Twenty-First-Century Transnational Theatre Development in the Cases of Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab and Sundance Institute East Africa: Cultural Politics, Performance Aesthetics, and Global Circulation

Julia Goldstein

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TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY TRANSNATIONAL THEATRE DEVELOPMENT IN THE CASES OF THÉÂTRE DU SOLEIL/AFTAAB AND SUNDANCE INSTITUTE EAST AFRICA: CULTURAL POLITICS, PERFORMANCE AESTHETICS, AND GLOBAL CIRCULATION

by

JULIA GOLDSTEIN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre and Performance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York, 2017
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Julia Goldstein

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

Twenty-First-Century Transnational Theatre Development in the Cases of Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab and Sundance Institute East Africa: Cultural Politics, Performance Aesthetics, and Global Circulation

by Julia Goldstein

Advisor: Jean Graham-Jones

This dissertation examines two case studies of twenty-first-century transnational theatre development programs in which arts organizations from wealthy countries in the Global North extend resources and support for the professional development of theatre artists in regions in the Global South. The first case study takes up the French theatre company Théâtre du Soleil’s work in Afghanistan, starting in 2005, leading to the formation of the Afghan theatre company Aftaab and the next ten years of Soleil’s support of and collaboration with Aftaab, transpiring both in Kabul and Paris. The second case study examines the Sundance Institute East Africa Theatre Lab program, a branch of the Sundance Institute Theatre Program, which since the early 2000s has explored opportunities for supporting the development of new theatre work in East Africa, eventually facilitating a series of development labs for East African artists held between 2010 and 2014. Methodologically, this dissertation draws on political, historiographic, sociological, and ethnographic theatre scholarship as well as performance analysis of key theatrical works.

For both case studies, I probe the ethics and cultural politics of the programs carried out in regards to their negotiations of unequal positions of geopolitical and economic privilege in the postcolonial and neoliberal context. Additionally, I study the aesthetics and concerns of the performance work that they yield, examining how the work is influenced by transnational support, what the artistic choices reveal about the programs’ values, what audiences the
performances target, and within what local, regional, and/or global circuits they circulate. Finally, I consider the implications of participating in these programs for the supported artists in terms of their ongoing career development and the sustainability of new movements in local or diasporic performance activity to which the programs contribute. In addition to examining these processes, I analyze closely a core product of each respective initiative. In the case of Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab, I reflect on two collectively created plays that were the most widely performed and documented of the company’s theatrical output, arguing that these productions constitute artifacts of the asymmetrical transnational working relationships that produced them. In the case of SIEA, I reflect on the Kampala International Theatre Festival as the most direct institutional offspring of Sundance’s program. I argue that through this festival, East African artists intervene in dominant trends in local performance and assert a globally-connected, twenty-first-century East African theatre culture.

This research suggests that the transnational programs examined here have been both productive and restrictive, contributing to the production of transnational artist subjectivities and performance work while also, in some ways, reifying preexisting systems of inequality and perpetuating dynamics of neocolonialism. Such initiatives, taking myriad forms, are likely to continue as we move deeper into the twenty-first century, and will continue to transpire through uneven power relationships. I argue therefore that a nuanced understanding of the potential outcomes, pitfalls, and implications of structural choices on the part of all artists and administrators involved is critical to approaching transnational development work ethically.
Acknowledgments

This project spanned several years of life and was supported by more people than I can name. Thank you to the committees at the Graduate Center who allotted me a five-year Enhanced Chancellor Fellowship, a Dissertation Fellowship, and several smaller research awards including a Doctoral Student Research Grant, an ARC Award, and a June Bennett Larsen Fellowship. This support made graduate school substantially closer to a reasonable endeavor and made possible several research trips to France and Uganda.

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This project would have been impossible if artists and administrators involved in the programs I have researched had not welcomed me and generously shared with me their knowledge and perspectives, sometimes on rather personal topics. I am deeply grateful to all of my interlocutors as well as to everyone who helped me plan and navigate my research trips, especially to Uganda, and everyone who extended friendship to me during these endeavors. Mahmood Sharifi, Taher Baig, and Omid Rawendah of Aftaab Theatre were particularly generous with their time and open with their thinking. Deborah Asiimwe and Faisal Kiwewa welcomed me twice to the Kampala International Theatre Festival and truly facilitated my
research through critical introductions and behind-the-scenes access to rehearsals, meetings, and social gatherings. Charles Mulekwa in particular spoke with me extensively and openly about theatre-making in Uganda today. The Sundance Theatre Program staff warmly welcomed me to their offices and spoke with me frankly about the goals and tensions of their work. All of these people and many others have reminded me again and again of why I chose to study theatre to begin with. Jude Lwanga Richards drove me all over Kampala and beyond, providing good humored company and much useful information throughout.

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This dissertation examines two case studies of contemporary long-term transnational theatre development programs in which arts organizations from wealthy countries in the Global North extend resources and support for the professional development of theatre artists in countries or regions in the Global South. The programs are propelled by a variety of impulses, from a commitment to arts philanthropy and cultural development as strategies for uplifting underdeveloped or post-conflict regions, to a search for productive intercultural exchange, to a conviction of universal human rights. In both cases, though, the programs are initiated by the wealthy donor country organizations and emanate from a core desire to connect across difference. I probe the ethics and cultural politics of these programs in regards to their negotiation of unequal positions of geopolitical and economic privilege in the postcolonial and neoliberal context. Additionally, I study the aesthetics and concerns of the performance work that they yield, examining how the work is influenced by transnational support, what the artistic choices reveal about the programs’ values, what audiences the performances target, and within what local, regional, and/or global circuits they circulate. Finally, I consider the implications of participating in these programs for the supported artists in terms of their ongoing career development and the sustainability of new movements in local or diasporic performance activity that the programs contribute to. Where relevant, I study the new institutions that emerge out of these programs and reflect on the ways in which they promote national and transnational communities of alliance. Overall, I suggest that these programs are both productive and restrictive, contributing to the production of transnational artist subjectivities and performance work while also, in some ways, reifying preexisting systems of inequality.
Introduction

The first case study takes up the French theatre company Théâtre du Soleil’s work in Afghanistan starting with the facilitation of a workshop in 2005. This workshop led to the formation of the Afghan theatre company Aftaab and the next ten years of Soleil’s support of and collaboration with Aftaab, transpiring in Kabul and in Paris. My analysis emphasizes tensions regarding Aftaab’s persistent financial, administrative, and artistic dependence on Théâtre du Soleil. Aftaab’s early work participated in a movement of new, post-Taliban-era Afghan cultural and artistic expression, with the company’s formal mission emphasizing Afghan cultural revitalization.¹ This mission, however, existed in tension with the consistent trend of their work being directed by European artists and their progressive orientation toward European audiences and European modes of professionalization and production. I engage in detail with Aftaab’s two collectively created plays Ce jour-là (On That Day, 2009) and La Ronde de nuit (The Night Round, 2013), both directed by a long-time Théâtre du Soleil member. The second case study examines the Sundance Institute East Africa (SIEA) Theatre Lab program, a branch of the Sundance Institute Theatre Program, itself a subset of the larger U.S. non-profit Sundance Institute that is best known for its famous film festival held yearly in Park City, Utah. Starting in the early 2000s, the Sundance Theatre Program conducted research into designing a version of its standard development labs, which primarily serve U.S. artists, to support theatre artists in East Africa. This project eventually came to fruition through a series of development labs for East African artists held between 2010 and 2014. My critical engagement emphasizes tensions regarding Sundance’s negotiations of agency and the culturally embedded nature of its development process in its work with East African artists. I also focus on the Kampala

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International Theatre Festival in Uganda as the most direct ongoing aftermath of the SIEA program after its culmination in 2014.

A set of key research questions guides this project. Throughout this dissertation I ask, what ideologies inform the approaches of the initiating organizations in their creation of theatre development programs that cross national borders and divides of geopolitical and economic privilege and disadvantage? How do these ideologies shape and structure the resulting programs? What do the participating artists, administrators, and organizations, from both sides of the interactions, derive from the transnational relationships and processes that the programs constitute, for example in terms of cultural and symbolic capital, skills, material resources, and entry into networks of globally circulating professional performance? Alternately, what do they sacrifice? What tensions emerge through the attempts to reconcile ethically the priorities and needs of arts organizations from the Global North with those of artists in the Global South? What perspectives, stories, and political messages do the collaborations enable to be voiced, and how do the collaborations exclude or disable the voicing of others? What kinds of artistic growth do the collaborations enable or disable for the participating artists? What visions do the resulting performances offer up for ways of being together, across and beyond boundaries of national, regional, and cultural identity? As artists, arts administrators, and activists from the North are likely to continue seeking enrichment and opportunities to “make a difference” by intervening in theatrical communities in countries of the South, and as some artists in the South are likely to continue making use of this influx of resources in contexts where resources are scarce, how might all parties strive toward building equitable, non-intrusive, reciprocal formations that resist the power structures of neocolonialism?
Introduction

This project is timely in its critical analysis of the broad ramifications of transnational interventions in economies and cultures of the Global South. In the twenty-first century, many of the world’s poorer nations are locked into dependent relationships with the world’s wealthiest countries in the aftermath of colonialism, international mediation in conflict and post-conflict zones, and the unequalizing force of global capitalism. The artists who interact through the case studies in this dissertation do so across well-established vectors of resource flow. The initiating organizations are located in the U.S. and France, countries that habitually contribute aid to recipient countries and direct the agendas of multilateral aid organizations.\(^2\) The artists who receive support through the development programs in the case studies come from countries that are ranked among the world’s poorest in terms of per capita Gross Domestic Product.\(^3\) They are also all deemed relatively “fragile” states according to the Fund for Peace’s Fragile State Index.\(^4\)

\(^2\) “Multilateral” refers to the involvement of more than two countries. Merriam-Webster Online, “multilateral,” accessed March 19, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/multilateral. One way to describe these donor countries is as members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), or “DAC countries,” as they are sometimes referred to in discourses on international aid and development. The DAC is the forum for coordinating international aid efforts of the intergovernmental economic organization OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). Member countries of this committee guide the standards whereby aid is distributed and contribute the overwhelming majority of money directed to multilateral aid. For example, the DAC countries’ pledges to the World Bank’s International Development Association (IDA) constitute over ninety-five percent of total IDA funding. Hany Besada and Shannon Kindornay, “Introduction: Multilateralism in an Era of Change,” in \textit{Multilateral Development Cooperation in a Changing Global Order}, ed. Hany Besada and Shannon Kindornay (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3.

\(^3\) The CIA’s ranking of world nations by per capita Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) GDP ranks these countries, including Afghanistan, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Burundi, among the poorest quarter of world countries. Out of 230 included countries, Kenya is listed as 185, Tanzania as 190, Uganda as 203, Afghanistan as 206, Ethiopia as 207, Rwanda as 208, and Burundi as 228. “Country Comparison: GDP Per Capita (PPP),” Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, accessed March 19, 2017, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html.

\(^4\) The Fund for Peace (FFP), an independent, non-profit research and educational organization, has ranked the world’s countries from most to least stable every year since 2005. In 2016 FFP ranked Afghanistan and Burundi under “high alert,” Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Rwanda
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While a broad number of factors contribute to the designation of “fragility,” such as government capacity, ethnic factionalism, and corruption, the most consistent factor is recent violent conflict.  

Both regions of targeted support in the case studies have long histories of international intervention. For Afghanistan’s entire modern history, “state-building has been largely dependent on external financial flows.” Its landlocked position at the crossroads of Central and South Asia and the Middle East, along with topography that disabled easy trade or circulation between the north and south of the country, contributed to limited internal economic development and constant incursions from foreign powers from the eighteenth century onward. Although it was never formally colonized, it was a site of imperial rivalry between the British and the Russians in the nineteenth century, and its twentieth-century governments have depended largely on foreign aid rather than a taxation system to power their state institutions. Funding from both the U.S. and the Soviets during the Cold War yielded the country’s period of economic progress in the 1950s and 60s, but it also contributed to the Soviet invasion in 1979. During the civil war among the Mujahideen after the collapse of the communist regime, the state institutions ceased to function under “alert,” and Tanzania under “high warning.” “High alert” is the second to highest level of fragility in the ranking system after “very high alert.” In 2016, 38 countries were ranked at the “alert” or higher categories of fragility, up from 33 in 2005. In 2005, when both case study programs were first getting underway, all seven of these countries were ranked under “alert.” See “Fragile States Index 2016,” Fund For Peace, accessed March 19, 2017, http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/rankings-2016; and “Failed States Index 2005,” ibid., accessed March 19, 2017, http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/rankings-2005-sortable.


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and Afghanistan was viewed internationally as a failed state.\(^7\) Post-9/11, international aid flowed into the country with an agenda of state rebuilding and development, but the bypassing of government, fractured and compartmentalized aid sources, and prioritization of the War on Terror over other objectives greatly limited its effectiveness.

East Africa’s modern history of international intervention and foreign aid has both points of similarity and substantial differences with that of Afghanistan. Aside from Ethiopia, the whole region’s modern history has been profoundly influenced by colonialism. Uganda and Kenya were under British colonial control since the 1880s, whereas Rwanda and Burundi (together called Ruanda-Urundi) and Tanzania (called Tanganyika) were part of German East Africa from the late nineteenth century until World War I, when Tanganyika came under British rule and Ruanda-Urundi was declared a Belgian League of Nations mandate territory. All five modern countries achieved independence within a few years of each other, between 1961 and 1963. Today, transnational forces—including, but not limited to, foreign aid—are the norm across many parts of Africa, playing an integral role in the shaping of political, social, and cultural life. Transnational activity in myriad forms has dominated recent decades of East and Central African history in economic, religious, and social arenas, precipitating the fall—and rise—of violent dictators and new stable governments alike. The ubiquity of transnational intervention in this region is partially the result of postcolonial Africa’s image, as viewed by the international community, as “the exemplar of a new form of global ‘disorder,’” with many African countries

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considered, since the end of the Cold War, to be “collapsed” states. Political scientists Robert Latham, Ronald Kassimir, and Thomas M. Callaghy characterize the external forces acting on the Great Lakes countries (Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi) and the Democratic Republic of Congo around the beginning of the new millennium as “neither peripheral nor determinative” but rather “constitutive” of these countries’ trajectories. What these scholars call “transboundary formations” active in many parts of Africa include mechanisms of international intervention engaged in activities such as “peacekeeping, post-conflict reconstruction, democratization, building of civil societies, environmental preservation, and coping with special diseases,” as well as “private security companies and arms dealers, missionary organizations, NGOs, and multinational firms” and even private militias and rebel forces that penetrate neighboring countries. Uganda, which features prominently in the SIEA case study, became in particular a major recipient of international aid and a site of much NGO activity after President Yoweri Museveni’s assumption of the presidency in 1986. NGO interest in aiding Uganda was fueled by a combination of “genuine goodwill,” Western desire for a “willing partner in its structural adjustment prescriptions,” and fears of the threat of Sudan, a so-called “rogue state,” to Uganda’s north.

With so many U.S. and European organizations engaged in cultural and artistic work in the Global South, it is necessary to examine the ramifications of such work for artists, audiences, and institutions. Moreover, movements over the last several decades in theory, scholarship, and

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9 Ibid., 4.
10 Ibid., 11-17, quote on 11. In other words, international aid is only one of many types of transboundary formation operating in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century Africa.
11 Ibid., 4.
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criticism have alerted artists and thinkers to the many problematic patterns that transnational and intercultural work, particularly across divides of global privilege and inequality, risks embodying. Increased awareness of the dynamics of cultural imperialism, appropriation, commodification, and the fallacy of the universal may encourage self-reflective, nuanced thinking and praxis in artists who experience a desire to work across geographic, national, economic, and cultural divides. And yet the programs set in motion by these artists may still, as my case studies illustrate, end up reifying hegemonic power hierarchies even as they create opportunities for artists in vastly underresourced circumstances. This dissertation thus participates in conversations about the possible ethics of transnational artistic encounter and support in North/South collaborations.

Scholarship analyzing and critiquing transnational performance work across divides of geopolitical privilege and disadvantage has often looked at theatre activism, community-based theatre, or theatre for conflict mediation. For example, in her study of theatrical facilitation in the Balkans and Middle East, Sonja Kuftinec examines the techniques of artist facilitators, often (although not always) from outside the local culture, working with populations in zones of conflict or its recent aftermath. She emphasizes the productive ways in which theatrical facilitation techniques can denaturalize the ideologies behind identity-based conflicts and animate collective alternative memories of community and nation.\(^{12}\) Several articles and essays by Laura Edmondson examine the intended and unintended effects of artists from the North visiting East Africa to facilitate rehabilitation and the processing of trauma in post-conflict areas. In discussing theatre activities run by visiting artists at a rehabilitation center for former captive child soldiers in the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, Edmondson argues that arts and

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particularly drama were used primarily as a strategy for marketing trauma in the global economy of humanitarian aid. Edmondson’s essay “Confessions of a Failed Theatre Activist: Intercultural Encounters in Uganda and Rwanda” problematizes practices of intercultural “theatre activism,” illuminating ways in which artists may push themselves into situations where they are simply not wanted, or in which participation in their facilitated programs is coerced. James Thompson’s book *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect* critiques the widespread dependence on a testimony and witnessing paradigm by theatre workers, largely from the North, in theatrical facilitation in post-conflict regions. He argues that much of this work imposes a culturally specific way of thinking about trauma and therapy that originated in European societies through work with Holocaust victims. Daniel Banks’ writing on his own work with Theatre Without Borders and DNA Works suggests guidelines for an ethics of cultural diplomacy and exchange for artists wishing to engage in mutual and democratic intercultural theatre work.

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16 Daniel Banks, “The Question of Cultural Diplomacy: Acting Ethically,” *Theatre Topics* 21, no. 2 (September 2011): 109-23. There is no shortage of scholarship reflecting on facilitated theatre projects falling into the categories of community-based, development, and applied theatre (with the term “applied” sometimes used to encompass all of these categories), but it is not necessary to cite all here as my dissertation does not examine cases of applied theatre. A few additional examples of scholarship specifically about European and U.S. artists conducting such work in regions that feature in this dissertation include The Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO), “Infinite Incompleteness: A Documentary Theatre Play,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 36, no. 1 (January 2014): 94-112; Brent Blair and Angus Fletcher, “‘We Cry On the Inside’: Image Theatre and Rwanda’s Culture of Silence,” *Theatre Topics* 20, no. 1 (March 2010): 23-31; and Cheryl Kennedy McFarren, “Laughter Diplomacy:
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Outside of this work on transnational facilitation and the spectrum of applied theatre practices, a great deal of theatre scholarship examines intercultural and transnational performance projects and collaborations that emphasize the production of professional or primarily artistic work. As theatre scholar Daphne Lei has pointed out, in the twenty-first century “intercultural theatre has diversified and multiplied,” embodying myriad forms. Lei suggests that while examples abound, the breakdown of notions of distinct cultural identity has rendered it all the more challenging to think clearly about what interculturalism might mean. Recent scholarship has produced many case-study explorations of performance projects with intercultural and transnational creation processes and aesthetics, but these have often focused on a pair or small group of artist collaborators or on individual productions. A newer body of theatre scholarship examines transnational and cosmopolitan dynamics in performance, defining these terms in varied ways but often emphasizing regional interaction, exchange based on an element of supranational shared heritage, or cultural crosspollination occurring in global cities. I

Transcultural Understanding at Play in Rwanda,” Theatre Topics 21, no. 2 (September 2011): 163-73.


18 Of course, it is possible for a performance to be deemed “intercultural” in its aesthetics without involving collaborative work between artists from multiple cultural or national positions. I am referring here specifically to scholarship that examines instances where artists work together across North/South divides.

19 Of these, many of these examples discuss East or South Asian performances with intercultural aesthetics and engagement with European dramatic texts. A few examples are Diane Daugherty, “The Pendulum of Intercultural Performance: Kathakali King Lear at Shakespeare’s Globe,” Asian Theatre Journal 22, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 52-72; Kathy Foley, “Shakespeare-Asian Theatre Fusion: Globe-‘alization’ of Naked Masks (Bangkok), Shadowlight (San Francisco), and Setagaya Public Theatre (Tokyo),” Asian Theatre Journal 28, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 7-43; and Jae Kyoung Kim, “Suzuki Tadashi’s Intercultural Progress in South Korea,” Asian Theatre Journal 30, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 207-22.
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will provide a more complete overview of theatre scholarship on interculturalism and transnationalism later in this introduction.

This dissertation project fills a gap in scholarship by examining programs initiated in the North and devoted to development of professional artists in the South, rather than those devoted to performance primarily as a social or activist practice. The case studies in this dissertation are sustained, long-term projects that involve substantial groups of artists and the creation or development of performances. Unlike much transnationalism and performance scholarship, which often organizes around regions or networks of particular diasporic identity, my project takes a comparative perspective, examining two geographically and culturally diverse cases. Bringing these two cases into the same study denaturalizes aspects of each that a researcher may otherwise take for granted. However, my methodology does not exclusively or reductively follow a comparison-and-contrast model, nor does it position the two case studies as polarized ends of a continuum. Rather, I aim to bring the case studies into conversation with each other in order to illuminate the ways in which particular strategies adopted, choices made, and actions taken by all parties involved contributed to the creation of particular dynamics of interaction, exchange, support, and implications for future performance activity. In addition, the multi-case model foregrounds consideration of how the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts of the collaborators influence the outcomes.

While bringing the cases into conversation with each other is fruitful, the cases are indeed not comparable to each other. Firstly, the contexts of the artists receiving support vary greatly between the two cases. Twenty-first-century Kabul cannot be equated with twenty-first-century

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Kampala, Kigali, or Addis Ababa, and I will provide below a brief overview of the political, historical, and cultural contexts of both regions during the time frames of each program’s activity. The organizations initiating both programs, Théâtre du Soleil and the Sundance Institute Theatre Program, differ greatly from each other as well. The former is a French theatre company with its own strong aesthetic vision and a long history of engagement with leftist political causes in keeping with its formation during the turbulent period of late-1960s radical politics. The latter is a U.S. developmental program guided by a mission to support artists’ independent visions, born in the neoliberal era of arts development and formally disconnected from a political agenda.

Nonetheless, several shared qualities justify the treatment of both programs in this dissertation. Both cases constitute programs that transpire through uneven power relationships in regards to the creation of performance work. That is to say, in each case, the party that sets the initial terms of the collaboration possesses some combination of substantial artistic experience, artistic vision, critical and international reputation, and/or financial resources that the other participating parties (the “participants”) do not possess. The initiators seek in each case collaboratively to support the artistic development of works driven by the participants or to create new theatre work along with, and using the personal experience of, the participants. In addition to these asymmetrical power relationships, the collaborations of these case studies embody, as I have mentioned, varied manifestations of transnationalism. In this dissertation, transnationalism describes diverse processes that cross state borders and that emerge from interactions of multiple influences from multiple centers of genesis associated with different national and state positions. It is the processes of ongoing collaborations crossing state borders, the multinational identifications and trajectories of artists, and the exploration of modes of
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belonging both larger and smaller than state identity that comprise the transnational activity in these cases.

Methodology

My methodological approach to this study is varied, drawing on political, historiographic, sociological, and ethnographic theatre scholarship as well as performance analysis of key theatrical works. A central component of my methodology involves fieldwork that took me into communities of artists of which I am not an organic member, not only to view performances but also to conduct interviews, attend rehearsals, and observe the social dynamics surrounding the performances. In undertaking this fieldwork I have strived to adopt techniques of critical and reflexive ethnography following performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison’s conceptualization. For Madison, critical ethnography engages an “ethical responsibility” to eschew easy assumptions and to illuminate “underlying and obscure operations of power and control,” while acknowledging one’s own subjectivity as researcher. These aims guided the fieldwork I conducted in researching both case studies during 2014 and 2015, through two trips to France to conduct interviews with artists affiliated with the Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab program and view Aftaab’s final production La Ronde de nuit, and two trips to Uganda to interview artists affiliated with the SIEA program and participate as a festival-goer at the Kampala International Theatre Festival. I also conducted interviews in the U.S. with Sundance Institute Theatre Program staff and, when necessary, over the phone with artists in France and East Africa.

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In addition to analyzing performances directly, my research examines performance contexts such as venues, producing formats such as festivals, performance travel itineraries, publicity materials, post-show activities, and audience make-up. Where possible, I attend to performance development processes, particularly the dynamics of collaborative devising and power relations between directors and performers. Of performances that I engage with in depth, I either viewed them live, as with all productions I discuss at the Kampala International Theatre Festival and with Aftaab’s *La Ronde de nuit*, or I viewed videos and consulted scripts, as with other Aftaab productions. In my approach to the SIEA case study, researching the Kampala International Theatre Festival as an outgrowth of the SIEA program also comprises a part of my methodology, as participating as a festival attendee constituted a methodological approach to observing the transnational practices at play. Conducting research at a festival had the practical benefit of enabling convenient interlocution with many artists gathered in one place, but it also enabled the experiential knowledge derived from participating in events and social practices surrounding a festival—not only technical rehearsals, talk-backs, and press meetings, but also down-time between performances, post-show after-parties, and impromptu hotel breakfast gatherings among out-of-town artists. As an outsider participant, my presence necessarily influenced the festival’s environment and contributed an additional layer to its transnational dynamic, rendering the entire event a subject of transnational study. I recognize that in some ways my own privilege of mobility as a scholar that enabled me to attend performance events across several continents recapitulates the very patterns of privilege and disadvantage that I critique in my study. I strive throughout to make known the perspectives of artists whose voices and work have not frequently been represented in scholarship.
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Regarding language, I have been able to conduct all of my research—including viewing performances and talkbacks, reading texts, and talking with my interlocutors—in English and French. When I conducted interviews in French, as I did with several Aftaab members, I listened subsequently to the recordings with a fluent French speaker to ensure my accurate understanding of my interlocutors’ responses. The Aftaab productions that I discuss in depth were performed in Dari and French and published in French translation, which I was able to read. While many artists supported by the SIEA program speak first languages other than English, everyone that I interviewed was sufficiently comfortable conducting interviews in English. The majority of performances at the Kampala International Theatre Festival were in English, sometimes interspersed with phrases in Luganda and other local languages, with a small number in French and Swahili or a combination of Swahili and English. Performances in French were accompanied by English subtitles, and artists working in Swahili shared with me texts of their work with Swahili translated into English. Talkbacks, publicity materials, and other primary sources such as reviews were in English.

Literature Review

This dissertation depends on broad sets of scholarship and theorization regarding contemporary phenomena of global interaction. From this broad field, I draw from theoretical and performance scholarship about globalization and neoliberalism as well as interculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and transnationalism.
Introduction

A body of scholarship examining the cultural, economic, and political dynamics of globalization emerged in the 1990s.\(^{22}\) Timothy Brennan, Arjun Appadurai, and Rustom Bharucha’s work on cultural globalization and cosmopolitanism has implications for my case studies’ selective balancing of local issues and international artistic development agendas. Brennan’s *At Home in the World* argues from a Marxist perspective that economic globalization and the emergence of transnational corporations have not led to cultural homogenization, and that scholarly assertion of an emerging global or transnational culture actually makes less visible the ongoing effects of neoimperialism.\(^{23}\) Like Brennan, Appadurai, in his *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, proposes that globalization does not result simply in global cultural homogenization because of strong tendencies toward selective indigenization; however, in Appadurai’s analysis, the paradigm of the nation-state has been superseded by an era of diasporic public spheres, in which the nation is disjoined from the state, and in which the experience of locality is fundamentally altered through ubiquitous media exposure.\(^{24}\) Bharucha, writing from within the field of theatre studies on so-called intercultural performance, calls for a more critical consideration of the politics and economics that determine what kinds of multinational and intercultural collaborations happen, and what regional performance practices


\(^{24}\) In Appadurai’s analysis, this era has been brought about by the influence of digital media and mass migration. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
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are promoted and circulated by global patronage.\textsuperscript{25} This last component of Bharucha’s work has particular bearing on my study, which considers the political, economic, and artistic motivations behind these particular transnational collaborations as well as the opportunities for and pressures on artists in the South to create work that will attract audiences in Europe and the U.S. Bharucha’s critiques also support my consideration of the distribution and visibility of labor within the transnational processes of each case study. In this dissertation I view forces of globalization as fueling processes of exploitation, privatization, commodification of cultural products, and cultural homogenization, while also initiating productive processes of hybridization, indigenization, and collaboration. As Jean Graham-Jones notes in an editorial comment for a \textit{Theatre Journal} volume devoted to topics of theatre and globalization, productive theatre scholarship must attend to the ways in which “the relationship between the local and the global [is] neither oppositional nor exclusive but rather interactive and interpenetrative.”\textsuperscript{26}

Another set of scholarship examines globalization from an economic angle, analyzing the phenomenon of neoliberal or global capitalist imperialism. Scholars such as David Harvey and Aihwa Ong identify neoliberalism as the dominant logic shaping global political economic relations since the late 1970s.\textsuperscript{27} These authors share a general characterization of neoliberalism as a phenomenon involving exacerbated and escalated processes of accumulation by dispossession, fostering inequality within and across national boundaries and transpiring hand-in-hand with increased privatization, deregulation of business, financialization of global

\textsuperscript{27} See David Harvey, \textit{A Brief History of Neoliberalism} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Aihwa Ong, \textit{Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
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economies, increased security and surveillance, and the imposition of structural adjustment programs on recently industrialized countries.\textsuperscript{28} The framework of neoliberalism is crucial to understanding the case studies in this dissertation both in terms of performance content as well as the enabling systems of development and production.\textsuperscript{29} The circumstances through which artists enter into global circuits of funding, artistic training, and production opportunity in both case studies resonate with Aihwa Ong’s argument in \textit{Neoliberalism as Exception} that neoliberal processes involve the selective interpolation of pockets of global populations into the transnational economy.\textsuperscript{30} Aftaab’s declared mission of revitalizing the Afghan cultural landscape, juxtaposed with the company’s retreat to Paris for three years to train, develop work, and tour around Europe, necessitates a consideration of the Aftaab actors in particular as neoliberal exceptions.

\textsuperscript{28} Harvey identifies the roots of neoliberalism in the 1947 formation of the Mount Pelerin Society and argues that a critical shift away from Keynesian economics and toward neoliberalism occurred in the late 1970s, catalyzed by Margaret Thatcher’s election in the UK and Paul Volcker’s tenure as chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank. Harvey, \textit{A Brief History of Neoliberalism}, 19-26. Similarly to Harvey, Neil Lazarus critiques what he describes as a prevalent assessment of neoliberal globalization’s inevitability as a necessary stage of capitalism. He argues that this view depoliticizes and obscures the individual policy decisions that contributed to the neoliberal turn. Instead, he contends that the reinstatement of imperialist control of the Global South by major world economic powers was not inevitable. Neil Lazarus, “The Global Dispensation Since 1945,” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies}, ed. Neil Lazarus (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19-40. Some scholarship disagrees with this assessment of neoliberalism as the result of the avoidable actions of individuals. For example, Samir Amin views neoliberalism as a phenomenon inherent to capitalism as it deepens, with the financialization of the global economy contributing constitutively to the emergence of oligopolies. In Amin’s estimation, movements of humanitarian aid from the Global North are incapable of delinking peripheral countries from the imperialism of global capitalism. See chapters one and six in Samir Amin, \textit{Ending the Crisis of Capitalism or Ending Capitalism?} (Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2011). For an overview of scholarship on neoliberalism, see Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston, eds., \textit{Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader} (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005).


\textsuperscript{30} Ong, \textit{Neoliberalism as Exception}. 
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Within theatre studies scholarship, Lara Nielsen and Patricia Ybarra’s edited volume *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations* articulates myriad ways in which twenty-first-century theatre and performance both participate in neoliberal processes, reinforcing trends of privatization and insecurity, and comprise powerful sites for imagining future collective structures of solidarity that challenge neoliberal trends of fragmentation and pure market logic. Maurya Wickstrom’s *Performance in the Blockades of Neoliberalism: Thinking the Political Anew* argues that performances at critical sites of neoliberal activity, where selective access to or exclusion from resources, sovereignty, and mobility is negotiated, have the capacity to reframe political conversations, interrupting the status-quo of what she calls “politics-as-is” with the assertion of the profound political “Idea” of equality. \(^{31}\) Both books provide models for analyzing how performances and performance contexts, especially those engaged in transnational and global formations, can be implicated in neoliberalism’s affirmation and perpetuation of global inequality or, alternately, can productively engage with and even interrupt hegemonic status quos.

Because this dissertation examines performances developed out of transnational processes and viewed by global transnational audiences, a long lineage of scholarship on performance as a site of interaction between disparate cultural influences bears relevance to this project. Terms such as interculturalism and multiculturalism, theorizing both self-conscious and incidental processes of artistic creation from multiple intermingling sources, and with varying connotations of power and cultural politics (from colonial and postcolonial to diasporic, forced hybridization, and others), have been theorized by scholars such as Patrice Pavis and Erika Fischer-Lichte, critiqued and sometimes rejected by scholars and artists such as Rustom Maurya Wickstrom, *Performance in the Blockades of Neoliberalism: Thinking the Political Anew* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
Bharucha, Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and reclaimed by authors such as Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins. Fischer-Lichte’s most recent edited collection of essays, *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism*, offers a rethinking of dynamics of global cultural exchange that rejects earlier paradigms of postcolonialism. Theories of cosmopolitanism, used variously, but generally referring to the phenomenon of in some way belonging to or appreciating and cultivating multiple cultural and national affiliations over one exclusive affiliation, have been critiqued by sociocultural scholars such as Timothy Brennan for obscuring the role of global capitalism and defended philosophically by scholars such as Kwame Anthony Appiah. Bruce Robbins glosses other authors such as Paul Rabinow, Scott Malcomson, and Yi-Fu Tuan in demonstrating the emergence of a conception of “located and embodied” cosmopolitanism of the unprivileged (and often coerced)—a cosmopolitanism that is not indifferent to particularity of place, but is, rather, a “complex and multiple belonging.” This notion of a coerced cosmopolitanism becomes relevant in examining performance by or about refugees or asylum seekers, an angle that emerges particularly in Aftaab’s work. In both cases, however, I examine how the imperative to engage in intercultural exchange or cosmopolitan

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creation is often attached to resources that are made available to artists in the Global South.

Theatre scholars such as Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo examine both the coercive and “thin” dimensions of some state-sponsored projects of cosmopolitanism as well as the productive possibilities of political cosmopolitanism as manifest in elite and grassroots organizations that operate across national borders.  

Transnationalism has emerged more recently as a conceptualization of cultural, economic, and social phenomena whose operations transcend national boundaries. Indeed, this concept is central to my dissertation, as both the development programs as well as the circulation of resulting works of theatre and the evolving conditions of many supported artists’ lives and careers can be described as transnational. In recent performance scholarship, transnationalism has been used to talk about movements of performances across national borders, the mutually constitutive nature of interactions between different regionally bound performance practices, and the relationships between performance circulation and systems of global capital. Performance scholars James M. Harding and John Rouse, in their introduction to Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde, state that the concept of transnationalism allows them to recognize the “unacknowledged cultural hybridity and negotiations” present within “sites of artistic innovation.” Harding goes on to frame transnationalism’s usefulness as a contested term, “signifying both the process of global hegemony and the practice of counterhegemonic resistance.” Transnationalism as a framework, then, supports complex analysis of performance projects that transcend national boundaries in their creation and

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dissemination, with sensitivity toward the neoliberal, neocolonial aspects of globalization as well as toward the counterhegemonic resistance that processes of hybridization and partnership can entail.  

Recent theatre scholarship has used the framework of transnationalism to highlight historical and contemporary ways in which creation and circulation of performance have and continue to transcend national borders. Performance scholars Laura Noszlopy and Matthew Isaac Cohen’s *Contemporary Southeast Asian Performance: Transnational Perspectives* asserts a transnational perspective to emphasize how performance in Southeast Asia has always been characterized by borrowing and the emergence of new developments through interactions between regionally specific techniques. But these authors also use “transnational flow” to critically describe the commodification of cultural products. Performance scholar Christopher Balme relies primarily on the term “cross-cultural” in his book *Pacific Performances: Theatricality and Cross-Cultural Encounter in the South Seas*, but transnationalism comes into play for him in the context of large scale migration, leading to “transnational networks” of performance (reminiscent of Appadurai’s “diasporic public spheres”) that “create new mental spaces at the interstices of traditional and postmodern ways of life.” Here, as in many of the previously mentioned texts, there is a discernible connection to Homi Bhabha’s concept of the

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40 Laura Noszlopy and Matthew Isaac Cohen, eds., *Contemporary Southeast Asian Performance: Transnational Perspectives* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010).

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“Third Space,” a liminal space that exists when discrete cultural or national entities meet, producing difference as well as hybridity.42

A recent proliferation of theatre and performance scholarship has used the framework of transnationalism to engage with border crossing, supranational, itinerant, diasporic, and hybrid performance. The 2014 joint special issue of Theatre Survey and Theatre Research International devoted to “Theatre, Transnationalism and Economy” emphasizes how “neoliberalism, economic nomadism, and transnationalism affect artistic practices.”43 Other recent publications have emphasized interpenetrating national and transnational movements, practices, and identities.44 Performance scholar Christina S. McMahon’s Recasting Transnationalism Through Performance: Theatre Festivals in Cape Verde, Mozambique and Brazil examines the phenomenon of the international theatre festival as a staging ground for competing political, economic, and artistic goals, in which state powers may use performance to “recast” the nation, while individual artists or performance groups may “recast” or revise a dominant narrative about relations within a “transnation” (in this case, the Lusophone transnation).45 I draw most directly on McMahon’s work in my analysis of the Kampala International Theatre Festival in chapter four. Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo address the phenomenon of the international theatre festival in Australia, viewing the proliferation of such festivals as evidence of a strategic state promotion and projection of a cosmopolitan identity.46

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42 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994), 53.
44 For example, see Claudia Breger, An Aesthetics of Narrative Performance: Transnational Theater, Literature, and Film in Contemporary Germany (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012); and Hyunjung Lee, Performing the Nation in Global Korea: Transnational Theatre (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
45 McMahon, Recasting Transnationalism Through Performance.
46 Gilbert and Lo, Performance and Cosmopolitics.
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Aihwa Ong prefers the conceptual framework of transnationality and transnationalism to a global/local framework because the former rejects the common assumption that the “global” relates to the political economy of advanced global capitalism and the “local” evokes creative and resistant cultural responses to the conditions of this system.\(^{47}\) Transnationalism is also a particularly flexible and dynamic framework because of its emphasis on practice and movement, connotation of multiple centers, and denaturalization of national identity. Theatre and geography scholar Amanda Rogers views transnationalism as a framework that helps us think complexly about the relationships between culture, people, and place or national territory. Rogers emphasizes the processual, practice-oriented nature of transnationalism, focusing not only on products that evidence the influence of multiple national positions or that speak to a shared diasporic national identity disarticulated from geographic territory, but also on practices that “work across, and produce, different geographies.”\(^{48}\) The transnational processes, relationships, and identities set in motion by the transnational development programs examined in this dissertation arguably participate in the production of new geographies of cultural identity. For example, SIEA has set in motion particular networks of collaboration and exchange between theatre artists in different participating countries in East Africa and supports the creation of new festivals celebrating East African theatre, an entity whose definition is porous and whose assertion has political implications.

For both Rogers and Ong, transnationalism implies movement or flow, not only of people or products, but potentially of intangible things as well—such as, in the case studies examined here, ideas, texts, theatrical practices, and values (for example, professionalism and the


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valorization of innovation). Rogers asserts that the framework of transnationalism is helpful for emphasizing multi-local circuits and for moving away from viewing cultural flows primarily in terms of east-west exchange. Utilizing a framework that assumes multiple centers and that is attentive to multidirectionality of cultural flows also enables analysis of the “friction within
flow,” without landing on a simple indictment of neocolonial cultural interventions or laudatory evaluations of programs deemed ethical and productive. Anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing uses the concept of “friction” to articulate the central and multiple role that interaction across geographic, economic, national, and cultural difference plays in “defining movement, cultural form, and agency.” Tsing defines friction as “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference.” This notion of friction supports my analysis of instances in which transnational interactions produce tensions that are simultaneously inhibiting and productive.

Historical, Political, and Cultural Contexts

The dynamics of the transnational development programs in both case studies emanate in part from interaction between the ideological values, concrete motivations, actions, and contextual circumstances of the initiator organizations and those of the supported artists. As a necessary backdrop to analyzing the implications of Théâtre du Soleil and Sundance’s interventions in the theatre cultures of the regions where they focused their support, I provide here a brief overview

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49 Rogers finds a dynamism in the term, stating that it “evokes movement and fluidity,” and highlights its emphasis of process over patterns or permanent structure. Ibid., 7, 10. For Ong, transnationalism implies movement and change and also alludes to terms such as “transversal,” “transactional,” “translational,” and “transgressive.” Ong, Flexible Citizenship, 4.

50 Rogers, Performing Asian Transnationalisms, 11.

51 Ibid., 9.

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of the historical, political, and cultural contexts, particularly in regards to theatre and performance activity, of twenty-first century Afghanistan and East Africa.

AFGHANISTAN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Théâtre du Soleil’s original workshop in Kabul in 2005 occurred during a period of intense international NGO activity in Afghanistan. While Afghanistan’s rulers have a long history of relying substantially on the outside world’s interest in its position in relation to geopolitical conflicts for revenue, and while 2001 marked the fourth time that Afghanistan had been invaded by outside forces over the previous one hundred and sixty years, the U.S. invasion in 2001 and subsequent international intervention in the country’s governance was different in that it occurred at a time when the Afghanistan state structure had ceased to function.

Understanding the context of 2005 Afghanistan requires a brief glimpse at the country’s violent history since the late 1970s. The Saur Revolution of 1978 was a bloody coup in which the Marxist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power, prompting the Soviets to invade a year later in attempt to stabilize this vulnerable communist regime. Rather than stabilizing the regime, the Soviet invasion became a ten-year occupation dominated by fighting pitting the Soviets and the PDPA against the Mujahideen factions. By the time the Soviets withdrew in 1989, their occupation had resulted in the deaths of one million Afghans, the flight of four million refugees to Pakistan and Iran, and the internal displacement of millions of others, in addition to effecting great harm on the agricultural economy and other aspects of

\[53\text{ Barfield, }Afghanistan, 311; \text{ and Bizhan, “Re-engaging in a Fragmented Context,” } 206.\]
\[54\text{ Barfield, }Afghanistan, 272.\]
\[55\text{ Ibid., 171.}\]
\[56\text{ Ibid., 234.}\]
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Afghan society. 57 Although the PDPA’s administration, under the leadership of Najibullah, outlasted the Soviet withdrawal, Najibullah’s regime could not withstand the end of Soviet financial assistance upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Civil war between the returning Mujahideen factions broke out in 1992, with the PDPA dissolving among the competing Mujahideen parties who themselves had been united primarily in their opposition to the PDPA. During the Mujahideen civil war large sections of Kabul that had remained intact during the PDPA regime were decimated and regions in the south and east of the country were thrown in turmoil, giving rise to the Taliban. The Taliban seized Kabul in 1996 and by 1999 controlled the whole country with the exception of the northeast. 58

At the time of the U.S. invasion in 2001, Afghanistan was a profoundly different place than it had been in 1978. Massive internal displacement had interrupted ties to local land, rural populations had far more experience with travel and familiarity with regions beyond their province than before, and Kabul’s population had grown from half a million in the 1970s, to two million in the 1980s, to an estimated three to four million by 2009. Those returning from refugee camps had experienced government-provided services such as electricity, health care, and schools and had developed higher expectations for a government’s responsibilities. 59 Scholarly assessment is in agreement that the international community, led by the U.S., made choices in their setting in motion of a new Afghan government based on insufficient knowledge and understanding of Afghan culture and political history. 60 Moreover, Afghanistan’s regional

57 Ibid., 242.
58 Ibid., 171.
59 Ibid., 281.
60 See Saikal, Modern Afghanistan, 233. For example, the international community’s assembly of a loya Jirga to ratify the decisions made at the Bonn Accords, including Hamid Karzai’s interim presidency and the new constitution, was based on a belief that the loya Jirga was a longstanding Afghan tradition for validating political leaders. Thomas Barfield characterizes the loya Jirga as
diversity, as well as its newly politicized regional populations, called in many ways for a federalist style of government. However, “for all their talk of consultation and inclusivity, representatives of the international community in Afghanistan were happier working with a powerful president and centralized bureaucracy than they were with a messy legislature or regional power structures.” Therefore, a centralized, Kabul-based presidential government was instated with Hamid Karzai as president. Unfortunately, Karzai was ultimately, in Barfield’s estimation, far more interested in establishing a patrimonial government in which “personal relationships determined everything” than in building an institutionalized state structure.

In regards to aid, twenty-first-century post-war Afghanistan needed international assistance most urgently in three areas: the deployment of international troops regionally to improve security, investment in agriculture for rural Afghans, and expansion of infrastructure, such as roads and electricity. While more economic aid from the international community entered Afghanistan than ever before, the amount was never sufficient for the task, and the manner of distribution was severely problematic. This was largely because of Washington’s representation of the intervention in Afghanistan as a “mission accomplished” and the subsequent prioritization of the war in Iraq. But it was also because economic aid was disbursed and processed primarily by international NGOs and foreign contractors rather than an “invented tradition” that had historically been used primarily on a small scale to resolve problems in Pashtun communities, but did not really have a precedent for functioning in this manner on a national level. Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 299. For another similar argument about the use of the *loya Jirga* in this context, see M. Jamil Hanifi, “Editing the Past: Colonial Production of Hegemony through the “Loya Jirga” in Afghanistan,” *Iranian Studies* 37, no. 2 (June 2004): 295-322.

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62 Ibid., 304.
63 Ibid., 312-13.
64 Ibid., 315.
65 Ibid., 318.
through Afghan government channels. It is estimated that 40 percent of aid given to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2008 was returned to donor countries in “corporate profits and consultant salaries.”

NGOs took responsibility for positive outcomes of their work, limiting the new Afghan government’s ability to take ownership of progress, and limiting economic benefit for local populations by employing foreign labor. Such dynamics contributed to the emergence of a booming opium industry in Afghanistan, which came to supply ninety percent of the world’s illegal production of the substance. The agonizingly slow pace of progress in the development of the country under the new government increased popular dissatisfaction and created a climate conducive to a deteriorating security situation. Between 2005 and 2006, instances of suicide bombings increased by more than four hundred percent, and by 2006 there were cases of full-blown insurgency attacks in southern regions by a rejuvenated Taliban. Political scientist Amin Saikal concludes that “after a decade of US involvement, Afghanistan was far less stable and secure than had been expected in late 2001,” and “as for the cause of democracy, it had not advanced beyond a charade.”

Afghanistan’s turbulent and violent history since 1979 significantly limited artistic and cultural production in the country and presented barriers to researchers and writers. There is a dearth of English-language sources documenting the history of theatre and performance in Afghanistan. Hafizullah Baghban, a scholar of Afghan peasant performance, suggests that through the extensive history of interaction and cross-pollination between Afghans and cultures from the surrounding areas due to geographic proximity, trade, invasions, and shared religion, an

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68 Ibid., 319.

understanding of the evolution of Afghan performing arts requires viewing this performance history in relation to Persian, Arab, and Turkish theatre traditions. He demonstrates how Persian culture and theatre, especially in the historical region of Khorasan (a part of the Persian empire that included western Afghanistan), was influenced by Greek culture during the period of Alexander the Great. Textual evidence reflects the presence of jesters and clowning in Khorasan as early as the seventh century C.E.\textsuperscript{70} Afghan peasant performance also has antecedents in cross-pollination between Greek and Arab mimes as well as in performance culture of the Ottoman Empire. Puppetry, too, was practiced in both ancient Iran and Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{71} Baghban found vibrant practice of itinerant comedic performance in preindustrial peasant villages into the 1970s.\textsuperscript{72}

In urban areas in twentieth-century Afghanistan among the intelligentsia, a new influx of literary and dramatic texts from Europe, as well as exposure to and accounts of European professional theatre contributed to the creation of a modern Afghan theatre practice. During the 1940s, several professional theatres such as the Knowledge Theatre and the City Theatre were established in Kabul and competitions held. Modern theatre in Afghanistan is viewed as having started in 1949 with the return of Muhammad Ali Raonaq, who studied theatre in France and transformed Kabul theatre upon his return, introducing European methods of staging, set, and

\textsuperscript{70} Hafizullah Baghban, “The Context and Concept of Humor in Magadi Theatre (in Four Volumes)” (PhD diss., The Folklore Institute, Indiana University, 1976, ProQuest), 10.\textsuperscript{71} Baghban presents detailed documentation of evidence of each of these influences in chapter one, “An Ethnohistorical Perspective of Native Theater in the Near East and Central Asia,” in ibid., 6-64.\textsuperscript{72} Baghan terms this genre of performance “buffoonery.” Baghban’s enormous collection of data focuses exclusively on peasant troupes in three villages outside of the western Afghan city of Herat. The troupes he studied called themselves “Magids” and made a living performing comedies, puppet plays, and magic plays, along with working as barbers. As barbers, their responsibilities ranged from shaving heads to administering medicine, pulling teeth, and performing minor surgeries. Ibid., 65-71. Baghban’s research includes hundreds of pages of texts of Magid skits translated into English.
costume design. European plays by Shakespeare, Chekhov, and others were performed along
with dramatizations of Afghan folktales and epic Dari literature. The Afghan Nandari (the
National Theatre) was established in Kabul in 1973, but following the Soviet takeover in 1978
many artists left the country to live abroad (by choice or exile), and the theatre building was all
but destroyed during the Mujahideen civil war that started in 1992. The story of Théâtre du
Soleil’s work in Kabul picks up in the period of rebirth of theatre and art after the fall of the
Taliban.

EAST AFRICA INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Whereas Théâtre du Soleil’s work in Afghanistan was centered on one hub of activity, the city of
Kabul, Sundance’s initiation of work in East Africa involved multiple cities across six countries.
In approaching East Africa, the Sundance staff intervened in a region with tremendous cultural
and historical diversity and boasting a wide variety of performance practices and theatrical

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73 Publications in English about theatre in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Afghanistan are
limited. This brief history of modern Afghan theatre is provided by Professor Mohammad Azim
Hussain Zadeh as part of a report produced by the International Network for Contemporary
Performing Arts (IETM). IETM is an international network that “advocates for the value of the
arts and culture in a changing world and empowers performing arts professionals through access
to international connections, knowledge, and a dynamic forum for exchange.” “About,” IETM
Official Website, accessed March 19, 2017, ietm.org/en/about. IETM’s most recently updated
report on theatre activity in Central Asia includes only Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and
Uzbekistan, with no coverage of Afghanistan. Zadeh, “An Introduction to Theatre in
Afghanistan,” in An Introduction to Theatre Today in Central Asia and Afghanistan, ed. Simon
Tordjman, International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts, 2007, accessed March 19,
afghanistan. The practice of translating European literary texts in Dari, sometimes indirectly
through Turkish translation, was started in the early 1900s by repatriated political exiles such as
Mahmud Tarzi. Scholarship views this trend of translation as playing a major role in the early
development of modern Afghan literature, which differed greatly from classical Dari literature in
its concern for political and critical rather than folkloric and mystical content. Mir Hekmatullah
Sadat, “The Afghan Experience Reflected in Modern Afghan Fiction (1900-1992),” Comparative
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traditions. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide a comprehensive history of theatre activity in the region that the SIEA program served, but here I will trace broad trends of history and provide a general picture of the theatre landscape in the region in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Precolonial societies of the region had rich and varied performance traditions that influenced the development of modern theatre in each country. Scholars of Kenyan theatre Ciarunji Chesaina and Evan Mwangi aptly sum up the complex relationship between precolonial and modern forms of drama in that country as such: “Throughout, theatre has remained an arena for confronting colonial attitudes in order to re-establish the values of precolonial theatre, which is deemed more participatory and democratic. However, the influence of other cultures, such as Islamic traditions and European and American values, have not been rejected wholesale.”74 In Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, colonial powers introduced Western drama and built theatres that were for the exclusive use of colonial populations until after independence, when African dramatists and administrators started to take control of these institutions. In each of these countries, school theatre festivals, which often involved competitions between schools, served as important mechanisms for introducing populations to theatre; under and immediately after colonialism these were dominated by productions of European plays, but increasingly in the late 1960s and 1970s they incorporated new plays by Africans in local languages.75

Outside of school festivals and competitions, much of the theatre activity in these countries since the 1960s falls into three loose categories: popular and/or commercial theatre

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75 For example, in Kenya, plays were written in Kiswahili and Maasai. Ibid. In Uganda there were festivals for new student plays in Luganda. Eckhard Breitinger, “Uganda,” in Banham, A History of Theatre in Africa, 248-53.
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(which are sometimes but not always one-and-the-same), community-based theatre, and literary or intellectual theatre often referred to as drama. These categorizations break down in many cases and are not mutually exclusive; indeed, in some cases individuals have been leaders in multiple categories. In addition, traditional performance practices persist in rural communities across the region. In each country, theatre has responded to and been influenced by political developments. Pre- and immediately post-independence theatre tended to promote anticolonial and nationalist messages, whereas theatre in the 1970s and 80s responded to conditions of disillusionment with postcolonial governments, poverty, corruption, and violent dictatorship. Much theatre in the region since the 1970s has had to negotiate systems of censorship, and in some cases, particularly in Uganda, generations of artists have been subdued by the government’s killings of artists with politically subversive messages in the 1970s and early 1980s.

There are, of course, myriad particularities of theatrical forms and trends unique to each country. Tanzania’s modern theatre and performance landscape has been influenced greatly by Swahili culture, as well as by the socialist ideology of its post-independence nation, which

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76 For example, Penina Mlama in Tanzania has been a leading writer of Kiswahili literary drama and the founder of modern community-based theatre in that country. Jane Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics: The Evolution of Theatre in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, a Comparative Study* (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996), 189-97.

77 Coastal Tanzania developed through a different cultural and economic trajectory than did the country’s interior region due to the emergence of coastal towns and eventually city-states starting around 900 C.E., spreading north along the coast of modern day Kenya and Somalia and south along the coast of modern day Mozambique. These city-states were trading centers that amassed wealth through commercial success in the broader trading economy of the Indian Ocean— involving contact with Arabia, the Persian Gulf, India, Indonesia, and China—and were influenced both religiously and culturally by Islam. Kiswahili (the language of the Swahili people) is commonly attributed to linguistic mixing between Shirazi (Persian and Arab) traders and the Sabaki-speaking people of the area’s coast, although this theory is convincingly contested by Derek Nurse and Thomas Spear, who argue that Kiswahili evolved as a result of the frequent movement of coastal populations due to economic factors and was later attributed to
yielded unique theatrical forms such as *ngonjera*, dialogue verse dramas using Kiswahili and traditional poetic dialogues to forward the values of *ujaama* (meaning “familyhood” or “kinship,” the official driving value of Tanzania’s socialist nationhood under President Julius Nyerere). The popular urban entertainment form *Taarab*, “an east African musical form informed by African, Asian, and Arabic musical motifs,” continued to evolve over the second half of the twentieth century, increasingly featuring the comedic and sometimes satirical skit form *vichekesho*. Cultural troupes, of which there were over forty in the capital Dar es Salaam by 1980, performed evolving versions of popular forms such as *ngonjera*, *Taarab*, and *vichekesho*, reflecting on and satirizing contemporary life. Under “structural adjustment” and the transition to capitalism in the 1990s, the number of these groups greatly decreased, and much of the performance landscape of the 1990s and early 2000s in Tanzania was dominated by a small number of highly popular commercial cultural troupes who continued to perform evolving, and increasingly commercial, versions of these forms. Jane Plastow has described Tanzanian literary drama (largely in Kiswahili) as being disconnected from popular or mass audiences and quite limited in production. Community-based theatre is extremely active in Tanzania today and new independent companies that emerged in the 1990s with artists coming out of the Shirazi influence because associations with these traders was seen as prestigious. See Robert Maxon, *East Africa: An Introductory History*, 3rd ed. (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2009), 39-40.

**Notes**


80 The most prominent critically acclaimed writers of Kiswahili drama are Ebrahim Hussein and Penina Mlama. Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics*, 190-93.
Introduction

University of Dar es Salaam and Bagamoyo College of the Arts have continued into the twenty-first century, often combining dance, music, and poetry to create hybrid performance pieces.\(^{81}\)

In Kenya, the 60s and 70s saw the emergence of Kenyan dramatists writing in English, the most prominent being Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Francis Imbuga,\(^{82}\) as well as the start of the Kenya Free Travelling Theatre, an interdisciplinary program run by students and staff of the University of Nairobi, performing plays in rural areas around Kenya in Kiswahili, local languages, and English.\(^{83}\) Ngugi and Ngugi wa Miiri’s project Ngaahika Ndeenda (Gikuyu language, translated as *I Will Marry When I Want*), developed and performed in collaboration with peasants at the Kamiriithu Community Cultural and Educational Centre in 1977, set a new model for community-based performance work that was “at once revolutionary and popular.”\(^{84}\) However, backlash from the government, which barred the group in the eleventh hour from performing their next project at the National Theatre, razed the Kamiriithu Cultural Centre to the ground, and sent Ngugi into exile, had a strong inhibiting effect on future generations of artists with subversive or resistant political messages.\(^{85}\) While new political plays and community-based theatre projects continued in the subsequent decades, plays directly addressing

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81 Lihamba, “Tanzania,” 243-44. These companies include Parapanda, with whom Mrisho Mpoto and Irene Sanga, artists I discuss in chapter three regarding their participation in the SIEA program, both worked.
82 Authors Chesaini and Mwangi determine that ultimately Ngugi is more important for the impact of his theoretical writing on Kenyan theatre more broadly than for his playwriting. Chesaina and Mwangi, “Kenya,” 222.
83 The Free Travelling Theatre in Kenya was modeled after the Makerere Travelling Theatre in Uganda. Breitinger, “Uganda.”
84 Chesaina and Mwangi, “Kenya,” 223.
contemporary politics were denied licenses, and artists such as Wahome Mutahi, whose Gikuyu-language plays openly castigate current political leadership, have found ways of staging works outside of formal theatres, including in streets and hotels. In 2003 the GoDown Center, a not-for-profit multidisciplinary arts center, opened in Nairobi and continues to serve as a hub of local and international multidisciplinary arts activity, including theatre and dance. A major player in Nairobi’s contemporary theatre scene is The Theatre Company of Kenya, founded in 2000 by renowned performer Mumbi Kaigwa (with whom SIEA has worked) and Keith Pearson. In the 2010s, spoken-word poetry theatre is developing substantial momentum in Nairobi.

