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Rashna Darius Nicholson

Decolonization, India, and Theatre History

'Decolonization' has superseded 'postcolonial' as the most compelling catchword of the present moment. Broadly speaking, the term possesses two parallel genealogies: African decolonization and Latin American decoloniality. But where are Asian territories such as India and Hong Kong, and more specifically, fields such as theatre history located in the debate? This article analyses the stakes and struggles, inner contradictions and blindspots involved in decolonizing or decentring the curriculum. It asks whether the decolonial temporalities of our time constitute an adequate lens to theorize theatre history by examining the term's misuse by popular historians, media, and government, and second, by interrogating a spectrum of positions on 'Indian Theatre' from the nineteenth century onwards. Through this double focus, the article probes the scholarly possibilities for undoing the dominant mode when the 'decolonization trope itself becomes a tool for colonization.'

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In July 2020 a controversy erupted on the list-serve of the American Society for Theatre Research when scholar Gabriel Varghese shared a link to an alternative canon of pre-1945 performance works.[1] The list included an Indian section that featured Sanskrit texts and a play by Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. According to the canon's creators, this list would help scholars and students value texts that traditional all-white and all-male theatre history would rather sweep aside.[2] Three days after Varghese's email, Indian theatre scholar Arnab Banerji responded:

> Teaching and/or listing Sanskrit texts 'only' under Indian drama before 1945 (well and Tagore. I am a Bengali, so you know, Tagore runs thick in my blood [literally] but dude was a landlord aka oppressor) is an act of violence in many ways. It participates in the silencing of the Dalit and other subaltern voices that have been muffled under the weight of Indian classical drama, which itself is a product of the British 'discovery' and 'legitimization' of the 'canon.' … If you want to amplify the anti-racist voices then simply listing a bunch of plays from the more melanated or non-English speaking worlds is not even remotely enough. One has to go into each of these works and dig through their contexts and see if each individual work is 'doing' the work that merits their inclusion in any canon of any form, if we need a frigging canon at all, that is. Just because we are more melanated or don't speak English doesn't mean that we cannot be racist/colourist/xenophobic/classist etc.[3]

Banerji's miniature protest against canons, the uncritical acceptance of Sanskrit drama and Tagore's plays as 'representative' of Indian theatre, and gestures of inclusion in anti-racist work strike at the heart of problems in current debates on the decolonization of universities.

Decolonization and Decoloniality

The term 'decolonization' signifies a number of different things to a number of different people. In its original avatar it referred to a *longue durée* sociocultural process linked to the political transfer of power from colonial empires to postcolonial nation-states.[4] Today, however, 'decolonization' has superseded the 'postcolonial' as the most compelling buzzword in academic discourse.[5] Heterogeneously configured, decolonization possesses,

broadly speaking, two geographically distinct genealogies born of specific struggles and shifting, often conflicting, usage: one regarding decolonization (in which the writings of Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Achille Mbembe are most representative) and another reagarding decoloniality (in which Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Santiago Castro-Gómez, and Walter Mignolo are most frequently cited). Despite their diverse disciplinary and geographic roots and differing emphases on the systemic injustices generated by colonialism in politics, the global economy, and academia, a common thread binds these two wide-ranging schools of thought: this is the colonial heritage of contemporary knowledge production. Thus, Mbembe, one of the most influential scholars in the 'decolonize the university' movement, draws on both Fanon's and Thiong'o's as well as Boaventura de Sousa's and Dussel's writings to critique not only the neoliberal university's privatization of public space and corporatized 'audit' culture but also obsolete Eurocentric forms of knowledge originally designed to meet the needs of colonialism.[6] Citing Thiong'o's influential theory of the politics of language – European imperialism's deployment of the 'cultural bomb' to destroy African peoples' belief in their languages, heritage, and self-worth – and Dussel's concept of pluriversity – a learning process which engages in authentic, horizontal intercultural dialogue – Mbembe argues that the new African university should embrace different epistemic traditions and teach in African languages, Chinese, and 'Hindu' even as he cautions against nationalist chauvinism.[7]

In a similar vein more crucial to the Indian context, Mignolo draws on the work of Fanon, Thiong'o, Quijano, and Dussel to unfold one of the primary premises of the Latin American decoloniality movement: the hidden complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality.[8] He takes up Peruvian sociologist Quijano's concept of the 'coloniality of power' – the invisible and constitutive side of 'modernity' – and Dussel's theory of transmodernity, which proposed, as an alternative to Eurocentric modernity, the

planetary-wide valorisation of hitherto scorned cultures which exist 'beyond' modern European/North American epistemological structures. [9] In doing so, Mignolo argues that the official end of colonialism (for example in 1947 in India) did not signify the end of coloniality, that is, the power relations and conditions of 'being' set in motion by colonial knowledge and its technologies of government. According to Mignolo:

Under the spell of neo-liberalism and the magic of the media promoting it, modernity and modernization, together with democracy are being sold as a package trip to the promised land…Yet, when people do not buy the package willingly or have other ideas of how economy and society should be organized, they become subject to all kinds of direct and indirect violence. …The crooked rhetoric that naturalizes 'modernity' as a universal global process and point of arrival hides its darker side, the constant reproduction of 'coloniality'.[10]

Differentiating between postcolonialism and decoloniality on the basis of genealogy (the first inspired by European poststructuralist theory, the second based on radical indigenous epistemology), Mignolo argues for a total break from colonial modes of knowing through 'delinking'.[11] Delinking from the structures of knowledge imposed by the West means 'to think and argue from the exteriority of modern Westernization itself' and to foreground 'other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics'.[12] Phenomena lying outside the rhetoric of modernity, which according to the principles of progress and market democracy must be conquered and colonized (the Arabic language, Islamic religion, Indigenous concepts of social and economic organization), thus constitute for Mignolo the conceptual starting point for disassociating from the colonial matrix of power.[13]

By reconstructing 'ways of thinking, languages, ways of life and being in the world that the rhetoric of modernity disavowed' and by paying 'close attention to the powerful articulation of players that have been reduced to the silence of the barbarians for five hundred years', this decolonization of the mind would facilitate the development of 'pluriversality',

that is, a detachment from old Eurocentric ideas, '*which ramify, for those brought up with them as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds.* [emphasis in original]'[14]

At first glance, the discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies seems uniquely poised to dialogue with the decoloniality movement. The critique of the devaluation of ephemeral, oppressed knowledges from below relative to empirical, rational observation from above constitutes the cornerstone of contemporary performance studies theory. For example, two of the leading lights of the discipline, Dwight Conquergood and Diana Taylor, have attempted to bridge the gap between 'stories' or 'repertoires' – the subjugated ways of knowing rooted in orality, enactments, and vernacular-local contingencies – and dominant, textual colonial-derived epistemologies, which are the 'map' or 'archive'. Described by Conquergood as 'the most radical promise' for performance studies at the turn of the twenty-first century, these theories regarding different ways of knowing critically consider the operation of colonialism in modern conditions of knowledge-production. By 'cut[ting] to the root of how knowledge is organized in the academy', these now compulsory topics in many 'Introduction to Performance Studies' courses constitute conceptual siblings of Dussel's 'transmodernity' and Mignolo's 'pluriversality' which call for a creative engagement with subalternized forms of knowing across socio-cultural and religious divides.[15]

Decolonization as an Infelicitous Performative

Crucially, however, the language of performance has also been powerfully used to describe the hollowness of much decolonization discourse. One of the most compulsively cited pieces of writing on decolonization in recent years, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', describes how performances of sympathy for the subjugated other work to demonstrate innocence and mutuality in order to absorb the Native

Other's difference and contain complicity.[16] The easy adoption of the language of decolonization, they argue, empties the movement of its radical political potential: '…it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future.'[17] Tuck and Yang's work has been criticized for its focus on a historically specific and geographically particular understanding of colonialism – settler-colonialism in the Americas – and its narrow understanding of decolonization as the restoration of land and wealth to Indigenous peoples.[18] Yet, its critique of 'settler moves to innocence' resonates globally at the current conjuncture marked by Burger King's marketing of plant-based products, Shell's championing of eco-friendly practices such as cycling, and Coca Cola's use of the Black Lives Matter movement to paper over its history of coded racial appeals.

