Expanding the Curriculum

Ranjana Thapalyal argues that for the curriculum to be truly decolonised, a more interdisciplinary method of teaching must be adopted – perhaps a new approach informed by the research-based practices of artists such as Ashanti Harris, Bouchra Khalili and Alberta Whittle.

Recent expressions of desire for 'decolonisation' of the curriculum are striking for what appear to be their ubiquitous presence as well as their absence in practical manifestation at the heart of curriculum planning within the academy. The term has increasingly become accepted shorthand for a host of significant concerns that are integral to education of any value but which have struggled to be recognised as such because they have been too easily evaded. In art schools, this evasion is in part due to their association with legislated equalities agendas, a perceived censorship of artistic freedom, and a tendency to associate equalities debates with overbearing management cultures. This in itself should give us pause for thought, as should an apparent assumption that the inherent problems of a deeply embedded uni-culturalism in art school curricula and teaching methods can be overcome by the very same actors who perpetuated it. How is this to be achieved without radical introspection and specialist training? Can it be done at all without addressing and redressing the past? And what can this specialist training comprise, in a world that seems more visibly in flux than ever before?

Reflecting on many years of teaching at an art school, there seem to be three instrumental changes that need to be implemented if any genuine progress is to be made. These are: representation (addressing the paucity of contact with lecturers of colour, diverse backgrounds and identities); curriculum expansion (in particular, more material from the global south, both historical and contemporary); and an expansion of interdisciplinary research culture. It is possible that the third of these changes holds the key to effective implementation of the first two, or of their benefits.

Advertisements for art schools (in line with universities of which they are often a part) tend to highlight institutional 'research culture', generally referring to the range of PhD projects, supervisors available, and possibilities for meeting and sharing ideas. For staff, the term 'research culture' has long come to signify the pressure to produce recognisable outputs of a very high level to be included in the Research Excellence Framework on which the institution depends for part of its funding. The words 'research' and 'culture' can, however, be jointly reinscribed, in a very different and far more meaningful way, as an artistic process that empowers through self-knowledge. Used in this sense, the phrase research culture can denote an environment that encourages, supports and applauds inter-disciplinary, in-depth, ethically, politically, socially and historically aware engagement with *context* in artistic practices. And perhaps ironically, this self-knowledge seems to require stepping out of ourselves in order to see others and ourselves more clearly. It becomes apparent, therefore, that interdisciplinarity and intersectionality are essential for effective and relevant research-based art, because among the many acknowledgments and learning curves this process entails, trans-cultural thought finds a home and new genres of work emerge.

There has long been a tendency in fine art teaching to focus critical dialogue on the work itself: what it says visually, within the contexts of its location, and generally without explanation by the artist. While this method has undoubtedly produced successful contemporary art, there is a casualty in the process in that complex subject matter can be reduced to ineffective glimpses. While tantalising, these flickers can also misinform, or distort, the material with which they engage. Where the artist/student also identifies with that subject matter, another casualty of uni-cultural critical dialogue can be these students' self-esteem. Hence another loss is work that could emerge in an environment better equipped for multi-faceted exchange. Any call for decolonising of art school curricula, reading lists and staffing, therefore, must include critical reappraisal of studio teaching practices themselves and their relationship to hierarchies of knowledge.

A powerful tool for this reckoning with art school's place in history and society is systematic enquiry affording fuller frameworks that usually require straying well beyond the confines of art-historical writing to other disciplines as well. For tutors, this entails encouraging students to look in these directions and supporting those who may struggle with academic reading and writing. Crucially, it involves equipping ourselves with the ability to hear and respond meaningfully to the broad range of cultural, pictorial, philosophical and intellectual approaches present in most student cohorts today. Without stretching

Ashanti Harris with Jen Martin, *Sonic Séance: The Gathering*, 2019, installation view, CCA Glasgow

Alberta Whittle, *Mammmmmmmyyywata Presents Life Solutions International*, 2016, installation view

Ashanti Harris, *Second Site*, 2019 performance with Adebusola Ramsay, Libby Odai and Natasha Ruwona

the pedagogic boundaries of art school experience, decolonisation rings a hollow note, and it is not surprising to see little action noted. Further, if research as a tool for self-knowledge and artistic practice is to be encouraged, alongside goes some rigorous thinking about where the inevitably voluminous outcome of such inquiry sits in any formal exhibition or performance. It opens the possibility of expanding our understanding of collaboration and community arts too.

