National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange

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In 2017, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT) were tasked with producing some sort of response to the 70th anniversary of Indian independence. As a cultural institution with national significance that is nonetheless embedded in an extraordinarily monocultural town, the Trust took the task seriously enough to acknowledge its limitations and approached Birmingham City University (BCU) to help design and produce an appropriate project. Just as the workforce and thematic capabilities of the SBT reflects the lack of diversity in Stratford-upon-Avon, the ethnic diversity of Birmingham is reflected in the student body and research emphases of BCU; home to the Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity and the first European institution to have a Black Studies course.

The exhibition that resulted demonstrated how something scholarly, impactful, and also broadly interesting for a public audience could be produced through such a collaboration. The series of interpretation panels designed and written by BCU students told the story of the partition of India through connections to Shakespearean performances and themes across the subcontinent, acknowledging the impact that it had, including on and beyond India. Fascinating and vital themes, issues, and ideas were brought forward by the students through this exhibition; for example, how disability was explored through a Bangladeshi production of *Romeo and Juliet*, the removal (and later reinstatement) of Shakespeare in Bhutan over political concerns about how his themes conflicted with ideas about national identity, and how a 2015 performance of *Hamlet* was used to reflect on and process the massacre of the Nepalese Royal Family in 2001. The success of this project was due to the skills and knowledges that were brought together by the partnership of the cultural and HE institutions.

The project also indicated the potential for further impactful work to come from the SBT's collections. Within months of the exhibition's opening, the SBT's Head of Research, Rev. Dr Paul Edmondson and BCU's Professor Islam Issa had secured funding for a PhD studentship that would explore the SBT's collections to establish what an 'international Shakespeare collection' might look like, what stories it could tell, and how it might intervene in discourses of diversity, inclusion, and representation in today's society. I was the recipient of the funding and the opportunity to do this fascinating work - courtesy of Midlands4Cities, a doctoral training partnership that is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

My doctorate was an overwhelmingly brilliant experience. Given the current HEI climate of overworked and underpaid staff and that postgraduate studies are now renowned for the adverse effect they too often have on students' mental health – points that are undoubtedly related – this is saying something. The supervisory team was essential here, and Islam and Paul were a wonderfully supportive team, but it is clear to me that the collaborative aspect of the project also added something invaluable. The requirement of the project that I have

access to the collections meant that I was immediately inducted into the SBT's collections department as any member of staff would be. I was offered a workspace among the collections team and was even invited to attend relevant meetings and contribute to several projects and events. As such, as well as having full and free access to my primary research objects and all the people who knew the most about them and their contexts, I felt like part of the team, and was encouraged that that team were interested in my findings. I was embedded in the department, but, crucially, retained the distance of the independent researcher that meant that I could, where necessary, criticize the SBT's practices and interpretation without the concern for my livelihood that I might have experienced as a staff member.

This is especially important given the doctoral project's emphasis on querying how the SBT's international collection might intervene in discourses of diversity and inclusion. As previously noted, the SBT was aware of its limitations in this area, but until the moment came it was unclear to me what the response might be to a suggestion that major changes were required to make the museum and online collections catalogue a welcoming space for all communities.

When I encountered the bronze bust of the Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore that stands in the Birthplace Garden, I realised that the moment had arrived. My research into this collection had already highlighted several moments of problematic interpretation, where the SBT had presented an object or figure through the lens of imperialist thought that, inadvertently or not, presented that object or figure as less valuable, civilised, or simply less legible as a result of their 'Indianness'. Now, I found that Tagore, who had been prolific in every written genre, was a composer and educationist with his own university, who was the first non-European to be awarded a Nobel prize for literature, and who was largely responsible for the entire field of Bengali literature in his lifetime, was introduced by the SBT's interpretation panel as if his most important, if not entire, contribution to global culture was the one poem he wrote about Shakespeare. I had to decide, then, whether my reflections on this wildly Anglocentric interpretation of Tagore's significance should be raised and tackled as I worked or just be part of my thesis, and I wondered how my 'colleagues' at the Trust would respond to such criticism.

