

# BLACK LIVES MATTER

## Listening to legacies of coloniality: Bhuchar Boulevard's Decolonisation



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"Decolonisation" is a term that has become familiar to many of us in recent years. Last summer's Black Lives Matter protests across the UK contributed to the global wave of solidarity with African Americans following the killing of George Floyd, and raised the political stakes of decolonising our disciplines, histories and institutions. Previous anxieties – and fantasies – about white men being dropped from the curriculum were usurped by the spectacular toppling and dropping of slave trader Edward Colston's statue into the Bristol harbour. The Conservative government, seeking distraction from its failures during the pandemic, has subsequently committed to a "culture war", reframing inquiries into the colonial past as erasing history and, in culture secretary Oliver Dowden's words, "trying to do Britain down". Labelling the interventions of activists and scholars as "woke" further delegitimises anti-racism as a mere fad. As Deborah Gabriel observed in the last issue of *Three-D*, mainstream coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement ignores longer histories of Black resistance: "This serves to limit public focus to the present, disconnecting it from the past – which is important to understand how we arrived at this juncture."

"Decolonisation" perhaps does not lend itself to the same sensationalist headlines and pithy soundbites as "woke" ("woke brigade", "woke warriors", "woke worthies") but decolonial perspectives nevertheless resonate across recent protests, events, conferences, publications and pedagogical initiatives. A decolonial approach reckons with transnational and local histories of empire and coloniality, and their persistence in contemporary institutions, regimes of power and knowledge, and experiences of racialisation. This is relevant to our understanding of academic spaces; as Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Ni ancio lu explain in the introduction to their edited collection *Decolonising the University*, the Western university is

"a key site through which colonialism – and colonial knowledge in particular – is produced, consecrated, institutionalised and naturalised. It was in the university that colonial intellectuals developed theories of

racism, popularised discourses that bolstered support for colonial endeavours and provided ethical and intellectual grounds for the dispossession, oppression and domination of colonised subjects." (2018: 5)

Since the Rhodes Must Fall campaign at the University of Oxford (inspired by the movement at the University of Cape Town in South Africa), UK institutions such as the University of Glasgow and University College London (UCL) have been scrutinised for their historical involvement in imperial projects including the transatlantic slave trade and development of eugenics.

I offer these precedents to contextualise my reflections on Bhuchar Boulevard's *Decolonisation: not just a buzz word*, a

encourage empathy and solidarity. Throughout, these insights are framed and rooted in the specific colonial history of SOAS, the acronym favoured over "School of Oriental and African Studies". This name, charged with imperial ambitions, is regarded by one interviewed student as "our version of the statue".

*Decolonisation* was conceived and staged by Bhuchar Boulevard, founded by acclaimed theatre maker and actor Sudha Bhuchar. The show's creative team included theatre maker Neela Doležalová, producer Suman Bhuchar and director Kristine Landon-Smith, who co-established the ground-breaking Tamasha theatre company in 1989 with Sudha Bhuchar. Suman Bhuchar initiated a residency at SOAS



All the actors and creative team. Zoom screenshot by Harry Clegg

headphone verbatim theatre piece performed and recorded on Zoom for the SOAS Festival of Ideas: Decolonising Knowledge in October 2020. The piece is a timely account of recurring issues in debates on decolonisation and universities: the diversity of staff and students; racialised experiences within academic spaces; the teaching of colonial histories at home, school and university; the privileging of white and global North perspectives; and museums' colonial loot. Viewers encounter decolonial perspectives in the personal testimonies of staff and students, and also through the innovative performance of these testimonies in ways that challenge hierarchies of knowledge and identity politics to

in 2018 to explore individual and institutional responses to decolonisation. Interviews were conducted with staff and students in autumn and these were curated as a headphone verbatim show, performed live at SOAS in February 2019 and then reworked as a pre-recorded Zoom performance for the Festival of Ideas: Decolonising Knowledge in October 2020.

Zoom has become one of the defining features of lockdown, its ubiquity secured through the virtual lectures, seminars, meetings, talks and social gatherings that have replaced many of our in-person activities. Beyond necessity though, the software provides a complementary platform for Bhuchar



Colonial connections. Zoom screenshot by Bhuchar Boulevard

Boulevard's headphone verbatim show. Verbatim and headphone verbatim are examples of documentary theatre, working respectively with transcripts and sound recordings of interviews to bring audiences into close contact with the real experiences and feelings shared by interviewees. Actors perform these testimonies without judgement or interpretative embellishment, faithfully replicating each word and nuance of the individual's speech patterns. Verbatim and headphone verbatim techniques have been favoured by practitioners working with political issues and marginalised individuals and communities, using the format to stage challenging conversations.

