

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Brunel University London		
Unit of Assessment: 33 Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
Title of case study: Dismantling Racism in British Contemporary Dance		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015 to 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Royona Mitra	Reader in Dance & Performance Cultures	03/2013 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 - Present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Dr Mitra's scholarship on new interculturalism, race and the politics of power and representation has influenced UK's contemporary dance sector, by bringing into the public domain discussions about the field's predominant whiteness and structural racisms. Her research has impacted the artistic practices of the British-Bangladeshi dancer-choreographer Akram Khan, and made Akram Khan Company's funding policies address sectoral inequalities by committing to the mentoring and showcasing of works by emerging Black and Global Majority artists. Together with researchers from Coventry University and University of Sussex (Dr Simon Ellis and Dr Arabella Stanger), Dr Mitra has contributed to a fundamental change in organizational structures and policies at Independent Dance, a London based artist-led organization, who have used their research to develop an anti-racist vision. Dr Mitra's individual and collaborative research has also equipped artistic practices of white dance artists to dismantle whiteness, and empowered Global Majority dance artists to centre conversations of race and racism in their own practices.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

By theorising the dance-works of Akram Khan, a foundational British-Asian dancer-choreographer, through the lenses of new interculturalisms, critical race and gender theories, Dr Mitra's research has pioneered a significant reshaping of academic language on intercultural performance, advocating for the concept of 'new interculturalism' as antiracist and anti-colonial modes of artistic resistance.

Dr Mitra's (then, Senior Lecturer) monograph analyses the relationship between Akram Khan's complex identity-positions as a diasporic British-Bangladeshi man and his dance-works through this lens of 'new interculturalism'. She theorises his 'new interculturalism' through examining 7 key case studies from Khan's career, focusing on his ground-up minoritised subject-driven language and reality. Dr Mitra's research builds on existing critiques of 1980s western intercultural projects as white Euro-centric projects of cultural appropriations. Instead, she centres Khan's lived realities as the catalysing force behind his new interculturalism's complex, anti-colonial and anti-racist aesthetics and politics (Ref. 1).

In interviews (Ref. 2; Ref. 3), Dr Mitra (then, Senior Lecturer) curates 2 conversations with Khan through which he explicitly critiques the whiteness of contemporary dance training, dance-making and discourses, through his own lived reality in the industry. He goes on to make a case for how dance has become his resistive language to stand up against oppressive systems, normative expectations, people and ideologies. The same methodology is used in an interview

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with Steve Paxton, the US based dance artist to whom the form of contact improvisation is attributed, in order to examine Western-centric notions of choreographic touch through the prism of new interculturalism as an anti-racist politics and aesthetic. The interview focuses in part on dismantling the whiteness of contact improvisation through considering the form's colonising impact on Black and Global Majority dancers (Ref. 4). Together with Arabella Stanger (University of Sussex), Dr Mitra critiques the structural racisms at the heart of 2 incidents that took place in 2020 in the British dance and theatre sectors, where organisations (Bonnie Bird Choreography Fund and Equity) accused of racist structures and policies, failed to recognise and apologise for their roles in upholding white supremacist structures in their issued public statements (Ref. 5).

British Academy Small Grant Project 'Contemporary Dance and Whiteness' (May - December 2019)

This collaborative project with Dr Simon Ellis (Coventry University) and Dr Arabella Stanger (University of Sussex) undertook critical conversations and interviews with 3 administrators and co-directors of Independent Dance (ID), the project partner, and 8 of their associated artists. The team delivered an 'Anti-Racist Dance Practices' workshop alongside Dr Cristina Rosa from Roehampton University at ID in September 2019. In December 2019, Dr Mitra curated a public discussion 'Anti-Racist Contemporary Dance' at ID's Crossing Borders event, centring the works and voices of 4 Black and Global Majority dance artists and producers.

The project and its associated activities brought into the public domain the implicit and explicit ways in which racism operates in the British contemporary dance sector. It focused on the dominant white curriculum content that is pervasive to contemporary dance training, revealed how prejudices operate within dance studios, foregrounded the lived experiences of Black and Global Majority dancers, made visible the dominant whiteness of the field and its gate-keepers, and generated a much-needed conversation on the need to practice allyship amongst white dance artists and organisations.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)Publications:

