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## CHAPTER 11

### HIDDEN HISTORIES AND RADICAL READING LISTS: RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AT SOAS LIBRARY

Farzana Qureshi and Ludi Price

Struggle makes history. Struggle makes us. In struggle is our history, our language and our being. That struggle begins wherever we are . . . sleeping not to dream but dreaming to change the world.

—Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986)

SOAS Library is one of the United Kingdom’s five national research libraries, with an estimated 1.3 million volumes in its collection. The unique material that we house reflects the languages and cultures across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Apart from a vast collection of modern print books, the collections consist of rare books, manuscripts, maps, ephemera, paintings, palm leaf manuscripts, and films.

SOAS was established in 1916 as the School of Oriental Studies, and in 1938, it was expanded to include the African continent, thus becoming the School of Oriental and African Studies. In 2013, the institution formally changed its name to “SOAS, University of London.” This was partially in response to sensitivities around the term “Oriental,” although the acronym had been used in an unofficial capacity for many decades previously (SOAS, n.d.). SOAS’s historical roots have deeply entrenched colonial beginnings, and the school long welcomed British colonial administrators through its doors. It was termed the “School for Spies,” and Enoch Powell was an alumnus who studied Urdu there and held high ambitions to become the next viceroy of India. The school was built by the British state as an instrument to reinforce Britain’s political, commercial, and military presence in Asia and Africa. It served as an educational ground for administration, language, and customs to facilitate military officers, teachers, doctors, commercial managers, and missionaries who were undertaking imperial positions in Asian and African territories (Qureshi 2022; Brown 2016, 14).

The library itself was built to aid in the school's colonial ambitions, starting with a collection donated by the University of London that included the ex libris of Robert Morrison, the first missionary to China. The library's collections were centered on language-learning materials, and indigenous-language publications from the school's regions of study. In this way, the collection has grown to become a unique storehouse of works in hundreds of different languages from wide swathes of the globe—and as such, is now the United Kingdom's national research library for Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

The Decolonising SOAS Working Group was established in 2016 in response to strong student interest in decolonizing the school's curriculum. This was led by student sabbatical officers and the student-run Decolonising Our Minds Society, and it was embedded in a wider history of antiracist activity at SOAS.

SOAS Library's Decolonising Operations Group was carved out as a cluster group in 2019 to address the ongoing grassroots affairs of the library relating to the national decolonization dialogue. It was formed to challenge but, more importantly, to acknowledge our roots. It started with humble beginnings by devising terms of reference, which provided the group with a sense of direction. Themes explored included decolonizing metadata, working with local authors, and reaching out across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East for indigenous resources.

## **HIDDEN HISTORIES**

One of our longest-running and successful projects so far has been Hidden Histories, a seminar series that seeks to highlight stories from African, Caribbean, and Asian communities in the United Kingdom and beyond. This project brings to light a shared vision of decolonizing knowledge production and documents the unique voices and experiences of diasporas in Britain and across the world.

The concept behind Hidden Histories was inspired by a conversation between four passionate colleagues who were all connected to libraries, research, and learning. Our aim was to find a platform that would decenter the Anglo-American, Eurocentric vision of history and storytelling, and highlight instead the stories of communities and diasporas that rarely get heard. Amma Poku, Angelica Baschiera, Ludi Price, and Farzana Qureshi came together from different paths, but their work strongly interconnected to libraries and knowledge empowerment. We were keen to reflect on the library's role as a knowledge exchange hub.

We discussed ways in which we could make an active and empowering change as a cluster group of SOAS Library's Decolonisation Working Group (SDWG). Our aim was to inspire each other with our ideas, goals, and ambitions to make Hidden Histories visible and more mainstream to a wider audience and to give a voice to the voiceless.

The testimonies were shared in a space where we wanted both BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) and non-BAME colleagues to feel comfortable, share a dialogue, and feel free to ask questions within a non-challenging approach. Our vision was to create a forum for indigenous knowledge, led by indigenous communities.

From Black Iranians to the undocumented migrants of America, our work with Hidden Histories and underrepresented communities such as Blindians (Black African and Caribbean communities in mixed relationships with people of South Asian descent) and Chinese students (living overseas and using theater as a vehicle to reflect on belonging, missing home, and identity) reflects the way we challenge history and empower communities to seek the truth. And, most importantly, our shared webinar recordings enlighten communities to learn about hidden stories that can liberate our minds and restore faith in humanity.

