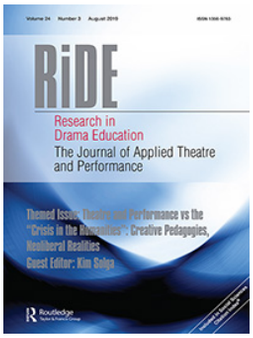

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Power and privilege in neoliberal perspective: the Laboratory for global performance and politics at Georgetown university

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ABSTRACT

The Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics at Georgetown University is an interdisciplinary endeavour operating at the intersection of theatre and international relations. It develops new work; presents global performance; establishes dynamic networks of young and established artists; and cultivates diverse community and financial partnerships. Interviews with Lab staff, archival material, and the author's experience indicate that The Lab functions both as a symbiotic performance-politics relationship that leverages locally voiced performance to enliven global political issues and as a necessary response to a major research institution's neoliberal formations, formations that it seeks to sidestep as much as possible, despite being imbricated within them.

KEYWORDS

Performance; politics; interdisciplinary; collaboration

Higher education has always had an awkward relationship with neoliberalism. Particularly in the United States, universities are simultaneously engines of capitalism straddling the public-private dichotomy and institutions that aim to improve the human condition through creating new knowledge and developing effective citizens. This dynamic becomes even more acute when particular universities host entities (such as research or performance centres or 'institutes') that promote a socially engaged, globally-facing politics, but actually end up entrenching neoliberal realities. Through such entities, social and creative relationships amongst scholars, artists, community participants, and others are transformed into economic capital requiring an embrace of neoliberalism's obsession with flexibility, entrepreneurialism, and doing more with less. The neoliberal myth of meritocracy, however, means that the power and privilege of these entities or their parent institutions are rarely questioned. Thus, neoliberalism works within such entities to refashion the labour of and knowledge about the 'Other' in its own image, one that threatens to cheapen and co-opt the value of institutional and political critique in an urgent social moment when both are sorely needed.

Such is the case at Georgetown University in Washington DC, with The Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics – henceforth, The Lab, which is the subject of my discussion in this article. Established in 2012, The Lab seeks to harness 'the power of performance to humanize global politics' (The Lab 2019a). It was founded to provide a grassroots perspective on the intersection of politics and performance, work it undertakes through collaborative external partnerships. These partnerships have been fruitful and created

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innovative, important, and timely programming, despite the organisation being ambiguously located both inside and outside of Georgetown. The Lab came into being after professor of theatre and performance studies Derek Goldman and professor in the practice of diplomacy Cynthia Schneider met on campus. Speaking of his and Schneider's motivations for founding The Lab, Goldman describes the US's national theatre discourse as 'isolationist and US-centric'.[1] In terms of politics, Schneider, a former US ambassador to The Netherlands, notes her frustration with 'the traditional way that international relations is taught at Georgetown and everywhere' that is 'missing this critical element of culture'. Instead, it continues to be 'taught from this security' and '1950s perspective [of] what is our interest' and 'how do we advance our interest, as opposed to what are the interest[s] of the people we're engaging with and could we possibly advance our interests by advancing theirs?'

Schneider's quotation is worth unpacking, given the vagueness of her use of the term 'interests'. The Lab's 'interests' are in constant tension with the 'interests' of those it works with. When The Lab showcases international political performance or responds to current events by hosting an event, it does multiple things at once: it demonstrates its worth to the university it is nominally attached to; it undertakes a genuine examination of troubling political moments; it builds collaborative relationships with DC-area partners; it co-opts stories of trauma and conflict to position itself as a leading global performance organisation; and it diversifies US- and Euro-centric theatre discourse. These 'interests' also relate to resources: is it in the organisation's interest to build a partnership that may not result in financial support but would result in a timely and marketable event? Or should it cultivate donors and risk reducing its own capacity by upsetting Georgetown's institutional development priorities? These tensions are live in The Lab's work. Thus, I remain attuned to Schneider's interest in 'interests' throughout this article, even though only some aspects of The Lab's work involve training international relations students to prioritise culture rather than national security. And because The Lab is not primarily a curricular or teaching initiative, I want to know: whose 'interests' does it serve, and how does that service happen?

Answering this question requires attention to the organisation's complex financial position and precarious funding relative to Georgetown. Though I take Schneider's quote as a guide, I use a materialist lens to analyse The Lab, given this special issue's focus on the intersection of performance, higher education, and neoliberalism. Specifically, I concentrate on how The Lab's relationship to resources affects its ability to do its work. My argument is in two parts. First, I contend that in order to continue working at the intersection of performance and politics in a way that it deems important, The Lab must become somewhat neoliberal itself. And second, despite this becoming, I argue that The Lab seeks to oppose that neoliberal ethos in the content of the work it produces. In essence, this means that The Lab adopts the basic principles of free market economics alongside neoliberal ideology in order to survive. It shifts its funding from primarily the university to a diverse range of private financial stakeholders, relies on the free movement and circulation of ideas and relationships outside the university, and constantly bids to find cheaper or free resources, at times by trading on the social capital of its staff.

