way of scholarly epistemology; it shifts the focus of inquiry away from texts towards non-textual cultural practices. Whereas scholars like Marie Louise Pratt or John Carlos Rowe conceived the (transnational) contact zone primarily as a textual space (Pratt 1991, 34; Rowe 2002, 12), we propose to explore it as a cultural event and to scrutinize the epistemological, communal, and political implications of this shift from text to performance. Performance Studies scholars such as Dwight Conquergood, David Román, or Joseph Roach present “performance as a counterbalance to the weight and prestige given texts in the academy … as representations of knowledge” (Conquergood 2013, 58). In Taylor’s work on cultural memory in the Americas, her distinction between the “archive” and the “repertoire” likewise suggests a reorientation towards performance. Whereas the “archive” consists of supposedly enduring and (more) stable materials like texts, visuals, or objects (Conquergood 2003, 19), the repertoire “enacts embodied memory: performance, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge …” (Conquergood 2003, 20; emphasis added). These scholars consider culture as performative and emphasize the usefulness of a Performance Studies approach—the epistemological parameters produced by cultural performances, enriching and at times even distinct from textual epistemologies—for the study of cultural processes and encounters. The concept of cultural performance allows scholars to perceive culture less as a stable, fixed construct but as an ongoing process. Yet despite these fleeting and presumably hard-to-pin-down qualities, cultural performance as a methodology provides a suitable frame of analysis that invites scholars to investigate core parameters—sites, bodies, audiences, actions, time frames, and processes of community formation—of particular, material cultural performances as exemplary, concrete, embodied manifestations of ongoing cultural processes. The fleeting quality of performance oftentimes needs the methodological assistance of archival materials and the assembling of available reports, recordings, or witnesses of a performance into a comprehensive “scenario” (Taylor 2003, 28) of the performance. Nevertheless, grasping the epistemologies and politics of concrete cultural performances—via their sites, bodies, presences—produces epistemologies of oftentimes fleeting and abstract transnational phenomena.

An emphasis on cultural performance as a material and methodological paradigm for the study of cultural processes entails an emphasis on its politics and its cultural, social, and political impacts. Cultural performances are not merely cultural representations of given realities—they must rather be considered producers of these very realities. As early as 1970, anthropologist Victor Turner emphasized both the affirmative and transgressive potential of cultural performance emerging from its liminality. In collaboration with Richard Schechner,
Turner also provided a model for the study of the interrelation between cultural performance and “social drama” (Turner 1982): Cultural performance came to be seen not only as a mirror of but also as a driving, problem-solving force for social and political crises. Scholars like John MacAlloon, Dwight Conquergood, Philip Zarilli, Jon McKenzie, or Elizabeth Dillon emphasize the efficacy, agency, and politics inherent in cultural performance. Accordingly, David Guss insists on the “ability [of cultural performance] to produce new meanings and relations” (Guss 2000, 11). This “transformative power” (Fischer-Lichte 2008) makes cultural performance a primary field of inquiry for the study of contact zones in which “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (Pratt 1991, 34) and which constantly require a reconfiguration of its diverse identities and the relations amongst them. Cultural performances thus emerge in contact zones, and as live, communal, and audience-based events they bear the potential to create ever-new contact zones. For this reason, we consider cultural performances as “site-specific, corporeal events and practices that constitute spatially and temporally confined encounters and physical, immediate spaces of transnational experience” (Bauridl and Wiegmink 2015, 161). In the following analyses of the 1848 celebration of Emancipation Day in Rochester, New York, and of the 2017 commemoration of liberation at the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial and the German-American Volksfest in Bavaria, we will examine the politics, epistemologies, and communal functions of cultural performance at the crossroads of transnational trajectories.

