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Decolonising Theatre and Performance Studies

Tales from the classroom

Sruti Bala

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Abstract

What does the demand to ‘decolonise the university’ imply for the discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies? Based on questions and insights derived from the author’s own pedagogical practices and experiences at the University of Amsterdam, the article enquires into the intellectual traditions in the discipline of Theatre Studies that place questions of decolonisation together with a multi-axis, intersectional analysis of race, class, gender, sexuality, and global asymmetries. To what extent is the discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies still imperialist? What are the ways of acknowledging absences and invisibilities? How does embodied knowledge become knowable? The article reflects on how 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. It equally emphasises the significance of theatrical and performative modes of engagement in these struggles. The classroom becomes a crucial site for the exploration of these issues.

Keywords: decolonisation, theatre and performance studies, creative university protests, embodied knowledge, intersectional feminism

What does the demand to ‘decolonise the university’ imply for the discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies? The question has stirred some debate and self-reflection in a field that has often nurtured close alliances with artists and activists in social movements and anti-colonial struggles around the world. Students and faculty of Theatre and Performance Studies have regularly been active participants in movements calling for the

safeguarding of public universities, academic freedom, accessible higher education, and challenging the replication of social hierarchies and elitisms within the institutional structures of the university. The last decade has witnessed a number of creative protests around the world, not only raising powerful slogans and formulating concrete demands, but also offering performative gestures and an embodied collective presence. Consider how the 'Fees Must Fall' movement in South African universities was precipitated by the powerful theatrical act of demanding and effectively bringing about the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes on the campus of Cape Town university in April 2015. Consider the widespread condemnation of the kidnapping and brutal disappearance of 43 male students from the Ayotzinapa Rural College in the Guerrero province in Mexico in 2014, where protesters painted their hands red, read out the names of the 43 students in public, lit candles on classroom chairs to symbolically mark their presence, and created elaborate altars of commemoration in public spaces. Consider the silent 'standing man' protests in Turkey in 2013, initiated by performing artist and teacher Erdem Gündüz: a simple gesture of protest by standing in silence snowballed into a massive act of collective civil disobedience. Consider the poetry and songs composed and performed by students and artist-activists at the University of Hyderabad in India in protest against caste-discrimination, state interference, and the systemic injustices that led to the suicide of the research scholar Rohith Vemula in January 2016.

These instances of protest vividly demonstrate how 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. They also reveal the significance of theatrical and performative modes of engagement in these struggles. Performance is not only what happens on a proscenium stage, and the theatre is not only a building or institution of art designated as such. Sites such as campuses, public squares, parks, and prayer halls may turn into stages of collective embodied action. Theatre buildings might, at critical historical moments, transform into courtrooms, public assembly halls, politically charged sites. Conversely, the witnessing of an artistic performance can mobilise people to take concerted action in other spaces. The collective creation of a mural painting or art installation can serve as a site of rehearsal and reflection. These porous boundaries between theatre, performance, and the contexts in which they emerge push us to ask what the decolonisation of the university implies for the field of Theatre and Performance Studies. In the context of the university struggles of recent years, the question raises very

high expectations: it demands new paradigms for the discipline – what Gayatri Spivak calls ‘the task of epistemological engagement’ (2012, p. 9), new habits of thinking the discipline and not just an addition of new things to think about.

In this article, I share questions and insights derived from my own pedagogical practices and experiences. The article enquires into the intellectual traditions in the discipline of Theatre Studies that place questions of decolonisation together with a multi-axis, intersectional analysis of race, class, gender, sexuality, and global asymmetries. Beyond a reflection of the issues specific to my own discipline, I seek to value the significance of teaching and acknowledge its inseparability from research. In today’s corporatised public universities, there is a growing disparity and inequality between those with the privileges of research time and capital accumulation through research grants, and those who unfairly undertake the bulk of teaching under precarious working conditions. The gender demographics of this divide are more than obvious. In a situation where teaching is tragically institutionally belittled and bureaucratised, and the labour of a large number of ad hoc, overwhelmingly female faculty are undervalued and underpaid, teaching in the university needs to be decolonised, rethought as a site of the collective pursuit of nurturing the free imagination.