To be clear, I am not saying that Lab staff endorse this ethos; neoliberalism is my framework, not theirs. In fact, they actively resist such language and see themselves as an organisation that sidesteps attachment to institutions such as the university, through drawing on multiple funding sources and partnering with various collaborators. As a result, they

produce artistic work that functions in opposition to the 'kind of social amnesia' that critical theorist Henry Giroux argues fuels neoliberalism through an erasure of 'critical thought, historical analysis, and any understanding of broader systemic relations' (2014, 2). Nonetheless, the organisation's idiosyncratic circumstances require it to operate in a neoliberal way. The Lab's conditions of possibility are neoliberal in and of themselves, and its functioning is *directly related* to it being steeped in a neoliberal order that exists beyond Georgetown. For better or for worse, this order often seeps into and affects that very same work. In what follows, my analysis draws on Schneider's interest in 'interests' as I examine particular ways in which The Lab is consistently, necessarily neoliberalized. Through clarifying key terms, examining The Lab's origin story and context, and considering two examples of The Lab's programming – the Fellows programme and 'Voices Unheard' – I argue that The Lab courts neoliberalism a bit too closely through its power and privilege as an offshoot of a prestigious Western university.

Before continuing, a short note on my position is in order. It is difficult to write critically of an organisation whose work I believe in and with whom I have been associated since 2014. I am problematically and also, at times, usefully intertwined with The Lab in various ways. In chronological order, my paid, professional involvement with The Lab has been: Research Fellow from March 2014-December 2015 for the Myriad Voices Festival, for which I received a stipend; assistant director for a piece they developed called *Generation (Wh)Y*, payment for which was included in my Research Fellow stipend; and Lab Fellow from March 2017-May 2019, for which I have been paid to travel to Edinburgh, Southend, New York, and Washington DC in support of my own work and the Fellows programme. These financial entanglements exist alongside my personal relationships with a number of relevant individuals. Most notably, Goldman has been a strong supporter of me and my work since I was a Master's Degree student at Georgetown, when he served as a faculty mentor for my thesis. He continues to be an important figure in my professional development. As a Lab Fellow, I have become great friends and colleagues with numerous other Fellows, some of whom I cite here. And, I have enhanced my employability prospects as an early career scholar-artist through multiple publications produced via my association with The Lab, including this article and two others (Majid and Jansen 2017; Cassidy et al. 2017). In general, I have positive associations with this organisation because of numerous financial, personal, and professional benefits.

And yet, there are questions to be asked. For example, I was first associated with The Lab through the Myriad Voices Festival that sought to use performance to counter stereotypes about Muslim societies. As a Muslim-American scholar-artist of colour, my unique social and artistic positioning offered The Lab an advantage at a time when none of its core personnel were either Muslim or of colour; this remains true as of this writing in May 2019. Of course, my own abilities as a researcher, facilitator, and artist were instrumental to my selection for and completion of the Research Fellowship. But my background was also likely instrumentalized to demonstrate The Lab's cognisance of its racial and religious politics, a tendency I am aware of, having worked in White spaces as a person of colour and religious minority for some time.

Thus, my relationship with The Lab is particular, made even more so because strictly demarcated roles of employer and employee, researcher and researched, or artist and funder have never been adhered to.[2] Rather, this relationship has been one of fluid movement through a number of personal, professional, and financial situations. My attempts at

an ethnography of The Lab through the lens of neoliberalism are complicated, requiring attention to the ways in which representing others and work that I hold dear can be done in a caring yet rigorous and critical way.[3] Others may speak on their own terms about The Lab, offering accounts that confirm, complicate, or challenge mine. Nonetheless, here, readers should recognise that my view of The Lab's 'interests' and neoliberal entanglements is coloured by my own experience of and work with the organisation.

Key concepts

I begin my discussion of key concepts with neoliberalism and free market economics, before moving to The Lab's configurations of performance and politics. I understand neoliberalism to be a worldview rather than strictly an economic mode of operation. This worldview relies on the notion of the free market, an idealised system in which: information is freely and openly available, state or corporate-monopoly intervention is non-existent, and value is based on equilibria between supply and demand. Making these values reach their purportedly natural status at particular price points requires the entwinement of free market economics and policy. Debating this entwinement occurs at the highest level of US politics: the 2008 financial crisis resulted from federal market deregulation ongoing from the 1980s, the resultant 2010 Dodd-Frank bill championed by Barack Obama attempted to reverse this, and the ensuing political debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump about Dodd-Frank in the 2016 presidential campaign continued the debate.[4] It is this constant attempt – indeed, obsession – to make the market completely 'free' that constitutes neoliberalism, what Giroux refers to as 'free-market fundamentalism' (2014, 1).

By neoliberalism, then, I mean the obsessive intensification of free market economic principles. I attach my argument to geographer David Harvey's definition of neoliberalism: 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free market, and free trade' (2007, 2). Thus, I think of neoliberalism as a way of being – a philosophy or worldview – rather than as an economic system. Expanding on how neoliberalism and free market assumptions function in The Lab's work is vital not only because The Lab draws on these frameworks as it seeks resources, but also because neoliberalism constantly seeks to direct human action. The missionary zeal with which neoliberalism expands its reverence for the free market is important to bear in mind when considering higher education's relationship to funding and resources more widely (see also the Introduction to this issue).

