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Collective Beauty, Grace and Care Against Isolation, Mistrust, and Lack of Utopia: Global Community Events on Neoliberalism in Social Justice Theatre Work

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This is a report on a series of online events in spring 2021 that identified problems of neoliberalism in TO praxis, goals and obstacles of how to counter it and lastly specific actions to be taken. It reflects how Northern TO praxis became coopted by neoliberalism into a middle class praxis within cultural industries (Hahn 2018, Bala/Albacan 2013) and takes into account unequal distribution of representation in the global TO movement(s). At the root of our work, I argue is a deep longing for a radical different life that needs to be recuperated in a dialectical and long journey.

The Problem(s)

Theatre of the Oppressed work or social justice theatre work in general claims to work against oppression of all kinds, yet as a practice it is also embedded in oppressive life-worlds. Neoliberalism has coopted critical TO praxis in the Global North and included it into a cultural industry that is based on answering open calls and working with project logic to make a precarious living. It has isolated practitioners by dividing them from their activist interests and turning them into individualized entrepreneurs instead of social movement actors. Maybe in the process of engaging in what amounts to a more elitist middle class endeavor, activist artists have lost some concern for a creative praxis that confronts the core contradictions of our societies as well as compromised a deep desire to radically live otherwise.

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² I want to thank all participants that were part of the discussions and took time to prepare for each session. For more detailed information on the events, do not hesitate to contact the author at joschka.koeck@tdu-wien.at

In a way, these speculations explain why the online events described here were aimed at Northern TO practitioners even though they wouldn't have to be. To me these gatherings of white northern TO practitioners themselves raised questions about the very meetings we were in. In intersectional global TO movement politics: Who can talk about a movement and who is actually active in it? To what ends can (white) people in the Global North discuss TO movement issues without people from the Global South present (or even BIPOC* TO practitioners from the Global North)? Is all this work just white middle class wankery? Or is this very problematization yet another way in which neoliberal capitalism divides TO practitioners?

The Events

We met during three online community events from March through May, 2021³. We began by describing the status quo of neoliberalism in local, regional and global social justice theatre work, mainly TO. We moved on to defining specific goals that we have that might change this status quo and defined obstacles on the way to achieving these goals. The last event was dedicated to designing actions to counter neoliberalism in TO work. This organizational procedure comes from strategic planning facilitation and is designed to help people to get into strategic action together.

During the first event, we discussed the critique of neoliberalism in the texts of Hahn (2018) and Bala/Albacan (2013), as well as quotes from TO activists around the world about the economics of their work, as starting points and inspiration. Then we split into breakout rooms where we shared personal stories about the impact of neoliberalism in our TO work and created short scenes based on what we had shared. These quickly developed performances revealed the magic of theatre, even in cyber-space, and how from hectic, burn-out endangered individuals emerged collective beauty, grace, and love. In

³ The events were organized by TdU Wien as part of their community evenings aimed at making local connections between activists of our group stronger but emerged as international events because of global lockdown and the necessity to hold them online.

discussion following that we came up with a range of questions regarding neoliberalism in our own practice, e.g. How can we organize within neoliberal economies in the cultural sector?

Searching for common objectives in the second event, we connected most to the idea of creating a **"global project where we can be sustainable and authentic and make a living."** Regarding the biggest obstacles, something curious happened: we began by talking about funds first as the reason for a lack of global cooperation, but we soon switched to very human emotions such as the lack of trust, isolation, and the lack of a collective vision or utopia (all neoliberalist tendencies) as more imminent and important obstacles. One participant then summarised this feeling as: *"We don't see a world in which we can all exist and support everybody else's existence."* Again, this was a moment of awe, surprise, contemplation, and introspection in this process. We all felt the truth of what we were sharing and saying, and mourning that it perhaps couldn't be otherwise. It was a feeling of honest mutual dialogue.

Preceding our third event by just one day, there was a global call to TO jokers from Ashtar Theatre in Palestine for action because of the occupation of Sheikh Jarrah. Also, Jana Sanskriti had asked for cyclone solidarity (for the second year in a row) and Hector Aristizabal was testifying about the protest situation in Colombia via email. After sharing information about these situations with the participants and an update from the Ashtar global call from the day before, I summarised the outcomes of the last meeting.

We tried to come up with specific actions that took these complexities into account. Surprisingly, we found out that we were all already involved in a lot of projects against neoliberalism in our TO work and yet participants in the discussion didn't have projects or even specific interests in common. So we acknowledged that maybe there is not so much need for a *"global project where we can be sustainable and authentic and make a living"* because we already do so many things in different contexts that are fostering connection and care and countering neoliberal behaviour. Do we have to add another one? Also, we

acknowledged that the connection throughout the global TO community was actually quite close (looking at the examples from the day before) and perhaps there is not much need to "fix" anything.

Even though all of the participants committed to small specific actions in the future, the main outcome of this session therefore was to actually acknowledge what we already have achieved!

What next?

One challenge of the event series was that even though some people attended throughout, there was no core group and all work remained somehow hypothetical and/or atomized. As each practitioner shared what they were already doing against neoliberalism in and through their work, no common intention or direction of change emerged. This actually mirrors the core neoliberal obstacle that had emerged in our session that we lack the vision of a world where we can all be truly connected and support each other.

Regarding Global North/Global South representation in the process particularly, one needs to ask: Where are the spaces where the global TO movement can meet and connect for real political action together? Is it necessary we all do something together, or are individual actions or actions by small numbers of practitioners also fine?

Overall, I would conclude from these events that general talk about combatting neoliberalism in our work detached from specific projects is not possible. As TO works from the specific to the abstract always, we also have to always analyse specific TO projects as non-violent activism to create and construct better worlds. Only then can we even begin to analyse the complex ways in which we counter and reproduce neoliberalism through what we do.

Working against neoliberalism in our theatre-making in a neoliberal world seems to be a dialectical process

within a Freirean notion of praxis in which utopia means action and reflection upon the world in order to change it. We all do something because of a deep longing for a liberated future, yet we have to deal with the oppression in the present. The contradiction also manifests itself as a dialectic of the individual and their community.

And so we must continue to analyse the complex ways in which we counter and reproduce neoliberalism through what we do. I believe there is a utopian goal that we can reach together. Who knows? But certainly you are invited to be part of the struggle, too. Take action, specific measurable, lovable action!

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⁴ Also appeared in a different version in Spanish in: Joffe-Eichhorn, Hjalmar Jorge, ed. (2019): *Ensayando el Despertar - Miradas movilizadoras desde el pluriverso del Teatro del Oprimido*. Hamburg: KickAss Books.