The reflections that follow, self-consciously anecdotal and open-ended, attempt not to offer clear blueprints or final answers to the problem of decolonising institutions of higher education around the world. Rather, I explore how the classroom is an important stage of the struggles for decolonisation. No doubt, this is informed by my own working context at the University of Amsterdam as a teacher of predominantly white Dutch students, as the only non-European faculty member of the Theatre Studies department, as one of the few women with the privilege of a long-term contract and allocated time for research and writing. For readers wondering about the anecdotal nature of this essay, I have two remarks. First, reflecting on my personal experiences serves as a way to ground and test my theoretical, political beliefs on the ‘decolonisation of knowledge’ against the messy day-to-day circumstances of an increasingly corporate university. Second, I think the status of the anecdote in scholarship is itself worth considering. Often condemned as frivolous and marginal, deemed as closer to the genre of gossip than to scientific truth (and here one cannot help but notice the gendered connotations of such a dismissal), the anecdote has gained prominence in methodologies such as oral history and feminist ethnography and in the feminist emphasis on knowledge being intersubjective and situated (Haraway, 1988; Hesse-Biber, 2014). In an essay

on the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, Walter Benjamin distinguishes between storytelling and information. Whereas information, according to Benjamin, 'does not survive the moment in which it was new' (1968, p. 90), i.e. it must reveal everything as completely and efficiently as possible in order for it to be disseminated and replicated without error, storytelling adopts a very different sense of time and being. For Benjamin, the story 'does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time' (1968, p. 90). To use the anecdotal story form in academic writing is thus not to claim a seamless, verifiable correspondence between experience and social reality, but rather, to make as visible as possible the grounds from which this perceived reality is discursively constructed. The knowledge of the story is grounded in the community of listeners and is thus not assimilable to informational knowledge (Behar, 1993, p. 13).

Is Theatre and Performance Studies imperialist?

A few years ago, in the maelstrom of curricular 'reforms' that the Humanities have been subjected to in the past decade, the faculty of the Theatre Studies department at the University of Amsterdam decided to put together a list of 100 play texts that every undergraduate student must read in the course of their BA in Theatre Studies. The idea was to use this list across various modules, to ensure students were being introduced to the most relevant works and to facilitate examination procedures. This seemingly straightforward idea raised a number of thorny issues. Given the broad intra-disciplinary branches in the department, from specialists in theatre architecture to theatre in educational and community contexts; from drama analysts and dramaturgs to those working on specific regions, languages, and historical periods; and with affiliations to anthropology, media studies, literature, philosophy, history of science, and memory studies, it became quickly evident that the selection of texts could at best be a reflection of the department's specific profile and ought not to claim the status of a comprehensive canon. If every undergraduate should have read these texts, then, we realised, so should we, at which point we concluded that this impossible list could simply offer suggestions to students and faculty alike. With these perplexing disclaimers and attendant questions around how to evaluate, examine, and attach credits to readings, we attempted to each contribute our own favourites to the list. Should the list be limited to Dutch theatre/play texts alone? If not, and obviously not, which

