

Editorial: On Critical and Convivial Assembly

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After two years of the pandemic, our academic community finally travelled last summer to gather at the IFTR World Congress in Reykjavik, Iceland, where the theme for 2022 was *Shifting Centres: In the Middle of Nowhere*. Middle-of-nowhere(s), reflecting dichotomies and hierarchies of centre and margin, often point to colonial and neo-colonial trajectories and positionalities, uneven exchanges, and the dichotomies of the privileged and the subaltern. They are not only geographical places, and they are not fixed either, even when the dichotomies seem hard to shake. Acts of war and of art both cause the centres to shift – the former quickly turns cultural, economic and geopolitical centres into wildernesses of devastation, where one literally needs to struggle for survival. The latter, art, is slower-burning, but with the advantage of imagination through which to generate radical shifts from the hinterland, the godforsaken place, the border, the refugee camp, the bomb shelter. Turning middle-of-nowhere(s) into strategic places, it is art that often has the key role in formulating the grammars of the margin (even of its everyday repertoires) – through which the hinterland sends signals to the centre, reflects its suppressed peripheries, deterritorializes and reterritorializes on its own terms – if only temporarily.

These are some of the broadest terms in which the trajectories of margin and centre were explored at our convivial and critical assembly in Reykjavik. I use the term ‘assembly’ deliberately alluding to Butler,¹ yet fully aware that I am stretching the term in ways that can be problematic. First, because our assembly is not directly political in its aims, though engagement with performance and politics of bodies, voices, spaces, forms, representation, spectatorship and participation permeate the work in every branch of our discipline. Second, while Butler links assembly with precarity, our gathering is enabled by a relative privilege of freedom of movement and association, as well as the means to travel. Milija Gluhovic’s keynote lecture, ‘What Does Defending Europe Mean? Theatre and Migration in the Balkans’, pointed to the disparities of these freedoms in the context of precarity and the biopolitics of migration, but also reminded us that trajectories of margin and centre had different directionalities through history (not always South to North and East to West, but the other way round too). Butler, drawing from Hannah Arendt, extends the notion of performativity from speech act to body action, whereby the very fact of people gathering tells us something. In the embodied ways of coming together, Butler sees a potential for long-distance solidarity and new ways of utilizing public space politically. Our critical and convivial assembly in Iceland might need to be taken with many caveats – of the aforementioned relative privilege of mobility (relative as, for some nationalities, European visas come more slowly than for others, for example,

suggesting yet another dimension of constructing centres and peripheries and the complicated, uneven realities of internationalist research). Our combined carbon footprints are not unproblematic, and the risk of contamination from the stubbornly lingering residue of the global pandemic is still very present. Despite all this, it felt necessary to gather. To speak, to listen, to hear (with ‘the ear of the other’ as much as with one’s own²), to see (and to see better), require the occasional gathering of people, whereby being there also becomes a form of saying something. Some degree, thus, of convivial and critical assembly remains essential for international research to unfold as a (self-)critical scholarly practice and pedagogy of forging long-distance solidarities.

This issue in many ways explores how performances, theories and ideologies travel and become modified, sometimes deliberately, sometimes unintentionally; how encounters both cross-cultural and intra-cultural (that occasionally also turn into modes of assembly) reshape, renegotiate and challenge forms, preconceptions and ideologies. Even though the dichotomies of margin and centre are not directly used as critical frameworks, the contributions retrace some of its frequently travelled trajectories in the dichotomies of East and West (Gao in relation to China, Duda in relation to Eastern Europe), and in the dichotomies of national and indigenous cultures (Gindt) and in Western critical concepts in non-Western contexts (Im, Ghosh).

In her article ‘Queering *Romeo and Juliet* in South Korea: Homonormativity as Gay Utopian Fantasy’, Yeeyon Im focuses on two queer adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, pointing to the gap between Western-centric queer theory and Korean gay reality still dominated by the pressures of the ideology of familism. She calls for more context-specific conceptual frameworks and vocabularies in which the Korean lived experience of sexual minorities could be formulated. In his article ‘Resistance to the Neo-liberal Economy and the Life of a Play: The Jana Natya Manch and Theatre Activism’, Arjun Ghosh takes the concept of theatre as a worksite of democracy (Balibar, Reinelt) from its Anglo-American and European contexts to left-wing cultural activism in India, against the backdrop of the neo-liberal politics of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Focusing on the life of a play performed by the leftist theatre group Jana Natya Manch, Ghosh explores cultural resistance to the government’s neo-liberal policies over time. Renegotiating the concepts of worksites of democracy and of the Left to the specific context of the Indian cultural and political Left, confronted with the right-wing populism of the BJP, Ghosh proposes that theatre, seen as laboratory of democracy, could also be a diagnostic tool to measure the efficacy of a political strategy. Although they focus on different contexts and subject matters, both Im and Ghosh question the adequacy of dominant Anglo-American and European conceptual frameworks to fully provide hermeneutical tools to understand social, political and cultural experience and challenges in other geographical contexts.