For her part, Moira Pérez describes performative scholarly approaches to decolonization, which metaphorize concrete claims of specific collectives in order to maintain structures of privilege and legitimize one's own subject position.[19] This vacuous form of academic decolonization, she argues, takes numerous forms: epistemic extractivism (pillaging ideas by subsuming them under a dominant epistemic framework); the instrumental use of marginalized subjects; intellectual endogamy (citing prestigious authors to establish one's own respectability); and the promulgation of research agendas that are irrelevant or contrary to the needs of peoples outside global circuits of intellectual power.[20] Accordingly, Banerji's vituperation against 'simply listing a bunch of plays from the more melanated or non-English speaking worlds' needs to be read in light of the critique of 'white people… "decolonizing" everything' or, in more polished terms, decolonization as an infelicitous performative.[21] This critique further extends to decolonization theory itself, which has come under fire for its vacuity and potential for causing harm. Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò belabours the point as to how much of the work that currently falls under decolonization can be achieved without

the term and 'the histrionics that go with it'.[22] Decolonization, he says, has become a catch-all mantra, 'often used to perform contemporary "morality" or "authenticity"'.[23]

In a different context, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui similarly hones in on the symbolic capital embedded in 'obfuscating discourses' on decoloniality.[24] Mignolo and company, she reproves, have built a small empire within an empire 'creating a jargon, a conceptual apparatus, and forms of reference and counter-reference that have isolated academic treatises from any obligation or dialogue with insurgent social forces'.[25] Neologisms such as 'transmodernity', 'decolonial', and 'ecosimía', she says, entrap and cripple Indigenous peoples, whose demands decolonial scholars ostensibly interpret and disseminate. At the same time, this depoliticized discourse helps to consolidate new pyramidical structures of academic power with new canons and new gurus that vertically bind Latin American universities to centres of intellectual production in the United States. She blisters: 'Through the game of who cites whom, hierarchies are structured, and we end up having to consume, in a regurgitated form, the very ideas regarding decolonization that we indigenous people and intellectuals of Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador have produced independently.' [26]

Modernity and Decoloniality

Crucially, both Cusicanqui and Táíwò focus their critical attention on the 'limited and illusory discussion' regarding the links between modernity and colonization.[27] Cusicanqui lambasts decolonialists' adoption of an essentialist, Orientalist discourse centred on the imagined notion of an 'original people'. By denying the modernity of Indigenous populations, decolonial discourse compels them to theatricalize their identities as NGO-ized, 'ethno-touristic' adornments for multicultural neoliberalism. The concept of an 'original people' as static and archaic, she argues, both recognizes and excludes the sweeping majority

of the Aymara- and Qhichwa-speaking population of the cities, mining centres and sub-tropics, thereby depriving them of the political agency to influence the state.[28]

In a different register, Táíwò describes how extending the meaning of colonization to modernity creates confusion, if not outright distortion and falsification. Decolonization, he claims, is increasingly deployed as a 'cure-all that cures virtually nothing'. The unbroken, dubious chain of causality drawn between colonial rule, on the one hand, and 'European' or 'Western'-derived modernity and neo-colonialism, on the other, results in a racialisation of consciousness and ultimately undermines indigenous agency. Europe, he contends, cannot be charged with holding an exclusive historic claim to modernity nor should the postcolonial masses be made into permanent victims in their own history. Inadvertently citing Spivak's disparagement of delinking as 'golden-ageist', her warnings that colonial historical crimes were often a rewriting of evils in existence in pre-colonial polities, and her critique that to be immersed in nothing but colonialism is to be ideologically directed by capitalist globalization,[29] he argues that struggles against many morally unjust practices make little conceptual sense under the category of decolonization. Decolonizing, more often than not blocks serious analyses of practices such as child marriage, polygyny, caste, and other forms of ethnic chauvinism. Moreover, by ignoring hybridity and uncritically accepting a binary conflict between traditional indigeneity and a western-colonial modernity of foreign provenance, conceptual decolonization or the 'decolonization of the mind' essentializes endogenous epistemes and homogenizes regions, languages, and cultures.[30] What does it mean, Táíwò asks, to be mentally 'African'? Is Jùjú music – created under colonial rule – colonial or African? If liberal representative democracy – part of modernity's 'package trip to the promised land' – is inseparable from colonialism, what are the consequences of its decolonization?

Statues

India, formerly part of the largest colony of the world's largest colonial power, may have some of the answers. The story of India's cultural decolonization begins, in my view, in the 1960s, when the nation began to have her tryst with the toppling of statues. On 12 August 1965 in the 'still hours of the night', Bombay's municipal authorities dislodged a sculpture of King Edward VII riding a horse, popularly known as 'Kala Ghoda'.[31] Renowned as one of the most exquisite cast iron statues in the nation, the piece had been the subject of controversy as early as 1958, when a resolution at the Bombay Legislative Assembly's budget session recommended that it be replaced with a bust of the Maratha warrior-king Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, patron saint of the soon to be founded state of Maharashtra.[32] After a period of inaction due to the high estimated costs of the removal, a local political association threatened to launch a *satyagraha* even as anonymous groups began to deface monuments of other 'foreign personalities'.[33]

Subsequently, a letter-writer in the *Times of India* self-titled P.B.V. argued that locals thought more of the horse than the rider.[34] Yet, despite P.B.V.'s protest against the 'misguided patriotism' of the removers, the equestrian monument was loaded on to a truck while a dozen-odd policemen looked on, disinterestedly.[35] Possibly 'the fastest job done by the municipality in its entire history', the piece was carted off to Bombay's graveyard for colonial-era statues – the zoo – to keep company with a decapitated Queen Victoria whose canopy would eventually be used by an industrialist's wife as an ornate sunshade for tea time.[36]

Time passed. In the 1970s the precinct was renamed Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Chowk after a Bengali freedom fighter even as locals stubbornly held on to the catchier, colonial-vernacular 'Kala Ghoda'. Two decades later, as slow, debt-ridden Bombay

transformed into fast-paced, globalizing Mumbai, a cultural association birthed the idea of converting the area into a temporary art district to raise citizens' awareness of the city's heritage. After a successful trial run in 2000, the 'Kala Ghoda festival' comprising play readings, jazz concerts, and handicraft sales became a much-loved annual event. Soon after, in 2017, the neighbourhood got its horse power back with high end luxury stores – the symbols of a new hyper-capitalist India – as well as the return of the symbol that once defined the precinct. A new bronze statue titled 'Spirit of Kala Ghoda' of a horse *sans* rider, was unveiled to much fanfare in the square where the original once stood. Embodying the essence of art, culture and the free flow of ideas', the statue, according to the Kala Ghoda Association, did not resurrect the past but constituted a 'symbol for the future' (Figures 1 and 2).[37]

In his study of 'Brand India', Ameet Parameswaran refers to Takashi Murakami's concept of superflat – a deliberately flattening, two-dimensional visual form signifying the emptiness of consumerism – to describe how a vacuous national aesthetic was constructed for the Indian commercial market. Not unlike the world of advertising, the new equestrian monument that sought to represent Mumbai's (not Bombay's) future by denying the presence of the persistent ghost of the absent horseman of the colonial past signified something double-edged. Revealing the banality of unreflective, homogenized symbolic representations of identity and the *unheimlich* (uncanny) or the presence of the unfamiliar in the familiar, 'Spirit of Kala Ghoda' illustrates the strategic use of history to bring about the disappearance of history. It did not matter that a local Jewish comprador philanthropist Albert Sassoon built the original statue – a man who exemplified how colonial oppression almost always came with local collaboration. Nor did it mean anything that nineteenth-century India's struggle against colonial rule, beginning with the work of comprador elites such as Sassoon, Dadabhai Naoroji, and Jagannath Sankarseth, comprised innovative, strategic adaptations of imperial-

liberal values, legitimate forms of co-participation in the public sphere, and the counter-hegemonic development of local projects of modernity.