other languages? What about those theatre works that are considered crucial to theatre history (whose theatre history?), yet which may not have been published as plays? What about performance practices outside of the theatre? How far back in time should we go? How far away? The critical theorists and feminists in the group no doubt pointed to the importance of including playwrights of colour, women, plays from the Global South, or forgotten, banned, unperformed, understudied plays. Then began the excruciating process of selection, periodisation, and prioritisation. What emerged was an impressive list from Aeschylus to Sarah Kane, which included works from all the continents except possibly the Arctic, in roughly a dozen languages around the world. And yet I do not know that any of my fellow colleagues use this list in its entirety in their teaching. The task of nailing down the curricular horizon of Theatre and Performance Studies on to something like a hits chart laid bare the predictable downsides of a canon-oriented pedagogy: reduction, oversimplification, erasure, epistemic violence, preference for the already well-known and insufficient attention to unconventional forms. Hard-wired conservatism held firm ground, even as it was attempted with the best of liberal-hearted intentions to create space for what came to be deemed as 'quirky' cases. Queer Mexican feminist playwrights or singer-songwriters will be willingly added to the list, but it does not mean we as teachers and students in Amsterdam know on what terms to engage with them, or to do justice to their simultaneous empirical inclusion and epistemic discontinuity. As Diana Taylor powerfully argues, the gesture of inclusion can have the effect of 'distancing non-Western cultural production as radically other', only to be recuperated 'within existing critical systems as diminished or disruptive elements' (Taylor, 2003, p. 11). Although the canon was successfully diversified through an additive logic, the inclusion of minoritised artistic practices into the canon ironically implied them being subject to specific configurations of both acknowledgement and disregard.

The life of theatre lies in performance and in its embeddedness in socio-political realities and not in a published theatre text. So while it was easy to agree that we should teach Sophocles' *Antigone*, we were far less clear about which versions to teach. We could hardly teach the play without considering its performance history. Yet where does one begin or end? Given the restraints of teaching in short overview modules that glide impatiently week to week from one topic to another, how does one find the patience to contextualise and introduce the Hindi version of *Antigone* directed by Indian feminist theatre director Anuradha Kapur in the early 2000s or spend time on the politics of the Kurdish adaptation of *Antigone*

by a community theatre in Amsterdam? The canon spreadsheet was confronted by the play's variegated, multi-dimensional performance histories, not all of which could be accessed by us, but which could nevertheless not be brushed aside.

The question of 'decolonising' the discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies has been ongoing for decades and has been formational to the field in many ways, even if not always employing the term. The shifts from 'drama' to 'theatre' and subsequently from 'theatre' to 'performance', often referred to as the performative turn in the field, indicate profound epistemological shifts that strike at the core of knowledge production and formation. After all, to be able to recognise that the embodied practices of an actress are also worthy of being valued as 'knowledge' is not simply a minor adjustment or helpful supplement to a body of text-oriented scholarship, but also, if taken seriously, a deep rupturing of the ways in which knowledge is conceived and authorised. The act of defining the borders and scope of a discipline is thus not merely descriptive, but programmatic, in that the choice and justification of the objects and methods of study lead to and imply specific effects.¹ Theatre Studies have historically been dominated by the notion of drama, and theorised chiefly as the representation of a dramatic text. This implied that societies without a scripted tradition did not have a place in the theatre history of the world or were relegated to the status of the folkloric. With the incursions of academic scholarship from and on non-Western societies, as well as the insights of communication studies, semiotics, postcolonial theory, and post-foundational language philosophy in the course of the 20th century, this restrictive framing of theatre has been revised. Theatre has come to be recognised as a communicative process and as an event with historical and cultural specificities (Zarrilli, Williams, McConachie, & Fisher Sorgrenfrei, 2010).

Scholars have been all too aware of the dominance of scholarship from Euro-American universities, or the influence of monopolist corporate publishing houses, and how this has served to disadvantage scholars working outside of major European languages, without access to international conference circuits or whose formats of collaborative, practice-led scholarship do not comply with academic journal publishing standards. In 2006-2007, the journal *The Drama Review (TDR)* published a series of statements by scholars responding to the provocation: 'Is Performance Studies Imperialist?' (McKenzie, 2006). In these short statements, various scholars critically interrogated the state of the discipline in terms of the diversity of voices and subjects of study, calling for a persistent decentring of the field (McKenzie, 2006, p. 1). This includes the relationship between 'practice'