Antebellum African American performances of August 1

Nineteenth-century celebrations of August 1, also referred to as Emancipation Day or West India Day, commemorated an event that was at first sight of little relevance for the United States. Nevertheless, for African Americans in the antebellum North this became probably the most important memorial day. As Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie estimates, celebrations of August 1 “were probably among the largest independent gatherings by people of African descent in nineteenth-century America” and it would not be until after WWI that similarly large groups of African Americans would parade in the US (2007, 107). August 1 was celebrated in both white (abolitionist) and black communities, and the festivities took on many different forms, from early church-based events to large-scale antislavery picnics and urban parades. During these events, Americans came together at a specific date and in a specific place to commemorate a transnational event, i.e., the peaceful abolition of slavery in the British West Indies in 1838. To study ritualized cultural practices like the commemoration of August 1 offers one possible pathway into examining the ways in which the fight against slavery substantially permeated the everyday lives and routines of black and white Northerners in the antebellum United States, and it also represents an apt possibility of assessing the transnational features of American abolitionism and their manifestations in Northern African American communities.

Emancipation Day was set up in direct opposition to the most prominent national festivity, the celebration of Independence Day on July 4 (Kachun 2003, 86). While July 4 celebrates independence from British tyranny, August 1 praises “Great Britain as a friend of freedom” (Jeffrey 2006, 205). Furthermore, as Julie Roy Jeffrey observes, “[b]lack and white abolitionists interpreted the end of slavery in the British West Indies not as a local but as a cosmic event” (Jeffrey 2006, 205; emphasis added). As a result, celebrating August 1 also represented a critical inquiry into what historian Edmund Morgan referred to as “the American paradox,” namely that a nation proclaiming “all men are created equal” enslaves a large proportion of its inhabitants and denies them their “unalienable rights” of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (2003, 6).
Although “oral culture played a vital role in the construction of political identities,” scholars of abolition are primarily interested in interpreting print cultures, as Kerr-Ritchie notes (2007, 3). Kerr-Ritchie’s observation corresponds with Taylor’s critique of privileging the archive over the repertoire. To pay more attention to the repertoire, however, emphasizes both the relevance of spoken word and its embeddedness in performative practices. Furthermore, such a shift in both perspective and methodology inevitably also results in stressing non-verbal cultural practices and considers how these practices shape local, national, as well as transnational cultures, politics, and ultimately, identities. As theatre historian Thomas Postlewait advises his students: “What historians see—or fail to see—depends upon not only where but how they look” (2009, 101). The following analysis of one (predominantly African American) August 1 celebration, which took place in Rochester, New York, on the tenth anniversary of Emancipation Day in 1848, demonstrates how a Performance Studies’ approach to the study of American abolition will prove a valuable tool for research in Transnational American Studies.

On July 14, 1848, *The North Star*, Frederick Douglass’ newspaper published in Rochester, New York, printed the following call to attend the upcoming August 1 celebration: “Let the friends of freedom gather, and make the occasion-memorable. Let every colored man and woman within two hundred miles’ distance of this city see to it that at the appointed hour they are in Washington Square, Rochester” (*The North Star* 1848a). The “order of the day,” published on the same page, announces the sequence in which the participants will march from Ford Street Baptist Church to Washington Square. The “procession” includes musicians at the head of group, benevolent societies, school children, speakers, and citizens among other people. The “exercises” at the Square consist of prayers, music, and several speeches (“Freedom’s Jubilee”). In the subsequent coverage in local newspapers and in *The North Star* we learn about “the general good feeling and happiness which seemed to prevail among the participants of the celebration” (who are altogether estimated at 1,500–2,000) and get to know that a fair and a ball followed the “large and respectable procession” (*The North Star* 1848c).

It is via these archived documents that we gain a fragmentary (and subjective) access to the event. In order to “retrieve” a cultural performance from the past, scholars depend on the archive. However, as Taylor reminds us, rather than privileging the text over other modes of expression, “we could also look to scenarios as meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes” (2003, 28). According to Taylor, “scenarios” are tools that depend on both archival documents and performative features in order to analyse an event.

An interpretation of the given event, which tries to grasp the performative character of the event, will emphasize the following aspects: First, the very fact that such a large number of (mostly) African Americans gathered in the streets of Rochester, and thus became in a very literal sense physically present in the public sphere, is already in itself significant. As Judith Butler reminds us in *Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*:

If we consider why freedom of assembly is separate from freedom of expression, it is precisely because the power that people have to gather together is itself an important political prerogative, quite distinct from the right to say whatever they have to say once people have gathered. The gathering signifies in excess of what is said, and that mode of signification is a concerted bodily enactment, a plural form of performativity.