A recent series of exhibitions by Ashanti Harris in Glasgow demonstrates that art that has evolved through historical and political knowledge inquiry can be powerful and evocative, and can create subtle new languages of its own. Immersed within Harris's multi-media creative practice, several years of dedicated research and reflection on black history in Scotland finds expression in her work as a solo artist and in dialogue with collaborators. In a statement accompanying her recent exhibition 'The Skeleton of a Name' at the Transmission Gallery, she states: 'I'm a sculptor by training and a performer by practice. In all senses, I "make" as a practice of discovering and understanding. This exhibition is a process of feeling my way to understanding my/our contemporary or present condition and thinking ways in which history is present in this. I am a black, British, Guyanese woman living in Scotland and this is a process of trying to figure out what that means through making connections and reading between things.'

Apart from presenting us with highly engaging visuals and performance, Harris succeeds in 'growing' the work through critical evaluation of the significant histories she works with and their absence from our conscious knowledge. Tackling the sieve-like nature of mono-culturalist histories that simply cannot capture the fine interconnections that exist in the reality of any society, her work manages to weave this richer history into critique of its erasure. 'The Skeleton of a Name' pools several strands of research that Harris has pursued over recent years, all with the commonality of unearthing African and Caribbean presence in 18th, 19th and early 20th century Scotland. For her exhibition 'Second Site' last July at the Civic Room, located in Glasgow's Merchant City, Harris created plaques for four women from Guyana, opening up a sea of questions but firmly declaring that they lived in Scotland as free women. Part of the frustration in reading this history is the scarcity of information beyond small anecdotes and sometimes only census entries. This, in conjunction with the general lack of awareness of Scotland's slaving past and the particularly strong links between the Highlands and Guyana, makes their stories all the more intriguing and special. 'Second Site' reinserted the real lives of Dorothy 'Doll' Thomas, Elizabeth Junner, Susanne Kerr and Elizabeth Swain Bannister in our consciousness through informative text; and in collaboration with Sekai Machache, Titana Muthui, Libby Odai, Adebusola Ramsay, Natasha Ruwona, Naomi Shoba and Nabu White, Harris also obliquely commented on the outcome of state amnesia. In a memorable durational performance, dancers moved with eyes closed, gently forcing viewers to make space for them, tracing their way through space, time and the physicality of the aging Victorian bank building-turned-arts venue.

A 2018 work by Harris involved taking participants on a walk from another Merchant City commercial building to the Ramshorn Cemetery. Through the intimacy of headphones, a recorded reading of the 1951 poem 'To a Dead Slave' by Martin Carter both punctured and suffused the streets with their undeniable inheritance of profit from enslavement and colonisation. At the same time, being among the gravestones and overgrown memorials of Scottish plantation owners and other grandees after passing fashionable city – centre pubs, cafes, civic buildings and arts venues highlighted the still active, more genteel pairing of culture and imperialism. Carter, the Guyanese poet and political activist, wrote the poem during Guyana's independence struggle, and it references Quamina, one of the leaders of the Demerara slave revolt of 1853. Taking 14 minutes to read, each stanza ends with the words, 'to you dead slave, from me, a living one'.

Underlining the significance of interdisciplinary inquiry, this work was also informed by Harris's reading of Arthur Jafa on dub music and Mark Fischer on dyschronia and hauntology. Picking up on Jafa's relation of fractured lines in African diasporic history to the open structure of dub music, Harris feeds in further tributaries to this incomplete but vital picture by turning participants into conduits for realising ruptures and sparking connections. 'By "raising the dead" and placing the living alongside them,' Harris argues, '[Carter] pushes the reader to consider the cause and effect – the presence of the non-present history.' In walking us through the sanitised remains of ill-gotten wealth from which we all profit today, Harris reiterates Carter's dyschronic act.

For her part in 'Sonic Seance: The Gathering', a nine-person collaboration at the CCA Glasgow which

Art school discourse, too, seems to have hoodwinked itself into thinking it has dealt with multiplicities and complexities in the student cohort by batting away the bogey-man of fixed truth, and declaring it to be unstable and contingent. Why then, in 2019, do we face renewed and quite rightly even more strident calls for 'decolonising the curriculum'?

overlapped with 'Second Site', Harris brought to mind traditional African reverence for ancestors and a sense of their existence in the lives of descendants. Her choice of ancestor, however, was a communal one. A collective reading of Audré Lorde's *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* became a literary form of spiritual contact, taking strength from a prescient voice from the past. It also reflected again Harris's ability to creatively embody academic research. 'The practice of channelling the voices of others became popular among black women, who in the mid 19th century were voiceless in society,' Harris wrote. 'Many Black Spiritualists used their abilities of communication to challenge racism and sexism and campaign for a reformation of society. This powerful spiritualist tradition lives on in the writing of Audré Lorde.'