and 'theory', the relationship between 'the knower' and 'the known' in the practices of theatre, as well as the relationship between performance as a subject of study as opposed to performance as a lens of knowing. A decade on from these important critical reflections, there have been significant disciplinary acknowledgements of the necessity of undoing the persistent hierarchical divides in the field. Yet, as Roderick Ferguson has powerfully argued in *The Reorder of Things*, one must be wary of the academy's claims to affirm and include minoritarian or marginalised subjectivities. It is necessary to fight for the inclusion, and simultaneously necessary not to assume that this inclusion is sufficient or emancipatory in itself (Ferguson, 2012). Chicano performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña expresses this wittily in a lecture-performance organised by our department in Amsterdam, wherein he asks: 'Is it the pinnacle of fame for a critical artist to end up as a Wikipedia page? Ouch!' (2012). Decolonisation, in this instance, is thus about taking seriously what goes into the canon, and equally not taking the canon itself too seriously.

'How can you see an absence when you don't know there is a presence?'²

In a postgraduate seminar on translation in theatre and performance, I struggled one afternoon with getting students to relate to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's theorisation of orature and orality in relation to performance in Kenya (Thiong'o, 2007). As I concluded the session, wondering to myself whether the absence of enthusiasm had to do with my own lack of knowledge of the performance practices referenced in the text, an exchange student from South Africa addressed the group, apparently sharing my exasperation: 'Do you all *really* have nothing to say about this topic?' This simple call from a fellow student served to trigger a number of passionate responses: 'But we don't know anything about Africa, so what can we say?' or 'It feels far away from our reality' or 'Riddles, proverbs and spirituality don't really play a significant role in contemporary performance as we know it here in the Netherlands'. Several Dutch students felt unduly pressured to demonstrate an interest in a topic they claimed they were simply personally not interested in. The conversations continued through the semester, and in all fairness, and despite their own initial resistance, it was possible to gradually, ever so slowly, translate the perceived gap to performance contexts in the African continent, not least because of the physical presence of students from South Africa and an exposure to a

range of artistic and cultural practices. What also resulted from this moment of vexation was the realisation for Dutch students that, unlike themselves, students from the Global South have to permanently engage with theory and practices from the Global North, without the epistemic privilege or entitlement to claim a personal disinterest. In other words, it's so much easier for a student in Amsterdam to say they cannot relate to African scholarship than for a student from the Global South to say they cannot relate to Euro-American scholarship. It's very common to refer to the influences of canonical theatre figures such as Bertolt Brecht or Samuel Beckett on theatre movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but the winds rarely seem to blow the other way: we can rarely speak, for instance, of the influence of Latin American theatre giants on practitioners in the West or in other non-Western contexts. This is partly because their existence and their innovative practices may be totally unknown to theatre scholarship and practice elsewhere. Or it is because disciplinary formations in different parts of the world have a 'shared, but internally discontinuous history' (Jackson, 2004, p. 11)? Yet in other instances, it is also a case of assumed epistemic privileges that are located in specific disciplinary narratives (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 23). Decolonisation here means persistently training ourselves to recognise how such epistemic privileges are ingrained in our disciplinary histories and challenge them on an ongoing basis. At a basic level, it is about learning to imagine the conditions of knowledge formation differently. In order for white European students in Amsterdam to value the knowledge of orature in relation to performance, as derived from traditions of orality in African contexts, one must be able to first *imagine* that they are valuable, and not only to Africans. One must be able to break the habitual rejection of something because it appears distant and irrelevant at face value. One must be able to recognise that there is a connection between a supposedly personal disinterest in the topic and the threat of erasure that certain oral traditions face in different parts of the world. The absent potential of what one does not yet know can only be recognised when its possible presence can be imagined.