The following sections give brief case studies of four of the eight events that we have held so far under the Hidden Histories umbrella. In order to give an idea of the scope of

Hidden Histories' remit and to give a guide for other librarians hoping to undertake similar projects, we have chosen to highlight case studies that featured as wide a variety of speaker backgrounds as possible and formats that were not strictly limited to sharing information via a traditional PowerPoint presentation.

### **PARTITION AND PEACE-BUILDING: RECLAIMING THE HISTORY OF BRITISH SOUTH ASIANS (NOVEMBER 2021)**

Activism mostly begins at home (Smith 2021, 222). Relaying personal stories creates a deeper understanding between organizations that hope to nurture hidden narratives and communities that can directly relate to testimonies openly documented.

This second event in the series was a moving and timely opportunity to share Partition stories from the Indian subcontinent. It also came at a significant moment, being held in 2021, the year before the impending 75th anniversary marking the independence of India and the creation of Pakistan.

The invited speakers used the opportunity to empower communities coming from various perspectives, enabling different unspoken narratives to surface, and to reflect on the cross-cultural map of ethnic and religious groups who were affected by the mass migrations during Partition, such as Parsees and Anglo-Indians.

Project Dastaan (story, tale) is a UK-based peace-building forum made up of filmmakers, journalists, writers, artists, and storytellers who each share a direct connection to Partition and the subcontinent. Their primary aim is to reconnect refugees to their original homeland via virtual reality (VR) technology. Using a headset, survivors can revisit the homes, villages, and towns that they were forced to leave behind in 1947.

This emotional journey was further described by the project's cofounder, Sparsh Ahuja, who encapsulated the feelings from a documentary video that featured refugees in an emotional telephone conversation, reuniting two families, one in India and the other in

Pakistan. This moment of memorialization struck a chord with many audience members as a sense of belonging to a community and reimagining lost homelands. The Zoom audience were invited to sense the repercussions of displacement and were faced with witnessing how, after seventy-five years, families and friends still could not forget the communities that had lived alongside each other. The session also explored the subject of trauma, grief, loss, and the aftermath of healing. These were stories that we wanted to expose and emotionally stir in our participants; that is, after the darkness of Partition, light and humanity can prevail.

The session also acted as a vehicle for those who have a British Asian presence and a geographical one in South Asia itself. As library colleagues, we were aware that a lot of what was being presented could trigger memories from the past for our audience participants. We were prepared that aftercare needed to be put in place. We learned that the chat function on the screen could enable anyone to comment freely and could be used to share the emotional legacies of empire. Each of our Hidden Histories was designed to contextualize and foster open dialogue for all participants.

Eventually, SOAS library went on to become one of the venues for Project Dastaan's global tour. The general public were able to watch a VR film entitled *Child of Empire*, a journey of the Partition which unfolds through the eyes of a seven-year-old child. This global tour of Project Dastaan included an exhibition display at the Library Wolfson gallery space for two months (September-October 2022), along with two dedicated evenings to showcase Project Dastaan's three diasporic short animation features relating to the various communities affected by the Partition.

Our next speakers were from South Asian Heritage Month (SAHM), a British initiative that formed in 2020 and runs from July 18 to August 17 each year. Inspired by the Black History Month movement, it actively seeks to engage South Asian identity with British

history and their shared interconnectedness. The organization's motto is to celebrate, commemorate, and educate (South Asian Heritage Month 2020).

As university library staff, we related to the educational struggles that SAHM was tackling, to ensure that their cultural heritage history would not be forgotten and to acknowledge the role that South Asians played in both world wars. We were also keen to support the democracy of knowledge, to view our Hidden Histories series as a platform to amplify the decolonization of the national curriculum. This was captured through Partition history toolkits and other related resources that SAHM was voluntarily distributing to educational institutions, such as secondary schools.

The peace-building work that SAHM contributed to during the talk reunited ethnic communities across India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, breaking down borders that were created by the Partition of the subcontinent and which emotionally disrupted religious and ethnic ties. The capacious nature of SAHM's work allows South Asian identity to be broadly celebrated through an official Partition commemoration day, uniting humanity over what has been described as the largest global mass migration in history.

### **SIYAH ZIBAST, BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL (JANUARY 2022)**

The Collective for Black Iranians were the third speakers in our series and the ones that drew our largest numbers of attendees. Up to 140 people signed up for the webinar, while the final number attending was close to that figure.

