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Global Performance Studies

Issue 5.1: “Decolonisation and Performance Studies”

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Call For Proposals

This special issue of *GPS* explores ways of framing and rethinking histories and discourses of Performance Studies as a field rooted in Western systems of knowledge production and communication linked to forms of cultural and political imperialism. This call comes at a critical time of collective undoing and reimagining that is part of a wider fight for social justice underlined by social, political and economic crises, in a climate where calls for paradigm shifts in education, scholarship, institutional structures and academic disciplines are more urgent than ever before. Performance Studies’ emergence as a relatively young interdisciplinary field of enquiry, originating in the convergence of theatre studies and anthropology, implicates it in anthropology’s violent legacy of colonialism. The field’s imperialist underpinnings and the roles dominant knowledge systems play in marginalising “non-Western” and Indigenous epistemologies have been acknowledged as subjects of scrutiny in the past two decades by scholars and publications that critiqued the dominance of the Anglo-American performance paradigm. These forms of reassessment opened up debates and important self-reflection that drove attempts to explore different genealogies of performance research in search for “alternative”, counter-hegemonic ways of defining and studying performance, when the term “decolonisation” was not widely adopted. Jon McKenzie’s provocation “Is Performance Studies Imperialist?,” prompted by conversations during PSI#10 in Singapore in 2004, and published in 2006 in *The Drama Review* journal generated a range of responses from scholars that critically interrogated the state of the field, recognising an imperialist history that casts its shadow across a discipline marked by North American and British dominance (McKenzie 7). Two decades on, debates and discussions on colonialism, white supremacy, the legacy of imperialism, racism, and inequalities remain pressing and urgent. The murder of George Floyd in the hands of a police officer and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement across the globe, the ongoing Israeli project of settler-colonialism and apartheid in occupied Palestine, foregrounded yet again in the recent violent military attacks by the US-supported Israeli occupation forces in Jerusalem and Gaza, Brexit, the climate crisis and a global pandemic that exacerbated structural inequalities, all necessitate a continued critical assessment of the position of the field at this critical moment.

Attempts to undo hierarchical structures and unsettle centres of power in Performance Studies pedagogy and scholarship still maintain the risk of reinforcing power formations and imperialist epistemologies, when debating the decolonisation of a field that is primarily rooted in the Euro-American academy and that adopts systems of communication, circulation and funding regimes located in Europe and North America. The search for “alternatives” in response to an urgent need to decentre the field’s Western emphasis, to “diversify” its systems of knowledge formation and promote other ways of being, thinking and doing, without challenging engrained inequalities and epistemic privileges, and without consideration of the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and global asymmetries, turns into a gesture of inclusion that results in “distancing non-Western cultural production as radically other” (Taylor 11). Sruti Bala argues, drawing on Roderick Ferguson in *The Reorder of Things*, “one must be wary of the academy’s claims to affirm and include minoritarian or marginalised subjectivities.” For while inclusion is important in the fight for justice and equality, it is necessary not to assume that form of inclusion is sufficient or emancipatory in itself (Bala 339). Well-meaning acts of selection and inclusion that attempt to diversify and decolonise pedagogical practices and scholarship in the academy can be reductive, exclusionary, maintains the

status quo, and perpetuates epistemic violence and systematic erasure against the labour, knowledge and experience of Black, Global Majority and Indigenous scholars and practitioners.

There is a danger in decolonisation becoming an empty signifier or a metaphor that recentres whiteness. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that decolonisation loses its revolutionary potential when its language is superficially adopted, replacing prior ways of talking about social justice or decentring hegemonic perspectives, and gets appropriated as a strategy to evade settler guilt and complicity, and as a premature attempt at reconciliation (Tuck and Yang). Drawing on Frantz Fanon, they assert that decolonisation specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life, and until that occurs, critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler-colonialism. Decolonisation is necessarily unsettling, and demands the dismantling and relinquishing of colonial power and privilege. This means that current understanding and engagements with decolonisation continue to be fundamentally flawed as long as the sovereignty of Palestinian land and Indigenous peoples around the world is not upheld, and as long as the settlers' possession of stolen land is not relinquished. Debates on decolonisation must go hand in hand with debates on Palestine and indigeneity. As Swati Arora argues, “[t]he project of decolonisation requires an ethics and an imagination that is rooted in an ongoing care work and whose freedom narratives leak into every aspect of the lives of precarious bodies – a solidarity that persists beyond the fulfilling of cursory institutional agendas” (17). Decolonization is not a singular action or a linear process, and it is certainly not yet accomplished. “Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process” (Fanon 35), and a long-term commitment that demands a great deal of reflexivity and consistent active learning and unlearning.