At the same time, I regularly also encounter public declarations of the idea that the intimate encounter with difference, especially with minoritised, primitivised others, is full of pleasure and has the capacity to transform and redeem the dominant self. Authoritative claims, for instance, of intimacy with a certain culture on the grounds of one's spouse or sexual partner being from that culture, are indicative of this stance. bell hooks brilliantly reflects the underlying desire for pleasure and their erotic connotations in popular cultural expressions and fantasies in *Black Looks*

(1992). The desire for proximity with bodies deemed as Other, remarks hooks, is tied to 'a contemporary narrative where the suffering imposed by structures of domination on those designated Other is deflected by an emphasis on seduction and longing where the desire is not to make the Other over in one's image but to become the Other' (1992, p. 25). I find this to be one of the most difficult questions to address in the classroom: when is the longing for and affective appreciation of the Other a move of acknowledgement; when is it a form of 'imperialist nostalgia' or primitivism?

In what ways does embodied knowledge become knowable?

The relation between theatre practice and theory, as well as the status of embodied knowledge in the academy, is a subject that has witnessed much debate in the recent decades. Yet how does such an embodied knowledge, a knowledge that is not discursive but historically formed in practices, acts, gestures, come to be knowable? I am interested in this question not only from a philosophical, theoretical point of view, but also from a concrete, pedagogical perspective. Does bodily experience become recognised as knowledge only when elevated to the conceptual, i.e. non-corporeal realm? Obviously there is a significant difference between knowing something in one's body and knowing it as a concept, between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how'. Yet why do so many forms of knowledge in the arts only gain recognition in scholarship when they can be expressed discursively? The deeply colonial heritage of this problem is evident. The absence of written classic texts, theoretical treatises, and documents have resulted in the devaluation of so many cultural practices around the world. It was in response to this that performance scholar Diana Taylor proposed the distinction between the archive and the repertoire, whereby an archive refers to those records that seemingly withstand change, while the repertoire enacts embodied memory (2003, p. 20). At the same time, as indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out, what is research for some can indeed be violence and erasure for others (1999, p. 2). The power of naming often goes hand in hand with the act of claiming and control, and this is as true of the arts of indigenous populations as it is of their knowledge of ecology and medicine. In my teaching practice, I am constantly looking for ways to trigger both archival memories as well as memories of the repertoire. Here I take inspiration from artistic practices I come across and occasionally experiment with embodied exercises in a classroom setting. Adapting the format of the *Read-In* developed by Utrecht-based artist Ann-

ette Krauss, I asked students to collectively read various versions of the 1851 speech by the women's rights and civil rights activist Sojourner Truth, titled 'Ain't I a Woman?' (Read-In-Collective, 2013). By the deceptively simple act of reading out loud, together, in public spaces or in a particular configuration of bodies, voices and accents, the exercise allows for an exploration of a range of questions around embodied knowledge and what counts as knowledge in the academy. Such performative exercises help to 'conscientise' students, to borrow a phrase from Paulo Freire, to become conscious of assumed hierarchies between intellectual and manual labour, between researcher and the researched, and of the way these hierarchies are inevitably gendered and racially connoted. It also opens the doors in a gentle way to pay attention to the loss of voices of the colonised in Dutch theatre history. Who might Sojourner Truth have been in the context of Dutch colonies in the West Indies? What happens when we recite her lines, not in order to arrogate to ourselves a comprehension of her position, but as the ones whom she was addressing? The question of decolonising the knowledge domain of Theatre Studies is constantly addressed in the space of the classroom.

Under which conditions is one entitled to know?

In 2013, the University of Amsterdam conferred an honorary doctorate on the Indian multi-billionaire Ratan Tata. Stunned by the logic of this act of a public university awarding a doctorate to one of the biggest corporate giants of the world, and unable to understand how the university was taken up by the sanitised public relations image of Tata, failing to see the darker sides of his vast transnational empire, I wrote a protest letter and gathered signatures of several colleagues and students at the faculty of Humanities. The letter was published on the opinion page of the national Dutch *Volkskrant* newspaper.³ Soon thereafter, I was contacted by the dean of the faculty of Economics and invited to a personal meeting in his office. This meeting, as well as the vast majority of responses I received online, basically conveyed one message: as a Theatre Studies person, I had no certified qualification in Economics and should better refrain from raising objections to the judgement of others better qualified to do so in the university. The protest did not have any direct effect, as the honorary doctorate was conferred with pomp and ado. However, the developments at the University of Amsterdam in the years since confirmed that financial power unashamedly occupies the highest position of authority in the man-