The Collective is a critical discourse for Iranian culture that stands side by side with its Black and African identity. Six Afro-Iranians from across the United States, Canada, and Europe formed the group in 2020 out of an urgency to be represented, heard, and understood. Their powerful platform resonates with many other Black storytelling struggles that focus on using peaceful interdisciplinary art to convey their message. This includes projecting myriad



ways in which the Collective creatively says the words “Black is Beautiful” in Persian: “*Siyah Zibast.*”

The group underlined ways in which they reach global audiences through media outlets, raising their voices as Black Afro-Iranians. Their work is designed to disrupt the racial bias in Iranian culture through storytelling, visual art, music, and film. This encourages the group to exemplify a greater understanding of their identity and history. Delving into childhood memories and experiences in Iran, the Collective can continue to pass on these stories to the next generation, while simultaneously enabling an audience to own these stories, as a way of distributing the knowledge transnationally (Baghoolizadeh and Kounkou-Hoveyda 2021).

Using a mix of animation, archive footage from Iranian media, and other strong visual representations, the webinar attendees were able to be part of a trailblazing conversation that included anti-Blackness, belonging, marginalization, and uncomfortable subjects like the history of slavery and its relation to colorism in Iran. It was also an opportunity to listen to stories that we may not have known existed.

During the event, the sense of interaction between the speakers and library colleagues was one of solidarity. “*Black is beautiful, Siyah Zibast*” was often repeated during the webinar and acted as an empowering chant between the Collective and our online audience. The Collective’s struggle reaffirms how the Iranian community can see and say that Blackness lives in Iranian identity and vice versa, a call to say that Black is beautiful (Kounkou-Hoveyda 2021).

**TRUE HEART THEATRE: GIVING VOICE TO LONDON’S CHINESE COMMUNITY THEATRE  
(FEBRUARY 2022)**

**[DESIGNER: PLEASE NOTE THE CHINESE LANGUAGE USED HERE AND RETAIN THIS FORMAT IN LAYOUT]**

True Heart Theatre 真心劇團 (*Zan1 sam1 kek6 tyun4*) is a British-based theater group that was created in 2006 to allow the voices of the Chinese diaspora in the United Kingdom to be told and heard. (As a group founded by and initially aimed at the Cantonese-speaking diaspora, the transliteration standard used here is the Jyutping Cantonese standard, as opposed to Pinyin Mandarin, which is the usual standard for transliterating Chinese.) This was done in an innovative way—by listening to audience members’ experiences and performing those experiences back to them in an improvised manner, in a type of performance known as “Playback Theatre.” This type of performance aims to give “voice and visibility to especially those most often overlooked and ignored,” while at the same time it “also acts as a vehicle for social change” (Fox 2007, 91–92). As a type of community-based art, Playback Theatre involves community collaboration and is performed in theaters across the world with audiences from all walks of life. Indeed, while True Heart Theatre was founded to give Chinese migrants in the United Kingdom a platform to express their feelings of homesickness, disjointedness, and isolation, the remit of the group has expanded to performing for and with audiences of diverse backgrounds, aspects that are reflected by the group’s members themselves.

As librarians, we felt it was important to highlight alternative methods of knowledge exchange and production that empower users themselves to be part of the production process, in meaningful and even visceral ways. Dramatic performance as a form of library outreach is not a new practice (see, for example, Slimon 2010), but we felt that the format of Playback Theatre would give a unique opportunity for audience participation and engagement. We were interested in True Heart Theatre because of their experience in working with migrant and minority ethnic communities.

True Heart Theatre—and Playback Theatre in general—allow audience members to share their personal experiences and have these played back to them—and the rest of the audience—in a manner that allows them to reengage in and recontextualize those experiences. This form of knowledge exchange has real meaning for the participant, but, as with oral performance, imparts knowledge to the rest of the audience and allows performers to internalize and interact with that knowledge on an intimate level, through playback. This highlights the diversities of truth and the power of storytelling, amplifying and validating audience experience by fostering a sense of togetherness. Any audience member who had had their experience “played back” would be invited to comment on the performance and to reflect on how it had enriched (or not!) their own perception of the experience by having the opportunity to view it through an outside lens.

Our concern was that, because of COVID-19 lockdowns, the interactive performance would have to be done online. This was a disappointment, as these types of performances are best suited to an intimate, in-person setting. Despite this, True Heart Theatre had already adapted their work to Zoom, and the event was successful. Because of the intimate nature of the performance, with participating audience members disclosing their personal experiences, possibly traumatic, it was important to consider ethical issues. Audience members were assured that they need not interact if they did not wish to, and they were free to remain anonymous. Unlike the other events in the Hidden Histories series, this one was not recorded.

