



## A manifesto to decentre theatre and performance studies

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## A manifesto to decentre theatre and performance studies

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### ABSTRACT

With the climate of Brexit, xenophobia and white supremacy on the rise, health and safety of Black and Global Majority people under threat during the spread of Covid in the UK and elsewhere, a discussion of colonialism, migration, borders, and equality – in the classrooms and outside – is more pertinent than ever. Situating the ongoing Decolonise the University movement as part of broader social justice struggles to address the political, social, and economic crises we find ourselves in today, I propose a few ways of decentering Theatre and Performance Studies in the form of a manifesto. What follows is a meditation on precarity, critical pedagogy, Black study, feminist survival, ethical research praxis, and the violence of caste, colourism, and racialisations.

### KEYWORDS

Caste; racialisations; critical pedagogy; Black study; feminist survival; ethical research praxis

Debates and discussions on the colonial underpinning of the discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies have gained an urgency, as was evident at the curated panel on ‘Decolonising Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies’ at the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) conference in 2019, but the imperialist leanings of the discipline have been interrogated before (McKenzie 2006; Reinelt 2007). With the climate of Brexit, xenophobia and white supremacy on the rise and the everyday survival of Black and Global Majority people under threat in the UK and elsewhere, a discussion of colonialism, migration, borders, and equality – in the classrooms and outside – is more pertinent than ever.

The framework of decolonisation is increasingly finding its way into global anti-racist movements and their vocabularies, but the origins of the term can be traced back to the work of Latin American scholars (Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2007; Lugones 2007) and their critique of empire, coloniality, and racism. The now widely circulated essay ‘Decolonisation is not a metaphor’ by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argues that repatriation of dispossessed indigenous land is the *only* way to decolonise. ‘Decolonisation is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools’, they write, and ‘using decolonisation as a metaphor recentres whiteness’ (Ahmed 2012, 3). While material struggles over land are specific to settler colonialism in the Americas, Australia, South Africa, Palestine and, most recently, Kashmir, and a crucial vector of repair, the colonial project takes vicious material and discursive shapes in other parts of the globe, here in the UK for instance. Trying to fix the violence and damage of slavery and its afterlives to *one* action ‘operationalises a synecdoche that engulfs slavery by having decolonisation stand in

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for the totality of struggle' (Garba and Sorrentino 2020, 765). Occupation and appropriation are not a singular event; they are ongoing, and solidarity cannot be limited to one singular event but requires a continuous commitment.

Franz Fanon warned us of the epistemicide that colonialism left behind even when the physical control of land had ended in some parts of the world in the twentieth century. Since the ongoing Decolonise the University movement is part of broader social justice struggles to address the political, social, and economic crises we find ourselves in today, the Theatre and Performance Studies discipline needs to highlight the epistemic violence that systematically excludes and erases the knowledge and histories of Black and Global Majority scholars from its borders. Borders that determine the coordinates of movement and belonging to territories are not just tangible – walls, airport signs, university as a site – they are also intangible and invisible, as in the case of recruitment processes for students and staff at universities. As someone without a British passport, boxed under the BAME category, working on a precarious contract while struggling to keep up with the escalating costs of immigration fees, I propose a few ways of thinking about the current moment of decolonisation in the form of a manifesto.<sup>1</sup> Following Cherríe Moraga, I have aimed to 'theorise from the flesh' (Moraga and Gloria 1981) as I navigate my academic life in the UK. Insisting on the necessity that women of colour theorise from the materiality of their bodies, Moraga wrote that 'theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin colour, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity' (Moraga and Gloria 1981, 23). The legacy of Black and women of colour feminists offers the blueprint for locating feminist theory in our specific cultural and social experience. The reflections in this manifesto are an attempt in that direction.