'Old' and 'new' in contemporary Mumbai's public space are placed together in contiguity not in continuity – an aesthetic mode that works to hinder rather than develop a critical public. In Hong Kong, the other place that I still call home, dehistoricized, placeless, selfie-conducive 'quotations' that give off the patina of the region's past – junk boats, Tai Kwun, and the Clock Tower – similarly operate to keep the colonial subject in place.[38] Manufactured, not unlike Disneyland, for mindless visual consumption, these deliberately clichéd, hyper-palatable stereotypes of the city's history manage, according to Ackbar Abbas, to 'make a complex space disappear into a one-dimensional image, structured on a facile binarism'.[39]

Perhaps 'misrepresentations' are consciously deployed by postcolonial cities to facilitate ocular amnesia because colonial symbols can be read in highly strategic ways during moments of political crisis. In the aftermath of Queen Elizabeth's death, thousands of citizens queued at Hong Kong's British consulate to leave tokens of mourning. Reminiscent of the pro-democracy protests when the union jack was (mis)used as a symbol of resistance, this outpouring of public grief offered residents a rare platform for silent dissent.[40] In a city transitioning between two forms of colonialism (Britain's and China's), where all modes of protest have been swiftly obliterated, the not unproblematic nostalgia for empire and admiration for empire's 'universal' liberal values (enshrined in Hong Kong's Bill of Rights) is, as John Carroll notes, not merely about romanticising the imperial past but also about tactfully critiquing the present.[41] In the manner that the Hong Kong government appropriates tools of oppression such as sedition laws from existing infrastructures of British colonialism, protestors lacking institutional power purposefully seize on colonial symbolism and ideological and cultural frameworks to articulate dissent obliquely.[42]

In a significant turn of events, the mute yet mass protests of the Hong Kong mourners ignited demands that the city's administration escalate its 'decolonization' efforts.[43] This comprised eliminating British colonial-era terms from the legal system, renaming streets, and enforcing allegiance pledges among civil servants. Part of a premeditated effort to bind Hong Kong to mainland China, culturally and conceptually, the official instrumentalization of the concept of decolonization mirrors the more elaborate weaponization of the term and its conceptual baggage in India.

India and Decolonization

> … instead of treating the European position as the sole universal benchmark, decoloniality prefers to treat it as but one of the options or subjectivities within the global pool of thought. Therefore, it rejects Europe's monopoly over time, space and subjectivity… [Decoloniality] seeks to restore the dignity of indigeneities and their subjectivities by unshackling them from the absolutism of European coloniality.[44]

This excerpt, which not inaccurately summarizes the 'foundational premises' of decolonial scholarship, was written by J. Sai Deepak, an Indian engineer-turned-lawyer-turned-popular historian.[45] Sai first gained prominence as an advocate in the historic Sabarimala Ayyappa Temple case, when he defended the temple's existing practice of banning women from the inner sanctum. Though caricatured by liberals as 'traditional', 'anti-rational', and 'anti-modern', his defence of the fundamental rights of the deity as 'a person' whose rights preceded those of female devotees were compelling enough for the Supreme Court to grant him extensive court time in 2018. Sai describes how, during the case, he intuitively sensed the colonialist underpinnings of Indian law, which favoured rational modernity over tradition. Consequently, he set out to deduce how the colonial lens had distorted contemporary understandings of indigenous religious practices.

In April 2020, he met a Hindu-American scholar, Indu Viswanathan, who described his work on reconciling the constitution with Indic civilisational perspectives as 'decoloniality in action'. She thus introduced him to the work of Quijano, Mignolo, Escobar, Sylvia Wynter, among others. On reading of the 'colonial matrix of power' that shaped racial hierarchies, normative concepts of history and time, and rationality and modernity, he embarked on a project to call out the double standards that were being applied to decolonial movements in other societies, on the one hand, and the Indic movement for cultural decolonization, on the other.[46]

The result, *India that is Bharat* (2021), is a widely disseminated analysis of the influence of European colonial consciousness on *Bharat* – the successor state to the Indic, pan Aryan-Hindu civilisation. Sai delineates how the nation, though formally decolonized, is still hostage to coloniality. Western imperialism propagated false ideas of caste, religion, and secularism, which persist to the present day because India's comprador postcolonial leadership merely took up the positions left behind by the British in running India. Through the parasitic presence of Protestant, seemingly universal values of equality, liberalism, tolerance, and humanism in the Indian constitution, all-pervading Western thought and alien Christian frameworks have caused the nation irreparable harm. Citing Quijano, Dussel, and Mignolo, Sai thus advocates for a new 'pluriversal approach' that allows for the coexistence of different subjectivities in the constitution.[47] In this context, he accurately sees a correlation between the Latin American scholarship on decoloniality and a body of scholarly literature known as the 'Ghent School'.

Stemming from the work of S. N. Balagangadhara, the school broadly holds that ideas such as secularism and the critique of caste are products of colonial consciousness and are therefore superfluous in politics and the lived reality of the nation.[48] Proponents of the school argue that many nineteenth-century Indian reformists who sought to change or abolish

indigenous practices such as untouchability, sati, and caste adopted an orientalist mode of thought that conceived of indigenous Hindu ethics as immoral, corrupt, and intellectually weak. Scholars, for example Prakash Shah at Queen Mary University of London, refer extensively to this body of work and its core tenet that caste is an orientalist construct to contest the inclusion of caste discrimination as a cognisable category in the UK Equality Act of 2010.[49] Piggybacking on the anti-racist language of decolonization, Shah and other academics, mostly European- and US-based, argue that indigenous Hindus – akin to indigenous communities in Latin America – are, undeniably, the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent.

This potent message suggests, at its core, that Muslims, Christians, and other religious communities do not rightfully belong to the nation.[50] Coloniality, they say, expresses itself as 'Hinduphobia', that is, as racist discrimination against native, autochthonous modes of thought which the rhetoric of modernity disavowed.[51] In the judiciary, this Hinduphobia/colonial consciousness manifests in legal pronouncements on faith-based matters; in legislation that facilitates state intervention in the majority's places of worship; and in laws that treat minorities, that is, Muslims, preferentially. Through the work of these 'scholars', the concept of decoloniality has thus been weaponized to censor international criticisms of caste, to peddle quackery as history, and to transform the law.