(*Butler 2015, 8*)
Regardless of the discrimination that many black participants might have experienced in their everyday lives, by “exercising a bodily and performative right to appear” (Butler 2015, 11), the participants in the celebration of August 1 claim physical, bodily recognition and political visibility. Given the fact that this “right to appear” is claimed in a nation that deprives enslaved African Americans of any rights, the celebration must also be considered a bold act of protesting the peculiar institution in public.

Second, the form of the gathering on August 1 further impacts the public reception and the political claims that are related to the appearance of African Americans in public space. As the newspaper reports indicate, the parade was “headed by Adams’ Brass Band,” a choir sung “Freedom’s Ode,” and music preluded each oratory (The North Star 1848b, 1848c). During the Civil Rights Movement, music, and in particular so-called freedom songs, were “the heart and soul of the movement” but also “a highly practical tool” (Reed 2005, 14). Sung collectively in church but also during protest marches and in prison, freedom songs represented the singers’ dedication to non-violent resistance, and they functioned as sources of communal mental resilience during the highly stressful protest events when many participants faced the threat of severe physical danger. It might very well have been for these particular reasons that music also featured prominently during August 1 celebrations. Similar to the Civil Rights Movement, during August 1 celebrations, music was performed collectively and thus provided participants with a sense of community. This community presented itself as peaceful, joyous, and thus non-threatening.

Third, an analysis of a cultural performance like August 1 draws attention to groups of people that were not or could not be addressed via print culture. As Mitch Kachun observes, with literacy rates generally low among free African Americans, … public commemorations provided an important opportunity to reach a segment of black communities who might otherwise remain unreachable. Many who did not … read pamphlets and newspapers … were … attracted by festive public events. (2003, 46)

Celebrations of transnational abolitionist events like those of August 1 thus provided the diverse groups of participants with an immediate and corporeal experience that transgressed demarcations of class (as well as gender) and created a collective experience for members of African American and antislavery communities that had no access to print culture.

Fourth, August 1 commemorations were carefully staged public performances that were repeated each year and that followed a certain dramaturgy. Participants, that is, actors and spectators, experienced the festive event as special and set off from the routines of everyday life. At the same time, these events were also inextricably entwined with the everyday lives of their participants: The experiences of joy and merriment as well as the fear of mob violence were feelings that had a very real impact on the everyday lives of free African Americans and abolitionists in the North. It is the “double identity” of performance as an event set off from everyday life yet also part of it, which produces the transformative power of cultural performance (Postlewait 2009, 119). Because any kind of performance creates an experience of a temporary, yet real community, (cultural) performances can function as rehearsals for alternative forms of togetherness. Accordingly, David Guss observes, “what is important is that cultural performances be recognized as sites of social action where identities and relations are continually being reconfigured” (2000, 12). Celebrations of August 1 communally commemorated a transnational past event of high relevance for the common identity of abolitionists and African Americans. Participants envisioned the possibility of a future society in which all
African Americans are free, in which they are not discriminated against, and in which they are perceived as respectable citizens. They did so by participating in an activity that was set off from the daily routines and experiences of racism of their everyday lives. The celebrations of a transnational event created a contact zone, a space of encounter for a diverse group of people, which was socially and politically distinct and which functioned as a model for envisioning the future.

To consider these practices as cultural performances thus allows us to conceive of them as public political acts in which diverse groups of people not only experience an event together in a particular time and space, it also enables us to consider celebrations like August 1 as cultural practices which not merely argued for the necessity to abolish slavery but which publicly performed, i.e., acted out a vision for a future togetherness without slavery. Such an approach allows scholars to perceive and discuss public contestations of prevalent notions of US American identity, citizenship, and discourses of national in- and exclusion that are not exclusively verbally articulated and recorded in print. It also enables scholars to examine formations, affiliations, and manifestations of cultural practices of nineteenth-century African American identity that clearly transgress the confines of the nation.