The authenticity of testimonies is offset by the visibility of headphones (although this is less jarring on Zoom) and the casting of actors whose age, ethnicity, gender and nationality might differ from that of the interviewees. This rejects essentialism and biased hierarchies of knowledge and empathy. The spectator must listen carefully to the nuances of the testimonies, rather than second-guessing motivations or "explaining" experiences through lenses of racialised (and usually gendered) expectations and stereotypes. The form eschews comfortable audience-character identifications to foreground the positionality of all parties. This is instructive for our classrooms too. We hear the white convenor of a course on Partition recalling that these histories were "understandably" distressing for South Asian female students. However, rather than using these emotionally invested students as "specimens", the tutor reflects critically on the "complete detachment" of the white British students and the implications for understanding the politics of emotion and memory. Who remembers? Who is affected by particular histories?

Student interviewees make connections between their sense of their identities and learning experiences, colonial and diasporic family histories, and longer imperial histories

and structures of power and knowledge. These are nuanced and complicated relationships, but education informed by decolonial approaches has the potential for self-discovery and empowerment. It can also facilitate unexpected dialogues and empathy with our elders and wider communities. In one of the most moving accounts, a student admits that they first learnt that Ivory Coast had been a French colony at the age of 16. One can hear the impact of this knowledge in the humble surprise and tenderness with which they describe building a relationship with their father based on new-found sympathy and recognition of shared experiences.

These individual testimonies would be compelling as monologues but are instead edited together, with Zoom allowing multiple speaker windows to appear onscreen together, rather than the solo speaker view. Here the platform emphasises and visualises parallel positions deserving of equal space. Experiences are personal and distinctly intersectional, but also embedded within similar histories of colonialism, migration and diaspora. Interweaving testimonies of a British-Chinese student whose father was too busy in the kitchen of the family's Chinese restaurant to engage in conversation, and a middle-class student of South Asian heritage whose internalised racism made her reject her father's attempts to teach her Indian history, alert us to the simultaneously similar and diverse experiences of people of colour. Access to knowledge – knowing and not-knowing – is uneven, especially when compounded by personal trauma and institutional silences.

Positioning anonymised personal experiences of racism within imperial histories and institutional structures can resist the isolation and backlash faced by students and staff of colour, especially postgraduates and precariously employed early career scholars. That the testimonies narrate intimate and recognisable scenarios facilitates empathy and activates us

as responsible listeners. The presence of multiple Zoom windows onscreen brings speakers alongside listeners, disrupting boundaries between staff and students, the personal and the collective, witnesses and potential allies.

*Decolonisation: Not just a buzz word* reminds us that decolonial approaches require us to interrogate regimes of knowledge and power. This means going beyond adding and removing case studies from the curriculum, to advocate deeper structural and disciplinary transformations. There are no quick or easy solutions. Like sudden interruptions to Zoom's speaker view when attendees forget to turn off their microphones, the noisy outrage of the government and the "anti-woke brigade" pose a serious threat to those of us engaged in decolonial work. The switch to online and blended teaching during the pandemic, and the potential long-term impact on our institutions (including redundancies), also places the burden for decolonising curricula and other pedagogical initiatives on staff who are already overworked and underpaid.

Bhuchar Boulevard and their collaborators nevertheless movingly demonstrate that listening and creativity can and should be foundations for decolonial work. Coloniality and its racist afterlives continue to be experienced in intimate and everyday ways, in our local spaces and institutional structures – and not just as abstract, theoretical debates. The awareness, energy and solidarity generated by Black Lives Matter have generated the momentum to fight for more critical, equitable and progressive academic spaces. We must seize this opportunity.

Bhuchar Boulevard's *Decolonisation: Not just a buzz word* and subsequent panel discussion is available on the SOAS YouTube channel: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-isKiJ9dW40&feature=youtu.be&tab\\_channel=SOASUniversityofLondon](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-isKiJ9dW40&feature=youtu.be&tab_channel=SOASUniversityofLondon)

An online seminar, "Verbatim theatre: looking beyond binaries", features members of the creative team discussing the project and headphone verbatim theatre: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyN6JQ871i0&tab\\_channel=SOASUniversityofLondon](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyN6JQ871i0&tab_channel=SOASUniversityofLondon)

Please contact Bhuchar Boulevard for further information or to discuss potential collaborations.