For Gao, Duda and Gindt the cultural construction of national identity is key to their critiques of centrality and marginality. Yang Gao looks at the construction of otherness in the Western tours of the Mai Lanfang and Tsutsui troupes in 1930 through theatrical forms of Peking opera and kabuki. In his article “‘Purification’ and

“Hybridization”:(Re)construction and Reception of Theatrical Nationality in Western Tours of the Mei Lanfang and Tsutsui Troupes in 1930’, Gao demonstrates how Mei Lanfang deliberately ‘purified’ the theatrical forms to meet Western expectations of ‘pure’ Chineseness, while the Tsutsui troupes subverted the expectations of international audiences with a hybridized version of kabuki. By situating Poland and Lithuania on the margins of Europe and reading their histories of occupation through a post-colonial framework, Artur Duda explores the possibility of a transnational theatre between the two states. In his article ‘Eimuntas Nekrošius’s Transnational “Voice from Lithuania”: Reinterpreting Polish Classics within Frames of the Theatre of Sensual Metaphors’, Duda focuses on the work of the famous Lithuanian director Nekrošius and his staging of the nineteenth-century classic embedded in both Polish and Lithuanian national consciousness – Adam Mickiewicz’s *Forefathers’ Eve* for the National Theatre Warsaw. Dirk Gindt further sees the stage as a powerful decolonizing forum as he writes on the Sámi cultural activism of the oldest professional indigenous theatre troupe in Sweden – Giron Sámi Teáhter. His article, “‘We Already Carry Out a National Assignment’: Indigenous Performance and the Struggle for a Sámi National Theatre in Sweden’, unmasks settler colonialism at the root of the company’s struggle with various financial and political difficulties in its aim to be recognized as the national theatre of the Sámi people of Sweden.

In the Summer School on the Politics and Performance of the New Silk Road held in Venice in late June 2022 by colleagues and students from a range of disciplines and different parts of the world,³ the issues of the politics and culture of margin and centre emerge again as we engaged with multiple routes of the Silk Road(s) past and present – that reveal both cultural collaboration and domination, exchange and exploitation, neo-colonial realities disguised as economic strategies. Ideas of national cultural forms and of international exchanges and encounters, with which some of the articles in this issue grappled, emerge in Venice too – both in the Summer School and at the Venice Biennale – albeit in somewhat different contexts and forms. I visited the Biennale, entitled this year *The Milk of Dreams*, with my seventeen-year-old daughter. We first headed to the Arsenale for the World Exhibit and then to the Giardini della Biennale, where most of the national pavilions are located. Giardini is a lush, sprawling garden of pine and oak trees, overlooking the Mediterranean, and dotted with national pavilions. This is the garden of nations, I mutter, as we search for the Korean Pavilion on the recommendation of my colleague Marcus Tan. In the Korean Pavilion Yunchul Kim’s extraordinary installations of non-human objects behave as organic life, as they metamorphose, affected by atmosphere, light and nature, repeating the infinite cycles of creation and extinction. Giardini is a curious, heterotopic geography of the world – the Korean Pavilion is nestled between the Japanese and the German, the French and UK pavilions are next to one another, the Russian Pavilion is closed but under the watchful eyes of security guards, a pavilion still bearing the name of Czechoslovakia sits in the background empty and deserted. Yet, for the first time in history, the Nordic Pavilion, which represents the countries of Norway, Sweden and Finland, has been renamed the Sámi Pavilion and it features indigenous artists. The deeper we go into the Giardini the



FIG. 1. The Canadian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2022. Photograph by Ana Todorovic.

more it becomes a dreamscape of nations, and at times even a kind of subconscious landscape of world nations.

‘Do you remember when you took me to Disney World? (Yes, dear reader, I gave in once, it was a long time ago.) And then we went to this ride, where you kind of travel through the whole world and along the way, puppets in national costumes sing “It’s a small world after all”?’ asks my daughter. ‘This reminds me of it.’ We laugh, but her comment is not entirely inaccurate – Disneyfication has often emerged alongside elitism and cultural tourism as central critiques of art festivals and biennales. Some pavilions are, indeed, more Instagrammable than others – as we watch performances of self unfold in front of artworks and for the mobile-phone camera eye.

We search for the Serbian Pavilion, get lost, and realize that the pavilion representing my place of origin is at the other, far end of the garden of nations. We give up, but this failed search for the place where one’s national culture might be represented has certainly not failed to add new twists to my repository of personal metaphors of national belonging and unbelonging. Moreover, the Canadian Pavilion emerges at the end of our path – representing the country where my daughter was born and whose passport we hold. In the Canadian Pavilion, we find Stan Douglas’s large-scale hybrid-documentary photographs depicting political performativity in two historical years – 1848 and 2011 – when upheavals took place in different geographical contexts. As we look at Douglas’s reflections on a range of events that variously

embody the performativity of political assemblies in continental Europe (1848) and globally (2011), my daughter interjects again:

‘Did I ever tell you that “It’s a Small World” was my favourite ride of them all?’

‘Mine too, despite everything.’ And then it dawned on me what was missing in the Canadian Pavilion. Why these powerful documents of the performativity of political assemblies seemed almost decorative – they craved the presence and engagement of a critical and convivial assembly (Fig. 1).

NOTES

- 1 Judith Butler, *Notes towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).
- 3 The Summer School (27 June–1 July 2022) was supported by the Institute of Advanced Studies at Warwick University (UK) and the Warwick in Venice Programme and organized by my colleague Milija Gluhovic.