### **Commitment to decolonisation as a long-term process**

I have a hard time accepting diversity as a synonym for justice. Diversity is a corporate strategy. It is a strategy designed to ensure that the institution functions in the same way that it functioned before, except now you have some black faces and brown faces. It is a difference that does not make a difference. Diversity without structural transformation simply brings those who were previously excluded into a system as racist, misogynist, as it was before. (Davis 2020)

The decolonisation movement in Anglophone academic centres is increasingly adopting the additive approach to fix the problem: altering the curricula by adding a few artists from Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Middle East, and hiring a handful of Black and Global Majority scholars. While such efforts are well meaning, this approach does not aim at structural change but works within it (Bhopal 2020; Joseph-Salisbury 2019). Following the state-sanctioned murder of George Floyd and the insurgence of Black Lives Matter movement across the globe, the solidarity statements released by Higher Education institutions risk becoming what Sara Ahmed calls 'non-performatives' – 'the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse *does not produce* the effects that it names' (Ahmed 2012, 117, emphasis in original). Inclusion without a reflexive critique can lead to 'distancing non-Western cultural production as radically other' that eventually gets assimilated 'within

existing crucial systems as diminished or disruptive elements' (Taylor 2003, 11). Tokenistic gestures of addition of certain Black and brown bodies to the university in the name of diversity overlooks how the entangled networks of oppression and domination function.

In *On Thin Ice* (Moraya 2019), the Kenyan writer and theatre-maker Ogotu Moraya talks about his experiences of living and studying in Netherlands while he was pursuing his MA in Amsterdam – what he describes as 'beautiful, complex and painful – an amalgam of paradoxical experiences'. After finishing his MA in 2016, he moved back to Kenya. Using notes from his diary written at the time, Moraya delves into his everyday experiences of navigating a system where people like him are 'otherwise considered undesirable' (Moraya 2019).<sup>2</sup> When he was invited to perform in Europe (the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium) in 2019, he decided to refuse to participate in the Schengen system – an invasive, expensive visa system that has consistently denied entry of Black people into European Union on arbitrary basis. Instead, he invited the Brussels-based Dutch Caribbean artist Quincy Gario to read on his behalf. A critique of borders and how they limit belonging and perpetuate racial discrimination, *On Thin Ice* highlights the gaps in the current institutional thinking around decolonisation. Voicing how the paradigms of global mobility are violent towards Black people and their inextricable connection to inequality and injustice, this performance-reading is also reminiscent of the Libyan refugee boat that sank just off the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2015, killing more than 1000 people. The same boat was recovered from the bottom of the Mediterranean and displayed as *Barca Nostra* (Our Boat) at the Venice Biennale in 2015 by the Swizz-Icelandic artist Christoph Büchel, without any contextual label or description of the tragedy. This is yet another instance of the cruelty of migration regimes and how Black death and Black bodies are appropriated for consumption by the white gaze and reduced to a spectacle for profit making.

'The question of the decolonisation of the university is inseparable from the question of defending the task of the university in social and political struggles, as a sphere of civic engagement', writes Bala (2017b, 334). Social justice struggles at universities in South Africa, Canada, and India are showing the way. Alongside socially just hiring and pedagogical practices, the current decolonisation moment needs to actively critique racist projects like Prevent UK. The Theatre and Performance Studies discipline needs to heed this call of decolonisation and its potentialities of creating a better, socially just world.

## **Address the violence of caste and colourism**

On 17 January 2016, Rohith Vemula, a Dalit student at the University of Hyderabad, India, pushed by systematic oppression and institutionalised casteism, committed suicide. An active member of Ambedkar Students Association (ASA), he had been suspended by the Vice Chancellor earlier that month for 'anti-national' activities. Vemula was removed from his hostel room and his fellowship of Rs. 25,000 was suspended. Finding it difficult to sustain himself, he and his four Dalit comrades set up a tent on campus and went on a hunger strike. But his demands were met with total inaction, leading to his suicide. He left behind a poignant letter that said, 'his birth was his fatal accident'.<sup>3</sup> Vemula's suicide highlighted the deep-rooted caste prejudice embedded in institutions of higher education and sparked a nationwide student movement that is ongoing.

