M4C Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA)

**Project Title**
Decolonisation, Dance and Curatorship: Interrogating situated colonial practices.

**LEAD INSTITUTION**

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<tr>
<th>Name of HEI institution</th>
<th>Coventry University</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lead regional city</td>
<td>Birmingham ☐</td>
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<td>Coventry ☒</td>
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<td>Leicester ☐</td>
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<td>Nottingham ☐</td>
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**PARTNER ORGANISATION**

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<tr>
<th>Name of organisation</th>
<th>The Bluecoat</th>
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<tr>
<td>URL for organisation</td>
<td><a href="https://www.thebluecoat.org.uk">https://www.thebluecoat.org.uk</a></td>
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**THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

This PhD project will examine the historical and geographical relevance of colonial histories in relation to dance and archival practices. This will be done by using The Bluecoat’s archive of 19th century migrating dance artists with the aim of exploring a multiplicity of influences on current dance practices. It examines through practice research, how dance contributes to the interrogation of the colonial history of archival practices in art spaces.

This collaboration meets the aims of both HEI and partner: the Bluecoat, Liverpool’s contemporary arts centre, to reflect on its colonial past and influences on archives. The project chimes well with a larger questioning in dance of its relationship to social justice and how practices and narratives of inclusion and diversity can be put into dialogue in envisioning new modes of production. In addition, the Bluecoat are concerned with ‘undoing’ and ‘liberation’ from a dominant colonial paradigm (Vázquez, 2021) and how dance has an important role to play in this.

African American artists are generally hidden or missing from archives yet nevertheless had an important role in creating musical theatre, particularly the dance we know today (Mayes & Whitfield, 2021). The Bluecoat archive is uniquely placed to redress this omission. It’s location in Liverpool, a port city that received an influx of people migrating in the 19th century, many from the United States, contributed to the significant evolution of musical theatre and dance. This is especially evident in the impact of the work of Master Juba who became well-known in the UK for his expressive rhythms on stage.

The student will show through practice research how the intersection between dance practice and archive practice led to ingrained norms. The student will engage in archival research online and in-person at the Bluecoat to provide a historical analysis of: a) dance practices, b) the organisation of archives. This method will look at moving and still image material, programme notes, exhibition details, papers, testimonials which will be the basis for choreography and workshop material.

The project will ask these research questions:

- What multiplicity of influences are there on dance practices such as ballet, tap, contemporary, live art etc? What is the impact of colonialism on these practices and how does this affect contemporary curatorship when influenced by colonialism at the time?
- How can dance practice and curatorship have a symbiotic relationship for the future?
- What can dance practice offer gallery spaces to rethink curatorship and addressing social justice?

**Methodology**

The methodology will foreground Practice Research (PR) and uses important adjuncts such as archival analysis and qualitative methods (e.g. interviews, focus groups, workshops).

Nelson (2013) suggests that PR is a valuable way of ‘knowing by doing’ and is a methodology employed in the creative arts. Arts practices enable the student to ask questions about effective preservation strategies for dance and the arts space through movement instead of writing. This
methodology challenges the student’s own practice and explores the research questions through the interstices of practice, discourse and theory. There will be opportunity for the researcher to co-create with local communities foregrounding the importance of Bluecoat visitors, dance artists and Bluecoat staff perspective in the research and co-design workshops and methods. It is envisaged that this research will culminate in an exhibition of archival materials and other found documentation including film footage and performances and present the work as performance as one exhibition/performance or a series of smaller events.

Benefit
C-DaRE and Bluecoat have not worked together before and this will benefit interdisciplinary and cross-institutional working. Studio space will be available at C-DaRE and Bluecoat for practice-based explorations through cross-site working which will benefit the project. C-DaRE has an excellent PGR community and research culture that the student will be part of. This practice research project will add to and enrich the existing practice research and archival expertise at C-DaRE. A dance practice research project is new for Bluecoat. C-DaRE has collaborated with international heritage institutions previously and bring this knowledge to the project.

Timetable of Research (by year)
1 - M4C activities; CU modules; induction at Bluecoat; literature review; methodology; ideas for practice research; plan qualitative activity and thesis.
2 - Qualitative data collection, detailed thesis plan, writing schedule; development of practice research and activities; conference contribution; M4C activities
3 - Data analysis; development of practice research and activities; drafting of a resource document aimed at guiding the future of curatorship; conference presentation (both part of broader training opportunities); M4C activities.
4 - Honing practice research; thesis full draft; delivery of practice research and curatorship document; thesis submission.

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE
Lead HEI Supervisor: Karen Wood
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