German-American encounters and epistemologies of embodied performance

On April 8, 1945, the US Airforce bombed a German Wehrmacht military training area in the German State of Bavaria a few days before troops occupied the adjacent rural town of Grafenwoehr. On April 23, 1945, US Army troops liberated the nearby Flossenbuch concentration camp from the Nazi reign of terror. The military grounds of the perpetrators of Flossenbuch turned into the space most visibly and imperially occupied by the liberators of Flossenbuch. Since 1945, the towns of Flossenbuch and Grafenwoehr have been linked in a transnational German-American vortex of liberation, occupation, (Cold War) symbiosis, and cultural encounters. Ben Chappell’s concept of “small transnationalism” (Chappell 2016, 44, 46) aptly applies to the region. It zooms in on particular—albeit blurry in terms of borders—local and regional spaces that have become crossroads of transnational pathways and stages of ensuing negotiations of cultural encounters. As site-specific, potentially transgressive or affirmative events (McKenzie 2001, 30, 31), the cultural performances of the region shape the epistemologies of their particular transnational site. Vice versa, the transnational German-American contact zone of Grafenwoehr/Flossenbuch can be approached via cultural performance as material and methodology of investigation.

The contemporary Grafenwoehr Training Area (GTA), one of the largest US military bases in Europe, generates a large civilian and cultural American presence. The on-base German-American Volksfest (entertainment fair) attracts up to 150,000 visitors annually. A few miles from Grafenwoehr and from the former Iron Curtain, in the past decade(s) Flossenbuch has been turned into a “European site of memory” and pays tribute to the diverse national backgrounds of prisoners of the Nazi regime and to its post-liberation use as a camp for prisoners of war and, subsequently, for displaced persons. Like Grafenwoehr, Flossenbuch prismatically reflects the region’s characteristics as a post-war German-American contact zone: liberated by US soldiers, it attracts visitors from the GTA, and both liberated and liberators regularly attend commemorative events and choreographies such as Liberation Day.

The Volksfest and Liberation Day share major characteristics. First, they constitute cultural performances. Second, both are inherently site-specific and indebted to their location’s diachronic and synchronic particularities: a history of German-American encounters since 1945
and an American presence in a contact zone located outside the United States. Given the continued co-presence of two (heterogeneous) national groups, both performances create ever-new cultural encounters via their audience. Third, both performances negotiate and construct the (trans-)cultural epistemologies of the site from which they emerge.

On April 23, 2017, the Flossenbuerg Concentration Camp Memorial commemorated the anniversary of its liberation. As a materialization of the site’s past and present, the event brought together survivors, witnesses, and their relatives from diverse European nations, e.g. Leon Weintraub from Łódź, now living in Sweden; as well as from the United States, e.g. Jack Terry, Polish-American speaker of the former Flossenbuerg inmates; a Polish military band; German and Bavarian political representatives, e.g. State Secretary Albert Füracker; US military representatives from the nearby Grafenwoehr Training Area; US Consul General from Munich, Jennifer Gavito; as well as an array of inter/national and regional visitors. Commemorative speeches; a testimony by Yves Durnez, son of survivor Marcel Durnez, translated from Dutch into German by the granddaughter; music; the vague background noise of multilingual translations from headphones in the audience; an international group of young people portraying their experiences of Flossenbuerg as a seminar site; the dedication of commemorative wreaths at the Square of Nations in the so-called Valley of Death—these are just some examples of the choreography.

The cultural performance at Flossenbuerg commemorates trauma and liberation; yet as an enactment of counter memory, it constructs a future-oriented epistemology of un-repeating. Emphasizing the potential of performance as a mode of investigation for trajectories of memory production, Taylor notes that the “repertoire,” i.e., “embodied practice” functions “as an episteme and a praxis, a way of knowing as well as a way of storing and transmitting cultural knowledge” (Taylor 2003, 278). The local site, that is, the historical space of Nazi terror and of liberation, is part and parcel of the embodied memory and performative politics of Liberation Day. The event makes use of the resistant potential of performance and serves as a multidirectional epistemology of remembering the past in order to avoid future trauma (see Hebel 2008; Sturken 1997), i.e., future “social drama” (Turner 1982, 61–88).