However, there was more. A QR code at the bottom of the interpretation panel led to a blog post that gave a much more rounded account of Tagore's achievements, but it also glossed over a crucial aspect of Tagore's biography that implicated the British Army in one of the most horrendous atrocities of the Raj: the Amritsar massacre. Following the merciless firing on thousands of unarmed and peaceful civilians in the enclosed garden of Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar on 13th April 1919, Tagore renounced his knighthood through an open letter that condemned the action and the broader treatment of Indian subjects under the Raj.

Clearly an important and unavoidable aspect of Tagore's biography, the SBT chose to explain the renunciation as 'a protest against British policy in the Punjab', thus avoiding appearing to take a critical stance against the British Empire in a telling echo of the ways in which British museums have been employed since the imperial Victorian era to emphasise the glory of Empire, the superiority of British culture, and the possession of colonial cultural artefacts as evidence of both points.

Through my inside-outsider embedded researcher role, I found I was able to immediately express my concerns about the Tagore interpretation effectively and without any sense of confrontation. Because of the relationships I had built with members of the collections team, raising the issue of the Trust's perpetuation of harmful narratives of Anglo-supremacy was understood in the spirit of the 'critical friend' who recognises the institution's desire to improve practices. Following informal 'water-cooler' style conversations with collection team members of varying levels the process of removing the problematic interpretation began and was complete before I had finished my thesis.

It is rare for critical research findings to be met with such openness, to receive such an immediate response, and to be further rewarded by the Trust's continued interest in challenging its own practices. How far this openness was the result of my own whiteness, and whether a researcher of colour might have found this task more difficult on potentially multiple levels, I must acknowledge here. What is certain is that the SBT evidently did want to know more about their collections, to respond to socio-political changes in the world, and to keep Shakespeare relevant. Indeed, the SBT's Head of Museum and curatorial Services, Paul Taylor, explains his response and position:

> From my point of view personally I was very open to that critique. Being a museum professional it's a dialogue that's very live in the wider museum sector and something we need to embrace. For the organisation as a whole I think it was a bit more challenging as you start to think... well, we're here to celebrate Shakespeare, why do we want to be getting involved in all these difficult matters? And so there has been a journey but it's been part of a wider organisational journey, of which the PhD has been part, where we think about our place in the world, we think about Shakespeare's place in the world, and we accept that we're not just here to glorify and celebrate him and his work but it's part of a wider contemporary discussion about what meaning we can take from his works and his life story, from how he has been used, and tell different stories today, and some of those will be difficult stories. I think we're not there yet, we are at the early stages of this journey organisationally, but there is a

> willingness and an openness that we need to have those conversations to maintain our relevance and to prove that to truly celebrate Shakespeare you've got to understand the whole, not just the parts you think you might like. So we are on a journey but the organisation is with us on that journey and the embedded nature of the collaborative PhD has been a big part of that.

That the benefits of such a partnership are understood throughout the institution is therefore crucial to its success.

The issue of engagement with 'difficult' stories that Taylor refers to here is also something that can be reflected on through the benefits of such a partnership. In addition to the ways in which discussions of potentially contentious issues are eased by the building of strong collegial relationships, the bringing together of the HE institution's academic expertise and the cultural institution's communicative expertise creates an ideal space in which to deflate that sense of 'difficulty' and create interpretation and messaging that can productively challenge out-dated ideas, such as the imperialistic ones noted here. The importance of this became increasingly clear as I began writing up my thesis during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, especially with the UK-specific context of challenging the ways in which British institutions continue to celebrate historical figures with dubious biographies. While the protests have prompted some change, the concept of decolonisation itself remains contested in media and society and is often invoked in order to make a point about 'cancel culture'. Contrary to the vehement protestations of right-wing media outlets who have a vested interest in the notion of the 'culture war', decolonisation is not about cancelling anything other than imperialist and racist ideas that are exclusory to a proportion of our society. To decolonise culture is to acknowledge the stories and perspectives that also exist alongside the ones that are established as history and knowledge. To decolonise Shakespeare would mean acknowledging the ways in which he was used to assert the superiority of British culture in the colonies and how that sense of inherent superiority lingers for the same reasons today and exacerbates the sense of marginalisation from British culture that many communities continue to experience. Following that acknowledgement, the work would generate opportunities for those who might not have engaged with Shakespeare previously to do so, and to encourage them to do so in their own way – to bring them into the interpretative conversation. To do so would be to enhance his value to a wider group of people.

