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If you call for papers, the papers call back at you: some thoughts on CfP and selection processes

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ABSTRACT

In her 'Manifesto to Decentre Theatre and Performance Studies' (2021), Swati Arora explores the intangible and invisible borders that function to exclude certain people and knowledges, usually indexed by race, gender, class, and geography, from the academy. As a new working group convenor, I'm interested in thinking through what hidden borders might operate through the Call for Paper and panel selection process. What are prospective panellists really being asked to demonstrate? What unofficial knowledges are privileged and who has access to these? How can we reorient this process towards questioning and away from demonstration of knowledge? In this short provocation I reflect my own experience of selecting abstracts and ask what work might be done to develop a more transparent and empowering model of panel curation. This is a short provocation that was prepared for the roundtable discussion on 'Decolonisation and Solidarity' 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.

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In her 'Manifesto to Decentre Theatre and Performance Studies' (2021), Swati Arora explores the intangible and invisible borders that function to exclude certain people and knowledges, usually indexed by race, gender, class, and geography, from the academy. As a relatively new working group convenor, I am interested in thinking through what hidden borders might operate through the Call for Papers (or CfP) and panel selection process for academic conferences. Within theatre and performance studies, this often includes not just academics but also practitioners, activists, students, and other weird nerds. But what are prospective panellists really being asked to demonstrate? What unofficial knowledges are privileged and who has access to these? How can we reorient this process towards questioning and away from demonstration of established knowledge? In this short provocation, I reflect my own experience of conference convening and ask what work might be done to develop a more transparent and empowering model of panel curation.

My own practice and research are mostly concerned with puppetry, racialisation, and object and human ontologies. The provocation I am offering today is not directly

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connected to puppetry, but it is likewise concerned with a kind of opacity of the mechanisms by which a particular kind of performance is created and discharged. If we understand puppetry as a process which trades in, yet also troubles, the mechanism of theatrical representation – by both concealing and revealing its construction – then we might understand the Call for Papers and selection process in a similar vein. In both cases, there is both an apparent transparency and deep opacity to the actual workings of the process. Here, I am also interested in thinking through the hidden ideological apparatus that animates human and object bodies, but also bodies of words and work in the academy. What I am suggesting, is that we, as conveners, might unknowingly find ourselves empuppeted in the service of exclusionary modes of thinking by seemingly neutral metrics of selection.

To better understand this, I want to walk through the kind of selection processes I have been part of recently in order to explore some of the questions I have. A typical process might operate as follows:

- (1) Working group conveners write the Call for Papers and disseminate it via their chosen networks.
- (2) Prospective panellists send in abstracts.
- (3) Proposals are then selected based on relevance and quality – two concepts that clearly warrant extensive unpacking.

Starting with the call itself, these tend to be based around a broad theme or concept, which is anchored by particular theoretical constructs and theorists. At the risk of stating the obvious, this both allows for a kind of cohesion across panels and gives panellists something to respond to. Indeed, were a call to invite scholars to ‘just send us some scholarship’, this might feel unhelpfully vague. That said, already an invisible hand is beckoning to those who share the theoretical references of the conveners, while perhaps rebuffing those who do not. What if your personal canon does not mirror those of the conveners? What particular kind of schooled confidence is required to send in an abstract that mentions none of these theorists but is nevertheless conceptually relevant?

These concerns are amplified by the selection process. Selection of papers is not something I have ever undertaken training in, though I have always been grateful for the thoughtful and patient unofficial mentoring I have received from more experienced conveners. Nevertheless, having been on both sides of the (Excel) table, it remains a profoundly opaque and inherently subjective process. In my own experience, we (as conveners) have: been careful not to automatically privilege linguistic polish; considered the career stage of prospective panellists and tried to ensure we platform emerging academics; acknowledged the importance of lived experience and positionality in relation to the subject matter; and tried to celebrate risk-taking and non-standard modes of presentation. And yet . . . we have also been concerned with relevance. We have wanted people to reflect back some of the thinking of the call itself.

When I consider the fact of a group of UK-based scholars pulling together a Call for Papers based on our own reference points, and then asking people to respond to these directly, I wonder if what we are really asking for is people who have read at least some of what we had read, and who think at least some of what we think. And I wonder why we

would want to assemble a room full of people who have read what we read and think what we think?

But what other ways might there be? I don't have a full solution, but I wonder if an attempt to decentre these processes might primarily involve three strands:

- (1) Making visible the hidden processes of selection. A transparent account of criteria on which papers will be selected demands a rigorous and honest consideration of what these criteria are. If one of the criteria is, for example 'I personally know and like this scholar', then perhaps writing this down will demonstrate that it shouldn't be. It also forces a move away from assumed knowledge – if it is important that applicants refer to particular concepts or theoretical structures, then the call should state this clearly.
- (2) Reckoning with the inherent biases of the structures of thought and knowledge production demanded by calls is also essential. Again, I have no readymade solution for this, but a working group I co-convene has explored replacing academic bibliographies with more inclusive and free ranging lists of scholars, writers and public figures. Of course, such lists are also infused with our own knowledge, biases and gaps in understanding, but our hope is that this might encourage a move away from reverence for any particular canon of thought.
- (3) Consciously building inclusivity into the overall ask. By that I mean consciously broadening calls to overspill the boundaries of our personal areas of expertise and understanding. To do this requires a constant commitment to curiosity over demonstrations of mastery. It is important here to acknowledge the privilege required to do anything other than attempt to demonstrate mastery in a professional context. The situations of precarity experienced by minoritized and early career scholars do not encourage us to sit with our not-knowingness. And yet this is the exact pre-requisite for curiosity.

It feels important to note that the material conditions of the academy do not support the core endeavour I am proposing, because it is all too easy place the burden of systemic change on the individual, often precariously employed scholar. To acknowledge this, however, is not to absolve any of us from interrogating the practices in which we participate.

Disclosure statement

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

Notes on contributor

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).

Reference

Arora, S. 2021. "A Manifesto to Decentre Theatre and Performance Studies." *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 41 (1): 12–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2021.1881730>.