Not unrelated is how, with the publication of Sai's book, decolonization has begun to serve as the official script for India's Hindu nationalist government, which is keen to position itself as a victim of global forces. Both the concept as well as its canonical theories have been deployed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the paramilitary Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh to recover Hinduism's ancient glory and confront the violence inflicted upon India by brutal 'foreign invaders' – Christian and Muslim.[52] Thus on 15 August 2022, during his independence-day speech, Modi delineated his 'Panch Pran' (Five Resolves) pledge to

eradicate every trace of 'slavery' in India by 2047. Variously described by the press as 'Modi's decolonization bid', Modi's determination to 'decoloniz[e] the Indian mind', and his 'decolonization project', the movement which is 'civilizational not political' attempts to displace Western-derived modernity by promoting superstition, pseudoscience, and Hindu dogma as indigenous.[53]

Concurrently, Modi's pledge seeks to eliminate 'symbols and structures of colonial oppression' such as place names, ostensibly 'redundant' colonial-era legislation, imperial war memorials, and – more troubling – mosques, 'obsolete' forms of secular education, and the use of English. As a consequence, 'Rajpath' becomes 'Kartavya Path' (The Path of Duty), a statue of Subhash Chandra Bose graces India Gate where King Edward's son George V once stood, Allahabad metamorphoses into Prayagraj, the Vedas and Puranas replace 'colonialist' historical scholarship, Patanjali's Drishti displaces cataract eye drops, and the secular nation 'India' transforms, rope-trick style, into the Hindu *rashtra* '*Bharat*'. Simultaneously, all people ostensibly still living under the yoke of coloniality – activists, journalists, university students and professors, and other defenders of the European-colonial-modern-secular values of the constitution – have, at best, been branded anti-nationals, 'presstitutes', 'sickular' internal enemies or 'liberandus' (a blend of liberal and *gandu* [asshole]) and, at worst, thrown into prison.

It is easy to dismiss these events as misappropriations of decolonial theory. That Mignolo wrote and then belatedly retracted a strong endorsement for Sai's text makes the jumbled landscape of far-left and -right, and of social justice and injustice murky. Although it can be attributed to poor judgement, Mignolo's review (which is not worth reproducing), points, as Harshana Rambukwella notes, to 'a larger structural problem in the politics of knowledge production in the academe'.[54] It exemplifies how decolonial theory is 'insufficiently self-reflexive' of how its core premises today – the inseparability of modernity

and coloniality, the denigration of 'universal', 'European' Enlightenment values, and the celebration of indigenous epistemes – constitute the conceptual armature of regressive, nativist rhetoric.[55] Paradoxically, this nativism was precisely what much canonical decolonization theory originally sought to fight against. Through citation after citation, 'decolonization' – a trojan horse without the horseman – thus risks being emptied of all ethical meaning. A peculiar convergence of academic neologisms, an internet outrage economy, and hyper-nationalism has allowed a discourse originally generated in struggle to be taken up lock stock and barrel by its putative opponents, with devastating consequences.[56]

The fundamental question then remains: can the word 'decolonization' *do*, in J. L. Austin's sense, any good? If one takes the Indian case as an example, is there any space left for this deliberately expansive and therefore potentially obfuscating term to be recuperated as a category that advances tolerance, equity, and meaningful cross-movement solidarity?[57] In the messy postcolonial context of regressive autochthonous indigeneity fused with neoliberal growth, can a distinction still be drawn between the exclusive, ethnocentric 'we' and the inclusive 'we' that decolonization/decoloniality originally envisioned?[58] If other, locally-specific words such as 'de-nativism', 'Anti-Brahminism', and 'de-saffronization' more accurately advance contemporary regional struggles for social justice, where does 'decolonization' stand? Does the term's perversion, empty performativity, and lack of critical purchase in India indicate a broader problematic? In other words, in critiquing all abstract European-derived universals, has decolonization discourse overlooked the problems of its own universalization?

To Decentre rather than Decolonize?

Scholars of performance are, to put it mildly, not unaware of how the scholarly fixation to European and US cultural histories, theories, and systems of knowledge parallels the violence

imposed by other imagined centres within the remit of the nation-state. Systemic racism, as Marilena Zaroulia and Glenn Odom emphasize, functions within a complex of other contingent, constructed centres: Han-centrism, Israeli-Jewish exceptionalism, and *Hindutva*.[59] Borrowing Swati Arora's use of the word 'decentre' (which has different charge to the word 'decolonize'), they argue that to decentre in publishing and pedagogy is to draw attention to cultures and forms of knowledge from positions imagined to be marginal as well as to evaluate the power dynamics of imagined centres. 'This is not a matter of finding a new centre, but, instead, a means of considering alternatives to the singular centre'.[60]

At first glance, the term 'decentre' appears as a potential panacea to the problems of decolonization when addressing questions such as Which knowledge is worth producing and disseminating? Who decides, and What historical struggles and erasures are reproduced? What does this entail, though, in practice? Sruti Bala and Arora – specialists in Indian performance and, thought provokingly, the two scholars in the field of theatre studies who have raised the issue of decolonization in recent years – have different responses to the question.

Bala sums up the problematic and the politics of her location succinctly when she describes how much easier it is for students in Amsterdam to state that they are unable to relate to African scholarship than for students from the Global South to say that they cannot relate to Euro-American scholarship.[61] References to the impact of Bertolt Brecht or Samuel Beckett on performance cultures in Africa, Asia, and Latin America abound, but the winds seldom blow in the other direction. Yet when she describes her department's attempt to include plays from the Global South, playwrights of colour, feminist works, or understudied, banned, and unperformed texts into a list for undergraduate study, she notes that the task unavoidably entailed oversimplification, erasure, and violence. Bala avers that intimate encounters with putative primitivized others are often full of hierarchic pleasure for students

and scholars in the centre and, instead of resolving intellectual indifference and erasure, they work to redeem the dominant self.

Bala, then, provides no answers to the questions: ‘What should be added to the canon?’ How to do justice to ‘quirky’ cases such as Queer Mexican feminist playwrights? When is the affective appreciation of the Other a gesture of acknowledgement, and when does it function as a form of ‘imperialist nostalgia’ or primitivism?[62] Arora, on the other hand, presents a manifesto which, as a genre, is less equivocal.[63] Locating the discussion in the UK’s climate of Brexit and white supremacy, she says that the discipline needs to emphasize how it dismisses the histories of Black and Global Majority scholars from its borders. Highlighting the epistemicide or erasure of indigenous knowledge systems by Empire dominant in what is taught in Theatre Studies classrooms, she argues for the need to embrace a multiplicity of knowledge systems. Like Bala, she provides a useful lens to think through this proposition. During the induction week of her MA, students were asked to bring one word from their first language relevant for Performance Studies research that could not be translated into English. Unlike Bala, however, she expresses confidence in this exercize. The result, she says was an archive of pluralities that made students aware of internalized cognitive injustices and of the need to unlearn colonial tropes of thinking and writing – echoing, thereby, Thiongo’s and Mbembe’s calls for re-centring or moving the centre through mother tongues.[64]

Taiwo says that in landscapes characterized by linguistic pluralism, where some languages are dominant and others peripheral, the question as to which language should be preferred and why is by no means insignificant. What word would I have picked in Arora’s place? The first language I learnt to read was English. Would ‘theatre’ count then? And if not, what language would best represent my culture? Would it be the first language that I understood, Parsi-Gujarati – a colloquial, lampooned, near-extinct dialect of which most

Parsis under forty cannot read a word ? Or would it be Hindi, the purified, national language that we typically loved (for films) and hated (because it had been imposed on us by the centre)? Or Marathi, my mother's preferred language and a compulsory subject in my state-board school, which we took pleasure in mangling due to the Shiv Sena's growing regional chauvinism? Would it have been better, in the choice of a word, to insist on English – the language of India's erstwhile colonizers – or essentialize an inevitably hybrid cultural past full of pleasure and pain by assuming, in the mode of Mignolo's 'delinking', a legible, homogeneous, more titillating indigeneity?