- Ref 1.** Mitra, R (2015) *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. [10.1057/9781137393661](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137393661)
- Ref 2.** Mitra, R. (2017) 'Beyond Fixity: Akram Khan on the Politics of Dancing Heritages', in Morris, G. and Nicholas, L. (eds.) *Rethinking Dance History*. London: Routledge.
- Ref 3.** Mitra, R. (2017) 'Akram Khan on the Politics of Choreographing Touch', in Butterworth, J. and Wildschut, L. (eds.) *Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Ref 4.** Mitra, R (2018) 'Talking Politics of Contact Improvisation with Steve Paxton'. *Dance Research Journal*, 50.3. 6 – 18. [10.1017/S0149767718000335](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767718000335)
- Ref 5.** Mitra, R. and A, Stanger (2020) 'Antiracism in the UK's Contemporary Dance Sector in Times of Covid-19 (Part 1)' published on 'Contemporary Dance and Whiteness' website. <http://danceandwhiteness.coventry.ac.uk/blog/antiracism-in-the-uks-contemporary-dance-sector-in-times-of-covid-19-part-1/> on 6 April 2020.

Grant:

Royona Mitra (PI), Simon Ellis (CI), Arabella Stanger (CI) British Academy (SRG1819\190079), May 2019-December 2019, *British Contemporary Dance and Whiteness*, GBP7,905

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4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

British contemporary dance maintains a predominantly white field of practice that upholds white US-Europeanist aesthetics and ideologies. This is reflected at every dimension of the sector: leadership at leading contemporary dance venues, conservatoires and university dance departments; repertoire and curriculum content; choreographers and artists; critical reviewers of dance-works. The result is a perpetuation of a white-dominant culture and aesthetic that is responsible for racist silencing, erasures of knowledge-systems from outside the US-Eurocentric contexts and discriminations against Black and Global Majority dancers. Even so, the UK contemporary dance sector ignores its inherent structural racisms and inequalities through false diversity initiatives. Dr Mitra's research actively challenges this notion and has been used to:

- I. Influence explicit pollicisation of themes of the dance-works of **Akram Khan** and shape his company's policies
- II. Shape policies and practices of the London-based dance organisation, **Independent Dance**
- III. Empower **Global Majority British contemporary dance artists** to centre conversations around racist and colonial legacies in their practices
- IV. Enable **white British contemporary dance artists** to challenge institutions and practices

I. AKRAM KHAN

Dr Mitra's research has "given [Khan] a clear mandate for his own ethical position and practice" (E2). It has "underpinned his commitment to issues of social justice and representation, particularly... in relation to South Asian diaspora communities and their contemporary cultural practices and forms of participation" (E2). It has equipped Khan with the "critical language to articulate and situate race politics and critiques of empire and colonialism at the heart of [his] works thematically and aesthetically" (E1). Khan uses Dr Mitra's research in his final solo *XENOS* (2018) to "call out white-washed histories of World War 1 through placing at its centre the lives and testimonies of brown Indian colonial soldiers, who were erased from the archives" (E1). Through *XENOS*, he brought these lives into public memory and strengthened his "commitment to 'dancing the archive' of people of colour" (E2).

Khan also used "Mitra's unpacking of the interdependency between his biography and [his] dance-works" in his April 2019 television documentary for Channel 4, 'The Curryhouse Kids.' He articulated the experience of growing up in the explicitly racist environment of 70s/80s UK while witnessing the racism his father experienced from white customers at his Indian restaurant in Wimbledon (E1).

Dr Mitra's research "has undoubtedly led to an organisational re-evaluation" at Akram Khan Company (E2). The company is one of the most innovative dance companies globally and was, amongst others, involved in the creation of the London Olympic Games Opening Ceremony in 2012. Dr Mitra's research has influenced the organisation's decision to commit to "legacy projects" to "fund, mentor and showcase the works of emerging artists of colour" (E1) through "developing training programme" for them and curating the platform 'Portraits in Otherness' (2018) (E2).

In September 2020, Akram Khan Company curated a digital panel discussion on 'Otherness' titled 'Clouds of Witnesses', demonstrating Khan's explicit "commitment to questions of power, race and racism within the dance sector". Dr Mitra was invited to speak on this panel "alongside

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illustrious transnational panellists, African American primaballerina [sic] Misty Copeland, British-Muslim writer and poet Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, Indian cultural and performance studies scholar Rustom Bharucha and South-East Asian cultural activist Eddin Khoo". Due to her long-established histories with Akram Khan Company, Khan felt Dr Mitra was "the right conduit for connecting the company's artistic processes with the outside world" on this panel (E1).

II. INDEPENDENT DANCE (ID)

Dr Mitra et al's research project (British Academy Grant) for which ID, one of the UK's leading artist development organisations, was a project partner led the organisation to undertake an internal review of existing structures and policies on racial justice. After participating in the project, ID changed its focus regarding the curation of training programmes and recruitment of artists and made the conscious decision to centre Black and Global Majority dance artists. The co-director confirms that "ID's Board has committed to accelerating board development and to reflecting on its own lack of diversity. The maximum number of trustees will be increased formally at our next Annual General Meeting and potential new trustees are being invited to observe the January meeting." Furthermore, ID updated their "organisational policies, including an equity policy and an ethical fundraising policy" in 2020 (E3).

