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Decolonisation and solidarity roundtable discussion

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ABSTRACT

'Funmi Adewole Elliott, Alethia Antonia, Ramsay Burt, Tobi Poster-Su, Thea Stanton, and Negar Tahsili were invited to participate in a roundtable discussion on 'Decolonisation and Solidarity', chaired by V́ctor Ladrón de Guevara, as part of the conference, *Borderlines IX: Seeking Solidarity and Wonder Through Performance*, which took place at De Montfort University in Leicester, UK, on 30 June and 1 July 2022. The provocations precede this article, and the video provocation can be accessed via STP online. What follows is the text of the discussion between participants, which was edited by Alissa Clarke with Harriet Curtis. The roundtable discussion considers decolonisation and solidarity in relation to topics including: the importance of self-reflexivity; contemplating new ideas, discourses and ways of being that sit outside existing dominant discourses and understandings; reductive representations; responsibilities, expectations and empty acts of decolonisation imposed by institutions; self-care; decolonisation as a process; undergroundness and the undercommons; creating and imagining new entry points for others; and challenging fetishization.

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'Funmi Adewole Elliott suggested the necessity of a roundtable discussion addressing 'Decolonisation and Solidarity' as part of the *Borderlines IX: Seeking Solidarity and Wonder Through Performance* conference, which took place at De Montfort University in Leicester, UK, on 30 June and 1 July 2022. Subsequently, Adewole Elliott, Alethia Antonia, Ramsay Burt, Tobi Poster-Su, Thea Stanton, and Negar Tahsili were invited to participate in this roundtable, and V́ctor Ladrón de Guevara to chair. What follows is the text of the discussion between participants, which was edited by Alissa Clarke with Harriet Curtis.

V́ctor Ladrón de Guevara: Now that we have heard these powerhouse provocations, why don't we start with the provocateurs and provocatrices themselves: would they like to comment on something that they heard, or a question they would like to ask the other presenters?

Thea Stanton: Across all of the provocations, in relation to this concept of decolonising, there seemed to be this real tension emerging between the intentions of the institution

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and the intentions of the individual. There was an emphasis on self-spectatorship, self-reflection, or self-interrogation that seemed a fundamental part of grappling with this positioning of the institution versus the individual. Actually, I don't think I should say the individual versus the institution, rather, it's the institution intertwined with the individual.

VLG: This is a really interesting place to begin. One of the things that link the presentations is the issue of self-reflexivity, and particularly, the self-reflexivity of the principles – the starting point – of the process of decolonisation. I wonder if mathematicians felt similarly when they were starting to create a new way of understanding geometry, for example. It's like we're looking at a non-Euclidean kind of geometry, and we are trying to find, imagine, and develop very different principles to those that currently dominate our systems of thought and action.

Would anyone else like to share any questions or observations in relation to each other's provocations?

'Funmi Adewole Elliott: I'm continuing the thought that Thea started, in that all of our provocations are discussing how we achieve purpose, or how we are heard and seen. This is really important to the idea of the colonality. Remember Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', which she wrote many years ago; she highlighted the plight of low-income women in India who have no voice, and if they do speak, they aren't heard. This not being heard might come from the fact that your point of view, your subjectivity, is seen as having no importance and no place within institutional arrangements. Recalling Foucault's theoretical framework, when you do speak, if you are speaking outside an existing discourse, outside of people's interests and general direction, you are not heard. I think a lot of what we are saying here is about how to broaden or diversify this conceptual discursive universe. I think that's coming through especially in Tobi's provocation and in Thea's consideration of immersive theatre. Thea brought forward some concepts for us to start thinking about, to take notice of what we would otherwise overlook because they aren't present in existing discourse.