If the premise of decolonisation is to undo histories of colonial violence, then the critique of systemic injustice needs to go beyond the white colonial oppressor as the

central focus and take into consideration the multiple forms of racialisations and social oppressions beyond the Global North – for instance, caste. Segregation, discrimination, and harassment based on caste prejudice exist not just in India but in the Indian diaspora as well – be it the UK, the US, or African nations (see Yengde 2015). Even when the current activism and legislation recognise racism as an offence, casteism has not found an urgent political currency. The Equality Act 2010 introduced by the Labour government in 2010 in Britain does not prohibit caste discrimination even when caste-based violence runs deep in the country (Dhanda et al. 2014; Waughray 2018).

Without reducing them to interchangeable categories conceptually or analytically, Dalit (ex- ‘untouchables’) activists are mobilising towards an understanding of caste as a fragment of race as a political strategy. In 2001, the United Nations World Conference on Racism held in Durban, South Africa witnessed Dalit groups across the world fighting for the inclusion of caste into the official charter on race as a form of descent-based discrimination (Viswanathan 2001). These legal changes were followed by a symbolic take down of racism and upper-caste hegemony perpetuated by Gandhi, otherwise known for his non-violent and civil disobedience movement in India. In December 2018, the statue of Gandhi was taken down from the University of Ghana campus in Accra following protests and petitions from the university professor and students (Safi 2018; Sagar 2019). Soon after, in June 2019, a statue of B. R. Ambedkar, the activist and social reformer who fought for the upliftment of Dalits, was installed at the Cradle of Humankind, Johannesburg, South Africa (Menon 2019).

The take down of the Gandhi statue has a political resonance with the demolition of the Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town in 2015 that had kick-started Decolonise the University across the globe. The symbolic take down of white supremacy and upper-caste hegemony in higher education are significant events that took place in South Africa but received attention in Britain only very recently. During the Black Lives Matter protests in Summer 2020, the statue of Edward Colston, a seventeenth-century slave trader, was felled in Bristol and thrown into the very same harbour that he had used to transport Black slaves for profit. The protests over the imperial iconography in university buildings resumed at the University of Oxford soon after, with renewed calls for removal of the British imperialist Cecil Rhodes’ statue, after they were first denied in 2016. With over 200,000 people signing the petition calling for Oxford to remove the statue and commit to decolonisation, the college has set up a commission of enquiry to look into the matter. Since Theatre and Performance Studies engages with concepts of performativity, site-specificity and urban performance, public acts of resistance to, and refusal of, upper-caste and white hegemony in university spaces as much as our everyday lives need greater attention.

The marginalisation of Black and Dalit lives at the hands of white and upper-caste supremacy has encouraged urgent conversations on the need for Black-Dalit solidarity, as exemplified by the recent dialogue between Cornel West, Chandrashekhara Azad, and Tanzeela Qambrani.<sup>4</sup> This initiative at building infrastructures of solidarity is reminiscent of the exchange between W.E.B. DuBois, the prominent African-American intellectual and activist, and B.R. Ambedkar in the early twentieth century, when Ambedkar’s experience of anti-Black racism in Harlem was influential in his thinking on caste in India (Desai 2014). Such transnational dialogues foreground the conceptual, material, and temporal links between simultaneous struggles across the globe, as well as the

differences and commonalities that can anchor the idea of solidarity. Discussions around caste violence and differing processes of racialisation around the globe must occupy a central space in our thinking around decolonisation in the classrooms.

## Interrogate methodologies of research

Linda Tuhiwai Smith has highlighted that the relationship between the researcher and the researched is never an equal playing field and what is considered as research by academics in northern universities is experienced as violence and erasure by the research subjects in the South (Smith 1999, 2). The emphasis on internationalisation in universities begs an intervention for its neo-colonial tendencies and unilinear profitability for universities based in Europe and North America. Such transnational collaborations with universities and academics in Africa, Asia, and Latin America underscore ethical concerns when passport and currency privilege allow for only one-way travel and engagement.