agement of the university, and that I was not alone in my indignation (Bloois, 2016). However, the one lesson that I did learn from this experience of speaking out was to be wary of being silenced with the remark that 'one should stay within one's area of expertise' and not 'interfere' in such matters. The protests in 2014-2015 at the Bungehuis and Maagdenhuis in Amsterdam initiated by a coalition of students and faculty members across disciplines demonstrated the importance of being invested in the sustenance of the public university against all odds. Decolonising the university implies, in this regard, that the foundational value systems of the university are not only a matter to be decided by the faculty of Economics and Business, but also equally concern students and researchers in the Arts and Humanities. Decolonising Theatre Studies, conversely, means that what we care for is not only 'the theatre', imagined as a self-enclosed institution and practice, with the sole purpose of public entertainment and amusement, but that we also bear responsibility as a discipline towards the university and the society at large. The responses to the protest letter indicated that we all tend to function as a foil for confirming the identity of others, or indeed, relegate others to the position of the amateur in order to be able to see ourselves in turn as professional (Jackson, 2004, p. 28). Indian students of the Amsterdam University Business School expressed their outrage on social media that I, as an Indian citizen, instead of showing pride on behalf of an Indian business tycoon receiving an honorary doctorate from a European university, was ruining not only the reputation of one of the most important industrialists, but also, by a logic of *pars pro toto*, the reputation of India itself! This was a moment to be alert to 'the imbrication of contemporary practices of postcolonial and advanced colonial states with capitalist processes of re-colonisation' (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997, p. xxi), a crucial insight from decades of intersectional feminist thought-practice. Those who are quick to point to the undeniable benefits of colonialism and contemporary neo-colonial capitalism tend to be impatient with its violations: they may be enabling, no doubt, even charitable, but they remain violent nevertheless. To call for the decolonisation of knowledge implies to me the necessity to be able to distinguish between when disciplinary borders are useful and when they merely serve to retain the status quo of hierarchies and hegemonies. The promise that Theatre and Performance Studies holds for me, then, lies in the order of the 'as if', the training of the imagination not only to make sense of the present, but also to generate the ferment, from which knowledge that does not yet exist may emerge (Bala, Gluhovic, Korsberg, & Röttger, 2017).

Decolonisation struggles around the world never all insisted on the same model of the nation state as their goal. Some have indeed been remarkably indifferent to the idea of national sovereignty, questioning whether the process of decolonisation can ever be a linear one, culminating in a state that will ever be successfully accomplished and able to stand on its own. Similarly, the disciplinary venture of decolonisation need not insist on enforcing one model of disciplinary sovereignty that will be achieved once and for all. In other words, while it is necessary to strive for the decolonisation of Theatre and Performance Studies, must we not simultaneously be wary of claiming its accomplishment?

Notes

1. This distinction between the definitive and programmatic features of a 'keyword' or a field was first drawn by cultural theorist and literary scholar Raymond Williams (1983, p. 23).
2. I draw this insight from dramaturg and theatre scholar Faedra Chatard Carpenter, who, citing Cherrie Moraga, formulates this as a question: 'How can you see an absence when you don't know there is a presence?' (Carpenter, 2016).
3. The letter, originally submitted with the title 'Eredoctoraat voor Ratan Tata: applaus voor de nieuwe kleren van de Keizer' (Honorary Doctorate for Ratan Tata: Applause for the Emperor's New Clothes) was changed by the editors of the *Volkskrant* newspaper to the more polarising headline 'Eredoctoraat voor kapitalistische Ratan Tata schaadt geloofwaardigheid van UvA' (Honorary Doctorate for Capitalist Ratan Tata damages the credibility of the UvA), (Bala, 2013).

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