Scholars of Transnational American Studies and Memory Studies have recently begun to call for “new theoretical frameworks, … new methodological tools, and … new sites … for studying collective remembrance beyond the nation-state” (De Cesari and Rigney 2014, 2; also see Hebel 2010; Rothberg 2009). An approach to Liberation Day via performance emphasizes the cultural, social, and political site-specificity of the event and provides new perspectives on its impetus and politics. The site’s transnational past as a concentration camp imprisoning diverse national and cultural identities as well as the location’s present as a transnational contact zone of visitors and employees presupposes the heterogeneity of the community that comes together for the commemorative event. Whose memory is it then? Is it a commemoration of trauma, of survival, of liberation, of guilt? The cultural performance as a whole allows and requires all these readings. The commemorative act becomes a communal transnational performance of memory. As a live event characterized by materiality, visible and tangible bodies, and especially their co-presence, it generates a community, or “communitas” (Turner 1982, 44, 47). This community reflects the transnational history of the specific site of Flossenbuerg and the multi-nationality of perpetrators, victims, and liberators. It also mirrors the transnational composition of the performance’s location and its inhabitants. In 2017, the Flossenbuerg region is characterized by the heterogeneity of multiple presences, ranging from German to American, from the nation of perpetrators to the nation of liberators, as well as to descendants of victims or displaced Persons living in the area. Itself a contact zone, the region partakes in the 2017 Liberation Day and the joint
endeavor and epistemology of counter memory. Albeit only part of the larger transnational community of Liberation Day, the region nevertheless experiences itself as a community in the here and now—a prerequisite for a positive future co-habitation of the transnational contact zone that hosts the event.

Similarly, the Volksfest constitutes a condensed enactment of the symbiotic needs of its transnational environment—the US base, e.g., offers a large percentage of employments in the area. Like Liberation Day, the Volksfest captures the negotiations of the historical and contemporary German-American contact zone. The event hosts multifarious micro-performances ranging from staged formats such as American Dimndl-and-Lederhosen contests, line dance performances by German groups, or country, rock, and Bavarian folk music; to choreographed procedures such as showing your ID and entering the heavily guarded space of the Volksfest on military grounds; to the behavioral end of the performative spectrum such as folk dancing or eating stereotypical German or American food. The performative impetus ranges from national, cultural, or imperial affirmation to the appropriation of cultural behavior in order to conspicuously demonstrate one’s mastering of the “other’s” culture.

A Performance Studies approach captures the impact of spaces characterized by small transnationalisms on everyday behavior. It allows us to trace the trajectories of transnational appropriation of behavior as a form of embodied cultural memory. Referencing Richard Schechner’s concept of “restored/twice-behaved behavior” (Schechner 1985, 36), Taylor argues: “Performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory … through reiterated, … ‘twice-behaved behavior’” (Taylor 2003, 2). She establishes a link between presumably ephemeral, embodied “individual instances of performance” (Taylor 2003, 20); their reiteration and hence “continuation” by new agents in new environments; and the thus emerging lasting qualities of cultural “memor[y]” and “knowledge” (Taylor 2003, 21). A plethora of German and American booths at the Volksfest sell stereotypical food. When Americans engage in the physical behavior of eating Bratwurst or when Germans eat burgers, they reiterate (stereotypical) strips of the other culture’s (presumed) restored behavior—an ability enhanced by the performers’ mutual cultural familiarity due to the co-presence in the contact zone. Via the corporeal practice of eating, the cross-cultural performers acquire embodied (and sensory) knowledge of the other culture’s food. This knowledge potentially impacts the assessment of future repetitions of cross-cultural food consumption and facilitates a self-fashioning as interculturally experienced to the transnational audience of the contact zone.

Cross-cultural eating may have become normalized due to general processes of globalization or due to the long experience of cultural exchange in the Grafenwoehr contact zone. Nevertheless, with “cultural memory” being “an embodied practice” (Taylor 2003, 50), the performers perpetuate “American” or “German” cultural behavior and perform “American” or “German” cultural memory. Yet any labeling as “German” or “American” is itself a flexible process and already a reflection of the negotiations in the contact zone; and, after all, in cross-cultural eating, the performer and the performance’s presumed epistemology differ in terms of nation. Eating Bratwurst and eating burgers become transnational acts. While globalization may have dispersed Bratwurst in America, an American eating Bratwurst at the Volksfest in Grafenwoehr is a product of and negotiates the specific contact zone. Likewise, the meaning of eating a Bratwurst for Germans or eating a burger for Americans exceeds and complicates any classification as stereotypical repetition of one’s “own” restored behavior. If cultural performance partakes in the struggles over cultural power at its site, eating “inner-culturally” continues one’s “own” embodied repertoire and memory in the face of potential interferences by another culture’s presence. Like cross-cultural eating, the repetition of one’s
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(presumed) “own” cultural behavior—within the particular frame of the transnational site as a meaning-making paradigm—is itself generated by the dynamics of the contact zone. Eating a burger or a Bratwurst at the Volksfest inevitable becomes embodied cultural memory of the transnational cultural processes and phenomena of the transnational post-WWII contact zone. Evidently, an approach via cultural performance allows us to grasp the politics of the seemingly casual and a-political actions of the transnational contact zone. As Elizabeth Dillon maintains in a different context: “Significantly, as well, performance is a key category through which the part of no part—the people out of doors—achieves visibility …” (Dillon 2014, 13).