Rather than neoliberalism though, The Lab takes the intersection of politics and performance in the service of a broad social good as its guiding philosophy; it defines this intersection in particular ways. It views 'performance' as theatre that privileges narrative drama, and 'politics' as an instrumentalization of that performance for diplomatic and political ends. The organisation's mission to humanise 'global politics through performance' indicates as much (The Lab 2019a), as does its interest in attempting to 'maximise the potential of theatre and performance in the context of international challenges' and 'bridge the gap between the worlds of foreign affairs and policy, and global performance' (The Lab 2012). This focus on theatre as a 'disciplinary system' (Kershaw 1999, 149) is no

surprise, given Goldman's position within Georgetown's theatre and performance studies department. Moreover, Goldman's artistic work – as well as that of former staff member Jojo Ruf[5] and current staff member Teddy Rodger, prior to her joining The Lab – has been almost exclusively directorial, with a focus on theatrical texts and adaptations. Even the notions of 'storytelling' and 'conversation' that The Lab regularly deploys in marketing materials attend to that which is said, spoken, or told.[6] Thus, The Lab attempts to link political content and context to the messaging of performances primarily through text and narrative, as opposed to through an interpretation of embodiment or musicality.

Such instrumentalization of performance and artistry is not accidental, and can be traced to Schneider's work as a diplomat. Her ambassadorial experience understands culture as a tool. Indeed, a common perspective within the US State Department and the wider world of international politics is that culture serves as a means to an end. The so-called jazz diplomacy of the 1920s, for instance, toured famous jazz artists around the world in pursuit of US foreign policy objectives. This practice has been translated, in contemporary diplomacy, as hip hop has become a late-modern cultural export mediated by the US government. Just as jazz diplomacy enabled touring Black musicians to call and agitate for increased civil rights in the US, so-called hip-hop diplomacy has entwined contemporary artists into the US imperial project in problematic ways.[7] The complexity of cultural diplomacy is embedded into the top-down discourse of culture-as-tool in which The Lab is steeped; it appears in the organisation's preference for 'performance' as narrative theatre and 'politics' as instrumentalization of such performance.

The Lab: origins and context

In this section, I focus on The Lab's particular problems with neoliberal flexibility, vis-à-vis the university, diverse funders, and numerous partners. The Lab was launched as 'an outgrowth' of the June 2012 Convening on Global Performance, Civic Imagination, and Cultural Diplomacy (The Lab 2019a). This three-day gathering featured 70+ artists, activists, educators, and policymakers from around the DC area, and far beyond. Many of these participants would go on to become members of The Lab's Think Tank, an international collection of culture leaders linked to the organisation.[8] To fund the Convening, Goldman, Schneider, and Ruf applied for and received a 'Reflective Engagement in the Public Interest' grant from Georgetown. Of approximately $30,000, the grant supported the Convening's speakers coming to campus and covered costs such as performance tickets and food (Georgetown 2017). This funding was not sufficient to meet all costs, however. Lab staff also integrated multiple financial and institutional partners – DC's Studio Theatre and Georgetown's performing arts centre among them – to secure a venue and reduced-price tickets for shows.

This partnership-based approach to resources is also evident in other aspects of The Lab's work. Before moving to their current home in the School of Foreign Service (SFS), the organisation operated primarily out of Goldman's office within the theatre and performance studies department or relied on teleworking arrangements. Now, The Lab receives office space and supplies from SFS. Lab staff are fully aware of their complex relationship to resources. Goldman has characterised The Lab as a 'cobbling [together] of a couple of professors' volunteer time and little scraps of funding and partnership support' in 'a nimble, fairly grassroots [and] entrepreneurial structure'. His statement

about 'volunteer time' is worth unpicking, because both Goldman and Schneider receive stipends for their work with The Lab. This is equivalent to compensation that the university offers an institute or centre director, but both co-directors have made clear that it does not match the amount of work that they do for The Lab.[9] Instead, their salaries come from their other relationships to the university, as professors in their respective departments. Before her departure, The Lab's only full-time staff member was Ruf, her salary paid for and sustained by SFS. A second staff member is Rodger, Communications and Global Connectivity Manager, whose 75% position is grant-funded as of this writing; efforts are underway to make her role permanent. Other part-time employees include project-specific support staff on temporary contracts and students who are paid hourly.

As the bottom of the organisation's website states (right above a 'Donate' button), 'The Lab currently has no ongoing operating support; we depend on outside funding in order to make our work possible' (2019a). Indeed, a snapshot of the organisation's finances during FY17 and FY18 – percentages that are accurate as of June 2018 – shows that income sources vary: university income at 50-60%, foundation income at 15-20%, in-kind support at 20-40%, and individual donations at 0-10%. These percentages take into account internal cost sharing within the university, such as when The Lab collaborates with a university department on an event and that department contributes some funds. They also include external in-kind support, such as when The Lab partners with an outside organisation and that organisation offers free space in exchange. Approximately 40% of The Lab's costs are overhead, which includes salaries and office space. Remaining costs include travel, artists' fees, accommodation, marketing, and so on. Lab staff note that these percentages are constantly in flux as they work to secure various sources of funding.