Elsewhere in her essay, Arora describes how Anglophone academic centres have progressively pursued an additive approach in resolving the issue of decolonization, that is, modifying the canon by 'adding a few artists from Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Middle East...'[65] In introducing a non-English word relevant to performance studies research in the classroom, how does one determine the difference between the tokenistic gesture of simply adding 'from Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Middle East' and meaningful inclusion?[66] Moreover, to whom would this exercize be directed? Would it work in places outside the global centres of intellectual production? What does it mean, in practice, to consider alternatives to the centre?

A Historiographic Experiment

Following this train of thought, what does it mean to decentre theatre history? The discipline, as we know it today, is inextricably intertwined with rules of evidence, secular calendrical time, and the modernizing narratives of citizenship, the bourgeois public and private spheres, and the nation state that excludes what is anti-historical and anti-modern.[67] If, as Bala and Arora point out, the task at hand does not entail filling in the gaps with new insertions and

additions and if ‘India’ is a construct like ‘Europe’, how do we decide, in our curation of a syllabus, which language, cultural forms, or values are sufficiently representative of a person, community, and region?

In order to answer these questions, what follows is a brief, authoritatively mainstream or ‘bog-standard’ historiography of Indian theatre written in relation to the political imperative to decentre the curriculum. Loosely adapted from existing historiographic accounts such as Rakesh Solomon’s ‘From Orientalist to Postcolonial Representations…’ and Shayoni Mitra’s ‘Dispatches from the Margins…’, it delineates how the centre and periphery have shifted over the years in the field of Indian theatre.[68] In tracing how ‘certain privileged parts are elevated to the status of the whole’, I hope to clarify the issue of whether one can ‘shift pedagogies and frameworks in ways that do not imply a hierarchical structure’.[69]

The Development of ‘Indian’ Theatre

Indological studies of performance usually directly or indirectly take as the centre the work of nineteenth-century orientalists: William Jones, Horace Hayman Wilson, and Sylvain Lévi. Their construction of a single, continuous cultural formation – the Sanskrit theatre – as the *Ursprung* of the theatre of the subcontinent became, from the mid-nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth, the dominant model for conceptualizing the history of theatre. Jones, for example, attributed his interest in learning Sanskrit to the belief that it was the language in which Indian drama was 'originally composed' and to its intimate ‘connection with the administration of justice to the Hindus’.[70] By equating Indian theatre with ‘l’art poétique des Hindous’ or the ‘Theatre of the Hindus’,[71] Wilson’s *Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus* (1827) and Lévi’s *Le Théâtre Indien* (1890), served to codify what was ‘Indian’, thereby providing the groundwork for the discourse on what lay inside and outside of the nation.

Rakesh Solomon argues that these texts exerted a tremendous influence on Indian theatre historiography as they constituted the first modern histories of the subcontinent's theatre. Through the force of citation, the Sanskrit theatre became the dominant model for conceptualizing the history of Indian theatre, even as an exhaustive number of vernacular and popular performance forms, stemming from a multiplicity of small states, chiefdoms, and regional kingdoms and diverse ethnic populations, were denigrated. Although India historically comprised speakers of languages from the Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic and Sino-Tibetan families, nationalist scholars took Sanskrit aesthetic treatises such the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as 'the law' rather than 'a' law – not one of several directives, but the singular source of rules for all Indian performance.[72] The orientalist conceptual centre of a long and unchanging Sanskritic Indic civilization accordingly dominated the work of key intellectuals such as Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) and Venkatraman Raghavan (1908-1979), becoming, as editor Sadanand Menon notes, the unwritten policy of the newly established in 1953 Sangeet Natak Akademi (India's national academy of music, dance and drama).[73]

According to the preamble to its constitution, the Sangeet Natak Akademi was established to 'develop Indian Dance, Drama, Music and Films and to promote through them the cultural unity of the country'.[74] This umbrella organization, which became the country's chief patron of the arts, overtaking other modes of patronage, was one of the earliest, most important, cultural policy initiatives of the emerging Indian state. It also functioned as an epistemic hub that determined and disseminated a specific understanding of the Indian performing arts – a wellspring of national unity – across an exceedingly complex, linguistically, socially, and ethnically fractured polity. As a first step, the Akademi organized four highly influential pan-Indian seminars between 1955 and 1958 that, together, invented a unifying national aesthetic. At the landmark 1956 drama seminar, which articulated 'deep faith in the potentialities of drama as a factor in the building up of the new India',[75]

considerable energy was not surprisingly devoted to the 'wealth of Sanskrit drama' that functioned 'through the centuries as a force for consolidation of spiritual, religious and moral culture among the people'.[76] For the 'glorious revival' of the nation's dramatic arts, the seminar's participants concluded that 'we ought to study Sanskrit drama; secondly, we ought to do experiments with performances of Sanskrit drama; third, we ought to gather from the Sanskrit drama anything which may help the proper evolution of modern drama'.[77]

Likewise folk theatre came to be perceived as surviving remnants of classical Sanskrit drama, which needed to be preserved and revitalized. By encouraging writers, with the aid of scholarships, to study the principal features of Sanskrit theatre, a powerful Indian aesthetic was crafted that would reach urban elite audiences and help to incorporate marginalized, 'folk', and/or tribal peoples into the nation's representational framework.[78] Indisputable in its applicability to all South Asian performance, Sanskrit theatre, as delineated in the performing arts treatise the *Nātyaśāstra*, thus not only constituted a blueprint for the development of dramatic theory, theatre scholarship, and a centralized form of performance training but also effectively legitimated and sustained the nation as a singular, unified cultural formation.[79]

In a similar fashion, the drama seminar committee suggested that a new Hindi theatre be 'built by the non-Hindi people' in keeping with the recent recognition of a 'purified', non-Persianate form of Hindi as the new official language of India. While, according to the influential writer Mulk Raj Anand, translations of 'all classics of the Indian theatre [were to] be rendered into the Hindi language by the Sahitya Akademi or the National Book Trust', the playwright Jagdish Chandra Mathur (1917-1978) recommended that professional companies located in different parts of the country produce plays in their own languages as well as in Hindi, if feasible.[80] Anita Cherian notes that 'the state's performances of modernity are based on an understanding of culture as both the locus of the traditional and the imagined foundation of a social solidarity that makes the modern state possible'.[81] 'Authentic' Sanskrit

and Hindi theatre thus constituted conceptual centres from which linguistic plurality could be absorbed, an approved, normative, authentic aesthetic past could be established, and a cohesive national identity and citizenship could be granted a common culture of meaning.