The internationalisation agenda and the call for a 'global university', when implemented in the discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies, relies heavily on ethnographic methodologies which – owing to their origins in colonial anthropology – risk perpetuating a 'fascination with otherness [...] that is abstracted from the conditions of knowing and labour which allow for the very possibility of speaking or listening' (Ahmed 2000, 57). The slippery terrains in this form of knowledge production risk becoming violent when the histories of colonialism, politics of border crossing, and funding regimes come into play (see Lock, Swarr and Nagar 2010; Simpson 2007). These transnational collaborations, more often than not, mirror the colonial and neo-colonial relations of domination and subordination in them re/producing the trope of the 'author' and the 'native informant' (Ahmed 2000, 62). Tamara Shefer, reflecting on the international research collaborations on sexuality and HIV in South Africa, argues that a form of 'global surveillance' is enmeshed in these scholarly trades and 'many northern scholars have grown their careers through the representation of southern knowledge, reproducing a colonial model of the global South as fieldwork and the global North as academic authority' (Shefer 2023, forthcoming). In the wake of a recognition for the need to decentre the discipline, Theatre and Performance needs to acknowledge the gendered and racialised hierarchies in collaborative research across geo-political divides and find ways of addressing them with a critical and ethical awareness.

## Pedagogy is political

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks, bell 1994, 207)

The current resurgence of decolonial movement has highlighted an impatience with, and a crisis of, northern epistemologies and an urgent need for alternate methodologies of knowledge formation (de Sousa Santos 2017). The epistemicide, as a result of centuries of colonial domination and erasure of indigenous knowledge systems by Empire, is

dominant in what is taught in Theatre and Performance Studies classrooms. The current moment of decolonisation is a moment of its reckoning. Celia Roberts and Raewyn Connell highlight this extractive nature of academic research and pedagogy: ‘*Theory* is normally produced in the metropole and exported to the periphery, while the periphery normally produces *data* and exports this raw material to the metropole’ (Roberts and Connell 2016: 135–136, italics in original). Rather than an extractive approach originating in a white gaze of a geographical site, the discipline needs to interrogate what it deems ‘theory’ and embrace a multiplicity of knowledge systems as vital to our pedagogy.

One such initiative was undertaken during my split-site Double Masters in International Performance Research programme at the University of Warwick and the University of Amsterdam in 2009 (Bala et al. 2017b). During our induction week, our class of international students from almost every part of world was asked to bring one word from our first language that is relevant for Performance Studies research but cannot be translated in English. The result of this exercise was an archive of pluralities: of languages, vocabularies, tonalities, rhythms, and sounds. A simple pedagogic exercise right at the start of a long, rigorous academic programme sensitised us to the awareness of a cognitive injustice that we had all internalised, and the academic training encouraged us to unlearn the colonial tropes of thinking and writing. I participated in a similar exercise at the University of Cape Town during my Andrew W. Mellon postdoctoral fellowship in South Africa in 2018 in a workshop on Located Theory.<sup>5</sup>

bell hooks writes that pedagogy is a practice of freedom. Why is My Curriculum White, a student-led movement that started at University College London in 2015, was an uprising against the Eurocentric curricula in British universities and highlighted the urgent need to critically examine academia’s complicity in propagating white supremacy. The same year, the Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford campaign at the University of Oxford gained fervour and students demanded a fierce interrogation of colonial legacies on campus, not just the whiteness of its curricula but also the way it permeates university spaces today – in the form of statues of colonial figures like Cecil Rhodes and Christopher Codrington. As a temporary lecturer in Theatre and Performance in the Department of English at King’s College, London (KCL), I attended Decolonise KCL meetings regularly. These were led by students and took the form of roundtable discussions, without any single person leading them. The urgency apparent in the students’ desire for altering existing systems of pedagogy keenly reflected that the purpose of education is not to further the project of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy but to rupture those systems of domination in all their forms.