Negotiating this diversity of funding requires partnerships with numerous organisations, what Rodger labels as 'nimbleness' and Goldman characterises as 'a nimble, fairly grassroots [and] entrepreneurial structure'. These partnerships are a cornerstone of The Lab's work. It does not announce an annual season, as might be expected from a regional theatre, but collaborates with multiple community and organisational partners to respond to current events and unexpected opportunities. Take, for example, The Lab's September 2017 involvement with a performance of *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real* by the National Theater of Ghana (NTG). When approached a year in advance by the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival to host a residency of NTG in Washington, The Lab initially said it could not do so because of a lack of funding. Then, a few months before NTG's trip to Provincetown, The Lab was approached again about a smaller date range within which to host NTG for low-tech performances of *Ten Blocks*. The Lab decided that the uniqueness of the opportunity was worth working to make it a reality. As a result, they drew on multiple local connections for financial and in-kind support, including various departments and programmes at Georgetown, nearby universities, and a DC-area theatre company that provided free rehearsal space and accommodation for the travelling NTG troupe.

While this type of negotiation may function as 'nimbleness' for Rodger, the framing of neoliberal flexibility is perhaps more apt. In the NTG example, a wider date range was impossible because funding was unavailable. As a result, The Lab initially turned down the opportunity. It was only when the opportunity was shortened, required less technical support, and was achievable at a lower cost that The Lab could make it possible. Here is a manifestation of one of Harvey's key critiques: 'in the neoliberal scheme of things short-

term contracts are preferred in order to maximize flexibility,' increasing precarity and complicating long-term planning (2007, 168). In this instance, The Lab's funding precarity meant that it could not achieve all that it hoped to with NTG, and NTG's exposure in DC was similarly limited. Ruf confirmed as much, indicating that The Lab never says 'yes to large-scale events without really knowing that we can fundraise', while 'also often need[ing] to have faith that if we are most of the way there, our relationships and our long-term collaborations' with a variety of partners 'can make it happen'. Such precarity emphasises that nothing is guaranteed, for The Lab often finds itself 'hav[ing] faith' that its work will continue, echoing Goldman's 'entrepreneurial' characterisation. However, neoliberalism even appears in this language, when read in light of anthropologist Carla Freeman: 'the emerging figure of the entrepreneur' is 'often considered neoliberalism's quintessential actor' (2007, 252).

As in the NTG example, many of the performances The Lab privileges are already part of international circulation, pointing to The Lab's 'global' emphasis vis-à-vis the university. As an institution, Georgetown benefits from immense international links and a student body that is often drawn from elite transnational families. Buildings and centres on campus are named after figures like former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, Saudi businessman Al-Waleed bin Talal, Austrian businessman Karl Landegger, former Goldman Sachs president Michael Mortara, and so on. The university also has a campus in Qatar, and it styles itself as a leading international institution that 'prepares the next generation of global citizens to lead and make a difference in the world' (Georgetown 2019). The internationality of this ethos is directly manifest in The Lab's mission and the types of work that it privileges, produces, and promotes.

The classed dimensions of Georgetown must also be considered here, for the university is among the most elite in the country, if not the world. Tuition exceeds $50,000 a year for undergraduates, making it one of the 40-most expensive universities in the US (Dangremond 2018). Moreover, all four of The Lab's past and present core staff come from a middle-, upper-middle-, or upper-class background. The events that The Lab connects and is connected to, then, tend to circulate among a mobile international intelligentsia and artistic class that has the capacity to move or interest in moving freely around the world. Neoliberalism's desire for free movement of and unfettered access to *certain types of bodies and capital* is evident here, in The Lab's attachment to global performances that transcend borders, yet also, paradoxically, work in the service of shoring up the cultural and economic capital of already-globalized elites, often at the at-least partial expense of non-elite participants. One of my case studies below – 'Voices Unheard' – marks the complexities of the Lab's imbrication with neoliberalism's often contradictory relationship to principles of 'free movement'. But the organisation's Think Tank is more indicative of The Lab's class-based norms. Despite its lack of political figures, the Think Tank features elite artists and culture workers with prominent international profiles, such as: Kwame Kwei-Armah, artistic director of the Young Vic; Ping Chong, artistic director of Ping Chong + Company; Alicia Adams, vice president of international programming and dance at the Kennedy Center; and Natalia Kaliada, co-artistic director of Belarus Free Theater (The Lab 2019d). Thus, The Lab's neoliberal 'flexibility' is best marked by its internationally-elite positioning, one that is directly related to the economics of its university home. Privilege is indeed part of The Lab's power.

This privilege, in turn, is best illustrated through case studies. The two examples found below are offered in reverse chronological order. First, I analyse the inaugural iteration of the Fellows programme, which occurred from 2017-2019. Then, I examine a 2014 event called 'Voices Unheard,' which replaced the production originally scheduled for performance via The Lab, a play titled *Syria: The Trojan Women*. Similar issues are found in both case studies. Neoliberal interest in the free movement of *certain kinds of* ideas and people is, in turn, linked to neoliberalism's implicit neoimperialism, raising questions about how to represent the Other and promulgating an ethical confusion regarding how artists are treated. My two case studies should thus be read in conversation with one another. Indeed, the Fellows programme can be seen as an attempt by The Lab to correct some of the problems that manifested in the 'Voices Unheard' event, including through selecting one member of the *Syria* cast as an inaugural Lab Fellow. Ultimately, the two case studies offer a materialist look at how The Lab instrumentalizes others, while itself being instrumentalized by neoliberalism.