This issue extends the urgent calls, debates and reassessments of this current moment by considering a future for Performance Studies that is more challenging to hegemonic configurations of power and epistemic privilege that place particular narratives, methodologies and epistemologies at the “centre.” It is an invitation to unsettle notions of “centre” and “periphery,” contest established binaries, critique and explore understandings and approaches towards decolonisation — given the flaws in institutional understanding and practices around decolonisation — asking if it is possible to imagine a decolonised Performance Studies. What does it look like? How can decolonising Performance Studies withhold the concept’s revolutionary potential in both its theoretical and practical values? In a field whose hybrid formation and transnational situatedness makes it a fertile ground for activism, politicised practices and solidarity movements, how can Performance Studies pedagogy and scholarship actively embrace calls for understanding and critiquing decolonisation as part of a broader process of creating more just futures? How can the field contribute to undoing the implications of colonial violence and dismantling systems of domination still prevalent today?

We call for artistic and scholarly contributions that critically engage with the question of “decolonisation” while examining the field of Performance Studies in the present, and considering its departure from that present and into the future. The issue cultivates an interdisciplinary focus, inviting perspectives from different artistic and scholarly fields, particularly those that draw on broader knowledge systems, paradigms and methodologies of understanding, making and teaching performance. We especially encourage contributions by artists, scholars and educators who identify as Black, Global Majority or Indigenous, or as being underrepresented or censored, and welcome articulations in the journal’s editorial languages (Arabic, English, and Spanish). Furthermore, we welcome contributions that discuss how these languages may carry colonial legacies while at the same time may enable decolonial critique. Contributions in the usual format are welcome, but we also invite submissions as video/photo essays, sound, and other non-conventional or hybrid formats. Contributors may wish to draw on the following broad areas of intervention, although the list is not intended to be exhaustive or restrictive:

- Processes of making and reception;
- training and pedagogy;

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- protest and activism;
- resistance and solidarity;
- identity and representation;
- the global pandemic;
- virtual and non-virtual spheres of performance;
- media and technology;
- migration and borders;
- exile and the diaspora;
- indigeneity and settler-colonialism;
- environment, ecology, and human-environment relationship;
- objects, materiality and the post-human;
- history, documentation and the archive;
- political performativity;
- healing and reconciliation;
- war;
- spirituality and religion;
- the state and institutions;
- economy, commodification and consumption;
- the politics of the everyday.

Works Cited

Arora, Swati, "A Manifesto to Decentre Theatre and Performance Studies." *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2021, pp. 12-20.

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GPS Seeks Proposals For: Critical, analytical, and creative articles, essays, position papers, manifestos, performance texts, scores, scripts, digital art, and performance archives.

Note: any digital media content should be carefully curated and associated with a proposal of a scholarly and/or creative project, and the purpose and use of digital media elements be clearly defined in the proposal, including obtaining rights and permissions to publish in *GPS*.

For articles or reviews that involve any digital media please include an additional 100-word (max) description of the scope, purpose, and format of the associated media. Please do not send media files with any initial proposal. Examples of media may be solicited as needed.

Proposals for articles / projects due by November 15, 2021.

Submission of full accepted articles / projects due by February 15, 2022.

Publication: September 2022

Requirements for Proposals*:

- 250-word (max) abstract as a Word document.
- Author(s) name(s) as they would appear in the journal.
- Author(s) Contact Information.
- Short bio (50-word max) for each author.

Please send submissions and questions to:

GPSEdits@gmail.com

About GPS

Global Performance Studies is a peer reviewed online academic journal sponsored by Performance Studies international (PSi). Our goal is to provide a resource to scholars and artists who are seeking to publish both traditional articles as well cross-platform, multimedia content that pushes the boundaries of what we think an academic journal can be. We are also interested in finding ways the journal can serve a truly global audience of performance studies scholars and artists.