There was, however, a price to be paid for the creation of an autonomous, undivided 'Indian' essence for the constitution of a modern political community. By privileging the origins of the dramatic past in one language and tradition – Sanskrit – which historically derived its power and elite associations from its exclusivity, nationalist theatre historiography not only followed a process of drastic selectivity, eliminating a luxurious jungle of linguistic and cultural phenomena, but also consciously or subconsciously assumed a 'political standpoint'.[82] Scholar Bishnupriya Dutt has shown that at an elementary level, privileging Sanskrit led to the elevation of particular 'classical' performance forms as sources of national cultural capital at the cost of others.[83] By positing particular performances as projections of the Sanskritic classical tradition and by promoting the normalized, disciplined, asexual, upper-caste Hindu body as 'the nation's metaphor and its literal embodiment', state agencies such as the Akademi rendered illegible or incomprehensible 'voices of difference', including the two significant contact languages, Persian and English, which were of fundamental importance in the history of the subcontinent. At a broader societal level, the official discourse on the national 'Indian' theatre – developed through a return to a homogenized vision of the cultural past, seemingly untainted by colonial, Islamic, or caste-based influence – unwittingly provided legitimacy to a vision of an 'us' and 'them', a 'majority' and 'minority' and 'the impression of 'our' as opposed to 'their' history', thereby providing ammunition for Hindu far-right groups at home and abroad.[84]

Banerji, Zaroulia, and Odom hint at how nationalist Indian theatre history-writing was at a few degrees of separation from the essentialist nineteenth-century mapping of Indian pre-colonial history into an utopian ancient Hindu past and a degenerate Muslim period that was

misappropriated by Hindu nationalists such as Vinayak Savarkar (1883-1966), Swami Shraddhanand (1856-1926), and Madhavrao Golwalkar (1906-1973) for the construction of the historical claims of *Hindutva*. National theatre historiography, in seeking to create aesthetic unity, thus became a highly charged stage for regional, linguistic, and caste-based encounters, inadvertently devouring subordinated groups and assemblages. It also had an impact on perceptions of belonging across regional and ethnic divides and propelled feelings of misrecognition, disavowal, and exclusion. The adoption by official cultural discourse of an 'integral', 'unitary' vision of the legitimate cultural legacy of the Indian nation that 'subsumes all contradictions within predetermined and homogenized categories and premises'[85] resulted in the depiction of non-normative cultural practices and their proponents, who performed from peripheral places of difference (linguistic, ethnic, religious) as subversive, threatening the cohesiveness of the state. According to Dutt, Rustom Bharucha, and others, the routine marking of Dalits, Muslims, tribals, and other targets of allegiance pledges, development crusades, and gagging as anti-nationals cannot be viewed as isolated from the nationalist delimitation of the Sanskritic-upper-caste Hindu tradition as the nation's legitimate cultural identity.[86]

Whither the 'National'?

Scholars have attempted to decentre the early-nationalist framework of Sanskrit unity and Hindi homogeneity in numerous ways. Initially, during the 'crisis decade' of the 1970s marked by growing economic strain, war, protests, and especially the Emergency of 1975-77, regionalism had an impact on both the nation's politics and its theatre histories. The period witnessed the eruption of forms of sub-nationalism – the assertion of regional identity, language, and culture. For example, in Madras (now Chennai), the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagham party (DMK) dislodged the dominant Congress Party from power in the 1967

assembly elections on the back of a perceived imposition of Hindi and North Indian Sanskrit identity by the centre.

Concurrently, regional theatre histories proliferated. Take, for instance, Dhīren Dāśa's *Jatra, the People's Theatre of Orissa* (1981), Ē. En Perumāl's *Tamil Drama, Origin and Development* (1981), and Clifford Reis Jones' *The Temple Theatre of Kerala: Its History and Description* (1971).[87] Likewise, 'folk' theatre such as Tamasha, Bhavai, and Jatra, hitherto viewed by the nation as the decadent fragments of the ancient Sanskrit dramatic tradition, began to be funded by state branches of the Sangeet Natak Akademi as the cultural heritage of regional states. By tracing their own classical lineages independent of Sanskrit, regional languages such as Tamil and their aesthetic forms could make their own competitive socio-historical, legal, and cultural claims semi-independently of those disseminated in New Delhi.

However, as Ernest Renan put it, any form of 'unity is always effected by means of brutality'.[88] The new understanding of the national as a conglomeration of a multiplicity of centres, while expanding the cultural vista of the national, mimicked the majoritarian-minoritarian, centre-periphery, elite-subordinate problematics of its predecessor. For example, while Tamil achieved 'classical' status, other languages in the state of Tamil Nadu such as Kannada, Urdu, Malayalam, and Badaga together with their art forms remained culturally peripheral. Similarly, the region 'Bengal' analogous to metropolitan Calcutta is widely considered overworked in the historiography of the subcontinent while its border regions stretching across present day West Bengal-Bangladesh and West Bengal-Orissa have scarcely been investigated. In Maharashtra, Dalit performing communities were effectively side-lined within the regional cultural sphere, even though the middle-class *sangeet natak* was nourished by radical Dalit genres such as the lavani and the tamasha.[89] Within each regional formation, 'regional minority cultures … were either assimilated or sought to be suppressed.'[90] The seeming dislodging of the national through regional history-writing thus

merely led to the mushrooming of numerous national allegories – a prominent example of an additive approach to resolving the centrism of the national canon.

During this period, 'authentic' regional theatre increasingly came to be understood through the lens of ritual through such works as Richard Schechner's *The Ram Lila of Ramnagar* (1977) and Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Philip B. Zarilli, eds. *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* (1993). The frame 'ritual', which facilitated the homogenization of the cultures of entire states and regions, also influenced subsequent texts on Indian performance like Steve Tillis' *Rethinking Folk Drama* (1999) and Ralph Yarrow's *Indian Theatre: Theatre of Origin, Theatre of Freedom* (2001) and genres such as intercultural theatre. This flattening of cultural difference was abetted by the Theatre of Roots, which was conceived as 'a post-Independence effort to decolonize the aesthetics of modern Indian theatre' by placing 'authentic' elements of traditional regional performance within modern structures of representation.[91] Juxtaposed against colonial ticketed-commercial Indian theatre, which ostensibly taught Indians to 'despise their own ritual, classical and popular performances',[92] the roots phenomenon, comprising works by Girish Karnad, K. N. Panikkar, and Ratan Thiyam, produced the finest 'export-variety' theatre in India.[93]

Leaving intact previous Indological approaches to the study of performance which were hostile to materialist, class, and caste analysis, the Theatre of Roots, which became the backbone for the study of modern Indian theatre abroad, had the sanction of the market and the approval of cultural officials in New Delhi. The movement thus promoted itself on a global platform as radical and anti-imperialist while obfuscating its engagement with the 'residue[s] of colonialism' in its valorisation of 'the tantalizingly exotic, "primitive" rituals' of the other.[94] As Brahma Prakash notes, 'ejecting Western views and adapting an institutionalized and elite concept developed by the Sangeet Natak Academy and other

institutions, along with a limited group of high caste and urban individuals in the theatre of roots, is neither a solution nor a way toward decolonization'.[95]

Liberalization and Decentralization

With the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s and the progressive interrogation of the relevance of the nation-state, a new form of regionalism – scaled up rather than down – came to the forefront. 'South Asia', a post-war formulation that first appeared around 1950 with US recognition of the subcontinent as a key geopolitical area in the battle to win the Cold War, provided new conceptual ground for theatre history. Already established as a discipline within the Euro-American academy, this broader regional approach (rather than an exclusively national one) facilitated analyses of the interconnections between the principal nations of the subcontinent.