Case study 1: the Fellows programme and the power to convene

In this case study, I discuss The Lab's formation of the Fellows programme in light of its financial, institutional, and artistic power to convene a group of young international artists – albeit in a largely virtual way. The Lab negotiates Fellows' participation by ceding an artistic and networking space to Fellows, even as it is responsible for bringing them together. If The Lab's convening of the Fellows amplifies their work and establishes a new network of international artists, then it also entrenches The Lab's position as a powerful Western organisation that attracts major donor support, wields a private US-American university's international brand[10], and presents new theatrical work. Ultimately, then, the Fellows programme serves two sets of 'interests': those of The Lab in cementing its position as a leader in the field of socially engaged global performance, and those of the Fellows in participating in a cohort of like-minded professionals from around the world.

Established in 2017, the Lab Fellows programme is a global virtual residency for a rising group of ten international artists, scholars, and activists working at the intersection of politics and performance. Importantly, Fellows are not physically resident at Georgetown. Initially an 18-month pilot, the programme has been expanded, based on the energy of the first cohort and continued support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, into a two-year fellowship, to be awarded biennially. The following ten individuals represent its first cohort: Palestinian comedian, clown, and actor Faisal Abu Alhayjaa; Syrian performing arts curator, writer, translator, and manager Jumana Al-Yasiri; Syrian theatre maker Reem Alsayyah; Arab-/Irish-American theatre maker Caitlin Cassidy; Cambodian dancer and choreographer Chankethya 'Kethya' Chey; Polynesian-/Gambian-American theatre director Velani Dibba; myself, a Tanzanian-/Pakistani-American musician and theatre maker; Indian-American theatre maker Devika Ranjan; Colombian theatre maker and director Manuel Viveros; and Zimbabwean playwright Gideon Jeph Wabvuta (The Lab 2019c). The ten Fellows hold regular videoconference calls to discuss our own work, drawing on Lab staff's professional expertise. In-person convenings of the entire group have included a weeklong stay in Edinburgh in August 2017 as part of the Institute for International Cultural Relations at the University of Edinburgh's Global Cultural Fellows programme and a week of devising and performance experimentation in Southend in August 2018. Roughly

half of us also attended The Lab's first CrossCurrents Festival in Washington DC in May 2019, which is – as of this writing – projected to be a biennial event serving as the opening and/or closing gathering for future cohorts.

Aside from the aforementioned virtual and in-person gatherings, which are funded through the Mellon Foundation or other project-specific sources of support, the Fellows programme offers cohort members financial backing to further their own development. Fellows propose to use Lab funds for a creative project, new collaboration, research trip, conference presentation, or other endeavour that will improve professional standing. Importantly, Lab funds cannot be used to pay Fellows as employees, but can cover costs such as travel, housing, conference registration, and so on. Using myself as an example, I have received money to support the development of a piece about Alzheimer's, the accumulation of stuff, and gambling; attendance at a symposium on youth theatre in Birmingham; and membership costs in academic theatre associations. The Lab accesses Mellon and other funding on behalf of the Fellows, serving as a conduit for resources. In this way, it is a financial gatekeeper for Fellows' artistic and professional growth.

Perhaps the other key aspect of the Fellows programme is that Fellows are encouraged to collaborate with one another, a benefit that stands in for salaries. When developing the aforementioned piece about Alzheimer's, for example, I worked with the New York-based Cassidy and her physical theatre company LubDub. Wabvuta and Chey are collaborating on a piece about their experiences of otherness, into which they hope to incorporate additional Fellows at later stages. Ranjan and Dibba are both part of the *I Pledge Allegiance* performance ensemble, The Lab's touring showpiece about immigrant or first-generation US-American experiences (2019b). These collaborations strengthen the relationships Fellows have with one another, overlapping personal respect with professional experiences. More informal collaborations also exist, including sharing resources such as key texts and inspirational performances, offering one another feedback on job and funding applications, and serving as guest speakers in support of teaching and practice through web-based videoconferencing. We also share a WhatsApp group that is quite literally full of love and joy for one another, in the form of heart emojis and smiley faces, at having found kindred spirits who work and struggle in similar ways.

The 'soft' benefits of travel, comradeship, collaboration networks, and connection to Georgetown put the Fellows in a transactional, quasi-employee relationship with The Lab, a relationship requiring minimal financial resources. Simultaneously, Lab staff decide the content and frequency of video calls, as well as structural aspects of the programme such as when and where in-person convenings happen. The gathering of these often decide individuals is quite extraordinary, given the range of virtual tools used, structural inequalities negotiated, and personal circumstances accommodated. Moreover, in-person convenings have contended with contemporary migration and visa regimes that disproportionately affect people from Global South countries, given that we count some refugees among our number. In this way, The Lab's 'nimbleness' is an advantage. But it also means that – because of the diversity of the Fellows' geographic locations and performance interests – The Lab has to hold on to resources and distribute them at certain intervals while determining the structure of Fellows' engagement with one another. That is, the power to initially convene the network gives The Lab the privilege to set the agenda regarding how Fellows interact as a whole. The Lab can thus claim to have – and indeed, has – established a network that looks to the future of socially

engaged global performance as a field, raising its own profile and augmenting the professional work that each Fellow undertakes.