Tobi Poster-Su: I agree a lot with all of that. Another thing that emerges from this is the idea of what it means to, as a minoritized person, always be representing a particular position, or a particular set of positions; often, institutionally, this is the job which we de facto are doing. My job is sometimes to do the things that I do, and sometimes it is to bear my identity visibly in a space and therefore represent something. At times, that's something I might make an active choice in, and sometimes it's a position that I'm placed in from without. I think you know what the weight of that means; recognizing that it carries with it both opportunities and responsibilities, and a necessity for self-reflexivity about our own position and relationship to power and structures of power. But also, I hope we're all being gentle with ourselves as we try and change things, and as we try and break things apart, because sometimes this is a position that one is placed in. As a puppetry researcher, that difficulty of just existing and working, without the task of also signifying

something, feels related to something I observe in puppetry design. It brings to mind how puppets that represent a kind of default subject positionality, i.e. white man, are allowed to be as abstracted as a puppet as they like. They might be comprised of a handful of feathers, or a paper bag. But puppets that represent people who are racialized, people who are disabled, people who occupy a minoritised position within society, are always really literal; everyone's got to be super representative. People know if it's a puppet of a person of colour, someone is going to get out the brown paint. It makes me think about my position within an institution: when do you get the space just to exist outside of the specifics of the body?

VLG: You're making a number of interesting connections, Tobi, that are striking a chord with many of us.

FAE: I wanted to ask a question about the puppet example Tobi gave. Tobi, do you find that if you were to make an abstract puppet of a Black person or an Asian person, made out of a paper bag and a few feathers, that such groups of people would feel insulted? Or is it because white people might feel like 'Oh, we can't understand what you're doing unless you represent these Black or Asian people literally'. Where does the pressure come from? Is it from all sides?

TPS: Thank you, that's a really great question. There are so many components, including the complex histories of dehumanization that exist both within processes of racialization and within making puppets of people or, indeed, any artistic representations of people. But I'm using this focus on puppetry conceptually or metaphorically to address certain pressures. I would never want to make any claim on behalf of any people about what anyone except myself would or would not find reductive or offensive. However, the pressure that I'm thinking of is the pressure to represent something specific from a minoritised subject position. This pressure is orientated around the idea that one is located more firmly within a specific body, within a specific identity, that can only be perceived through one reductive frame, by virtue of occupying a minoritized subject position. That's the pressure that I'm thinking about; but you're absolutely right, there's all sorts of potential reasons for the production of puppets in that way.

VLG: Thank you for bringing to this discussion the notion of representation and reminding us about the complexity of these processes. Negar, you wanted to say something?

Negar Tahsili: I just wanted to mention how we gather together so frequently to talk about decolonisation, but the process of decolonising is so slow. From the point of view of minorities, we are just battling all the time and we have fewer allies. We need more people to be united with us.

You mentioned in my biography that I'm an inventor, and I invented something in Iran. When you have a patent, then automatically you become one of the Members of the Society of Iranian Inventors, and as a member of this society you are meant to protect Iranian inventors. But if I'm an Iranian inventor, how can I both be an inventor and

a protector of inventors? How can you exist in both positions? It's like, you are a giraffe, but you are also part of this group protecting giraffes. This is how I feel when we're talking about decolonisation; we are placed in impossible positions.

The institutions that I'm invited to work with in Europe always ask the question, how can we decolonise? But the results are usually so empty and pointless. Even the discussions, they go nowhere. They just produce many more questions and no actions. The universities say that they want to be diverse and have people from different backgrounds and different geographies working for them, but then they don't do it. You can go through their website and see how few people are from different nationalities.

At The Academy of Media Arts Cologne (KHM), they have a course named Contemporary Art/Global South, which is a new thing that they invented. Why should you call a course Global South? What does that mean? And why do you have it? What issues are suggested when you have to bring in somebody from another nationality to come and teach on such a course because your white, white, white department contains nobody appropriate to undertake this role?