In Uganda, in addition to school competitions, the early 60s saw the creation of the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre, the prototype to the parallel institution in Kenya, which travelled the country bringing new plays in English, Luganda, and Kiswahili from 1964 to 1974. The period from 1966 through 1986, encompassing Milton Obote’s first presidency, Idi Amin’s dictatorship, and Obote’s second presidency, “was characterized by political persecution, censorship, anti-intellectualism, and killings that isolated Uganda from the rest of Africa and the world.” Nonetheless, major playwrights developed their craft in Luganda (such as Wycliffe Kiyingi and Byron Kawadwa) and English (Robert Serumaga), launching camouflage political

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86 This summary is based on Chesaina and Mwangi, “Kenya.”
87 This space arguably met needs that were not being met by the Kenya National Theatre, which was non-functioning for several years, though finally reopened in 2015 after major renovations. “Kenyan National Theatre Glows After Facelift,” Daily Nation, September 10, 2015, http://www.nation.co.ke/news/National-Theatre-glows-after-facelift/1056/2864662/11mikft/index.html.
89 The spoken-word poetry scene, popular in Nairobi among university students and graduates, was described to me in an interview with a group of young spoken-word artists. Joel Mwamkonu, et al. (spoken word theatre artists), in discussion with the author, November 27, 2015.
critique and resistance to cultural repression through dramas that incorporated folk forms and
music as well as religious and historical narratives to packed houses at the National Theatre, and
leading scholars to refer to the 1960s as a golden age of Ugandan drama.\textsuperscript{91} Kawadwa’s murder at
the hands of Amin’s government in 1977, Serumaga’s mysterious death in Nairobi in 1980, and
the persecution of other artists and intellectuals effectively ended this period of theatrical
resistance and subversion. Under renewed freedom of Yoweri Museveni’s rule starting in 1986,
hundreds of theatre groups quickly became active, with some developing into successful
commercial enterprises that continue to this day as popular entertainments in and around
Kampala, performing original scripted and unscripted plays addressing contemporary issues in
Luganda.\textsuperscript{92} Theatre innovation since that time has featured prominent artists such as Rose
Mbowa, whose work in the late 1980s brought together regional performance traditions with
Brechtian structure and contemporary politics, playwright Alex Mukulu and his work addressing
political and social issues in the 90s, and a generation of younger playwrights including Charles
Mulekwa and Deborah Asiimwe.\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Companies that are active today include Bakayimira Dramactors and The Ebonies, whose
work I will touch upon in chapter four. This history is outlined in Breitinger, “Uganda,” and a
full description of the Kampala theatre scene in the mid-eighties and the decades of work by
Bakayimira Dramactors was relayed to me by theatre artist and director of Bakayimira,
Charles Senkubuge. Charles Senkubuge (Director, Bakayimira Dramactors), in discussion
with the author, November 26, 2015. Except for where otherwise noted, all interviews were conducted
in English.
\textsuperscript{93} For analysis of Rose Mbowa and Alex Mukulu’s work, as well as that of Robert Serumaga, see
Village Press, 2011), 45-71. Charles Mulekwa and Deborah Asiimwe’s work has been written
about in Jessica Marisol Brown-Vélez, “Travel and Migration, History, Identity, and Place: Four
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Theatre scholar John Conteh-Morgan writes that “the region of Africa now commonly described as ‘Francophone’ is home to some of the most vital cultures of performance in Africa,” but Rwanda and Burundi, both Francophone countries, have received little attention in scholarly histories of precolonial or twentieth-century African theatre and performance. In the period since Rwanda’s 1994 genocide against the Tutsi ethnic group, theatre has emerged as a core practice for rebuilding Rwandan culture and reckoning with aspects of the country’s violent recent history, led by key artists such as Odile Gakire Katese and Hope Azeda. Theatrical practices have been used extensively by and in conjunction with the gacaca, local-level courts serving both transitional justice and reconciliation functions whose hearings the Rwandan population has been mandated to attend.

Partially because of its different history in relation to colonialism, the trajectory of Ethiopian theatre has less in common with these Great Lakes countries than they do with each other. Many earlier performance practices that influence modern Ethiopian theatre come from Amhara court traditions, such as gene, a style of church performance poetry that was developed by the sixth century, imagery that comes from feudal Amhara hierarchical culture, and a general

Contemporary Ugandan Playwrights Abroad” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2013, ProQuest).


96 Ananda Breed, Performing the Nation: Genocide, Justice, Reconciliation (New York: Seagull Books, 2014), 1. Breed examines the many manifestations of theatre and performance being used today in Rwanda for purposes of reconciliation, Rwandan identity building, and the dissemination of a state-sanctioned narrative of Rwandan history. Her study includes some discussion of applied theatre projects in Burundi as well.
Amhara linguistic trait of speaking indirectly, in double entendres. Modern Ethiopian drama began in 1912 when European drama was introduced by an Amhara nobleman returning from European travels. New plays started emerging from Addis Ababa University, primarily in Amharic. Theatre scholar Jane Plastow notes that “drama has been mediated through an Ethiopian sensibility from its beginning in a way that was not possible in colonized African nations.” After the four-year period of Italian rule (1936-1941), theatre began to spread beyond the university, and comedy in particular became popular among non-elite audiences, while more literary plays for the elite mined Ethiopian church and imperial history for content. The National Theatre and several other over-a-thousand seat theatres were built in the 1950s, and theatre became an established part of urban life—all under the supervision of Emperor Haile Selassie, who personally censored plays that critiqued his regime. As revolution got underway, theatre became a space of debate among the intelligentsia, but soon after the military Dergue took power in 1974 and instituted the “Red Scare,” theatres came under strict control of the military government. For the remainder of the Dergue’s rule until 1991, theatre remained, in urban areas, a popular and well-attended family entertainment, but dominated by light romantic fare and European plays. Since the Dergue’s overthrow by Tigrayan forces from northern Ethiopia in 1991, theatre has continuously held its popular status, and the theatres are still state run, but plays tend to avoid serious social issues. Plastow characterizes Ethiopian culture, particularly Amhara culture, as xenophobic, with little interest in exploring foreign aesthetics, while placing great value on its own. However, the “melodramatic, symbolic style” that is accepted as the norm

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98 Prominent playwright Tesfaye Gessesse was detained without trial for three months. Ibid., 200.
99 Ibid.
Introduction

by Ethiopian audiences has been, since the 1990s, challenged some by graduates of Addis Ababa University’s Theatre department who have assumed leadership positions at major theatres.100

Dissertation Structure

The following four chapters examine the two case studies independently of each other, starting with the Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab project as the subject of chapters one and two and continuing with the SIEA program and its aftermath in chapters three and four. Chapters one and three focus on the cultural politics of the transnational processes through which the respective programs transpired, analyzing the ideological drives of the initiating organizations, the motivations of the participating supported artists, the tensions that emerged through the long-term working relationships between the two parties, an overview of the supported or produced performance work, and the current and future implications for supported artists. Chapters two and four take closer looks at some of the most substantive products of the two programs, which consist, in the case of Aftaab, of two collectively created plays that were the most widely performed and documented of the company’s theatrical output, and in the case of SIEA, of the Kampala International Theatre Festival, the most direct institutional offspring of Sundance’s program at which many performance works supported at the SIEA labs have been performed. As the two case studies differ in important ways, the respective chapter structures are not always parallel. In chapter two, my focus on two performance pieces employs a more detailed close reading than do my reflections on any individual performances in chapter four. Chapter four’s study of an ongoing festival in Kampala necessitates a contextualization of that city’s contemporary theatre

activity that is not paralleled in chapter two’s close study of Aftaab’s collectively created plays performed in Europe.

In chapter one I consider the circumstances of Théâtre du Soleil’s 2005 initiation of a program for artists in Kabul. I demonstrate how the French company’s approach to supporting professional theatre activity in Afghanistan was shaped by director Ariane Mnouchkine’s political convictions about the relationship between performance and human rights as well as her endorsement of a notion of universality of artistic expression. Tracing the resulting company Aftaab’s performance and touring history over the next ten years, I examine the shifting signification of their performances in relation to an emerging twenty-first-century Afghan expressive culture. This chapter juxtaposes first-person accounts of Aftaab’s story with the public narrative of the Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab project, largely authored by Théâtre du Soleil, and concludes with a reflection on the Aftaab members’ position in 2015 as transnational artists suspended between Afghanistan and France.

Chapter two engages in performance analysis of Aftaab’s two collectively created pieces, both directed by longtime Théâtre du Soleil artist Helene Cinque and performed exclusively in Europe. I present these works as artifacts of transnational development, embodying tensions demonstrative of negotiations of the asymmetrical working relationships that produced them. Employing media scholar Lilie Chouliaraki’s theorization of the “communication of solidarity in the West” and the “humanitarian imaginary,”¹⁰¹ I parse the ways in which these performances, produced in Europe, inevitably participate in a broad discourse about the suffering of distant others, while also harboring aspirational messages for Afghan audiences for whom the company hoped—to no avail—to be able to perform. *Ce jour-là*, Aftaab’s play depicting experiences of

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Afghans during the Taliban’s rise to power and the U.S. military occupation, mobilizes a dramaturgy of cultural presence whose power is particularly potent in relation to the recent history of Afghan cultural annihilation. *La Ronde de nuit* depicts the precarity of immigrant and refugee lives in France, giving voice to habitually marginalized positions with some success while failing in other ways to render these subjectivities with agency.

In chapter three I take up the second case study, the Sundance Institute East Africa program. I demonstrate the ways in which Sundance Theatre Program’s approach to transnational work was shaped by its identity as an arts organization of the neoliberal age and how it struggled in some ways to reconcile its arts philanthropy and development instincts with Sundance’s institutional commitment to merit rather than need. Using Tsing’s concept of “friction,” I analyze the outcomes of SIEA’s self-reflexive and purposeful attempts to facilitate equitable, non-colonial transnational artistic exchange and support, arguing that the program yielded unanticipated and productive activity particularly in the form of intra-regional East African exchange, while also embodying dynamics that disavowed the program’s situatedness in U.S. values and perpetuated preexisting systems of inequality. This chapter also explores the reflections of participating East African artists on the program, particularly in regards to its approach to intercultural exchange, and trends in the performance projects chosen for support, concluding with a consideration of the politics of Sundance’s culmination of its work in East Africa.

Chapter four turns to the Kampala International Theatre Festival (KITF) as the most direct institutional product of SIEA, examining its relationship to Sundance, including Sundance’s subtle ongoing influence as well as the substantial ways in which the festival has broken from Sundance values and priorities. My discussion in this chapter is based on my
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attendance at the first two iterations of the KITF in 2014 and 2015. I use theories of festivals as holistic participatory events to analyze how the KITF has served to cultivate regional and transnational affective community and to intervene in a cultural and theatrical status quo in Kampala. I consider how Sundance’s evolving form of support for the festival has influenced the kinds of exchange that occur at the festival, suggesting that decreasing financial support from Sundance renders intra-regional East African exchange less feasible, as most international support does not prioritize local and regional exchange. I situate the festival in the context of Ugandan theatre history, arguing that the festival is both a return to a longstanding Ugandan practice of using theatre to launch political critique and an attempt to affirm and popularize contemporary East African artists’ engagement with global and cosmopolitan performance trends and aesthetics.

In a brief conclusion, I take stock of the overarching trends in both case studies and explore some possible alternative models of transnational engagement, taking a cue from two concepts in critical theory.

It is often assumed in the Global North that any overture made extending support to artists in geopolitical positions of disadvantage will be welcome. It is not my intention to argue in this dissertation that such overtures are broadly unwelcome or that they should be avoided. Rather, I wish to underscore the magnitude and diversity of outcomes such initiatives may have on individual human lives as well as on trajectories of local and regional artistic activity. It is critical to develop a more nuanced understanding of how these overtures of support may affect individual artistic careers and evolving arts communities, particularly, but not exclusively, those in the regions receiving support. This nuanced understanding must involve interrogating in particular any potential dangers, acts of coercion, losses, and sacrifices instigated or encouraged
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by these programs, including those that are not immediately apparent. Initiatives of transnational
theatre development can bring about profound change in the lives of individuals, both materially
and more abstractly. Individual theatrical works can be catapulted into global spotlights and may
be saddled with the responsibility—however speciously—of representing the modern theatrical
production of an entire underrepresented region. Artists may, as a result of such initiatives, leave
local contexts where their presences could be powerful agents of change. One individual over
another may be given a ticket out of a limiting, oppressive, or even dangerous environment.
Those embarking on such projects, including those hailing from both the North and South, will
do well to anticipate the crossroads they will come to, the pitfalls they will be susceptible to, and
the many weighty choices they will have to make. A comparative study of multiple initiatives
has the capacity to denaturalize choices that seem most obvious or even inevitable in a given
context. Finally, and more broadly, this project aims to deepen our understanding of how twenty-
first-century patterns of transnational theatre development work, extending support and
facilitating exchange across divisions of economic and geopolitical privilege and disadvantage,
contribute to the creation of new and evolving globally-informed performance cultures.
Chapter One

Chapter One: Performing Modern Afghanistan Through Transnational Development: Théâtre du Soleil and Aftaab Theatre

“I was born in war, I grew up in war, war is the reason why I left my country,” explains Aref Bahunar, actor with Aftaab Theatre, as I sit with him on the steps of the Théâtre du Nord in Lille, a town in the north of France, in March of 2014. Aftaab Theatre, a company of actors from Afghanistan who have been living and creating new work in Paris since 2011, is in town for a week to perform their newest piece, La Ronde de nuit, a collectively developed play that depicts stories of Afghan immigrants and refugees in France. On a poster displayed on the theatre’s façade, the words superimposed on a blue and purple nighttime vista of Paris read, “A collective creation by Aftaab Theatre/ Based on a proposal by Ariane Mnouchkine/ Directed by Hélène Cinque.” Much is communicated in these three simple attributions, and much is left out as well. Those familiar with the avant-garde theatre giant Théâtre du Soleil, founded in the early 1960s and directed to this day by Ariane Mnouchkine, will instantly wonder about the relationship between the performance at hand and Mnouchkine’s renowned company, as well as the nature of Mnouchkine’s particular role in developing the piece. A careful observer may also wonder about the dynamics of collective creation between a company of Afghan actors and the direction of Hélène Cinque, long-time member of Théâtre du Soleil.

This chapter examines the ten years of transnational development work between Théâtre du Soleil and Aftaab, considering the ethics of this asymmetrical relationship, the resulting performance work, and the implications for the Afghan artists’ artistic and professional futures. Aftaab’s work has been from the start deeply engaged with performing the national, while also

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1 Aref Bahunar (actor, Aftaab Theatre), in discussion with the author, French, March 28, 2014. This quote is my translation from Bahunar’s French.
2 My translation from French.
being fundamentally transnational in terms of process as well as product. Both of these dynamics have evolved as Aftaab’s story as a company has unfolded. Aftaab Theatre provides a particularly rich example for reconsidering the evolving relationship between the local and the global in twenty-first-century artistic production and circulation. In response to assertions that globalization and transnational economic activity are leading to cultural homogenization, many critical theorists have suggested different ways of conceiving of how, rather than leading to homogenization, these increased global interactions have led to myriad new and particular relations between local and global practices. Theatre scholar Nadine Holdsworth reminds us that globalization has not obliterated the significant relationship between theatre and national identity. Indeed, Aftaab’s story is integrally intertwined both with negotiations of national identity and with transnational processes and the emergence of transnational identity. Some scholars have harnessed the term “glocalization” to articulate ways in which the local and the global interpenetrate each other. In her editorial comment to an issue of *Theatre Research International*, Charlotte Canning highlights theatre scholars’ examination of “how the national

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might reinscribe itself into the global,” and even how performing the national may become uniquely available to some artists in a transnational setting.\(^5\)

In the case of Aftaab theatre, performing the national has been enabled by a transnational process. This transnational process has constitutively influenced the artists and the resulting performance work. Central to my study of Aftaab Theatre’s work are questions about how pressures (internal and external) to perform the national and the transnational have directed the company’s evolution, as well as concerns about how Aftaab has been a product of, and both benefitted and suffered from, pressures of the transnational cultural economy and demand for “global” theatre.

In this chapter, I explore the trajectory of Aftaab Theatre, from its formation out of a workshop led by Théâtre du Soleil in Kabul, through its years presenting work in Afghanistan and the region of Central and South Asia; its move to Paris and development of a method of theatrical collective creation; and to its current situation, suspended in Europe, unable to function independently from Théâtre du Soleil and unable to return as a group to Afghanistan. I analyze the context in which the collaboration between Aftaab Theatre and Théâtre du Soleil emerged, including each party’s motivations, the ideological positions that drove them, and the resources that each brought to the partnership, assessing the dynamics that this particular and asymmetrical pair of motivations, ideologies, and resources has yielded. I suggest that the work of the Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab project has taken three main shapes. Firstly, it has been a project of humanitarian arts activism and transnational relationship building motivated by Théâtre du Soleil’s compassion and desire to create a space for dialogue and understanding. Secondly, it has been a project of experimental theatre creation, pushing boundaries and exploring new forms of performance. Lastly, it has been a project of cultural exchange, fostering a dialogue between different artistic traditions and perspectives.

\(^5\) Charlotte Canning, “Editorial: Theatre, Transnationalism, and Economy,” 166. In the first of these comments Canning is referring to Claire Maria Chambers’ article “Mythologizing the Global with the ‘Korean Original Musical,’” and in the second, to Katherine Mezur’s article “Stranger Communities: Art Labour and Berliner Butoh,” both in this issue.
Chapter One

Soleil’s commitment to international human rights and cosmopolitan interest in “global” theatre. Secondly, it has been an Afghan-oriented project of promoting a modern, post-Taliban Afghan nationalism-in-process through positive affirmation of cultural identity and public self-critique. Lastly, it has been a project of performing modern post-Taliban Afghanistan for the outside world, and especially for European audiences, positioning the Aftaab actors as Afghan cultural ambassadors to the West and intervening productively in dominant representational trends of Afghans.

As an example of a twenty-first-century professional theatre development program run by a Western organization located in a wealthy country in the Global North and supporting artists in the Global South, Théâtre du Soleil’s work in Afghanistan and its ensuing decade-plus support of Aftaab Theatre demonstrate many tensions and ethical quandaries inherent in such programs of North/South intervention. It is perhaps not surprising that as a theatre company, rather than an arts development organization, Théâtre du Soleil had no long-term strategy or evident commitment to self-reflective practice in regards to its intervention in a foreign cultural context. In this chapter I argue that Théâtre du Soleil, as a company with a strong driving aesthetic and a set of ideals with roots in late-sixties radical politics, made choices in defining and implementing its support for the Afghan actors fueled primarily by its own values and, perhaps inevitably, its particular skill set. The shape of its support consequently prioritized the group of Afghan artists’ viability as a troupe of professional actors capable of touring in Europe over other possible outcomes, such as holistic growth of the Afghan participants as individual, autonomous artists; the acquisition of skills enabling the Afghans to participate fully and independently in the professional French theatre scene; or support for sustainable theatre activity in Afghanistan as the country struggles under resurging violence and renewed suppression of civil liberties.
Chapter One

Théâtre du Soleil’s program of support for Afghan artists ultimately cultivated an apprenticeship-like relationship characterized by ongoing power asymmetry and with an unclear future. My analysis of the relationship between the two companies highlights how artists in the Global South often experience an imperative to build transnational alliances, and moreover to cultivate cosmopolitan aesthetics and identities, in order to benefit from available transnational support.

The chapter begins with a consideration of the context of new theatre practices emerging in Afghanistan in the mid-2000s, after the 2001 ousting of the Taliban, which provided the backdrop to Théâtre du Soleil’s first trip to Kabul. Then, I analyze the driving ideology behind Mnouchkine’s initiation of a program in Afghanistan, demonstrating how her strong beliefs about human rights and the universality of theatrical expression drove the program’s decision-making in ways that diminished possibilities for an equal and collaborative co-creation with Afghan artists. Next, I turn to the performance work that emerged from the creation of Aftaab and its ongoing work with Théâtre du Soleil, reflecting on the shifting signification of these performances when shown in Afghanistan or Europe, and the reasons for and implications of Aftaab’s increasingly Europe-oriented positionality. In the chapter’s final section, I examine the Aftaab members’ condition as transnational artists in the neoliberal economy, considering the ways in which the particular shape of Théâtre du Soleil’s support has opened up opportunities for the Afghan artists in significant ways while establishing limitations in others.

Context and Origins of the Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab Project

Théâtre du Soleil’s work in Afghanistan coincided with a burst of new theatre activity in Afghanistan, centered in Kabul. A consideration of new trends in Afghan theatre practice that emerged following the 2001 ousting of the Taliban is critical to contextualizing Aftaab’s early
work—and to understanding that Théâtre du Soleil arrived in Afghanistan at a time when new theatre institutions were already forming and artists uniting to share performance work with a liberatory agenda.

Aftaab emerged in the context of new activity in Afghanistan using theatre to construct, negotiate, and disseminate a modern, twenty-first-century, post/anti-Taliban Afghan national identity. A large body of scholarship examines theatre as a significant site for the negotiation, debate, and strategic framing of narratives of nationalism, particularly in countries where recent independence, the end of a period of violent conflict, or a major change in economic or political structure creates an urgent need for a public assessment of the past and assertion of updated national identity. Laura Nozslopy and Matthew Isaac Cohen, for example, suggest that performance practices can be looked at as one of the ways in which nation-states are performed into existence, with nations functioning as texts that are written and re-written through performance. As Laura Edmondson’s work on popular theatre in Tanzania in the 1990s demonstrates, performances that animate negotiations of nationalism can function as litmus tests for changing attitudes toward issues related to gender, sexuality, ethics, challenges to tradition, and urban-rural divide. Edmondson argues that such work does not necessarily happen through enacting resistance to the state, or through directly bolstering a state-sanctioned narrative of nationalism, but rather through processes of “strategic nationalism,” “collaborative nationalism,” and “alternative nationalism.” Diana Taylor emphasizes theatre’s ability to “re-member” a nation as complex and diverse, through staging of social memory from across multiple regions.

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7 Edmondson, Performance and Politics in Tanzania.
8 Ibid., 7.
and sectors of society. In her work on the performance of transitional justice in South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Catherine Cole theorizes the capacity for public performance to formally affirm actions perpetrated by a government in private as part of a public, national history, thereby turning isolated suffering into collective responsibility and working a previously silenced aspect of history into a public national narrative.

Afghanistan in the early 2000s was undergoing a phase of possibility and transition, making it a ripe environment for the kinds of renegotiation of national identity that these authors describe. As in the cases cited above, theatre was one of the modes through which such negotiations occurred. The revitalization of theatre activity in Afghanistan after 2002, largely centered in the national capital of Kabul but occurring in the provinces as well, was part of an endeavor to build a positive, uniquely Afghan, decidedly modern social and cultural fabric, as well as a response to the needs of this already emerging society to have expressive outlets when preexisting institutional structures failed to provide them. A wave of new theatre activity in Afghanistan, starting in 2002, served a variety of functions that shared a common purpose of facilitating social and cultural transformation toward a modern, democratic, post-conflict Afghanistan. A concrete manifestation of this new activity was the Afghan National Theatre Festival, which was inaugurated in 2004 and occurred annually until fizzling out in the early 2010s. Much of my analysis uses this festival as a primary source of information. Through reflecting on this festival, which convened theatre groups and individual artists from around the

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11 Aftaab member Omid Rawendah believes that the Afghan National Theatre Festival was discontinued because major internal corruption eventually discouraged the international funders from providing support. Rawendah (actor, Aftaab Theatre), in discussion with the author, July 9, 2015.
country, we can see that theatrical activity in early-twenty-first-century Afghanistan served several functions. Theatre was used to incorporate the broad population into the democratic process, to influence perception of female subjectivity and affirm women’s rights, and to facilitate exchange between the different regions of the country, thereby affirming the existence of a unified—but not homogenous—nation. Additionally, theatre served a key function of affirming Afghanistan as a place in the larger world, particularly its connection to European traditions and literary, dramatic, and intellectual history.

Since 2002, the new surge of theatre activity fulfilling these functions has taken primarily two forms: performances with a didactic, educational, or participatory style with direct treatment of contemporary social and political issues in Afghanistan; and performances of European plays in Dari translation. Both have emerged through a variety of models of Afghan and international leadership, with funding from international cultural and humanitarian institutions a ubiquitous presence—a point to which I will return in greater detail. Both strains of performance activity were prominently represented at the Afghan National Theatre Festival in Kabul. As Robert Kluyver of Kabul’s Foundation for Culture and Civil Society (FCCS) observes,12 to obtain funding for cultural projects in the region, one must demonstrate the social efficacy of the project, a requirement that, as in many other countries with “underdeveloped economies,” privileges projects with clear goals of effecting social change above other kinds of theatre

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work.\textsuperscript{13} The reopening of the Kabul National Theatre in 2002, and the start of the festival in 2004, hosted by the Theatre together with the Kabul University Faculty of Fine Arts, marked the beginning of this new period of tentative theatrical exploration.

Many of the primary functions that theatre fulfilled in regards to nation-building during this period can be viewed through the institutional structure of the Afghan National Theatre Festival, but even before the emergence of the festival, theatre was being utilized strategically as a social instrument in the transition toward democracy. In fact, Guilda Chaverdi, professor of theatre at Kabul University, locates the beginnings of new theatrical growth in 2002, when NGOs initiated educational theatre programs aimed at incorporating the whole nation into the democratic process. In 2002, troupes of young performers were trained in educational theatre techniques and developed short pieces designed to speak to rural audiences in the provinces about the significance of voting and to encourage enthusiasm and participation in the 2002 Afghan presidential election.\textsuperscript{14} This instrumental use of theatre evinced a need to facilitate cultural and social buy-in at the regional level to this state-level political change set in motion by international forces.

In addition to its use as an educational tool in the transition toward democracy, a prominent trend in the emerging practice was to use theatre to produce direct social-commentary with a clear message promoting women’s rights and to document recurring phenomena of

\textsuperscript{13} Kluyver explains this in the documentary film about Théâtre du Soleil’s 2005 trip to Kabul. Duccio Bellugi Vannucini, Sergio Canto Sabido, and Philippe Chevalier, \textit{Un soleil à Kaboul…ou plutôt deux}, DVD (Bel Air Media: 2007). This film is in French and Dari with English subtitles.

oppressive and self-inflicted violence toward women. The 2006 Afghan National Theatre Festival lineup illustrated the prominence of this trend. For example, a performance directed by Abdul Qayum Bessed, referred to as the “father of Afghan theatre” because of his sixty-year history of training Afghan people in theatre arts, depicted a woman enduring many kinds of degradation and abuse from her husband. At the end of the piece, she claimed the stage, demanding attention of her audience both onstage and off, and removed her chadri (full body-covering veil), delivering a defiant speech declaring her faith in a religion that affirms the right of both men and women to receive knowledge. A troupe of all women actors from the western city Herat performed a play called *Why?*, depicting a woman who chooses self-immolation as the only escape from the confines of her life after her husband dies—because of prohibitions against both returning to her family and remarrying. The play ended with the woman going up in flames, burning in front of the audience. Chaverdi locates this kind of work’s power in its ability to influence, over time, men’s perspectives on women’s rights. She explains that men who have grown up in contemporary Afghanistan will need time to accept that women have rights, and will eventually come to be more considerate toward their own wives. As Cole and Taylor, among others, have argued, public performances that represent private, hidden acts of state-sanctioned violence render such acts visible, inscribing them into public national history and spreading the weight of carrying the memory of suffering across a large public body. In the case of representations of self-immolation, these performances shared with an audience private acts of non-state violence, affirming these acts of self-inflicted violence as products of larger systems of repression and denial that are set in motion by state and societal actions.

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15 Unless otherwise noted, all descriptions of performances at the Kabul International Theatre Festival reference Paraboschi’s film *Afghanistan: Reconstructing Through Theatre*.
Other performances featured in the third Afghan National Theatre Festival illustrate how the festival opened up space for public airing of nuanced social commentary—about gender roles of both women and men, and about political and religious hypocrisy, among both international forces and domestic Afghan society. Mediothek Theatre Group, composed primarily of teenage girls from the region of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan, presented a comedic skit-like play in which teenage girls played men complaining about the pressures of modern life in a rapidly changing society.\(^{17}\) Women playing men onstage—particularly in this humorous portrayal—is a radical act in a society where women who perform onstage are viewed as morally dubious. The Afghan National Theatre Festival was one of the few opportunities for groups like Mediothek to perform, thereby creating a rare space for public performative gender play and commentary on normative social roles. Kamran Mir Hazar, freelance journalist, author, Persian-language poet, and activist, performed a political satire using documentary theatre elements, such as a scene where he read a speech by George W. Bush, drawing attention to the lies and hypocrisy of Bush-era policy in Afghanistan. In another scene he portrayed a Mullah who teaches the Koran, but treats his students cruelly, and watches Bollywood dance films in the privacy of his home.\(^{18}\) Such performances publicly reflected the tensions and inconsistencies of social life in modern-day Afghanistan, thereby constituting a public forum for sharing critiques of both outside intervention and internal systems of power and control.


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In addition to the particular theatrical treatment of major social issues such as women’s rights, gender roles, and religious hypocrisy in contemporary Afghanistan, structural elements of the Afghan National Theatre Festival were significant in the festival’s assertion of a modern Afghan nationhood. One of the festival’s important functions was to bring together performing artists and works from all regions of the country. By 2006, the third Afghan National Theatre Festival showcased forty-three productions, including sixteen companies from regions outside of Kabul such as Kunduz, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and even the southern Kandahar, a former territory of the Taliban. This is particularly significant in light of the fact that many of these artists may have otherwise not regularly experienced any theatre other than that which they created. An actress from Mediothek Theatre Group explained that in the company’s hometown, Kunduz, most people have no idea what theatre is. Bringing theatre work together from the disparate regions of the country reinforces the potential of the art form for artists who are often working in solitary conditions and exposes them to diverse styles and dramaturgical modes.

The second large trend in productions at the Afghan National Theatre Festival was Dari-language productions of plays from the classical and contemporary canon of European dramatic literature. This trend affirmed publicly that modern Afghanistan in the twenty-first century remains connected to a classical European intellectual and artistic tradition. The medium of theatre, then, holds a connotation of European greatness. For example, Chaverdi directed her students in a production of *Ubu Roi* in an original Dari translation. A group called Asman Company presented *Waiting for Godot* in Dari, directed by Hamid Alizadeh, who brought experience from working in Iranian television and show business. The 2005 festival included Aftaab Theatre’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and the 2006 festival presented their *Tartuffe*. Chaverdi continued to guide her students through explorations of European dramatic and literary texts,
through performances of Heiner Müller’s *The Horatian* and Machiavelli’s *Mandragola* at the national festival in 2007.¹⁹ The company Azdar, formed by Chaverdi with former university students, performed an adaptation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* in 2010 and turned to clowning techniques for a new piece in 2011.²⁰ These efforts represented an impulse to make theatre that was less overtly didactic and to participate in global movements of physical theatre—as evidenced by the exploration of clowning techniques. This trend further communicated an underlying idea that European theatre is the natural height of the form; it is the way to approach the medium of theatre in a serious and artistically sophisticated way. These plays communicated that Afghanistan was a country that embraces the liberal humanist ideals of authors such as Molière and Shakespeare, as well as the class critiques of plays like *Ubu Roi*. At the same time, staging European classics in this context enabled uncensored criticism of contemporary Afghanistan through the distancing mechanism of these foreign settings.

While these new developments in Afghan theatre activity, starting after the U.S. invasion of the country and overthrow of the Taliban, have been engaged in negotiating and co-creating the face of the twenty-first-century Afghan nation, such activity has from its inception been transnational, both financially and culturally. As such, it is not surprising that Aftaab’s own story has been transnational from its moment of inception, even as from the beginning it pursued goals closely tied to nation. As is to be expected in a country whose infrastructure has been ravaged by thirty years of revolution, civil war, and occupation, much twenty-first-century theatre activity in Afghanistan is driven—administratively, creatively, and financially—by international organizations. The Afghan National Theatre Festival was funded in its first year by the Goethe

Institute and has received additional funding in subsequent years from the French Cultural Centre, the British Council, and the United States Embassy. The leadership role of NGOs and international cultural organizations has been integral to this emerging theatre activity because, according to the documentary *Afghanistan: Reconstructing Through Theatre*, the Karzai government did not emphasize cultural forms like theatre and cinema. While this support might be necessary, Chaverdi warns of the double bind this support comprises, insisting that while the funders will eventually leave, the artists—mostly young and inexperienced—will stay.

Like much theatre activity in twenty-first-century Afghanistan, Aftaab Theatre was founded and powered by international forces and thus constitutes part of a larger movement of international NGOs supporting the development of arts and culture activity in Afghanistan. The story of Aftaab Theatre’s relationship to Théâtre du Soleil, however, is unique in its longevity, ongoing sustained support of individual artists, and emphasis on professionalization. In this next section I describe the circumstances that led to Théâtre du Soleil’s initiation of work in Afghanistan and examine how the French company’s deeply held ideological beliefs about theatre informed the character and structure of its evolving relationship with the group of Afghan actors. I argue that Théâtre du Soleil—driven by Mnouchkine’s convictions about theatre’s liberatory potential and the universality of human experience and unequipped for self-reflection because of a lack of awareness of the ethics and politics of their culturally interventionist position—initiated a paternalistic relationship with Aftaab, positioning itself as both teacher and parent and establishing a unidirectional flow of artistic knowledge.

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22 Chaverdi says this during an interview featured in the documentary. Ibid.
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Théâtre du Soleil’s first trip to Kabul was initiated by Robert Kluyver, who was serving at the time as the executive director of the FCCS. He describes the FCCS’s inauguration in Kabul in 2003 as fueled by recognition for the need in Afghanistan for platforms for cultural expressions of a “new, changing society,” particularly one that was “rather urban and educated.”

Attending *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, Théâtre du Soleil’s epic theatre piece about the global refugee crisis, Kluyver was struck by its considerable emphasis on Afghan experiences and use of the Afghan language Dari, and he approached Mnouchkine about running a program in Kabul. Thus, a core impetus for Mnouchkine’s work in the area is the contemporary trend of NGOs seeking international support to fund and facilitate cultural initiatives in a country where the government does not fund such work.

Mnouchkine accepted the invitation to run a program in Kabul, but the specific shape of the program still had to be determined. Ultimately, it was articulated according to the French director’s particular vision of what such an encounter could most productively accomplish. Although Kluyver was initially motivated by *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, no party considered bringing that show to Afghanistan—an endeavor that would have been prohibitively expensive. Mnouchkine remarks also that “it was too soon to bring such a piece there,” acknowledging the early stage of redevelopment that Afghan theatre was undergoing at the time. The workshop that they planned instead was designed, as Mnouchkine explained to her company members, “to show what our theatre is….to share, to receive from the Afghan people, and to give whatever

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23 At the time of publication, Richter was the Open Society Institute associate director. Mnouchkine, Kluyver, and Richter, “Open Society Panel: ‘Théâtre du Soleil in Afghanistan,’” 68.
24 Kluyver attended the production at the Cartoucherie, Théâtre du Soleil’s performance space on the outskirts of Paris. Ibid., 67.
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[we] have to give.” Mnouchkine brought, including herself, forty-three members of Théâtre du Soleil and ran workshops outside at the FCCS’s small outdoor stage and garden for three weeks. The workshops were open to the public and largely attended by students at the Kabul University Faculty of Fine Arts, as well as by members of a few existing small theatre companies and people working in television. For the workshop’s duration the participants were introduced to mask work, learning to use costume and masks to embody characters which would then dictate movement and lead to improvisations. Mnouchkine introduced social themes to the improvisations, starting with the theme of forced marriage, and used a distancing technique of setting the improvised scenes in temporally distant, hypothetical societies to free the resulting scenes from the confines of direct commentary. It was crucial to Mnouchkine that the Afghan participants include some women.

Théâtre du Soleil’s approach to this invitation to Kabul reflects, above all else, Mnouchkine’s beliefs about the relationship between theatre and liberation. Theatre scholar Judith G. Miller characterizes Mnouchkine’s ideological orientation to theatre as leftist, humanist, and universalizing, rather than overtly political. Mnouchkine’s commitment to leftist politics is illustrated through her long history of developing and directing performances about liberation struggles and human rights crises. Her early works embody a more directly political, even Marxist orientation, as evidenced in pieces such as 1789 (1970), which uses the French Revolution to talk metaphorically about the activist movements of the late 1960s; L’age d’or (1975), about immigrant experiences in France; and Mefisto (1979), an exploration of the origins of Fascism. In the 1980s and 1990s Mnouchkine’s work turned towards the theatricalization of

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legendary epic texts, paired with exploration of mask work (using traditions from both Commedia dell’Arte and Balinese topeng masks) and Asian traditional performance techniques such as Kathakali, Bharata Natyam, Kabuki, Bunraku, and Noh. These works also tended to have prominent political themes. Prime examples of this turn in Mnouchkine’s work are *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia* (1985), an epic history play about the rise and fall of the bloody Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s, and *L’Indiade* (1987), a retelling of India’s fight for independence.

Mnouchkine’s work has continued to have a political nature, particularly in its engagement with questions of human rights, as evidenced clearly in the production that elicited Kluyver’s interest, *Le Dernier Caravansérail*. The political slant of her performance work, however, does not necessarily prioritize the creation of critical distance. Miller describes Mnouchkine’s work above all as “fanatically theatrical.” Nonetheless, scholars and reviewers have lauded Théâtre du Soleil’s rigorous and longstanding use of the theatrical medium to confront audiences with their own role in international humanitarian crises and injustices, especially those in which France is complicit. Mnouchkine and her company’s devotion to global human rights causes is evidenced also in activities in which they engage outside their theatre work. For example, Mnouchkine has aided Algerian refugees and participated with other theatre artists in a hunger strike demanding French government intervention in ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. In 1996 Mnouchkine and members of Soleil served as allies to a group of three hundred undocumented immigrants, mostly from Mali, who were being expelled from France,

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28 Ibid., 101.
being locked up with them in a church for several days and later housing them in caravan huts outside of the Cartoucherie, the former munitions factory building in the Vincennes Forest that has been Théâtre du Soleil’s rehearsal and performance space since 1970, for several multi-week stretches.\(^{30}\) To this day the company continues to house refugee artists at the Cartoucherie on an individual basis. Théâtre du Soleil is also known for its communitarian ethos that colors many aspects of life as a member of the company, evidenced by practices such as the collective preparation and consumption of meals by company members at the Cartoucherie on the outskirt of Paris and the policy of equal pay for all company members.

Although motivated in substantial ways by radical liberatory politics, Mnouchkine’s work has also come under the scrutiny of critics who view her universalizing aesthetic, along with her adaptation of global performance techniques, particularly physical theatre and dance traditions from South and East Asian countries, as orientalist and engaged in the appropriation and commodification of cultural forms. Rather than demonstrating rigorous study and application of the Asian techniques that she became known for using in the eighties and nineties, Mnouchkine’s works illustrate a process of borrowing and creating original interpretations of the techniques at hand.\(^{31}\) Particularly in the late 1990s, Mnouchkine’s work was hotly debated and critiqued in conversations about new trends in Western interculturalist performance. For example, writing about Mnouchkine’s production *L’Indiade*, Marvin Carlson argues that the piece is far more about Mnouchkine’s particular directorial aesthetics than it is about Indian cultural forms. He asserts that the “universal” can be a dangerous goal, risking the silencing of the Other while purporting to speak from a space existing temporally before cultural

\[^{30}\] Shevtsova, “Ariane Mnouchkine in Tibet,” 73.

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specification.\textsuperscript{32} Christopher Balme distinguishes between what he calls “syncretic theatre” and “theatrical exoticism,” describing the latter as performance in which foreign cultural forms are decontextualized, becoming “floating signifiers of otherness.”\textsuperscript{33} He cites Mnouchkine as an example of a Western artist whose intercultural work has aligned with this latter mode.\textsuperscript{34} John Russell Brown has characterized Mnouchkine’s borrowing of Asian performance techniques and aesthetics as a kind of cultural looting.\textsuperscript{35} Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, in describing a spectrum of intercultural theatre work ranging from “collaborative” to “imperialistic,” cite Mnouchkine as a chief example of a Western artist whose intercultural aesthetic can be seen as occupying the imperialistic end of the spectrum, in which Western culture is seen as “bankrupt and in need of invigoration from the non-West.”\textsuperscript{36}

It is not surprising, therefore, that Mnouchkine brought her universalizing ideology to bear on the workshops in Kabul in ways that positioned herself problematically as an expert on how theatre could liberate Afghan society. The director’s reflections on the workshops she led in Kabul in 2005 make clear her endorsement of the concept of a universality of human experience that, I contend, disavows her own privileged position in the encounter and naturalizes her own

\textsuperscript{33} Christopher B. Balme, Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{36} Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, “Towards a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis,” TDR 46, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 39. Mnouchkine has been characterized by some as a controversial figure whose position of control over her large company is seen as at odds with the company’s purported devotion to collaborative artistic process and the politics of equality, democracy, and collectivity. Adrian Kiernander describes critics framing Mnouchkine as a “dictator,” but insists that in fact, her work directing productions is “radically non-authoritarian.” Kiernander, “The Role of Ariane Mnouchkine at the Théâtre du Soleil,” Modern Drama 33, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 330.
culturally situated beliefs about what constitutes liberation. Reflecting on the mask workshops, Mnouchkine comments:

[T]hey had never seen masks in their lives. Never. They had never heard of Harlequin, or Commedia dell’Arte, or Noh, or Kabuki, or anything like that. When we first showed them the masks, it was really as if something was being recalled from an ancient memory. They recognized the masks without ever having seen any before….When the Afghan actors became familiar with these masks, they were deeply happy, because masks are shades of personhood.\footnote{This is a direct quote from Mnouchkine. Mnouchkine, Kluyver, and Richter, “Open Society Panel: ‘Théâtre du Soleil in Afghanistan,’” 70.}

Folded into this universalist ideology is language that positions the Afghan workshop participants in a stance of lack (“they had never…”) and a perspective that assumes to understand the inner emotional experience of someone with whom the speaker does not share a language. On the subject of the political nature of theatre, as opposed to other art forms, Mnouchkine emphasizes what she sees as the transformative potential for performers themselves, in embodying those whom their society deems separate and unknowable:

Theater has to do with the Other. It’s the art of knowing, understanding, and incarnating the Other, other people. Therefore it’s also a school of life and much more….To play someone else, to incarnate somebody, you have to understand them, you have to accept them. If you are Muslim, you suddenly have to become a Jew or a Christian. If you are Christian, you suddenly become Muslim, or Jewish, or black, or a dwarf, or a giant, or a woman if you are a man, or a man if you are a woman. You have to be the Other, and that is priceless—priceless. Especially in a society based, because of history, on the refusal of the Other.\footnote{Ibid., 76-77. Mnouchkine’s emphasis.}

Mnouchkine’s use of the workshops in Kabul as a platform for her universalizing ideology and convictions of theatre’s productive capacity as a medium for encountering and transcending difference brings to mind Rustom Bharucha’s indictment of universalizing aesthetics promoted by some Western theatre artists in the context of intercultural work. Bharucha critiques the late-twentieth-century intercultural aesthetics trend for ignoring the material realities of inequality.
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that have accompanied so much cultural interaction between nations, yielding dynamics that are "colonial, exploitative, coercive, and assimilationist." He goes on to critique the universalist approach for conveying an implicit assumption that the Western cosmopolitan artist holds the universal position and presents a scathing indictment of the interculturalist’s assertion of universality:

[T]he interculturalist, at least in his/her most idealized manifestations, erases all distinctions through an assumption of a shared universality. In the empty space of the intercultural meeting ground, which assumes the ‘point zero’ of an authentic ‘first contact’ between ‘essential human beings,’ there is a total erasure of the participants’ ethnicities in favour of their universal human identities, creativities, and potentialities. The interculturalist is above ethnicity; he/she is always already human. And therefore, he/she can afford to propose a universality for all, cast in an invariably white, patriarchal, heterosexist image.  

Mnouchkine’s deployment of universalizing ideology in her approach to theatre work in Afghanistan, paired with the non-reciprocal framework of the workshop and the strong foregrounding of her political agenda, contain shades of the colonialist interculturalist stance that Bharucha indicts.

Théâtre du Soleil’s ongoing documentation of their program for Afghan artists, particularly in the form of documentary film, evinces the company’s guiding values and priorities in approaching this work. Several longtime members of the company created a documentary about Théâtre du Soleil’s 2005 workshop in Kabul and the subsequent creation of Aftaab Theatre, and there is currently in process a second documentary about the making of Aftaab’s latest work, La Ronde de nuit, based on hundreds of hours of rehearsal footage. These documentaries, along with other promotional materials, comprise a body of narrative about the relationship between the two companies from Théâtre du Soleil’s perspective. They demonstrate

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40 This second documentary is an ongoing project of Sergio Canto Sabido, longtime Théâtre du Soleil company member.
the French company’s interest in telling the story of its work in Afghanistan as a humanitarian intervention, celebrating in particular the subversive power of theatre in a repressive society as well as its capacity to unite people across cultural and geopolitical divides. Here I will focus on the documentary covering the 2005 Kabul workshop and subsequent formation of Theatre Aftaab, titled *Un soleil à Kaboul...ou plutôt deux*, to analyze Théâtre du Soleil’s narrativization of the two companies’ unfolding relationship.

*Un soleil à Kaboul* positions Théâtre du Soleil as the protagonist of a story about benevolent European artists assuming personal risks to bring theatre to a region in need. It is notably silent about the context of Aftaab’s performance of *Romeo and Juliet*—at the second Afghan National Theatre Festival—thereby erasing, in this narrative, the larger movement out of which Aftaab emerged and the roles that other individuals and institutions, including those with Afghan artists and institutions at the helm, continue to play.\(^{41}\) The film begins with footage of meetings in Paris in which Mnouchkine and her troupe discuss the trip to Kabul and grapple with a letter warning them that their presence in Kabul—a group of over forty artists from Europe—may render the workshop a visible target of anti-Western violence. The camera favors moments of Mnouchkine addressing groups of artists. Once the company members arrived in Kabul, we see Mnouchkine reminding them that their mission is to show the work of their company rather than universal theatre, adding the addendum, “even if privately we believe we have come to show universal theatre.”\(^{42}\) The telling inclusion of this aside in the documentary implicitly asserts Théâtre du Soleil’s assumption of this position. The viewer sees Mnouchkine introducing masks from the Commedia dell’Arte and Balinese traditions, explaining the dynamics of mask work; Mnouchkine explaining the subversive power of comedy; Mnouchkine declaring the

\(^{41}\) Bellugi Vannuccini, Canto Sabido, and Chevalier, *Un soleil à Kaboul*.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
responsibility of artists, and especially actors, to challenge oppressive social structures; Mnouchkine insisting on the artist’s rejection of division based on ethnic, gender, or religious identity. The film thus largely tells the story of Mnouchkine imparting ideology through theatre, most prominently the idea that the act of embodying the Other (as defined by identity categories such as gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation)—as actors by definition do—generates compassion and enacts resistance against socially constructed divisions, paving the way for broad social liberation and progress.43

As the film progresses to depict the creation of Theatre Aftaab and its first production, Romeo and Juliet, agency is represented primarily in Mnouchkine’s hands, and the Afghan performers are portrayed as receivers of her liberatory teaching. While in a sense the protagonist of the film shifts from being Théâtre du Soleil to Aftaab Theatre, it is Mnouchkine’s voice that continues to deliver the analysis of the Afghan Romeo and Juliet’s significance. Footage of opening night shows the Aftaab actors reading a letter from Mnouchkine, who assures them that their performance of Shakespeare’s play means “the terrible and irremediable defeat of the Taliban.”44 The actors listen intently to the letter as tears roll down their faces. A scene depicting a phone conversation between Maurice Durozier (the Théâtre du Soleil member who directed

43 The film includes interview clips with several Afghan workshop participants. Mnouchkine’s lectures are interspersed with direct camera addresses by a few individual Afghan participants as well as excerpts of particularly humorous or successful masked improvisations and decontextualized scenes of Kabul street life. In several clips, workshop participants explain their families’ disapproval—sometimes violent in nature—of their pursuit of arts education and even participation in the workshop. In one, Mahmood Sharifi (who later served as Aftaab’s administrative director) explains that the workshop has given him a new understanding of what theatre can be. The statements by Afghan participants that are chosen for inclusion affirm the importance of art in the face of personal hardship. The actors speak in Dari with English subtitles. In addition to these scenes in and around the workshop, the film includes interludes of footage from Kabul, privileging scenes of children playing amidst rubble or washing laundry in a body of murky water. Ibid.
44 This is a quote from a letter written by Mnouchkine, read out loud in French with simultaneous translation into Dari and English subtitles, in the film. Ibid.
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Aftaab in *Romeo and Juliet*) and Mnouchkine after the performance is the only piece of post-show reflection, reinforcing Théâtre du Soleil’s position as the protagonist of the film’s story.

The film closes with the promotion of a narrative of cosmopolitanism and camaraderie. Four months after the performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, Aftaab travels to Paris to study global physical performance techniques at Théâtre du Soleil’s space in the Bois de Vincennes. The camera shows footage of a dance party at the Cartoucherie, at which Aftaab and Théâtre du Soleil company members greet each other with kisses and laughter and dance to Persian music. We are shown images of Aftaab members studying dance traditions from Korea, Sri Lanka, and India. In this part of the film, the Aftaab actors are incorporated into a cosmopolitanism of performance traditions, and Théâtre du Soleil becomes Aftaab’s portal to a global roster of techniques and styles. *Un soleil à Kaboul* thus emphasizes the Soleil/Aftaab project’s status as a successful intercultural encounter in which embodied expressive practices such as dance are able to transcend cultural and linguistic divides.

In contrast to Mnouchkine and her company’s specific ideological agenda in their approach to working with artists in Afghanistan, the Afghan workshop participants who ultimately became members of Aftaab entered into their relationship with Théâtre du Soleil without a strong or unified ideological position or goal. Many participants were first-year students in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Kabul University. As members of Aftaab describe, the school of Fine Arts is attended by those who do not score high enough on the entrance exam to gain admission into the other schools, rather than by students driven by a desire to pursue the arts. No doubt this lack of popularity among students is due to the lack of exposure most younger
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Afghans have had to the arts, thanks to the Taliban’s strict banning of music, theatre, and visual arts.

Most of the Aftaab actors who were present at Mnouchkine’s workshop in 2005 describe having had very little prior experience with theatre. Some of them were drawn to the workshop because they wished to become artists of some kind, and Soleil’s program represented a unique opportunity to be exposed to renowned international professionals. Taher Baig describes being motivated, as a first-year university student at the time of the workshop, to make art—in whatever form it took—although he was specifically interested in being a film director. Mnouchkine’s workshop, and the prospect of Theatre Aftaab, seemed to offer a way in to becoming an artist. However, even once Aftaab was formed as a company and members began working together, Baig did not harbor clear hopes or goals for the company. He describes life in Afghanistan at this time as being so unstable that it was near impossible to have a plan for anything.45 Sayed Ahmad Hashimi had participated in theatre as a student in Pakistan in the late 1990s and, upon returning to Afghanistan, performed with a company in the first Kabul International Theatre Festival in 2004 while working as a tailor. Hashimi found Mnouchkine’s approach to be different and fascinating, and was originally motivated simply to have fun.46 Some future Aftaab members ended up at the workshop more serendipitously. Omid Rawendah, like Baig, was in his first year studying in the Faculty of Fine Arts, but had arrived there reluctantly because of his low exam scores. He had originally wished to retake his exams to gain acceptance to a different program, but he was encouraged by his father and grandfather, who had memory of theatre from before the wars, to give it a try. Rawendah describes the early period of

45 Taher Baig (actor, Aftaab Theatre), in discussion with the author, March 27, 2014.
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participating in Aftaab as a process of falling in love with theatre progressively with each new production. He explains, “Honestly at the beginning, I didn’t have any objective for Aftaab. My only objective was to learn something.”\textsuperscript{47} Shafiq Kohi, one of the youngest members of Aftaab, was only fourteen when he participated in Théâtre du Soleil’s workshop, which he had heard about from his brother who was living in France. Kohi describes having had no prior experience with theatre but was quickly enamored by his work with Mnouchkine and devoted himself to learning the craft of acting.\textsuperscript{48}

Most Aftaab members did not specifically see their work in theatre as an important agent of political or social change during the early years of the company’s existence. Hashimi explains that he did not begin with any belief that Afghan society could be changed through theatre. Over time he came to understand that people can learn from theatre, but despite attesting to having hope, he conceded that he does not truly believe that theatre can change Afghanistan today.\textsuperscript{49}

Rawendah, on the other hand, identified in hindsight significance to Aftaab’s early performances in Kabul of which he wasn’t cognizant at the time:

At the moment I didn’t feel it. I was too young. I didn’t recognize what we were doing. I was a student in theatre, and I was doing my best to learn more about my profession, and people would come up to me afterwards and tell me I was very good, that’s what I cared about. Now… when I see Afghanistan from outside, I recognize that it was a very good thing that we were doing at the moment. Now I know that that’s why people loved this, not everyone, but most of the people. There were people who came two, three times to see one show, but for the moment when I was playing there, I didn’t realize this. I was just enjoying it.\textsuperscript{50}

Aref Bahunar, who arrived in Kabul for the first time from a village without electricity to attend Kabul University in 2004, cited his attendance of Théâtre du Soleil’s workshop as his first

\textsuperscript{47} Omid Rawendah (actor, Aftaab Theatre), in discussion with the author, March 28, 2014.
\textsuperscript{48} Shafiq Kohi (actor, Aftaab Theatre), in discussion with the author, French, July 10, 2015.
\textsuperscript{49} Hashimi, discussion.
\textsuperscript{50} Rawendah, discussion, 2015.
introduction to theatre. He explained to me his conviction that theatre is necessary for a society
to collectively take stock of its situation. But theatre’s social function, in Bahunar’s eyes, stems
just as much from its capacity to produce happiness and laughter. Culture is to life, he asserts,
what salt is to food.\textsuperscript{51}

Thus, the political significance that Mnouchkine placed on Aftaab’s work from the start
was not, for many of the Afghan actors, the primary conscious motivation for moving forward
with Théâtre du Soleil. Rather, for these young artists, Théâtre du Soleil’s presence represented
opportunity in an environment of few prospects. At the end of the workshop, Mnouchkine
selected twenty-four participants whom she wished to continue to support on a theatrical path.
The group agreed to continue working together as a company under the name Aftaab, which
means “sun” in Dari. The exact terms of the ongoing support that Théâtre du Soleil would
provide were not established. Over the next five years, Aftaab continued to work together as an
acting company on a production-by-production basis, primarily based in Kabul but for periods of
time in France, usually—although with a few exceptions—under the direction of a Théâtre du
Soleil artist.\textsuperscript{52} As I will explain more thoroughly in a subsequent section of this chapter, from
2010 onward the Aftaab actors have been primarily based in France.

\textsuperscript{51} Bahunar, discussion.
\textsuperscript{52} Three of Aftaab’s productions have been directed by artists who are not members of Théâtre
du Soleil. In each case, the director arranged with Théâtre du Soleil to work with Aftaab. The
first was the 2007 production of \textit{The Caucasian Chalk Circle}, directed by Arash Absalan.
Absalan is an Iranian director based in Kabul who in recent years has directed the company
Azdar Theatre. See, for example, a review of Azdar’s 2013 production of a Persian translation of
Dario Fo’s \textit{The Tale of a Tiger}, directed by Absalan, performed in New Delhi. Pheroze L.
Aftaab’s second piece directed by a non-Théâtre du Soleil member was the 2010 production \textit{Les
Chiens/Sag Ha}, a dance-theatre piece directed by French choreographer Laurence Levasseur.
Levasseur works extensively in Central Asia as a dance “ambassador.” For more information on
Théâtre du Soleil’s workshop in Kabul and the subsequent support it extended to a group of Afghan actors constituted a substantial, in many cases life-changing, influx of exposure and resources, both artistic and financial, to a group of individuals who would otherwise have had extremely limited access to professional theatrical training, development, and performance opportunity. Simultaneously, though, many choices that the French company made in structuring its work with the Afghan artists from the start ensured that the relationship between the two companies would remain paternalistic and non-reciprocal, and would naturalize the limited position of agency held by the Afghan artists. The French company did not discernibly aim to foster artistic exchange in its work in Afghanistan. This positioned Soleil first as a teacher rather than a collaborator or peer, and later as an employer. It might appear at first glance that reciprocal exchange of artistic technique would be unrealistic in the context of a country where the disproportionately young population has had little exposure to local and regional performing arts practices due to war’s obliteration and the direct prohibition of said practices. But an organization devoted to reciprocal exchange might have sought out Afghans with knowledge of the country’s rich traditions of poetry, dance, and music. The absence of such a component


The third piece was the 2011 production of Oedipe/Tyran, directed by Matthias Langhoff. Langhoff is a France-based German star theatre director, known for his commitment to radical politics, whose early directing work was with the Berliner Ensemble in the 60s. See, for example, Margaret Setje-Eilers, “Wochenend und Sonnenschein: In the Blind Spots of Censorship at the GDR’s Cultural Authorities and the Berliner Ensemble,” Theatre Journal 61, no. 3 (October 2009): 363-86. David Barnett characterizes both Langhoff and Mnouchkine as “post-Brechtian” directors, committed to combatting loss of historical consciousness in the face of capitalism. Barnett, “Toward a Definition of Post-Brechtian Performance: The Example of In the Jungle of the Cities at the Berliner Ensemble, 1971,” Modern Drama 54, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 353.

53 Today, the majority of Afghanistan’s population was born after the Soviets left the country in 1989, although the current political leaders all “came of age” during the period of Soviet rule. Barfield, Afghanistan, 347.
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comprises a preemptive devaluation of Afghan knowledge, skill, and tradition. By working exclusively with young artists with little experience, and by determining themselves the agenda of their work in the country rather than seeking out the perspective of local cultural leaders or positioning any of the Aftaab members as equals with them in the organizational structure of the partnership, Théâtre du Soleil positioned the Afghan artists as apprentice company members in a satellite Soleil troupe that even used the same name as the French company, as aftaab and soleil both mean “sun.”

These actions on Soleil’s part do not surprise if we consider its status as a theatre company driven by the strong aesthetic and political vision of one artistic director. In a sense, Mnouchkine’s workshop in Kabul and the subsequent shaping of Aftaab constitute work almost identical to her habitual endeavors of shaping artists into a company that can animate her specific artistic vision. Moreover, the Aftaab members, starting out with mostly limited or nonexistent experience with theatre, some of them in fact still adolescents, were in some ways appropriately positioned as students. From this perspective, these artists had the good fortune to be accepted into a highly specialized, tuition-free theatre school in which they were instructed and directed by high-level international professionals. The case of the Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab project illuminates how a cultural program run by an organization from a wealthy country in the North can simultaneously provide life-changing resources and support at the level of individual artists and also impose and perpetuate a neo-colonialist relationship with implications reverberating, as I will demonstrate, into the future.
Aftaab’s Performance Work: Cultural Politics and Reception

Thus far I have reflected on the origins of Théâtre du Soleil’s work in Afghanistan and the formation of Aftaab. I turn next to an examination of Aftaab’s evolving performance work and the circumstances of these performances in production, including their implications for audiences in Afghanistan and, increasingly, in Europe. Aftaab’s work has most frequently been composed of adaptations of European canonical dramatic texts (except for two collectively created pieces that are the subject of the following chapter). Here I will consider the politics of this trend of Aftaab’s engagement with European forms and text. I argue that the signification and reception of these productions shifted substantially between Aftaab’s performances in Afghanistan and its performances in Europe. In Afghanistan, Aftaab’s performances participated in a nation-building project, contributing a subversive edge derived both from its public launching of social critique and its assertion and affirmation of aesthetic and embodied pleasure, also eliciting collective, affective experience of possibility. In Europe, the same Aftaab performances came to be perceived as emissaries of authentic suffering, admired both for their signification of resistance against repressive forces widely condemned by the West and for their novelty value as rare examples of Afghan theatre. First, though, I will provide an overview of Aftaab’s production history to demonstrate the gradual shift in their orientation toward European audiences and European modes of theatrical production.