Along with the crisis in nationalist methodologies and mounting critiques of forms of eurocentrism linked to the essentialisation of cultures, this emphasis on South Asia propelled cultural histories of the pre-independence period and studies of the politics of diasporic identity formation. Thus appeared such books as Sudipto Chatterjee's *The Colonial Staged: Theatre in Colonial Calcutta* (2007), *Lata Singh's Play-House of Power: Theatre in Colonial India* (2009), and Neilesh Bose's *Beyond Bollywood and Broadway: Plays from the South Asian Diaspora* (2009). These works appeared to spell a solution to the quandary of inclusive national history-writing from the 2000s onwards. India, however, dominates this terrain, in line with the developing view of the Indian nation state as a hegemonic force in the field of South Asian Studies. Moreover, within works focusing on the Indian region, the languages taught in South Asian Studies departments in North America and the UK – 'classical' Sanskrit and Tamil, Hindi, Bengali, and Marathi – overwhelm the field, propelling the marginalisation of other languages (Maithili, Kashmiri, Konkani, and Assamese, with

between 5 and 55 million speakers) and broadening an already gaping scholarly vacuum in their socio-cultural formations and proponents.

'Area' studies also underpin the decade-long trend of the digital mapping of colonial networks and cross-cultural flows linked to post-nineteenth century globalization. Digital databases of European language newspapers such as Proquest's *Times of India*, Singapore's *Straits Times*, Trove's comprehensive Australian database, Delpher's *Bataviaasch Handelsblad*, and *The New York Times* seemed to democratise access to primary source repositories – previously out of reach for many due to travel costs and visa regimes. Appearing to be the cure-all to barriers in knowledge production, they heralded a new mode of scholarly analysis built on correlation rather than causation. However, as the digital ceased simply to function as an abstraction of the world and became a material agent capable of manufacturing new worlds, surplus data, which was haunted by histories of colonialism, population control and the study of race in which modern statistics had its roots, increasingly structured historical thought in line with racist logics.

Researchers have shown how, in a world of noncausal modalities, inductive reasoning, and multiple truths/fakes, thick data sets articulate historical realities according to existing colonial and new neocolonial frameworks.[96] Digital research on 'key figure[s…] in the globalization of theatre'[97] – the Asiatic escapades of Maud Allan and Ariane Mnouchkine, Carl Hagenbeck's and the Christy Minstrels' border-crossing, and the proliferation of Shakespeare, Sheridan, and Gilbert and Sullivan across the subcontinent – does not merely reveal unknown tales of brave transcultural adventure at the click-of-a-button. Algorithmic modes of inquiry are not simply descriptive or analytical but actively constructive of a deeply unequal reality. By exacerbating the visibility of some languages (easily recognizable by optical character recognition technologies), archives, and forms of study, these works inadvertently reproduce imperialist visions of the world and generalize

Eurocentric interconnections, movements, and contact zones (rather than immobilities, ruptures, and forms of stasis) as modern or global cultural history writ large. The false premise that mappings allow us to celebrate the infinite new possibilities of circulation and connectivity obscures the extractive and discursive violence of data collection intrinsic to digital knowledge production.[98] Put simply, the digital humanities return us to the problem of history, yielding no easy answers to the question of whether expansive, seemingly all-encompassing global data-mapping yields a more just understanding of the past than the centralizing national and regional historiographic models that had been followed in earlier periods.

The Centre did not Hold

Concurrently, the influence of poststructuralism, postcolonial theory, and subaltern studies from the 1980s and the concomitant decline of material and class analysis created the groundwork for the critique of non-class forms of domination and new forms of identity politics and 'interest-group' theatre.[99] Bruce McConachie describes how feminist, African-American, Hispanic, and LGBTQ theatres arising from minority communities in the US reflected the ways in which multiculturalism had dispersed audiences and destabilized the idea that a nation-state has a singular, authoritative culture.[100] Meanwhile in India, Shayoni Mitra notes that the centre was similarly destabilized. The new Indian theatre, she says, is 'off-beat, alternative, serious, sustained, activist…marginalized for one reason or another'.[101] Recent theatre histories such as Lakshmi Subramanyam's *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre* (2002), Meera Kosambi's *Gender, Culture and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema before Independence* (2015), Sanjoy Ganguly's *Jana Sanskriti: Forum Theatre and Democracy in India* (2010) – to name very few – accordingly attempt to respond

to political issues such as Dalit solidarity, women's and LGBTQ rights, street protests, and development.

According to Mitra, this ostensibly changed focus on performances working against 'the hegemonies of space, gender, language, and caste' reflects how the new Indian theatre is *not* in the capital Delhi, is *not* concerned with a singular national historiography, is *not* attracted to an ancient Sanskritized past, and is *not* an elite concern.[102] Defined through litotes, the 'fearless, new', comprehensively decentred terrain of Indian performance is a space where previously marginalized theatre has become increasingly visible and where 'subaltern' groups can have their political messages taken seriously.[103] Mitra describes three areas where the rise of marginal theatres is most visible: feminist theatre (Maya Rao, Anuradha Kapur), Indian English theatre (Mahesh Dattani) and Dalit theatre. In this formulation, Dalit theatre in Maharashtra is placed on the same plane as the work of Rao, Kapur, and Dattani – artists with variable access to global touring circuits, major publishing houses, and international forums such as Art Basel and the International Federation for Theatre Research. Such an understanding of the Indian theatre under the umbrella-term 'marginal' thus raises significant issues regarding the ethics of representation that lie at the core of artistic work, research, and pedagogy that claim to intervene on the side of the oppressed.

Gopal Guru describes how scholars equipped with a specific theoretical language that has no tangible link to the specificity of the suffering of untouchability seek to theorize the Dalit experience.[104] There is something fundamentally fraudulent, he observes, about the facile usurpation of Dalit life by intellectuals who do not know the lived experience of humiliation to which the oppressed Dalit 'other'is subjected. Nevertheless, many wish to endow her with their intellectual discourse. Guru's insistence that there should be a connection between theory and the reality which theory wishes to interpret, and his polemic

against the division between theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras is significant in understanding the conundrums implicit in work not only on Dalit theatre but also on all 'marginal' cultures legible in the postcolonial turn.[105]

Mohan Datta and Ambar Basu describe how contemporary neocolonialism in postcolonial spaces functions through mechanisms of seduction as affect.[106] Instead of being severed from capitalist production, subaltern subjectivities are enticing sources of neoliberal profiteering, whether these be micro-finance and rural development, women's self-help programs, or decolonizing narratives. Research on the marginalized other is invariably complicit with neoliberal seductions; funding structures that seek verifiable impacts of social change; and elite caste and class privileges that collaborate with Whiteness in reproducing the margins. Moreover, by sidestepping relationships of accountability with the objects of study, such scholarly work replicates colonial modes of knowledge extraction, violence, and erasure.[107] The World Bank's gender-empowerment projects, based on a colonialist frame of Third World women as mute, helpless, and requiring expert humanitarian assistance, is conceptually identical to scholars extracting tales of oppression to signpost their radicalism or market themselves as experts to avail of prestigious grants and job opportunities.[108]

Today, the new colonial professional is often Brown, trained in elite Anglophone universities, and part of a bourgeois class out of touch with the larger part of the Indian electorate.[109] Performing their own marginalia by obfuscating the caste and class privileges that facilitated their access to the global centres of intellectual production, elite postcolonial academics both function as instruments for marketing the cosmopolitan, multi-racial university as well as for working to instrumentalize subalternity.[110] Formulated as emancipatory scholarly politics, the academic profiteering from oppressed cultures thus provokes a two-pronged critique. While the Hindu far-right decries the wine and cheese 'liberandus' for fetishising caste annihilation and gender equality, caste activists and the

radical-left decry upper-class, upper-caste academics for being politically correct rather than politically conscious, that is, for convincing themselves that they are on the side of moral truths without acknowledging how precisely those truths are produced. How, then, can work on the persecuted peoples of the Indian nation, Dalits, the victims of hyper-development, or non-English speaking queer peoples, be decentring or decolonizing if these communities constitute spectacular sites of scholarly profit-making? Is there a line between 'theorising on' and 'theorising with', between maintaining the veneer of academic distance and disrupting tediously radical, inadvertently narcissistic analyses in line with the latest Euro-US fashions?