However, these practices also risk an entrenchment of Western hegemonies around creative knowledge and capital. Though the 'free-market fundamentalism' that constitutes neoliberalism appears, on the surface, to promote the unfettered movement of people and ideas, this is of course not the case – nor, indeed, meant to be the case – in neoliberal practice. The already-economically and politically powerful, under neoliberal ideology, control movement, borders, and thus the illusion of freedom; for those without mobile wealth (such as economic migrants or political refugees), movement is obviously, at this moment in sociopolitical time, far from 'free' in any sense of the term. The Lab's interest in convening and networking a group of artists from all over the world arises from the very best, classically liberal intentions, of course – and yet The Lab centres those artists' 'movement' in the contemporary West. All in-person convenings of Fellows thus far have occurred in the US or the UK. Videoconferences are set in Washington DC's Eastern time zone, with those located elsewhere needing to convert and adjust accordingly. By virtue of its geographic position at the heart of US – and international, through US imperialism – political life, The Lab's attempt to convene occurs on Western rather than 'global' terms – and here emerges a particular classed and neoimperial manifestation of The Lab's work. The artists in the first Fellows cohort are all internationally mobile, English-speaking, from middle-class or higher backgrounds, as well as highly educated, with MAs, MFAs, and PhDs the norm rather than the exception. Thus, an unspoken set of privileges around class, language, education, and mobility manifests in who the Fellows are – despite the 'global' image they project.

I now want to return to the Schneider quotation I discussed earlier: 'what are the interest[s] of the people we're engaging with and could we possibly advance our interests by advancing theirs?' This formation applies to The Lab's ethos with its Fellows. The Lab demonstrates its connection to Georgetown *and* elsewhere through incorporating alumni into the cohort while integrating non-alumni as well. It also 'advances' The Lab's 'interests' of being an organisation at the cutting edge of performance-politics work 'by advancing' the professional and performance ambitions and 'interests' of early career artists. The network of the Fellows is one that I, at least, will hold on to and leverage for the rest of my career. But the Fellows programme also serves an important and instrumentalized purpose in The Lab's ecology.

Ultimately, the Fellows help The Lab deepen its reputation and its ownership over a particular definition of the intersection of performance and politics that is steeped in class politics, power, and privilege. The convening of the network means that the success of my professional work for example, and those of other Fellows, is partly attributed to The Lab – even if most of my projects are made independently from it. I am not in full ownership of my professional work, because I am a Fellow as well as an artist. Similarly, opportunities to convene the Fellows in-person can sometimes come into conflict with paid work, leading to subtle and indirect pressure to privilege Fellows events over personal development or financial security. The existence of the Fellows as a network of socially engaged international artists becomes a source of potential capital for The Lab; through the power to convene on its own terms, and the privilege that comes with its Western position, The Lab's ethics of engagement with the group are – at times – questionable.

Case study 2: 'Voices Unheard – the *Syria: Trojan Women* Summit' and neoliberalism's neocolonialism

In this case study, I examine the covert neocolonial nature of 'Voices Unheard,' a Lab event regarding Syria, women who are refugees, and testimony theatre. I argue that two neoliberal narratives emerge from this event: government abandonment and instrumentalization of the Other. The Lab's power to dictate how performance happens, in this case, occurred on problematic ethical terms vis-à-vis those with whom it worked and in whom it claimed to be interested. A reconstitution of troubling Orientalist tendencies (Said 2003) emerged when The Lab attached itself to neoliberal and neoimperial dynamics to reassert control over a project at risk of failure. On one hand, The Lab fell into the familiar trap of those in the West attempting to give voice to oppressed others through performance, a tendency I have critiqued elsewhere (Majid 2017). On the other, it became clear that, despite The Lab being based in Washington DC and its staff having links to the US government's diplomacy machine, the organisation could not overcome the state's national security apparatus, which stood in this case as a barrier to The Lab's activities. As such, in the moment of this event, The Lab attached itself to a neoliberal ethic in order to do innovative performance-politics work, an entanglement that revealed the organisation to be instrumentalizing others in order to serve its own 'interests' more than the 'interests' of those with whom it was working.

'Voices Unheard' took place during my tenure as The Lab's Research Fellow. In that capacity from March 2014 to December 2015, I was responsible for evaluating Myriad Voices, an 18-month cross-cultural festival focused on performance work from and about Muslim-majority countries. Georgetown was one of six campuses to receive funding for this work from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, given the Duke Foundation's interest in using the performing arts in university contexts to counter stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. The other five grantees were the University of South Florida in Tampa, Augsburg College in Minneapolis, the University of Houston, LaGuardia Community College in New York City, and Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT. Duke teamed up with the Association of Performing Arts Professionals (APAP), such that APAP was responsible for administering the funds to all grantees and ensuring that programme evaluation occurred through hiring project-specific Research Fellows. As Research Fellow for The Lab's grant, my task was to design an evaluative study that involved engaging student cohorts in focus group discussions and pre-/post-project surveys around Myriad Voices events. The Lab's application to Duke and APAP, as well as the overall programming outline of Myriad Voices, had occurred and was successful before I was hired as Research Fellow.