The media attacks on the concept of decolonisation, however, rely on this reality, that it encompasses increase, sharing, and generation, remaining unexplained. And it is fair to say that it most often is unexplained. Just as the SBT shied away from naming the Amritsar massacre, cultural institutions that rely on ticket sales and public footfall shy away from

alienating visitors with 'difficult' topics, despite being the ideal centres for such explanations. This leaves a knowledge gap where the concept is widely understood in academic and some broader institutional circles but not by the general public, and that gap allows the media and other vested agents to 'fill' it with the notion of 'cancellation'; the sense that something that is valued, that has been associated with British identity and culture, is being taken away or destroyed by an 'anti-British' group of some kind. This is why cultural institutions must use their skills of explaining complex information, histories, and biographies in ways that are accessible to as many people as possible to bridge this gap and eliminate the possibilities for bad-faith actors to exploit it. With university partnerships providing the research, the background, and the support such institutions need, we might even hope to see the gap close one day.

As such, the SBT is ideally placed to translate such complex concepts as decolonisation for several reasons: because of its established communicative skills, because of Shakespeare's wide appeal to broad public audiences, and because Shakespeare's works offer opportunities for creative responses that can demonstrate the benefits of decolonisation in action. BCU's role in supporting this work, by supporting researchers like me, enables the SBT to take that crucial step back from itself and see the changes that are needed as well as tapping into the university's civic role by enabling it to help to enact change outside the academy.

The value of this partnership to both institutions is evidenced by the recent signing of a memorandum of understanding that ensures that the relationship is institutional and sustainable beyond the personal relationships that initiated it. Indeed, following the completion of my doctorate, BCU were awarded NCACE funding to enable the production of a series of reports that were outlined in consultation with SBT and would translate the academic recommendations of the doctorate into positive and achievable actions with clear objectives, methods, and timelines. The NCACE Festival of Cultural Knowledge Exchange (October 2022) presented a further opportunity to explore the work and the partnership that helped to support it, as well as presenting the opportunity to produce a short film about my research that introduces and explains the setting – Shakespeare's Birthplace – as well as the key objects under discussion. Another aspect of the partnership, as it was recorded and edited using BCU equipment and time by Professor Vanessa Jackson, is that the film can be added to the recording of the NCACE festival presentation and my open access doctoral thesis to emphasise, through its digital permanence, that the success and sustainability of this project results from the fact that it is built on the foundations of such a partnership.

An audio recording of the presentation I gave at the NCACE Festival of Cultural Knowledge Exchange in October 2022 is available zoomand the short film produced with Prof. Vanessa Jackson about the Trust and its Tagore collection is available here

(https://youtu.be/2uog9oi9n44) . My full doctoral thesis is available on the BCU open access repository here (https://www.open-access.bcu.ac.uk/cgi/facet/simple2?q=helen+hopkins&_action_search=Search&_action_search=Search&_order=bytitle&basic_srchtype=ALL&_satisfyall=ALL) .

Blog: https://ncace.ac.uk/2022/12/05/decolonising-the-shakespeare-birthplace-trusts-collections-as-an-inside-outsider-a-perspective-on-collaborative-research/

Report: https://ncace.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/NCACE-Micro-Commissions-Birmingham-City-University-and-Shakespeare-Birthplace-Trust.pdf

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