Alethia Antonia: I wanted to continue with this idea of the institution. Tobi has outlined in the Zoom chat how 'institutions of all kinds will always try to pull us towards framing decentring/decolonial approaches as a set of actionable tasks which can be ticked off as "done", rather than the necessary constant active struggle'. Indeed, I'm starting to think lately about decolonisation as something that has to be in a continuous active process. Because as soon as we think that it's done, or it's codified or solidified, then we're only replicating the structures that we're trying to dismantle. There are necessary and uncomfortable processes within institutions that need to take place in order to find decolonisation: processes of unlearning, and those in positions of privilege working at both giving away power and utilising power to support in solidarity. At the moment, there's a resistance there in relation to our individual wants and needs to decolonise, and an institutional need to keep things the same. I also wanted to touch on what Funmi said about what is understood and the discourse that lives outside of a known language. In *bell hooks: Moving from Pain to Power* (The New School 2015), which is a recording of an event called *Mapping Desires: Archaeologies of Change*, writer and activist Darnell Moore talks about his conversations with other Black people concerning whether they could imagine a 'Black loving world' where they weren't treated and perceived the way they are now, and a lot of people couldn't. The inability to imagine this highlights tensions in those conversations about decolonising, where people are asking us what that existence is, what it looks like, and what we want from it. There's something in what we're trying to do as marginalized and colonized people, trying to find this unknown space, that we might not know what that looks like yet or have the language for it. That's also where additional labour comes up, and why imagining, conveying, and constructing this new existence is a very strenuous journey, which takes a lot of self-reflection, a lot of self-work. I think that's why it's important when we're talking about solidarity that the institution is able to hold people in that journey, and not be another barrier to that journey.

VLG: That's another great reminder of why we're doing what we're doing, the necessity of doing something, of continuing doing something, and reminding us of the need of caring and working as a community.

Ramsay Burt: Listening to this discussion about the institution and its problematics in relation to the project of decolonising makes me think of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's notion of the undercommons and the underground in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013). They address people being in, but not of the institution, and maybe a kind of 'solidarity of feeling' as part of that kind of underground. Perhaps part of the role of that is to use the institution, as Moten and Harney put it, to get what you want, while resisting, and the result of that might be to disrupt the institution to a certain extent. It's problematic for me because I don't know quite where we go with that, as we want to believe in the institution. We need to work within the institution to try and get what we want. We need to try and understand how the institution works. While I was still working at De Montfort, that was the kind of role that I was trying to do, trying to make space in order to try and support the sorts of things that I felt needed to happen. The notion of solidarity that comes across in Sara Ahmed ([2004] 2014) is of being in solidarity with the other who one is not the same as, but with whom one feels some kind of connection. I wonder whether this connection that we feel is one of being underground and feeling something. I'm not quite sure with this kind of solidarity, which is opening up a space, how useful that can be within the institution. Does the institution always win? Is it nudged sometimes sideways, dislodged, disrupted a little bit? These are my slightly depressing thoughts.

VLG: But it's necessary for us to be able to consider when, how, and at what stage decolonial solidarity can be forged in the institution.

TS: Building on Ramsay and Alethia's comments about the institution, but also the undergroundness being an important area to create, I'm reminded of Sara Ahmed (and I know we talk about her a lot) referring to diversity workers as kind of institutional plumbers (2012). I think our role as, not just minoritized people in the institution, but also privileged people in the institution, is to create entry points, as many entry points as we can. Reflecting on Tobi's provocation about being in a position of power, our role is to move away from those entry points to allow other people to create new realizations of entry points that we can't even imagine. I'm reminded of Royona Mitra's talk at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in 2018. She spoke about diversity being this image of a happy circle, with everyone dancing inside, and there being this very small gate that can only be opened and closed by the people inside. Thinking with this notion of underground plumbing and repositioning entry points, that closed gate is what we're trying to fight against. I think it is important not to always see diversity as this happy resolution, where we're all dancing together and holding hands.

VLG: It feels to me that we're at this stage where we're questioning everything, and we're still very uncertain about the future. We're trying to create a different future from the existence we've had so far.

We have a little time left for audience questions.

Lyn Cunningham (audience member): It's a response to the strands of concern that have been evident throughout the discussion. When I watched the video provocation by Negar, it said that curators and institutions expect her to produce the golden egg and she demonstrated the fetishization of her work; this really resonated with me. I am interested in who's trying to decolonise, what the agenda is, and why that action comes into being in the first place. When lecturing, I was often the subject of tokenism: 'Oh, Lyn, you're a lesbian, you'll teach on the lesbian or gender studies stuff', or 'Lyn, you're from Ireland, you'll teach about conflict in Northern Ireland or this kind of play text'. The reality is, those weren't my subject areas. They also weren't something that I particularly wanted to speak about, because of a particular trauma. Reflecting that experience, a fabulous Black playwright, who is also a friend, has talked about how often she receives commissions framed by comparative fetishization. She is expected to write about a kind of Black context – whatever that may mean, and without any consideration of different contexts, origins, cultures, and subcultures within that – through a white gaze. She said that part of her difficulty is actually being a Black middle-class playwright – this doesn't suit the agenda of the commissions, which are asking for a particular form of language to be used.