After the launch of Myriad Voices in March 2014, the first flagship event was to be a performance of *Syria: The Trojan Women* scheduled for September 2014. This production re-imagined Greek playwright Euripides' text, performed by a cast of Syrian women who are refugees and integrated their own testimonies into the original script. The making of the play was supported by UK-based organisations like Refuge Productions, and developed and directed in Amman by Syrian director Omar Abu Saada. The Lab's intention was to bring the cast of *Syria* to Georgetown to perform (Goldman 2014). Throughout the spring and summer of 2014, The Lab worked to secure visas for the cast. This work took an additional toll on an already overstretched staff, especially because they were

ultimately unsuccessful. The US State Department denied the twelve cast members visas on account of their uncertain migration, asylum-seeking, and/or refugee status. Consular officials in Amman were not convinced that cast members would return to Jordan after their US tour of the piece, which included scheduled stops at Georgetown and Columbia University (Marks 2014). Visas were granted, however, to Abu Saada and other members of the creative team. All this took place despite The Lab's best efforts to advocate on behalf of the cast. Schneider, in particular, campaigned for the artists at the highest level she could. Even as a former US ambassador, her connections at the State Department were not enough to overturn the consular decision in Amman. Immigration lawyer Jonathan Ginsburg, who worked on the case pro bono, confirmed that much of this had to do with the increased securitisation of visa-granting processes for artists and others, especially after 9/11 (Simon 2014).

When it became clear two weeks before the scheduled performance that visas were going to be denied, The Lab moved to their back-up plan. In place of the performance, they developed an imperfect alternative that Goldman characterised as 'not the event we envisioned' (Marks 2014). Titled 'Voices Unheard – The *Syria: Trojan Women* Summit', the event saw the women, based in Amman, being Skyped into Georgetown's main performing arts theatre and holding virtual court alongside Abu Saada, who had abstained from travelling in solidarity. It was 7:30 PM in DC and 2:30 AM in Amman when the event started. A capacity audience sat in the theatre, asking questions of the women and taking in their answers. Clips were shown from a documentary that was being made about the process of making the play.[11] Lab staff and others associated with the project made speeches. The cast was certainly the highlight, and the moment that earned them the greatest support of the rapt audience was when one cast member asked David Donahue, who was Principal US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs at the time, a loaded question: 'Why has the State Department rejected our visas?' (Marks 2014). Donahue was unable to do much other than reference the legal requirements for granting visas. *Syria* went on to have a touring life of its own and travelled to the UK, where some members of the cast pursued asylum claims. The aforementioned documentary also undertook a screening tour across the UK, and one of the original cast members became a member of the inaugural cohort of Lab Fellows.

In some respects, it is remarkable that this event took place at all. Lab staff were determined to ensure that the women's experiences were conveyed to US audiences in some way; they worked tirelessly to advocate for and attempt to secure visas, even if those efforts proved fruitless. There was also a tremendous reimagining that occurred to showcase the story of *Syria*, despite the women not being physically present. In these dimensions of the evening, the advantages of The Lab's 'nimbleness' are evident. It negotiated numerous difficulties: state bureaucracy as manifest in the international visa-granting regime, aesthetic structures from the intersection of contemporary and Western classical theatre, migration inequalities and ongoing conflict through the lived experience of Syrian women who are refugees, language translation given the use of an Arabic-English translator for some of the women, and technological uncertainty because of the potential unreliability of Skype, not to mention electricity and the internet in Amman and DC. Each of these negotiations by itself would be enough for most organisations. The Lab's ambitions meant that the scale of these negotiations was notably amplified, dramatically raising the performative and political stakes.

Yet the question of 'interests' is important here once more. In holding the event, The Lab sought to serve both its interests as – at that point – an emerging stakeholder working at the global performance-politics intersection, *and* the interests of the women who were unable to tour their piece to the US. But for some of those watching the event, the interests of the women played second fiddle to The Lab's. In evaluative discussions that I facilitated after 'Voices Unheard' concluded, members of the student cohort were incensed by the event. One student from an Arab background, who had worked for international corporations, had this to say:

> It's a power game. The poor ladies had to wake up at 2 AM. Would anyone in the auditorium wake up at that hour to come see them? … I highly doubt it … we Arabs, Muslims, have to make the extra effort. No one would come out on a Sunday in the States to meet you, while you would have to come out on a Friday back home … If there is mutual respect, they would cater to these things. This event didn't have to be at night. It could have been much earlier. At 10 PM their time, which is like 2 PM here … [the women] were up at 2 AM, with kids. That's against human rights.

From this perspective, it is difficult to argue that the women's interests were being prioritised by the event. Instead, this student claims that – in Schneider's terms – 'our interests', by which I mean The Lab's, were being advanced *much more*, and particularly in very basic, tangible ways, than 'the interest[s] of the people we're engaging with'. Reading 'Voices Unheard' through the lens of this student's helpfully anti-colonial comment, the West purporting to give voice through performance to the cast of Syrian women who are refugees is ethically troubling and worth resisting (Majid 2017). Indeed, the notion of voice was deployed in both the title of the replacement event and the press coverage of it, in which The Lab became the implicit saviour of those women who were not granted official access to the US. The voices of the women were 'unheard' or 'denied', and it was The Lab that made 'listening' possible (Goldman 2014). Thus, intentionally or not, The Lab became complicit in a neocolonial and Orientalist narrative, simply because it was desperate to make something, *anything*, happen in place of the absent play.