Following the initial workshop in 2005, Mnouchkine sent Maurice Durozier, longtime Soleil actor, to Kabul to direct Aftaab in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*, which was performed in Kabul and, by invitation, in Duchambe, Tajikistan. In 2006 Aftaab spent two months in Paris, studying theatre and beginning work on their production of *Tartuffe*, which they completed that
summer back in Kabul, under the direction of Hélène Cinque, and performed at the French Cultural Center. In 2007 they rehearsed and performed *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in Kabul and toured the production in India (to New Delhi and Mumbai) in the winter of 2008. In April and May of 2008, Aftaab returned to Paris and performed *Tartuffe* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in repertory at the Cartoucherie. In 2009 the company spent seven months in Paris developing their first collective creation piece, *Ce jour-là*, which they performed at the Cartoucherie as part of the Festival Premier Pas and in Lyon at the Festival Sens interdits, a festival of international political theatre. Back in Kabul in 2010, the company developed the movement theatre piece *Les Chiens/Sag Ha*, which they performed at the French Cultural Center, and began rehearsing *The Miser*, first on their own and then under the direction of Hélène Cinque, who returned to Kabul. *The Miser* was performed several times in Kabul that summer and early fall. Aftaab spent a year during 2010-2011 enrolled at ENSATT (École Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Techniques) in Lyon, studying theatre, and in the summer of 2011 they performed in Matthias Langhoff’s three-part *Oedipe/Tyran (Oedipus, Tyrant)* by Heiner

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54 Hélène Cinque is a longtime actor with Théâtre du Soleil as well as an experienced director. Her own company is called L’Instant d’une Résonance. Cinque has directed collectively created pieces in collaboration with organizations aiding displaced persons and refugees in France. See, for example, “Hélène Cinque,” THEATREonline, accessed March 19, 2017, http://www.theatreonline.com/Artiste/Helene-Cinqu/55647.

55 For information about the Aftaab production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, see note 52.

Müller. This production played at the Avignon Festival and in Paris at the Théâtre du Chaudron. In the summer of 2012 Aftaab reprised *Ce jour-là* and *The Miser* at the Paris quartier d’été Festival. The following fall they began rehearsals for their second collective creation piece, *La Ronde de nuit*, which was performed during March and April 2013 at Théâtre du Soleil and again for the month of November 2015. *La Ronde de nuit* toured to Calais, Lille, Milan, Barcelona, and Limoges in 2013-14.

Several trends are visible in this trajectory. Firstly, Aftaab’s work has shifted from being centered in Kabul, in that early productions were primarily rehearsed and premiered there and then toured in Central and South Asia, to being centered in Paris, where they have lived since 2011, and touring in Western Europe. Aftaab has not performed as a company in Afghanistan since 2010, and neither of the company’s collective creation pieces has been performed there. Secondly, Aftaab’s work has shifted from largely being composed of productions of plays from the European dramatic canon (specifically Shakespeare, Molière, and Brecht) to centrally featuring original works about contemporary Afghanistan based on personal experiences and months of improvisation. Thirdly, while all of Aftaab’s work prior to *La Ronde de nuit* was performed in Dari with French or other subtitles when necessary, *La Ronde de nuit* marks the first bilingual Dari and French production, signifying a linguistic shift toward more fully transnational work. In general, Aftaab’s work has become increasingly oriented toward European audiences and enmeshed in European modes of theatrical production and circulation.

Furthermore, it has entered a particular circuit of European performance work by participating in international theatre festivals, especially festivals focused on political theatre, such as the

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57 For information about the Aftaab productions *Les Chiens/Sag Ha, The Miser*, and *Oedip/Tyrant*, see note 52.
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Festival Sens interdits, and international Francophone festivals, such as the Limoges Festival, at which the other 2014 performances were primarily works from the Francophone world (specifically France, Francophone West Africa, Quebec, Haiti, and Belgium). This last point makes visible how Aftaab’s seminal relationship with Théâtre du Soleil has “Francophonized” the company, ushering them into a Francophone cultural sphere that otherwise brings together cultural products from former French colonies.

As I have explained, Aftaab’s primary genre of performance has consisted of dramatic texts from the classic canon of European theatre, most often transposed to an Afghan context. From one perspective, this choice reflects Théâtre du Soleil’s implicit belief that theatre is a universal language and that, therefore, dramatic texts deemed as “great” from a European tradition are the rightful property of global artists. There is an inherent element of cultural imperialism here, implicit in the assertion that a liberatory performance practice—which Théâtre du Soleil most certainly viewed its early work with Theatre Aftaab—can be achieved through European early modern great texts with their ideals of individual liberty and romantic love. By choosing to direct the Aftaab actors in Romeo and Juliet and then Tartuffe, Théâtre du Soleil brought Western masterpieces to a non-Western society and communicated that the tools of emancipation lie outside of the local context, but can be imported and internalized.

However, to claim that any Afghan engagement with a European dramatic tradition is necessarily culturally imperialist is ahistorical, denying Afghanistan’s existence in the contemporary global world and its right to participate in the global circulation of cultural products. Theatre scholars Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins affirm the validity of prevalent criticisms of intercultural performance that critique impositions of external and unfamiliar theatrical forms or that problematize the privilege-fueled mining of non-Western traditions by
Western artists, but they also argue that adaptations can be fruitful sites of intercultural performance because they often bring multiple nations, time periods, and theatrical styles into conversation with each other. Moreover, theatre scholars writing about diverse geographic performance practices illustrate ways in which utilizing forms of foreign origin is often a strategic survival technique.

The first decade of the twenty-first century was certainly a time of great possibility for social change in Afghanistan. But unlike the examples that Holledge and Tompkins cite, the dramatic texts in question were not chosen by the Afghan actors, nor were the final directorial choices in their hands. At the same time, though, the plays were chosen for their ability to speak to particular social problems in contemporary Afghanistan—problems for which there are few accepted outlets for discussion in Afghan society—and the actors contributed substantially to the staging process through the use of improvisation as a core rehearsal technique. Rather than adaptations, these productions are more accurately characterized as innovative stagings in which the plays are translated into Dari and the setting transposed to modern day Afghanistan.

Company members describe the choice of play in this early phase as the responsibility of the director. As former Aftaab member Haroon Noori explains,

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It’s been up to the director…. It’s their ideas, their style of work, but still everything starts with improvising. It’s 80-90% actor work. Whatever parts the director likes, they’re going to pick it up, update it a little bit, make a play out of it. The director picks
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the style, genre, the play itself. They have to link it somehow to Afghanistan. There has to be something for Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{62}

The emphasis on actor work, then, should be seen as mitigating some of the power imbalance between the French director and Afghan actors. The physicality of the actors was of central importance both in rehearsal and in the final productions, as in the early years before the Afghans learned French, the directors and actors communicated largely through a translator and worked from scripts in different languages.

The “something for Afghanistan” that Noori refers to has been substantial in each of these productions. In \textit{Romeo and Juliet}, \textit{Tartuffe}, and \textit{The Caucasian Chalk Circle}, this “something for Afghanistan” took the shape of using these texts to speak to contemporary social problems in Afghanistan. \textit{Romeo and Juliet}’s theme of divisive and destructive family feuding resonates with Afghanistan’s history of violence fueled by ethnic division and hatred. With \textit{Tartuffe}, the company was able to voice criticism of the common phenomenon of forced marriage, as well as the prevalent stifling of expression of personal thoughts and feelings in the name of religious doctrine. As Baig explained, “\textit{Tartuffe} was four centuries ago. It was a problem of that moment. But in Afghanistan, it’s today.”\textsuperscript{63} \textit{The Caucasian Chalk Circle} is a somewhat different case, as it was directed not by a Théâtre du Soleil member but by the Iranian director Arash Absalan.\textsuperscript{64} This production, like the others, used a text translated into Dari, but unlike the others did not transpose the action of the play in any naturalistic way into an Afghan context. Nonetheless, this play also spoke to contemporary Afghan audiences in its

\textsuperscript{62} Haroon Noori (former actor, Aftaab Theatre), in discussion with the author, May 8, 2012.
\textsuperscript{63} Baig explained to me the relevance of both of these plays to contemporary Afghan society. Baig, discussion.
\textsuperscript{64} See note 52.
representation of the lives of common people interrupted by the civil war, living at the whim of political power-grabbers.

It would be ahistorical to assume that Théâtre du Soleil’s direction of European canonical dramatic texts with the Aftaab actors was an introduction or imposition of a tradition without a history in the region. In the 1960s and 70s a precedent was set for performances of classic European plays in Kabul. Ali Raonaq, who managed the Kabul Nandari Theater (now the National Theater) in the mid 1950s, was the first translator of Molière into Dari. The Kabul Nandari was built during the reign of Mohammed Daoud Khan, when theatre activity in Kabul proliferated. The theatre became a gathering place for international cultural activity, with foreign artists performing with regularity. Productions of Molière flourished particularly in the 1970s on the well-equipped stage of the Kabul French High School, where French teacher Guy Michel Carbou staged coeducational student productions of Raonaq’s Molière translations to audiences who found Molière’s wit and social commentary eerily relevant to contemporary Kabul. Actor and director Hafiz Assefi, who performed in Carbou’s productions in the 1970s, reflects that Molière’s “language and wit fit perfectly with the Afghan taste.”

Considering this history, then, Aftaab’s productions of these classics, along with some other performances included in the Afghan National Theatre Festival (particularly those of the Kabul University students) marked a continuity with the theatrical activity of 1960s and 70s Kabul. It also marked a rejection of the Taliban’s prohibition of Western cultural products and

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65 Paraboschi, *Afghanistan: Reconstructing Through Theatre*. Raonaq explains in this documentary that Molière’s plays are beyond space and time. He describes being approached by an audience member after a production of Molière’s *Les Fourberies de Scapin* who insisted that the character of Géronte precisely described a person on the streets of Kabul.

66 Ibid.
was a public affirmation of Afghanistan’s participation in global—or at least Western—artistic and intellectual traditions.

Aftaab’s production of Tartuffe is the result of a particularly intricate set of adaptations and translations. This Aftaab production, directed by Théâtre du Soleil member Hélène Cinque, was credited as following the staging of Mnouchkine’s 1995 production of Tartuffe, which itself transposed Molière’s early modern play about religious hypocrisy to a Muslim society in an unspecified, and romantically stylized, Mediterranean setting. Ironically, while in the Théâtre du Soleil version Tartuffe is portrayed as Muslim, in the Aftaab version—as performed both in Kabul and Paris—he is portrayed as Catholic, due to the danger of publicly criticizing Islam in Afghanistan. Symbols of Catholicism can be shown in Afghanistan more readily in fiction—such as onstage—than they can in other public contexts. Aftaab’s production of Tartuffe was based on an Iranian translation, which, although currently banned in Iran, was located by Mnouchkine in a used bookstore, duplicated, and sent to Kabul. Whereas documentation of Molière productions in Kabul from the 1970s show characters dressed in seventeenth-century French period costume, Aftaab’s production made use of a spectrum of clothing reflecting modern-day Afghan society, with some stylization, as in Mnouchkine’s original version. Aftaab’s production used the general stage design scheme of the Théâtre du Soleil version, in which the stage was split in half with two rectangular rugs occupying the respective sides. The Théâtre du Soleil set

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68 Judith G. Miller, review of Tartuffe, by Molière, directed by Ariane Mnouchkine, Théâtre du Soleil, Paris, Theatre Journal 48, no. 3 (October, 1996): 370-71. Miller describes the production as portraying Tartuffe as a religious fundamentalist in a Mediterranean setting that is coded as Islamic through set and costume design, as well as in the program notes.
69 Paraboschi, Afghanistan: Reconstructing Through Theatre.
70 According to Sharifi, as featured in the documentary. Ibid.
involved an elaborate background landscape of overlaid white stone walls, creating a romantically rendered generic Mediterranean cityscape. Aftaab’s version was performed in Kabul with a simple black backdrop and virtually empty stage, save for the carpets and a few chairs and tables. Thus in the case of Tartuffe, the Aftaab production took elements of staging and design from the Théâtre du Soleil production but abandoned the romanticization of the Muslim setting, embracing instead an exuberance and irreverence paired with stylistic minimalism.

While these performances were bold and powerful in their public address of contemporary social problems in a closed society with few outlets for open self-critique, Aftaab’s performance of these classic European plays in Kabul was powerful in additional ways. As part of the Afghan National Theatre Festival, Aftaab’s performances were in the minority in comparison to a majority of short, didactic pieces asserting women’s rights or concretely illustrating a social problem or recent episode of history. While all of these performances have a radical potential in a country where only a few years before all artistic expression was prohibited, Aftaab’s employment of humor, irreverence, aesthetic beauty, and a poetics of exuberance stands out in some ways as more radical, in its embrace of shared pleasure as one of theatre’s constitutive features and its assertion of Afghanistan’s right to art beyond that of a clearly educational or utilitarian purpose.

Jacques Rancière argues against the expectation that there is a potential direct line of efficacy between performance and life. He writes that “there is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world.” 71 Rancière argues instead for an understanding of aesthetic experience as liberatory because of its ability to

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“trigger new passions,” thereby upsetting a balance between what one does functionally and what one senses. For Rancière, this rupture can have a political implication because it disrupts a seeming fit between one’s daily life/work and what one might be capable of, thereby denaturalizing class positions and the kinds of labor associated with them. James Thompson makes a related argument for the liberatory potential of aesthetic beauty, which for him is part of a larger argument in favor of recognizing the powerful affective (rather than effective) outcomes of participating in or witnessing performance, particularly in contexts of applied theatre. Using Elaine Scarry’s theorization of the experience of observing beauty as inherently expansive, prompting one to desire to reproduce the beauty and share the sense of pleasure it elicits, Thompson argues that experiencing aesthetic beauty relates the individual to others and links individual spectators to the social realm of politics.

Aftaab’s focus on performances with a strong aesthetic emphasis, particularly through the physicality-heavy and stylized approach of Théâtre du Soleil, should be viewed as containing elements of radicalism in this context otherwise mostly dominated by more efficacy-oriented theatre.

Several noteworthy moments in Tartuffe and The Caucasian Chalk Circle illustrate particular social power achieved through a poetics of beauty, optimism, and exuberance. In a scene from Aftaab’s Tartuffe at the festival in 2006, Persian music blasted as each character ran energetically onto the stage, one by one, from the back of the house. Each character had its own style of movement, dancing onstage and greeting the others as they arrive. Taher Baig ran down the aisle of the audience in slow motion, taking off his vest and swinging it playfully around his head. This gesture had a liberated, even sexual, quality to it. The two maids (aside from Dorine), dressed identically (men playing women, wearing padding to create plump, voluptuous figures),

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72 James Thompson, *Performance Affects*, 144-49.
danced playfully together, linking arms and swinging their hips in unison before turning to the audience with a furtive giggle.

An even more electric scene occurred during Kabul productions of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. In the final trial between the two would-be mothers to the child Michael, the actor playing the social mother character Grusche (the only female actor in the production) jumped off the stage, rushed into the audience, embracing women and shouting that she cannot tear her child apart. First-hand accounts describe an affectively overflowing scene of communion between performers and audience in this moment. A reviewer writes:

The rest is madness. The actors dance, embrace and kiss each other, they throw flowers and are drunk with joy. The audience is, too, and it storms the stage. It’s pure theatre bliss, performers and spectators, men and women, are one, and they overrun all separations with their happiness.  

Former Aftaab member Haroon Noori describes this scene similarly:

That was a moment that the audience in Afghanistan had never seen. The fourth wall had never been broken. The play was three hours, but that day it went on for many more hours. Everyone was so intense. Stuck on what we are going to do about it. Women were crying; they couldn’t talk…. When the play was done, the audience couldn’t stop clapping, hugging us. They were hugging each other. They were so happy right now, because of what happened to the child.

How can the particular power of these scenes be understood? These theatrical moments go beyond the indictment of particular injustices of contemporary Afghan society. They are radical in their facilitation and harnessing of affective experiences of shared optimism and longing for more liveable social structures and positive affirmation of corporeal existence. As such, they resonate with Jill Dolan’s concept of the “utopian performative” and with Jacques Rancière’s concept of “aesthetic community.” Dolan describes the utopian performative as a mode that elicits shared emotive experiences among publics, in which audiences are moved to “feel

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73 Klett, “Report from Kabul,” 89.
74 Noori, discussion.
themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public” through a shared social affective inclination “toward the possible, rather than the insurmountable.”

Dolan’s utopian performative “describe[s] small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.” For Dolan, it is crucial that these moments animate feelings of interconnection and intersubjectivity that do not enforce or imply homogeneity, and that do not elide important difference (particularly related to privilege and oppression) or promote a simplistic universality. Both scenes have elements that draw attention to the physical body and integrate the performers with the audience or public—in the *Tartuffe* scene, through the running and dancing through the audience and the performance of physical exuberance, and in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, through Grusche’s entrance into the audience, speaking directly to, and embracing, audience members. The *Tartuffe* scene asserts the importance of physical experience and expression of joy and aliveness, encouraging compassion toward the human body. The *Chalk Circle* scene created a physical connection between the play’s emotional climax and audience members through the actor’s breaking of the fourth wall and not only talking directly to but hugging audience members, causing a wave of physical embrace manifesting an overflow of social longing and optimism. Both scenes harnessed an affective dynamic focused on possibility—in the former, the possibility of the body’s free and joyful movement, and in the latter, the possibility of justice for a loving mother. This emphasis on depicting joyfulness and on eliciting, through performance, a shared affective experience of

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75 Jill Dolan, *The Utopian in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2. It is important to Dolan that this concept is not fixed or prescriptive. The utopian performative can manifest itself in widely varying ways.

76 Ibid., 5.
pleasure and hope is echoed in Sharifi’s thoughts about Aftaab’s potential impact on both Afghan and French society:

Personally, I would like to show to a society, to an Afghanistan one, that another life is possible. That you can just live and enjoy your life. You’re not just living because you have to… I think that that society has lost the joy, the pleasure of living… But this mission can be true also of French society. Because here as well I sometimes feel we are prisoners in a materialist, consumer society. In French we use a lot the expression the “society of consumers” and I don’t like that. We are not just consumers to buy things and make the economic machine work… Sometimes we forget about thinking. We’re not thinking. We’re just consuming things… I think that’s the mission of theatre, to give back the joy of thinking.  

Here Sharifi underscores the importance of pleasure and joy, on the one hand, and critical, free thought, on the other, drawing a connection between the two. Indeed, the eliciting of—and celebration of—both joyfulness and critical thought were, I suggest, at the core of Aftaab’s performance activity in Kabul and the exuberant reception of their work.

Aftaab’s engagement with these European texts and performances of these pieces in Kabul had a particular set of connotations and significances that shifted when the company performed them in Paris. A glance through the publications about Aftaab during the time it was performing its classic plays in France reveals that media sources were as much or more interested in publishing articles about Aftaab’s own story as an Afghan theatre company than reviews of the plays themselves. This trend supports my assessment that, in Europe, Aftaab’s

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77 Mahmood Sharifi (former Administrative Director, Aftaab Theatre), in discussion with the author, March 29, 2014.
performances were consistently viewed through a framework that attributed prime value to perceptions of the actors’ authentic experiences with violence, repression, and suffering.

One review of *Tartuffe* and the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* at the Cartoucherie in 2008 engages more thoroughly with the productions themselves. There is no mention of the breaking of the fourth wall in the *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, nor of an audience response comparable to the one in Kabul. Author Olivier Pansieri is generous but controlled in evaluating the actors’ performance, describing the actors as “not all excellent, but so enthusiastic!” Two theatrical staging choices stand out to this author as the defining characteristics that make the production remarkable. One is that all but one of the female roles are played by men—a reality that the reviewer recognizes as both an “obstacle” and a “choice,” acknowledging that onstage this has particular ramifications of signification. (The designation of the lack of women as a “choice” elides a significant reality that the company would like to have more women, but the negative social pressure on Afghan women who perform onstage is so substantial that they have had difficulty maintaining even one or two women in the company.) Pansieri observes that the device of having men play women in *Tartuffe* “places the actors at a good distance—not too close and not too far away—for painting portraits of the female characters able to achieve broad comic effect as well as an uncanny resemblance.” To Pansieri’s eye, this device—although born of necessity—is, like the similar device in Elizabethan theatre, subversive in its mocking of and drawing attention to the social taboo that drives the prohibition. The second staging choice that the author deems remarkable is the depiction of Tartuffe as Christian rather than Muslim, which


he likens to substitutions in works by playwrights such as Václav Havel or Heiner Müller. Such substitutions enable the plays to implicitly launch critiques that would be unacceptable if explicitly rendered. What this French reviewer finds most noteworthy about this production, then, are the ways in which staging choices necessitated by the politically and socially oppressive circumstances in contemporary Afghanistan highlight or foreground the subversive nature of these particular plays and of theatrical representation itself.

This reading of which particular theatrical conventions make these performances noteworthy to a French audience extends to Pansieri’s general assessment of the Aftaab performances’ power. Near the beginning of the review he writes that “better than the plays, are the people.” It is impossible for the reviewer to respond to these performances without responding to the performers themselves, or at least to his imaginings of the performers’ lived experiences. The author deems *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* to be less successful than *Tartuffe*, due to its “outdated Brechtianism” as evidenced by long choral delivery of “didactic commentary” that “we cut” today. This “we” appears to refer to French (or more broadly to Western) theatre-makers, subtly reifying an East/West dichotomy that positions the Western approach as the more evolved of the two and assumes that the reader also identifies with this normative position. What matters ultimately for the reviewer, what makes the difference in these productions, is that the Aftaab actors are familiar with “fear, injustice, survival” in a way that reinvigorates these plays that for the French public have become “mere literature.” Pansieri deems the productions “letters, clumsy but beautiful, that bring us news of what happens to our values at the other end of the world.”

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80 My translation from the original French. “*Mieux que des spectacles, des gens.*” Ibid.
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This reviewer’s assessment illustrates that, in the context of a French or European theatre scene, Aftaab’s renditions of *Tartuffe* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* demonstrate neither polished virtuosic skill nor stylistically innovative staging that would render them remarkable. After all, in 2008 most Aftaab actors had only been acting for three years. These productions represented a novelty on the Parisian stage. The fetishization of suffering is visible here in the conviction that an actor’s autobiographical familiarity with injustice and suffering will be transmitted through the performance and that this perceived authentic experience of the performers gives the work value. Does the reviewer claim to sense the effects of this autobiographical experience through the sensory acts of the actor’s performance, or is it rather the basic knowledge of the performer’s biographical information that creates this heightened sense of authentic relevance and urgency? It is clear that a production of *Tartuffe* set in a Muslim country performed by Théâtre du Soleil has a different source of value and a different power than a production of Tartuffe performed by actors from Afghanistan. Part of the different signification of these two events is that the performance on the part of the Afghan actors is more immediately recognizable as a daring act of resistance. Aftaab’s rendition of *Tartuffe*, even when performed in France, is recognized as a political act and is lauded as such.

While Aftaab’s most common genre of performance throughout its lifespan as a company has consisted of classic European plays, in 2009 the troupe started working on its first collective-creation piece with Théâtre du Soleil. Aftaab’s work since that time has continued to include classics, but this turn to collective creation nonetheless marks a significant shift in the company’s work. The two full-length collective-creation pieces have been Aftaab’s most frequently performed works and have functioned as vehicles for Aftaab to tour to a broader set of venues around Western Europe. I will treat these two pieces more fully in the following chapter, but here
I briefly introduce this component of Aftaab’s work. I wish to suggest that the turn to collective creation was significant in that it afforded the Aftaab actors a higher degree of autonomy and authorship than they had experienced previously and earned the company entrance into a circuit of international political theatre venues and festivals through its more direct harnessing of the demand for authenticity in the European theatre market.

The collective-creation work marks a movement toward more direct input on the part of the Aftaab actors into their productions. Both of Aftaab’s collective creation pieces were developed over periods of seven or more months of daily improvisations, based largely—although sometimes very loosely—on the Aftaab actors’ personal experiences growing up in Afghanistan. The two plays do not necessarily tell any of their stories directly, but rather draw liberally, and with creative license, on experiences and stories with which they are familiar. Aftaab developed both projects while in Paris, under the direction of Hélène Cinque, with whom Aftaab had first worked on Tartuffe. The move to collective creation afforded the Aftaab actors a kind of authorial role, as in these pieces they directly contributed content, characters, and text.

This shift to a more generative role on the part of the Aftaab actors also enabled further touring of the company in Europe, particularly addressing some of the potential limitations of Aftaab’s performances of European classics raised by the reviewer. As illustrated by Pansieri’s Les Trois Coups review, there was limited potential interest in France in well-known, oft-produced canonical plays performed with little in the way of update or adaptation, by a company whose craftsmanship or technique is not vetted by recognizable institutions. A production of a canonical play may be legitimized through a company or artistic team’s tremendous cultural capital, through a highly innovative staging or an adaptation that reveals new angles in a familiar text, or perhaps through novelty or political position. In Aftaab’s case, productions like Tartuffe
and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* offered, more than anything, the novelty of a performance from a country most associated in Western media (since 9/11) with violence and war, and the heightened political relevance of being performed by people who are perceived as speaking from personal experience of injustice. With the collective-creation pieces, Aftaab began performing more substantially in France at and beyond Théâtre du Soleil’s Cartoucherie, as well as outside of France in Western Europe, and received more substantial critical coverage in the media. I argue that these productions more clearly displayed and foregrounded modern Afghan identity—thereby making a clear case for their own uniqueness and originality within the diverse field of European theatre offerings. Moreover, the collective-creation process and the nature of the productions that it yielded communicated to audiences a more direct connection between the performances and the actors’ personal experiences, thereby further feeding the demand for authenticity in the theatre market.

**Aftaab as Transnational and Diasporic Artists**

Aftaab’s shift from being situated and oriented toward Afghan audiences to living in France and performing work primarily for European audiences has implications not only for the signification and reception of their performances, but also for the company members’ subjectivities as transnational artists. Although Aftaab’s formal primary and long-term goal is to contribute to the building of professional theatre in Afghanistan, since 2011 the Aftaab actors have been based in France and have performed primarily for audiences in Europe. The tension between this long-term goal and their present condition draws attention to the friction that characterizes their ongoing transnational position, including their relationship with Théâtre du Soleil. To understand the company’s current position as transnational Afghan artists based in Europe, in this final chapter section I examine the Aftaab actors’ position as flexible workers in the context of
neoliberalism, to consider how this dynamic and others complicate the company’s negotiation of autonomy in its work. Finally, I reflect on the company’s current diasporic position, including a consideration of the ways in which their partnership with Théâtre du Soleil, while enabling a great deal of opportunity and artistic creation, has also foreclosed or disabled some possible directions of growth for the company.

In key ways, Aftaab’s movement back and forth between Afghanistan and France, and their eventual move to France, is demonstrative of their position as artists working in today’s neoliberal global economy, particularly as they originate from a place of global disadvantage. As Lara Nielsen has emphasized, twenty-first-century artists are prime examples of neoliberal workers, living under circumstances of itineracy, through the need to travel to where work is—sometimes internationally—as well as ongoing economic precarity, and circumstances that demand flexibility.\(^1\) Performing artists in particular engage in labor of communication and affect, which many scholars view as the hegemonic type of labor in the post-Fordist economy, characterized by affective or virtuosic labor.\(^2\)

Nielsen views theatre in the twenty-first century as both reflecting and responding to the neoliberal context. Aftaab has certainly done both. Aftaab’s move to Paris has largely been catalyzed by the workings of the global theatre market. As they have developed marketable skills of theatrical performance—for which there is no substantive market in their country of origin—they have relocated to a part of the world where such a market exists. This is a phenomenon that happens at multiple levels of global economy, and populations who embody these trends of flexible and mobile—even cosmopolitan—labor do so from a wide spectrum of positions of privilege and disadvantage. For example, migrant workers or other itinerant low-wage workers

\(^1\) Nielsen, “Heterotopic Transformations,” 5.  
\(^2\) See, for example, Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).
do not benefit from this system in the way that tech industry specialists may. As theatre scholar Susan Bennett has argued, theatre is essentially anachronistic to a transnational market economy because of its requirement of corporeal bodies gathering in one place, day after day, to witness performances of skilled labor, and therefore can only survive through versions of tourism, in which international travel enables artists to attract new audiences, particularly through the novelty of the “international” performance.⁸³ Aftaab has entered this neoliberal performance market by relocating to be able to participate in a robust economy of live performance in a country where they can apply for and receive government grant money, where a substantial theatre-going public exists, and where that public is able to pay for theatre tickets. There is an imperative, in order for this to work, for Aftaab to make theatre that is appealing to a European audience.

In some ways, then, the Aftaab company members have been influenced by—and in key ways benefitted from—the phenomenon that Aihwa Ong calls “neoliberalism as exception.” Ong employs this phrase to describe the ways in which neoliberal techniques are introduced selectively into an environment that otherwise does not operate according to typical neoliberal values. Through these techniques, “mobile individuals who possess human capital or expertise are highly valued and can exercise citizenship-like claims in diverse locations,” while “citizens who are judged not to have such tradable competence or potential become devalued and thus vulnerable to exclusionary practices.”⁸⁴ In Aftaab’s case, the company members have experienced unique privileges such as training, publicity, financial support, and ultimately access to mobility through artist visas, because of the particular interest of a foreign not-for-profit organization that distinguished them from their peers in Kabul based on both interest and

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⁸⁴ Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 7.
perceived talent. This opportunity has altered the life trajectories of many of the company members, ushering them into a circuit of European theatre education, international travel, and participation in a global theatre economy.

Aftaab continued well into its move to Paris to carefully curate its story through a public-facing marketing presence that balanced its situatedness in Europe with a formal mission declaring its intention to return to Afghanistan. As of late 2015 the Aftaab Theatre official website retained the headline “Aftaab Theatre: Rebuilding theatre in Afghanistan,” when the company had already been living and working in Paris for four years.\(^{85}\) This was a constitutive part of the company’s official narrative, promoted elsewhere such as during the talk-back that I attended in Lille in 2014, following a performance of *La Ronde de nuit*. In an interview afterward Sharifi explained to me that it was important for the company to convey a unified message on this front, implying also that some members were more consistent than others in complying.\(^{86}\) The implication is that the intention to return to Afghanistan in order to play a key role in revitalizing theatre activity there is critical to Aftaab’s appeal in the eyes of current and potential financial supporters. Aftaab’s official publicity materials refer to the company’s long-term project of returning to Afghanistan in connection with the French Institute of Afghanistan and the French Embassy in Kabul to organize workshops in theatre practice and to perform their repertoire of collective creation and classical plays.\(^{87}\) This intention was also reflected in the company’s official title as a nonprofit organization in France: “Theatre Aftaab en voyage,” or “On the Road.” The significance of this name is highlighted in Aftaab’s biography published

\(^{85}\) “Aftaab Theatre,” Aftaab Theatre Official Website. This website was taken down sometime in 2016. Aftaab’s last performance as a company to date was the remounting of *La Ronde de nuit* in November of 2015 at the Cartoucherie.

\(^{86}\) Sharifi, discussion, 2014.

online as a participant in the Limoges Festival of International Francophone Theatres, which stated that Aftaab is “‘on the road’ and not in exile, because the company has the objective of returning to Afghanistan to practice and transmit theatre.” At the same time, the company’s official website was clearly designed to face a European public rather than an Afghan one, as its text is in French and English, with almost no Dari.

Thus, while Aftaab’s existence is a manifestation of this neoliberal logic through which some individuals are unevenly fast-tracked into participation in and benefit from the global economy, this privileged access and mobility also come with a substantial burden of responsibility to uplift their troubled home country. Aftaab’s ability to live and make theatre in Europe depends on their consistent promotion of their shared mission to return to Afghanistan as well as their continued relationship—always a subordinate one—to Théâtre du Soleil. This position is necessarily a precarious one, with substantial implications for their ability to achieve any kind of autonomy. Nielsen asserts that neoliberalism’s new formations between labor and capital particularly complicate the possibilities for autonomy of cultural production in theatre and performance. Indeed, that struggle over autonomy is not surprising given the asymmetrical relationship between the two groups comprising the transnational collaboration that yields Aftaab’s work.

Aftaab’s limited autonomy is visible in the company’s lack of a unique style, confirming their position as an acting troupe available to embody the styles imposed on them by external directors. The absence of a clear style underscores the company’s lack of an artistic leader and is a reminder that the company was formed through an outside hand and the members did not

89 Nielsen, “Heterotopic Transformations,” 2.
choose to work with each other out of shared vision or even political stance. Moreover, the formal mission that has driven the company throughout their existence, to return to Afghanistan eventually to be leaders in a new era of professional Afghan theatre, demands a versatility rather than stylistic identity. Thus, many of the company members view it as their responsibility to learn many styles and to become versatile in many modes of theatrical performance. Caroline Panzera, a French actor connected to Théâtre du Soleil who has worked closely with Aftaab since their first visit to Paris in 2008, suggests that rather than a style, Aftaab has a content area: “I would say their style is that they are talking about their country, how they see it, how they live it, how they have grown in it. Which is a style, maybe.” Panzera suggests that having a particular stylistic identity is a luxury made possible by privilege and therefore is not a goal currently on Aftaab’s agenda. Rather, she views Aftaab’s work as utilizing a dramaturgy constructed on the idea that the company members are personal ambassadors of a message about contemporary Afghanistan. This ambassadorship stems from a premise that their Afghan identity—their national identity—and their personal experience of growing up in Afghanistan automatically render their ability to transmit a message about the real Afghanistan more truthfully and authentically than others can.

The question of Aftaab’s lack of a unique defining aesthetic points to the more fundamental problem of the company’s artistic, material, and administrative dependence on Théâtre du Soleil. As a program powered by Soleil, Aftaab’s tenure in France was inherently finite, based on the unsustainable model of ongoing integral support. The factors that contributed to this unsustainable model are not all within the scope of Théâtre du Soleil’s agency. The

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90 Caroline Panzera (actor and administrative coordinator for Aftaab Theatre, Théâtre du Soleil), in discussion with the author, March 27, 2014.
91 Ibid.
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untenability of professional theatre in Afghanistan today, combined with the profound difficulty of supporting oneself in Paris as an immigrant from a stigmatized country with an artist visa, are both realities that ensure the Aftaab actors will face tremendous challenges in continuing their artistic work in Afghanistan or France, together or individually. But I argue that Théâtre du Soleil’s choices—to emphasize the group’s training as actors rather than as generative artists and to prioritize achieving tour-worthy productions over learning experiences that would encourage the development of autonomous, self-driven work—have contributed to the precarious and unsustainable position that the Aftaab artists faced as their first four years in Paris drew to a close.

Aftaab members and other artists who have worked with them characterize the problem of the company’s dependence on Théâtre du Soleil as complex. When I spoke with him in Lille in 2014, Sharifi described the directorial role that Théâtre du Soleil has taken, particularly in the early years of Aftaab’s existence, as necessary:

I think we didn’t have lots of independence to take the direction we wanted. Because we were very young, our company is still very young. We’re maybe like an adolescent who thinks he knows the direction, thinks he’s going in a good direction, but actually needed someone to say no, this direction isn’t the good one, you’d better take this other direction. We really needed the guidance of Ariane. We are following the style of Théâtre du Soleil.92

Since Aftaab’s official move to Paris in 2010, there have been efforts to prepare Aftaab to work independently. By registering as a separate non-profit organization, Aftaab became eligible to apply for funding for its work. Sharifi suggests that the initiative to send Aftaab members to the French theatre school ENSATT was a part of this push toward independence. Théâtre du Soleil managed to arrange for Aftaab members to receive a one-year scholarship to ENSATT, where they studied acting, technical studies, and theatre administration. In Sharifi’s estimation, this year

92 Sharifi, discussion, 2014.
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of study was less than optimally productive, largely because of the company members’ insufficient facility with French language at the time. This language barrier is key to the challenges that Aftaab faces in France, both artistically and administratively. Sharifi explains that Aftaab members’ ongoing lack of sufficiently nuanced French language skills has significantly limited the company’s ability to market itself to theatres and carry out administrative and communications tasks at a professional level.93

The challenges of the material reality that Aftaab faces in France are substantial and must be considered alongside the artistic and ideological challenges. After finishing their studies at ENSATT, the company members moved into the Cartoucherie, staying, some with spouses and children, in trailers on Théâtre du Soleil’s property. Caroline Panzera, a French actor affiliated with Soleil, was in charge of obtaining the actors’ visas and dealing with all paperwork to create the non-profit organization Théâtre Aftaab en voyage and apply for funding. Panzera describes Aftaab’s challenges in establishing independent lives in Paris, and tensions that emerged between them and Mnouchkine:

Ariane is too shy to say “go out!” Now they’ve been working for two years, and they have to go. So half of them did, took apartments. It’s hard for the families. Four of them are married, three have children. In Paris it’s not easy if you are Afghan and an actor… it’s not very easy. You have to either lie or find friends. “I’m an artist and I’m from Afghanistan!” For their families they have to find bigger apartments, and it’s not easy.94

Panzera’s comments suggest the compounded challenges of Aftaab’s position in France: as professional artists navigating the precarity of the neoliberal economy, and as transplants from an origin country whose global position has become inextricably colored by associations—however misguided—with Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Even travelling within France with artist

93 Ibid.
94 Panzera, discussion.
visas, Aftaab members have met roadblocks. For example, Panzera describes arriving with the company at an airport in southern France and having airport personnel, upon seeing twenty-two Afghan passports, call airport police.\textsuperscript{95} Aftaab member Taher Baig stresses the primacy of meeting material needs—both for the company in regards to their work, and for Afghan society in general—before addressing more abstract or idealistic goals. He relates this to the potential for theatre activity to grow in contemporary Afghanistan: “The most important thing for us in Afghanistan is to get something to eat, to have a roof over your head. If these things are ok, they can go to the other. Naturally, humans like the arts. But if there isn’t any occasion…”\textsuperscript{96} Baig speaks similarly of Aftaab’s choices of subject matter and style, explaining that although he personally would like to see Aftaab make use of Afghanistan’s rich body of traditional music and poetry, these goals remain secondary to the more immediate needs: “Always the personal life is first, the \textit{vie quotidienne}, and after, if there is an occasion, after one thinks about....There is always an obstacle. \textit{La vie quotidienne, ici en France}, we, the actors, always have a problem of lodging. So we need those things first, before we can think about the idealistic things. All the idealistic things need some support.”\textsuperscript{97} Baig uses this phrase \textit{la vie quotidienne} to refer both to Aftaab’s intention of depicting everyday Afghan life onstage and the daily material needs of the company members in order to sustain their lives in Paris. This responsibility that the company feels to represent, above all else, the normalcy and relatability of everyday Afghan life can be seen, then, as connected to their precarious position in relation to everyday material needs.

Several more nuanced factors have contributed to Aftaab’s continued dependence on Théâtre du Soleil—not only financially and administratively, but artistically as well. The

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Baig, discussion.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
company has internal divisions and in some ways was never the cohesive unit that some publicity materials imply. To begin with, they were brought together by Mnouchkine and did not particularly seek each other out for collaboration. Members come from several of Afghanistan’s ethnic groups, including groups that have historically conflicted and been locked in relationships of relative privilege and oppression within Afghan society. They are from different parts of Afghanistan, which can be very significant in a country with a long history of cultural division between urban and rural regions. One actor confided in me that his family couldn’t believe that he was able to work closely with his colleague of a different ethnicity. During the collective-creation development process of *Ce jour-là*, which traces Afghanistan’s recent history, conflict arose between company members who disagreed on certain historical points.\(^9\) In Panzera’s assessment, Aftaab’s limited company cohesion is partially personal:

> They don’t have an artistic leader, and they are young women and men coming from a country where nothing of their dreams were possible. It’s not only about Theatre Aftaab from Théâtre du Soleil, it’s also personal. They were put together, but I think we are at the point where they need their own individual independence from the group to realize again in one, two, three years, to realize how great the gift of this part of life gave them is. Being a young artist in France, this is something very rare.\(^9\)

The company’s continuing failure to or lack of interest in making work independently—or at least under internal direction—stems from a combination of lack of deeper unified vision, lack of internal artistic leadership, and the many practical reasons why individual members choose to continue working with the company. Baig explains, “Our group’s members, they’re trying to make a life here… they don’t want to go back to Afghanistan. It’s not very easy to go back.”\(^1\)

The reality is that Aftaab’s theatre work cannot consistently be the actors’ top priority. Moreover, the goal of presenting a human face of the Afghan people often precedes all other

\(^9\) Sharifi, discussion, 2014.  
\(^9\) Panzera, discussion.  
\(^1\) Baig, discussion.
potential artistic and representational missions for the company, perhaps at the expense of the artistic risk-taking that would be involved in a self-directed production.

But there are also ways in which the particular nature of Théâtre du Soleil’s support and assistance limited Aftaab’s range of flight even as it gave the company wings. Sharifi describes the back-and-forth of this ambivalent relationship between Mnouchkine and Aftaab: “Ariane is, I think, deceived with us…. She thinks that we’ll start working independently. But it’s not true one hundred percent. She wanted us to be independent but she didn’t really let us be independent, but she’s angry that we didn’t try enough to be independent, but she decided what we would work on, so we couldn’t be independent.”¹⁰¹ The company’s most often-cited example of an attempt to self-direct was with their production of The Miser, which they agreed to rehearse and develop on their own, under member Taher Baig’s direction, in Kabul in 2010. Eventually deciding they were unable to develop the piece on their own, they asked for assistance and Hélène Cinque returned to Kabul to direct them.

Some company members harbor criticisms of Cinque’s work with the company. Sharifi explains that Cinque’s strength as a director is in working with the body to create physical expressions and visual images. He wished, however, for direction with a clearer philosophical or ideological vision. “There has to be an ideology of what’s going on on stage,” he asserts. “It has to mean something. Its not just actors onstage, doing things with their bodies.” Sharifi asserts that it would have been productive if Théâtre du Soleil had developed a deeper knowledge of Afghanistan’s rich cultural heritage, insisting that “a country can never be only negative. There are always positive and negative things in every country.”¹⁰² Sharifi’s comments suggest larger problems regarding representational ethics, particularly related to a dramaturgy of absence and

¹⁰¹ Sharifi, discussion, 2014.
¹⁰² Ibid.
victimhood—a dramaturgy in which a place or culture that implicitly holds the position of “Other” in the context of the performance is depicted as empty, as defined by tragedy or need.

Although not functioning autonomously as a theatre company, the Aftaab actors are nonetheless actively engaged in negotiating their positions as transnational, diasporic artists. The prospect of returning to Afghanistan to make theatre there and, alternately, of forging a theatrical career in France, either as a company or as individual artists, both hold considerable challenges. The goal of returning to Afghanistan as a company to lead a theatrical revitalization there has become increasingly untenable since the mid-2000s. Making a living as a theatre company in Afghanistan is not possible in the current economy. In Kabul, although Aftaab’s performances have been profoundly popular and received with great success, the company has never charged for tickets. Sharifi explains that the protocols of making theatre in Afghanistan are largely about developing relationships or knowing the right people. All theatre productions must be accepted by the Ministry of Culture, and developing a friendship with military personnel who supports one’s project can be integral to earning the Ministry of Culture’s support. There are two main auditoriums in Kabul, at the French Cultural Center and the reopened National Theatre, in addition to the makeshift open air stage at the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society. Aftaab has performed at all of these venues. Nevertheless, making professional theatre in Kabul presents major practical challenges. Sharifi explains that the actors need to have other full-time jobs in order to support themselves and that family responsibilities and pressures create an additional barrier to attending regular rehearsals. Moreover, as Aftaab has thus far not been successful at self-directing its work, there is the challenge of bringing in a director.

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103 Noori, discussion.
104 Sharifi, discussion, 2014.
Finally, and most substantially, the climate in Kabul has become increasingly hostile, since the mid-2000s, towards the arts. The Afghan National Theatre has a resident company and is currently the only theatre company with state funding in the country. While the company produces two plays a year, one for adults and one for children, it performs primarily outside of Afghanistan, typically in Tajikistan and India, and plays only occasionally for one night at a time to packed houses in Kabul. Actors, particularly the few women in the company, receive threats from the Taliban that make it difficult and dangerous to perform regularly. Occasional theatre performances are held in Kabul at other venues, particularly the Kabul University Faculty of Arts. For example, Noori Shah, a former member of Aftaab who studied theatre at California East Bay University and recently returned to teach at Kabul University, directed a student production of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* in 2014, but the performance, held in a small auditorium at the university, was open only to students, artists, and foreign diplomats. A suicide bomb attack in December 2014 in the theatre of the French Cultural Center, where Aftaab has performed frequently, is a sobering affirmation of the very real ongoing danger associated with performing live theatre in Afghanistan. A new student theatre festival run by the Faculty of Fine Arts at Kabul University, active since 2014, represents hope for the medium’s future in the fragile country.

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107 Haidari, “Afghan Notebook: Ibsen in Kabul.”
Aftaab company members are suspended between aspiring to theatre careers in France that many feel are not fully open to them and feeling a strong responsibility to return to Afghanistan and contribute to a growing arts community there. There is tension between the company’s official mission and some company members’ experiences and emerging individual desires. Rawendah explains that he fell in love with theatre, and particularly with performing “the classics”—specifically naming French, English, and Russian plays. However, he expects that he will not be granted entry into networks of classical French theatre performance in France. In his experience, the French culture of pride in the national language and literary legacy does not leave room for appropriation from a non-native speaking position. He explains:

For me as an artist, as an actor, my wish is to continue. It could be better in Afghanistan, because I’m an Afghan artist. I could find my place in the Afghanistan theatre. But I will never find my place in the theatre here, because there are lots of actors and actresses. But for the moment, I cannot work in Afghanistan, so I will try to find my place here, but it will be very difficult. Because I am a foreigner, a foreigner will be a foreigner wherever he goes. I will not play classical plays, maybe after 30 years, because of the language.¹¹⁰

Rawendah’s experience is characterized by liminality and displacement. It is the classical European theatre that inspires him, but he feels he could only perform to his fullest ability—both in terms of his performance itself and social acceptance of his performance—in Afghanistan.

There are also ways in which Aftaab’s focus on developing professional-level work, and their time spent training and working in France, has made it increasingly difficult for the company to work in Afghanistan or to work independently in France. Because Aftaab’s style, level of professionalism, and degree of production value have always been a product of its close relationship to Théâtre du Soleil, working independently, without the leadership of advanced-career directors like Hélène Cinque and Théâtre du Soleil set designers, would risk achieving a degree of professionalism inconsistent with what European audiences have witnessed of their

¹¹⁰ Rawendah, discussion, 2014.
work in the past. While earlier works employed simple, easily transportable sets with few technical needs, such as Tartuffe’s set of two rugs, their most recent piece, La Ronde de nuit, employs an elaborate, naturalistic set depicting the theatre’s interior, with transparent glass walls, a kitchen, storage space, a separate bedroom, as well as technology—namely, real-time Skype conferences projected onto a screen and devices such as artificial snow. This set is most fitting for exclusive, multiple-show runs in mid-to-large-sized regional theatres. Although it has toured to theatre festivals in France and regional theatres in other parts of Europe, the extensive set would present serious challenges in some quick turnover festival contexts. That Aftaab productions always include the entire fourteen-person cast renders travel a major expense. Moreover, it is unconfirmed whether or not Aftaab’s work would be as enticing to regional French theatres and theatregoers without the recognizable name of Ariane Mnouchkine prominently displayed in the credits.\(^\text{111}\)

Perhaps even more significantly, Aftaab’s work has evolved in directions that make it less conducive to performing in Afghanistan. La Ronde de nuit most notably contains elements that would not be acceptable on an Afghan stage, specifically in the form of direct sexual content and critique of sexual repression. Scenes such as the refugee Walid’s being tortured by his erotic dream, or the prostitute Céleste prancing around in her lingerie, would not be publicly presentable in Kabul.

The transformation of Aftaab’s work is also intertwined with personal and ideological transformations initiated through the transition from living in Afghanistan to living in Europe. Sharifi views one of the most significant implications of Aftaab’s move to Paris as being the

\(^{111}\) Rawendah shared with me that when a company member attempted to independently negotiate plans for a new project, they were told that it would be best if a Théâtre du Soleil representative contacted them directly. Rawendah, discussion, 2015.
changes the new environment has brought about in the company members. He notes in particular that the group, mostly composed of men, has changed its attitude toward women, particularly women working with them in theatre. Where there was once some underlying suspicion and judgment, there is now acceptance and respect. More generally, he explains the internal transformations initiated by the move to Paris:

> When you’re in that closed society you don’t have access to liberal information. Your mind is awash with information from the dominant society. You think what that society says is good. But when you get out, you see other possibilities. Then, if you don’t believe in some kind of religion, or whatever it is, you can have a life. You can have your own opinion and not force it on others. Because in those kinds of societies the society obliges you to believe in certain things. You don’t have a choice. When you leave and change your mind, it becomes a little bit impossible to go back because you can’t be free. It’s a little cliché to say “free” because it means so many things, but for us it’s not cliché.\(^\text{112}\)

Other company members affirm the complexity of the experience of living in Europe and its impact on their ability and desire to return to Afghanistan. Baig speaks of this dynamic as an irresolvable tension between wanting to return to Afghanistan—and feeling responsibility to bring Aftaab’s experience and knowledge back to Afghanistan—and the real difficulty of returning to life in Afghanistan after experiencing life in Europe.\(^\text{113}\) Moreover, Aftaab company members have come to see themselves as professional actors—a profession that is all but impossible to pursue in Afghanistan. This is particularly the case for the women in the company. Company member Wajma Bahar explains that Afghan society continues to look down on women who perform, viewing them as unclean or even akin to prostitutes. She does see evidence that these attitudes are beginning to change and that there is a generally growing recognition that

\(^{112}\) Sharifi, discussion, 2014.  
\(^{113}\) Baig, discussion.
artists have valuable skills to contribute to society. Bahar considers it a responsibility of female actors in Afghanistan to dare to perform in order to encourage others to follow suit.\textsuperscript{114}

In some ways, Aftaab members have come to serve as a corps of non-artistic labor for Théâtre du Soleil. Some Aftaab members work for Théâtre du Soleil as technical hands, building sets, or working the bar during Théâtre du Soleil performances. Many company members worked on the 2015 Théâtre du Soleil production of Macbeth as stage hands, maneuvering the elaborate set around the stage—a responsibility that is arguably very much a part of the production and involving nuanced spatial and temporal knowledge of the piece. Aftaab actor Shafiq Kohi described to me his satisfaction with working the set changes for Théâtre du Soleil’s Macbeth. For Kohi, Théâtre du Soleil is an artistic giant whose stage he is honored to grace—this year as a stagehand, perhaps next year as a performer.\textsuperscript{115} Some Aftaab members aspire to perform more substantially in the next Théâtre du Soleil production, and it is possible that a part or all of the company will be subsumed into Mnouchkine’s larger company as a long-term solution. Several Aftaab members declined speaking with me. As the company members’ artist visas, enabling their residence in France, depend largely on their ongoing artistic work, maintaining the official support of Théâtre du Soleil and association with Mnouchkine’s name, well known and respected in France, is understandably a high priority for these individuals. This is particularly the case as several have explained to me that on its own, an Afghan passport is worth little in Europe.

\textsuperscript{114} Bahar’s story is unique among the Aftaab actors in that her mother was an actor in Afghanistan the period before the Taliban. Bahar came to Paris with another Afghan theatre group working with a French director in 2009 and came into contact with Aftaab. She perceived Aftaab as being the most professional of the Afghan companies, and spoke with Taher Baig about joining the group. Her first production with Aftaab was Ce jour-là. Wajma Bahar (actor, Aftaab Theatre), in discussion with the author, French, March 27, 2014.

\textsuperscript{115} Kohi, discussion.
While the challenges and conundrums the Aftaab artists face are substantial, it is critical to emphasize the ways in which they, as individuals, are exercising agency to move their own careers forward, in many cases independently of Théâtre du Soleil. When I re-met with some of the company in Paris in the summer of 2015, Aftaab had no plans to develop a new piece, the reasons for which were a source of disagreement among some company members. While Aftaab does not have a new project, many of the artists are pursuing smaller projects that have brought them back to Afghanistan on a project-based basis, and some of the company’s underlying goals are being pursued by individuals in lieu of full group endeavors. At Mnouchkine’s suggestion, the company performed *La Ronde de nuit* for a third run at the Cartoucherie in November 2015. This production appears to have functioned at least partially as a means of producing evidence of Aftaab’s ongoing theatrical activity, necessary for renewing the group’s artist visas.

While there are no current plans for a new Aftaab production, Aftaab members are working on a variety of performing arts projects today. The majority of them involve film. In 2013 Wajma Bahar and Mustafa Habibi, one of Aftaab’s identical twin brothers, starred in *Wajma: An Afghan Love Story*, in which they both play characters named after themselves. The film, whose director Barmak Akram is Afghan-born and Paris-based, won the World Cinema Dramatic Screenwriting prize at the Sundance Film Festival. The film *Kabuliwood*, by French director Louis Meunier, also featured several Aftaab actors. *Kabuliwood* is particularly interesting in that it illustrates a real-life aspiration manifested symbolically in art as a substitution for what security and economic realities in Afghanistan today make impossible. The director wanted to make a film with the whole Aftaab company about a group of young artists converting an old out-of-use cinema building into a cultural center in Kabul.

116 Louis Meunier knew Aftaab in its early days in Kabul when the company was trying to create a permanent performance venue for themselves. Rawendah, discussion, 2015.
limitations led the director to use only three Aftaab actors—Rawendah, Farid Joya, and Ghulam Reza Rajabi—along with a few other actors based in Kabul to make the film.\textsuperscript{117} While filming in Kabul, the actors attempted to convince the real owner of the old cinema to make the fictional transformation a reality. Although they weren’t successful, this endeavor yielded yet another film project—a documentary titled \textit{Kabul Cinema} about the creation of the film \textit{Kabuliwood} and the behind-the-scenes attempt to actually establish the cultural center. In the summer of 2015, Kohi and Sayed Ahmad Hashimi were acted in a short film directed by a young French-Afghan director about young boys who are sold into sexual slavery to wealthy rural Afghan men. Hashimi also designed and made the film’s costumes. The director sought out the Aftaab actors based on their reputation as an Afghan theatre company in Paris, and filming is taking place in Tunisia, where security is less of a problem than in Afghanistan. Many Aftaab actors have been acting in other film projects in France. Rawendah participated in the development of a new street theatre piece about immigration in France under the direction of Panzera, whose new theatre company La Barac Liberté is affiliated with Théâtre du Soleil. The piece, \textit{Bouc de là!}, was performed alongside \textit{La Ronde de nuit} at the Cartoucherie in November 2015. A few Aftaab members have embarked on independent projects. In the summer of 2015 Baig was in Afghanistan working on a film project of his own, and Aref Bahunar was in Kabul running theatre programs with schoolchildren—an endeavor that is part of the official long-term Aftaab mission. In some ways, these individual projects represent Aftaab fulfilling various aspects of its mission through smaller scale, independent projects. An individual artist working independently in Afghanistan poses far less of a security threat than does a group of fourteen artists possessing a recognizable company name, requiring a consistent working space where collaborators or

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
workshop participants can meet them regularly.Outside of theatre and film work, Mustapha and Mujtaba Habibi have continued their music work, forming a band called Aksan Dari along with French musician Camille Hablar. Aksan Dari, which has performed at venues in France and Italy, plays “a new form of music mixed from the Orient and the Occident.”

Thus, we can see that the lack of a clear path for Aftaab as a company does not signify the failure of these individuals to forge paths for themselves as artists. Indeed, the long-term effect of the Aftaab project on performance culture in Afghanistan is still unpredictable. Moreover, to impose on these artists the mission of establishing free expression in Afghanistan through theatre is to hold them, problematically, to a set of expectations based on their subjectivity as artists originating in a region of notorious conflict and repression. To do so is to impose on them a political imperative like the one Mnouchkine imposed during her original workshop in Kabul.

Conclusion
Aftaab Theatre was started as a project of international humanitarian work through theatre training during a brief period when an improving security situation in war-ravaged Afghanistan made a renaissance of public cultural and artistic expression seem possible. Under Mnouchkine’s leadership, Théâtre du Soleil brought to its work with the Aftaab actors strong ideas about what theatre should be, as well as an unchecked assumption that bringing theatre to Afghanistan would mean, primarily, training actors. Aftaab’s first several years of performance work was directed primarily at an Afghan audience, and they participated in a burgeoning theatre

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118 Rawendah, discussion, 2015.
community engaged in breaking longstanding taboos and claiming public space for the negotiation of a contemporary, post-Taliban Afghan nationalism. This internal focus, however, was mediated by the values, aesthetics, and organizational management of the famous French company. A convergence of several factors, including Aftaab’s emerging viability delivering professional performances in European venues, the life-changing opportunity that artist visas in France represented for this group of young people who grew up in ongoing war, and an increasingly insecure political climate in Afghanistan making it close to impossible to regularly make and present theatre work, led to Aftaab’s move to Paris and the increasing orientation of their performance work toward a European audience. Through the company’s trajectory we see how geopolitics, transnational humanitarian work, and a global cultural economy with an appetite for the novelty of global performance converge to deeply impact the trajectory of these individual lives, creating great opportunity while also introducing new limitations and struggles over autonomy.

In the next chapter I take a more focused look at the two collectively created pieces that Aftaab developed under Hélène Cinque’s direction. I reflect on these performances as artifacts of the productive but asymmetrical and sometimes troubling transnational development program that produced them, considering the signification of these performances on European stages as well as the possibility of their performance in Afghanistan.
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Chapter Two: Aftaab’s Collectively Created Works
As Artifacts of Transnational Development

Since 2009, Aftaab has developed and performed two collective creation pieces. These projects mark a significant departure from the company’s earlier works, which were almost all stagings or light adaptations of classical European plays transposed to an Afghan context. The collective creation pieces have brought Aftaab broader exposure to audiences not only in France but in Italy and Spain as well, achieving participation in international political theatre festivals and playing for month-long runs on several occasions at Théâtre du Soleil’s performance space on the outskirts of Paris. They mark a greater level of direct input and artistic autonomy on the part of the Aftaab actors in that they were both developed through extensive processes of improvisation rather than pre-scripted texts. Moreover, they speak more directly and explicitly to experiences in contemporary Afghanistan and Afghan immigrant experiences than do any of Aftaab’s previous works. In this chapter, I examine these pieces as the pinnacle of artistic output of Théâtre du Soleil’s transnational development work with Aftaab, in which the Afghan performers had the greatest claim to artistic authorship and with which they reached the largest audiences, received the greatest press attention, and yielded, in the form of original published play scripts, the longest-lasting products.

These works, Ce jour-là and La Ronde de nuit, stand out as strong examples among very few theatrical representations of contemporary Afghanistan and Afghan people—created and performed by Afghans—found on professional stages in Europe today.\(^1\) They are ambitious

\(^1\) Aftaab member Omid Rawendah explains that while there are quite a few Iranian artists working across many mediums in Paris today, and while there is a sizeable number of Afghan film makers, he does not know any Afghan actors or theatre makers in Paris other than those who make up Aftaab. He was aware of one Afghan theatre company working in London. Rawendah, discussion, 2015. Much professional theatre work about Afghanistan in Europe and North
plays of broad scope, taking on the substantial responsibilities of representing large portions of history and experiences of diverse populations. The desire to depict broad swaths of Afghan society is apparent in the structures of both pieces, which enable panoramic views of contemporary Afghan society and Afghan diasporic experience in France. *Ce jour-là* employs an episodic structure organized around depiction of life in Afghanistan from the mid-nineties onward, instead of focusing on a particular story or smaller set of intertwining stories. *La Ronde de nuit* employs a tighter focus, using one night and a few central characters as a frame for exploring a set of issues, but also introduces a flashback technique to give voice to a broad set of Afghan experiences among a large group of refugees. These structural elements point to an awareness of the lack of representation of Afghan people on the French stage and suggest a sense

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of responsibility to generate representation of a whole nation—even as the problematic nature of this impossible task is readily apparent.