In the Transmission show, Harris extends the evocative power of anonymity and silence, continuing the practice of re-inscribing the histories she studies. The gallery is painted completely black and two structural pillars are covered with the text of Carter's poem in glittering gold letters. Three videos juxtapose the bare, known facts about the four women from 'Second Site with images from the Highlands and islands resonant with cultural memory and, in the context of the show, open to geographic imagination: 'a pier in the Highlands, landscapes from across the Black Isle, Pictish stones at Nigg, the ferry crossings between islands'. The work in the gallery could not have come into being – at least in its present form – without Harris's tenacious research, through which erstwhile forgotten or overlooked history has acquired a solidity previously denied it.

On questions of curricular content, both Richard Hylton (*AM*426) and Virginia Whiles (*AM*429) quote expressions of dismay from students when presented with histories relating to the British Empire, its ramifications today, and the centuries-old presence in Britain of people from the colonies and their descendent diaspora. Expressions of anger, such as, 'why didn't I know this? Why wasn't I taught this?' clearly indicate a gap in curriculum at primary, secondary and higher education levels for these students. Art school proves to be no more radical on this matter, except – and it is important to note this – where individual tutors have taken it upon themselves to insert in their feedback, lectures and/or practices a broader sense of history and culture, often against the grain of the zeitgeist. Thus,

Nadia Myre, *Code-Switching and Other Work*, 2018, installation view

these bewildered statements also indicate other factors that have not greatly been commented on. One could ask, to put it bluntly: 'Yes, why didn't you know this?' School and art school could – indeed should – have presented world history and culture in more nuanced ways, but should not the curiosity and critical questioning that would have revealed some of this information already be second nature to an art student? And, given the long-lived embrace of postmodern and poststructural theory at art schools in the UK, should art students not already be equipped to understand postcolonial contexts? In fact, while art students now seem readily sceptical about 'the canon', 'the academy' or dogma both hidden and overt, questions of art's interaction with race, colonialism and representation seem all too often to elude them. How is it that this is the only domain that art institutions and, as pointed out by Hylton, art-historical studies seem frequently to be so comfortably blinkered about? The harshness of the question continues to startle many, but must be seen in the context of the harshness of the experience of those who are impacted by this reality.

The problem has not gone unnoticed in philosophy of education, feminist and postcolonial discourse. In a reflection on a poststructuralist turn in anthropology, Mascia-Lees and others argue that the required evolution of anthropological methodology would benefit more from feminist than from poststructuralist theory, because feminist theory is grounded in the political understanding of women's marginalisation as part of single narrative histories, and is therefore 'already sceptical and critical of traditional "universal truths"'. They also point out, however, that apolitical adoptions of postmodern assertions of subjectivities that belie the very concept of truth are fraught with contradictions. Referencing political scientist Nancy Harstock, they state that: 'the postmodern view that truth and knowledge are contingent and multiple may be seen to act as a truth claim itself, a claim that undermines the ontological status of the subject at the very time when women and non-Western peoples have begun to claim themselves as subject. In a similar vein, Sarah Lennox has asserted that the postmodern despair associated with the recognition that truth is never entirely knowable is merely an inversion of Western arrogance. When Western white males – who traditionally have controlled the production of knowledge – can no longer define the truth, she argues, their response is to conclude that there is not a truth to be discovered.'

Though written nearly two decades ago, these words still resonate. Art school discourse, too, seems to have hoodwinked itself into thinking it has dealt with multiplicities and complexities in the student cohort by batting away the bogey-man of fixed truth and declaring it to be unstable and contingent. Why, then, in 2019, do we face renewed and quite rightly even more strident calls for 'decolonising the curriculum'? And how is it to be done without engaging with the truths of our peers and students, including identifications with race, class, gender, disability, gender fluidity, challenges to gender normativity and the ever-evolving languages that go with them? So art schools and universities would do well to avoid vaguely applied poststructuralist thought

and engage instead with appropriately targeted postcolonial, anti-racist, progressive education theories and a rigorous look at history.

Relevant here is sociologist and cultural critic Arjun Appadurai's call, in his 1996 book *Modernity at Large*, for a 'cosmopolitan ethnography' premised on 'a fresh approach to the role of the imagination'. In order to deliver a genuinely decolonised curriculum, art schools will need to assess those points of communication where certain subject areas and references made by students are easily swept away and therefore never evolve, because they do not fit into normative notions of what is contemporary, intellectual or individualistic enough. These are difficult, fascinating and vital conversations without which, as tutors, we not only damage the self-worth of many students, but also stifle the potential emergence of new and dynamic work. It seems increasingly evident that part of this process also has to include a relocation of disciplined, critical research practices as foundational to inter-subjective dialogue, coupled with radical listening. In total, this amounts to a genuinely thoughtful application of Kimberlé Crenshaw's now-popular term intersectionality, one that does not bypass the real impact on people of popularised theoretical debates.