Using the research, ID has ringfenced financial resources (GBP5,000) for the development of anti-racist practices through 2020, feeding directly into their next business plan and decision-making frameworks to implement structural and creative changes. The funding is also expected to "support paying artists of colour for reflective critique of [ID] and structural/creative ways to address changes" (E3). Dr Mitra has been invited by ID to be an independent panel member for applications to their bursary scheme for an MA/MFA in Creative Practice (2021), which they deliver in partnership with Trinity Laban. The MA/MFAs curriculum content is also being reviewed with a commitment to diversify beyond its current Euro-US-centricism.

III. EMPOWERING GLOBAL MAJORITY CONTEMPORARY DANCE ARTISTS

Dr Mitra et al's research (British Academy Grant), has empowered Jane Chan, an independent dance artist of East Asian heritage who has performed internationally and nationally, "to centre conversations around racist and colonial legacies in UK contemporary dance" in their own professional affiliations for the sector as Artistic Quality Assessor of Arts Council England (E4).

Chan has previously felt her "voice, narrative and work are regularly underrepresented, at times denied systematically by institutes" (E4). Her works aim to steer against such erasures and "act as catalysts, to invite as many people to a wider conversation about identity, race, collective experience and multiculturalism" (E5). Since taking part in the research project, Chan has felt "energised and empowered to create and seek out coalitional spaces and artistic collaborations with other East Asian dancers in the UK. This led to the creation of *Double Bill* (2019) with artist Sung Im Her, presented at Chisenhale Dance Space in 2019 and Brunel Arts Centre in 2020" (E4).

Chan used Dr Mitra's research for a successful project grant application to the Arts Council in autumn 2020 to "create a platform for conversations, network support and galvanisation of the dance sector by amplifying voices of 20 independent artists of East and Southeast Asian heritage across Britain working towards an anti-racist sector" (E4). Chan has also felt "empowered to call out racism and structural inequalities against Orientalist stereotyping of East Asians in UK's dance industry, [...] speaking out on the additional barriers that dancers of

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African, Caribbean, East, Southeast, South Asian heritage and global majority face in the industry at organisations such as Sadler’s Wells” (E4).

IV. ENCOURAGING WHITE CONTEMPORARY DANCE ARTISTS TO CHALLENGE INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTICES

Dr Mitra et al’s research (British Academy Grant), has influenced white dance artists and critics to examine their own white privilege in the industry and change their practices. It has led to white contemporary dancers speaking out against the field’s racisms, challenging institutional practices and contesting purist and Euro-US-centric understandings of dance practices (E7; E8).

The research has made dance critics conscious of the white lens through which dance criticism takes place in the UK and changed the way in which they approach dance and dance criticism. They have since “engaged in conversations with Black dance artists and artists of colour before reviewing their dance-works” and set in motion talks with The Place, London’s contemporary dance training school which trains approximately 190 students each year, to recruit Black and Global Majority dance critics (E7).

As a result of the research, white dance artists and critics, have successfully pushed for structural change at Nottingham Contemporary, one of the largest contemporary art galleries in the UK that have provided approximately 138,000 people in the assessment period with learning programmes. The structural change includes advertising for 2 new board members of Black and Global Majority heritage, “a new internship and mentoring scheme for young people of the Black and Global Majority to gain professional experience in the cultural sector and access its networks”, and an anti-bias training day for all staff to take place every season. Furthermore, a review of Nottingham Contemporary staff demographic is being undertaken to “reveal the intersection with roles, salaries and budget allocations” amongst other initiatives (E8). Likewise, dance artists have sought out funding to embed unconscious bias training into their work and hold space in their work for an increase of diverse peoples (E6).

These narratives demonstrate the impacts of Dr Mitra’s scholarship on the UK contemporary dance sector and the vital role it plays in facilitating structural change, towards its antiracist futures.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

E1 Corroborating letter from Akram Khan, 5 October 2020

E2 Corroborating letter from Dramaturg at Akram Khan Company, 7 July 2020

E3 Corroborating letter from Independent Dance, 5 October 2020

E4 Corroborating letter from Jane Chan, 28 September 2020

E5 Jane Chan’s website, <http://www.chanjane.com/about>

E6 Corroborating letter from dance artist, May 2020

E7 Corroborating letter from dance critic, 7 July 2020

E8 Corroborating letter from dance artist, 13 October 2020