In their direct depiction of contemporary Afghan experiences and their orientation to a European audience, the collectively created pieces embody dynamics that are distinct from those of much of Aftaab’s earlier work. The direct representation of Afghans and Afghanistan to a European audience loads these performances with a great deal of responsibility, which can be detected in the pieces’ negotiations of how to portray Afghan people. Inevitably, through the central depictions of war, oppression, violence, and exile, these performances enter into a discourse that media and communications scholar Lilie Chouliaraki calls the “communication of solidarity,”\(^2\) in which Western audiences are called upon to experience an emotional response—such as pity or empathy—in relation to representatives of distant suffering. At the same time, Ce jour-là, which Aftaab originally developed with the hope of eventually performing in Afghanistan, participates in an Afghan-oriented discourse about recent national history, internal social critique, and cultural affirmation. La Ronde de nuit, developed without real expectation of ever being performed in Afghanistan and through more prominent and visible collaboration with several Théâtre du Soleil artists, promotes a positive depiction of intercultural encounter and cosmopolitanism in Europe, linking the content of the work with the ideological position that, as discussed in the previous chapter, has driven Théâtre du Soleil’s work with Aftaab from the start.

In this chapter I argue that Aftaab’s collectively created pieces constitute artifacts of the asymmetrical transnational relationship that produced them. As such, they manifest both productivity and tension. They constitute substantial productive interventions in dominant European representational trends of contemporary Afghanistan, created through integral Afghan

input. They do so by defetishizing life under the Taliban, by asserting a positive Afghan cultural identity, and, especially in _Ce jour-là_, by foregrounding everyday Afghan resistance against oppressive regimes. They also animate many of the core tensions of Aftaab’s position, both specifically in its relationship to Théâtre du Soleil and more broadly as Afghan artists in Europe. These tensions are visible in both plays’ careful negotiations of the burden of representation that the Afghan company must shoulder in Europe, balancing depictions that prioritize rendering Afghans familiar and empathetic to European theatre audiences with depictions that address internal social problems and give voice to suffering. The two pieces’ trajectory embodies tension in regards to the company’s shifting mission in relation to Afghan cultural revitalization, as the plays’ orientations shift from speaking to audiences in both Europe and Afghanistan in _Ce jour-là_ to speaking exclusively to audiences situated in Europe in _La Ronde de nuit_. A consideration of the plays’ creation illuminates ways in which self-directed representation of Afghan experiences was made possible, but also circumscribed and even obscured, by the dynamics of collective creation under Théâtre du Soleil’s institutional support and direction.

To further my analysis of Aftaab’s collectively created works’ signification on European stages, I draw on Chouliaraki’s theorization of theatricality’s role in eliciting responses from Western audiences to depictions of distant human suffering. Thus, this chapter starts with a closer look at this theory before turning first to _Ce jour-là_ and subsequently to _La Ronde de nuit._

**Solidarity Communication, Authenticity, and the Humanitarian Imaginary**

As I discuss in the previous chapter, a convergence of factors, including Afghanistan’s increasingly devolving security conditions and Aftaab’s continued dependence on Théâtre du Soleil, contributed to the Afghan company’s indefinite stay in France and orientation toward
European audiences. Inevitably, the signification of Aftaab’s work shifted as it became increasingly situated in Europe, entering into a discourse of Western solidarity with human suffering in the Global South. Critical reception of Aftaab performances of classics such as Tartuffe and The Caucasian Chalk Circle in Paris illustrates how these performances’ perceived value was attributed to their firsthand experience with modern-day versions of the kinds of suffering and injustice portrayed in these plays. In contrast, the collectively created pieces rely much more directly on representing contemporary suffering in the concretely representational contexts of Afghanistan. As such, these performances participate in what Lilie Chouliaraki writes about as “the communication of solidarity,” comprised of broad set of communicative practices aimed at eliciting feelings of concern in relation to distant human suffering, and motivation to act on this concern through anything from contributing funds to engaging in political action.\(^3\) Chouliaraki’s analysis finds the possibility of productive solidarity building in theatrical mediums that “mobilize the faculty of imagination,” uniquely enabling spectators to see the world as a distant other may see it and to consider how they may be implicated in or how they may take action to improve the other’s circumstance.\(^4\) She considers ways in which the privileging of authenticity in the performance of distant suffering can be problematically essentializing and fetishizing as well as potentially constructive. Aftaab’s collectively created performances about the struggles of contemporary Afghans are precariously positioned on the fault line of this divide, frequently succeeding, as I will demonstrate, in eliciting what Chouliaraki calls a productive humanitarian imaginary, but in some instances falling into patterns promoting pity and depoliticization.

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\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Ibid., 23.
Chouliaraki finds it necessary to resuscitate the idea of theatricality as a viable and ethical medium for generating productive kinds of cosmopolitan solidarity in the West, because, as she demonstrates, major movements in critical theory have rejected this possibility. She resists critical theory’s prevalent assessment that today there is no possible alternative to the ethos of ironic solidarity, which she describes as Western society’s response to the collapse of grand narratives following the end of the Cold War. The previous dominant twentieth-century discourses of solidarity—solidarity of salvation and solidarity of revolution—were rendered untenable through the widespread suspicion of doctrines of moral objectivity, frustration with the compromises habitually made by NGOs, and the Left’s disillusionment with Marxian approaches to social change. Today’s prevailing ironic solidarity is a form that focuses its gaze inward towards the self, rather than outward toward the distant sufferer, emphasizing the participant’s own feelings. For Chouliaraki, this form of solidarity is one that, “in recognizing the limits of its own legitimacy and efficacy, avoids politics and rewards the self.”

Ironic solidarity is also a rejection of theatricality. Chouliaraki synthesizes the dominant arguments in critical theory against the productivity of humanitarian theatricality into two critiques: the “inauthenticity critique” and the “biopolitics critique.” The “inauthenticity critique” argues that “the staging of human misfortune…does not bridge the moral distance between those who watch and those who suffer, but ultimately intensifies such distance.” Proponents of this critique contend that mediation through, for example, actors or technology renders the testimony inauthentic. The “biopolitics critique” finds that theatrical representation of human misfortune

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5 Chouliaraki’s project traces the contemporary moment’s dominant form of solidarity communication—the solidarity of irony—through its evolution from eighteenth-century liberal thought, and critiques its prevalence. Ibid.

6 Ibid., 15.

7 Ibid., 36.
risks depoliticizing the position of distant sufferers, portraying them as “\(\text{zo\ë}\)”—Giorgio Agamben’s term for “bare life,” to whom one has a responsibility to alleviate physical suffering rather than to address the underlying political injustice from which their suffering stems.\(^8\)

In challenging these critiques, Chouliaraki defends the capacity for humanitarianism to “sustain a public ethos of solidarity with vulnerable others beyond the West.”\(^9\) To do so, she posits that humanitarian theatricality is not a practice with a singular or finite outcome but rather a performance of what she calls the “humanitarian imaginary”—a “configuration of practices which use the communicative structure of the theatre in order to perform collective imaginations of vulnerable others in the West, with a view to cultivating a longer-term disposition to thinking, feeling and acting towards these others.”\(^10\) It is crucial to her argument that the humanitarian imaginary is agonistic and has the ability to mobilize audiences through empathy while simultaneously challenging them to make critical judgment.\(^11\) Chouliaraki recognizes that it is not easy to accomplish this balance. Such theatrical communications may evoke productive empathy rather than unproductive pity by including the sufferer’s voice itself and positioning this figure as a “sovereign actor endowed with her/his own humanity,” taking “center stage as a historical agent…striving to make a difference under systemic constraints of injustice.”\(^12\)

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\(^8\) Ibid., 40-41. See Giorgio Agamben, _Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life_, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 8. Agamben develops the concept of bare life or \(\text{zo\ë}\), the Classical Greek term for the same concept, throughout this book.

\(^9\) Ibid., 24.

\(^10\) Ibid., 45.

\(^11\) Chouliaraki explains that her usage of the term “agonism” is somewhat different than that of Chantal Mouffe. For Mouffe, agonism is associated with radical democracy. For Chouliaraki, agonism is a condition elicited through theatrical practice that regulates an audience’s “affective proximity to and contemplative distance from vulnerable others,” encouraging empathy but also confronting audiences with “meaningful dilemmas of action.” Ibid, 192-96.

\(^12\) Ibid., 193.
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Aftaab’s collectively created pieces do not serve concrete humanitarian goals such as compelling audiences to give money to a cause, sign a petition, or otherwise engage in humanitarian acts. However, I suggest that they frequently elicit a productive humanitarian imaginary through cultivating empathy rather than pity toward a population that, since 9/11, has often been fetishized as perpetual victims or demonized as terrorists and oppressors. These productions’ ability to cultivate empathy is partially a function of the perceived authenticity of the depicted stories as told by artists with firsthand experience of the world they depict. But this image of authenticity also poses a double bind for Aftaab, raising questions about the relationship between Aftaab’s implicit role as ambassador from Afghanistan—an iconic land of distant suffering—and its role as a collective of artists. The more the Afghan actors are appreciated for their perceived authentic experience with the hardship they depict, the less room remains for them to be recognized as artists. Their personal experience and identity as Afghans continue, in a sense, to be fetishized. Alternately, receiving recognition for their authentic representation of Afghan identity traps them, rendering their viability as artists contingent upon making art about their firsthand experiences with hardship as Afghans. I argue that as long as Aftaab performs together as a company in Europe, they are unlikely to escape the responsibility as cultural ambassadors of representing Afghanistan to Europe, nor will they escape the double bind of their position as authentic interlocutors giving voice to distant hardship and suffering. I continue to parse the dynamics of this double bind through my analysis of the two plays that follows.
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Ce jour-là

Ce jour-là, Aftaab’s first collective creation piece, represents a purposeful movement in the company’s work toward generating new theatre that speaks directly to experiences of contemporary Afghans, rather than transposing classical European dramatic texts. Ce jour-là was developed over seven months of rehearsal during 2009, while Aftaab lived in Paris at the Cartoucherie. Although the creators anticipated performing the work immediately in France, many company members expressed to me having harbored the desire to eventually perform Ce jour-là in Afghanistan, which at the time of development seemed to them like a real, if not altogether likely, possibility. Several company members suggest that they played the most direct role in regards to conceiving and writing Ce jour-là out of all their productions. As Aftaab member Aref Bahunar emphasizes, Ce jour-là tells stories that Aftaab has experienced. The play spans the years 1995 to 2009 in Afghanistan, focusing on the emergence and intensification of the Taliban’s regime, the United States military occupation following the events of September 11, 2001, and the ongoing impact of U.S. presence at the end of the decade.

Ce jour-là’s structure is primarily episodic, following a handful of characters through the play’s fourteen-year timespan. It frequently introduces new characters for one-off scenes, so that the end result is a broad panorama of individual experiences refracted through the social and political events of the period. The production, two-and-a-half hours long, featured the twelve Aftaab actors as an ensemble, each playing several named characters as well as more generic roles such as Taliban members, U.S. soldiers, students, wedding guests, nomads, and patrons of a Kabul hammam (public bath). The set was composed of movable pieces suggesting each

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13 Omid Rawendah specifically confirmed that while they created Ce jour-là knowing it would first be performed in France, the hope that they would have the opportunity to perform it in Afghanistan as well was present through the creation process. Rawendah, discussion, 2015.  
14 Bahunar, discussion.
subsequent environment, such as a well, a tree, a peddler’s fruit cart, a barber shop’s façade and interior, and wedding furniture, with video projections of news clips displayed on an upstage screen. Musical interludes of Persian music—and, in one case, prayer—accompanied set-change blackouts with soundscapes (such as a Kabul street scene) serving at times to introduce new environments. Aftaab performed the play entirely in Dari with French subtitles.\(^\text{15}\)

*Ce jour-là* carefully introduces 1990s Afghanistan through the lens of a peaceful status quo of middle class urban life, strategically familiarizing the face of contemporary Afghan society and emphasizing the Taliban regime’s derivation of power through the distortion of social relationships and annihilation of cultural practices. These representational choices, while simplifying and eliding some aspects of Afghan history, largely cloud a western gaze that would position the Afghan protagonist as subaltern or perpetual victim. Without ever self-consciously presenting itself as a play about political resistance, the piece highlights small acts of everyday resistance by Afghans against oppressive regimes—both the Taliban and the U.S. military occupation—and enacts affirmation of positive national identity through a dramaturgy of cultural presence. But by the play’s conclusion, resistance has broken down and agonism takes its place. *Ce jour-là* makes visible the breakdown of paradigms of resistance and subversion in a context where ongoing conflict and violence make life precarious without the presence of one clear oppressive power, but where instead individual lives are suspended in a matrix of ineffective international intervention, failed state government, religious fundamentalism, and random military violence. The play ultimately eschews a neat political conviction, rejecting a specious narrative of positive change and questioning the efficacy of international intervention.

\(^{15}\) My discussion of *Ce jour-là* is based on a video of the production as well as the published text of the play, in French translation from Dari. The Dari was translated by Hamid Djavdan and adapted by Charlotte Andrès and Hélène Cinque. Théâtre Aftaab, “*Ce jour-là*,” *L’avant-scène théâtre* no. 1353-1354 (December 2013): 57-84.
Throughout, the play lends itself to a double reading, based on the knowledge that Aftaab created the piece with the intention—or at least concrete hope—of performing it in Kabul. This is significant because, in addition to being the company’s first collectively created work, *Ce jour-là* was also one of the first Aftaab productions not performed in Afghanistan. While the specific content of *Ce jour-là* is only one of several reasons why the piece has yet to be performed in Afghanistan, the stakes of performing direct and critical representation of contemporary Afghan society—namely Taliban members and supporters, but also of U.S. soldiers and the Mujahideen—are higher than those of performing social critiques through dramatic texts removed by the distance of several centuries and a continent. Therefore, at several stages in my analysis of *Ce jour-là*, I attend both to meanings emerging through the performance context in France and other European countries and to meanings more subtly present through the potential, or aspirational, context of performing the play in Kabul. I argue that the aspirational performance is layered implicitly onto the actual performance, imbuing it with a double significance of which a savvy audience member would, on some level, be aware. The performance is intended for its European audience (itself a nonhomogeneous and transnational entity) while simultaneously functioning as a substitution for the aspirational performance in Kabul.

It is important to note that while the choices of what aspects of Afghan society and experience to depict in *Ce jour-là* emerged generally from the group’s own life experiences, there are ways in which the world of *Ce jour-là* strays from the group’s aggregate background. For example, unlike the characters in the play, several Aftaab members grew up largely in neighboring Iran and Pakistan or lived in these countries for part of their young adulthood. While the company is made up of members of several ethnic groups historically in competition for
power and resources, *Ce jour-là* is silent on the subject of ethnic identity and difference. Finally, while the play primarily shows life in Kabul, not all Aftaab members grew up in urban settings.\(^{16}\)

Representational choices in *Ce jour-là*, then, do not simply replicate the direct biographical stories of the Aftaab company members. The play evinces a careful negotiation of representational responsibility in its depiction of the Afghan *vie quotidienne*. *Ce jour-là* offers up polarized representations of Afghan people, separating out critical depictions of qualities internal to Afghan society from depictions of a balanced, peaceful, and modern society under attack from the outside. While the set of characters with whom the audience is most directly asked to identify, and whom we revisit most frequently throughout the play, is rendered in a manner that optimizes familiarity to a European theatre-going audience, qualities likely less familiar to this audience—and that risk affirming representations of Afghan people as victims of unimaginable violence or as caught in rigid, anachronistic belief systems—are depicted separately, less prominently, and often through a distancing mechanism. This careful managing of representation is particularly important considering the dominant trends in representations of Afghans in the West. As Wendy Kozol notes, major news-gathering sources such as the Associated Press, Reuters, and AFP/Getty Images “typically represent international conflicts through a Western imaginary in which the global South exists solely as locations of poverty, crisis, and chaos.”\(^{17}\) As Chouliaraki argues, such depictions elicit pity unlikely to awaken a productive humanitarian imaginary.

For the most part, the company depicts *la vie quotidienne* in *Ce jour-là* as urban. Most of the action of the play takes place in Kabul, in a well-lit middle-class world where the audience is

\(^{16}\) For example, Aref Bahunar grew up in a rural village. Bahunar, discussion.

first introduced to a status quo of daily life in which everything is in balance. There is a barber, Mr. Abass, who chats playfully with his regular clients, and his late-teenaged son Ahmad, who surprises his girlfriend Fereshta—an aspiring medical student—with the gift of a rose. Mr. Abass looks forward to one day leaving his business to this young couple. He and his client wear Western slacks and button-down shirts. We meet other small businessmen and professionals, such as the tailor, the doctor, and the owner of the neighborhood baths. The audience is introduced to this world just as the Taliban has arrived in Kabul in 1996; Mr. Abass leaves his shop to witness their arrival and returns disturbed by the public hanging of Najibullah, the last ruler of the PDPA communist regime in power at the time of the Mujahideen’s return.

This prioritization of depicting the normalcy of everyday life illustrates an orientation toward a European audience through the use of strategic familiarization. Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism” explains how certain kinds of essentializing may be employed by subordinate groups as a way of enacting resistance against dominant representations of themselves that they do not control. A marginalized population may fight back against dominant essentialized representations of their identity group as, for example, exotic, quaint, mysterious, or sensual, by purposefully circulating their own essentialized depictions of themselves with empowering characteristics to counter these dominant depictions. Aftaab’s depiction of Afghan society in Ce jour-là promotes an image of Afghans not simply as good people going about their daily lives, but in a particular light designed to be immediately familiar and empathy-inducing to an average Western theatre-going audience. There is a safety to the choices made in this piece in regards to representing Afghanistan to Europe. For example, there

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are few direct references throughout the play to Islam (and this is also the case in *La Ronde de nuit*). *Ce jour-là* does not dwell on images of women wearing burqas, a choice which takes on particular significance in relation to Western news media’s fixation on the burqa as part of the “photographic turn to women as both metonymic victims of repressive Islamic cultures and feminized symbols of the failed state of Afghanistan.” *Ce jour-là*’s presentation of these wholly idealized and relatable characters as the entry point through which audiences begin to engage with this world functions as a kind of strategic essentializing or, more accurately, a strategic familiarization, painting a picture of a mid-1990s Kabuli daily life as egalitarian, comfortable, and noticeably modern (and in some cases Western) in visual markers like dress.

The play also depicts the imposition of the Taliban’s regime as the start of contemporary Afghanistan’s problems. With the exception of one memorable monologue describing the violence of the civil war among the Mujahideen factions that devastated large parts of Kabul and killed tens of thousands of Kabul residents, the play’s characters are largely shown as being interrupted from a peaceful status quo by the Taliban’s usurping of Kabul. The happy world of Mr. Abass’s barbershop is interrupted by the first of a series of announcements of increasingly restrictive prohibitions: it is forbidden for men to shave their beards. When we next see Mr. Abass, he and his client are dressed not in their slacks and shirts but in *shalwar kameez*, the flowing linen pants and knee-length tunic of which variations have been worn traditionally throughout parts of Central and South Asia. We witness how the Taliban’s oppressive regime has distorted the social relations of this world. Mr. Abass gives a hair cut to the same client as in the earlier scene, and accidentally shaves a section of the man’s beard out of habit. The client, scared

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19 In fact, there is only one scene in which a female character is depicted in a burqa. A woman who has just given birth under the supervision of a doctor who has risked his career to illegally provide this service is shown in a burqa as she and her husband are leaving the doctor’s office.  
20 Kozol, *Distant Wars Visible*, 68.
for his life, threatens to turn the barber in to the Taliban. Mr. Abass decides to leave Afghanistan rather than live an impossibly restricted life, while his son Ahmad decides to stay with his girlfriend Fereshtah, who has been forced to abandon her studies. For these characters, it is the Taliban that has disrupted what had been a life of contentment, as described by Fereshtah in a letter to Ahmad: “I hope that all of this is a nightmare and that I will awake, joyfully, by your side, sheltered, in your father’s salon smelling of barber’s soap and a warm towel, lulled by the laughter of our friends.”

While there were, no doubt, individuals for whom the Taliban’s overtaking of Kabul was the end to a peaceful existence, this depiction is somewhat ahistorical, as Kabul was the site of massive destruction during the Mujahideen civil war that began in 1992. This choice is another way in which *Ce jour-là* rejects a narrative dominant in the West of Afghanistan as a region perpetually in turmoil. By introducing the play’s most central characters in a period of peaceful prosperity—that is also urban and coded visually as modern and globally connected through the Western dress—*Ce jour-là* positions these protagonists as identifiable non-victims and accentuates the imposition of the Taliban’s oppressive regime as an external force occupying a peaceful, recognizable land.

While the characters portrayed in this light are clearly those with whom the audience is meant to identify most, and the stories of whom we follow most consistently throughout the play, another trend of representation weaves throughout the play, albeit less prominently, functioning as an almost separate realm in which sustained suffering and internal social problems are depicted through a dramaturgy that distances them from a clear historical timeline. The play opens with one of the few scenes that take place outside of Kabul, which is also one of the sole

21 All quotes from *Ce jour-là* and *La Ronde de nuit* are my translation from the published French text. Aftaab Theatre, “Ce jour-là,” 67. Text references are to page numbers of this publication.
onstage depictions of violence. In Ghazni, a small city south of Kabul that was once a center of Persian literature, a father catches his daughter and her lover embracing by the well where she is doing laundry. In a torrent of rage, he hangs his daughter and stabs the lover to death. When he sees the finality of what he has done, he begs his daughter to open her eyes and ultimately prays for his own death. Although the script locates this scene in 1995, the date is not apparent in production, and the image of the woman washing clothes by a well makes the scene appear potentially timeless, or at least unfixed in time, as opposed to later scenes that the audience immediately ties to iconic moments in recent history, such as the Twin Towers’ collapse on 9/11. The scene is tragic, suggesting that long-standing doctrines within Afghan society dictating strict honor codes relating to sexual propriety cause Afghans to bring tragedy upon themselves.

The depiction of a peaceful pre-Taliban Kabul also has a counterpoint in the play, which, like the honor killings at the well, is depicted in a contained manner with a distancing mechanism. An elderly man peddling fruit on the street delivers an apocalyptic rant recounting the start of the Mujahideen war. A truth-teller figure whose hyperbolic and metaphoric language and emphatic oration make him appear slightly deranged, Zouan recounts to the audience the outbreak of civil war on the day that the new government attempted to hold an assembly of regional leaders. His language avoids political motivation or specificity, moving into apocalyptic descriptions of “the devil walking the Earth” (Ce jour-là, 63). In his second monologue later in the play, he alludes to the deaths caused by 9/11 and to the 1997 massacres in Mazar-e Sharif,22

poetically describing Kabul itself as a graveyard: “All of the wells of Kabul are full of cadavers. When you look for water, you find blood. Today the people of Afghanistan are exterminated. Five thousand years of history annihilated. Today the orphans of Afghanistan fill the streets of Kabul. They are growing up illiterate” (75). Zouan is one of the only characters in the play to directly reference the mujahideen war, and it is through his descriptions alone that the audience receives images of a crumbling, destroyed Kabul overrun by orphans. Whereas the play’s episodic structure generally follows a clear timeline from 1995 through, more or less, the play’s premiere in 2009, Zouan’s two monologues seem to interrupt this linear progression. Alternately, he can be seen as a character for whom the witnessing of violence and destruction has flattened time, and for whom time is no longer linear. His mythologizing language and conspiratorial nature create distance between these historical events and the events shown onstage, even though he describes events that happened in 1992, a few years before the play starts, and in 1997, well into the play’s timespan. Zouan is played by Saboor Dilawar, who conceived the character and wrote the monologue based loosely on stories told to him by his father, who had worked for the Ministry of Security when the Mujahideen war broke out. The limited direct references to the Mujahideen war also have a political significance in Afghanistan. Many former Mujahideen warlords held prominent positions in the Karzai government during the first decade of the twenty-first century, and there is risk associated with publicly condemning them.


23 This is with the exception of Jan Arqa, who talks about losing his entire family in the war.
24 Saboor Dilawar (actor, Aftaab Theatre), in discussion with the author, French, April 10, 2015.
25 Ali Reza Sarwar describes the Karzai government as a “symbiotic coalition with Mujahideen leaders,” including some who have been accused of war crimes such as massacre, rape, and
Rawendah explains that at a hypothetical performance in Kabul, ninety-nine percent of audience members would take no offense at such representations, but the one-percent exception could be a dangerous person.\(^26\)

The primordial scene at the well would be powerful for an audience in Afghanistan. Rawendah describes the scene as eliciting a powerful emotional response from the Aftaab actors when it was first performed as an improvisation, and the shared conviction was that the scene must make it into the piece.\(^27\) Actor Bahunar emphasized to me the significance of theatre as a mechanism for society to publicly and collectively examine itself,\(^28\) a significance that could particularly emerge through a performance of this scene in Afghanistan. This scene and Zouan’s monologue are the play’s only acknowledgements of violence with sources internal to Afghan society, rather than politically motivated impositions from outside, exemplified in the depictions of the Taliban and the U.S. military occupation. Performing this scene for an audience in Afghanistan could, in keeping with Bahunar’s thinking, have the powerful potential to acknowledge and confront the ideologies and social structures that cause such suffering.

The polarization of these depictions speaks to the high stakes of responsibility for representing Afghanistan in the West. The play illustrates a struggle to balance competing impulses, including the impulse to depict critically a social problem internal to sectors of contemporary Afghan society and the strong impulse to depict a sympathetic and familiar picture of Afghans that contradicts dominant representations in the West. In one rendition, timeless and caught in self-inflicted tragedy, and in the other, modern, Western-influenced, peaceful and

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\(^{26}\) Rawendah, discussion. 2015.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.

\(^{28}\) Bahunar, discussion.
happy; in one depiction, a country already turned into a cemetery, flowing with blood, before the Taliban’s arrival, and in the other, the Taliban regime as interrupting a comfortable, in-balance world. Together, these juxtapositions illustrate a complex negotiation of strategic representation of Afghan society and history. As such, Ce jour-là is a product of a struggle to represent social problems internal to Afghanistan and to depict the terrible violence and suffering in the region, while also resisting participation in dominant Western narratives of Afghans as victims and subalterns.

Aftaab’s representational choices in Ce jour-là also privilege depictions of Afghans striving to exercise agency under oppressive and unjust conditions. Although Ce jour-là is not presented as a play about resistance, much of what it portrays constitutes acts of resistance in several forms, with varying degrees of subtlety. Ce jour-là interrupts and rejects subaltern and victimized representation of Afghans through depicting their enactment of resistance to and subversion of repressive regimes throughout the play. It does this in two distinct ways: through consistently dramatizing small actions of resistance and through subversively—and at times satirically—embodying oppressors. This second mode operates partially through the presence of the aspirational performance context—the desire to perform the piece in Afghanistan—where such theatrical embodiment would have a higher-stakes subversive signification.

The theatrical representation of resistance by Afghans to the oppressive regime of the Taliban on a European stage is important, because it contributes to the possibility of Chouliaraki’s “humanitarian imaginary,” communicative acts that “perform collective imaginations of vulnerable others in the West” to affectively cultivate empathy rather than pity in Western publics.29 As I discussed above, Chouliaraki argues that performances—theatrical or

29 Chouliaraki, The Ironic Spectator, 45.
otherwise—of distant suffering in the West can have the potential to initiate affective responses of empathy that, unlike pity, are productive, if the representation includes the voice of the distant figures in control of their own representation, and depicts them as “sovereign actors” and “historical agents,” “striving to make a difference.”

_Ce jour-là_’s characters are sovereign actors exercising agency, albeit within their limited realms of ability, to resist and subvert the Taliban regime’s repressive and oppressive policies and daily disciplining of behavior. Mr. Abass, the play’s most-frequently recurring character whose position the audience is invited to identify with from the start, defies the Taliban by shaving his beard and advertising his services as a beard shaver (with a sign announcing “we shave beards here”), but he ultimately must leave the country to avoid getting into further trouble with the Taliban. In one scene, a doctor risks his life to deliver a baby (under the Taliban women could only receive medical attention in special facilities designated for women) and is subsequently dragged off by the Taliban and forced to perform a public hand amputation. In another scene, the Taliban’s own tool of repression is used to hide an act of resistance when a pair of musicians dress as women and hide their instruments under burqas to slip under the Taliban’s radar. The tailor and his apprentice collaborate in this act of subversion, hosting

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30 Ibid., 193.
31 Khaled Hosseini’s novel _A Thousand Splendid Suns_ depicts the squalor of one of these facilities, severely understaffed and under-resourced. Khaled Hosseini, _A Thousand Splendid Suns_ (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).
32 I do not intend to suggest here that the burqa is exclusively the Taliban’s tool. Much has been written about the burqa’s empowering function from the perspective of some Muslim women. For example, for a book-length study of the wearing of the burqa as a feminist and culturally affirmative practice, see Fadwa el Guindi, _Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance_ (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003). Kevin J. Ayotte and Mary E. Husain argue that U.S. representations of the burqa frame Afghan women as “slaves” in need of saving by the West. Ayotte and Husain, “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil,” _NWSA Journal_ 17, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 112-33. For another angle, see Ellen McLarney on Western media’s commodification and appropriation of the burqa. McLarney,
regular secret musical gatherings. In another scene, an older Iranian woman named Pari Gull recalls the glory days of her youth as a popular singer, lamenting her current fallen position as a fruit and vegetable peddler on the streets of Kabul, and declaring her refusal to wear a chadri (the word for burqa in Central Asia). She curses the Taliban and exclaims that she has never been afraid of anything—and against all odds seems to get away with her defiant stance. In the hammam (the communal baths where men gather), a client argues forcefully against the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam and is threatened by a Talib also with him in the baths. Significantly, none of these incidents escalate into substantial violence—in keeping with the play’s polarization of victimhood and agency. While the audience hears about atrocious events—such as the public stoning that the tailor’s apprentice attends out of curiosity, Zouan’s apocalyptic narrations of a country obliterated by death, and Jan Arqa’s description of losing his entire family to war—these violent acts happen offstage, while the play foregrounds (through onstage depiction) acts of resistance by rejecting Taliban control of personal comportment and expression, artistic practices, personal liberties, and prohibitions against Western dress.

In addition to depicting these acts of resistance, Ce jour-là enacts subversion through the actors’ embodiment—at times satirical—of powerful figures representing oppressive regimes. In Ce jour-là the Aftaab actors portray all characters, whereas in their subsequent collective

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33 Pari Gull’s irreverence stems partially from her being played by a male actor. None of Aftaab’s productions include irreverent and bawdy sexual humor performed by female actors, but male actors playing women are often vehicles for sexual humor. For example, Pari Gull dances provocatively in front of the U.S. soldiers in Act 2 to humorous effect, but fails to capture their interest. Aftaab’s female actor Wajma Bahar talked with me about the difficult and even dangerous nature of performing as a woman, or being known as an actress, in Afghanistan. Bahar, discussion. Even when performing in Europe, Aftaab productions appear to not position the women performers in a light that would exacerbate Afghan negative perceptions of women onstage.
creation piece, *La Ronde de nuit*, French actors portray most of the non-Afghan characters. The very act of theatrically embodying the figures of Taliban members onstage is subversive given the Taliban’s ban of artistic representation of human figures. Furthermore, the Taliban’s reemergence after 2001 and regaining of control over parts of the country means that their threat was once again active at the time of the production. This subversiveness is another dynamic that emerges more prominently through consideration of the aspirational performance in Afghanistan. Moreover, in the play the Taliban are one-dimensional characters, always marching onstage in pairs and barking commands. *Ce jour-là*’s depiction of U.S. soldiers utilizes satire more overtly, ridiculing them through depiction as stupid, simple, and heartless. In one scene they intimidate and confuse an elderly grandmother into wrongfully implicating her grandson in terrorist activity. They utter only five or six word sentences, always screaming. When the U.S. general deposits Ahmad’s dead body on the floor in front of Mr. Abass, his father, he says, “Sorry, it was just an accident!” (83).

The play draws a visual parallel between the Taliban and the U.S. soldiers, who are played by several of the same actors, with Aref Bahunar prominently recognizable as both. After a video projection depicts news coverage of the collapse of the Twin Towers, George W. Bush’s voice announcing the launching of his war on terror replaces the earlier announcements of new restrictions unrolled by the Taliban. Both are portrayed as outside presences whose arrival interrupts Kabul life.

In addition to depicting acts of resistance and enacting subversion through satirical embodiment, *Ce jour-là* performs positive Afghan identity affirmation through a dramaturgy of cultural presence. This is particularly significant given Aftaab’s administrative director Mahmood Sharifi’s frustration with a lack of knowledge of Afghanistan in positive terms, even
among some of the artists with whom they work with in France, and his insistence that while
Western media portrays Afghanistan as a country that has been destroyed, in truth, “a country
can never be only negative.”

Although Afghanistan is not strictly speaking a postcolonial nation, a long history of
occupation by outside forces and several phases of cultural engineering have interrupted many
rich cultural practices and the country’s sense of heritage. Historically, Afghan cultural identity
has been characterized by its diversity and regionalism on the one hand and pride in national
unity on the other. While Afghanistan’s population is made of many distinct ethnic groups and
geographic and ecologic diversity, Nancy Hatch Dupree emphasizes that “despite pride of origin,
despite episodes of friction, despite plays for power, despite self-serving ethnocentric panegyrics
by individuals, a sense of belonging, of being Afghan, is evident among the population at
large.” Moreover, the region’s thousands of years as a “zone of intercommunication,”
functioning as a crossroads of many societies and attracting “men of intellect, missionaries,
pilgrims, traders, artisans, nomads and political exiles,” contributed to a richness of cultural
heritage stemming from this diversity.

The twentieth century brought change in Afghan cultural practices, in some ways
affirming connections with historical Afghan and Persian traditions, and in others connecting
Afghanistan to other parts of the modern world. Afghans returning from travel abroad in the
early twentieth century initiated the development of modern Afghan literature, which broke from

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34 I discuss this more fully in chapter 1. Sharifi, discussion, 2014.
Quarterly* 23, no. 5 (October 2002): 978. Thomas Barfield asserts that Afghans at the turn of the
millennium generally wanted, for various reasons, to be united as one nation—following an old
central Asian view of political order that did not link ethnicity to nationalism See Barfield,
*Afghanistan*, 278.
the centuries-long traditions of classical Afghan literature, focused on fables and legends, to reflect and comment on social and political dimensions of modern life through stories and novels. The Mohammadzai leaders in the mid-twentieth century emphasized the cultivation of national unity through, for example, national holidays and the extensive proliferation and popularization of radio. During this period, cultural and artistic practices were engaged both with embracing and preserving traditional and folk forms and with embracing contemporary regional popular forms (specifically from Iran, Pakistan, and India) and modern Western forms. A local popular music industry emerged, spreading throughout the country by radio and linking the rural regions with urban centers. At the Kabul Nandari (the National Theatre), modern Russian and American plays were privileged, and in provincial theatres, new full-length social dramas emerged, replacing traditional circus-like performances. National cultural heritage was celebrated through the opening of the Kabul Museum (later renamed the National Museum of Afghanistan), which by the 1970s was “one of the world’s most opulent depositories of ancient art.” During this period, Afghan literary activity looked back to the rich body of ancient Persian poetry while also being influenced by modern European, American, Indian, and Iranian writers.

Systemic assault on Afghan culture began with the Soviet regime, starting with the 1978 overthrow of the Mohammadzai and the subsequent Soviet occupation. As in many Soviet-run regimes, literature and art were mobilized to promote socialist ideology, and the imposition of socialist realism stifled Afghan cultural values. The violence of war and the failing economy,

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37 Mir Hekmatullah Sadat provides an overview of the history of modern Afghan literature in “The Afghan Experience.”
38 These provincial theatres were called sirkas, traditionally featuring “acrobats and strongmen.” During this time period they began to offer musical numbers from regional cinema and “full-length social dramas that upheld traditional values while making merciless fun of urbanized pseudo-sophisticates.” Dupree, “Cultural Heritage,” 982.
39 Ibid.
continuing into the Mujahideen civil war, led to extensive plundering of archeological sites all over Afghanistan, as well as “massive looting” of the National Museum. The Taliban’s rise to power brought yet a new method of cultural annihilation. The Taliban’s “puritanical attitudes toward dress, music, and entertainments of any kind” were “in contradiction to accepted codes of behavior” in the country, painfully repressing cultural expression. In addition, the Taliban’s edict ordering the destruction of all non-Islamic objects, culminating in the exploding of the treasured Bamiyan Buddhas, was a profound cultural loss for Afghanistan, and “Afghans at home and around the world were devastated.”

While not precisely a story of colonialism, what contemporary Afghanistan has experienced resembles Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s conception of a “cultural bomb,” in which colonization destroys a peoples’ belief in themselves, their heritage, language, and culture. For theorists of anticolonial movements, the telling of a nation’s stories is key to resisting cultural annihilation. Frantz Fanon, for example, writes that “the poverty of the people, national oppression, and the inhibition of culture are one and the same thing.” Fanon describes how the role of live storytelling—a form integrally connected to theatre—in a society struggling against colonialism becomes reinvigorated with innovation and with the urgency of making old stories speak directly about the present moment. When this happens, he writes, “the present is no longer turned in upon itself but spread out for all to see.” The power of telling one’s stories, even recent stories, through the public and embodied form of theatre, is potentially all the more potent

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40 It is estimated that between 1993 and 1996 70% of the museum’s collection disappeared. Ibid., 984-86.
41 Ibid., 986.
42 Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Decolonizing the Mind, 3.
in a context where representational art of all kinds was prohibited for a period of time (and is once again forbidden in some regions) and where artists are often viewed with suspicion. Homi Bhabha argues that any act of representing a particular culture is not just descriptive, but actually constitutive, contributing to the production of the cultural identity itself. Therefore, Aftaab’s performance of Afghan cultural identity in Ce jour-là not only strategically presents a curated image of this identity, but also participates in the construction, perpetuation, and continuing renegotiation of that cultural identity.

The aspirational performance of Ce jour-là in Afghanistan embodies Fanon’s concept of spreading the present out for all to see. In a general way, the public telling of recent violent history in an accessible, non-didactic way affirms a situatedness of contemporary Afghan society. It publicly acknowledges recent cultural loss, making visible the ways in which the country’s current social and cultural landscape have been shaped by politics. This could be of particular importance in light of the fact that the majority of Afghanistan’s population today was born after the end of the Soviet era. Aftaab member Omid Rawendah explains that while Afghanistan’s violent history of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been well documented in books and documentary film, it has not been widely told through the medium of theatre, which derives a unique power through being visual and live. In his estimation, performing Ce jour-là in Afghanistan would be powerful, because the story would be told to an audience that had lived through that history together. Moreover, theatre is potentially accessible in ways that books and films are not. Books are inaccessible to the many illiterate Afghans. Documentary films about recent Afghan history cannot be shown on public television and must

45 Bhabha, The Location of Culture.
46 Barfield, Afghanistan, 347.
be accessed through YouTube or through libraries outside of Afghanistan. Internet access and computers themselves are not widely available, and, outside of cities, electricity is not a given.

The device of interspersing scenes of these characters navigating their swiftly changing social landscape with announcements of each new Taliban decree highlights the trajectory of a society with a rich cultural fabric being reduced to one in which most cultural practices and social interaction are forbidden. This includes the 2001 decree that all statues and shrines in the country be destroyed. Video projections during this interlude depict footage of the destruction of shrines and statues from Afghanistan’s long history as a crossroads of diverse cultural and spiritual traditions, including, perhaps most famously, the Taliban’s explosion of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the world’s tallest carved Buddhas dating from the third to sixth centuries CE during the flourishing of the region’s Buddhist monastic complex.

The dramaturgy of cultural presence in Ce jour-là is also accomplished through the on-stage representation of cultural practice and ritual. One scene in particular, the wedding that follows shortly after the depiction of 9/11, illustrates this impulse. For a full nine minutes, the entire company performs the celebration of a wedding, animating traditions of ritual as well as celebrations and dancing, with an array of characters pantomimed, before a bomb explodes and kills everyone. The scene is exuberant and elaborate: men rush to set the stage with a large Persian carpet and decorations of candles and flowers, and music plays before the bride, in a white fitted wedding dress, and the groom, in a suit, are ushered in by various relatives. The guests feature an array of characters; a young pregnant woman who fawns after her husband, the old fruit peddler Zouan, and a host of other guests, including many male actors playing women

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47 Rawendah, discussion, 2015. As of 2011, the illiteracy rate in Afghanistan was 70% in rural areas, and 23% overall. See Michael Daxner, “Reclaiming Afghanistan: Moving Toward Nationhood?,” World Policy Journal 28, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 74.
48 Barfield, Afghanistan, 46.
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in this scene. A feisty elderly woman offers up comic relief, feigning shyness before dancing uninhibitedly and falling, having to be helped back up. The bride and groom take traditional glimpses of themselves together from a small mirror covered in cloth, feed each other traditional desserts and beverages, and finally dance together playfully, with sweet sideways glances at each other, in front of the guests. The lights suddenly go out and a terrible noise simulates a bomb, and as the lights briefly flicker on and off, we catch glimpses of the celebrants fallen in crumpled, lifeless piles. The stage time devoted to animating this life-affirming, joyful event accentuates the presence of a particular and positive culture, offering a counternarrative to the anonymous coverage of such events in Western news media.49

In scenes like the one described above, Ce jour-là strongly implicates the U.S. military in senseless violence toward innocent Afghan people, but the play also draws the audience into genuine debate over the respective responsibility different parties hold in Afghanistan’s position in 2009. Although Ce jour-là highlights acts of everyday resistance to oppressive regimes, by the end of the play these paradigms of resistance break down as the identification of a single clear oppressor becomes less apparent. Instead of resistance and subversion, the play embraces agonism, eschewing any simple placement of blame on one source and emphasizing disagreement and debate among young Afghans after almost a decade of U.S. military intervention. For Chouliaraki, a spectacle communicating distant suffering to a Western audience can be productive through eliciting agonism, or “a dynamic field of communicative

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paradoxes,” by raising questions for an audience. It is key to Chouliaraki’s conception of “agonistic solidarity” that the spectacle elicits empathy in an audience while also challenging spectators to make a judgment. In the case of *Ce jour-là*, the dynamic of agonism onstage is relevant not only in its ability to productively engage a Western audience without producing pity, but also in its significance in confronting an Afghan audience with difficult questions about its current situation, its future, and the rightful placement of culpability for the population’s suffering.

Although the play’s final scenes show some evidence that Kabuli life has stabilized and improved—for example, Fereshtah’s realization of her dream to become a doctor—Ahmad’s senseless death at the hands of the U.S. military reaffirms a deep ambivalence in response to questions about the effectiveness of international intervention in Afghanistan’s conflict. The play does not present consensus about where blame for Afghanistan’s ongoing problems should be placed, or even about the degree to which circumstances have meaningfully improved since U.S. intervention. Shortly before learning of Ahmad’s arrest, a co-ed group of university students waiting for a class to start debate the country’s progress toward peace and economic stability.

The students argue:

FRAIDON: What’s important to me is that nobody chooses for me my haircut, what shirt I wear, what book I’m not allowed to read, or what thought I can or cannot think!

JAWID: In the name of their democracy, and calling it liberation, the Americans occupied us. How many provinces are there in Afghanistan?

AMENA: Thirty-two.

JAWID: No, thirty-four! There are seventy-two countries that came to our country to help us! If you distribute them, that’s two countries per province. Two rich countries to liberate one poor Afghan province. If they really wanted our liberation, in a month, every province in Afghanistan would be paradise on earth. […] But that’s not what they wanted! They have another objective. They came to pillage our energy resources, our raw

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51 Ibid., 192.
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materials, for their children, at the expense of our flesh and blood. And us, we’re motionless. We are sleeping! We are like dead people! (80-81).

Fereshtah, for whom the ouster of the Taliban has meant a return to her studies, refuses to congratulate foreign intervention for the achievement of social liberties: “How so? You believe that it was the foreigners who brought freedom? We wouldn’t have had women doctors on our own? On the one hand they help us, and on the other hand they kill us shamelessly. I don’t know what to think about all of it” (81). Ahmad’s senseless death that concludes the play suggests that much of the achievement of day-to-day freedoms and women’s rights is an illusion, if human life is subject to the whims of a power—foreign or otherwise—unchecked by accountability.

The shift from emphasis on acts of resistance and subversion to this agonistic mode reflects the nature of Afghanistan’s current set of challenges in the context of global systems of inequality and neoliberal precarity that elude grand narratives of oppression such as colonialism. The final scenes of *Ce jour-là* acknowledge the neoimperialism of U.S. military occupation, uneven global development, shortsighted and self-motivated international intervention practices, as well as internal corruption and the blossoming of illegal business such as the substantial opium industry. Ultimately, the play concludes not with an indictment of a particular power, but with Mr. Abass’s more abstract longing for a world that values human freedom over material wealth: crossing over into Pakistan after witnessing his son’s death, he insists that the only thing he fears is “to die in a country where a gravedigger’s salary is more valuable than freedom” (84).

*Ce jour-là*’s closing action gestures toward Aftaab’s second collectively created work, through Mr. Abass’s exodus from Afghanistan in search of a more liveable social world. In the next section, I examine *La Ronde de nuit*’s depiction of immigrant and refugee life in France in its cultivation of the humanitarian imaginary. I consider ways in which the priorities and
concerns of this production reflect Aftaab’s own shifting position and point to tensions in the ongoing asymmetrical collaboration between the Afghan company and Théâtre du Soleil.

La Ronde de nuit

La Ronde de nuit was developed between September 2012 and March 2013 by the members of Aftaab and several French actors under the direction of Hélène Cinque, and performed at Théâtre du Soleil’s Cartoucherie in April 2013 and again for an additional run the following winter. During the spring of 2014 the company toured the piece in France, Spain, and Italy, traveling to regional theatres that had extended invitations. While the piece is attributed in publicity materials to Aftaab Theatre, it is also described on Aftaab’s website as a French-Afghan production and was, indeed, developed in collaboration with several French actors who performed in the piece. I saw the play at the Théâtre du Nord in Lille, France, where the five performances were sold out.\textsuperscript{52} La Ronde de nuit employs the frame of an Afghan’s first night on the job as the watchman of a French theatre to tell story fragments from the experiences of a host of Afghan refugees requesting shelter for the night. Dramaturgically and stylistically, the play uses highly naturalistic elements of set and dialogue, interspersed with scenes of exaggerated, Commedia-style humor, as well as staged abstract visions and fragments of memories and nightmares that haunt the dreams of the sleeping refugees, and occasional departures into symbolic and poetic modes of expression. The 105-minute-long production featured most actors playing one main character each and doubling as needed in brief dream sequences. Except for the homeless man, Francis, all non-Afghan characters in the play were portrayed by French actors. The language alternated between French and Dari, with subtitles translating dialogues from Dari

\textsuperscript{52} This was in March of 2014.
to French. A large downstage center screen broadcast Skype conferences with Nader’s parents and wife in Afghanistan at several points throughout the show.

Different from *Ce jour-là*, which was primarily concerned with representing contemporary Afghanistan onstage, and from most of Aftaab’s adaptations of classics, which were set in Afghanistan, *La Ronde de nuit* focuses on Afghan immigrant and refugee experiences in France. In this sense, this piece becomes less concerned particularly with Afghanistan and more broadly concerned with issues pertaining to immigrant and refugee experiences of people who have been displaced, have fled violence, or are in Europe seeking economic opportunities. *Ce jour-là* targeted two distinct audiences (audiences in Europe and, aspirationally, audiences in Kabul), whereas *La Ronde de nuit* targeted multiple sectors of a transnational (but still Francophone) audience in Europe, with the dual intention of increasing understanding and empathy toward immigrants and refugees among non-immigrants in Europe, and affirming and giving voice to experiences of various immigrant and displaced people. Aftaab members described to me in particular the additional relevance of their production to Arab and North African immigrants in Europe, who often approached them after performances moved to tears and grateful to see aspects of their stories onstage. In focusing on experiences of displacement and intercultural exchange, *La Ronde de nuit* clearly reflects Aftaab’s own shift from working in and about Afghanistan to living and working in Europe. The piece also reflects their intention to

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53 The refugee characters primarily spoke in Dari, but the characters of Nader and Sohrab spoke to each other in French. The absence of subtitles from French to Dari clearly indicates the anticipation of a non-Afghan audience.

54 My discussion of *La Ronde de nuit* is based on attending the production in performance three times, as well as consulting a video of the production and the published text. Aftaab Theatre, “*La Ronde de nuit*,” *L’avant-scène théâtre* no. 1353-1354 (December 2013): 23-52. Although performed partially in Dari and partially in French, the text is published entirely in French, with translation done by Mahmood Sharifi and Omid Rawendah. All of my direct quotations are my translation from the French text. Text references are to page numbers.
perform in Europe rather than in Afghanistan through the inclusion of elements that would not be acceptable on an Afghan stage, particularly in the form of overt sexual content and nudity.

As in *Ce jour-là*, Afghans are depicted in *La Ronde de nuit* as active agents striving to improve the conditions of their lives. But whereas *Ce jour-là* dramatizes life under the circumstances of particular political events, educating an audience and affirming a particular reading of national history, *La Ronde de nuit* largely sidesteps direct political issues and does not engage with visions of or longings for a peaceful Afghanistan. In some ways, the piece assumes that life in Afghanistan today is untenable, but alludes very little to any particular political or security circumstances there—although there are references to social problems. There is very little of the kind of affirmation of cultural identity that we see in *Ce jour-là*. Rather than emphasizing Afghan acts of resistance against oppressive regimes, *La Ronde de nuit* highlights ongoing negotiations of daily life under the precarity associated with immigration, displacement, identity crisis, uneven global economic development, and inequality.

Also different from *Ce jour-là*, which depicted lives interrupted by identifiable crises, the world of *La Ronde de nuit* is more aligned with what Lauren Berlant has called “crisis ordinariness,” a “notion of systemic crisis” which turns away from the paradigm of isolatable traumatic events to make sense of daily lived experience in which crisis is not an interruption but the status quo. Berlant argues that, under the neoliberal global order, precarity and crisis are characteristics of the “new normal,” and therefore it is productive to think of “the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on.” It is not my intention here to compare or equate the precarity of life under more than thirty years of state violence, civil war,

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56 Ibid., 8.
and insurgency with the precarity of life in a downturned economy, but rather to examine the ways in which La Ronde de nuit approaches contemporary Afghan diasporic experiences through a lens of precarity rather than oppression or isolatable crisis and, in doing so, aligns these refugee experiences with other positions of economic, legal, and bodily precarity in a European urban center. Many critical theorists have turned to the concept of precarity to connote conditions distinct from a more general precariousness, particularly in relation to neoliberalism. In Judith Butler’s estimation, precarity “designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.”

Precarity as status quo pervades the world of La Ronde de nuit. As a common condition of immigrant life, precarity is introduced through the central character of Nader. Nader has come to France seeking economic opportunities to better his family’s prospects, because, as he tells his father, in Kabul there is nothing for him to do but drug himself like the rest of the jobless. (La Ronde de nuit, 32). His goal is to make enough money to bring his wife and son over to join him. However, it has taken Nader so long to find employment that his extended family believes he has secretly remarried and abandoned his wife in Kabul. He must therefore manage his precarious financial situation in France and his wife and child’s well-being in Kabul, as well as his family’s unrealistic expectations of the ease of life in Europe. Nader remains hopeful and eager to please his employer throughout the play, but the specter of his own precarious position in France looms over him at all times. Both the theatre’s director and the national police, the two most overt signifiers of French authority in the play, ask Nader about his “papers” but decline to actually view them—the director as a sign of trust, and the police as a half-joking assertion of power—

moves that, while overtly communicating acceptance and alliance, also function as reminders of Nader’s contingent status as always already under suspicion.

Experiences of ongoing precarity abound, both among Afghans, whose presence in France is under less privileged circumstances, and among socially marginal European characters. *La Ronde de nuit* presents the theatre as a space providing security and resources to these individuals, both knowingly and unknowingly. In addition to the refugees who end up spending the night, the theatre houses a young immigrant woman from Russia and regularly provides hot showers to a homeless man and batteries to a prostitute who works out of a truck parked in the nearby forest—a clear reference to the Bois de Vincennes in which the Cartoucherie is located.58 The forest functions as a specter of social problems and crime. Nader learns from the national police that it is a hot spot not only for prostitution and homelessness but also for drug trafficking. His first night on the job proves to be a constant struggle of negotiating the demands of French authority figures—namely a representative of the national police, who checks in on him periodically, and the theatre director, who spends the night in her office upstairs—and competing loyalties to his job, his family back in Kabul, and the band of Afghan refugees who follow his friend Sohrab from the train station, desperate for shelter on this night of an impending ice storm.

*La Ronde de nuit* foregrounds the contradictions inherent in the differentiated abilities of disparate populations to cross state borders and participate freely in, and benefit from, global

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58 This is one of several allusions to Théâtre du Soleil itself in the play. For example, the theatre director character refers to the storage room that is Nader’s home base during his nights on the job as containing the theatre’s “world archives,” a reference to Théâtre du Soleil’s own collections of costumes, instruments, masks, and documents from around the world. Aftaab Theatre, “La Ronde de nuit,” 27. As I will discuss later in the chapter, *La Ronde de nuit* celebrates the theatre—and especially Théâtre du Soleil—as a center of meaningful intercultural encounter and of collective caring.
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economies, as described in Aihwa Ong’s theorization of “neoliberalism as exception.” The play draws attention to the difference between experiences of Afghans holding the key to legitimate participation in the international economy and travel and those who are excluded from participation, with Nader and his friend Sohrab functioning as counterpoints to the refugees who arrive later. Sohrab, who stops by the theatre on his way to the airport to return to Kabul, has indulged in some touristic shopping and comes across to the audience as humorous and a bit foolish as he reveals to Nader the contents of his suitcase: an Eifel Tower trinket, designer perfume, cheese, wine, and sausage. Nader admonishes him, telling him he will go straight to prison from the airport in Kabul, but Sohrab has news: he has obtained the holy grail of Afghan travellers—a French passport. Upon learning of his friend’s good fortune, Nader dances and laughs ecstatically, telling his friend, “You are a free man!” (36). We don’t learn the why and how of Sohrab’s good fortune, but a connection is drawn between Sohrab’s privileged mobility, his consumer activity, and his culturally assimilationist stance. This final element comes through in his communications to his brother, to whom he composes a long email throughout the play. He urges his brother, recently released from a Berlin prison where he was incarcerated for stealing a car, to forgive the flaws in German democracy and reminds him that Afghanistan’s penal system would have been far less forgiving. He encourages his brother to enjoy a beer at a café, because, “God also created beer. And Germans” (44). Sohrab’s relatively easy movement back and forth between Kabul and Europe is juxtaposed with the desperation of the refugees.

59 As I describe in chapter one, Aihwa Ong employs the concept of “neoliberalism as exception” to describe the ways in which neoliberal techniques are introduced selectively into an environment that otherwise does not operate according to typical neoliberal values. Through these techniques, “mobile individuals who possess human capital or expertise are highly valued and can exercise citizenship-like claims in diverse locations” while “citizens who are judged not to have such tradable competence or potential become devalued and thus vulnerable to exclusionary practices.” Ong, Neoliberalism as Exception, 7.
particular highlights the difference in how bodies are subject to violence based on having or lacking the privileges of money and legal documentation: a refugee named Shékib recounts how his brother froze to death next to him on a treacherously cold winter night in the outskirts of Moscow, a stop along a common refugee route out of Afghanistan. In comparison, Sohrab’s long description of the two full days of air travel it will take to get him to Kabul seems like a luxury.

La Ronde de nuit draws attention to the unequal mobility of different bodies and the corporeal effects of this inequality, but in other ways it strives to depict boundaries between people breaking down through staging moments of transcendence that enable characters to connect and find common ground across cultural and sociopolitical difference. The play pushes an agenda of demonstrating interconnection and symbiosis among, in particular but not exclusively, to individuals who are in different ways marginal to society. A motif of self-empowerment, through the pooling of resources among characters marginal to society, eventually builds upwards to include not only marginal figures but characters from all levels of social and political hierarchy. Ultimately, the play promotes an image of social interdependence at every level, paired with an optimistic depiction of intercultural connection and cosmopolitanism. While some of these alliances and connections ring true, many are depicted superficially, yielding a cosmopolitanism that reads as specious, superficial, or “thin.” La Ronde de nuit presents a clear message: the unwanted and undocumented, those who fall into Giorgio Agamben’s categorization of “bare life” (specimens of human life lacking the legitimacy of political belonging from which to claim rights), are actually necessary to the fabric of French society.

60 See note 8.
This motif of interdependence first appears in the alliances built among the various marginal figures in the play. La Ronde de nuit presents Nader’s situation as intrinsically interconnected to these other figures, as he must interact with them and in some cases assist them in order to fulfill his job. When the group of refugees arrives at the theatre door and demands to be let in for the night, Nader wants to turn them down but ultimately cannot do so, even though their presence will pose great risk to his hard-won new job. As the play progresses, interconnection matures into partnership or coalition building, as alliances develop among combinations of socially marginal characters. For example, the prostitute Céleste helps a refugee, Taqi, research his options for seeking asylum from the French government. Lena, the Russian immigrant living in the theatre, attempts to care for Francis, the homeless man whom she fears will freeze in the woods on this unusually cold night. Eventually Lena, too, seeks out Céleste’s help in navigating the immigration process in hopes of bringing her mother to France. Alliance between these variously marginal figures broadens into a more inclusive interdependence when the National Police officer—performed with humorous pompousness and naïve adherence to arbitrary protocols—collapses in the theatre from hypothermia as a result of the ice storm. The refugees briefly debate what to do, but they ultimately revive him, perhaps saving his life, by undressing him and warming him with their bodies. The result is an intimate scene that highlights the shared human baseline of bodily vulnerability at the whim of the elements.

Alliance and interconnection in the play eventually develop into a representation of cosmopolitanism and productive intercultural encounter. However, I argue that La Ronde de nuit’s depiction of this dynamic has a superficial quality. As a performance representing conditions of substantial material inequalities and cultural differences based on disparate life conditions and experiences, but also striving to depict productive connection and emerging
interdependence between these disparate groups, *La Ronde de nuit*’s depiction of productive connection across lines of class, culture, and geopolitical position sometimes falls into the trap of representing what Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins call a “thin cosmopolitanism,” in which elements from different cultural positions are superficially pasted together with little awareness of the power dynamics present in these positions of difference.\(^{61}\) The play presents the theatre as a space where, for a brief period of time, hierarchical relationships based on power and privilege or lack thereof become irrelevant to actual human relations, in which cultural difference can be transcended by means of a bit of alcohol and through which people can learn from each other across difference and develop higher levels of mutual respect. It’s inspiring, but somewhat romantic and even specious, particularly given that some Aftaab actors confided that the relations among the various cast members—Afghan and French—did not necessarily embody this dynamic. Indeed, Taher Baig suggested to me in an interview that the social relationship between Aftaab and members of Théâtre du Soleil with whom they have worked has tended to remain relatively superficial, with the two groups splitting off at meal times and social interactions failing to evolve beyond the level of friendly pleasantries.\(^{62}\)

*La Ronde de nuit*’s dramaturgical structure uses the impending ice storm to drive the disparate characters together and to heighten the stakes of any travel or outdoor activity, ramping up the symbolism of the theatre as a space of encounter and exchange. A great deal of the play’s humor is derived from uncomfortable clashes between the prostitute Céleste’s frankness about sexuality and the conservative attitude of the Afghan characters.\(^{63}\) By the play’s end, new connections have formed: Lena and one of the female refugees have shared shots of whiskey and

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\(^{62}\) Baig, discussion.