There is no lack of theoretical material to support a genuine postcolonial, interdisciplinary shake-out of art school pedagogy, and, as exemplified by the work of Harris and others, clearly artists have begun to work in ways that far outrun some of the favoured modes of delivery. Integrated critical uses of historical, geographical and sociological facts, contested accounts, cultural memory and archival material, often navigated through a postcolonial lens, form a recognisable and growing space in contemporary art. A few further examples are cited here: Alberta Whittle's extensive use of research in her current exhibitions (Reviews *AM*431) lies at the heart of her earlier works too. In her performance *Recipe for Planter's Punch*, 2016, a performance commissioned by curators Mother Tongue as part 'Rum Retort', the exhibition they curated at the Tobacco Warehouse in Greenock. Whittle's repeated chant 'pay me what you owe me' suspended aural patterns in the air, as she mixed and served rum punch, a simple and straightforward exposition of the absurdity on which the economic success of plantation owners and their beneficiary governments was built. Similar themes were explored in Montreal-based artist Nadia Myre's *Code Switching*, 2018, which was part of Glasgow International. An Algonquin of the Kitigàn-zìbì Anishinàbeg First Nation, the artist turned fragments of broken clay pipes manufactured in Glasgow but collected on the banks of the River Thames into enigmatic constructions revealing the conjoined faces of European modernity and land and rights usurpation in the Americas. One of the first disposable consumer goods, clay pipes, sold pre-stuffed with tobacco and later discarded by sailors, were transformed by the artist into abstracted collectives, solid yet shattered. One piece several metres long was shaken rhythmically during performances, creating the eerie sound of distant trains and evoking, for this viewer, the forced transportation of First Nation children to Canadian boarding schools. The impact of research on self-perception and the vitality it lends to critique is seen also in the 2018 documentary *Wax Print* by Nigerian-British filmmaker, composer and fashion designer Aiwan Obinyan. Obinyan traces the colonial origins of wax – resist fabric techniques now so strongly associated with Africa but often of European origin as highlighted by British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare CBE. Through the voices of designers, fabric producers, textile historians, performers and aficionados of wax techniques across three continents, the film weaves a complex, open narrative about cultural memory and political consciousness amid a tale of commerce, expediency and cultural palimpsests.

Similarly pertinent here is Bouchra Khalili's *Foreign Office*, 2015, which employed the deceptively simple device of filming a conversation around photographs from the early days of Algeria's independence from France. Two contemporary Algerians ponder the silence of their parents' generation on the struggle for liberation. Across a table they present these material histories, referencing the many liberation organisations from across the world which were drawn to Algeria between 1962 and 1972. Alongside still images of the present-day sites of the offices of these revolutionary groups, and a screenprint that maps the group's locations in Algiers, the work offers many inroads to contemplation of utopias, resistance and resurgence. Singaporean born Sim Chi Yin, combines her skills as historian, journalist, photographer and artist to gently prise open an almost erased family past that is inextricably connected with broader postcolonial phenomena. In the still unfolding project from 2015, *One Day We'll Understand*, Sim's curiosity about the family silence of grandfather Shen Huansheng leads her to find the memorial with his name in mainland China where he died. The work centres on the 'Malaya Emergency of 1948–60, and the anti-imperialist resistance to British rule of Malaya, with the story encapsulating not only the degree of displacement that occurred worldwide under the British Empire and its continuing legacies, but also the ways in which the development of the Cold War shaped the private and public fates of newly independent countries. Sim reveals that her grandfather was an editor of a leftist newspaper and school principle who, along with over 30,000 comrades, were exiled to China as part of a round-up of anti-British agitators, branded 'terrorists', seemingly whether armed with pen or involved in guerrilla insurgency. Arriving in the final months of the Civil War between communist and nationalist forces, Shen joined a guerrilla unit of the Chinese Communist Party. Shortly before the victory of Mao Zedong, he was executed by nationalist troops, his body thrown into a mass grave. Shen was later honoured with a memorial by the new communist government, but beyond this all lies the personal sorrow of Sim's grandmother, who laments that her husband chose 'politics over family'. In a poignant spoken letter, Sim reflects, 'one day we might understand', deftly recasting words she has found on a Scottish rubber plantation owner's pristine grave in Malaya.

In all of these works, history is sifted, knowledge resurrected, canonical narratives interrupted. The process opens pathways for those wishing to engage further, but affords much to contemplate in encountering the work itself. Ultimately, it is perhaps this ineffable quality, of time as political storyteller in an ontologically charged space that rings out so significantly. It connects us to people we might not have thought of as 'ours' and reminds us to decolonise our minds, as well as our reading lists.

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