Many Indian performance studies scholars are not unaware of this scholarly shift in the centre from the exotic classical to the subalternized other and the seemingly impossible position of the postcolonial academic as native informant. This awareness, together with the developing view that sweeping historiographic generalizations directed towards a Western readership glosses over the thick intricacies of the Indian performance experience, led to a stream of ethnographic histories which focus on singular, fragmented events, troupes, and playtexts. As Samik Bandyopadhyay notes: 'Performance Studies in India have come to a stage where there is a need to make more micro-level studies of artiste-performers, forms, movements, techniques, practices and traditions in their local-regional-cultural contexts'.[111] While these, mostly article-length, works attempt to circumvent conventional (national, regional, transnational) history's attendant difficulties of periodization in linear, unbroken time and analytic categorization (for example, classical versus folk; traditional versus modern), they implicitly refute the possibility of facticity or truth claims.

As previous scholarship on the impossibility of evading national allegories has shown, overcautiousness regarding macro-historicization results in an opposite but equally perilous circumstance: an 'instability of the subject'. Polyvocal, anti-teleological narratives and the conception of multiple truths seriously undermine the nation-state's body politic as

these contradict the notion of singular evidence, thereby rendering a 'rationally-defensible position in public life' impossible.[112] A certain degree of normativity – a minimum agreement or shared consensus on what constitutes the history of a group – is required for the continued institutional functioning of any polity. As Partha Chatterjee argues, there is a penalty to be paid for the relegation of the grand, explanatory, necessarily Euro-derivative narrative to the dustbin of history; also for the avoidance of any methodical notion of causation and the concomitant shift to the ethnographic, every day, and local.[113] Fundamentally, whose story is being told if the meanings assigned to categories are rendered so inherently unstable?, Barbara Weinstein asks.[114]

More practically speaking and closer to our disciplinary home, pointillist, kaleidoscopic collages of history-from-below do not travel well. Diminutive, discontinuous fragments require contextual knowledges or larger frames of reference for students and scholars outside the studied region. While this difficulty is often dodged through Anglophone performance theory, does the vocabulary of the performative (which emanates from the centres of intellectual power in the Global North) then assume an imperialist, globalist position? Do the seemingly neutral 'peculiarities of criteria' of four star or Q1 theatre journals and US- or UK- based university presses constitute a colonizing or centring impulse by another name – a more brutal form of violence because they exclude while appearing to include?[115]

By attempting to sidestep the hegemony of the representative 'national', Performance Studies, which is marked by 'universally' legible frames ('archive and repertoire', 'liminality', and 'simming') becomes a new translational medium, a site like Hindi and Sanskrit of general equivalence. In keeping with its anthropological roots, the field possesses a compulsive, all-encompassing ability to render illegible categories – *lila* or *rasa* – and topics – a nineteenth-century enactment of Gurgin in Surat or a twenty-first century Christian

peacock dance in Kottayam – legible as performance. But this potent act of translation suggests World Bank-, United Nations-, or human rights-speak, where messages broadcast contemporaneously across the world are 'universally' comprehensible, yet misleadingly value-free.

This also functions at the level of syntax. Following Emily Apter's description of the political unneutrality of rules of grammar, one could argue that the variety of English used in theatre and performance journals – unambiguous sentences, the use of em dashes, abbreviated paragraphs – operates to change that which is unfamiliar into something recognizable, non-threatening, and non-other.[116] A 'good' article or student paper permits semantic transfers between geographic divides yet flattens the patina of multiform English under a missionary-like morphological impulse. In sum then, by consistently returning to the US/European scholarly centre as the originating source not only of reason, modernity, postmodernity, the postcolonial and the postdramatic, but also what is understood to be a 'well-written' text, do we merely keep going, like dogs attempting to catch their tails, in unremitting full circles?

Conclusion

Returning to decentring and decolonization, should we evaluate 'the power dynamics of the imagined centres' and include more non-European-and -North American themes in syllabi and journals? Yes.[117] Yet, can one 'shuffle the centre and the periphery in the hope that the concept of the 'centre' is no longer relevant' or 'shift pedagogies in ways that do not imply a hierarchical structure'? No.[118] I do not see a solution to the conundrum of choosing between the 'Indian', which cannibalizes smaller formations or the flattening discourse of the global, which fetishizes niche-marketed national and ethnic difference. Nor do I think that the canon (the horseman), whether Shakespeare, the landlord aka oppressor Rabindranath Tagore, or

the Turner-Schechner theory of social drama can be readily dismissed from the horse. To think otherwise is to be caught up, to use Spivak's naughty phrase, in 'liberal-radical fantasy'.[119]

Paul Gilroy describes how, in the nominally postcolonial present, the desire for liberation no longer finds a direct object. Fundamental questions yield no easy answers: 'what are the politics of decolonization in an age without colonies? Is anti-imperialist consciousness possible in an era that lacks the explicitly racist empires of the nineteenth century?'[120] The blurred ideological outlines and ill-defined political differences of our present moment therefore mean that 'white supremacists, black nationalists, Klansmen, Hindu fundamentalists, Black Muslims, neo-Nazis, Zionists, and anti-Semites encounter one another as potential allies rather than as sworn foes'.[121]

In this regard, we must confront, as Gilroy argues, the limits of the idea of liberation or in Datta and Basu's formulation, how the 'decolonization trope itself becomes a tool for colonization'.[122] As Arora astutely implies, the university with its histories of exploitation and violence was possibly never meant to be fully transformed.[123] Despite our best intentions and efforts, our 'interventions and radical research'– our professional bread and butter – invariably involve elements of coloniality due to our performances, as salaried scholars, of social power. Accordingly, Spivak and Pérez emphasize the need for us to claim complicity.[124] Since scholars – and not merely the institutions in which scholars work – are part of the problem, much depends on our humility to acknowledge that there is no one morally self-righteous path, whether this be a digital database mapping routes between India and Europe or a study of subaltern cultural forms made legible through terms such as 'undercommons', 'hapticality', or 'liveness'.

However, at the same time, I do not think that nothing apart from self-reflexivity can be done. Located in Hong Kong at the time of writing this article, I cannot help going back to

Chinese artist Zhang Huan's performance *Family Tree* (2000) by way of a conclusion. The nine photographs that document the performance depict traditional divinatory marks which gradually obscure the artist's face until all that remains are his eyes and the contours of his face (Figure 3). Zhang seems to say that the more one writes a word, the more those words become illegible. We cannot research, study, write or cite our way out of forms of injustice, abuse, and oppression. But we can, as Bala and Arora, Mbembe, and Cusicanqui intimate, call out the pervasive and false distinction between pure scholarly pursuits and the unclean activist politics of university life brought to light by Dipesh Chakrabarty, when he rebuked JNU students for participating in protests. We can challenge working conditions and pay-gaps, attend meetings in 'unfamiliar', 'dangerous', or 'inconvenient' places, question gestures of inclusion at conferences at the Marriott hotel, interrogate land acknowledgements on elite campuses that push Black communities from their homes or punish BDS advocates, and condemn the removal by a university of a Tiananmen square memorial. Radical possibilities cannot be negotiated through pure discourse bereft of the exposed, vulnerable, undisciplined body, which, as such, would be penalized.

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