\(^{63}\) For example, Nader’s parents and wife in Kabul have an accidental run-in with Céleste, in her lingerie, through Skype.
some laughs—but the audience does not hear a word of their conversation and is left unconvinced of this connection. Bahunar’s character, the refugee who refuses to be in the same room with a strange woman, has come to terms enough with this premise to shake Lena’s hand respectfully upon his departure—but this change doesn’t particularly feel earned. Most dramatically, the final scene drives home the message of interdependence when Nader discovers a leak in the theatre ceiling and calls the refugees back—after sending them away at daybreak—to rescue the theatre’s extensive storage of costumes and instruments from all over the world. The symbolism of this final image, in which the displaced characters facing an unknown future rescue the theatre’s precious global artifacts, is clear: the powerful European urban center depends on its most vulnerable, displaced, and unwanted population. But while this scene achieves a satisfying dramatic flurry of activity, during which the lights fade to black, the ending sidesteps the uncomfortable reality that while the theatre depicted onstage derives protection from such an encounter, the refugees obtain only one night of respite from their vulnerable and unknown future. I suggest that we can read *La Ronde de nuit*’s thin cosmopolitanism as connected to Théâtre du Soleil’s desire to characterize its own intercultural work as successful in facilitating meaningful communication and interrelation across cultural difference and uneven positions of political power. This ideological position distinguishes *La Ronde de nuit* from *Ce jour-là*, in which Théâtre du Soleil’s authorship of the project and investment in disseminating a set of values and self-image were less readily discernible.

The thin depiction of cosmopolitan connection in this work is echoed in its relatively thin or unelaborated representation of the refugee characters. While *La Ronde de nuit* complexly depicts the competing pressures and difficulties comprising immigrant experiences, the play sheds little light on the stories of the refugees themselves and ultimately bars the audience from
developing any greater understanding of their lives, struggles, and motivations. In this way, La Ronde de nuit engages in a polarization of representation (similar to that of Ce jour-là) in which some characters are rendered as familiar and knowable, while others are decontextualized and reduced to functioning as vehicles for cataloging traumatic experiences. La Ronde de nuit reinforces a sense of this group of people as unknowable and untranslatable to a European audience of theatregoers. The audience receives from most of them only brief moments of individuality: a man who refuses to sleep in the same room as a woman, a man who is haunted by witnessing a violent attack in a French subway, a woman who has a persistent nightmare of rape, a man who begs god to relieve him of his sexual fantasy, a woman who has disguised herself as a man for her travels, and a man who recalls watching his father kill his mother when he was a child. While these vignettes reveal moments of crisis in some cases, and lifetimes of tension in others, they do not help the audience understand their displacement or the experience of their journey. Even when Céleste tries to help Taqi, she fabricates a humorous explanation for why he deserves being granted asylum in France, rather than asking about his real circumstances. The vignettes lack parallelism to guide the audience’s understanding: are these explanations of each individual’s departure from Afghanistan? Or are they miscellaneous memories of lasting and/or recurring traumatic events associated with life in Afghanistan? If they are the latter, it is unclear what justifies their inclusion in this particular play.

In the production, the refugee characters remain largely mysterious, each being illuminated by one brief moment depicting their struggle or trauma in a decontextualized manner. During the development process, however, the company created an extensive body of improvisation that illustrates a more complex and contextualized set of stories. Through a rehearsal process that spanned seven months, the Aftaab actors, along with four French actors,
created hundreds of improvisations. Each was titled, filmed, and performed with relatively high production values and in many cases with costumes, lights, music, and props. While many improvisations clearly found their way into the final production, a large percentage did not—sometimes after being explored through multiple different improvisations over several months. Director Hélène Cinque ranked each improvisation on a scale of one to five based on her evaluation of their potential, choosing highly ranked improvisations to develop further. The improvisations represent the broad range of stories and experiences that could have been depicted in La Ronde de nuit.

The improvisations generally fall into two categories: experiences of violence, loss, and sexual aggression in Afghanistan, and experiences of immigrant life in France—of cultural disconnection, of being haunted by people left behind, and of complex and ambivalent relationships with Europeans. Several improvisations depict chaotic, violent scenes of bombing during the civil war, with figures carrying the injured through a stairwell, words drowned out by moaning and screaming. In one scene, a woman singer in Afghanistan struggles to escape the aggressive sexual advances of the club owner who has employed her to perform. In a recorded improvised scene that clearly fed into a vignette featured in the final production, two brothers attempt to intervene—albeit unsuccessfully—when their father beats—and kills—their mother, who has just destroyed an important document.

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64 Rawendah explained this process to me. Rawendah, discussion, 2015.
65 The cast performed around nine hundred total improvisations during the seven-month development process of La Ronde de nuit. I viewed around ten-hours’ worth of improvisation video footage, choosing a selection of improvisations across the range of rehearsal dates and noting trends in repeated subject matter and improvised characters to gain a general sense of the scope of material. The improvisations were performed in French and Dari. Aftaab Theatre, rehearsal video footage, digital video file, 2012-2013.
Most significantly, the improvisations represent a vast array of in-depth, nuanced depictions of immigrant and refugee experiences, rendering refugee figures with imagination, passion, and curiosity. In one powerful scene, Wajma Bahar, playing a refugee in the theatre, explores the costume and makeup room, timidly at first but with increasing boldness, transforming herself from a figure in hiding—covered in layers of drab sweaters--into a attention-commanding figure, sensual but conservative, in a long-sleeved mauve dress and heels. As music comes on, she begins to smile and dance onstage, hugging herself—or an imagined other—and reciting a poem in Persian about zindagi (life). Another plot line that formed the basis for an ongoing series of improvisations featured actor Shohreh Sabaghy as a young Afghan woman in Europe haunted, tortuously, by the memory of an elderly Afghan woman perpetually engaged in cooking a meal. In some versions of this improvisation, Sabaghy’s character becomes attached to an elderly French woman whose caretaker she becomes, serving as a surrogate figure in her life and creating tension with the woman’s real daughter. Other improvised scenes explore the aggressive stereotyping of Afghans in Europe. In one nuanced scene, a dance club becomes the site of subtle aggression when club-goers force an Afghan man to perform “Arab” dancing for them, locking him into the center of a dance circle and aggressively grinding up against him until he flees the club. In another, an Afghan man in France trying to rescue his girlfriend from a violent mugging himself ends up arrested by the police.

This large body of improvised scenes and characters constitute a breadth and complexity of representation not present in La Ronde de nuit. It is, of course, unlikely that a two-hour-long play could effectively include the diversity of the hundreds of moments explored during the play’s development. Perhaps even more than illustrating the lack of full humanness given to the bulk of the Afghan refugee characters onstage, this videotaped collection of improvisations
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makes visible how "La Ronde de nuit" barely begins to represent the breadth and depth of material that Aftaab has generated and the stories they are interested in dramatizing.

A comparison between the enormous set of material developed through improvisation and the final production brings us back to Lilie Chouliaraki’s concerns about the mediation of the distant sufferer’s voice. In some ways, I argue, "La Ronde de nuit" obscures the fact that in the creation of the piece, this voice remains mediated. A look at "La Ronde de nuit"’s creation reveals tensions and complications related to the question of the company’s autonomy. As I mention at the start of chapter one, "La Ronde de nuit" was attributed as a collective creation by Aftaab under the direction of Hélène Cinque and based on a proposal by Mnouchkine. Indeed, "La Ronde de nuit" is based on an original concept by Mnouchkine and inspired by an actual occurrence involving Aftaab and Théâtre du Soleil: Rawendah, who ended up playing the character Nader, was himself working as a watch guard for Théâtre du Soleil on the night of a storm and called upon the Aftaab actors to save materials stored in the theatre from a leaking roof. Mnouchkine was inspired to use this incident as the shell of a new play. After seven months of improvisation and under Cinque’s direction, the company showed the piece they had developed to Mnouchkine, who told them they were not ready. The opening was postponed for a month and a half, and Mnouchkine redirected the play. The final product is based on Mnouchkine’s reworking of the piece. In Sharifi’s estimation, the piece came together powerfully—to the degree that it is successful—because of Mnouchkine’s imposed vision.

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66 This is the case for "Ce jour-là" as well.
67 Caroline Panzera, a French actor associated with Théâtre du Soleil who has worked closely in an administrative capacity with Aftaab and who performs in "La Ronde de nuit," explains, “We changed it several times, because she had this show in mind, what she wanted to say with this story, in a theatre, one night, with a director. It’s her story.” Panzera, discussion.
68 Sharifi, discussion, 2014.
One particular instance in *La Ronde de nuit* illustrates the way in which content generated by the Aftaab actors may have been funneled through Théâtre du Soleil’s representational choices in a manner that diminished its specificity and power. One of the refugee vignettes depicts a woman who awakes screaming, terrorized by a repeating nightmare or vision of a man who haunts her and, in one instant, rapes her. The scene leaves much unspecified; the audience does not know if the vision is a dream or a memory, or who the man is to the woman. When an actor proposed this scene during rehearsal, the proposal was to address a common phenomenon in Afghan marriages in which women are expected to be passive during sex with their husbands and not to experience sexual pleasure. This image of a woman passively serving as a sexual prop for her husband would allude to a host of issues in contemporary Afghanistan, such as marital rape and sexual repression that affects both men and women. However, under the direction of Cinque and Mnouchkine, the scene became a generic rape scene. In former Aftaab administrative director Mahmoud Sharifi’s estimation, “[I think we cannot see that now, but if they had kept the original proposition, we might have seen that. Now we see a rape scene, and we can’t understand if it’s a forced marriage, was she really raped, is it a bad memory, or is it a fear of being raped?”69 This example illustrates how a nuanced message—one that emerges from intimate knowledge of a society—is flattened and obscured by a directorial hand from outside that society into a more generic depiction of an easily recognizable social problem.

**Conclusion**

Aftaab’s two collective creation pieces to date have, unsurprisingly, brought the company’s work to new levels of circulation and participation in European international theatre.

69 Ibid.
festivals, particularly festivals with a political orientation. Through these pieces, the Aftaab actors have played a more active role as generative artists in developing their own work and have brought stories and experiences rarely depicted in professional theatre onto European stages—not in contexts of community-based theatre or events organized around issues of global social justice but rather in venues known for artistically rigorous and innovative theatre work. Unlike Théâtre du Soleil’s own production about the global refugee crisis, *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, Aftaab’s productions tend to not depict the stories of distant figures compelled or forced to leave their homelands in terms that are romantic, beautiful, and terrible. *Ce jour-là* and *La Ronde de nuit* are full of humor and mundane moments from daily life—with some exceptions.

The two pieces, quite different from each other, both relay experiences of lifetimes spent under shifting circumstances of war and insecurity. They also affirm—in different ways—Afghanistan as a real, contextualized place. For example, in the penultimate scene in *La Ronde de nuit* the characters gather to watch a photo slide show of images from Afghanistan; and the feeling of longing for home—however imperfect—is palpable. Both works illustrate anxiety and tensions around the responsibility of representing the Afghan people in the context of a dearth of representations outside of news media and human rights discourses. *Ce jour-là* is concerned centrally with Afghanistan itself—through the goals of teaching a European audience about recent Afghan history, interrupting dominant depictions of Afghans in the West, affirming positive Afghan cultural identity both for Afghans and the larger world, and asking questions about the country’s future. In contrast, *La Ronde de nuit* (despite this slide show scene) focuses its gaze not on Afghanistan’s future but instead primarily on possibilities of life in the diaspora. This is a work Aftaab could not have created before its own collective experiences living in
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Europe through the partnership with Théâtre du Soleil, and thus it illustrates how the transnational relationship in this case integrally influences the artists’ identities and their work.

As the most widely performed and most documented (in video, published play scripts, and reviews) productions to come out of Théâtre du Soleil’s program of support for Aftaab, the collectively created works *Ce jour-là* and *La Ronde de nuit* constitute artifacts of a complex asymmetrical transnational relationship. They are artistic products that would not have been created in the absence of the unique context that yielded them, and they communicate many of the anxieties and insecurities inherent in Aftaab’s position as Afghan artists in France. Théâtre du Soleil’s formation and support of Aftaab were indeed productive and life-changing for a set of individuals, but there is little clarity as to what kinds of long-term influence these experiences will have on the performance culture of contemporary Afghanistan or on the Aftaab members’ futures as artists. The defining characteristic of the Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab story is that it was driven by a company—and an individual—with its own robust aesthetic vision and political motivation, focused primarily on the creation and production of new work. In the second half of my dissertation I turn to the Sundance East Africa Theatre Lab, a transnational development program with less overt political vision and a prioritization of artistic process over product. While the Sundance Institute Theatre Program’s approach to transnational work has differed greatly from that of Théâtre du Soleil, my treatment of this second case study examines many of the same tensions present in the first, particularly related to questions of responsibility, autonomy, aesthetics, and sustainability.
Chapter Three

Chapter Three: Friction in Transnational Development
Through Sundance Institute East Africa

The Sundance Institute East Africa program was initiated by a U.S. impulse for cultivating global connection. It was fueled by a combination of philanthropic longing and longing for cultural exchange, and funneled through the vocabulary of an early-twenty-first-century elite U.S. developmental theatre program. While the program functioned partially to usher a select group of East African artists into the circulation of “global theatre,” bolstered with powerful Sundance brand endorsement, many points of friction throughout the program’s run revealed ruptures in its universalizing rhetoric of implicit assumption that great theatre can be nurtured in the developmental lab environment and will translate across cultural contexts. The program constituted a significant influx of resources into an environment where artists struggle to produce work addressing pressing social and political issues under limited financial support, varying degrees of formal and informal censorship, and trends in international NGO work supporting Theatre for Development at the expense of other performance work. Sundance’s self-reflective, critically aware but not always successful negotiation of the ethical position of transnational cultural work across uneven positions of geopolitical privilege yielded interactions demonstrative of what anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing calls “friction: the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference.”¹ These interactions are, as Tsing emphasizes, both limiting and productive, as well as unwieldy and surprising, with some of the most prominent outcomes exceeding and altering the intentions of the program.

¹ Tsing, Friction, 4.
Many unresolved tensions thread throughout this chapter, and through the Sundance Institute East Africa (SIEA) program in general. These include tension around the nature of a U.S. arts organization’s responsibility to address systemic inequality in its work in so-called developing countries; tension between Sundance’s pursuit of its institutional mission through work in East Africa, on the one hand, and the needs of East African artists, on the other—not necessarily at odds with each other, but not necessarily aligned, either; tension over the cultural values implicitly embedded in artistic methodology and over what constitutes African agency in a program run primarily by U.S. Americans and modeled on a U.S.-based program; and tension between the functional, socially embedded, and performative nature of much African theatre, and the professionalized and decontextualized orientation of the Sundance development model. In this chapter, I analyze the multiple vectors of thinking and feeling about artistic engagement across cultural difference and geographic divide that drove the SIEA’s formation and duration, parsing out how particular choices generated a particular set of limitations and affordances, including both reinforcing existing systems of inequality and precipitating bold and subversive performance events in the East Africa region. Some of these bold performances and performances events are the subject of the subsequent chapter, in which I analyse the aftermath of the SIEA program through its most direct institutional offspring, the Kampala International Theatre Festival.

It is useful here to establish a brief overview of the SIEA program’s trajectory. SIEA developed as the first sustained international endeavor of the Sundance Institute Theatre Program, growing out of several individual U.S. theatre professionals’ separate forays into work with theatre artists in East Africa during the first few years of the twenty-first century. While much of the funding for these early forays came from a Ford Foundation grant attached to
interest in establishing U.S. support of theatre in that region, within a few years the Sundance Institute Theatre Program, under the leadership of Philip Himberg, assumed ownership of an ongoing project initiating exchange between U.S. American and East African theatre artists. For eight years the Sundance Theatre Program conducted research trips in East Africa to learn about the performing arts context of the region, also featuring theatre workshop exchanges between U.S. American and African artists, and brought small numbers of East African artists (first as observers and later as artists in residence) to the yearly Sundance Theatre Labs in Park City, Utah and Banff, Alberta, Canada. SIEA officially convened an advisory council in 2008, and between 2010 and 2013 it conducted four theatre labs for African artists, located in East Africa and devoted to developing theatre projects by African playwrights and directors, with the support of Sundance-appointed dramaturgs or artistic advisors—often U.S. Americans but sometimes Africans. The SIEA labs generally followed the structure and methodology of Sundance Theatre Program’s yearly labs for U.S.-based artists. In 2014 the Sundance Theatre Program formally wound down its work in East Africa, collaborating with artists and arts administrators in the region to help set in motion several new theatre festivals and pledging a degree of ongoing financial and administrative support to these new institutions, but ultimately ending its period of sustained direct work in the region.

This chapter begins with an examination of the larger Sundance Institute’s position within the cultural field of its home U.S. context. I argue that Sundance’s institutional structure, funding, and approaches to art making are products of the neoliberal era. The implicit effect of this orientation played out in many aspects of Sundance’s creation of SIEA, even as the program presented resistance to certain dominant neoliberal trends in theatre interventions in Africa today. I demonstrate how Sundance Theatre Program’s self-reflective practices and sensitivity to
the cultural politics of global interaction in the postcolonial context did shape the evolution of SIEA in many productive ways; while at the same time Sundance retained some blind spots in regards to its wielding of power in the region, yielding points of rupture between its institutional goals and the needs of East African artists. In the second half of the chapter I turn to the SIEA theatre labs themselves, considering trends in the choices of program-supported artists and the nature of their projects, as well as the artists’ own reflections on their experiences in the program in relation to their careers and development as artists. I argue that while Sundance emphasized the cultural exchange component between U.S. American and East African artists in their framing of the program, SIEA’s most significant outcomes had to do with the generation of unprecedented interactions among artists from within the six featured countries of East Africa, leading to the emergence of new regional and international theatre festivals that are the subject of the following chapter. The study of SIEA presented here contributes to the larger dissertation’s examination of the ethics and aesthetics of twenty-first-century transnational theatre development programs, revealing how Sundance’s depoliticized neoliberal institutional approach has differed from that of Théâtre du Soleil, driven by its centralized aesthetics, communitarian ideology, and sixties-era politics.

Sundance Institute East Africa Program Origins

In order to understand the implications of Sundance Theatre Program’s involvement in East Africa, it is necessary to examine the position that the Sundance Theatre Program holds in its primary context of the United States, as well as the convergence of ideological influences that inspired its interest in East African theatre. As a small subset of the larger Sundance Institute, the Sundance Theatre Program shares its parent organization’s position as an arts organization of the
neoliberal era, in which non-profits have shouldered increased responsibility for cultural production and have increasingly adopted behaviors of the for-profit and commercial world in order to survive. The Sundance Theatre Program also shares the larger Sundance Institute’s veneration of “independence,” a value that simultaneously positions the organization in opposition to market forces and affirms a neoliberal valuing of individual freedoms above political conviction. As I will argue, the Sundance Theatre Program, a much smaller operation than its parent organization, derives an elite position in the United States from its extremely high selectivity rate and its eschewal of interest in the theatre market, but its relationship to this market is also an ambivalent one, as it depends on some degree of commercial success to ensure ongoing funding. Sundance Theatre Program’s position in the cultural economy of the U.S. informs the direction and shape of its work abroad. Whereas the Sundance Theatre methodology, in many ways reproduced with little adaptation in the SIEA program, appears at first glance to be devoid of aesthetics or ideology, it contains within it, and emanates from, a set of ideological assumptions about arts creation, politics, and commerce.

The larger Sundance Institute was founded in 1981 by film actor, director, and cultural activist Robert Redford to “foster independence, risk taking, and new voices in American film.” Today Sundance’s programs have grown to include a variety of programmatic support for the creation of documentary and feature film, including special programs supporting film music and multidisciplinary work, as well as programs promoting marginalized voices such as the Native American and Indigenous Filmmakers Fellowship, the Female Filmmakers Initiative, and the Diverse Storytellers Initiative. Most famously, Sundance runs the annual Sundance Film Festival in Utah, as well as the summer Next Fest, international festivals in London and Hong Kong.

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grant programs, artist workshops, public programs, and—the Theatre Program, which makes up a small fraction of the larger organization’s activity and budget. The overall Sundance vision is about “support[ing] independent storytellers and advance[ing] the impact of their work in the world,” asserting that, “a story driven by an individual, authentic voice can awaken new ideas that have the power to delight and entertain, push creative boundaries, spark new levels of empathy and understanding, and even lead to social change.” While Sundance’s work has always primarily focused on film, the Sundance theatre program is almost as old as the film program (in 1984 Sundance took over the four-year-old Utah Playwrights Conference, turning it into the Sundance Theatre Lab). In 1997 Philip Himberg, hired to direct the Theatre Program, restructured the existing Lab to incorporate teams of artists (playwrights, directors, actors, dramaturgs, and others) into the development process, rather than solely supporting playwrights. By the early 2000s, the Lab had taken on much of its current form: artistic teams gather for three weeks at the 5,000 acre Sundance Resort in the Wasatch Mountains of Utah to rehearse every other day, with alternate days devoted to rewriting and reflection. Sundance takes on the responsibility of casting actors for the workshops and assigning each project team a dramaturgical advisor. The Lab placed—and continues to place—a strong emphasis on process over product, with a final presentation of each new in-process work open only to that year’s Lab participants, and purposefully disconnected from any critical or commercial presence.

The Sundance Theatre Lab serves a purpose that many see as direly needed in today’s landscape of new U.S. American plays. Critics like Rick DesRochers bemoan that the “American regional theatre has lost its sense of purpose” and has “shriveled significantly” since a more

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3 Ibid.
robust period of regional nonprofit theatre in the 1950s and 60s, whereas today “funding concerns override the commitment to produce new work.”⁵ While Sundance is not the only new play development program in existence today, several qualities make it unique. Time is highly valued at the lab, which aims to give artists, in Himberg’s words, “stretched-out breathing time,” without pressure to prove productivity.⁶ The Sundance staff fiercely protects artists from commercial presence or audiences beyond the other lab participants. Another value is genre diversity, as the lab nurtures musicals, plays, as well as a variety of genre-bending performance work. Himberg also values the proximity to nature afforded by the Utah lab as “integral to nurturing the creative process.” Program alumni cite the care taken to provide for all non-artistic needs such as food and accommodations, the natural beauty, and the intimacy and vibrancy of the community of artists that emerges, as key to the uniquely valuable experience of the Lab. It is difficult to track the success of the program in any quantified way, as “disappointments and dead ends are common and viewed as being of small consequence,” but the program’s publicity materials do emphasize—for marketing reasons—projects that have attained popular and critical success, often on Broadway (such as *Spring Awakening, Passing Strange, The Laramie Project, I Am My Own Wife*, and *Fun Home*, to name a few).⁷ In Himberg’s words, “the space that defines

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⁷ Gener, “Sundance on the Move.” All of these pieces ran on Broadway after initial off-Broadway runs, except for *The Laramie Project*, which played in New York Off Broadway. The following production information refers to the original Broadway productions: *Spring Awakening*, book and lyrics by Steven Sater, music by Duncan Sheik, directed by Michael Mayer, Eugene O’Neill Theatre, New York, Broadway premiere December 10, 2006; *Passing Strange*, book and lyrics by Stew, music by Stew and Heidi Rodewald, directed by Annie Dorsen, Belasco Theatre, New York, Broadway premiere February 8, 2008; *The Laramie Project*, by Moisés Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project, directed by Moisés Kaufman, Union Square Theatre, New York, Off-Broadway premiere March 18, 2000; *I Am My Own Wife*, by
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the Sundance Theatre Program…is that precious wedge of time between ‘idea’ and ‘production,’ when artists dream, leap into their discomfort, their unknown, and get closer to their vision.\(^8\)

Indeed, Himberg declares he is more interested in supporting artists in whom he believes in a long-term capacity than he is in investing in individual projects that may or may not come to fruition. Rather than training artists or developing successful plays, the Sundance Theatre Lab invests in risk-taking artists with powerful visions, and timely, unique, even dangerous stories to tell.\(^9\)

The Sundance Theatre Program, along with the larger Sundance Institute more generally, is a product of neoliberal approaches to the process of art-making (rendering it fundamentally different from Théâtre du Soleil, the other theatre organization of the Global North whose transnational work is also the subject of this dissertation). The backdrop to the Sundance Institute’s story is the neoliberal turn in arts funding, in which direct government funding of the arts has been severely cut back and private sources of arts funding have become the status quo. The trend of cuts in government spending on culture, in keeping with broader neoliberal trends of privatization, deregulation, and the spread of corporate paradigms into arenas of social welfare, can be seen by the reduction of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding, which by 1997 was “close to half its former high.”\(^10\) Although non-profit arts organizations had long played a central role in U.S. American cultural and arts activity, the cuts in direct

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\(^8\) Himberg quoted in Gener, “Sundance on the Move.”

\(^9\) Gener, “Sundance on the Move.”

government funding of the arts placed new pressure on these non-profits to make up the deficit they created, ultimately contributing to the reorganization of funding structure in the arts non-profit sector.\textsuperscript{11} Lillian Lewis and Sara Wilson McKay conclude that “the involvement of private funding has complicated management structures and pushed nonprofit organizations to operate like for-profit businesses.”\textsuperscript{12} Many scholars critique the neoliberal trend of governments promoting private philanthropy as the future of arts funding. Jen Harvie, for example, contends that dependence on arts philanthropy “risks reinforcing social imbalances rather than challenging them” in several ways, including through the legitimization of government withdrawal of arts funding and through privileging conservative art forms.\textsuperscript{13} Sundance, created in the 1980s in the early years of neoliberal policy changes and coming of age under this new paradigm, is an example of a response to and accommodation of these trends.

Sundance’s relationship to neoliberal ideology is, however, complex. This complexity is clearly discernible in the organization’s largest and most visible branch, the Sundance Film Festival, which Sherry B. Ortner characterizes as a leading institution in the independent film “critical cultural movement” rising up in response to conditions of neoliberal capitalism.\textsuperscript{14} The festival has been known to promote independence as something close to a mantra of universal


\textsuperscript{13} Jen Harvie, Fair Play: Art, Performance, and Neoliberalism (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 157. Also, U.S. direct national funding for the arts today remains notoriously low in comparison to that of European countries. In 2012, direct U.S. government arts funding was less than one fifth what existed in the UK, with a much starker difference between the US and Germany. Ibid., 151.

liberation, through speeches as well as literature with declarations of “Free the artist” and “Free the Audience,” the latter described as craving “originality, diversity, and authenticity.” Some critics today, however, argue that the Sundance Film Festival has “succumbed to influences of market forces,” and become beholden to the stylistic, ideological, and budgetary standards set by Hollywood. Beyond these challenges to the festival’s bona fide anti-corporate credentials, Sundance’s emphasis on liberated individuals telling urgent, authentic stories emanating from their unique visions, unhindered by financial, political, or social restraints, is interesting in that it simultaneously comprises resistance to the hegemony of commerce-driven art creation and aligns Sundance with the neoliberal emphasis on the individual’s accomplishments and vision detached from broader networks of social organization.

Sundance rhetoric avoids particular political convictions, justifying its promotion of individual artistic vision as a critical factor towards protecting the “creative use of freedom in an

16 Matt Dee Cottrell, “The Question Concerning the Cooptation of the Sundance Film Festival: An Analysis of the Commodification of Independent Cinema,” (master’s thesis, Utah State University, 2009, ProQuest), 73-77. Part of the critique is that the festival has come to function as a showcase for filmmakers vying to be picked up by commercial studios. The commodification of the Sundance Film Festival, as emblematic of the direction of the independent film movement, has been the subject of many web articles. See, for example, Claire Atkinson, “Sundance is About Film—and Money,” NYPost, January 18, 2014, http://nypost.com/2014/01/18/sundance-is-about-film-and-money/; and Anthony Kaufman, “Why Indie Films Must Resist Hollywood,” ReelPolitik, June 14, 2013, http://blogs.indiewire.com/anthony/why-indie-films-must-resist-hollywood. Cottrell also suggests that Sundance Institute’s commitment to independence is compromised by its relationships with large corporations; for example, the Sundance Channel has built alliances with companies such as Amazon, Starbucks, Volkswagen, and Sky Vodka, and since 1998, Blockbuster has been a “major sponsor of the Sundance Film Festival.” Ibid., 28.
17 David Harvey describes one of neoliberalism’s tenets as discouragement against and distrust of strong social organizations, such as trade unions, in favor of weak (if any) collective entities such as voluntary charitable organizations. He explains that under the neoliberal agenda, “each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being,” and that “individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings.” Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, 65.
open society,” which it suggests cannot be sufficiently protected by “economic or political forces.”

Although the organization is driven by the liberal ideal of freedom of expression, and uses rhetoric that implies a broader social benefit is to be derived from this freedom, the language used is never overtly political—in keeping with neoliberal logic that separates out the protection of individual liberties from the demand for social justice.

The Sundance Theatre Program, comprising a small portion of the larger Sundance Institute, shares the parent organization’s emphasis on independent storytelling voices and eschewal of overt political orientation. In addition, the Sundance Theatre Program policy of selecting which artists to support based solely on merit—as determined by the program’s leadership—is in keeping with neoliberal meritocracy, which is “ostensibly the power of anyone who earns it, but is effectively the power of those who have the skills, resources and contact – the cultural capital, in other words – to do so.”

Even the basic premise that art can best be cultivated through the support of a professional institution with private funding detached from institutional, social, or ideological agendas confirms Sundance’s integral engagement with neoliberal logic.

The larger tension in Sundance’s relationship to anti-commercial values is mirrored in the Theatre Program’s ambivalent relationship with theatre’s market economy. Disavowing interest in commercial success is part of Sundance Theatre Program’s unique brand; its respected position in the cultural hierarchy of U.S. independent theatre rests partially on this disinterest in using its platform to help artists secure productions. The program accrues cultural capital from

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19 Harvey explains that the popularization of neoliberal ideology depended partially on appealing to the ethos of late 1960s protest movements which contained a tension between desire for individual freedoms and demand for social justice. Neoliberalism was positioned conducively to appeal to this value of individual freedom, while sidelining the value of social justice. Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, 40-42.
20 Harvie, Fair Play, 4.
this divestment from commercial or even critical success, but at the same time it must advertise those productions that do go on to achieve commercial success in order to secure ongoing funding. The Sundance Theatre Program in particular holds a unique position in relation to the larger Sundance Institute, of which the Sundance Film Festival is, of course, the most visible and broadly recognized entity. Sundance Theatre Program derives prestige from its connection to the visible Sundance brand, while enjoying an elite position through its lower profile in the eye of the public, its insider position as a highly respected program among U.S. theatre artists, its extremely low admission rate, and its rigorous maintenance of privacy and inaccessibility to industry workers. The Theatre Program stands to accrue a new kind of artistic capital from expanding internationally even though—or perhaps partially because—the staff has had to consistently work hard to justify their commitment to the East Africa program to Sundance’s upper leadership. A more cynical perspective on Sundance Theatre Program’s international expansion is voiced in a Theatre Communications Group article, which described the Sundance theatre program as having reached a “maturation stage” and summed up the program’s work in East Africa remarking that “restless expansion is a distinct marker for such full bloom.”

The Theatre Program cannot increase the volume of its work in the United States without diminishing its level of selectivity. Running a program for artists on the other side of the world increases the program’s activity and visibility without threatening the program’s position on the home front. Moreover, Sundance benefits from association with a perceived exoticness of theatre in the region of East Africa in a time when consumption of cultural products from around the world is increasingly in vogue among cultural cosmopolitans.

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21 Gener, “Sundance on the Move.”
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Having established the Sundance Theatre Program’s position as a product of the neoliberal context of arts development, its ambivalent relationship to market success, and its position within its field of cultural production, I turn now to its above-mentioned impulse to expand internationally, specifically to East Africa. Sundance Theatre Program’s drive to develop an international program in East Africa was fueled by two main motivations that exist in tension with each other and give particular shape to this instance of global encounter: the motivation to support and the motivation to engage in exchange. On the one hand, the program sought to support theatre in a context where conditions are hostile to the art form because of lack of resources and a repressive political climate. On the other hand, it sought to enrich artists from geographically and culturally disparate parts of the world through facilitating deep and equitable artistic encounter between them. These two motivations bumped up against one another regularly, creating ruptures that expose the inconsistencies between needs of artistic communities in parts of the Global South and the priorities of a U.S. arts organization’s international programming. As such, Sundance’s sometimes contradictory internal motivations, brought into contact with the multiple motivations of East African artists, produced what Tsing calls “friction,” the “grip” of “heterogeneous and unequal encounters” that “can lead to new arrangements of culture and power.”

SIEA’s rhetoric of cultural exchange has its origin in the program’s early roots in arts philanthropy through a connection with the Ford Foundation. The word “philanthropy” here is tricky in that it directly implies support but is also directly tied to exchange in the context of cultural work. For both Philip Himberg and theatre director Roberta Levitow, 23 Himberg’s

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22 Tsing, Friction, 5.
23 Roberta Levitow is a U.S. theatre director, dramaturg, and teacher. She serves as the Senior Program Associate/International for the Sundance Theatre Program, a position that was created.
partner in conceiving the SIEA program, exposure to theatre in East Africa in the early 2000s was initiated by the Ford Foundation, which took interest in East Africa following the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. While cultural centers, including the German Cultural Center and Goethe Institute, Alliance Française, and British Arts Council, have presences in the region today, American cultural centers closed down decades before the start of the twenty-first century, leaving a void strongly felt by Levitow during her first trip to Nairobi.

Both Himberg and Levitow were brought (on separate trips) by Philip Arnoult, longtime director of the Center for International Theatre Development, who was working as a consultant for Ford with a mission of learning about the current theatre activity and viability of Ford support for her during the formation of SIEA. Levitow first travelled to East Africa in 2001 to facilitate the East African Theatre Workshop sponsored by the Ford Foundation East Africa office and the Center for International Theatre Development. In 2004 she co-founded Theatre Without Borders, which she currently co-directs. Levitow has received Fulbright Specialist grants to teach in Uganda, Hong Kong, and Romania. See note 31 for a description of Levitow’s organization Theatre Without Borders.


of theatre in the region. Himberg was tasked with writing a report about the theatre climate, and Levitow with facilitating a theatre workshop.27

This early connection to Ford Foundation programming links the origins of SIEA to a project of cultural diplomacy, or more accurately, to a subset of cultural diplomacy commonly referred to as “international arts philanthropy.” Formal cultural diplomacy, from an international relations perspective, refers to a diplomatic strategy through which a nation may “represent national values and beliefs abroad and also build positive attitudes in the foreign culture environment toward the country.”28 It is not surprising that in the twenty-first-century political economy, U.S. American cultural diplomacy happens primarily under the auspices of large private foundations, with six foundations—the Duke, Starr, Freeman, Mellon, Rockefeller, and Ford, respectively—responsible for the majority of grant-giving in the area of international arts philanthropy.29 Proponents of this kind of philanthropy or, as it is sometimes interchangeably called, international arts exchange, lament that under the intensifying circumstances of

27 Philip Himberg (Artistic Director, Sundance Institute Theatre Program), in discussion with the author, October 26, 2015; Roberta Levitow (Senior Program Associate-International, Sundance Institute Theatre Program), in discussion with the author, January 18, 2016.
29 Today France is the global leader in cultural diplomacy. In comparison with other wealthy countries such as the UK and Japan, the U.S. government allots significantly less money yearly toward such programs. Cultural diplomacy can take multiple forms, with France’s today manifesting primarily as cultural exchange facilitated by embassies and cultural centers. Grincheva explains that while the U.S. government invested actively in cultural diplomacy during the Cold War era, often in the form of government-sponsored tours of U.S. American musicians and theatre performances in the Soviet Union, since the end of the Cold War these programs have largely dissipated, with government funding no longer allocated for an endeavor whose efficacy is difficult to quantitatively evaluate. After 9/11 some voices within the State Department advocated for a new deployment of U.S. American cultural diplomacy, but the approach was not adopted—largely because using taxpayer money to promote U.S. American culture abroad was an unpopular concept given the ubiquity of U.S. American popular culture in the free-market global economy. Grincheva, “U.S. Arts and Cultural Diplomacy,” 172-73 and 178-79.
globalization, U.S. philanthropy directs only a tiny fraction of its resources toward international arts exchange, which supporters argue has the capacity to “enhance knowledge and correct stereotypes,” over time functioning to “foster a more open environment for diplomatic and political relations.”

This formulation of international arts philanthropy/exchange views artists as cultural ambassadors, influencing dispensations of foreign populations toward their home countries in ways that can positively impact political relationships between nations. Himberg and Levitow, however, developed their own thinking about international arts exchange that moved away from any formal interest in diplomatic relationships. Levitow in particular, whose early trips to East Africa led her to pursue other opportunities for international theatre exchange work and, in addition to serving as a Specialist with SIEA, to found the Theatre Without Borders network, developed her own theorization of the dynamics and potential successes of productive cultural exchange, which became important to SIEA’s development. In her estimation, “exchange”


31 Levitow founded Theatre Without Borders (TWB) as an informal group among colleagues in 2003 upon returning to the U.S. from her Fulbright residency at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, which led to a two-day symposium in 2005 in New York on the future of international exchange. Today, TWB is an “informal, volunteer, virtual community that shares information and builds connections between individuals and institutions interested in international theatre and performance exchange.” “About Us,” Theatre Without Borders Official Website, accessed March 19, 2017, http://www.theatrewithoutborders.com/. Partnering with many other organizations devoted to global humanitarian and social engagement causes, TWB provides archives and news alerts regarding events and funding opportunities for international artists as well as resources for artists in danger, organizes and participates in conferences and publications, and is linked to many ongoing projects of theatre for social engagement such as DNAWorks and The H.E.A.T. Collective, among others. See “Opportunities,” “Networking,” and “Initiatives,” on the same website.
differs from “diplomacy” in its eschewal of predetermined goals; its embrace of shared artistic exploration “leads to unanticipated and unpredictable revelations of inner, often unspoken and even unacknowledged truths” whose articulation and sharing she views as the precursor to “real change” within a society—the ultimate goal. Moreover, Levitow asserts that, “the process of interaction profoundly influences the lives of the artists and alters irrevocably their world-view, allowing for new communications between artists within and about their communities.” As she described to me, Levitow’s priority in the formation of SIEA quickly became the facilitation of “deep encounter between a place and another place.” The phrase “exposure and exchange,” which became the language that SIEA officially used to describe its work, was first Levitow’s formulation.

For both Himberg and Levitow, the concept of international arts exchange was compelling also for its ability to address perceived shortcomings of U.S. American theatre culture, namely U.S. theatre artists’ lack of exposure to world theatre and U.S. teaching institutions’ egregious blind spot in regards to African theatre. Himberg is adamant that his primary motivation for starting the SIEA program was to facilitate theatrical exchange for the sake of U.S. artists, whom he viewed as “woefully underexposed.” Bringing African artists to the Sundance lab in Utah, or to quote Himberg, “bringing Kiki to the mountain,” “changes

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32 Roberta Levitow, as quoted in Daniel Banks, “The Question of Cultural Diplomacy: Acting Ethically,” *Theatre Topics* 21, no. 2 (September 2011): 111. Banks himself uses the term “cultural diplomacy” to refer to the facilitation of a variety of performance-based programs outside of one’s home country towards goals such as encouraging self-expression, leadership training, community-building, and building bridges between marginalized and majoritarian populations, often in contexts of poverty and social and political marginalization and oppression. Banks, “The Question of Cultural Diplomacy, 109-10.
33 Levitow, discussion.
34 Himberg, discussion.

36 This frustration led Levitow to reach out to Philip Arnoult, who happened to be on campus at Bennington College. Levitow, discussion.

However, supporting theatre development in Africa necessarily takes on another level of signification because it enters into a relationship with the discourse of Development (with a capital “D”), replete with connotations of the spread of global capitalism, the IMF’s structural adjustment programs, and the proliferation of international NGOs. Much scholarship has critiqued international development organizations such as NGOs as little more than replacements for older models of violent imperialism. Slippage between development and Development creates a stickiness that SIEA has inhabited, sometimes uncomfortably.

In approaching theatre work in Africa, Sundance automatically became enmeshed in larger trends of Global North involvement in cultural development in sub-Saharan Africa. This trend is largely defined by Theatre for Development (TfD), of which SIEA staff was critical from the start, and from which careful to distance their work. Categorized by theatre practitioners and scholars today as a subset of “applied theatre” and having much in common with practices that in other parts of the world are often referred to as “community-based theatre,” TfD refers to a variety of practices using participatory, embodied theatrical expression to collectively explore, analyze, and even propose and rehearse solutions to social and political problems embedded in a community. In the context of neoliberalism, one of the most prominent demands placed on theatre and performance is the imperative to be “useful.” As such, TfD is a product of the trend

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38 Development rhetoric emerged after World War II, articulated clearly in President Harry Truman’s inaugural address that separated the world into the “developed” and the “underdeveloped” or “developing,” introducing a paradigm in which “those who do not live as ‘we do’ are seen as lacking the benefits of our economic and political system.” Tim Prenktti, “History and Origins of Theatre for Development,” in Applied Theatre: Development, ed. Tim Prenktti (New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 9.

39 For example, Miranda Joseph argues that the so-called “sustainability” development work pursued by international NGOs actually endeavors to make the “underdeveloped” world sustainable for the global spread of capitalism. Joseph, Against the Romance of Community (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 95-98.
of the strategic and instrumental use of arts and arts institutions “as devices for developing economies, cities, and society.”

While sometimes run by African organizations and African facilitators, a great deal of TfD in Africa is run by international NGOs that receive funding for their programs from private or public sources in the country of origin. A proliferation of scholarship exists on TfD in Africa, characterizing it as a complex interaction of local and pre-colonial performance practices with contemporary global methodologies of community-based theatre, such as Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed. Much of this scholarship characterizes TfD in different parts of Africa as complex and holding great potential but also compromised in its power due to funding and power related conundrums, potentially reduced to being merely a “simulacrum of people’s culture.” Some scholarship goes so far as to argue that TfD is frequently used to deceptively justify neoliberal policies of global capitalism through a participatory approach. Indeed, my

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42 Ibid., 191. For example, Dale Byam views TfD practices as a potentially empowering return to more indigenous African performance traditions in the postcolonial era, but critiques many iterations of TfD as failing to embody liberatory processes of Freirian grassroots pedagogy key to achieving conscientization. See Byam, Community in Motion: Theatre for Development in Africa (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin and Garvey, 1999). Authors such as Julie Koch and Shule raise ongoing questions about the capacity for TfD to empower grassroots communities when programs are dictated by international NGO financing. Shule glosses several sources arguing that the ubiquitous model, in which TfD programs are accountable to donor organizations, necessarily implies a conflict of interest between the donor organizations rubric of quantifiable development and the grassroots desires of local communities. See Julie Koch, Karibuni Wanachi: Theatre for Development in Tanzania (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 2008); and Shule, “Theatre In/For Development in Tanzania.” Ola Johanssen debates TfD’s concrete effectiveness at diminishing particular social problems such as HIV transmission. Johanssen, Community Theatre and AIDS (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
43 Shule makes this argument explicitly. Shule, “Theatre In/For Development in Tanzania,” 211. Related to TfD but sometimes categorized separately are practices such as theatre for reconciliation and theatre for transitional justice, which scholarship has likewise revealed to be
fieldwork in Uganda has brought me into conversation with many East African artists who view TfD as a phenomenon that has suffocated local expressive practices by linking money to theatre with concrete effect-orientation, thereby reducing its affective and aesthetic potential, and by introducing monetary incentives for participation in theatre projects, thereby discouraging interest in theatre without the monetary incentives that NGOs can furnish.

Sundance’s rejection of TfD paradigms is a significant challenge to the neoliberal imperative for art-making, especially art-making in the so-called developing world, to be made concretely useful. 44 But in other ways, the SIEA program did participate in a discourse of “Development.” The Sundance Theatre Program has an ambivalent relationship to the idea of their work addressing need or lack. On the one hand, Sundance Theatre’s work is never formally about need; its emphasis on merit is crucial to maintaining the position it holds in the field of professional theatre. On the other hand, the larger Sundance Institute clearly has committed some of its resources to goals of supporting expressive creation by marginalized voices—as evidenced, for example, by its special programs for women and Native American artists. Sundance Theatre does not have comparable programs, although it does pride itself on the diversity of projects it complex, with many political, social, and economic factors potentially limiting its healing or otherwise productive capacity. For example, see Ananda Breed’s discussion of how much government-sponsored theatre for reconciliation in Rwanda engages in politically motivated myth-making and the silencing of certain voices. Ananda Breed, “Performing the Nation: Theatre in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” TDR: The Drama Review 52, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 32-50. Laura Edmondson has problematized practices of “theatre activism” engaged in by applied theatre facilitators from the Global North in the region of East Africa, illuminating ways in which artists may push themselves into situations where they are simply not wanted, or in which participation in their facilitated programs is coerced. Edmondson, “Confessions of a Failed Theatre Activist.”

44 Himberg, Levitow, and Christopher Hibma, Producing Director of Sundance Theatre Program, all conveyed to me their desire to disassociate their work from NGO theatre, particularly in regards to its reductive treatment of social issues and utilitarian purpose. Himberg, discussion; Levitow, discussion; Christopher Hibma (Producing Director, Sundance Institute Theatre Program), in discussion with the author, October 5, 2015.
supports, as defined by genre, story, and voice. While promotional materials did not express so,\textsuperscript{45} the Sundance staff did see their work, to some degree, as addressing areas of lack or need in the region of East Africa. Himberg agreed with me that, secondarily, need did play a role in SIEA, in the sense that Sundance Theatre would not have launched a program in regions where well-resourced new play development programs already exist.\textsuperscript{46} At a deeper level, some Sundance staff members describe their early thinking about theatre in the region in relation to a quality of lack based on an incomplete process of cultural decolonization. Himberg in particular was motivated by what he saw as a profound hole left by the legacy of British colonialism. He describes teaching a playwriting workshop in Kenya in which he asked writers to go out onto the street and write monologues from the voices of beggars and street people, recounting the following interaction:

They were written in the Queen’s English, and I asked, would that person speak in that English? And they said no, and I asked well why didn’t you write in a vernacular? And they said, well that’s what they know. That’s what we were taught. And I asked, again naively, well why wouldn’t you write it in Kiswahili, and they said, well we don’t know it well enough. And it was this dawning light, that language had literally been robbed from several generations of people in British Africa.\textsuperscript{47}

Himberg was dismayed to find that a substantial amount of theatre happening in Kenya was in the style of British comedy, an industry being run by what he saw as “colonized theatre people.”\textsuperscript{48} What inspired him was the presence of a younger generation of artists who “didn’t

\textsuperscript{45} In fact, unlike Théâtre du Soleil, the SIEA team produced very little formal messaging about the program for any public consumption. They have not published their observations about theatre in the region of their intervention, nor did they produce narratives in public-facing mediums about the program other than brief videos of photos from the labs set to music and a final document on the Sundance Institute website profiling the seventeen most prominently supported East African artists.

\textsuperscript{46} Himberg, discussion.

\textsuperscript{47} Himberg, discussion.

\textsuperscript{48} For example, Himberg commented on a production of \textit{No Sex Please, We’re British}, at the Phoenix Theatre in Nairobi. Ibid.
have one foot in the old British system,” artists who were doing something new. Through the SIEA U.S. American staff members’ exploratory trips to East Africa, they developed evaluations of the state of contemporary theatre in each respective countries, sometimes colored by ideas about what theatre in these countries should look like.

Himberg’s impulse to participate in the decolonizing process of African theatre was ultimately translated into the apolitical framework of supporting independent theatre aligned with the Sundance Theatre Program’s general set of aesthetic criteria: formal innovation, boundary-pushing, risk-taking in terms of content, and timeliness.\(^49\) While SIEA’s evolution was driven by the evolving values of a few key individuals as illustrated above, when it came to justifying the program to the larger Sundance Institute, it was not the value of cultural exchange nor the desire to support theatre development in the face of need that Himberg drew on, but rather the language of Sundance’s larger institutional mission, emphasizing the value of the product that the program would yield. As Sundance’s mission is to find and nurture independent storytelling voices, Himberg argued that a new generation of these voices would most prominently be found (that is, outside of the U.S. context) in places undergoing social change and lack of stability. For this reason, he says, “I want to support storytellers in parts of the world where there is cultural, social, political unrest.”\(^50\)

The awkwardness of Himberg’s attempts to articulate SIEA’s work in the language of the Sundance Institute’s institutional mission belies a larger tension between institutional motivation

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\(^49\) Ibid. It is important to note that upon launching SIEA, and for the majority of its duration, Sundance did not receive additional funding for its work in East Africa. Rather, Himberg made the international work a core program, using part of the Sundance Theatre Program’s general operating budget and cutting back in other areas of programming in order to maintain the East Africa program when the 2008 recession led to reduced budgets for every branch of the Sundance Institute. Himberg explains that in recent years they have received some money toward the international program from a private family foundation.

\(^50\) Ibid.
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and personal, emotional desire. Himberg and Levitow, both through their relationships to Ford
Foundation and Arnoult, pursued their initial forays into theatrical work in East Africa with
primarily personal motivations and curiosity; these initial trips fanned the flames of new desires
which were, at their most basic level, motivated by the thrill and enrichment these individuals
experienced in these encounters. For example, Himberg explains how on a personal level, he
values the SIEA program for the expansive theatre experiences it has afforded him:

I’m sitting here looking at the Saint James Theatre marquis … and yes, that’s part of my
life, I’m a Broadway Tony nominator. But I have a memory of sitting on the dhow, in
Kenya, with Mrisho Mpoto, listening to him sing with the sailors a song in Kiswahili.
And I was part of that world for a moment, even though I grew up in the Bronx and he
grew up in a village in Tanzania, that both of us express our humanity through a thing
called theatre.\textsuperscript{51}

Personally felt desires for transnational connection function as powerful motivators. It is this
personal-level, emotional, and affective longing for global connection that in turn powered the
formation of the SIEA program, compelling those driving the program’s development to
formulate this longing in the vocabulary of the institution that had the capacity to fuel it with
material resources and social legitimacy. As Tsing demonstrates, this intention toward the other,
acted upon through myriad structures for diverse motivations, is the catalyst of the “heterogenous
and unequal encounters” where friction occurs. But these encounters create “new arrangements
of culture and power,”\textsuperscript{52} including enabling the spread of capitalism, which happens as
“producers, distributers, and consumers strive to universalize categories of capital, money, and

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. Himberg’s juxtaposition of his habitual theatre world, the commercial world of
Broadway, with the scene of sailors on a boat singing in Swahili, a language known for its poetic
quality, positions the African performance context as authentic, innocent, anti-commercial,
romantic, and integrated into regular life rather than virtuosic or professional. This juxtaposition
is elaborated by the urban/rural contrast of the Bronx versus a Tanzanian village.

\textsuperscript{52} Tsing, \textit{Friction}, 5.
commodity fetishism.”

Thus, Himberg and Levitow’s personal longing for and embodied thrills in connecting globally prompted the forging of a new path through which the nonprofit funds of the Sundance Institute flowed, and continue to flow (or trickle) along exclusive and highly regulated routes, to Africa, to support the creation of cultural products there.

These encounters across difference involve friction, both restrictive and productive, through the bumping up against each other of competing goals, uneven agency, and differentiated mobility. Tsing’s concept of friction does not excuse or neutralize violences committed through global encounter, nor does it read resistance into all disruptions of global power.

I turn now to the SIEA program’s approach to navigating the inherent friction in the encounters it initiated, including attempts at mitigating inherently problematic aspects of their work, ruptures in this endeavor, and products of the encounter that exceeded and supplanted the program’s formal goals.

Building the SIEA Program: Negotiations of Agency

SIEA is vastly different from many late-twentieth-century experiments in intercultural theatre, and from training programs open to international artists or programs bringing artists from the Global South to train with artists in centers of former colonial power, in its strategic, preemptive concern with ethical engagement, promotion of peer-to-peer exchange, and avoidance of imposing U.S American aesthetic values or embodying a hierarchical, apprenticeship relationship (such as that between the Aftaab actors and Théâtre du Soleil) in their work. The

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53 Ibid., 4.
54 Ibid., 6.
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first and most obvious manifestation of these concerns is the program’s eight-year period of
research and exploration, in which the Sundance team took multiple trips to the region,
developed ongoing relationships with artists in each of the six countries, and utilized methods of
transparency in regards to their proposed work with the region. Deborah Asiimwe, the Ugandan
playwright who served on the staff of the Sundance Theatre Program and played a central role in
the program’s administration and decision-making, asserts that Sundance’s many years of
research in the region set them apart meaningfully from other wealthy donor country
organizations that simply enter, run programs, and leave.

Sundance’s approach to equitably engaging artists from the region of East Africa began
with reaching out to a wide spectrum of artists from many pockets of each city’s performing arts
landscape. Himberg describes the approach that his team took in these trips preceding the start
of the formal East Africa Theatre Lab, highlighting strategies of transparency and of developing
knowledge of the existing theatre communities and cultural contexts. In 2008 Sundance staff
members began conducting formal research trips to Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania with the
purpose of learning more about the existing theatre activity, established and early-career artists,
and interests and desires of the theatre communities of each country. They brought with them
U.S. American theatre artists Charlayne Woodard and Noah Heidel, evidencing an interest in

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56 The exact number of years that Sundance spent doing research in the region is fluid, since the
first period of exploration involved Himberg and Levitow, separately, visiting the region before
Sundance institutional support was formally in place. The Sundance Institute website’s published
timeline of SIEA lists 2002, in which Sundance brought two East African theatre artists (Charles
Mulekwa and Gichora Mwangi) to the Theatre Lab in Utah as observers, as the program’s first
year. “Sundance Institute East Africa Timeline and Metrics,” Sundance Institute Official
57 Deborah Asiimwe (playwright; Co-Director, Kampala International Theatre Festival; former
East Africa Specialist, Sundance Institute Theatre Program-International), in discussion with the
author, December 2, 2015.
58 This emphasis on cities automatically privileges urban over rural artists.
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peer-to-peer exchange. Himberg describes the method that the team used of entering each new context and striving to make itself available to a broad spectrum of artists:

We would always go in to a new place and have three meetings. We would meet with the highest-level artists and they would do the workshops. Then there’d be another level of acknowledging the grandfathers, acknowledging the people who we probably didn’t want to support because they were sort of rigid in their old fashioned thinking, but we wanted to respect and honor them, so we’d always have a meeting. And then we’d have another ‘court,’ which was in every country that we landed in, an open meeting at the national theatre, and anyone could come and speak—and the younger people would show up, and one by one they’d get up—and one was a skateboarder, and one was a hip hop kid...59

The Sundance team and U.S. artists would teach workshops and in turn participate in workshops taught by established African artists, such as prominent Kenyan actor and playwright Mumbi Kaegwa and Ugandan playwright Gichora Mwangi.60 Although Rwanda was not part of the mix from the start, the Sundance team soon connected with Rwandan artists as well, bringing Odile Gakire Katese and Carole Karemera to Kampala to teach workshops. Himberg describes his and the Sundance team’s desire to maintain an “open suitcase” policy. They were told about the common phenomenon in postcolonial decades of Westerners arriving in Africa with suitcases, proceeding into meetings with local officials behind closed doors, and leaving after the completion of a transaction that remained mysterious to the majority of the population. The Sundance team committed themselves to opening their metaphorical suitcase, which meant, among other things, communicating clearly what they were and were not there to do. Himberg

59 Himberg, discussion. Himberg’s comments here do not elaborate on how Sundance determined who were the “highest-level artists” in each country.
explains, “We said we’re not going to produce your work, and we’re not going to give you grants; we are exchange peer to peer, and we are interested in America in new forms and in breaking forms, and we’re interested in that in Africa as well. We’re not here to teach.”

Nonetheless, Sundance’s initiation of this long-term program of encounter produced frictions in the form of contradictions, discrepancies, tensions, and ruptures. This friction is visible even—perhaps particularly—in the organization’s efforts to prioritize African agency in the labs, which became the centerpiece of the program’s activities, through deployment of Sundance Theatre Program artistic development methodology, the selection of dramaturgical lab advisors, and the institution of African leadership within SIEA. The program was characterized both by rigorous self-reflection and attention to the ethical component of cultural politics, as well as by complex power dynamics and sometimes unself-conscious wielding of soft power. There was often tension between Sundance’s intentions to mitigate or altogether avoid problematic aspects of their presence and the demands of the immediate material realities of their work and requests of the participating artists.

One important point around which friction emerged was the question of Sundance methodology. Sundance Theatre Program rhetoric promotes the idea that the organization does not formally possess its own aesthetic, and that its lab methodology is comprised primarily of an absence of methodology, a creation of open space in which artists may ask questions, individually and together, with the support of artistic advisors who themselves primarily ask questions as well. This depiction of the Sundance Theatre Lab’s methodology was conducive to presenting the Sundance East Africa program in culturally respectful and non-intrusive terms. The idea that Sundance does not promote a culturally specific methodology or aesthetic, but

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61 Himberg, discussion.
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rather primarily provides resources that empower artists to pursue their visions—in the context of artistic community—assuaged, for some, concerns about the imposition of Western aesthetics.

Sundance staff is aware, theoretically at least, that a neutrality of methodology or of ways of thinking about theatre more generally is a fallacy. Moreover, to downplay Sundance’s unique set of strengths and experience in new play development would have been, in a sense, counterproductive in its erasure of the very resources that Sundance had to offer. Himberg expressed to me an acute awareness that everything Sundance does is influenced by a U.S. American perspective and that he is incapable, personally, of not being a U.S. dramaturg. Christopher Hibma, Producing Director of the Sundance Theatre Program, describes the Sundance staff approach to asserting its own methodology in the intercultural context as an ongoing negotiation:

We’ve swung the pendulum. At the very beginning of our work, and we’ve continued to revert to this, saying we don’t know anything. You have to teach us. So that’s one end of the pendulum. And the other end is to really claim what we do know. We do know some things, and we do have a history of experience to provide as evidence to that, and we should not shy away from that. So it’s a balance of being kind and respectful and culturally appropriate, as well as championing the things that we do know about storytelling. 62

By initiating this program of global encounter, Sundance placed itself in a double bind of seeking to eschew a stance of cultural imperialism while also not withholding its resources and expertise. Levitow, who assumed the role of Senior Program Associate-International, discusses the importance of being transparent about cultural perspective when working internationally, specifically recalling the first workshop she led in East Africa:

I said it openly. This is what I come from. I come from a culture where we are the protagonists in our own drama, and we value creativity, innovation, and personal expression. So that’s what we’re gonna do. We also value action, and I will break down what I mean by action, versus rhetorical or ideological performance. I acknowledge

62 Hibma, discussion.
that these are my prejudices. But I said, you’re here to be exposed to me, and I’m here to be exposed to you. I’m not a neutral space, but I’m not going to predict what you’re going to do.63

U.S. playwright Erik Ehn’s critique of the value of cultural neutrality as an ideal to strive for in intercultural work is useful here as a reminder of the danger of claiming a space or an approach to be culturally neutral when, in fact, no such neutrality exists.64 Ehn urges cultural workers working in contexts outside of their cultural home to ask themselves, “How is our neutrality violent? To what degree do we a) long to intervene? And b) actually intervene in ways we are not declaring?”65 A claim of cultural neutrality is by default an act of implicitly rendering a particular cultural position invisible by making it normative.