With a focus on embodied learning at the core of the discipline, Theatre and Performance Studies needs to democratise learning conditions by engaging with the affective legacies of Black and Global Majority scholars in our everyday life, pedagogy, and research instead of relegating them to footnotes and margins. The need of the hour is to recognise and undo the colonial matrix of power that legitimises certain forms of knowledge as ‘core texts’ and relegates the others as ‘secondary’. The project of decolonisation requires an ethics and an imagination that is rooted in an ongoing care work and whose freedom narratives leak into every aspect of the lives of precarious bodies – a solidarity that persists beyond the fulfilling of cursory institutional agendas. How can the pedagogical practices of Theatre and Performance shuffle the centre and the periphery in the hope that the concept of the ‘centre’ is no longer relevant?



## The neoliberal university must fall

The project of Black feminist study was never to reform institutions, writes Saidiya Hartman (2019). Black feminists like Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks have been studying in coffee houses, gardens, kitchen tables, together with sisters, friends, daughters, mothers, neighbours – they did not need to be ‘in’ or ‘of’ the academy. Black study is thinking with and for others, outside of what the institution requires of you.

After Hartman, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, acknowledging the violence of the neoliberal university as a site of operation of the colonial present, propose a fugitive mode of being in the world – the world of the Undercommons as a space and a mode of being, ‘where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong’ (Harney and Moten 2013, 26). With its histories of colonial exploitation, the university as a structure in Europe and North America is incapable of a radical structural change: ‘what it is that is supposed to be repaired is irreparable. It cannot be repaired’ (Harney and Moten 2013, 152). But, with the structures that exist now, we – by which I mean the precarious, Black, Global Majority, Indigenous scholars – can be together in the brokenness. Harney and Moten propose using the resources of the university for public good and letting the learning and the teaching leak out from university buildings into the streets and beyond. For instance, during the KCL University and College Union (UCU) strike action in February 2020, the picket became a site of affective learning.<sup>6</sup> We read poetry, plays, manifestos; discussed the Kashmir occupation; the Hong Kong protests; and the land reclamation movements in South Africa and Canada. The classroom as a physical site of learning became irrelevant; it was industrial action that made coalitions possible.

Perhaps the university, with its histories of colonial exploitation and racialised violence, was never meant to be transformed. Perhaps we need to imagine and build alternate spaces for collective learning and thinking. What if, following Tina Campt, we reject the system that renders us fundamentally illegible and unintelligible (Campt 2019)? What if we refuse the terms of engagement with the institution because those terms diminish our subjecthood (Campt 2019)? We create our own reading lists. We create our own communities. We gather, assemble, and study together, outside of the gated corridors of the university and create a coalition with those who were left out.

‘The coalition unites us in the recognition that we must change things or die. All of us’, writes Halberstam (2013, 10). This is the clarion call of the present moment.

## Notes

1. The state-manufactured acronym BAME, that clubs together people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, needs rethinking. The origins of BAME date back to the 1960s and 1970s in the UK, when activist alliances between migrants from formerly colonised countries were essential to resist state violence. But the term does not register the disproportionate violence experienced by people from Africa, Caribbean and their diaspora by continuing to fuse together experiences of disparate groups into one monolith and reductive category. See more here: <https://gal-dem.com/bookmark-this-are-acronyms-like-bame-a-nonsense/>
2. More details on Ogutu Moraya’s performance *On Thin Ice* are available here: <https://spielart.org/en/program/all/on-thin-ice>



3. Rohith Vemula's letter can be read here: <https://thewire.in/caste/rohith-vemula-letter-a-powerful-indictment-of-social-prejudices>
4. The discussion between Cornel West, Chandrashekhara Azad, and Tanzeela Qambrani is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oCDP2OStDg>
5. This is the link to the workshop that took place in Cape Town in 2018: <http://www.apc.uct.ac.za/news/located-theory>. It is part of a larger project at the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa: <http://www.apc.uct.ac.za/news/concepts-global-south>
6. Recent years have witnessed an intense strike action by universities that are members of the UCU in the UK, to protest against increasing precarity in Higher Education and to secure better pay, working conditions and pensions.

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