Speaking to a particular example from puppetry, *The Walk (Little Amal)* that is currently happening in the UK [the 12-foot puppet of 10-year-old Syrian refugee child travelled to and around towns and cities] is focused on a representation of a displaced child's body. I wonder what that would be like if the puppet body concerned was that of an adult Syrian male, or an adult female? There's something troubling here about the gaze and the tokenism. Perhaps you all can unpack this further?

F.AE: I just want to link what Lyn has said with Lisa Wilson's comment in the online chat 'about the connections between the immersive, self-authorship, and reflective practice as a disruptive approach (whether for self or beyond) that seem to be emerging as a way to approach decolonisation for researchers, practitioners and educators.' The focus on immersive self-authorship and reflective practice is designed to subvert this fetishization of finding one type of Black person that represents all Black people, or the one type of disabled person that represents all disabled people. The multitude of stories that come from people reflecting on their lived experience and via self-reflection can break through that. I still feel that the ability to break through requires an associated language of articulation. That's why attempting to decolonise pedagogical practice by just including case studies or people of difference doesn't always work. If I am teaching a course using three case studies of Black artists, and one case study of someone from Israel, and another from an Arab country, how do the students know how to reflect on and use the information from those case studies? It's dependent on whether they have been supported to develop an analytical approach towards such case studies. Their ability to use the information from those case studies powerfully is reliant on this.

Coming back to the struggle with the idea of reflective practice and self-authorship, which Alethia is talking about, and finding a process, I think it's more important to find a process than an outcome, because the process becomes a tool, which can enable people to find their way through the situations that you're speaking about, Lyn.

TPS: I'm just thinking about the different demands that are made to different people about self-authorship, and how many people that authorship is then assumed to stand for. The fear that I always have about processes of decentering or decolonisation is that they are reliant on this idea of giving one or a small selection of voices a platform, and that then there is an assumption that that voice, those voices, stand in some monolithic way for a whole group of people in a way that non-minoritised voices are not assumed to. There's a distinction to be made between being present in a space, because it is a space in which one can reasonably expect to be, versus the idea of one or a few people being invited into a space to represent an entire set of people. The latter is when fetishization happens, and that's when all this weight gets placed on the shoulders of a very small number of people who are then torn between all these different demands. They are tasked with doing parts of the institution's job, in terms of decolonisation and decentering, while also having to negotiate with themselves through processes of self-reflection – which are absolutely necessary and important – about how they navigate their own power and privilege, and the need to create space for other people. I sometimes worry that the people who are most concerned about making space are not the people who have the most space, and not the people who have been occupying space for the longest. Sometimes I worry that the process of giving up space is a bit bottom-up, and that then what we have is a kind of cycle of people who are low paid, not necessarily with a lot of power within institutions, agonizing over these things. This is not to say that we don't all need to be self-reflective all the time, and think 'are we doing enough, could we do more?', because we do. But I also wonder if there's more that could be coming from higher up distributions of power, and maybe the work is to really throw that into focus.

VLG: My own perspective is that there is far too much to do. We live in a land of contradictions where there are no easy answers. If there were easy answers to the questions that the institution is asking of us, then it would be fairly straightforward to create significant change through increased self-reflexivity or more representation, etc. For me the issue is that we live in an environment that is so charged with pain, with injustice, with history, and to start changing it is really, really complex, and there are not going to be easy pathways forwards.

I am wondering if can we now use the remaining time not to talk about the problems, but some of the things that we can do. My last question to you all is, what are you doing, and how will the solidarity that we are trying to forge help you to do it?

TS: Something I'm trying to do with my practice is not just to put all my ideas of decolonisation and plurality of experience into the juicy creative parts, but embedding that in all of the administration, the hiring processes, the contracting, the pastoral care, and advertising of work. What I'm trying to do is develop a creative practice that begins the moment that I start thinking of something, including how I interact with that in an administrative context. I'm seeing those borders as a bit more fluid. Also, just pay your dancers fairly! It's such a basic way to start by addressing issues of power and balance. So that's what I'm trying to do. I always try and mention it at conferences to encourage others to do the same.