Sundance also sought to promote African agency through the inclusion of African artists as dramaturgical project advisors. At the SIEA labs, Sundance followed its standard protocol of pairing artistic teams (with a playwright or director at the helm, depending on the project) with

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63 This particular workshop was sponsored by the Ford Foundation in 2001 and was not formally part of the Sundance Institute East Africa program. I quote this here to illustrate the culturally particular nature of Levitow’s thinking about theatre. Levitow, discussion.
64 Erik Ehn has intertwined with the SIEA program in several ways. Ehn, who currently heads the graduate playwriting program at Brown University, previously served as Dean of the School of Theatre at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) and was instrumental in Deborah Asiimwe’s attendance of that program for her MFA. As a playwright, Ehn has written Soulographie, a cycle of seventeen plays addressing twentieth-century genocides, including the play Maria Kizito, about two nuns who are convicted of complicity in the killing of 7,000 people seeking refuge in their convent. Ehn’s interest in the region of East Africa began upon reading a news article in 2000 that inspired Maria Kizito and, eventually, a long-term collaboration with Jean-Pierre Karegeye, a Rwandan who was at the time a PhD candidate at U.C. Berkeley. With Karegeye, Ehn has run the Arts in the One World Conference, an annual event “devoted to the intersection of arts and genocide,” organized trips to Rwanda for students, artists, and scholars to study genocide and its aftermath and commemoration, and formed the Interdisciplinary Genocide Studies Center in Kigali. Laura Edmondson, “Genocide Unbound: Erik Ehn, Rwanda, and an Aesthetics of Discomfort,” Theatre Journal 61, no. 1 (March 2009): 65-67. Also see the Soulographie Official Website, accessed March 19, 2017, http://www.soulographie.org/. Ehn participated from an early stage in formative discussions leading to Levitow’s creation of Theatre Without Borders, and TWB has participated regularly in the Arts in the One World Conference. “About Us,” Theatre Without Borders Official Website.
advisors who functioned often as dramaturgs or, in some cases, as directors. Sundance chose to include some of their regular dramaturg collaborators as well as several U.S. American and African playwrights and directors who Himberg believed would be able to productively and respectfully negotiate the layered cultural context. Director Liesl Tommy, South African-born but raised in the United States, was the most recurring advisor figure, serving in several capacities at all three of the East Africa Labs and the Directors Workshop. Other U.S. (and UK) artists who participated in the dramaturg role included playwright Lynn Nottage, theatre artist and musician Stew, dramaturg Janice Paran, playwright Lisa Peterson, and British director Indhu Rubasingham. African artists serving as lab advisors included Ugandan playwright, actor, and scholar George Seremba, Rwandan theatre artist Dorcy Rugamba, and Ugandan-American actor and playwright Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine. While it was important to the Sundance staff to include African artists in the advisory position, all of the African artists who served in this role had been living in a long-term capacity in Europe or North America and were experienced in European and U.S. American modes of professional theatre work. While the inclusion of African advisors marks an attentiveness to the need for African agency through the affirmation of African theatrical expertise, the choice of which African artists to employ as advisors is evidence of Sundance’s concern with control of methodology—not in the sense of shaping the aesthetics

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66 In some cases artistic groups came with their own director or were explicitly assigned a director.
67 Indhu Rubasingham has also worked extensively with the Royal Court International Playwrights program, a program that has had considerable crossover with SIEA in terms of supported artists. Elaine Aston and Mark O’Thomas, Royal Court: International (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
68 George Seremba and Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine’s work as playwrights is discussed in Brown-Vélez, “Travel and Migration, History, Identity, and Place.” Hope Azeda, a leader in contemporary Rwandan theatre, also participated in a SIEA lab as a director, but Sundance does not list her participation on their official timeline of the SIEA program. Her work is discussed in Amanda Montei’s article, “Performing Reconciliation.”
of the emerging piece in a particular direction, but in the sense of shaping the way that
dramaturgs and playwrights or other artists work together in a room. As such, SIEA maintained a
kind of disavowed control over modes of cultural engagement at the labs.

Another set of negotiations concerned with embedding African agency into the SIEA
program occurred around the question of African decision-making and leadership within SIEA.
In the early stages of the program’s formulation, Himberg and Levitow were well aware that they
could not run the program without East African participation at a leadership level and appointed
an advisory council of five East African artists. But in Levitow’s estimation, the advisory council
model that they established in 2008 was not successful, largely because she, Himberg, and
Hibma did not know how to use the council effectively. The dissolution of the council created a
rift between Sundance and Ugandan playwright and Performance Studies scholar Dr. Charles
Mulekwa, one of the first East African artists brought to the Utah lab, whose voice had been at
the center of early exploratory conversations about SIEA. Mulekwa warned Sundance that it was
unacceptable to run the SIEA program without East African leadership. In place of the council,
Sundance hired Asiimwe, who had just completed her MFA in Playwriting at Cal Arts, as a part-
and later full-time staff member. Asiimwe remained an integral member of the SIEA staff team
for the duration of the program, working in the Sundance Theatre Program office in Manhattan
and attending the labs, thereby ensuring a role for African leadership in the program’s high-level
decision-making. And yet, this move marked a power shift from African leadership as equals to
an employer-employee relationship between Himberg and Asiimwe, evidencing Sundance’s
reversion to a model with, again, more methodological control. Moreover, the change altered the

69 Levitow describes how Mulekwa wrote her a letter about his concern after the dissolution of
the advisory council. Levitow, discussion.
direct African input into program design from a chorus of potentially dissonant voices to one carefully chosen voice.

Sundance’s concern with embedding African agency into the SIEA program, and its incomplete success in doing so, points to a larger problematic regarding the organization’s wielding of power in the region. Despite SIEA’s formidable self-reflexive practices and strategies for sharing their resources without positioning themselves in a hierarchically powerful position in relation to theatre communities in East Africa, Sundance’s presence in East Africa inevitably included a wielding of soft power in ways of which the organization seemed not fully aware. This dynamic is visible in Mulekwa’s accounts of his early contact with Ford and Sundance affiliates. Mulekwa voices a recurring concern about international support for theatre in Uganda and East Africa at large habitually following an unsustainable in-and-out model.\(^70\) He also characterizes his first meeting with Roberta Levitow as layered with power dynamics and intercultural misunderstanding. In 2001, when Mulekwa’s play *In a Time of Fire* was playing in Kampala, he heard that a U.S. American woman was in town talking with theatre artists. She turned out to be Levitow. Mulekwa describes power and competition playing out from the start: “She was around, she met some people, there were these power games going on and everyone was trying to make sure we don’t meet, Roberta and I, and she was trying to make sure we met. Everybody was fighting for the little resources. She was kind of a precious commodity at that point.”\(^71\) Mulekwa’s account illuminates ways in which simply by being in Kampala as a representative of U.S. American institutional support for theatre, Levitow automatically

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\(^70\) As Mulekwa tells the anecdote, when the first Ford Foundation researcher knocked on his office door at the Uganda National Theatre in the early 2000s, he flatly told the researcher to go away several times before finally letting him in to hear what he had to say. This was before Levitow’s arrival, although Mulekwa did not specify who this researcher was. Dr. Charles Mulekwa (playwright and scholar), in discussion with the author, November 29, 2015.

\(^71\) Ibid.
embodied a kind of power in ways of which she might not have been aware. He recalls arranging a meeting with Levitow and bringing with him a group of other artists who he thought had been barred from meeting with her—and her misunderstanding his gesture, reading it as him bringing “backup.”

Mulekwa’s anecdotes illustrate some of the ways in which by representing a U.S. American organization, the representative automatically enters into a complex field of artists vying for resources.

Artists everywhere compete for resources, and there are few places in the world where artists find such resources to be abundant, but in a country like Uganda where arts funding from the government is minimal to nonexistent (or, when it does exists, in some cases is directly tied to loyalty to a semi-authoritarian government), such resources hold a magnified sway. This can mean that while facilitators of such programs with funding from, in this case, the U.S., are motivated by ideals of cross-cultural exposure and exchange, participants from the less resourced country might be compelled to participate solely because it is an opportunity to secure support. Levitow describes a difficult attempt at exposure and exchange through a theatre workshop that she co-facilitated prior to the formal start of SIEA, bringing together U.S. American, East African, and Polish artists. She comments that the workshop’s structure did not appear to come out of the participating artists’ particular desires, and the artists ended up developing new work separately in groups according to their regional identity.

It is crucial to recognize that when

72 Ibid.
73 Political scientist Aili Mari Tripp classifies contemporary Uganda as a semi-authoritarian state, a type of hybrid state that mixes elements of liberal democracy and authoritarianism. Tripp, Museveni’s Uganda: Paradoxes of Power in a Hybrid Regime (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2010), 13-14. The semi-authoritarian regime holds internal contradictions which “simultaneously pull the state toward both democracy and authoritarianism,” countering internal and external pressures to democratize with strong tendencies toward centralized authority and the bolstering of military forces. Ibid., 21-22.
74 Levitow, discussion.
opportunities for funding, exposure, and training are scarce, artists may be compelled to engage in intercultural work primarily as a means of securing material resources and access to training. Whereas for the participating artists from the initiating country, the encounter or exchange is an active choice for the sake of enrichment, for the (in this case) African artist, the willingness to “exchange” becomes the prerequisite to benefiting from international resources—which might be among a highly limited set of options for professional training in the national context.

Above, I have examined tensions between SIEA’s simultaneous commitment to ensuring African agency and implicit disavowal of its own control of methodology and curation of cultural engagement. Articulating this tension makes visible how the particular shape that SIEA assumed was not inevitable, but rather the resulting accumulation of concrete choices and actions. While many East African artists chose to apply and, for those accepted, to participate in the SIEA labs, the program was also met with criticism among some East African artists. These critical perspectives illuminate points of disconnect between what SIEA wished to offer and what artists in the region most needed.

Some of these critiques denaturalize choices made by SIEA, asserting a need for more African agency and questioning normative assumptions of Western dramaturgy and aesthetics. Others raise ethical considerations about the use of resources in the context of an economically struggling region. On the subject of the program’s limited use of experienced African playwrights as dramaturgical advisors, Mulekwa, who was involved in the early years of Sundance’s explorative work with East African artists, explains, “I wanted more agency on the part of Africans. And I don’t care if this African came from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, whatever. I wanted more….Ok, there is something to be gained from a young person working with an
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experienced dramaturg from another country, no question. But there’s also something to be gained from a young person working with a dramaturg who is actually African.\textsuperscript{75} Ugandan performance artist and social activist Okello Kelo Sam found the primary use of U.S.-based project advisors similarly problematic, suggesting also that in the case of the use of African advisors, the reliance on African artists primarily based in Europe and America does little to affirm African artistic agency.\textsuperscript{76} Mulekwa’s critique calls into question the effectiveness of Sundance’s approach to advisorship, suggesting that the interests of East African artists might best be met by pairing them with experienced African theatre artists. While he affirms the existence of a universality of drama, he rejects the concept of a universality of theatrical form, suggesting that the culturally specific taste that a particular artist holds in regards to theatrical form cannot help but influence their method of shaping or guiding artistic inquiry in a rehearsal room.\textsuperscript{77}

The choice to pair African artists with U.S. American or European advisors, sometimes functioning as directors, also raises questions about the ability and ethics of a Western artist running a rehearsal of an African project with African generative artists and performers. Theatre scholar Samuel Ravengai argues that commonly held ideas about the ideal neutral body of an actor, stemming from Stanislavsky-based acting technique, are perpetuated by, in the

\textsuperscript{75} Mulekwa, discussion, November 29, 2015.
\textsuperscript{77} Mulekwa (playwright and scholar), in discussion with the author, December 4, 2015.
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Foucauldian sense of the mutually constitutive relationship between power and knowledge, the privileged position of knowledge-making held by the dominant group. He illustrates how the so-called neutral body with which actors are expected to approach character in the staging of Western naturalism is influenced by the history of European court society, which is, of course, not neutral but particular. Ravengai asserts that “the body is therefore, like language, a carrier of culture and a repository of community memories,” and that “the African body is asked to lose far too much as compared to a Western-groomed body” in common Western approaches to modern drama. While the Sundance labs provide development support, not training, Ravengai’s position illuminates potential limitations of the directorship or artistic advisorship by a person without a strategic and culturally informed approach to maximizing the agency of African performers.

Other aspects of the Sundance Theatre Lab model harbor values that are not only culturally specific but problematic and even counterproductive given the material conditions under which many African artists struggle to work and live. The Sundance model of relocating artists for several-week-long labs in resort settings is designed to free artists from the concerns of daily life (including the most practical domestic responsibilities of, for example, food preparation) and to unleash creativity by constructing a retreat environment and sense of bountiful time. But the connotations of this luxurious retreat model in countries with the poverty levels of East Africa are different from those in the U.S., and Sundance’s use of financial resources is incongruous with the needs of many artists in the region. Okello contends that if an artist is struggling to make art because of perpetual financial precarity and unrelenting anxiety

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around achieving some degree of material stability, possibly for a whole family, the opportunity to have an all-expenses-paid trip to a resort for three weeks to be creative with no strings attached does not improve the artist’s holistic circumstances in any sustainable way and fails to enable them to be more artistically productive in the long term. Mulekwa raises the point that several weeks of absence from regular life can cost an artist substantially (they may be sacrificing their regular income, risking losing a job, or accruing costs to cover their absence, such as for child care). A substantial per diem salary for work done is potentially more meaningful than luxurious but ephemeral amenities. Furthermore, the retreat model has a long history in a Western lineage of modern theatrical development and holds cultural values of individualism that may be uncomfortable and ethically troubling for artists from a cultural context in which sharing resources with family or community is expected.

The Sundance Theatre Lab model necessitates an allocation of substantial resources to a small number of artists, in keeping with Sundance’s maintenance of an elite image and devotion to supporting the visions of extraordinary individuals. This model translates to a disinterest in an equitable or broad distribution of resources. Okello maintains that when running a program in a developing country, there is an implicit responsibility to incorporate a multiplying factor into the programmatic design. In other words, even if the initial program only reaches a small number of individuals, there must be a mechanism for the subsequent spreading of the program’s resources; otherwise, the resources are wasted. This argument illuminates a fundamental disagreement about the ethical responsibilities of an arts organization from the Global North running programs in a region of geopolitical and economic disadvantage. An arts organization might view its responsibilities differently.

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79 Okello, discussion.
80 Mulekwa, discussion, November 2015.
81 Okello, discussion.
international program as always already an influx of resources that would otherwise not exist, and to take for granted the ethics of pursuing its institutional mission in the international context as long as this mission aligns with the needs of some artists. But from another perspective, the wealthy donor country program engaged in arts labor in a poor region is faced with an ethical imperative to engage in an equitable deployment of its resources toward achieving the broadest impact. To ignore this imperative is to participate in the deepening of entrenched systemic inequality. Okello takes issue with the inherent elitism of the program’s structure, in its support only for a privileged few artists, implying that this is not what East African theatre needs. Moreover, the program’s emphasis on arts activity in urban centers exaggerates the already existing inequitable access to resources available to African artists based on relative degrees of economic and educational privilege, as well as urban versus village context. Through SIEA, then, East African artists who already possess some privilege gain further access to resources, professional contacts, and global exposure, and the work that gets funded is work that is translatable, in terms of its aesthetics and content, to audiences in the U.S. and Europe. As with Ariane Mnouchkine’s work with the Afghan company Aftaab Theatre, SIEA’s work in this sense operates according to Aihwa Ong’s formulation of neoliberalism as exception, selectively incorporating privileged populations into participation in and benefit from the global capitalist economy.

82 Ibid.
83 Ong, Neoliberalism as Exception.
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The SIEA Labs: The Artists and Projects

Thus far I have discussed the ideological underpinnings of SIEA’s creation and critiques of its overall conceit and structure. But once SIEA culminated the research phase and began formally supporting cohorts of East African artists through theatre labs, what emerged through the encounters that they facilitated? In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to the work of the labs themselves. I consider the implications of what artists and projects were selected for participation, and the role that intercultural exchange played in the workings of the labs. I argue that projects were chosen based on ideas about a universality of theatrical expression, but that the labs also supported a spectrum of projects with specific and urgent messages for local East African audiences. Next, I turn to the reflections of SIEA-supported artists on their experiences in the program, emphasizing unexpected outcomes. Subsequently, I examine frictions that emerged through the lab work, emanating from uneven partnerships with unaligned goals and discordant methodologies, and conclude with an analysis of the ethics of SIEA’s culmination.

Once SIEA was fully underway, the East Africa labs became the heart of the program. The East Africa Lab formally began in 2010, with a three-week lab on Manda Island, Kenya. There were four labs in total, with a second held on Manda in 2011, a third in Zanzibar, Tanzania, in 2013, and a special Directors Lab—or workshop, as Sundance staff labeled it, because of its inconsistency with the usual Sundance lab format and programming—in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2012. The East Africa lab initially followed the same structure as the original Utah-based Sundance Theatre Lab: a three-week retreat with teams of artists working on four projects, holding rehearsals every other day with writers revising scripts on off days, culminating in workshop showings of works in progress open only to the community of lab participants. As discussed above, each project was matched with what was termed an advisor—sometimes a U.S.
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American, sometimes an African, but always an experienced theatre artist charged with supporting the artistic processes of each project’s lead artists.

Projects were accepted based on open calls for submissions, and while I will later address SIEA’s criteria for choosing projects, the Sundance Theatre Program’s emphasis on investing in individual artists with clear and powerful artistic visions makes a consideration of the SIEA-supported artists themselves a productive and necessary starting point. Sundance staff sought artists who were ready and willing to benefit from a rigorous and collaborative workshop process, which meant already having a sufficiently evolved and substantial project, in the evaluation of Sundance staff, to bring to a lab, as well as genuine motivation for further developing this piece of work with a community of international artists. Advertising the program and soliciting submissions was a challenge, as Sundance found that some of its habitual modes of mass communication were less efficient in East Africa. They found few preexisting newsletters or similar mechanisms through which to reach out to potential applicants, and ended up relying primarily on Facebook and email—an imperfect solution, as regular and reliable internet access is not a given in all parts of the region. Submission numbers to SIEA labs were never high. The largest number received for a particular lab was seventy-five, as opposed to the nine hundred submissions that the U.S.-based Sundance Theatre Lab regularly draws.84

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84 Sundance compiled a mass email listserv over the course of its years of research in the region that included the contacts of artists who attended any meeting or event that Sundance held as well as university theatre departments and performance organizations, and created a SIEA Facebook page, which still functions as a free-form platform for advertising opportunities for African artists. Hibma described this advertisement process to me as a challenge. At the time, the Sundance Institute did not allow the creation of additional Facebook pages under the Sundance umbrella outside of the organization’s official page. The SIEA Facebook page was, in Hibma’s words, a “rogue” page. As cell phones are a prevalent medium of communication in East Africa, SIEA also attempted, to only moderate success, a mass texting announcement. Hibma, discussion.
Over the entire period of Sundance’s involvement in the region, including the research stage, Sundance worked with one hundred artists (including actors) and supported the development of twenty-five projects. Of these hundred artists, twenty-one were the lead artists of a particular project or participants of the Directors Workshop. Of these twenty-one project-leading artists, the national breakdown is roughly equal among Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, with four to five represented from each, and slightly fewer from Rwanda (three) and Burundi (one). The gender ratio is roughly even, although women are somewhat disproportionately represented among those who identify primarily as playwrights. As a generalization, the artists whose projects SIEA supported were already working in the performing arts in some way, and in many cases had already received some form of international attention. While many were early career artists, many others were established leaders in their countries’ theatres as well as university instructors, and a substantial number had already studied theatre, or were in the process of studying theatre, in the United States or Europe. This trend highlights how SIEA functioned frequently (although not in every case) as an additional bridge for artists who already had established connections with artistic or educational institutions in the

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85 However, this number does not include several experienced artists who were involved with the program as directors, such as Hope Azeda, or in earlier phases of the program, such as Mulekwa and Gichora Mwangi.

86 Sundance has published online a list of seventeen “highlighted” artists, which includes some artists who played other prominent roles as actors and/or workshop leaders or Sundance Lab International Fellows in the earlier research and exploration phase of SIEA’s work. The online list is a bit more skewed toward Uganda and Kenya. Although it leaves out some artists whose projects were developed at Sundance labs, the “highlights” list of seventeen artists is probably the best reflection of the roster of artists whom SIEA staff felt were most integrally involved with the program over the years, or most influenced by their participation. It is also a reflection of Sundance’s endorsement of particular artists, although omission does not necessarily indicate a lack of endorsement or support. Unless otherwise noted, the information about the supported artists over the next several pages comes from “East African Artist Impact,” Sundance Institute Official Website, accessed March 19, 2017, http://www.sundance.org/pdf/artist-programs/theatre/east-african-artist-impact.pdf.
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Global North, some degree of privilege in regards to access to higher education abroad, and in some cases, a deeply cosmopolitan cultural identity.

Several artists who participated prominently in SIEA programs are leaders of performing arts activity in their countries. These include Odile Gakire Katese and Mrisho Mpoto. Katese, known to most as Kiki, has been working in theatre in Rwanda since “returning” in 1996 from a childhood in exile in the Democratic Republic of Congo, serving as the Assistant Artistic Director of the University Centre of Arts and Drama at Butare University from 2003 to 2011, and since 2012 as the director of her own company Rwanda Professional Dreamers. She has been a central figure in developing the performing arts as a means of collective, ongoing processing and social healing after the genocide of 1994. Kiki received the inaugural Gilder/Coigney International Award from the League of Professional Theatre Women in 2014. Mrisho Mpoto, a Dar es Salaam-based and renowned Swahili-language spoken word poet, musician, and performer, is a household name in Tanzania, where he runs his own theatre company, Mpoto Theatre Gallery, also a music and film production company. Mpoto is an award-winning musician with a history of collaborations with European theatre companies; for example, he played Falstaff in a Kiswahili production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at London’s Globe Theatre in 2012 as part of the Globe to Globe Festival. Mpoto also works closely with education, health, and social welfare programs in Tanzania. Another example of a highly established artist supported by SIEA is Kenyan pop musician Eric Wainaina, who studied at Boston’s Berklee

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87 Katese was born and raised in DRC, but was considered Rwandan because she was born to a Rwandan family in exile. For Katese’s biography and an interview with her, see Odile Gakire Katese, “Odile Gakire Katese: Making art and reinventing culture with women.”
89 “East African Artist Impact,” Sundance Institute Official Website.
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College of Music and has been a musical star in Kenya since the early 2000s as well as an innovator in African musical theatre.  

In contrast to these examples, many SIEA-supported artists began their involvement with the program at an earlier stage in their theatre careers—including both younger artists and older artists embracing the medium of theatre later in life. There is a trend of SIEA supporting younger playwrights who have completed, or are in the midst of, MFAs from U.S. American universities—interestingly, this contingent is mostly women. Many of the playwrights who fall into this group also share an early background in writing radio plays. Like Asiimwe, Judith Adong is a Ugandan playwright with an MFA from a U.S. university, working on her degree at Temple University at the time of her participation in the first SIEA lab on Manda Island, and is now a Professor of Theatre at Makerere University in Kampala. Margaret Namulyanga, also a playwright from Uganda who started her career writing for a Ugandan radio serial drama, had recently begun her MFA in Playwriting at Brown University when she participated in the first SIEA lab. Kenyan playwright Andia Kisia has a degree from Georgetown University. Adong, Namulyanga, and Kisia have also all participated in the Royal Court International Playwrights

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91 “East African Artist Impact,” Sundance Institute Official Website.
93 For more information about Margaret Namulyanga, see Margaret Namulyanga, interview by Mark William Lindberg, Mark William Lindberg blog, July 14, 2015, http://markwilliamlindberg.com/margaretnamulyanga/.
94 Andia Kisia has been publishing stories and articles, and receiving productions of radio and stage plays, since 2001. She has twice won the BBC African Performance Playwriting Competition for her radio plays. A biographical overview can be found here: “Celebrating Writers from Africa and the Diaspora Festival,” University of Illinois Center for African Studies Official Website, accessed May 11, 2016, http://www.afrst.illinois.edu/news/annual/celebrating/.
Residency in London.\textsuperscript{95} Other playwrights supported by SIEA are not U.S.-educated, such as Angella Emurwon,\textsuperscript{96} a Ugandan playwright who first received public attention for winning the BBC African Playwrights Competition in 2010, and Ethiopian playwright Meaza Worku, who had been professionally writing television and radio plays in Addis Ababa for over a decade before beginning to write stage plays.

The career trajectory of SIEA-supported artists is, however, varied. Quite a few artists came to develop work with Sundance in the midst of well-established careers as performers, directors, and writers in their local contexts. Ugandan artist Philip Luswata is a top comedian in Kampala, founder of the comedy troupe Theatre Factory, university drama instructor, and playwright, and he has also participated in the Royal Court International Playwrights Residency repeatedly since 2001 (and holds an MA in Communications from Leeds University, UK). Tanzanian artist Irene Sanga was already a prominent singer, actor, writer, and director in Dar es Salaam’s Parapanda Theatre Lab as well as a writer for television and radio. On the other hand, Kenyan artist Sitawa Namwalie stands out as someone who came to playwriting later in life, after a career in development work with NGOs while writing poetry on the side.\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{95} The Royal Court International Playwrights program has a long history of working with Ugandan and other East African playwrights. A long-term workshop project with Ugandan playwrights, started in 1996 under the leadership of at-the-time Artistic Director Stephen Daldry, was one of the Royal Court’s first sustained international workshops. Aston and O’Thomas,\textit{ Royal Court: International}, 16.


\textsuperscript{97} Sitawa Namwalie also has an MA in Environment, Society, and Technology from Clark University in Massachusetts. She also goes by the name Betty Muragori. “Sitawa Betty Muragori,” Kampala International Theatre Festival Official Website, accessed March 19, 2017, http://kampalainternationaltheatrefestival.com/sitawa-betty-muragori/.
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Because SIEA supported entire projects, sometimes bringing whole teams of artists to work collaboratively on a piece, and also developed a program specifically for directors, several artists first worked with Sundance as actors or collaborators on a piece and later returned as directors. Examples include Rwandan artist Wesley Ruzibiza, a choreographer, director, and performer who has trained in Dakar, Ouagadougou, and Paris, and who founded Rwanda’s first professional dance company, Amizero Kompagnie; and Ugandan multidisciplinary artist Aida Mbowa, also a Theatre scholar with a PhD from Stanford University. The sole Burundian SIEA-supported artist, Freddy Sabimbona, is a director and performer who founded the Bujumbura-based company Troupe Lampyre.

The international artistic, professional, and educational connections that these artists possess tend to fall along language lines, in keeping with networks ingrained by former colonial relationships. The artists from Anglophone countries have almost all studied previously in the U.S. or U.K., whereas the artists from Francophone countries tend to have studied and/or performed in France. SIEA is unique, therefore, in its bringing together these artists whose international connections exist more typically in silos organized by linguistic affiliation. Additionally, and particularly in regards to the Ugandan and Kenyan playwrights, SIEA has functioned as part of a small network of international development programs focused on contemporary African theatre, along with the BBC African Playwriting Competition and the Royal Court International Playwrights Residency. As such, these programs function according to Tsing’s metaphor of the road as one embodiment of the friction of global encounter. Roads, she suggests, “create pathways that make motion easier and more efficient, but in doing so they limit where we go.” She insists, moreover, that “the ease of travel they facilitate is also a
structure of confinement.” These development programs serve as stepping-stones to each other and to/from U.S./U.K. playwriting MFA programs, paving a route for particular African artists into circulation within a world theatre network as cultivated in the U.S. and Europe. Travel down the institutional roads of a small group of U.S./U.K.-run transnational theatre development programs increases the visibility of these artists within this realm of theatrical circulation, with each instance of participation further solidifying their position in this global realm. For example, at the 2015 PEN World Voices Playwrights reading series in New York City, the two African artists whose work was included (Sitawa Namwalie and Angella Emurwon) were both SIEA alumni.

Finally, the body of artists supported by SIEA is delimited by the ability and willingness to work, at least partially, in English. Several projects selected for the labs were primarily in Swahili or French, with translations into English created for the lab process so that people without knowledge of these languages could engage with (and sometimes advise or direct) the work. In some cases, artists worked in English at the lab and later translated their work for performance in their home region. Local languages such as Luganda, the dominant language in central Uganda, had very little representation at the labs. I will examine the implications of these languages—the presence of some and absence of others, as well as their interactions—more fully in the following chapter.

Thus, with this body of artists, Sundance set out to run its first international theatre lab series, with the dual goals of supporting the development of new theatrical works in East Africa

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98 Tsing, Friction, 6.
99 Another example of participation in one of these programs leading to other opportunities to work in a U.S. or UK professional context is Wesley Ruzibiza’s assistant direction of Les Miserables, under Liesl Tommy’s direction, at the Dallas Theatre Center in 2014.
and facilitating exposure and exchange through deep encounter between artists from different cultural contexts. I now turn to the work of the East Africa labs themselves, as experienced in particular by the East African artists. I start with a closer examination of the role that purposeful engagement with and exchange across cultural difference played in the lab process. The SIEA program created space in which encounter between artists of different national and cultural positions is presupposed as valuable. However, this encounter engendered interactions and engagements far more nuanced and than a simplistic meeting of disparate and discreet cultural positions. It is important to note that, in the twenty-first century, African artists in postcolonial contexts do not necessarily view themselves and their work primarily—or at all—in relation to a legacy of colonial cultural imposition, and the use of European dramaturgical structure or theatrical form is not necessarily seen as politically motivated, coerced, or imbued with tension.

In her discussion of the West African travelling theatrical form Concert Party, performance scholar Catherine Cole contends that the hybrid and popular form of Concert Party in Ghana does not approach difference between cultural influences, or tension between indigenous and Western, as problematic or irreconcilable; rather, she characterizes Ghanaians as “critically examining and avidly consuming a wide range of disparate cultural influences.”

Nigerian theatre scholar Kene Igweonu uses the term “transculturation,” as distinguished from interculturalism, to describe performances that “occur within the context of Eastern/African cultures, where the imposition of Western theatrical conventions is not necessarily seen as

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oppositional to the local cultures because of the transformative impact of colonization and globalization (or more appropriately Westernization) on indigenous traditions.”

Igweonu’s perspective is crucial to considering the SIEA lab process in regards to its approach to cultural interaction or exchange. To begin with, the works supported by SIEA are products of the twenty-first-century context of global circulation of culture, and therefore must be seen, even before any Sundance action, as profoundly polycultural, in the sense that cultural historian Vijay Prashad uses the term. Prashad prefers the term “polyculturalism” to interculturalism or multiculturalism, because of its acknowledgement that peoples’ lives are made up of myriad cultural lineages. He considers polyculturalism to be distinct from cultural hybridity, which he characterizes as the product of a more self-conscious and purposeful mixing. To talk of the SIEA artists’ work as intercultural would be overly simplistic; these artists draw in varying ways, and to varying degrees, from a wide array of cultural and artistic influences. Some examples of these influences are performance, dance, and music practices associated with particular regional or ethnic traditions; national performance traditions which evolved through interactions between different ethnic groups within modern African nation-states and in the context of strategic deployments of post-colonial nationalist ideologies; influences of European theatrical tradition with which African performance practices have been interacting since the beginning of colonialism; U.S. American popular culture which has been ubiquitously disseminated in the neoliberal global order; higher education at East African universities and European or U.S. universities where a global perspective on theatre history,


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dramaturgy, and aesthetics is taught; and varied experiences with international travel, including artists who themselves grew up primarily in countries other than their family’s country of origin (such as Rwandan artists displaced by civil war and genocide and Ugandan artists who grew up displaced by Idi Amin’s violent dictatorship). It would be wildly inaccurate to characterize the body of East African artists supported by Sundance as bringing a sole cultural perspective to the table in their work at the SIEA labs. These artists are themselves transnational subjects.

What role, then, did intercultural encounter and exchange, or other models of conceptualizing the interaction between multiple cultural positions in processes of art making, play in the space created by the SIEA labs? I have already demonstrated how the Sundance staff designed the program driven by values of mutual enrichment through intercultural exchange, specifically through the formulation of “exposure and exchange” that is highlighted in SIEA’s online presence and promotional materials.\textsuperscript{103} The SIEA program presupposed the potential productivity of artists working across different cultural and national positions. But the formal dynamic of exchange was fundamentally uneven. As a development program for East African artists, only the African artists formally developed work within the labs. Exchange implies two central acts: giving and receiving. While the receiving act undoubtedly took place for the U.S. and UK-based artists (including those African artists based in the U.S. or UK who served as project advisors), this act was implicit for them. U.S.- and UK-based artists supported the development process of African artists as advisors and sometimes as directors, but the opposite

was never formally the case. While U.S. artists report being influenced artistically by their experiences through SIEA programs, the influences they experienced were generated on their own terms while they themselves held the positions of facilitators or guides for others.

In some ways, SIEA eschewed an overt model of cultural interweaving. The work of the labs was not driven specifically by a goal of creating products of cultural cosmopolitanism. Artistic teams at the labs were never specifically charged with creating works of art that brought together multiple cultural perspectives or that utilized performance techniques from multiple cultures of origin. Rather, the goal was always to best support the development of each piece of work as conceived by the primary generative artist or team of artists. Sundance largely resisted the global market’s privileging of marketable aspects of cultural difference in which particular performance practices, often of indigenous communities, are seen as conducive (and therefore rendered vulnerable) to being commodified, branded, and marketed as concrete, “authentic” expressions of cultural otherness.

Kenyan playwright Andia Kisia’s play *The Butcher of Crawford*, which Kisia developed at the 2013 lab on Zanzibar, is a good example of a piece that defied any expectation that a play by an African artist must embody recognizably African characteristics. The in-process script as developed that summer was set in a U.S. city and explored a tense and sexually charged relationship between two men, one a former soldier,

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104 Philip Himberg described to me how the majority of the US artists who participated in the SIEA program shared with him at one time or another that the program had changed their lives as artists. Himberg, discussion.

105 Gilbert and Lo specifically identify this trend in Australia’s attempt at forging a cosmopolitan and diverse image for itself. One common pitfall that they identify in this process is the commodification of aboriginal cultural practices. Gilbert and Lo, *Performance and Cosmopolitics*, 72-73.
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amidst an abstract specter of war. Overall, SIEA’s approach to theatrical development did not essentialize or fetishize cultural otherness. Moreover, although cultural exchange was part of the program’s overall mission, the day-to-day working relationships between advisors and supported artists were not foregrounded as being intercultural.

In their selection of works of theatre to support, a process shared among Himberg, Hibma, Levitow, and Asiimwe, SIEA strove to adhere to the larger Sundance Theatre Program’s criteria. For the most part, the SIEA leadership agrees about the criteria they followed for selecting artists and projects. For all of them, a great story was key. Hibma emphasized uniqueness and timeliness: “an interesting voice, interesting story, what could be told right now that couldn’t be told at another time?” For Asiimwe, it was important for this story to have the capacity to transcend context: “Ultimately, I was interested in a good story. A story that transcends culture, that transcends time. A story that I knew would be performed here, makes sense, performed in the Middle East, makes sense, performed in the Americas, makes sense.”

The team looked for evidence that an artist would be able to follow through with their project and use the Sundance time and resources productively. They also prioritized originality, innovation of form, and the treatment of high-stakes (in context) content, such as, in Asiimwe’s words, “topics that were considered taboo” or, as Himberg phrased it, “dangerous” subjects, such as sexuality or women’s issues. While Himberg particularly focused on great writing, SIEA did not exclusively accept text-based proposals. This openness to non-text-based work is particularly significant in the context of East Africa where many traditions of performance practices are

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106 Hibma described to me his awareness of the illogic of his own amazement that a Kenyan could write so convincingly about the U.S., when, as he pointed out, U.S. artists write about other parts of the world all the time. Hibma, discussion.

107 Hibma, discussion.

108 Asiimwe, discussion.
rooted in ritual, music, movement, drumming, and vocalization rather than scripted text. On top of these strategic priorities, Himberg highlighted the subjective nature of choosing from among submissions, conceding that he gives substantial weight to that submission that “jumps off a page and goes ‘boom.’” This comment is a reminder that new work developed through the Sundance East Africa program was selected according to the particular aesthetic sensibilities of four individuals, three of whom were U.S. citizens—a very different model than having projects selected by the originally conceived advisory council of five East African artists.

This act of discerning quality across cultural context—and the prioritization of a work’s ability to communicate across continental borders—demonstrates SIEA’s grounding in the liberal humanist ideal of universality. Tsing points out that “it is this kind of post- and neocolonial universal that has enlivened liberal politics as well as economic neoliberalism as they have spread around the world with such animation since the end of the Cold War.” The longing for the universal underpins both movements of international organization in the name of human rights as well as the spread of global capitalism, and it fuels new emerging structures like SIEA for cultivating global artistic production. But it is not only the U.S. Sundance staff who promoted the value of universality; Asiimwe also articulated the value of work that can speak across cultural contexts as significant in her process of project selection. It is crucial to recall that for many African artists the imperative to make work with international appeal is linked to the economic and political restrictions to making work in their home countries, as well as, in some cases, limited local audiences. Asiimwe’s prioritization of universally communicative work can

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109 For example, the work of renowned Ugandan playwright Robert Serumaga, who toured with his company around the world in the 1970s, included unscripted plays that were in his company’s repertoire. Ntangaare and Breitinger, “Ugandan Drama in English,” 224-49.

110 Himberg, discussion.

111 Tsing, Friction, 1.
be seen, among other things, as a pragmatic strategy for cultivating material conditions capable of supporting African artists. Concurrently, it is critical to recognize that while SIEA presupposed the existence and value of some artistic universals, these implicit universals have more to do specifically with evaluations of what African work will be able to communicate effectively to a U.S. audience than with evaluations of what work will speak to other imagined audiences outside of the Global North.\footnote{Although Asiimwe herself expressed interest in developing work that would be accessible to audiences in many parts of the world, including Latin America. Asiimwe, discussion.}

However, when we look at the body of projects that ultimately received support through SIEA labs, it is clear that universal appeal, or appeal to U.S. theatre-going audiences, was not simplistically the sole factor in choosing projects. Certainly, SIEA was concerned with supporting work that can communicate beyond one immediate cultural context, but the nature of the transnational engagement and reception that these projects invited varied greatly. I argue that by introducing these projects into this transnational development context, SIEA was necessarily engaging with the projects as a kind of world theatre. I draw, here, on Comparative Literature scholar David Damrosch’s framework of thinking of “world literature” as a temporally bound process. Damrosch writes optimistically about world literature as “not an infinite, ungraspable canon,”\footnote{David Damrosch, \textit{What is World Literature?} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 5.} but as a “mode of circulation and of reading” that ultimately is as much about the host culture’s values as about the source culture.\footnote{Ibid., 284.} Damrosch argues that any text, as long as it is being read as literature, can theoretically enter into the realm of “world literature,” but that readers most commonly approach world literature in one of three ways: “as an established body
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of classics, as an evolving canon of masterpieces, or as multiple windows on the world." In Damrosch’s schema, works of literature may cross in and out of the realm of world literature over time, depending on evolving definitions of literature and the shifting geopolitical and social dispensations toward the interaction of particular national entities around particular themes. At the SIEA lab, the supported projects entered into the realm of world theatre through receiving engagement from a transnational set of artists. Moreover, these pieces represent a broad spectrum of positions in regards to their comparative relationships to East African versus transnational audiences, as well as a variety of potential relationships to the U.S. theatre economy’s interest in global performance.

Many of the pieces chosen for the labs hold direct, urgent, and specific messages for local East African audiences, sometimes with political implications. Two examples of pieces that, in different ways, directly address an artist’s co-nationals to engage in theatrical sense-making about a set of pressing shared issues include Namwalie’s Cut Off My Tongue and Odile Gakire Katese’s The Book of Life. Cut Off My Tongue, a theatricalized rendering of Namwalie’s poetry cycle of the same name, asks questions about the modern meaning of tribal identity, frankly and often humorously probing themes of privilege and violence, the legacy of colonialism, as well as private joys and pains of human life, in modern Africa and specifically Kenya. Written following the ethnic violence that erupted in Kenya after the contested presidential election of 2007, the

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115 Ibid., 15.
116 It is necessary to note here that Damrosch’s schema of world literature assumes that “virtually all literary works are born within what we would now call a national literature,” an assumption that is less applicable to theatrical performances, given the collaborative nature of, in particular, producing and staging processes. Ibid., 283. Damrosch does acknowledge that there is an increasing trend of artists writing primarily for readerships outside of their home country, for diasporic populations, or in cases of local censorship or small readership. Ibid., 18.
piece is timely and political. It speaks directly to a Kenyan audience, asking genuine questions such as, “If tribe were a taste/A sound, a feeling, a thing alive/What would it be?”

Katee’s *Book of Life* project is an ongoing work using letters to the dead written by individuals implicated in the Rwandan genocide of 1994—both family members of victims as well as perpetrators—to create a theatre piece. *The Book of Life* is a prime example of a work that is both urgently local and globally reaching, as the longer-term goal is to create a “Book of Rwanda” and a “Book of the World,” embracing the particularity of the local context and history while also situating Rwanda in a larger archive of global pain and hope.

Judith Adong’s *Silent Voices*, developed at the 2010 lab, is another clear example of a SIEA-developed work written expressly for audiences in Uganda, addressing a strong pressing need and voicing timely political criticism. The play exposes the complexities of ongoing cycles of violence and problematizes the mandate of forgiveness toward rehabilitated rebel soldiers in Northern Uganda. Media coverage of the play’s premiere in Kampala recognized its significance—and subversive position—in exposing a more complex picture of violence in the north of the country than is typically depicted in central and southern Uganda, including Kampala. Such complexity includes a critique of the Ugandan government’s rebel soldier rehabilitation program that in the eyes of some have “rewarded” murderers, and representation of abuses that the national army has perpetrated against northerners while pursuing their mission to quell Joseph Kony’s violent and sadistic rebel forces. The *Silent Voices* premiere at the Uganda National Theatre in 2012 was packed, with an overflow of would-be spectators turned away at

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the door and a concern among many that the police would halt the performance for its critical stance toward the government.\footnote{Polly Kamukama, “Kony Play Raises Hair at National Theatre,” Doen Culture Programme Official Website, accessed August 3, 2016, http://www.doenculture.com/2832/en/kony-play-raises-hair-at-national-theatre (site discontinued). Sundance contributed funds to this 2012 production of Silent Voices.}

All three of these performances are likely to be of interest to certain pockets of U.S. theatre-going audiences, particularly audiences with an interest in global affairs relating especially to human rights and global women’s empowerment. Performance opportunities would, however, be limited. While Cut Off My Tongue could perhaps fit into a lineup of international performances in certain festival circuits, such as the Public Theatre’s Under the Radar festival, a full staging of either Silent Voices or The Book of Life in the U.S. would likely be limited to educational or NGO-sponsored contexts or to collections of global responses to war and genocide, perhaps as a commemorative event itself.\footnote{It is interesting to consider why a play like Silent Voices is unlikely to be produced in a mainstream nonprofit or commercial theatre in the U.S., whereas Danai Gurira’s play Eclipsed, about a group of displaced women serving as mistresses to warlords in war-torn Liberia, played on Broadway in the spring of 2016.} In contrast, a small number of SIEA-supported projects may have commercial potential in the U.S. The strongest example of this is Eric Wainaina’s musical Mo Faya, later titled DJ Lwanda.\footnote{As I mention in my review, Wainaina presented a thirty-minute excerpt of DJ Lwanda at the 2014 Kampala International Theatre Festival. See Julia Goldstein, review of Kampala International Theatre Festival, Uganda National Cultural Center, Kampala, Uganda, November 2014, Theatre Journal 67, no. 3 (October 2015): 535-40.} Wainaina’s musical tells the story of a local radio DJ’s fight against a real estate tycoon who unleashes terror and violence on his slum community in a scheme to obtain the land for development. While taking on a serious political and economic problem, this lively, entertaining piece has the potential for mainstream commercial appeal in the West, especially through its fusion of Western pop, East African pop, U.S. American musical theatre, and reggae musical idioms. It had already been produced in New...
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York at the New York Musical Theatre Festival prior to its selection for development at the 2011 SIEA lab.

The relatively mainstream and international appeal of this project stands in vivid contrast to a set of works that are, in my assessment, least likely to speak substantively to U.S. or European audiences: the Swahili pieces led by Tanzanian artists Mrisho Mpoto and Irene Sanga. While comprised of an interweaving of instrumental music, song, poetry, dance, and heightened physical expression, the use of, from a U.S. perspective, expressly foreign theatrical idioms of Swahili poetry and storytelling position *Africa Kills Her Sun* and *Safari Ya Mwandale* in a very different category than Wainaina’s *Mo Faya/DJ Lwanda*. Mpoto and Sanga’s projects do not make use of a language of global popular culture as Wainaina’s musical does with its deeply cosmopolitan fusion of musical styles. In the U.S., the Swahili pieces would inevitably circulate as showcases of a culturally foreign form, something more like Damrosch’s “windows on the world.”

While Sundance operated from a set of values and goals, including supporting work in East Africa that could speak across cultural difference to U.S. audiences, the artists who chose to submit work, and ultimately to participate, in the SIEA labs were motivated by their own set of values and goals and chose to utilize Sundance resources to their own ends. How did the participating artists themselves view the value of the labs and other support they received through SIEA? For many, the specifically intercultural element of the program was not its most

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121 It is interesting that although Mpoto and Sanga consider their work to be modern, rather than traditional, African theatre, the term “modern” in this case does not refer to use of cosmopolitan or global culture. Irene Sanga (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), in discussion with the author, November 28, 2014; and Mrisho Mpoto (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), in discussion with the author, November 28, 2014.
significant quality, or even a main source of its value. Artists across the board cited the
program’s offering of professional-level feedback and guidance of a nature not widely available
in their home context as among the top reasons for applying to participate, and as a primary
benefit they gained. Asiimwe explains her motivation for participating in the creation of a
professional development program for theatre artists in East Africa. For her, it was: “Knowing
that there hadn’t been designated spaces where new work could be nurtured in East Africa. That
I would sit in my small room, write a play, maybe send it to a few friends to get feedback, and
have it produced. But really putting in work, working rigorously, working under pressure. That
kind of space. We didn’t have that.” In many of the participating countries, communities of
professional theatre-makers (particularly those working outside of the purely commercial
context) are small, and artists are likely to be working in relation to a limited set of regular
collaborators. Some artists have studied theatre formally at an undergraduate or graduate level,
but beyond a university context, there are few ongoing formal structures in place for a
professional artist to develop and get feedback on new work in a rigorous way. Other artists
never studied theatre formally in a university context, instead developing their craft through
sustaining individual mentorships and workshops. The limited opportunity for professional

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122 Asiimwe is talking specifically about Uganda. Asiimwe, discussion.
123 Moreover, at Kampala’s Makerere University, the most prestigious university in the region
(aside from Addis Ababa University), undergraduate theatre training emphasizes theoretical and
historical knowledge over practical application, partially due to a lack of student performance
space. This was explained to me by Charles Mulekwa, currently a professor in Makerere’s
Department of Performing Arts and Film. Mulekwa, discussion, December 2015.
124 For example, Burundian theatre artist Freddy Sabimbona cites the mentorship of Bujumbura-
based French artist Patrice Faye as crucial to his artistic development. Sabimbona (Sundance
Institute East Africa-supported artist), in discussion with the author, November 30, 2014. Wesley
Ruzibiza, who did not formally study theatre in a degree program, attributes a great deal of his
theatre training to the performing arts workshop program organized by Odile Gakire Katese at
the University Center for Art and Drama in Butare, Rwanda. Ruzibiza (Sundance Institute East
Africa-supported artist), in discussion with the author, November 2014.
development is connected to both funding trends and politics. One contributing factor is a shift in international aid priorities since 9/11, as governments and NGOs have pivoted their focus away from culture and toward funding security initiatives in effort to reduce the threat of terrorism.\footnote{For example, in Tanzania, many cultural organizations had depended on funding from the SIDA (Swedish International Development Agency). When SIDA’s donation priorities changed, organizations such as TzTc and EATI collapsed. Schule discusses how the network of Tanzanian women artists called Binti Leo, formed in 2005, has failed, since the change, to secure international funding, previously its main source of funding. Vicensia Shule, “Binti Leo: Women in the arts in Tanzania,” in Plastow, Hutchinson, and Matzke, \textit{African Theatre: Contemporary Women}, 81.} In Uganda, while stand-up comedy and popular commercial plays, primarily in Luganda, can sustain themselves through ticket sales, and while corporate sponsors will sometimes fund art and theatre that is deemed safe, theatre addressing substantive or controversial political or social questions struggles to secure funding.\footnote{Mulekwa, discussion, November 2015.} I will discuss these circumstances more fully in the following chapter.

For these artists, a program like SIEA represents a sought-after opportunity to deepen their artistic practice in a formal, sustained format, with feedback from working professionals who have achieved critical success in their home context. In this sense, the SIEA program inherently had a professionalization function for many participating artists. Ethiopian playwright Meaza Worku explains that although she already had a career as a professional writer, largely for television and radio, she pursued the Sundance lab as an opportunity to get “professional help and guidance” in her playwriting.\footnote{Meaza Worku (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), in discussion with the author, November 27, 2014.} For these artists, Sundance’s professionalism, not its U.S. Americanism or its emphasis on cultural exchange, is its defining characteristic.

Many SIEA-supported artists specifically valued the program for its eschewal of theatre industry concerns and its enactment of resistance to the ubiquitous pressure to produce. This
trend speaks to Sundance’s difference from the standard neoliberal cultural interventionist position that demands evidence of accomplishment, such as is practiced in many NGO theatre programs. Tanzanian artist Mrisho Mpoto described Sundance’s attitude in this respect as “totally different” from any other organization he had worked with, an approach that flipped his expectations: he had planned to complete and show a performance over the course of the first lab, and the directive to relax, think, share, and let ideas evolve instead was a paradigm shift. Wesley Ruzibiza concurred that the removal of pressure to create a final product was an important distinguishing feature of the program, enabling an environment where “you can be more creative.” For Worku, this quality helped her break through a conservative status-quo in her local theatre landscape and become an agent of change. She explains, “I think playwrights such as me, you want to try something new in your work, but you need encouragement and support. To try something new, make mistakes, to be independent. You write for the audience. So the market leads you. But with Sundance, you can write independently of the audience.” On the one hand, this value represents a liberal humanist ideal that reifies a Western doctrine of individualism. But reducing Worku’s experience of the labs to this observation would fail to see her as an artist in possession of agency, utilizing global resources to further her work. The opportunity to develop work in an environment purposefully sectioned off from market concerns is particularly significant in Addis Ababa, where theatre is a popular and accessible form of entertainment, but where plays are primarily performed in state-run theatres regulated by

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128 Mpoto, discussion.  
129 Ruzibiza, discussion.  
130 Worku, discussion.
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government censors who favor light romantic fare and conventional well-made plays. Worku in particular stands in as evidence that developing work independently of concerns for audience expectation does not necessarily mean developing work disconnected from its intended audience. Her play *Desperate to Fight* depicts a thirty-five-year-old woman grappling with the implications of her choices to end each of her three marriages—an unlikely scenario in contemporary Addis Ababa, and a play that would not be produced in the state-run theatres. After workshopping *Desperate to Fight* at the SIEA lab, Worku independently produced the play in Addis Ababa, where it played to packed houses for multiple several-month runs, receiving substantial media attention and demonstrating that innovative form and socially challenging content could indeed attract substantial audiences. A global flow of knowledge of the kind that Tsing invokes, “knowledge that travels and mobilizes, shifting and creating new forces and agents of history in its path,” functioned crucially in Worku’s path-forging production: discussions with artists she met in New York, through a SIEA trip, about strategies for independently producing one’s own work, were instrumental in her mounting of the production. The success that Worku has achieved with her play in Addis Ababa is particularly significant given the ongoing challenges women face in working in theatre in Ethiopia.

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131 This has been the case in Addis Ababa since the period of Mengestu’s rule in the 1980s, and according to Worku, has not changed substantially in recent years. See Jane Plastow, “Ethiopia and Eritrea,” 200-1.
132 *Desperate to Fight* breaks with conventions of contemporary state-sponsored theatre in Addis Ababa both in its content and style. For my review of *Desperate to Fight* in production, see Goldstein, review of *Kampala International Theatre Festival*.
133 For example, an article in *Ethiopian Business Review* devoted to the production is titled “Desperate to Fight: How One Playwright is Changing People’s Perception of Theatre.” See *Ethiopian Business Review* (September 16-October 15, 2014).
135 Worku, discussion.
136 While there have been substantive changes in recent years (for example, actresses today may become celebrities, whereas for most of Ethiopian theatre history they were associated with
SIEA-supported artists value the program for having helped develop their craft and for introducing them to new methods and techniques that they have adapted and selectively incorporated into their own work. Many of these developments are not overtly products of cultural exchange. As in the U.S.-based iterations of the Sundance Theatre Lab, the nature of the support was catered to the nature of the project. Angella Emurwon’s play *Strings*, a family drama with predominantly naturalistic style and framed with a Swahili story chant, was matched with U.S. American dramaturg Janice Paran. Emurwon describes her experience at the lab in productive terms:

Every day she asked me to tell the story, and she would ask me about character motivations, etc., and she would tell me what she thought was happening in that scene, and I would agree or disagree, we’d have a conversation like that. And then I’d sit down and really mull over what she’d said. And then I would read other plays, and I would go to other sessions where there were plays going on. So it’s percolating, but I’m putting in other stuff. And you could even be involved in some of the readings. So I got to see how all the different writers were working, all the different directors were working. And it would percolate.\(^{137}\)

In Emurwon’s description, the productive working relationship between herself and her dramaturg, with whom she continued to work remotely after the lab, had nothing to do in particular with the different cultural and national positions of the two. In her experience, it was valuable to observe different artists working in different ways, but these differences in approach did not necessarily emanate from cultural difference. Culturally situated perspective was one of many potential factors contributing to the valued variety of artistic approaches. When I asked her...

\(^{137}\) Angella Emurwon (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), in discussion with the author, November 30, 2014.
about the meaning of SIEA’s guiding values of “exposure and exchange,” Emurwon viewed the “exchange” component of the SIEA motto as being primarily about the exchange between artists that transpires at the lab, rather than, as Levitow viewed it, about intercultural exchange per se.  

For some artists, the exposure to U.S. American performance work through SIEA-sponsored trips to the U.S. or participation as Artists in Residence at the Utah and Banff labs had a profound impact. Artists emphasized the value of witnessing highly varied and innovative theatrical forms in U.S. theatres. Ruzibiza describes in detail how several performances he saw in the U.S. during SIEA programs inspired him to utilize particular approaches—not stylistic, but conceptual—in his own work. For example, Ruzibiza, whose work as a choreographer/director responds to life in contemporary Rwanda (in the artist’s words, “I do feed myself mostly from my experience as a Rwandese”), was inspired by the West End/Broadway production of War Horse’s mechanism of telling the story of a major human tragedy through the microcosm of an individual horse, using the nonnaturalistic aesthetics of puppetry. He returned to Rwanda motivated by the idea of using something innocuous to tackle a volatile social issue and created Frontiers, a piece about identity, using stones as metaphors for “the thing that cannot crack even if you try hard.” In Ruzibiza’s words, “I asked, how do I pass through something else that isn’t as direct? I wouldn’t go and say Hutu or Tutsi, or gay or straight. You can talk about these things without really talking about them, and people will understand.” Ruzibiza hopes to see more

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138 Ibid.
139 War Horse premiered at London’s National Theatre in 2007, and transferred to the West End in 2009. A co-production by the National Theatre and Lincoln Center played on Broadway from 2011 to 2013.
theatrical innovation in Rwanda, but does not want Rwandan theatre to become commercial in the way much U.S. American theatre is.\textsuperscript{140}

Some artists specifically reference the value of working in a multicultural context. Tanzanian artist Irene Sanga is one of the artists most frequently supported by SIEA, as she participated, with two different projects, in three SIEA labs and attended Sundance Theatre labs in Utah and Banff. She describes the SIEA program as a space of exploration, experimentation, and mixing, between U.S. American and African theatre, as well as between contemporary and traditional modes of performance. Sanga, herself a director, describes learning from her work with British director Indhu Rubasingham: “Maybe we are directing in an African way. And then you get an influence of directing in an African way plus whatever the other country does. The influence you get, you build up something very strong.”\textsuperscript{141}

Tsing emphasizes the surprising and unexpected features of global encounter.\textsuperscript{142} Indeed, the most prominently and consistently cited outcome of the SIEA program from the perspective of supported artists is the strengthening of regional East African connections among artists and arts administrators. Mbowa reflects that through SIEA she’s been able to connect regionally, which for her exceeds in importance any other outcome.\textsuperscript{143} Several artists viewed the exposure to work and working methods of other African artists as a primary strategy of the lab.\textsuperscript{144} For

\textsuperscript{140} Ruzibiza, discussion. Ruzibia’s discussion of the role played by exposure to international work resonates with Gakire Katese’s comments on the critical role played by foreign artists in Rwanda toward reviving what she viewed as a “frozen” post-genocide culture into something dynamic. Odile Gakire Katese, “Odile Gakire Katese: Making art and reinventing culture with women.”

\textsuperscript{141} Sanga, discussion.

\textsuperscript{142} Tsing, \textit{Friction}, 3.

\textsuperscript{143} Dr. Aida Mbowa (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), in discussion with the author, November 30, 2014.

\textsuperscript{144} For example, Sanga and Sitawa Namwalie viewed the format of bringing artists from several east African countries together at the labs as a central function of the program, enabling the
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Kenyan playwright, director, and actor Rogers Otieno, the element of intra-East African exchange has an implication for cultural politics. For Otieno, knowing more East African artists and their work was at the “top of my bucket list.” Otieno was profoundly inspired by his SIEA trip to Ethiopia, where he was impressed with the strength of the theatre-going tradition and the degree to which popular culture in Addis Ababa is influenced by local traditional culture—such as in the dance and music found in popular night clubs. He returned to Nairobi with a dream of strengthening the presence of traditional local performing arts influences in Kenyan theatre and popular culture.\(^{145}\)

For other artists, the regional connections are particularly significant in regards to the professional connections and increased sense of the availability of regional resources and talent, making the region less dependent on importing artists from further afield. Mpoto explains that while such regional connections between artists did exist previously, it was common for many years to pass between the crossings of artists’ paths. In his experience, SIEA programs enabled a proliferation of these kinds of meetings, strengthening connections and ultimately reaffirming Mpoto’s intentions to keep art theatre—not just NGO theatre—alive in Tanzania.\(^{146}\)

The most concrete manifestation of these increased connections is a proliferation of new theatre festivals headed by artists who worked in various capacities with SIEA. The festivals that


\(^{146}\) Mpoto, discussion. Tanzania has a vibrant arts scene, but theatre proper is not highly institutionalized or supported. Until recently, there was no national theatre. Theatre for Development is practiced widely in Tanzania, but Mpoto and Sanga differentiate the theatre work they pursue from this movement.
most directly emerged from SIEA are the Kampala International Theatre Festival in Kampala, Uganda, co-directed by Deborah Asiimwe, and the Crossing Boundaries Festival in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, co-directed by Meaza Worku. But other new festivals organized by and featuring performances by artists who worked with SIEA include Hope Azeda’s Ubumuntu Arts Festival in Kigali, Rwanda, Ruzibiza’s company Amizero Kompagnie’s East African Nights of Tolerance (EANT) Dance Festival, and Freddy Sabimbona’s Buja Sans Tabou Festival in Bujumbura, Burundi. (One of these, the Kampala International Theatre Festival, is the subject of the following chapter.) Participating artists characterize this proliferation of festivals and traveling of performances between festivals across the region as a new development that has magnified significantly in recent years. In Mbowa’s words, “The collaborations that are happening, the festivals, supporting, taking things places, that’s within the region, and that just wasn’t happening before.” Ruzibiza frames the issue in terms of self-sufficiency of the region, explaining, “I know that there is quality art in East Africa that I can bring to my country, I know that I don’t have to travel far to get good directors, good actors, that there is resource in the region, and this I didn’t know before.” Asiimwe views the presence of these new festivals run by Sundance alumni as a testament to SIEA’s success. Because of cost of travel, lack of institutional support, and in some cases, language barriers, it has not been common or easy for artists to collaborate across national borders within the region. It has historically been more

147 Crossing Boundaries is co-organized by Worku and her fellow Ethiopian SIEA alumnus Surafel Wondimu. According to Worku, she and Wondimu had not worked together before Sundance. Worku, discussion.
148 Freddy Sabimbona’s Buja Sans Tabou Festival happened in 2014, but is not a recurring festival. I don’t intend to suggest here that these festivals have emerged directly because of SIEA, or that they would not have happened without SIEA.
149 Mbowa, discussion.
150 Ruzibiza, discussion.
151 Asiimwe, discussion.
common for East African artists to work with shared-language European artists (such as Ugandan/British connections) than for them to work with other African artists, a trend that presents barriers to South-South artistic connections.