Conclusion

Dillon’s statement aptly captures the common ground of both nineteenth-century Emancipation Day celebrations and contemporary performances in Flossenbuergh and Grafenwoehr. While on August 1, African Americans enact their desired participation in the national, social, cultural, and political site of their very performance, Liberation Day in Flossenbuergh makes visible those who were “the part of no part” during the Nazi reign of terror, and eating at the German-American Volksfest represents the power of the performance of those who are, in Dillon’s sense, metaphorically “out of doors,” i.e., not part of official and clearly demarcated stagings.

Dillon points to the politically, socially, culturally, and epistemologically constructive and constitutive quality of cultural performance. Rochester, Flossenbuergh, and Grafenwoehr all become the site of cultural performances that use the material, immediate potential of performance to literally make visible and inscribe the past and present presence of diverse groups into the site from which these cultural performances emerge. It is African Americans that enact their presence in a predominantly white America—a presence that resulted from the transnational system of slavery and the enforced mobilities of the Middle Passage; it is Germans and Americans that negotiate their cultural presence in the contact zone of Grafenwoehr; it is the victims of Flossenbuergh that receive a counter voice in the contemporary transnational commemorative act. The particularities of the respective sites—sites of performance and sites of cultural contact—impact the meaning of the performance. Marching, singing, and celebrating in the public sphere of a nation that still maintains slavery, African Americans embody presence, that is, their right of (cultural and political) participation. Displaying embodied cultural memory in a German-American contact zone becomes a form of either cultural empowerment or cross-cultural appropriation. Making use of the affirmative, transgressive, or resistant potential of performance, cultural performances constitute condensed versions of the dynamics and the, at times desired and envisioned, communities of the respective sites.

All three sample performances discussed are impacted by transnational trajectories: Rochester by the global economies of slavery and the public commemoration of a transnational event in the West Indies; Flossenbuergh by the imprisonment of diverse European identities, liberation, and the continued American presence, which also affects Grafenwoehr. All three events are concrete manifestations of the larger transnational dynamics of their sites. As a subject of inquiry, these cultural performances offer a contribution and fresh perspective to the study of transnational crossroads and processes for American Studies. As a method of inquiry, cultural performance enables us to tackle the tension between the more abstract, hard-to-grasp, and oftentimes fleeting pathways of transnational processes and the very local sites and identities affected by and participating in these processes. It offers the opportunity to
locate and examine past and present transnational mobilities and movements at their junc-

tions within particular local sites and periods of time.

Notes

1 See in particular chapter three of Kerr-Ritchie’s Rites of August 1, which examines the transformation of August 1 within black Northern communities from the 1830s to the 1850s (2007, 82–117). Julie Jeffrey gives an overview of how August 1 celebrations differed within black and white communities (2006). For further explorations, see also Kachun (2003, 54–96); McDaniel (2005); and Rugemer (2008, 222–57).

2 On August 1, 1834, the British Slavery Abolition Act became effective. The Act initiated the (predominantly) peaceful official end of slavery in the British Caribbean but was, however, followed by an apprenticeship system that ended in 1838.

3 Kerr-Ritchie’s Rites of August First is a prime example of such an endeavor.

4 See McKenzie (2001), who adds “resistant” to the Turnerian functions of performance as “affirmative” or “transgressive.”

Bibliography


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*The North Star*. “First of August Celebration.” August 4, 1848b. Accessible Archives.