FAE: What I'm trying to do in my research is really look at the analytical and how it ties up with these concepts of global and artistic citizenship, so that everybody should be able to work within these spaces. I want my students to ask better questions about their situations, and also be able to research in a way that opens the doors for them.

Coming from the African space, sometimes our research is a retelling of our problems. I was talking to a student recently who is looking at the dance industry in Nigeria, and I said: 'You know the answers to your research questions already: it's underfunded, there's corruption, dancers are treated badly. You know this already, so why are your questions all about collecting more information on this?' But because she has no examples of any other type of research other than to continue to represent everything going wrong around her, she was about to do the same thing again. We had some very interesting conversations. Now she's looking at a certain aspect of the industry and what intervention can be made to create change. Normally, she wouldn't think in that way. This shifting of perspectives through analysis and use of global and artistic citizenship is something that I see colleagues doing outside the arts in African studies, in Sociology and other disciplines, and I feel it really needs to come into artistic research and practice.

RB: I'm retired, which is kind of wonderful situation in some ways, as it means that I don't have to prove what research I'm doing. I can choose what to do. But I'm left with certain issues and questions that I am still very interested to explore. Participating in this panel allowed me to think about solidarity and allyship; how to be a good ally without necessarily claiming to understand everything. I think that might be a very useful thing for everybody to think about.

NT: Thank you very much for being our ally. In my practice, I have for many years worked with displacing festivals, museums, and events. It's a method of mixing people and mixing ideas, which disrupts attempts to be viewed through a colonial gaze. This is the strategy I bring to different institutions.

TPS: As a lecturer, researcher, and theatre maker, I'm trying to perform expertise less and sit with uncertainty and ask questions more. I'm not saying that I'm good at that yet. I've been socialized male so it's a struggle. But it's been so gorgeous sitting, thinking, and questioning with all of you. I'm just so grateful for the opportunity to do so.

AA: I'm thinking mostly about solidarity and allyship. In my journey so far, I've been thinking about what can I do and how I can take that weight. I think there's something about decolonisation that requires us to actually share that weight. I'm trying to identify spaces and people within those spaces that I can call genuine allies. I'm being more strategic in where I place myself, and where I do not place myself. I'm thinking not about being a martyr to the cause, because there are not many of us, and there's something about preserving ourselves within the spaces in which we practice. That's what I'm thinking about in relation to my practice in solidarity; that I give myself a chance to be able to do the work that I want to do.

VLG: That's such a beautiful way of finishing. Thank you to all of our speakers for sharing with us, with the world, their work, their challenges, and for giving us such radiant beacons of hope with which to move forward.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

'Funmi Adewole Elliott is Senior Lecturer in Dance at De Montfort University Leicester, England and an independent arts practitioner. She has a background in performance, education, arts development, and journalism. She started out as a media practitioner in Nigeria and moved into performance on relocating to Britain in 1994. For several years she toured with physical theatre and African dance drama companies whilst working as an arts consultant and voluntarily as a dance advocate. 'Funmi has an international reputation as a facilitator and has led workshops, labs, and discussion groups in West Africa, South Africa, Canada, and the USA. 'Funmi gained her BA in Languages from the University of Ibadan Nigeria; she holds an MA in Postcolonial Studies, a Professional Graduate Certificate in Education, and a PhD in Dance studies. In 2019, 'Funmi was awarded a life-time achievement award for contributions to Dance of the African Diaspora in the UK by One Dance UK, the UK National body for Dance. Her research interests include dance as a profession, Black British choreographers, and African performance in the creative and cultural industries.