Frictions of Encounter at the SIEA Labs

Along with these experiences of lab productivity, including the intended, the surprising, and everything in between, the labs constituted sites of friction where the incongruity between Sundance’s decontextualized professional development model and the socially-embedded functionality of many East African performance projects came into focus. In some ways Sundance’s depoliticizing model is fundamentally at odds with what theatre has historically meant in Africa. Scholars of African theatre Osita Okagbue and Kene Igweonu affirm the “famed principle of functionality that is believed to underpin all forms of theatre and performance in Africa,” explaining that theatre in Africa is “often geared towards fulfilling particular social or aesthetic functions,” and is therefore “performative at its core.”

Considering African theatre’s social embeddedness and its performative role in creating realities, worlds, and identities, the concept of developing performance work disconnected from audience and performance context—and in collaboration with dramaturgs and advisors disconnected from this context—poses risks connected to the removal of creation processes from the contexts through which they derive meaning.

A case in which the friction of unaligned goals—in regards to the purpose of a performance and its intended audience—led to a limiting of productivity and agency on the part

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of African artists is the Tanzanian project *Africa Kills Her Sun*. Sundance Theatre Program Producing Director Christopher Hibma has expressed in retrospect that, in the case of this project, he and the rest of the Sundance team became problematically attached to a vision of the project’s translatability and success in terms that they imposed, ultimately to the detriment of the project itself. *Africa Kills Her Sun* is a hybrid-form theatre piece in Swahili and English that uses spoken-word poetry, music, dance, and storytelling techniques to relay a story indicting the corruption of African governments, based on the eponymous original satirical short story by Nigerian author Ken Saro-Wiwa. The piece was among the most-often supported of the East African projects, returning again and again to SIEA labs and workshopped several times at Sundance labs in Utah and Banff. It is easy to understand how the Sundance team might have placed so much hope in the project with Mrisho Mpoto at the helm: Mpoto’s celebrity status in Tanzania is well earned through his highly accomplished craftsmanship in the writing and performing of Swahili spoken-word poetry. Hibma relays that SIEA leadership had a vision of the project eventually being performed at Lincoln Center’s summer festival as an example of contemporary Swahili theatre. At multiple North American-based labs, financial constraints led Sundance to pair the lead artists—Mpoto, Irene Sanga, and composer Elidady Msangi (who later left the project)—with additional U.S. American (African American) artists, rather than transporting additional performers from Tanzania. Hibma attributes the team’s difficulties with continuing to develop the piece on their own, and Sundance’s repeated return to supporting its development, at least partially to this imposed construct of an international team, which created barriers to the project’s further development outside of the context of Sundance support.

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153 For a description of *Africa Kills Her Sun* in performance, see Goldstein, review of *Kampala International Theatre Festival*.
154 Hibma, discussion.
The language choices also illustrate friction in regards to competing goals of the African artists and the Sundance team. *Africa Kills Her Sun*, as developed at the lab, is largely performed in Swahili, with occasional sections and lines spoken in English to make the plot and themes accessible to an English-speaking audience. For the most part, the poetic language is in Swahili, with the English sections functioning more mundanely to communicate basic plot points and core themes. The conceit of using both Swahili and English was suggested by Sundance staff and accepted by the Tanzanian artists, opening up the possibility of performing the work in the U.S., enabling the collaboration of international teams at the SIEA labs—including non-Swahili-speaking Africans, and making the piece more accessible for a broader set of East African audiences, as Swahili is more widely spoken in Tanzania than in any other country in the region. In Tanzania, however, English is “for the majority of Tanzanians still considered an elite language.” Hibma views Sundance’s approach to the project largely as a failure, explaining that “as intent as we were about not being colonial, as intent as we were on not imposing a western dramaturgy, as intent as we were about honoring the Tanzanian context, we weren’t successful, because we paired a group of people together who didn’t want to be together at the end of the day, totally.”

The example of *Africa Kills Her Sun* also reveals friction in the Sundance model in regards to the approach to performance work designed to be embedded in a particular society with aims of functionality. Sanga and Mpoto voice tension over the competing modes of effect-

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155 See Introduction, note 77 for history and development of the Swahili language. After independence, Swahili was designated as the official language of the modern nation state of Tanzania, with English serving as an official language as well. See Maxon, *East Africa*, 39-40.
156 The team also has a version of the piece entirely in Swahili.
158 Hibma, discussion.
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oriented theatre and theatre for aesthetic enjoyment in the context of contemporary Tanzania. Sanga views it as a necessity for theatre in Tanzania today to address pressing social issues with some element of added concrete benefit for an audience, such as delivering an educational or unequivocal socially significant message. In her words, “People don’t expect that they can go to the theatre looking just for the comic and go home. They will never pay…. People expect to get education and a moral, waking up themselves and questioning what is going on in their country, what is going on in their society.”\(^{159}\) At the same time, Mpoto hopes to create a space for “theatre for itself” in Tanzania,\(^ {160}\) and Sanga acknowledges fundamental limitations of reductively educational issue-based performance work, which she thinks risks “kill[ing] the beauty of art.” Mpoto and Sanga both seek to deliver a combination of affective uplifting through aesthetic pleasure and enlightenment on social and political problems with an accessible educational component. Ultimately, Sanga asserts, “What your audience wants—that is the most important.”\(^ {161}\) This orientation toward the particular needs of a local audience for whom they make work, including the specific economic context of performance in that environment, is at odds in some ways with the Sundance model of working in a manner divorced from audience and market demands. It also fundamentally presents a challenge to the assertion that theatre can be responsibly and meaningfully advised or directed from a position outside of the performance’s cultural context.

Another related tension between Sundance’s decontextualized and international approach and the situated, socially embedded work of many East African artists is visible in the support of pieces that directly address recent violent conflict and trauma, with an aim of using performance

\(^{159}\) Sanga, discussion.
\(^{160}\) Mpoto, discussion.
\(^{161}\) Sanga, discussion.
to facilitate collective processing and social healing. What are the implications of welcoming outside artists to guide or facilitate the creation process of work that engages with a particular community’s collective trauma and serves an immediate social function?

Wesley Ruzibiza discusses the difficulty of working on a piece using primary source material from the Rwandan genocide with a Sundance advisor who was not Rwandese. At a SIEA lab on Manda Island Ruzibiza assumed Katese’s place as director of the piece, paired with Liesl Tommy as the Sundance advisor. Ruzibiza describes the challenge of sharing the directorial role with a foreign director: “At the beginning it was a little bit hard for me because you need to give space when you’re a director to another one to get into your piece. And The Book of Life was kind of hard because it’s our personal story, it’s a Rwandan story, it’s more than just a play. You cannot easily give someone space to go into your story.”

During the lab, the artists on The Book Of Life project were working with verbatim texts from the letters Katese has collected, finding ways of situating the texts in imagined worlds where artists could act out the letters—a particularly challenging directorial task due to the constraints of working with unrevisable texts compiled from the testimonies of everyday people. For Ruzibiza, the difficulty of collaborating productively with a Sundance-assigned advisor was mitigated specifically by that advisor—Liesl Tommy’s—own relevant biographical experience. Tommy, a black South African who moved to the U.S. as a pre-teen, has played a special role throughout SIEA as what Philip Himberg calls a “bridge artist,” raised largely in the U.S. but with substantial first-hand understanding of some African contexts. In Ruzibiza’s experience, it was hearing about Tommy’s experiences living under apartheid, learning that she was “not just being a director, but she’s also been there, and being a human, and understanding the need that we have to tell that story,” that enabled a

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162 Ruzibiza, discussion.
productive and mutually trusting collaboration. Tommy’s particular position is an important ingredient in what made the SIEA program function, especially as she singlehandedly ran the Directors Workshop in Addis Ababa.

Sundance staff members themselves identify moments of being unequipped for working with artists on intensely emotional and raw material, illustrating a gap between expectations of the role that artists inhabit in the Sundance development model and some of the contexts in which participating East African artists develop work. These moments, in lab workshops or otherwise, made visible and palpable the uneasy or disjointed nature of some aspects of the collaboration engendered through this set of global encounters. As such, the SIEA program became, at times, a site where the very conceit on which the program was founded, the conviction that effective professional theatrical development methodology can be extended globally, was exploded, if only briefly.

Katese’s work is a strong example of performance functioning to engender deep aesthetic experience and a public social process of reckoning with history and moving forward. Her work engages with questions about how national conflict and trauma can be meaningfully commemorated, and how a society can continue functioning after profound internal violence.

Ngwino Ubeho ou La Pluie et les larmes (Come to Life or Rain and Tears), performed in

\[\text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{Ibid.}\]

Serving as Assistant Artistic Director of the University Centre of Arts and Drama, Katese has been at the center of initiatives for building up arts activities as an integral component of reconstructing social life in post-genocide Rwanda. She has received perhaps the most attention for her creation of a women’s drumming circle called Ingoma Nshya, remarkable partially because it provides training to women in a national art form traditionally performed only by men. Katese has written, co-written, and directed several performance pieces that strive, in different ways, to engage with the memory and aftermath of the genocide. For a nuanced and critical study of how performance, both social and theatrical, has been used by state and non-state powers in Rwanda to publically process the 1994 genocide and its aftermath, see Breed, Performing the Nation.
Rwanda in 2009 as part of a theatre festival commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of the genocide, uses poetry, dance, and music to depict Rwandans maintaining relationships with their dead.\footnote{165}{“A Day with Odile Gakire Katese,” League of Professional Theatre Women, digital video file (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, October 17, 2012).}

Hibma in particular relays vivid memories of sitting in rehearsals for Ngwina Ubeho in Butare at the University Center for Arts and Culture and witnessing the spontaneous eruption of wailing from women both onstage and in the audience. Hibma reflects that the artists were engaging with “things that were so emotionally raw that we had no context to receive that emotion, so all you could do was just be present.”\footnote{166}{Hibma, discussion.} Entire programs have been designed around the practice of outside participants bearing witness to testimony and participating in commemoration of large-scale violence in a local national context, such as Erik Ehn’s organized exchange program for North American and Rwandan artists and activists. In regards to such cases, scholars have suggested and theorized ethical modes of serving as such a witness as a cultural ambassador or theatre activist of sorts.\footnote{167}{For example, Laura Edmondson proposes modes of alternative theatre activism premised on Levinas’ conception of “radical passivity,” Derrida and Erik Ehn’s theorization of precarious hospitality, and Badiou’s “event.” Edmondson, “Confessions of a Failed Theatre Activist.” Several theatre scholars have problematized paradigms of theatrical testimony and witnessing. See James Thompson, Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the Ends of Effect (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Julie Salverson, “Witnessing Subjects,” in A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics, ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman (New York: Routledge, 2006), 146-58.} But in the case of Sundance’s visit, the formal purpose of Sundance’s presence at this performance was not specifically to bear witness or lend their support to the performative social process; rather, it was to learn about and forge connections with contemporary Rwandan theatre. Performance work such as Katese’s in Rwanda today makes visible the speciousness of the dichotomy between performance with direct social
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function and performance as aesthetic creation. Katese’s rehearsal of *Ngwina Ubeho* was not just a rehearsal. It was a space where community members were engaged in remembering and invoking trauma publically, and emoting in relation to a shared aesthetic and affective experience. This anecdote of the Sundance staff’s presence at the rehearsal, unprepared to receive the rawness of the overflowing emotional response elicited by the performance, suggests a point of friction between the Sundance theatrical ontology and the African principle of theatrical functionality asserted by Okagbue and Igweonu.\(^{168}\)

SIEA at times became a site of tension between the expectations of professional theatre development and the processing of raw emotional experience through theatrical means. For example, at the first SIEA lab on Manda Island in 2010, Ugandan playwright Judith Adong, at the time working on her MFA in playwriting at Temple University, was workshopping her play *Silent Voices*. The immediacy and emotionality of the material for Adong, who is herself Acholi from the northern Ugandan town of Gulu, made it difficult, if not impossible at times, for Adong to enter into dialogue about her play in the context of the workshop. Hibma cites this dynamic as an example of challenges in the SIEA lab process,\(^{169}\) illustrating a discrepancy between the professional development context and the development of performance work engaged with immediate and raw social and emotional wounds.

Some East African artists involved with SIEA are fully aware of the friction inherent in the program, in some cases viewing it as fundamentally and unavoidably problematic, while also choosing to inhabit that space of friction. They view that uneasy space as also productive and valuable, both personally as artists and institutionally, for the opportunities it has facilitated for a

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\(^{168}\) Igweonu and Okagbue, “Introduction.”

\(^{169}\) The description of Adong’s work in the 2010 SIEA lab here is as relayed by Hibma. Hibma, discussion.
network of artists. Asiimwe, who herself contributed to designing and producing the SIEA program, framed this aspect of Sundance’s position as such:

I think that any set-up where someone comes from the outside is problematic. But that is the way slave-trade colonialism structured the world. That is the way it is. For as long as economic-political structures do not change, we’ll forever have that as a problem. For as long as poorer countries export raw materials to the developed world and these materials are made into products and these products are sold to these poorer countries, that will forever be a problem.\(^{170}\)

In the face of global capitalism’s creation and perpetuation of inequality and the legacy of slavery and colonialism, interactions between organizations from the Global North and the poorer, postcolonial countries are inherently implicated in these systems of inequality, but the answer is not therefore to disengage from attempts at such relationships. Kenyan poet and playwright Sitawa Namwalie describes her simultaneous love for the Sundance staff and full recognition of the fraught cultural politics of Sundance’s position in East Africa. She explains, “I know what they’re contributing to me, but I also know what I’m contributing to them. I know that I’m a great product for them. I’m not interested in them developing me. I am developing myself, and they happen to be a tool that I use to develop myself.”\(^{171}\) Namwalie’s remarks illustrate how artists have agency to make use of resources made available to them with a critical lens, and view themselves as entering into a voluntary transactional relationship.

The model of a set of voluntary transactional relationships in an uneven field of power, potentially productive and even enriching—artistically and personally—while also fundamentally uneven and uneasy, may provide a more equitable and accurate vocabulary for thinking about the SIEA program as global encounter than does the language of family or community, sometimes used casually by Sundance staff and supported artists alike. The latter

\(^{170}\) Asiimwe, discussion.
\(^{171}\) Namwalie, discussion.
vocabulary foregrounds horizontality and harmony while eliding systems of hierarchy and power that are, as I have demonstrated, inevitably at play. Power operated not only in Sundance’s decisions regarding how to enter the region of East Africa, but also how to exit it.

Culminating the Program

Sundance Theatre Program’s choice to wind down its work in East Africa can be viewed from two angles. Sundance staff explains that it is not part of Sundance’s intention to run international programs on a permanent basis in any one place. Himberg feels that continuing work in East Africa would be potentially unhealthy and counterproductive, suggesting that it would be detrimental to local artists if their ability to move forward with their work depended on Sundance’s presence.\(^{172}\) He views new initiatives by SIEA alumni, such as festivals, as evidence that Sundance’s work in the region will continue to indirectly fuel new work and innovations, not dictated by Sundance models but rather embodying new forms and methodologies driven by the artists. Asiimwe strongly affirms this perspective that a permanent Sundance presence in the region would be problematic. She explains the problem with an international arts organization’s permanent presence as such: “I think what happens with those kinds of things is … it does not give artists any agency. It becomes an NGO again. It becomes aid. Then people feel like they don’t have agency. They feel crippled. They feel like there is someone who is in the driver’s seat who is driving the whole program.”\(^{173}\) From this perspective, Sundance’s termination of the SIEA lab program is a safeguard against the danger of the organization overstepping its boundaries in the region and becoming a permanent fixture. Indeed, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, new theatrical formations are emerging in the region with clear influence from the

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\(^{172}\) Himberg, discussion.

\(^{173}\) Asiimwe, discussion.
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SIEA program, but also moving distinctly in directions that break with Sundance methodology and ideology, affirming continuities with other aspects of performance trends in the region that have been consistent before and during the period of Sundance’s direct involvement.

From another perspective, Sundance Theatre Program’s general practice of seeding the development of new work without investing financially or administratively in its coming to fruition over time—more specifically, without supporting production—is demonstrative of its neoliberal ethos of nurturing talent before sending projects off to navigate their own way through the production world. The concerns of some artists in regards to the SIEA program relate to this absence of attention devoted to producing work.  

There are also ways in which the ending of the SIEA program was brought about not by strategic choice based on the best interests of the African artists, but by financial and institutional pressures. Hibma shares that for Sundance, working in and with East Africa presented ongoing challenges in terms of difficulties finding institutional partners in the region and difficulties securing financial support for the work. He asserts that there was little international interest in the region of East Africa. Moreover, the Sundance Theatre Program faced ongoing challenges to justify its work in East Africa to the larger Sundance Institute, which sought to align the various international initiatives run by different branches of the Institute in one region. Sundance chose the Middle East and North Africa for this role, labeling the region with acronym MENA. The move from East Africa to the MENA region illustrates how transnational arts development

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174 Mulekwa expresses having had concerns about whether full productions would emerge on the ground in East Africa from the Sundance support. However, he realizes now that several full productions of Sundance-supported pieces have been staged at the Kampala International Theatre Festival, the Crossing Boundaries Festival, and others. Azeda, too, expresses concern for the ongoing evolution and production of the Sundance-supported projects after the labs. Mulekwa, discussion, November 2015; Hope Azeda (theatre artist, Director of Mashirika Performing Arts and Media Company), in discussion with the author, November 28, 2015.

175 Hibma, discussion.
resources tend to prioritize regions deemed influential in the sphere of global politics. As the Sundance Theatre Program embarks on its new work with MENA artists, part of its goal is to stimulate triangular relationships between the U.S., East African, and MENA artists, and will invite some East African artists to MENA programs. Sundance’s culmination of the SIEA program is not a clean break; while they will offer no more labs in East Africa, they continue to provide varying combinations of financial, administrative, and as Hibma phrases it, “emotional” support to several new theatre festivals run by Sundance alumni in the region.

Sundance Theatre Program’s ongoing self-reflective practice is evidenced in significant changes in the MENA theatre labs, which are scheduled to start in May 2016. Himberg has decided to combine the original U.S.-based summer lab with the MENA lab, creating a combined lab to be held in Morocco, supporting projects by four U.S. American and four MENA artists. Each project will be supported by two advisors, both a U.S.-based and a MENA-region national. This move holds the potential to substantially disrupt the centrality of the U.S. American position, and bespeaks a new level of commitment to the goal of equitable exchange and mutual development.

The Sundance Theatre Program’s alterations of their methodology for international work has significant implications for their projects moving forward, holding great potential for the equitable positioning of U.S. and international artists as collaborators and mutual supporters at the labs. In regards to the question of ongoing influence on artists in East Africa after the culmination of the SIEA program, the clearest evidence for continuing impact is the series of new theatre festivals bringing together artists and work from the region of East Africa and beyond. These festivals have included full productions of projects developed at Sundance labs, new works by Sundance-supported artists, as well as works entirely disconnected from
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Sundance, and have departed in several ways from Sundance theatrical values. In the next chapter I turn to these new theatre festivals blossoming in East Africa, several with relationships to, although not direct sponsorship from, the Sundance Theatre Program. I will focus on the Kampala International Theatre Festival in Uganda as my primary case study.
Chapter 4: The Kampala International Theatre Festival as Cultural and Political Intervention

The Uganda National Theatre is known in Kampala, Uganda’s capital city, as a venue to be rented at high prices—as much for office space and wedding meetings as for live performance. But for four days in November each year since 2014, it has housed the Kampala International Theatre Festival (KITF), a new festival bringing together works by artists in East Africa, the larger African continent, and the world. The festival has featured a variety of genres, including political satire, naturalistic family drama, spoken word poetry, musicals, Swahili storytelling, physical comedy, hybrid video/dance performance, primarily in English, Swahili, and French. As I will demonstrate, in Kampala today, as in many East African capital cities, while artists making innovative theatre work exist, few resources or institutions exist to support, produce, or circulate their work. Substantial limiting factors include indirect restrictions on freedom of expression, political regimes that deprioritize cultural production, and trends in popular, commercial entertainments that eschew engagement with pressing social and political realities of the times. In this environment, a new theatre festival with an emphasis on artistic innovation and an international scope holds great weight; it represents opportunities for producing work, for facilitating interaction and exchange among isolated artists, and for carving out space to take theatre seriously as an art form. In such a vacuum, the choices at hand are laden with significance: what shape will the new festival take? To what end will this new institution use its resources? As an artistic, social, and performative event, what identities, collectivities, and messages will Kampala’s new theatre festival cultivate, communicate, and support?

In this chapter, I explore several key ways in which the KITF intervenes in the cultural status quo of contemporary Uganda and East Africa, supported and influenced—but not dictated
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by—international support (primarily, but not exclusively, from Sundance). The festival is not always successful in its attempts at meaningful intervention, and the manifestations of its failure point to conflicting ideas about what urban Ugandan society wants and needs from theatrical activity, as well as what truly constitutes Ugandan culture. These failures illuminate tensions in a rapidly changing Kampala. Analyzing the KITF as a holistic event rather than simply as a series of performances affords an understanding of the festival as a site of negotiating the cultivation of a vibrant performance culture that is expressly Ugandan, modern, and in conversation with the world, while also resisting the hegemonic trends in global popular culture as well as the strong repressive forces from within Ugandan and East African societies themselves.¹ In other words, the festival becomes a mechanism for actively situating Uganda in the world, and for strategically exercising control over how the outside world enters into Uganda in terms of the objectives that drive international players and the political and ethical positions shaping the ways in which they pursue these objectives. My analysis of the KITF broadly as an event draws on my experience attending the first two iterations of the festival.²

In the previous chapter I examined the Sundance Institute East Africa program’s driving ideology, power relations, and artistic output, as well as the experiences and career ramifications for participating East African artists. As the most direct aftermath of the SIEA development program, the KITF deserves inclusion in my dissertation project’s examination of transnational professional theatre development programs. This festival is part of the ongoing story of the Sundance Institute Theatre Program’s initiative to support theatre in East Africa, although

¹ By “hegemonic trends in globally-circulating popular culture” I refer to the high availability in many parts of the world, including Kampala, of commercial forms such as Hollywood films and U.S. popular music.
² I was able to attend almost every performance presented at both the 2014 and 2015 festivals, as well as all post-show discussions, some rehearsals, and many social gatherings affiliated with the festival.
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Sundance is by no means the exclusive or even primary catalyst for the festival. Indeed, the ways in which the festival’s priorities and values differ from those of the SIEA program, and the ways in which Sundance’s influence has at times been discernible more through its relative absence than through its ongoing presence, support a nuanced understanding of the festival in relation to its network of transnational support. In this chapter I ask, how does Sundance’s agenda as a funding organization influence the shape of the festival and the nature of the work it produces? How does the festival’s transnational thrust, both in terms of funding and of networks of participating artists and performances, create both opportunities and threats? The case study of the Sundance Institute East Africa program yields a very different set of outcomes from that of Théâtre du Soleil’s work with Aftaab. Whereas, after ten years, the ongoing project of Aftaab had produced little in the way of autonomy on the part of the Afghan theatre artists and had resulted in these artists relocating to France, the SIEA project, now formally concluded, has contributed to the creation and sustainability of robust festival institutions, operating in East Africa under East African leadership. The KITF itself cultivates transnational relationships beyond those of its funding structures, and the shapes and characters of these transnational relationships are of as much interest to me here as are those of the U.S./East African relationships that, as I discussed in the previous chapter, were at the center of the SIEA program.

This chapter starts with an introduction to the city of Kampala, Uganda’s capital, and with an overview of Uganda’s modern theatre history, whose activity has been centered in Kampala, to afford analysis of the KITF’s engagement with—and in some ways rejection of—historical and contemporary trends in Ugandan theatre. Then, I turn to the circumstances of the Kampala International Theatre Festival’s creation in relation to the Sundance Institute, arguing that the festival cannot be seen simply as an outcome of the SIEA program but as the
convergence of several streams of influence and activity in contemporary Kampala. Next, I analyze the festival as a performative event that cultivates certain transnational, affectively experienced communities, alternately along the lines of regional East African, pan-African, and global alliances. Subsequently, I examine how while the KITF is a site of significant community building, it is also limited by its precarious position within Kampala’s existing field of cultural production. Its struggles to cultivate a substantial audience reflect the festival’s interventionist position, engaged in engineering a twenty-first-century Ugandan theatre culture that rejects many elements of the cultural status quo. Finally, I turn to the festival’s consistent engagement with political content, arguing that the KITF also actively intervenes in the city’s political status quo through the creation of public affective political space, asserting a contrasting narrative to more visible kinds of political performances that occur in Uganda’s capital.

The Context of Ugandan Theatre in Kampala

Kampala is in many ways a typical African capital city, whose bustling city center with high-rise buildings gives way to increasingly leafy, dirt-road suburban neighborhoods, where chickens and goats roam among small roadside shops, as one moves toward the city outskirts. Located just north of Lake Victoria, the city’s population today is over 1.65 million, making it smaller than other East African capital cities. Although Kampala’s history as a city is traced back to 1890 when British Captain Frederick Lugard set up his camp on Kampala Hill, the region was already the heart of the Buganda kingdom, and many of the hills that became part of the city had been sites where previous kabakas (Buganda kings) constructed their citadels. By the end of Idi

3 Lugard arrived as head of an Imperial British East Africa (IBEA) Company expedition. British missionaries, however, had already been influential in the region since the 1870s. The British Church Missionary Society was particularly instrumental in planting Christianity in Buganda in the 1880s. Maxon, *East Africa*, 122-26.
Amin’s regime in 1979, the city buildings and infrastructure had undergone tremendous destruction, but today Kampala is the site of much regrowth and new wealth. The city center is Nakasero Hill, where Parliament, international embassies, government buildings, tourist hotels, and the Uganda National Cultural Center, which houses the National Theatre, are located. Immediate surrounding areas include Namirembe and Rubaga Hills topped with Anglican and Catholic cathedrals; Makerere Hill where Makerere University, the oldest university in East Africa, is located; the posh Kololo neighborhood that is home to many diplomats and well-to-do Ugandans; the vibrant all-night bars and clubs of Kabalagala; densely packed street markets such as Nakasero and Owino; and cramped slums with makeshift housing such as Katwe and Katanga. Terrible traffic regularly clogs the city’s streets, but many Kampalans weave their way through the jam on boda bodas, or motorcycle taxis, that line up for customers at practically every street corner. Kampala boasts a strong art scene, with frequent gallery openings, craft markets, concerts, contemporary dance workshops and performances, the Bayimba Cultural Foundation’s music and art festival, Maisha Film Lab’s programs supporting East African film makers, and other events occurring on a regular basis.

To understand what the Kampala International Theatre Festival means in its social context, it is necessary here to provide an overview of the roles theatre has played in postcolonial Uganda, particularly as an agent of nation building and political resistance. Theatre and performance practice in Kampala has been a political space of resistance at times in the past, but for a variety of reasons it is largely today a commercial space of light entertainment and distraction.

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Considering the KITF in the context of Uganda’s modern theatre history affords an understanding of the festival as an episode in a complex trajectory, rather than an ahistorical event of unprecedented theatrical activity driven by support from a U.S. theatre non-profit. In an opening night speech at the inaugural festival, festival co-organizer Deborah Asiimwe took a moment to remember the playwright Wycliffe Kiyingi, who had died a few weeks before the festival. This invocation situated the KITF in Ugandan theatre history, affirming a link to this “golden age” giant whose work resonated with Ugandans as relevant and deeply specific to the Ugandan context, even though the new festival’s offerings included no representation of drama in Luganda and were far more cosmopolitan in their scope than the work Kiyingi is known for. The KITF should be seen as participating in several trends in Ugandan theatre history. It affirms a long tradition of Ugandan society valuing performance, spectacle, and humor. It claims the National Theatre as a space where socially and politically relevant performance work should occur. And as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, it continues a long history of theatre in Uganda being used to launch political critique and subversion of the status quo.

Formal theatre has been both a popular and a political practice in Uganda’s modern history. Theatre played a central role in cultural innovations in the late 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the emergence of Kampala and particularly Makerere University as an intellectual capital of modern East Africa. Soon theatre activity began to develop outside of the university as well, with the Uganda Drama Festival starting in 1955 and the National Theatre, the venue where the first two iterations of the KITF were produced, opening in 1959. While these university festivals and the programs that emerged from them did not necessarily position theatre overtly as a political activity, they were engaged in asserting Ugandan facility with and adaptation of modern Western forms of proscenium theatre, while using theatre to discuss social issues
relevant to contemporary Ugandan audiences. Although in the early years the National Theatre
was dominated by expatriate theatre, by the time of independence in 1962, the venue had started
to host works by Ugandan artists, including many plays coming out of Makerere, in both English
and Luganda. From the early years the National Theatre has received criticism for being
informally aligned with the Baganda people, privileging performance in Luganda and the local
Baganda audience over pan-ethnic Ugandan nationalism.\(^5\)

Theatre also played a role in the postcolonial Ugandan project of cultural nationalism and
in local and regional community-building and educational endeavors. Theatre was perceived by
many to be a particularly good fit for Ugandan society, for its ability to reach non-literate
populations, at times even to transcend language barriers, and to build unity between disparate
ethnic groups and communities within the new modern nation-state of Uganda.\(^6\) The Makerere
Free Travelling Theatre, formed in the 1964/65 school year by staff and students at Makerere,
developed a repertoire of one-act plays, a combination of European and African plays in English
and new original plays in Luganda, Swahili, and local languages, and toured around the country
performing for free in Ugandan villages.\(^7\) During this time, theatre was also used for hybrid
didactic and entertainment purposes by churches and the Social Welfare Department, and Radio
Uganda employed radio drama in support of cultural nationalism.\(^8\)

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\(^5\) Margaret Macpherson, “Makerere: The Place of the Early Sunrise,” in *Uganda: The Cultural
\(^6\) Ibid., 29.
\(^7\) A few examples of plays are *The Bear* and other one-act plays by Chekhov, the Tanzanian
president Julius Nyerere’s Swahili translation of *Julius Caesar*, and new plays by Makerere
students—Ugandan and otherwise. David Cook, “The Makerere Free Travelling Theatre: an
Landscape*, 212-13.
What scholars often refer to as the “golden age” of Ugandan theatre developed under the escalating ethnic tensions and political repression of the Obote I regime. During the period after Milton Obote’s coup in 1966, theatre increasingly took on overtly political dimensions, launching camouflaged critiques against political leadership. Ugandan theatre became acutely political as it turned inward, with the intensification of repression and the exodus and expulsion of white expatriate and Indian populations under Idi Amin severely limiting the cosmopolitan network with which artistic activity in Kampala had previously been engaged. This period of highly politicized and popularly attended theatre, spanning the late 1960s and much of the 1970s, was dominated by performances in Luganda. Scholarship characterizes the work of Wycliffe Kiyingi and Byron Kawadwa as being the most significant in this trend, with some drawing a distinction between Kiyingi’s work as popular and Kawadwa’s work as the development of

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9 For example, Mbowa uses this phrase. Ibid., 216.  
10 At the time of independence in 1962, Milton Obote as Prime Minister led in coalition with the KY party, who represented the Baganda traditionalists. In 1966 Obote enacted a coup, dismantling the coalition government and soon after instituting a new constitution. In 1971 Idi Amin, the army’s second-in-command, led a military takeover of Obote’s government. The Amin dictatorship collapsed in 1979 and in 1980 Obote resumed the presidency through an election overseen by a military commission. However, this election was contested by the young radical Yoweri Museveni, one of the opposition leaders to Obote’s reelection. Museveni started a guerilla war to resist Obote’s presidency, with several armed forces joining in to overthrow the new regime. This period from 1981-1986 came to be called the Bush War. In 1986, The National Resistance Movement (NRA), under Museveni’s leadership, gained control of the country and established Museveni as president. Maxon, *East Africa: An Introductory History*, 284-90.  
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forms pioneered by Kiyingi into “art theatre.” 13 Much of this work had a strong ethnic component, responding directly to the Obote I regime’s dismantling of the Buganda kingdom, the exiling of Kabaka Mutesa, and the repression of Baganda cultural expression under the rhetoric of the new republican constitution, continuing once Idi Amin obtained power through a military coup in 1971. 14

While politically charged theatre in Luganda at this time was the most regularly performed, broadly attended, and embraced by Kampala audiences, some of Uganda’s most acclaimed political theatre in English came out of this period as well, namely the plays of Robert Serumaga. 15 Serumaga, who had studied at Trinity College in Dublin and brought back to

13 Rose Mbowa makes this distinction, whereas Samuel Kasule does not. See Mbowa, “Luganda Theatre and its Audience,” 216; and Kasule, Resistance and Politics.

14 While Milton Obote (Prime Minister from 1962-1971 and 1980-1986) abolished all of the kingdoms in 1966, not just the Buganda kingdom, the Baganda people, whose kingdom was historically the largest and most powerful and which included the urban center of Kampala, developed in particular a deep hatred of Obote, whom they viewed as having betrayed them. This history is described in Maxon, East Africa: An Introductory History, 284-86. Frederick Golooba-Mutebi provides a history of Buganda monarchism in tension with the modern nation-state of Uganda, explaining that practices associated with Buganda monarchism were repressed starting with the Obote I regime. Yoweri Museveni reinstated the Buganda and other kingdoms in 1993. Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, “Settling the Buganda Question: a peek into the future,” Transition 106 (2011): B-10 – B-25. To be clear, though, Amin’s “soaked in blood” regime persecuted many ethnic groups, beginning with massacres of the Langi and Acholi people. Maxon, East Africa: An Introductory History, 287. According to Mbowa, Kiyungi’s work “aimed at de-emphasizing expatriate colonial culture and bringing majority culture to the centre of the cultural scenery in Buganda.” Mbowa, “Luganda Theatre and its Audience,” 213. Kawadwa “forged theatre in Luganda into a modern and politically relevant form whose impact was stronger and more immediate than theatre in English.” Ibid., 220-21. Both Kiyungi and Kawadwa used biblical and historical narratives, especially from the Buganda kingdom’s religious wars of the late nineteenth century, metonymically to critique the contemporary political regimes while transgressively asserting Baganda cultural identity. The historical narratives served as camouflage to protect them from censorship and political persecution, although in Kawadwa’s case these measures proved insufficient, as Amin’s forces murdered him in 1977. Both Kiyungi and Kawadwa’s plays are discussed in Mbowa, “Luganda Theatre and its Audiences,” and more comprehensively in Kasule, Resistance and Politics.

15 Robert Serumaga’s plays are discussed in chapter two of Kasule, Resistance and Politics and in Ntangaare and Breitinger, “Ugandan Drama in English.” They are also the subject of George
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Uganda with him the influence of Beckett and others, pursued a “vision of African theatre trying to communicate with humanity on a universal plane,”\textsuperscript{16} through actor-centered theatre utilizing abstractions and political allegory, often commenting on the degeneration of Ugandan society.\textsuperscript{17}

As Serumaga’s work employed theatrical idioms and language that were not always accessible to Kampala audiences at a time when much of Uganda’s intellectual elite had fled the country, his company received more acclaim on tour in Europe than in Uganda.\textsuperscript{18}

Eventually, the violent persecution—and killing—of visible artists from this period substantially discouraged artists from making subversive work, and sent many artists into exile, thus bringing an end to the golden age of Ugandan theatre. When Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Army achieved power in 1986, ending the long period of detentions, torture, and killings and promising increased civil liberties and democracy based on a no-party political system, theatre reemerged as a popular entertainment, with four hundred new theatre troupes registering around the country. Partially improvised shows in Luganda, or in a mixture of English and Luganda, became the dominant form, with Jimmy Katumba’s troupe the Ebonies standing out as the most famous, performing mixtures of Luganda farce and television drama.

\textsuperscript{16} This is Serumaga’s language, as quoted by Ntangaare and Breitinger in “Ugandan Drama in English,” 231. Their source is Robert Serumaga, “History of the Abafumi Company,” \textit{Sunday Nation Nairobi}, 149-56.

\textsuperscript{17} Ntangaare and Breitinger, “Ugandan Drama in English,” 231-33.

\textsuperscript{18} Serumaga did, however, employ strategies to evade censorship within the country, including the staging of unscripted plays. Some scholarship has questioned the capacity for Serumaga’s work to have meaningfully enacted resistance on the ground in Uganda during the dictatorship period, given the relatively inaccessible nature of his work for many Ugandans. Kasule, \textit{Resistance and Politics}, 48. Other significant Ugandan playwrights working in English such as John Ruganda and Cliff Lubwa p’Chong were writing during the Obote and Amin years as well, but some, including Ruganda, were living in political exile outside of Uganda at the time, and their work has played a more important role as part of the canon of dramatic texts studied in Uganda and East Africa when restrictions on political expression lifted.
forms at the “lavishly equipped” Theatre Excelsior. This form expanded with commercialization in the 1990s, as Museveni was forced to concede to the IMF’s structural adjustment policies and abandon many of his socialist principles. The prevalent analysis in scholarship is that this work was dominated by light fare primarily functioning as distraction from life’s difficulties and as fuel for class-climbing aspirations, emphasizing sensationalism and spectacle. Ugandan theatre artist and scholar Rose Mbowa states that by the late 1990s theatre in Luganda had become “the dominant genre of cultural or creative activity and one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the country,” tending to play on “cheap emotional audience reactions.” Kasule concludes that in the post-Obote II period, theatre became “irrelevant” as a space for the challenging of “anti-people political practices.”

While such diversionary theatrical fare may have become standard in 1990s theatre, within a limited sphere, some artists continued to utilize theatre to air political and social problems and pose challenging questions to Ugandan audiences. The most prominent example is playwright Alex Mukulu, whose work was both decidedly political and well attended. For example, Ugandan theatre artist and performance studies scholar Charles Mulekwa describes how Mukulu’s play *Thirty Years of Bananas* played at the National Theatre in 1992 for an “unprecedented” six months uninterrupted, although ticket prices limited his work’s accessibility to the more well off. Mulekwa affirms a strong trend of Ugandan theater artists in the post-

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19 Ntangaare and Breitinger, “Ugandan Drama in English,” 244.
23 Ibid., 211.
25 Mulekwa describes how although the audience was limited by ticket prices to the upper classes, audiences did include members of all racial groups within Ugandan society—native Ugandan, white, and Indian. Mulekwa, “Theatre, War, and Peace in Uganda,” 61-62.
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Amin and Obote period using the stage as “an important way to chronicle the postcolonial Uganda” in which he grew up, filling a void left by the loss and falsification of much historical record during war times. He asserts that his own generation of theatre artists has been acutely aware of the sometimes-mortal sacrifices previous generations of Ugandan theatre artists made.26

In twenty-first-century Kampala the available roster of performance entertainment is dominated by film, including Hollywood film as well as Nigerian film (Nollywood), Ugandan film (called kinaUganda) and others, live comedy, popular music, and commercial theatre performances such as those by The Ebonies and Bakayimbira Dramactors. The Ndere Center caters to African and non-African tourists, focusing on the preservation of traditional East African dance, music, and singing. A younger generation of independent playwrights writing on political themes, such as Mulekwa and Deborah Asiimwe, have had major productions at the National Theatre.

The KITF, then, is a part of a new chapter in the story of Uganda’s theatre. As I will demonstrate, its emphasis on works engaging with pressing and sensitive social and political issues aligns it in some ways with the highly political works from the 60s and 70s. Its global

26 Mulekwa describes his generation of theatre artists as those who were born shortly before or shortly after Uganda achieved independence in 1962. Ibid., 46-47. It is necessary also to complicate the picture of commercial theatre in the Museveni period as being primarily diversionary. Of the companies that emerged out of the often-cited four hundred new theatre troupes that registered at the beginning of Museveni’s presidency in 1986, some of the most prominent commercial ones did view themselves, particularly in the earlier days, as creators of politically-charged theatre facilitating social space for the public evaluation of current political leaders, as my interview with Charles Senkubuge, director of Bakayimbira Dramactors, confirmed. Senkubuge, discussion. Political plays were also being written and produced by Ugandan artists in exile, such as George Seremba, during this time. Seremba grew up in Uganda (Buganda kingdom) in the 1960s and 1970s and worked in theatre after graduating from Makerere University. He was forced into exile following an unsuccessful attempt on his life by the army of Milton Obote in 1980, living under asylum in Canada and then in Ireland where he earned a PhD in Drama at Trinity College. He is the author of several plays, most prominently Come Good Rain, which dramatizes the circumstances of his attempted killing and exile from Uganda. Brown-Vélez, “Travel and Migration, History, Identity, and Place,” 35-41.
outlook and inclusion of works from many parts of the African continent and the world, among
other things, however, distinguish it substantially from earlier periods of Ugandan theatre
history. In addition, the KITF is the product of foreign support from the Sundance Institute and
other international funders. While analysis of the influence of ongoing Sundance support for the
KITF will thread throughout the remainder of this chapter, it is helpful here to detail the
circumstances of the festival’s creation in relation to Sundance and to characterize the nature of
Sundance’s ongoing involvement. After doing so, I will consider some of the most concrete ways
in which Sundance support has influenced the festival.

Although the new festival was started in the aftermath of the SIEA program and was
catalyzed by a point of intersection between Sundance’s goals and the agenda of Bayimba
Cultural Foundation, the festival organizers, both Ugandan artists and arts administrators based
in Kampala assert that interest in and intention of creating something along the lines of a new
theatre festival in Kampala was already mobilizing prior to Sundance’s pitch. Founded in 2007
by Faisal Kiwewa, Bayimba Cultural Foundation is a leading arts organization in Uganda.27 It
hosts the highly popular annual Bayimba International Festival of the Arts in Kampala, as well as
five regional arts festivals around the country and the Doa Doa Arts Market, which offers a
variety of workshops and other programs throughout the year.28 Kiwewa explains that he and

27 Faisal Kiwewa is the Founding Director of Bayimba Cultural Foundation, in which capacity he
serves as co-organizer of the KITF. Through Bayimba, Kiwewa has played an integral role in
invigorating performing arts in Uganda. For more information, see his bio on the Kampala
International Theatre Festival Official Website, accessed March 19, 2017,
http://kampalainternationaltheatrefestival.com/faisal-kiwewa/.
28 The Bayimba International Festival of the Arts attracts over twenty thousand attendants yearly.
Faisal Kiwewa (Director of Bayimba Cultural Foundation and co-organizer of the KITF), in
discussion with the author, November 28, 2014. For more information about Bayimba, see the
Asiimwe shared an independent interest in creating a platform to highlight the medium of theatre under Bayimba’s institutional support before Sundance approached Bayimba. Kiwewa had become aware of Asiimwe when her play *Cooking Oil* won the BBC African Playwrights Competition in 2010, and Asiimwe began teaching yearly creative writing workshops through Bayimba. Kiwewa and Asiimwe began discussing ways of incorporating more theatre into Bayimba’s programming, and when Sundance staff approached Kiwewa in their exploration of how they might continue supporting theatre arts in the region after terminating the SIEA lab program, the timing seemed right. This conversation yielded plans for the new festival, with Sundance as a core, but not exclusive, sponsor and funder. In Asiimwe’s estimation, the festival would have materialized in one form or another regardless of Sundance’s support.\(^{29}\) From the Sundance staff perspective, the presence of Bayimba played a critical role as a local cultural institution with its own infrastructure and locally recognized brand, making possible a partnership through which Sundance could sustain a level of support without rigorous involvement, and without establishing itself as a permanent institution in the region.\(^{30}\)

Sundance’s role in the festival has become increasingly hands-off, but in the first year it did make its support contingent on one strong condition. Sundance would provide a substantial portion of the funding for the festival, including transporting out-of-town artists to Kampala, on the condition that the festival primarily showcased work developed through the SIEA program, or at least by East African artists whom SIEA had supported.\(^{31}\) While Sundance’s prioritization

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\(^{29}\) Asiimwe, discussion.

\(^{30}\) Hibma, discussion.

\(^{31}\) There were several exceptions to this. The first was *Ster City*, directed by French theatre artist Jean-Paul Delore in collaboration with South African performers Lindiwe Matshikiza and Nick Welch. *Ster City* had no connection to the Sundance Institute. The festival also included the
of producing the work of artists it had supported demonstrates sustained commitment to these artists and projects, Kiwewa found this limitation challenging. From his perspective, the festival’s appropriate role is to present fully complete works of a high caliber, which he felt the opening night “guest” performance of Ster City from South Africa effectively did. Kiwewa believes the festival should showcase professionally realized productions, even if they must be presented in excerpted form when large casts encounter barriers to travel. He felt that some of the performances in the inaugural festival were not ready to convey the degree of professionalism demonstrated by this South African piece.\textsuperscript{32} The 2014 KITF performance line-up, therefore, was not based per se on the prioritization of attracting local audiences, but on producing work by artists that Sundance had chosen and vetted.

Sundance’s footprint in the inaugural KITF would have been a bit bigger if not for a fascinating intersection of local and international politics and media leading up to the festival. Sundance initially intended to play a larger role in the inaugural KITF, functioning as the primary producer, but ended up limiting its role in response to concerns from Human Rights Campaign,\textsuperscript{33} the largest U.S. LGBT civil rights advocacy group, that Sundance’s presence would render the festival a target of violence. The concern was based on a convergence of events. In December 2013 the Ugandan parliament passed anti-gay legislation making homosexual screening of a filmed New Orleans production of Erik Ehn’s play Maria Kizito, directed by Emily Mendelsohn and featuring Ugandan actors Esther Tebandeke Lutaaya, Allen Kagusuru, and Tonny Muwanga. Two of the Ugandan actors, Tebandeke and Kagusuru, responded to questions at a talk back following the screening. In addition, the festival included two pieces with artistic leadership by participants in the SIEA labs, but which were not specifically developed at the labs: Troupe Lamyre’s Dechirement, performed by SIEA alumnus Freddy Sabimbona (Burundi) and Amizero Kompagnie’s Radio Play, directed by and featuring SIEA alumnus Wesley Ruzibiza (Rwanda).\textsuperscript{32} Kiwewa, discussion.

behavior punishable with life in prison and banning “the promotion of homosexuality.”

Meanwhile, the film *God Loves Uganda*, exposing the role played by American Evangelical Christian institutions in cultivating radical anti-gay sentiment in Uganda, garnered attention and accolades at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival (and at film festivals around the country), catapulting it into the public eye in Uganda. Human Rights Campaign’s concern was that the Sundance brand had come to be associated, through the success of *God Loves Uganda*, with a critique of Uganda’s anti-gay legislation, and could draw negative attention to the festival. After months of deliberation, Sundance chose to step down from formally producing the festival, still contributing some money but primarily handing all decision making and organizing over to Bayimba and Asiimwe (albeit technically still a part-time Sundance employee at the time).

Christopher Hibma was the only Sundance Theatre Program staff member to attend the festival. On the ground in Kampala, it was difficult not to view the whole episode as imbricated in trends of Western news media’s sensationalist depiction of security and human rights conditions in Africa. Ultimately, though, the impact was that Sundance staff played essentially no role in the operations or marketing of the festival from the start. This case thus offers an example of how a globally recognized, prestigious brand can be perceived as a threat to a local event.

An additional result was the conspicuous lack of visibility of Sundance throughout the first festival. The direct invocations of Sundance’s role in the festival were limited to a brief essay in the festival program by Hibma, who also made a short speech at the opening night.

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36 Hibma says this was always the eventual goal, but that the response to *God Loves Uganda* and the concern from Human Rights Watch brought this about more quickly than it might have happened. Hibma views this as ultimately positive. Hibma, discussion.
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reception, and a mention in the co-organizers’ program notes that in addition to bringing together works by East African theatre artists and affirming the region’s theatrical richness, the festival functioned to celebrate the more-than-a-decade of Sundance support of artists in East Africa.\(^{37}\)

Several artists with whom I spoke at the 2014 festival had not specifically been aware that the festival was connected to Sundance. In general, the KITF promoted its intra-East Africa transnational nature while downplaying, or making less visible, its relationship to a U.S. organization and the transnational development program from which it emerged. This framing and publicity choice in some ways rendered invisible how, at the 2014 festival, the celebration of an interconnected regional East African theatre culture was mediated by participation in a U.S.-run program.

As the festival has evolved, Sundance’s role has grown increasingly hands off, in keeping with its disinterest institutionally in the role of producer and its commitment to supporting autonomy on the part of East African artists and arts administrators. Sundance is not the sole funder of the KITF. The list of funding organizations has varied year to year, with the 2016 festival press release listing Sundance, Bayimba, the Open Society Kampala, and U.S.A. for Africa as its primary “presenters.”\(^{38}\) Of course, some degree of agreement with broad Sundance values is built into the structure of the KITF, as Asiimwe as co-organizer is influenced by her years of work with and for Sundance—a role for which she was hired in no small part because her theatrical values and perspective on global exchange were seen by Sundance staff as being congruent with their own.


The KITF has not highlighted its relationship to the Sundance Institute for a variety of reasons. In the next section I turn to the kinds of relationships that have been highlighted and promoted through the collective experiences the festival has curated. Later, I will revisit Sundance’s ongoing influence on the festival through a reflection on the KITF’s affirmation of and points of divergence from Sundance values.

Cultivating Communities of Transnational Alliance

In this study of the Kampala International Theatre Festival, I approach the festival not just as a series of performances, but as an event that has unique capabilities for making theatre visible, cultivating affective alliances, and intervening in cultural and political status quos. In this section I clarify my usage of the term transnational in describing this particular festival and situate my analysis in relation to scholarship about the particular dynamics of contemporary theatre festivals in Africa. Then, I propose that the KITF is an event engaged in negotiating a theatrical identity for a twenty-first-century, cosmopolitan Uganda, in relation to the region of East Africa, the larger African continent, and the world. In the following I will trace some of the transnational communities of felt connection that the KITF cultivates as it has moved through its first few years of existence, and consider how it is influenced by both transnational funding structures and unfolding political economic conditions in East Africa as it does so.

I examine the KITF as a transnational event comprised of border crossings and flows of people, texts, performances, values, ideology, and money, in some cases (particularly in regards to funding) between the United States and Uganda, but in most others between locations within the region of East Africa, between Uganda and the larger African continent, and between Uganda
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and other (geographic and deterritorialized) global locations. Transnationalism is a sufficiently multifaceted terminology to accommodate the several layers of border-crossing interaction, affective connection, and exchange that festival organizer Deborah Asiimwe has, from the start, envisioned as the KITF’s goals. Asiimwe wished to create a vibrant theatre festival that African artists from across the continent could feel ownership of, that would function as a space for East Africans to collectively discover their commonalities, but that would also bring, selectively, the world outside the African continent to Uganda.  

Many of the festival’s transnational flows involve multiple layers of border crossing and interaction, such as the traveling of performances that are themselves products of transnational collaborations shaped by postcolonial relationships and migratory trends. For example, the 2015 KITF featured a performance by Senegalese artist Patricia Gomis that is the result of an ongoing partnership between Gomis and France-based theatre director Marcia de Castro, as well as the performance piece Body Revolution, developed and directed by Iraqi artist Mokhallad Rasem, now based in Belgium, with three Belgian performers of Middle Eastern descent. Moreover, many of the East African artists whose work the KITF has featured themselves have cosmopolitan and hybrid identities, even if most are currently situated in East Africa. National affiliations themselves in the region (as in many parts of the world) are not always the most prominent sources of identity, as ethnic, regional, linguistic, and religious identifications exist alongside, and sometimes in tension with, nation-state designations. As Kenyan theatre artist Rogers Otieno, who directed a play in the 2014

39 Asiimwe, discussion.

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KITF, put it, “I’m honestly not attached to boundaries created by human beings less than a hundred years ago.”

Scholarship has identified several economic and ideological explanations behind a proliferation of international/transnational theatre festivals in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century. Many international festivals located in the West cater to cultural omnivores, meeting the demands of cosmopolitan audiences in global cities, and forging additional performance opportunities for international artists whose local theatre economies are insufficient to support them. Theatre scholar Christina McMahon writes of a core tension within international theatre festivals, which on the one hand “epitomize the enhanced interconnectedness of cultures that characterizes our age” but, on the other hand, “pose significant obstacles to meaningful intercultural exchange” by decontextualizing performances and even commodifying and sensationalizing cultural difference.

The KITF, like better-known and older arts festivals with major theatrical components in sub-Saharan Africa today, such as the Harare International Festival of Arts in Zimbabwe and the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa, emphasizes both its devotion to presenting work by local artists as well as its international scope. McMahon distinguishes the trend of international theatre festivals in Africa from those in Europe and other parts of the Global North, asserting that those in Africa have tended to emerge in a substantively different geopolitical and economic context than did many of those in Europe, which emerged after WWII. The new African international theatre festivals have tended to be oriented both toward

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41 Otieno, discussion.
42 McMahon, Recasting Transnationalism Through Performance, 2-3.
encouraging tourism and to forwarding political objectives related to postcolonial and transnational communities (such as disparate countries connected by a shared colonial heritage). They have existed from their origin in the context of a global, neoliberal economy, and have tended to rely, at least partially, on foreign funding such as NGOs. As such, they are often sites of both the creation and contestation of narratives about postcolonial relationships between nation-states, as well as sites of negotiating the priorities and pressures of international funding sources. On these points the KITF is no exception. As I have demonstrated, its creation is bound up with a transnational theatre development program run by the prestigious U.S. organization the Sundance Institute, whose ongoing funding remains a factor in the Ugandan festival organizers’ decisions. McMahon also argues that international festivals in Africa tend to be incentivized to emphasize community building over commercialism or artistic competition, which, along with their relatively smaller size, in many cases make them more conducive than their larger, European-based counterparts to meaningful cultural exchange, debate, and community building.

From its start, I suggest, the KITF has exemplified the transnational festival’s unique ability to serve as a performative event engaged in the active engineering of new identities and communities of sentiment—at national, regional, and global levels. Amanda Rogers writes that “theatre practitioners and performances represent but also produce, navigate and order transnational geographies…. As such, theatre can physically and imaginatively create new configurations of place, identity and culture that are always in the making.” Theatre festivals in particular, through their facilitation of discussions and talk-backs, their visible curation, their

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45 Ibid., 4-5.
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spotlight on theatre as a social event, and their gathering together of artists as much as audiences, are conducive to the kinds of identity configuration that Rogers highlights. In the inaugural KITF, I argue, the festival as event participated in cultivating feelings of cultural and social interconnection within East Africa through a movement of twenty-first-century modern African theatre. It thereby contributed to the production of a twenty-first-century transnational East African identity, including in this identity the sizeable cultural, historical, and linguistic diversity of Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and Ethiopia.

The inaugural festival’s organizing principle demonstrates this orientation toward regional identity and alliance building. The lineup of performances constituted a more-or-less even representation of each of these six countries, with performances labeled in the program according to the national identity of the playwright. The productions themselves constituted more nuanced relationships to national identity, for example: Desperate to Fight, by Ethiopian playwright Meaza Worku, was directed locally by Ugandan director Aida Mbowa with a Ugandan cast; and a reading of Strings, by Ugandan playwright Angella Emurwon, was directed, also with a local Ugandan cast, by Kenyan director Rogers Otieno. The transnational nature of these productions, then, underscored the overall emphasis on East African theatrical regionalism.

One of the most concrete sites where feelings of regional connection were visibly encouraged and expressed was during post-show discussions. Many festival performances in both 2014 and 2015 generated feelings of connection and recognition of similar social dynamics and tensions across national lines. During a talk-back after Ethiopian playwright Meaza Worku’s Desperate to Fight, a play interrogating the ramifications of a woman’s choice to reject compromise in marriage, Kenyan playwright Sitawa Namwalie lamented the lack of circulation of performance work among African countries. Of this Ethiopian play, she declared, “the story is
so familiar; it’s a Kenyan story, it’s a Ugandan story, it’s our story,” afterward questioning why she had never before heard of this playwright. The inclusion of the Ethiopian work is particularly significant given the limited circulation of contemporary Ethiopian plays, which are predominantly written in Amharic. A group of young Nairobi-based spoken word poets performing in *We Won’t Forget* shared with me that the understated treatment of the dangers of tribalism—a largely taboo subject—expressed in the Ugandan play *Grave Robber Services* resonated with their experiences of tribalism as a taboo issue that has generated violence in recent years in Kenya. The talk-back after a video screening of a U.S. production of U.S. playwright Erik Ehn’s play *Maria Kizito*, about the Rwandan genocide, involved Ugandan performers and audience members recalling their own memories of being aware of genocide occurring in their neighboring country.

In some cases, festival events became active calls for the promotion of indigenous East African expressive practices. At the talk-backs following her own play *Room of Lost Names* at the 2015 festival, Namwalie drew attention to her production’s use of East African musical instruments, declaring that while West African instruments are widely known globally, East African instruments are far less so, even within East Africa. She explained that her incorporation of them into her work strives to remedy this lack. Namwalie draws from the music and cosmology of multiple Kenyan ethnic groups in *Room of Lost Names*, for example, through her use of the Luhya creation myth and a Luo funeral dirge, both of which she told audiences she wished to make more visible in contemporary mainstream East African society. Namwalie’s embrace of performance traditions from multiple Kenyan ethnic groups eschews the narrow promotion of her own ethnic identity, emphasizing, rather, the expression of the diversity of the

47 Joel Mwamkonu et. al., discussion.
48 See note 31 for information about the production of *Maria Kizito.*
region’s ethnic groups—an act with particular political significance after the ethnically-charged post-election violence that flared up in Kenya in 2007 and 2008.\(^49\) The KITF audience clapped when Namwalie declared her intention to compel audiences to take the Luhya creation myth seriously. Across moments such as these, artists and audiences together highlighted similarities of experience and interrelated memories as well as positive affirmation of ethnic and regional cultural heritage.

This foregrounding of East African regional identity is significant for several reasons. Firstly, the festival’s emphasis on bringing together East African artists annually and with institutional support represented a proliferation of professional opportunities for artists in the region. Opportunities for many East African artists are limited in their own countries due to scarcity of performance venues and producing institutions, lack of funding, limited audiences for so-called art theatre, and governments that are hostile to the arts, particularly theatre. For several artists I spoke with, the growing knowledge of theatrical talent within relative geographic proximity was a significant boon. Moreover, transnational development or collaboration opportunities available to East African artists have tended to come from Europe or the U.S. along the lines of former colonial relationships (such as British/Ugandan or French/Rwandan partnerships). The Rwandan and Burundian artists I spoke with also had longstanding relationships with artists and organizations in Francophone West Africa, but relatively limited connections among their Anglophone East African neighbors. More abstractly, the East African

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connections mobilized pride in the region’s own cultural resources in contrast to the more visible and more broadly popular West African cultural production (such as the Nollywood film industry).