In this case the flexibility and 'nimbleness' that The Lab constantly seeks to spin to its advantage actually demonstrated a lack of 'mutual respect'. In responding to the denial of visas quickly, including through The Lab's overstretched labour and the pro-bono involvement of an immigration lawyer, The Lab revealed its embeddedness in a neoliberal world order. This is put succinctly in the opening line of the *Washington Post* article documenting the event: 'You can't stop the drama – even when the government tries to' (Marks 2014). Here is the very neoliberal principle that the show must go on, at any cost and in spite of government meddling. Here also is the inescapability of the global art market notion that the women and their project must be showcased to a US-American audience in order to obtain proper ligitimacy. And further, here is the die-hard belief in an unfettered movement of resources without state intervention, movement that is determined by the freest of markets. In this case, the state became a distinct and unwelcome barrier to The Lab's ability to undertake innovative performance-politics work, echoing neoliberalism's disinterest in state intervention. As a result, The Lab's quick actions revealed it to be attached to those same neoliberal dynamics, lending primacy to the inevitability of the event rather than the care with which it ought to or could have been conceived.

Indeed, in this case, The Lab's embeddedness in neoliberal frameworks bulldozed the organisation's purported commitment to thoughtful grassroots work.

Closing

In this article, I have examined Georgetown's Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics through a materialist lens. I have focused on two key Lab entanglements: the intersection of power and privilege, and the interaction of interests and resources. My argument has taken into account the uniqueness and importance of The Lab's work at its self-defined intersection of performance and politics. By inhabiting a space both inside and outside of Georgetown – a private, for-profit, US-American university – The Lab must operate in a neoliberal way that emphasises flexibility and nimbleness, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a diversity of funding sources. Attachment to a neoliberal ethic allows The Lab to undertake exciting and timely work, but it also affects how that work manifests. Differing relationships to individual artists, contemporary politics, and state-sponsored visa regimes reveal how The Lab ultimately serves its own 'interests' first and foremost.

These entwinements recall the awkwardness of higher education and neoliberalism as bedfellows. The Lab's interests are in constant tension with those of the others it seeks to serve and partner with, particularly when those others are individual rather than organisational colleagues. Moreover, it simultaneously negotiates, struggles through, fails to divorce itself from, and succeeds in distancing itself from its precarious financial position. As such, The Lab as a Western para-educational organisation leverages its power and privilege in complex ways: sometimes in support of marginalised voices, sometimes in favour of its own position, and oftentimes in problematic negotiation of both. This is, therefore, its inconsistent reality: attempting to operate outside of higher education's institutional parameters necessitates an embrace of neoliberal principles and ways of being, even as the organisation itself seeks to oppose that ethos in the content of the work that it produces. For the time being then, The Lab has found its home in power, privilege, and paradox.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotes from Lab staff come from either one group interview with all Lab staff members in January 2018 or a second follow-up interview with former Managing Director Jojo Ruf in June 2018.
2. This is one of neoliberalism's key tenets, in which traditionally defined roles are collapsed into one another or the responsibilities allocated to those roles are merged.
3. In anthropology, texts that speak to ethnographic representation of Others are Nancy Scheper-Hughes' 'Ire in Ireland' (2007) and Amanda Coffey's *The Ethnographic Self* (1999). This challenge is a hallmark of anthropological research, manifesting no matter the subfield in question.
4. Neoliberalism is also the heartbeat of international institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Both of these bodies use financial heft to compel debt-ridden countries – often from the Global South – to adopt neoliberal economic policies in exchange for loans, through predatory packages known as structural adjustment programs (SAPs) that require nations to cut social services and privatise industries. SAPs have been critiqued for: causing or exacerbating poverty (Shah 2013; Easterly 2000), stagnating or negatively impacting economic growth (Sylla 2018; Easterly 2005; Logan and Mengisteab 1993), reducing available healthcare options (McPake 2009), being associated with rises in tuberculosis levels (Bakalar

2008), interfering in national sovereignty (Kaiser 2018), and functioning as neocolonial and neoimperial enterprises (Jahn 2005; McGregor 2005).

5. Ruf left the organisation in January 2019, after working with The Lab since its founding. I reference her here because she was instrumental in its formation, ethos, and operation up to that point.
6. This is not to say that theatre itself is only ever text-based, as numerous scholars have argued. Performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood's critique of the Western obsession with 'scriptocentrism' is one example of such an argument (2002, 147).
7. Anthropologist Su'ad Abdul Khabeer describes 'hip hop diplomacy' as the US State Department recruiting and paying Black Muslim and non-Muslim artists to perform overseas in 'Muslim-majority locations such as Turkey, Morocco, Indonesia, Pakistan, and the Occupied Territories' in an effort to 'manage' both 'the US profile abroad' and 'young Muslims who are perceived as potential terrorists' (2016, 180). This implicates these artists in the 'imperial relationship' that the US attempts to maintain with the 'Muslim World,' even if those artists reject that relationship altogether (2016, 180).
8. I offer more information about the Think Tank at the end of this section.
9. Neither Goldman nor Schneider chose to share what their stipend amounts to.
10. I use the term 'US-American' to recognise and write against the imperial connotations of the word 'American.' 'American' belies the fact that dozens of countries -- from Canada in the north to Argentina and Chile in the south -- make up the Americas. The US' claim of this continental term as its national identifier is consistent with the country's founding imperial and genocidal ethic, deployed at the expense of thriving indigenous communities.
11. That documentary is now complete and is titled *Queens of Syria* (Fedda 2014).

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I have previously been a part-time paid employee of The Lab in various capacities, as described in this article.

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