Alethia Antonia (they/her) is a UK-based independent choreographer, performer, teacher, and researcher. They trained at London Contemporary Dance School, Salzburg Experimental Academy of Dance, and Northern School of Contemporary Dance, and is currently a parttime PhD student at De Montfort University with a Midlands4Cities scholarship. Alethia's choreographic work and research incorporate various movement practices, music, and vocality to explore artistic and socio-political issues, and performance as a place to practice navigation and reimagining. Their choreographic work has been presented in theatres (The Place, Sadler's Wells, London; DanceEast, Ipswich), galleries (UTA Artist Space, LA; Centre Pompidou, Paris), outdoors (National Theatre Riverstage Festival, London Gallery Weekend, London), and in film contexts (Phoenix Dance Theatre Digital Programme; Sadler's Wells Digital Stage) and has been supported by institutions such as Akram Khan Company, FABRIC, Yorkshire Dance, and Leeds Dance Partnership. Alethia is currently a Work Place Artist at The Place. Alongside their choreographic career, they are also an established performer who has worked with Russell Maliphant Dance Company, Scottish Dance Theatre, James Cousins Company, James Wilton Dance, VOXED, Tom Dale Company, and Theo Clinkard, amongst others. Alethia also guest teaches for various dance conservatoires, CAT schemes, outreach projects, and professional companies around the UK.

Ramsay Burt is Professor Emeritus of Dance History, De Montfort University. His publications include *The Male Dancer* (1995), *Alien Bodies* (1997), *Judson Dance Theater* (2006), *Ungoverning Dance* (2016), with Christy Adair, *British dance: Black routes* (2016), and with Michael Huxley *Dance, Modernism, and Modernity* (2020).

Víctor Ladrón de Guevara is Lecturer in Theatre at Brunel University London. His scholarly work is centred on Acting Training processes, the use and understanding of the body in performance, and the interrelationship between theory and practice.

Tobi Poster-Su (he/they) is a UK-based scholar and theatre maker who specialises in puppetry and devised, cross-disciplinary work. They lead the MA in Puppetry at Wimbledon College of Arts and

are completing an AHRC-funded PhD (*Towards a Critical Puppetry: Racialisation and Material Performance in the Twenty-First Century*) at Queen Mary University of London. He has published in *Critical Stages*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Applied Theatre Research*, presented at ATHE, IFTR, TaPRA, ASTR and the Prague Quadrennial, and is co-convenor of the TaPRA Bodies and Performance working group. As co-artistic director of Wattle and Daub, Tobi has co-created and performed in *Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)* (Chinese Arts Now Festival, Mayfest), *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* (Wilton's Music Hall, New Diorama, Bristol Festival of Puppetry) and *Triptych* (Mayfest, Pleasance Islington). They have worked as a puppetry director and puppeteer on shows including Tom Morris's *A Christmas Carol* (Bristol Old Vic) and *Heidi: A Goat's Tale* (the egg) and RSC and Improbable's *My Neighbour Totoro* (the Barbican).

Thea Stanton is an indigenous Chilean British researcher, choreographer and lecturer. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Chichester where she is exploring the notion of a decolonising immersive choreographic practice through border experiences and distributions of power. She has produced and choreographed large scale immersive events at The Royal Academy of Arts, TripSpace Projects and the Royal College of Music. She has presented work at Turner Margate, The Place, Spontaneous Combustion, Walmer Yard and Edinburgh Fringe. Most recently she has also collaborated with Architects Stanton Williams on a site responsive work for Milan Design Week. Thea is currently a Unit Leader and Lecturer at London Contemporary Dance School. Most recently Thea has presented papers on her research at Our Dance Democracy 2 Conference, TaPRA 2021, The Society for Dance Research Intersectionality Symposium and What Dance Do. She has also spoken on the ResDance Podcast and been published in *Kritika Kultura* in 2022. She is currently a coconvenor of the TaPRA Bodies and Performance Working Group.

Negar Tahsili (b. 1980) is an inventor, filmmaker and multidisciplinary artist-researcher. She directs films and works on interdisciplinary exhibition-based projects around the world. Her recent art projects have been based on the concept of cloning and displacement. She uses curating as medium to create and exhibitions and festivals are her artworks. Apart from curating, her visual art project has been shown in many exhibitions across the globe, and her documentary films about culture and art have been screened in international film festivals and featured on the international broadcasters like ARTE. She is currently undertaking a Midlands4Cities-funded PhD at De Montfort University, entitled: 'Museum of Tears: Utilising interdisciplinary arts to decolonize the image of Iranian women and artists.'

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