The cultivation of a twenty-first-century East African theatrical identity is also powerful given the history of cultural and intellectual interaction across these nation-state borders in the postcolonial period. Theatre scholars such as Eckhard Breitinger and Margaret Macpherson have characterized Kampala in the immediate postcolonial period as the center of regional and pan-African literary and theatrical activity, centered at Makerere University. Makerere was founded as a technical college in 1922 and grew into a university, drawing students from all over East Africa, as well as from Central and Southern Africa and parts of West Africa. Macpherson, who taught at Makerere before and after independence, describes the social climate at Makerere in the period immediately following independence in 1962 as a “notably colourless society” where one’s ethnic and class identity did not dictate status within the university community. The 1962 conference of African Writers of English Expression was held at Makerere, establishing it as “the East African centre in cultural development.” Tanzanian law scholar Issa Shivji has described the early years of independence in East Africa as a robust time of intellectual exchange between Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, comprising what he calls an “East African discourse.” Isolation and inward-turning were the results of dictatorship and political upheaval of the late 60s and 70s, which in turn gave way to neoliberalization of educational and cultural institutions in the 80s and 90s—also hostile to the crosspollination of authentic intellectual and artistic discourse across the region. Shivji has called in the twenty-first century for a renewed East

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50 Macpherson, “Makerere: The Place of the Early Sunraise, 27.
51 Breitinger, “Introduction,” 2.
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African discourse that will expand to include what he labels “Eastern Africa,” bringing into its scope Rwanda, Burundi, and even the Democratic Republic of Congo.\(^{52}\)

Such a reinvigorated collaborative spirit between the nation-states of East Africa is undoubtedly manifest today is in the realm of economics, trade, and border policy. Today, the cultivation of a regional East Africanism holds significance in regards to the East African Community, a regional intergovernmental organization founded in 1999 working towards “widening and deepening co-operation among the Partner States” in political, economic, and social spheres.\(^{53}\) The East African Community today includes all of the countries that participated in SIEA and the first KITF, with the exception of Ethiopia and with the recent addition of South Sudan. Plans on the horizon include establishing a monetary union and shared currency, and eventually a political federation. Scholarship has anticipated how the recently established “Common Market protocol,” promising free movement of goods, capital, and people across state borders within the region is anticipated to initiate, over time, a new East African identity.\(^{54}\) The KITF’s choices of which transnational relationships to celebrate, then, have implications for attitudes toward evolving supranational organization. There are economic benefits, then, to encouraging this particular supranational entity from a cultural angle. But is East Africa a significant identity in the lives of its inhabitants, or is it merely a convenient grouping that will better enable a series of small, low GDP countries to participate in the ubiquitous global market? Recall, here, that the promotion of East African regional integration


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dates back to the colonial partitioning of British East Africa. Perhaps the KITF’s regional approach can be seen as an alternative mode of stitching together independent states into supranational blocks, not through the logic of global capitalism, but through the affective alliances and discourses that theatrical exchange can facilitate, attending both to affinity and diversity and without erasing difference.

While the inaugural KITF fully embraced East African regionalism as its transnational scope, the second iteration of the festival introduced a different approach to transnational connection that continued into the third KITF in November of 2016. As I’ve addressed previously in this chapter, Sundance’s support of the first festival was contingent on the festival producing exclusively works that had received development in the SIEA program. Therefore, this carefully curated regionalism was at least partially the result of Sundance’s heavier hand in the early festival. This is not to say that the promotion of East African regionalism through felt connection was not present in year two; indeed some of the examples I cited earlier were from this second festival. But whereas the inaugural festival forwarded primarily a regional East African emphasis, the second festival positioned Uganda in conversation with the larger African continent and with other parts of the globe. Ugandan playwright and Performance Studies scholar Charles Mulekwa asserted in an interview the significance of seeing international artists, particularly from places other than the U.S. and Western Europe, in Kampala—a presence that he considers of particular significance for Ugandan theatre students.55 In 2015, one such individual was Senegalese theatre artist Patricia Gomis, who, although having toured her work widely in France and Francophone Africa, shared with me that her performance at the KITF was her first time performing in an Anglophone country. The KITF functioned in this case as a force

55 Mulekwa, discussion, December 2015.
interrupting cultural flows that tend to follow the paths of postcolonial affiliations, forging new paths with a different logic.

In their curation of the KITF’s increasing global scope, I argue, the festival organizers participate in the engineering of Kampala’s ongoing process of globalization, actively asserting agency over how Uganda globalizes. A great deal of scholarship on the transnational flows of globalization emphasizes the cultural affects of populations in movement. One example is Arjun Appadurai’s concept of diasporic public spheres in which national and cultural identities become disarticulated from state territory. Attention to the effects of globalization on immobile local populations tends to consider tactics for resisting or indigenizing global hegemonic cultural forms. Faisal Kiwewa, KITF co-director, reasons that since the majority of Ugandans do not have access to substantial world travel, part of the job of arts programmers is to bring the world to Uganda. This logic partially explains the decision in the second year of the KITF to solicit submissions from artists globally. The 2015 festival’s inclusion of performances by artists from Kosovo, Iraq, and Senegal presented an alternative option to the global/local dichotomy of cultural consumption options epitomized, for example, by the contrast between the Hollywood film offerings at major cinemas and the offerings of the local Luganda film industry. Presenting performances by international artists not representative of global superpowers interrupts the cultural flows dictated by global capitalism, asserting that global connections need not be limited to the hegemonic and commercial.

The performances by artists from Kosovo and Iraq in the 2015 festival contributed to the building of what Appadurai calls “communities of sentiment,” in which groups of people imagine and feel things together across national boundaries. Appadurai remarks that these

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56 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*. 
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communities “are often transnational, even postnational,” and that they are capable of “moving from shared imagination to collective action.” At the KITF the emergence of a community of sentiment is based not on regional proximity or interrelated cultural heritage, but on shared histories of struggles for sovereignty and the long aftermath of violent conflict and repressive regimes. *Waiting For Train*, conceived and directed by student director Kushtrim Mehmeti, who also performed in the play, is a good example. A forty-minute highly physical play with no spoken text, the piece uses slapstick comedy, music, and dance to depict the evolving relationship between two men waiting for a train that, with clear echoes of *Waiting for Godot*, never stops for them—evoking a sense of being immobilized in a desert of opportunity as history charges forward. Much of the humor in the piece is derived from the contrast between the two characters, one a loud, expressive, entertainment-seeking buffoon, the other a quiet, refined gentleman. With the onset of abstractly rendered civil war as well as darkness and cold, the two men eventually turn to each other for support. In the final moments, they scan the radio desperate for news, feed their homemade fire with a book as a last resort, and huddle against each other for warmth as darkness descends. Following performances of *Waiting for Train*, there was a palpable feeling in the room of mutual appreciation and connection. When Kiwewa as talk-back moderator explained that Kosovo was a new country in South Eastern Europe that achieved autonomy only in 2008 and had been refused formal recognition by many governments (including Serbia, which considers Kosovo part of its sovereign territory), an audience member interjected that the Ugandan government was among those countries that had recognized Kosovo. The audience cheered. *Waiting for Train*’s abstract and playful rendering of themes of

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57 Ibid., 8.
58 This is actually not the case. Uganda’s recognition of Kosovo as a sovereign state is contested. See, for example, Gëzim Krasniqi, “Rising Up in the World: Kosovo’s Quest for International
stasis, lack of opportunity, the permanent state of waiting for a better future, and ongoing
eexistence after the devastation of war, resonated with experiences of many Ugandans. This was
particularly the case in November 2015 as the country prepared for a weighty election in which
Yoweri Museveni would ultimately secure yet another term, extending his presidency beyond
thirty years and threatening an already tenuous democracy.⁵⁹

Stylistically, the piece’s comedic register and reliance on physical storytelling won over
the KITF audience.⁶⁰ In the festival’s final performance, a Sunday matinee, the audience was
largely composed of young festival volunteers, and several families with children, who laughed
with glee as the roguish character stole apples right out of the uptight gentleman character’s
hand, returning them, to the latter’s chagrin, gnawed down to the core. Director/performer
Mehmeti was visibly moved by the welcome he and his co-performer received and the warm
reception of his work by the Ugandan audience and festival administrative team, and the
audience clapped when he expressed his desire to return to Uganda. The inventive staging placed
the audience with the actors on the stage of the National Theatre main auditorium and used

⁵⁹ In February 2016 Museveni won an election whose legitimacy was highly contested. The
primary challenger candidate was arrested in the week before the election. See Josh Kron,
“Yoweri Museveni, Uganda’s President, Wins a Widely Criticized Election,” New York Times,
February 20, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/21/world/africa/yoweri-museveni-
ugandas-president-wins-a-widely-criticized-election.html?_r=0. Current Ugandan law does not
include a presidential term limit, but a president may not be over the age of seventy-five.
Museveni’s reelection in 2016 ensures that he will be in office upon reaching that age, leaving
many concerned that he will use his presidential authority to change the law. Jeffrey Gettleman,
17, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/18/world/africa/uganda-firmly-under-one-mans-
rule-dusts-off-trappings-of-an-election.html.

⁶⁰ As live comedy shows and comedic commercial drama are popular entertainment forms in
Kampala, and as physical comedy emphasizing mimicry has a long history in the region, Waiting
for Train was arguably a natural fit for Kampalan audiences. See Mbowa, “Luganda Theatre and
its Audiences,” 208.
scaffolding and ladders in a wing on one side of the stage as the setting, abstractly simulating the train platform and functioning as the jungle-gym for their acrobatic antics. The audience’s presence onstage helped create the sense that they too were waiting along with the performers for the train. When an audience member asked, “Did Uganda inspire you or did you inspire Uganda?,” although she was specifically referencing the seamless transposal of the performance into the found environment of the National Theatre offstage wing, it was easy to read into her question implications of an organic resonance between Kosovo and Uganda.

The lineup of performances at the third KITF in November 2016 confirmed that the festival was moving more fully toward this approach to transnational identity that emphasizes resonances between Uganda and the international theatre community outside of East Africa. In that year’s festival, five Ugandan pieces were accompanied by performances from the Middle East and the U.S., without a single inclusion of performances from the broader East Africa region. While the festival website’s “about” page still declares its devotion to nurturing the East African theatre community, the 2016 press release advertises primarily its curation of theatrical fare from “different parts of the world.” On the one hand, we can view this as a rejection of the limitations of an imposed regionalism. Northern Ugandan theatre artist and activist Okello Kelo Sam suggested to me in an interview, when I asked if he attached significance to the cultivation of an East African theatrical identity, that East Africa is, after all, a very small area, implying that the potential payoff of cultivating such connections is limited.

Was the 2014 regional emphasis primarily a Sundance imposition? My conversations with artists lead me to think not. Many of the East African artists I spoke with saw value and

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62 Okello, discussion.
expressed deriving empowerment from the creation of opportunities for cross-pollination among regional artists, as well as from the creation of space to engage in discourse about issues of shared East African significance. Certainly, part of the move away from regional emphasis is financially enforced. Without the more robust international funding that Sundance provided in the first year, East African artists are likely to find the cost of transporting a production between, say, Dar es Salaam or Addis Ababa and Kampala, prohibitive. At the 2015 festival, the two non-Ugandan East African performances were both from Nairobi, including a group of students who endured a thirteen-hour bus ride to perform at the festival and Namwalie’s artistic team for Room of Lost Names, whose trip was funded privately by Namwalie herself. Transnational funding sources do not appear interested in specifically helping, for example, a Rwandan production travel to Uganda. These circumstances suggest serious barriers to the proliferation of East African regional exchange without the mediation of a wealthy donor country and significantly limit the opportunities that this new festival may have initially represented for theatre artists in the region, outside of Kampala. Beyond these observations, I wish to suggest that transnational theatre festivals in Africa, despite the limitations associated with dependence on transnational funding, can function as opportunities for so-called “peripheral” localities to present themselves as centers of global exchange on their own terms. As the KITF evolves, Ugandan artists will continue to imagine, test, revise, and reimagine what kinds of transnational alliances will define a modern and cosmopolitan Ugandan theatre culture of the twenty-first century.

Cultivating New Identities and Audiences for Ugandan Theatre

The transnational nature of the KITF creates an opportunity for multiple kinds of community building, but it also presents a set of challenges that limit the festival’s capacity for building
community on a larger scale. The KITF, with its cosmopolitan scope and its transnational funding and set of alliances, is struggling to cultivate an audience. A closer look at this struggle illuminates ways in which the festival occupies a precarious position within Kampala’s cultural hierarchy. The KITF strives to straddle multiple sets of taste and expectation while also attempting to intervene in the status quo of cultural production in Kampala.

In attempting to present globally connected theatre work in conversation with East Africa, the larger African continent, and the world—particularly in terms of a certain kind of globally circulating theatre work—the festival has also established barriers to its own success. The most apparent manifestation of these barriers is low festival attendance. Some of the performance venues at the National Theatre, particularly the Round Hut and the Green Room, are relatively small, and a thirty-person audience can constitute a packed house, but performances in the larger main stage auditorium were sometimes conspicuously empty, with fewer than fifteen audience members present for some performances. The festival attracted a large “expatriate” contingent, representing the many primarily Europeans and Americans based in Kampala, often working for development NGOs or conducting research. At the 2015 festival, the audiences of several performances were largely dominated by a group of undergraduates from NYU Dubai who attended the festival in conjunction with their enrollment in a course on African women playwrights. A review of the 2015 festival in *The Observer* described the festival as “right on production, wrong on numbers,” lamenting the small audience and

63 This course was developed by NYU professor Robert Vorlicky in collaboration with Deborah Asiimwe, who provided several play scripts by contemporary African women playwrights, including Sitawa Namwalie’s *Room of Lost Names*, which premiered at the 2015 festival. Vorlicky taught this course at NYU Abu Dhabi in the fall of 2015 and 2016 and brought students to the KITF both times. See “Robert H. Vorlicky, Associate Professor,” Tisch School of the Arts, New York University Official Website, accessed March 19, 2017, https://tisch.nyu.edu/about/directory/drama/108494575.
prominence of expatriates, even for Ugandan productions that clearly addressed topics of relevance to Ugandans. The same article describes a would-be audience member who left the box office disgruntled upon hearing that the performances were primarily in English or French, complaining, “These shows are for whites.”64 These critiques highlight how even when the festival’s offerings spoke directly to issues relevant to Ugandans, there was some perception of the festival as elitist or as catering to Kampala’s sizeable expatriate population.

Indeed, there are quite a few contributing factors to the KITF’s difficulty in attracting an audience. Language is one. As noted above, the festival performances have thus far been primarily in English, with a few performances in French or Swahili, usually, although not always, with supertitles. While English is an official language of Uganda, many Kampalans consume media and entertainment primarily in Luganda and have varying degrees of comfort with English. Ticket prices are another factor. At 50,000 Ugandan shillings for a full festival pass, or 20,000 for a day pass, festival tickets are no doubt a barrier-to-entry for some Kampalans (20,000 Ush converts to about $5.84 at the current exchange rate). The accessibility of the National Theatre venue is a third factor. Located across the street from Parliament, in the city center near upscale hotels that cater to international travelers and corporate conventions, the theatre occupies a position near the city’s center of power and is difficult—and expensive—to access from many residential areas for those who rely on public transportation. Moreover, the National Theatre’s complex history of signification relates to the country’s ethnic politics in

ways that might keep some audiences away. In theatre scholar Samuel Kasule’s account, the National Theatre became a strong symbol of Buganda nationalism during the dictatorship years. It was suggested to me by one Ugandan expatriate that the Baganda people have more or less abandoned the National Theatre today, as it is under the leadership of non-Baganda under the current government.

Several of these explanations imply an elitism, and indeed while Asiimwe has insisted that she wants people from all walks of life to attend the festival, co-organizer Faisal Kiwewa straightforwardly acknowledges that the festival’s target audience is Kampalans who can afford to buy tickets. From his perspective, the festival serves as a vehicle for developing a professional arts culture in the city, which requires cultivating a class of paying audience members. But there are more complex dynamics at play in the KITF’s positioning within Kampala’s field of cultural production. A theatre-going population in Kampala, including those who pay good money for such entertainment, exists, but this audience’s tastes and expectations differ greatly from what the KITF delivers. At popular commercial theatres such as Bat Valley or La Bonita, audiences line up out the door for performances costing 20,000 Ush per ticket. One explanation is that a performance at Bat Valley Theatre for this price will last for four hours, translating into a whole evening out. The experience at such a venue is substantially different than at the National Theatre; at Bat Valley, audiences can purchase food and beverages during the show, and performances are interrupted for frequent intermissions and function for some as backdrops for conversation. In comparison, some Kampalans would be hard-pressed to pay the same amount for only one hour of entertainment. Moreover, the rung of Kampalan society that is willing to

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66 This comment was made outside of an interview and under request for anonymity.
67 Kiwewa, discussion.
pay prices such as these—or higher—for entertainment is also accustomed to better-equipped venues such as the privately funded and lucrative Theatre La Bonita, with its sleek interior, red velvet-covered seating, and video-equipped stage, or even performances that are sometimes staged at Kampala’s five-star Serena Hotel. The nominally state-funded National Theatre’s facility, with its chipping paint, under-resourced stage, and ill-equipped amenities cannot compete with these sharper venues (positioning it ironically as simultaneously elitist and inaccessible as well as materially sub-par). This distinction extends to the festival’s production values. The above-mentioned article in *The Observer* comments that “to make matters worse, organizers did not have the corporate backing that other shows enjoy.” Indeed, the process of choosing performances for the festival, especially after the first year, was heavily curtailed by funding capabilities, which necessitated the prioritization of small casts and undemanding set and technical needs, as well as a high ratio of readings to fully staged productions. Given the popularity of spectacle in Ugandan performance culture, this trend presents challenges to many local audience tastes and expectations.

Performing live in a formal theatre space separated from daily or popular sites of social activity, in some ways, involves pushing against performance trends in contemporary Kampala. Some feel that in comparison to theatre, stand-up comedy, which is currently very popular in Kampala, has “moved closer to people in bars and nightclubs.” Charles Senkubuge describes how his popular company, the Bakayimbira Dramactors, has increasingly taken to bringing their popular productions to neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city rather than expecting audiences to come to them. This trend would be supported by theatre scholars Patrick Ebewo and

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68 Ochwo, “Theatre Festival Right on Productions, Wrong on Numbers.”
69 Douglas Sebamala, as quoted in Ibid.
70 Senkubuge, discussion.
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Ofonime Inyang, who argue that contemporary African theatre struggles to attract large audiences among the masses, because it fails to prioritize the habits and tastes of these audiences, asserting, among other things, that theatres located in city centers discourage popular audiences. And while there are still audiences lining up, sometimes for several hours, to attend certain commercial performances, in general the theatre in Uganda today is, as in many parts of the world, up against a vastly different entertainment landscape than that of the sixties and seventies, when live theatre was, along with radio, prominent among few other sources of entertainment. Today’s Kampalan youth, as is the case for so much of the world, are preoccupied with television, film, music videos, cell phones, YouTube, and the endless applications of social media, all of which are more readily available than live theatre.

But beyond all of these factors, the most prominent reason for the difficulty in attracting a substantial audience to the KITF is that the festival purposefully pushes against the grain of the entertainment and performance status quo in Kampala, actively attempting to generate an interest in viewing and making work that breaks from the aesthetics and content of the dominant commercial theatre, which means introducing theatrical idioms unfamiliar to many Kampalans. Moreover, in its embrace of innovation through international exchange, the festival also risks charges of elitism and of catering to an elite cosmopolitan Ugandan and expatriate audience. Although unarticulated in any official festival materials, there is a degree to which the KITF’s emphasis on doing theatre differently is a critique of the aesthetic value of the city’s commercial theatre. Festival co-director Kiwewa described to me his disgust with the shows at Bat Valley and La Bonita, which he insists are “not theatres,” but purely commercial venues. He

71 These authors point out that in indigenous African cultures, there is a strong practice of witnessing performance, but performances come to the audiences, rather than vice-versa. Patrick Ebewo and Ofonime Inyang, “African Theatre and the Quest for Audience,” in Igweonu and Okagbue, *Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre* 3, 72-88.
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characterizes the work they produce as “what people are fed everyday” and fundamentally
different from the KITF in purpose and output. He describes walking out on a production at Bat
Valley shortly before the first KITF, fed up with the weak plot and excessive explanation of
stage action. (For Kiwewa, a major goal of the festival is to expose Ugandan artists to a wide
variety of innovative forms, to fuel their own innovation.) Another KITF administrator
expressed to me frustration with a broad Ugandan cultural tendency to deflect disturbing
messages or news with laughter and a generalized discomfort or lack of experience with
interpreting abstractions.

These reflections suggest that initiatives like the KITF are attempts at cultivating a more
highbrow arts scene that will reflect the city’s changing demographics and reinvest educated
middle and upper class audiences in theatre going as a stimulating and valuable activity. The
sense of newness and of movement toward a kind of work characterized by a cosmopolitan
sophistication is reflected also in the press around the festival. For example, an article in
RwandAir’s *Inzozi Magazine* by an artist involved with the festival is titled “Theatre Comes of
Age in East Africa,” suggesting a trajectory of maturation. And one of the two bloggers
covering the festival on the KITF’s official website posted reviews that read more like a playful
and exploratory narrative of the author’s first foray into a new art medium, at times voicing
(partially tongue-in-cheek) anxiety about being “not bright enough to get” the show. In one piece
he quotes a conversation with a National Theatre employee who anticipates that the festival
performances will have underlying messages challenging to decipher because he’s “grown

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72 Kiwewa, discussion.
73 *Inzozi Magazine* is the official magazine of Rwanda’s national airline. The article’s author,
Samuel Lutaaya Tebandeke, is a performing artist and writer who participated in the 2014 KITF
as a stage manager and whose play *Marriage Chronicles* was featured in the 2015 festival.
Tebandeke, “Theatre Comes of Age in East Africa,” *Inzozi Magazine* (March-May 2015),
accustomed to the comedic type of theatre that is usually served around town.” Indeed, Charles Senkubuge, director of Bakayimbira Dramactors, one of the most prominent and long-standing commercial theatre companies in Kampala that sometimes performs at Bat Valley Theatre, conceded in an interview with me that perhaps his own company had failed to continue evolving since its heyday in the eighties and nineties, and as Kampalan society has become more educated and cosmopolitan, Bakayimbira has not kept up, thereby losing the interest of a sector of society that used to make up a substantial portion of its audience. But if companies like Bakayimbira have lost the interest of a segment of their historical audience, this audience has yet to be won over in large numbers by the KITF.

The KITF must be seen, then, as a struggle to engineer a twenty-first-century cosmopolitan Ugandan theatre culture and to market it to audiences who may have very little experience witnessing live theatre, or whose experiences attending commercial popular theatre in Kampala have primed them for a different theatre experience. The festival’s difficulties attracting an audience in its first two years reveal tensions over the question of what theatre is truly Ugandan and what Ugandan theatre should consist of.

The KITF pushes the envelope of theatrical trends in Kampala in ways that extend beyond aesthetic, linguistic, and stylistic conventions. In the next section I turn to trends in the festival’s content material, specifically its treatment of political themes.

The KITF’s Creation of Affective Political Space

In this section I argue that the KITF, although small and young, constitutes a significant attempt at cultivating resistance to the political status quo in Kampala through the creation of public affective political space. The festival at large should be recognized as a performative event whose presence encourages the voicing of politically charged work that might otherwise go unproduced, and where a growing community of theatregoers and makers can push each other to articulate that which often goes unspoken.

The Kampala International Theatre Festival creates a public space where collective experiences of political desire or longing may be felt. It constitutes an intervention in regards to the hegemonic status quo of cultural production in the realm of live performance in Kampala today. While the festival might not necessarily incite direct acts of political resistance, the creation of the corporeal, emotional, and discursive space of the festival actively makes room for the possibility of resistance to a status-quo of self-censorship and complacency in a society where two decades of repressive and violent dictatorship have been followed by three decades of relative stability (for some of the country) soured by rampant government corruption, crumbling infrastructure and social services, and a democratic system that is widely viewed as a sham. It does so while simultaneously promoting a cosmopolitanism that attends to the particularities of local issues and modes of communicating while also positioning Uganda and East Africa in conversation with the larger African continent and the world.

In putting forward the idea that the KITF creates political space in Kampala, I am not suggesting that all performances at the festival concretely address the behaviors of governments, police, or military forces, or that the festival initiates debate or action related to concrete governmentality. Rather, my use of the concept of the political is more similar to the
conceptualization of Jacques Rancière, who views politics as the assertion, in the face of an existing regime premised on some kind of exclusion, of a universal equality. Lauren Berlant addresses the affective dimension of political attachment, proposing the concept of “political noise,” or political feeling that is unfiltered into concrete messages. She asserts that, indeed, the process of binding people to each other politically, and to an idea of the political, is generally accomplished more through “the affect of feeling political together” rather than through concrete policy or even ideology. I argue that the KITF is a space where an audience in Kampala might experience “political noise,” perhaps because they came seeking such an experience, or perhaps without arriving with such an expectation. Moreover, the festival is a space where artists and audiences may audition and evaluate various modes of performance, including different dramaturgical forms and styles of staging, and where the ensuing community may engage in discussion of both content and form. We can view this discursive engagement with work that elicits emotional response as a kind of search for or negotiation of what Berlant calls a “filter,” the formation that distorts or funnels unarticulated noise into coherent, communicable messages. Berlant proposes that “amidst all of the chaos, crisis and injustice in front of us,” to desire the political (in Rancière’s sense) is to desire “the sense…of a more liveable and intimate sociality.” While the performances at the KITF are not likely to themselves produce the “scene” of this more liveable social world, they can activate a shared longing for that world (its “sense”), enable a shared articulation of the “chaos” and “injustices” at hand, and facilitate active discussion over these circumstances. The KITF performances may not directly stage subjunctive visions of what this more liveable social world may look like (in fact, the KITF performances

76 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 224.
77 Ibid., 227.
have rarely done so overtly), but the festival has consistently curated live performances that publicly expose injustice and violence and elicit longings for a more compassionate social world.

As I outlined previously in this chapter, Uganda has a vibrant history of political theatre. Theatre was used most pointedly during the years of the Obote I and Amin dictatorships to launch political critiques and drew crowds in doing so until the government’s persecution and killing of artists brought an end to this period of vigorous and subversive theatrical activity. But by the first two decades of this century, theatrical performance in Kampala had become most commonly a light diversion, in the form of the comedic four-hour-long improvisational performances by famous companies such as the Ebonies and Bakayimbira or the popular live comedy shows that can be attended many nights a week at venues such as the plush Theatre La Bonita. Entertainment in Kampala today is dominated by the film, music, and music video industries, including Western products as well as films from Nigeria’s Nollywood and from the more nascent Ugandan, Tanzanian, and Kenyan film industries. Today the National Theatre functions as a nominally state-run venue for rent at what theatre artists find to be exorbitant prices, renting its rooms out regularly for office space and traditional wedding meetings. Moreover, the Museveni government’s method of buying artists out has restricted the likelihood and ability of artists to produce work that is substantively subversive or critical.78 Playwright and theatre scholar Charles Mulekwa described to me that since he is a respected playwright, corporate sponsors will sometimes offer to fund his theatre projects with the caveat that the projects avoid political content. Mulekwa suggests that theatre is perceived as more threatening to the government than forms such as popular music and comedy because of theatre’s sustained

78 Charles Mulekwa described to me how the current government recently invited many prominent artists from all mediums to dinner, and made a promise to them of 400,000 Ugandan shillings. Mulekwa, discussion, November 2015.
duration and the medium’s formal demand for a unified theme, making a politically charged play far more dangerous than one or two political jokes slipped into a comedy routine.⁷⁹

Beyond the systemic limitations on the arts, particularly theatre, through the government and private sector’s disinterest in funding work that probes social and political issues of serious national concern, the Ugandan populace of the twenty-first century has much reason to desire change. The widespread corruption of the Museveni government into the current decade is well documented, with its so-called “zero tolerance” policy that in fact clamps down exclusively on petty bureaucratic corruption and in some ways diverts attention from the deep, high-level party corruption from which NRM party elites benefit.⁸⁰ This system of “neo-patron clientelism” is supported by a “skewed power structure that enables institutional and social manipulation.”⁸¹ Two areas that have suffered some of the most extensive siphoning of government funds are health care and education, and the phenomena of “ghost soldiers” have impaired the military’s ability to suppress Joseph Kony’s rebel forces during two decades of civil war in the north.⁸² The government has also notoriously suppressed free political speech, a recent example of which is the state’s banning in 2009 of the ebimeeza (or “peoples’ parliaments”), a form of radio-broadcasted open public debates about current nation-level politics that became popular in and outside of Kampala during the first decade of the twenty-first century.⁸³

⁷⁹ Ibid.
⁸⁰ NRM, Museveni’s political party, stands for National Resistance Movement.
⁸² Ibid., 137.
⁸³ The ebimeeza were banned as a response to the 2009 Kampala riots, as discussed in Florence Brisset-Foucault, “A Citizenship of Distinction in the Open Radio Debates of Kampala,” Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute 83, no. 2 (May 2013): 227-50. The 2009 Kampala riots were an unusual outburst of street violence for southern Uganda, in which thousands of young people took to the streets to protest the state’s “symbolic power play” against
In the context of such widespread government corruption, funding structures that discourage political performance, the lingering influence of the memory of government persecution of outspoken artists during the dictatorship period, as well as the substantial appetite for light, comedic distraction in the form of popular commercial theatrical entertainment, the significance of not just one political performance but an annual festival presenting a lineup of work engaged with “the political” should not be underestimated. The festival’s promotional materials, such as the website and yearly festival brochure, have never specified or advertised a commitment to political work. But in discussion with Deborah Asiimwe, co-director of the festival and herself an accomplished playwright, it is clear that the festival holds for her a political significance. She explains,

I want to say that [theatre] can play the role it has always played. Of making people think about their circumstances and begin to question how they can change their circumstances, and begin to ask themselves whether they can be initiators of change. I think for so many years, and this has been worrying to me, for so many years there has been this spirit of complacency, that things have failed to work and we should accept them the way they are and just move on. But you cannot move on; well, I feel that I cannot move on if my circumstances are not what I want them to be. I will be stuck.  

Asiimwe’s commitment to showing work with substantial social and political critique is evidenced in the festival’s performances themselves. Over the first two editions of the festival, 16 plays were presented, either as full productions or staged—and occasionally unstaged—readings. Only one or two plays of the sixteen did not substantially grapple with questions that I deem political.

One identifiable strain of work has emphasized social critiques about the position of women in Ugandan and other East African societies. Ethiopian playwright Meaza Worku’s

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84 Asiimwe, discussion.
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*Desperate to Fight* engages audiences in a critical moment of decision making for thirty-five-year-old Marta, married and divorced three times, as she contemplates the possibility of a fourth marriage to an older widower, likely her last chance at motherhood, matrimony, and the social legitimacy that these positions afford. Angella Emurwon’s *Strings* features a woman who, having returned to her family’s village to work as a secretary in an office after reaching the all-but-dissertation stage of her PhD, confronts her ambivalence about what romantic love might have to offer her, the limited opportunities she faces in the village, as well as her own self-inflicted internalized barriers to further accomplishment and success. Kenyan playwright Sitawa Namwalie’s *Room of Lost Names* presents a study of the erasure of identity and loss of narrative control in a fictionalized account of the sexual abuse and brutal murder of a middle class young woman in a flashy and hedonistic corner of Nairobi’s socialite scene. Whereas in the popular Ugandan film industry, even in films by female directors, women tend to be portrayed as sources of immoral influence and to hold only supporting roles, in these plays women are protagonists negotiating the discrepancies between globally informed expectations of their lives as educated, single, middle class women and the reductive or compartmentalizing options that they perceive as available to them in their immediate social worlds.

Another set of plays shown at the KITF has directly addressed modern histories of political and ethnic violence, and ongoing cultures of political and economic corruption and censorship, in the East Africa region, including Uganda. *Radio Play*, a dark satire incorporating lyrical moments of dance theatre and expressionistic staging, uses the behind-the-scenes daily activity at a local radio station to present a scathing critique of surveillance, censorship, and covert state violence in contemporary East Africa. While many of the play’s references castigate

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in particular the company’s home base of Rwanda, *Radio Play* is designed to speak more broadly to chronic regional phenomena of censorship and self-censorship, sexual repression, barely sublimated ethnic hatred, and complicity between media and government. *Déchirement*, by Bujumbura-based company Troupe Lampyre, is the festival’s to-date most direct and graphic engagement with mass violence, chronicling Burundi’s history of colonialism, civil war, genocide, and ongoing covert violence and extreme wealth disparity. The Kenyan spoken-word-poetry piece *We Won’t Forget* weaves together a series of monologues by characters victimized directly or indirectly by several forms of violence in twenty-first-century Kenya, including the ethnically charged post-election violence of 2007 and recent terrorist attacks around the country (including the Westgate Mall and Garissa University attacks). The Tanzanian piece *Africa Kills Her Sun* is a parable-like reworking of the Nigerian short story of the same name, in Kiswahili and infused with song and dance, that uses a bandit’s reflections on the eve of his execution to illustrate how a corrupt government compels its honorable citizens to embrace corruption. While some of these performances depicted nation-specific conflicts and social injustices, giving voice to a diversity of political histories and present circumstances in the region of East Africa, the majority of them also resonate with phenomena that Uganda has on some level experienced, from colonial violence, civil war and displacement, and ethnic killings, to government corruption, gender-based violence, and the neoliberal economic policies of structural adjustment programs. The international festival context softens the landing of some political critiques; for example, the stakes of satirizing the Rwandan government’s control of media are not as high as directly depicting such problems in Uganda.

These political performances inside the National Theatre offer up a contrasting narrative to political performances of another kind happening outside of the theatre. This was particularly
the case during the 2015 festival, which took place under three months before a presidential election carrying significance for the future of Uganda’s supposed democracy. In front of a backdrop of the city plastered with large billboards displaying images of a smiling Yoweri Museveni in his signature wide brimmed hat and with smaller posters with the faces of his main opponents, parades of young NRM party supporters in their yellow t-shirts, some of whom are reported to be paid, or even duped, to attend, cheering from the tops of vehicles, would occasionally stall traffic in the downtown area. Democratic process in Uganda is itself in some ways quite literally a performance, as the government is recognized by scholarship as being “semi-authoritarian,” formally conducting multiparty elections but unwilling to actually “permit a changing of the guard through the ballot box.” The same weekend as the 2015 festival, another set of performances unfolded in Kampala, as Pope Francis’s arrival in Uganda during his first trip to Africa dominated all news coverage. Performances of traditional culture greeted the Pope in Entebbe, where Stephen Rwangyezi’s Kampala-based Ndere Troupe, a professional company devoted to the preservation of the region’s indigenous dance and music, entertained crowds. The activity filling the National Theatre, although less visible to most, presented a performative counternarrative of contemporary Uganda and East Africa, animating not traditional culture but a globally connected, while locally grounded, East African modernity, and exposing the inequities that the current regime would like to conceal.

The festival as event enables the articulation of some political ideas through collaborative process, even when individual artists are not fully prepared to do so on their own. As explained

[87] Tripp, Museveni’s Uganda, 23.
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by Asiimwe, one of the core goals of the festival is to render visible the iterative nature of the artistic process, and to involve audiences in the development of works-in-progress. To this end, some pieces are shown as readings in draft form, and the talk-backs serve as workshop-like constructive feedback sessions for artists, in conversation with a theatre-going public. An interesting example at the 2015 festival was Ugandan playwright Kaya Kagimu Mukasa’s *Grave Robber Services*, a draft of a play about a young Ugandan man named Junior who, like so many in Kampala today, has been unable to find employment despite his university degree. Under pressure from his family and girlfriend to make something of himself, Junior convinces his friend who works for a funeral services company to help him steal expensive goods from a wealthy man’s grave. While the play easily justifies Junior’s woes in the context of current soaring unemployment rates for young graduates, several characters make vague, unelaborated comments about being “from the wrong place.” During the talk-back that I attended, a Ugandan audience member commented that it seemed the author had tiptoed around what she wanted to say, what she had led the audience to believe she would have the courage to say, thereby letting the audience down. This message was about tribalism in contemporary Uganda, a relevant subject which is nonetheless not commonly discussed, almost to the point of being taboo.

Mulekwa, who directed the reading, expressed to me later in an interview that he had brought up the same critique with the playwright when he first agreed to direct, but Mukasa the writer was hesitant to elaborate on the issue.\(^89\) Whether or not the author revises the play to more explicitly address tribalism in Ugandan society, the public acknowledgment of the silence at the center of the play functioned, at least partially, to fill that silence, to make the critique by drawing

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\(^89\) Mulekwa, discussion, November 2015.
attention to its absence, even in a context where an artist was unprepared to fully commit to such a critique herself.

In some cases, KITF productions launched more explicit political critiques. Joshua Mmali’s play *The Betrothal*, performed as a staged reading at the 2015 festival, is politically daring in its direct castigation of government corruption in the Ugandan health care sector. But it is also notable for its clear defiance of Sundance aesthetics and values, marking the festival’s departure from the influence of the U.S. organization that was so integral in its creation. In 2015 *The Betrothal* was one of three Ugandan plays that were all primarily naturalistic pieces emphasizing issues of local concern related to corruption, unemployment, and domestic tensions. These plays defy the Sundance values of innovative form and universality; they do not prioritize the ability to reach out across cultural contexts. They do not push boundaries of form, do not incorporate music, movement, or dance, video or other media, and are not hybrid fusions of traditional and modern mechanisms of storytelling. The example of Mmali’s *The Betrothal* in performance illustrates the potential power of staging a topical play catering, above all, to a local Ugandan audience. The play tells the story of a young woman from a financially strapped village family who, in becoming engaged to a well-to-do municipal government employee in the Ministry of Health, is blinded by love and the prospect of wealth and social standing to her fiancé’s culpability in the deep government corruption that has deprived her baby sister of an important vaccine. Despite her mother’s suspicions of the wealthy fiancé’s role in the clinic’s mismanagement, it takes her sister’s death to force the young woman to see the man for who he is. In the chilling closing scene, the mother demands that the daughter go through with

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90 In addition to *The Betrothal*, these included *Grave Robber Services*, which I discussed previously in this chapter, and Samuel Lutaaya Tebandeke’s *Marriage Chronicles*, a bedroom domestic drama offering a series of glimpses into one couple’s nightly negotiations of the challenges of marriage.
the marriage, at the last minute bringing out the dead baby as the bride, shaming and humiliating the groom in front of all the guests. Staged as a reading, the play is still in development, and the production had a distinctly amateur quality, directed and acted by young artists experienced mostly in film.

_The Betrothal_ elicited a strong response in KITF audiences. Its straightforward didacticism and instrumental plot devices, such as the moment when the daughter finds a pile of incriminating papers on a table in fiancé’s home, would likely not have piqued Sundance’s interest, and it would have very little opportunity for production in the Global North, but its power at the festival was palpable. Mulekwa suggested that the play was powerful in the Ugandan context partially for its embrace of a culturally relevant mode of communication. In Mulekwa’s words, “In Uganda, if you really want to get your message across, you’re always better off being didactic… Because for us, people feel like what they lack is a voice. Always what people are looking for is someone with courage, someone candid enough to say ‘oh look, so much money was stolen from such a place. That stinks.’” Playwright Mmali explained to the audience in a talk back that he’d written the play after attempting for several years, while working as a BBC journalist, to cover a court hearing on a corruption scandal similar to the one in the play. The hearing was postponed year after year, making it impossible for him to file the report. The personal register from which the play emanated for the playwright was also paralleled in audience responses. One woman described how her father had passed away under circumstances related to insufficient regional medical services after having a stroke on vacation away from the city. Another audience member took issue with the ending, in which the criminal is shamed but receives no further punishment, insisting, “We need to see justice.” This is another

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91 Interestingly, Mmali himself currently lives in the U.S.  
92 Mulekwa, discussion, December 2015.
example of talk-back responses giving voice to critiques or messages that extend beyond what
the playwright ventures to depict. The talk-back moderator brought the discussion to a close with
the assertion that “theatre makes change possible” and that, as Ugandans, they need to consider
their responsibilities in relation to the circumstances of their society. The talk-back thereby
created an occasion for this public assertion of theatre’s political function.

A play like The Betrothal was not written for the KITF, but without a venue for small-
scale productions of new works by early and mid-career artists with a particular commitment to
intervening in the aesthetic and political status quo, it would likely go unstaged and unseen.
Artists are producing work, sometimes privately, sometimes unsure of how politically daring
they are willing to be. A festival like the KITF brings these individuals into contact with each
other, clarifies, magnifies, and extends messages of political critique and subversion, and
emboldens other artists by the “noise” it creates. Theatre scholar Osita Okagbue has written that
the national theatres in African countries must function, among other things, as a political and
cultural concept, playing a role in ongoing negotiations of national identity. The KITF’s
success cannot be measured only by the artistic and communicative success of individual
productions but also by its claiming of the National Theatre as a space for collective artistic,
social, and political discourse about the nation to occur.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the Kampala International Theatre Festival both in regards to its
relationship with the Sundance Institute and in regards to its social, artistic, and political
functions within its context in contemporary Kampala. Through my study of the KITF as an

93 Osita Okagbue, “Dreams Deferred: National Theatres and National Development in Africa,” in
Igweonu and Okagbue, Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre 3, 67.
outcome of international funding and development, I wish to trouble any simplistic understandings of the implications of such funding and support structures. The festival demonstrates that support from a wealthy donor country organization, the rule rather than the exception for non-commercial performing arts endeavors in many parts of Africa today, cannot be seen reductively as a catalyzing force from outside of the country or as driven primarily by international agendas. Contemporary Ugandan society, especially in the urban center of Kampala, is complex, in many ways transnational and cosmopolitan in and of itself. Many of the Ugandan artists shaping the KITF have been deeply influenced by their experiences in theatre abroad and enjoy many international connections, in some cases even international reputations. Nonetheless, they have chosen to focus their efforts on nurturing theatre activity in Uganda. The festival harbors continuities with the SIEA program, such as Asiimwe’s leadership and the ongoing presence of some Sundance-supported artists, but it also constitutes breaks from some of Sundance’s signature trends, as evidenced in performances disinterested in embodying Sundance values. Moreover, the KITF brings together communities of Ugandan artists, including some whose relationships with Sundance contained friction. Charles Mulekwa, whose disapproval of some Sundance choices and subsequent distancing from the SIEA program I discussed in the previous chapter, has embraced the new festival as a fresh venture with much potential.

Mulekwa shared with me that while he does not like directing and does not think of himself as a director, he agreed to direct Kaya Kagimu Mukasa’s play *Grave Robber Services* not only because of their history as friends and theatre colleagues, but because he believed that if someone had the courage to write this play addressing difficult Ugandan social and political issues, it is imperative that someone else have the courage to direct the play. Mulekwa, discussion, November 2015. Another artist who has criticized the SIEA program, Okello Kelo Sam, was scheduled to perform his play *Forged in Fire* at the 2015 KITF, but it was cancelled only a few weeks before the festival. Okello declined discussing the circumstances of his play’s cancellation with me.
Chapter Four

The KITF is a small festival, and its impact thus far on the larger landscape of transnational theatrical circulation and exchange in Africa should not be exaggerated. The KITF’s small size and low profile arguably afford the festival directors, in some ways, a higher degree of autonomy than they might otherwise have, in the sense that the festival doesn’t experience pressure to generate tourist revenue and is, at its current size, unlikely to capture the attention of the city’s political powers. Yet even at its small size, it constitutes a significant attempt at straddling the push and pull of both local and global forces, while rejecting conceptions of the global as defined by the Global North or by partnerships between North and South. As the prospects for Ugandan democracy become increasingly murky with Museveni maintaining power into a fourth decade, institutions that galvanize the capacity for performing arts to critique, oppose, and even undermine repressive and unjust political systems—a capacity that Ugandans have much experience with—have a critical role to play.

As I have demonstrated, the KITF is meaningful and relevant in its local context, if struggling in some ways to find or cultivate an audience. The circumstances under which it operates are indeed imperfect, as evidenced for example by the ways in which its performance offerings from outside of Uganda are circumscribed by funding limitations. More broadly, though, the festival constitutes an example of a new theatre institution which a transnational development program played a significant role in initiating, but which is now run by local artists and administrators who direct its mission and growth. Sundance’s work in East Africa constituted an external intervention that productively directed resources to an underresourced region, generating new works and relationships while also embodying some problematic dynamics. Its aftermath, though, in the form of the KITF and other festivals, is dictated by a generation of early and mid-career East African artists with global connections and experiences.
Chapter Four

Through the KITF we see these artists continuing their work to create meaningful theatrical space in East Africa in ways that are in conversation with but also exceed, contradict, and in some ways simply disregard Sundance’s vision.
Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have examined two case studies of transnational theatre development programs run by arts organizations in the Global North for and with artists located in the Global South. In reflecting on both case studies, I considered the ideological impulses that motivated the initiating organizations, the French theatre company Théâtre du Soleil and the U.S. developmental non-profit Sundance Theatre Program, to run programs abroad for artists in Afghanistan and East Africa, respectively. I examined the motivations and experiences of the Afghan and East African artists who participated in these programs, the modes of working together employed in each case, and the aesthetics and concerns of the performance work that was generated by—or that received support from—these transnational initiatives. In addition, for both case studies, I analyzed closely a core aspect of the program’s output or aftermath. For Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab, I considered the two collectively created pieces, Ce jour-là and La Ronde de nuit, which were performed more widely than any other Aftaab work and which I argue constitute artifacts of the transnational relationship that produced them. For the Sundance Institute East Africa program, I emphasized the Kampala International Theatre Festival, the most direct institutional product of Sundance’s initiative in the region, which I argue nonetheless embodies a convergence of several strains of influence and is not beholden strictly to Sundance’s values and goals.

While these cases are in no way representative of all comparable programs, my analysis of the Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab project and the work of Sundance Institute East Africa suggests several vectors of consideration for transnational theatre work across uneven geopolitical and economic positions in the twenty-first century. As Gayatri Spivak writes, “To be human is to be
intended toward the other.”¹ Indeed, artists from countries with relative access to resources and mobility are not likely to stop embracing the impulse to travel and work across geographic divides and cultural and economic differences. They will continue to do so, out of desire to gain inspiration and enrichment, to broaden their theatrical viewpoint, or to support artists in under-resourced and even dangerous environments. In some cases, they will set out as theatre activists in hopes of improving lives through theatre or in support of politically and socially liberatory causes. They will pursue partnerships, collaborations, and exchange, with interest alternately in supporting local theatrical activity or in cultivating performance work with a global or transnational flavor. While such initiatives may sometimes hold mutuality, equal exchange, and shared agency as core values, they will most commonly be initiated by artists and organizations from wealthier parts of the world. As such, they will be implicated in broad configurations of—and struggles over—power, agency, and representation in the twenty-first-century context of globalization, postcolonialism, and neoliberalism.

Several considerations emerge from my reflections on the two case studies in this dissertation as common problematics that come into play in such work. The first involves the notion of responsibility. Across both case studies, stakeholders in the programs have disagreed on the responsibilities held by organizations initiating transnational theatre development programs for artists in the South. In both cases, the initiating organizations maintained agendas linked to their own missions. Théâtre du Soleil’s agenda stemmed from both the company’s conception of theatre as a political space involved in the promotion of global human rights and its highly developed aesthetic vision. The Sundance Institute East Africa agenda followed from Sundance’s commitment to supporting the development of strong independent artistic voices

Conclusion

with formally innovative theatrical visions. Disagreement emerged around questions of what responsibilities these organizations held in regards to responding to the most pressing priorities and needs of artists and communities in the regions they entered. For example, some East African artists felt that Sundance held a responsibility, in entering an underresourced region, to utilize its resources to reach the maximum number of artists and to prioritize the outward reverberation of its influence. Some Aftaab artists were troubled by Théâtre du Soleil’s failure to prioritize from the start the kinds of skill-building that would enable Aftaab to become autonomous from the French company, at least artistically if not financially. These case studies problematize the assumption, on the part of initiating organizations, that any kind of support they wish to provide in their interventions will constitute positive and valuable additions.

The case studies in this dissertation also illuminate the central problematic of the model of intercultural and transnational encounter embodied in transnational theatre development initiatives. Goals of facilitating symmetrical and egalitarian artistic encounter are in some ways fundamentally at odds with the asymmetrical power relations that define these initiatives. The structuring of working relationships among artists brought together by transnational theatre programs dictates much about what transpires through these encounters. The dynamics of these relationships and the institutional structures that shape them are products of political choices. A program might have one or several of many possible relational models as its goal. It might aim to enable, for example, exposure, mutual exchange, mentorship, collaboration, or training. The goal might be a one-off collaboration or an ongoing and evolving relationship. In the case of SIEA, the official narrative of “exposure and exchange” was complicated by the fact that as a developmental program, the East Africa Theatre Labs exclusively supported projects by East African artists. Thus, opportunities for African artists to support projects by U.S. artists were
limited to more informal interactions involving small numbers of African artists at Sundance labs in the U.S. Théâtre du Soleil did not particularly emphasize dynamics of exchange or collaboration in their work with Aftaab, facilitating instead a relationship resembling an apprenticeship in which the Afghan artists learned a trade under the French company’s tutelage.

In both case studies, the initiating organizations accrued nonmaterial value such as the symbolic capital associated with cosmopolitan, global work and their ability to introduce novel offerings of theatre from Afghanistan and East Africa into their respective spheres of theatrical activity. The dynamics of encounter include not only the working relationships among artists but also the structuring of leadership and decision-making bodies that guide the programs. In the case of SIEA, Deborah Asiimwe’s presence as a Sundance employee was critical to ensuring African agency in the program’s creation and implementation. And yet the contrast between Asiimwe’s employment as Sundance staff and the original plan of utilizing a board of directors of East African artists made visible the limited nature of the structure they eventually embraced. My reflections on both case studies demonstrate that self-reflective awareness of the politics of these relationships of encounter and purposeful, transparent choices about the nature of these relationships are critical mechanisms for engaging in equitable transnational artistic work.

A related problematic operating in transnational theatre development work, as demonstrated through the case studies in this dissertation, is that of the imagined target audiences and producing circuits of performance work. Transnational development work may fall anywhere along the spectrum from aiming to support ongoing local theatre practices and aesthetics to introducing styles and modes of working that are culturally foreign, and it may embody tension running between divergent points on this spectrum. This tension also relates to the question of target audiences and economies of circulation. A program might aim to nurture
Conclusion

and strengthen a primarily local theatre culture for local audiences, to cultivate performances that may successfully circulate in a global economy of world theatre, or some combination of the two. In the case of Théâtre du Soleil/Aftaab, the early performance work that developed through this project participated in an important period of local Afghan theatrical activity attended with great anticipation by local Kabul audiences. However, a combination of the deteriorating security conditions and the economic context in Afghanistan, mixed with Théâtre du Soleil’s emphasis on professionalization in European terms, led Aftaab to establish a position in Europe as a diasporic Afghan company, participating far more directly in a European cultural field of international festivals than in a field of contemporary Afghan theatre. In attempting to mitigate its imposition of culturally foreign values, SIEA carefully emphasized, however speciously, the aesthetically neutral nature of its development methodology. While Sundance did tend to support work with the potential to appeal to global audiences, much of the performance work developed through SIEA has been produced primarily in East Africa. SIEA can be seen, then, as participating in the development of twenty-first-century movements in cosmopolitan East African theatre.

Transnational theatre development programs always constitute, to some degree, an artistic and cultural intervention. While no individual organization can control the political and economic conditions that encourage or discourage theatrical activity in a particular country, the initiators of transnational development programs can and do make choices to align their performance goals for the program with those of the artists they support.

The cases I have examined in this dissertation demonstrate that even when initiating organizations have self-reflective practices and a commitment to liberatory politics, they may nonetheless initiate and reproduce structures and relationships with traces of neocolonialism. In
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the final section of this conclusion, I suggest two concepts from critical theory on which more ethical transnational theatre development work may be premised.

I start with Rosi Braidotti’s concept of “becoming minoritarian.” A part of Braidotti’s project in theorizing the nomadic subject is to propose a new way of thinking about subjectivity that is reflective of the current neoliberal, global, postcolonial, and postindustrial world. She suggests that the shifting contemporary world has made available to global populations potentially productive transformations of subjectivity. As national subjectivity has always been an imaginary, what is needed to transform subjectivity is the cultivation of a new social imaginary. Nomadic subjectivity, for Braidotti, is an unfixed subjectivity in which one is always in the process of becoming. It is an affirmative condition, because the act of becoming is seen as a positive force. It is also potentially an ethically charged condition, as “each nomadic connection offers at least the possibility of an ethical relation of opening out toward an empowering connection to others.”

Nomadic subjectivity is not about relativism, glorification of the individual, or disavowal of systems of power and inequality. Rather, it is about the capacity for paradigms of center and periphery or majority and minority to be destabilized. Braidotti writes,

The paradoxes, power dissymmetry, and fragmentations of the present historical context rather require that we shift the political debates from the issue of differences between cultures to differences within the same culture. These are the shifting grounds on which periphery and center confront each other, with a new level of complexity that defies dualistic or oppositional thinking.

Because the center and periphery are no longer in a neatly dualistic relationship, it is possible and indeed timely for the destabilization of the center/periphery paradigm. For subjects

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3 Ibid., 3.
4 Ibid., 244-45.
Conclusion

occupying the center or majority position, embracing nomadic subjectivity entails a process of “becoming minoritariann.” To become minoritarian is to develop the practice of viewing one’s position as one of many peripheries, rather than as a center. Braidotti draws on theorization of whiteness to illustrate this process. The dominant racial position of whiteness is invisible until rendered visible by the marginalization of others in relation to it. The position of the “center,” like whiteness, can be rendered visible and recognized as being as differentiated and particular as is any other position, through a process of contextualization and historicization that reveals it to be one position out of many.⁵

I suggest here that theatre artists and organizations originating in the North who set out to facilitate transnational development work for and with artists in the South might productively engage in the process of becoming minoritarian as they approach this work. But what might it mean for artists and administrators to practice becoming minoritarian? It would entail actively and purposefully cultivating the understanding of one’s cultural and political subjectivity as affording one among many perspectives in the world and acknowledging that this perspective is therefore a necessarily a partial one. It would not mean disavowing the privileged access to material resources, global mobility, and various kinds of symbolic capital that holding a position of historical centrality and power may offer. Rather, it would mean wielding these resources with keen awareness that access to them in no way indicates innate centrality, accuracy, or neutrality of perspective. Perhaps the Sundance Theatre Program’s new international lab with artists in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), in which Sundance relocated its standard U.S. theatre lab to Morocco and in which artists from the U.S. and the MENA region develop projects with

⁵ Ibid., 251-53.
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support from dramaturgs from both regions, embodies some aspects of Braidotti’s notion of becoming minoritarian.6

For Braidotti, the concept of nomadic subjectivity applies as much to those occupying the so-called periphery in a center/periphery paradigm as to those occupying the center. However, the processes of becoming available to those positioned in peripheral or minority locations are different from those positioned as center or majority. Whereas from the center, becoming nomadic necessarily means becoming minoritarian, from the periphery, the path toward nomadic subjectivity is far less prescriptive. Braidotti acknowledges that it often must begin with the assumption of a fixed “identity politics” position, because you cannot “dispose nomadically of a subject position that you have never controlled to begin with.” But the pursuit of nomadic subjectivity does not stop there. Braidotti insists that nomadic subjectivity is fundamentally processual, reminding us that “you can never be a nomad; you can only go on trying to be nomadic.” Cultivating nomadic subjectivity does not result in “dialectical role reversal” but rather goes “beyond the logic of reversibility.” From the periphery or minority position, then, one may follow many paths of becoming; what matters is the shift from fixed identity to an antiessentialist and actively in-process subjectivity.7 Braidotti’s theorization invites extensive unpacking, the bulk of which is beyond the scope of this conclusion. What I wish to suggest is that there is potential productivity and ethical possibility in a transnational encounter in which all sides enter the work not as fixed identities but as already in-flux vectors of becoming.

The second concept I suggest as a potentially productive mode of engagement for transnational theatre development work is Gayatri Spivak’s notion of planetarity. Writing from the field of comparative literature, Spivak proposes the concepts of the planet and planetarity as

6 Hibma, discussion. Hibma described to me this new lab structure which debuted in May 2016.
7 Braidotti, Nomadic Theory, 42-43.
distinct from the globe and globalization, although not neatly oppositional to the latter set, as an alternative mode of being “intended toward the other.”

Unlike the globe, which Spivak characterizes as something we may easily imagine we can “aim to control,” the planet is “in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan.” Conceiving of ourselves as planetary subjects, then, involves cultivating an awareness of our human presence in an environment that is both our home and a strange, uncanny, or unheimlich (un-homelike) place. The notion of planetarity enables us both to perceive familiarity in that which is unfamiliar and to see the familiar in a defamiliarized manner. Spivak writes, “If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, as planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away.” As planetary subjects, alterity and otherness are not particular to the distant other; they are features of that which is most familiar to us.

Spivak writes from the discipline of comparative literature and is concerned specifically with establishing a way for literary studies to cross linguistic and cultural borders without embracing the reductive platform of liberal multiculturalism. Is it possible for planetary thinking to inform theatre work that crosses borders, particularly in contexts of theatre development programs fueled by resources and institutions from the North? Perhaps initiating and participating artists and administrators from both the North and the South may approach border-crossing as a process that starts with defamiliarizing the familiar. Cultivating an awareness of the inherent strangeness of the planet, including the parts of it that one calls home, may serve to destabilize the neat opposition between self and other—not in a specious manner that celebrates

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8 Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 73.
9 Ibid., 72.
10 As Spivak discusses, both uncanny and unheimlich are terms used by Freud.
11 Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 73.
universal humanity in terms that may elide inequality, but in ways that decenter the search for common ground across difference in favor of explorations of strangeness and familiarity both in close proximity to and far away from home.

    Both Braidotti’s becoming minoritarian and Spivak’s planetarity offer up ways of thinking about the possibility and productivity of destabilizing identities of centrality and conceptions of home. The act of crossing borders from a position of geopolitical privilege to facilitate artistic development across difference and in contexts of need may very well most ethically involve a willingness on the part of those from the North to inhabit a peripheral position and to denaturalize the knowledge base and artistic values with which they approached this work. But the capacity for shaping these initiatives into ethical formations lies also in the actions of artists and administrators from the South, who may—and do—assert their agency to co-create the terms of engagement, selectively make use of the resources extended for their own purposes, engage with the whole planet as a both familiar and strange terrain, and in some cases, when possible and preferable, opt out.


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Wajma Bahar (actor, Aftaab Theatre), French, March 27, 2014.
Taheer Baig (actor, Aftaab Theatre), March 27, 2014.
Saboor Dilawar (actor, Aftaab Theatre), French, April 10, 2015.
Haroon Noori (former actor, Aftaab Theatre), May 8, 2012.
Caroline Panzera (actor and administrative coordinator for Aftaab Theatre, Théâtre du Soleil),
March 27, 2014.
Omid Rawendah (actor, Aftaab Theatre), March 28, 2014.
———, July 9, 2015.
Mahmood Sharifi (former Administrative Director, Aftaab Theatre), March 29, 2014.

Sundance Institute East Africa and The Kampala International Theatre Festival
Deborah Asiimwe (playwright; Co-Director, Kampala International Theatre Festival; former
East Africa Specialist, Sundance Institute Theatre Program-International), December 2,
2015.
Hope Azeda (theatre artist, Director of Mashirika Performing Arts and Media Company),
November 28, 2015.
Angella Emurwon (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), November 30, 2014.
Christopher Hibma (Producing Director, Sundance Institute Theatre Program), October 5, 2015.
Philip Himberg (Artistic Director, Sundance Institute Theatre Program), October 26, 2015.
Okello Kelo Sam (performing artist and activist), May 3, 2016.
Faisal Kiwee (Director of Bayimba Cultural Foundation and co-organizer of the KITF),
November 28, 2014.
Roberta Levitow (Senior Program Associate-International, Sundance Institute Theatre Program),
January 18, 2016.
Mrisho Mpototo (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), November 28, 2014.
Dr. Aida Mbowa (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), November 30, 2014.
Dr. Charles Mulekwa (playwright and scholar), November 29, 2015.
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Rogers Otieno (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), November 30, 2014.
Sitawa Namwalie (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), April 14, 2016.
Wesley Ruzibiza (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), November 30, 2014.
Freddy Sabimbona (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), November 30, 2014.
Irene Sanga (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), November 28, 2014.
Charles Senkubuge (Director of Bakayimbira Dramactors), November 26, 2015.
Meaza Worku (Sundance Institute East Africa-supported artist), November 27, 2014.