While no traumatic or upsetting experiences were retold or relived, the event did allow us to consider that, in future similar events, it might be incumbent upon us to consider aftercare. While the format of Playback Theatre did allow participating members to provide feedback, and evaluate and reflect on the experience with performers, this may not always be the case with other formats of interactive storytelling, where participants may feel the need to decompress from or discuss traumatic or visceral responses to what they are seeing and

hearing. This is something we plan to account for in future events and in our everyday roles as librarians.

### **UNDOCUPOETS: A CONVERSATION AMONG UNDOCUMENTED POETS OF AMERICA (MAY 2022)**

The Hidden Histories event with the Undocupoets was our first foray into highlighting a multitude of communities and diasporas, through the experience of undocumented migrants. As librarians, we were inspired by the work of undocumented students to change the Library of Congress subject heading from the offensive and dehumanizing term “Illegal aliens” (Baron and Broadley 2019). In an effort to share the experiences of undocumented migrants in the United States, we sought out the Undocupoets, an organization whose mission is to promote “the work of poets who are currently or who were formerly undocumented in the United States and raise consciousness about the structural barriers they face in the literary community” (Undocupoets.org, n.d.). We were eager to learn how poetry could communicate and inform deep and traumatic experience and share this with our audience. Of course, poetry is an ancient and still-practiced method of information and knowledge exchange over generations, “utilised as a persuasive force, a historical record, a means of attack or reconciliation in times of conflict, and a medium for transmitting news and information” (Brinkhurst 2012, 244). And while poetry has obvious aesthetic value, it has always been regarded by indigenous or past populations as “a repository of historical knowledge” among communities that may regard history differently from the way in which Western paradigms perceive it, in a way that is “more personal than structural” (Guillorel and Hopkin 2017, 93). Having the Undocupoets and their fellows (all undocumented or previously undocumented Americans) give readings of their poetry was a way, we felt, in which we could harken back to this ancient form of dissemination to tell very modern personal (hi)stories that so often go unheard by the wider public.

Importantly, the event was not only a way to express the challenges that come with being labeled “illegal.” It was also a way for the poets to challenge and grapple with “the public expectation that they *must* write of this experience” (Lin 2022). The event was not merely to share experience through poetry, but to disrupt what we, as comfortable “non-illegal” persons, expect to be the concerns, struggles, and everyday realities of the undocumented. Such events are opportunities to humble ourselves and interrogate our own privilege, as well as to interrogate the ways in which we might privilege certain forms of “authoritative” knowledge sources over others. For example, we might well question whether the academic paper, the lecture slides, or the news report on the plight of undocumented migrants are to be valued more than the oft-unheard poetry and other artistic endeavors of the migrants themselves. This is perhaps an obvious point to make—but what the latter might lack in “objectivity,” accuracy (hopefully), and authoritativeness, it makes up for in terms of immediacy, empathy, and in the human capacity to want to relate to the lived experience of another.

Again, due to time zone differences and travel restrictions, the event took place over Zoom. The Undocupoets gave a background talk on their organization, their mission, and what brought them together. The fellows were then able to showcase their work by giving readings of their poetry. They were then able to discuss their work, and how it reflected their experiences through often harrowing events in their lives. Audience members were invited to comment and ask questions. Overall, the event was warm, moving, and had a deep sense of camaraderie, shared even between strangers. As with the True Heart Theatre, the intimacy afforded by the format—despite the “digital divide”—allowed everyone in the virtual room to learn through emotional resonance and not merely on an intellectual level.

As librarians, we see ourselves as facilitators of the sharing of knowledge far beyond the canon. We are not experts, and it is important that we learn and listen. Hidden Histories

has been invaluable in broadening our own horizons as much as those of its audience. Our speakers and panelists are given the floor and invited to use the time and space to share their experiences with audiences they might otherwise never reach.

## **DISPLAYS AND EXHIBITIONS**

As part of our library work and one that relates to visual representations of our collections, the librarians at SOAS have been creating material displays to amplify representations of people, races, and identities that fall under colonial rule. These displays are nascent, and there is much to still probe regarding how the space can be used to exploit our collections, and to understand how we represent history through a decolonized lens. The displays are designed to repatriate knowledge discourse and to take creative courage and inspiration in order to enable our audiences to think differently about communities and their histories. The displays have gained positive feedback, acting as agents to stir emotions both positive and negative. The material is designed to disrupt the norms of how history has been shaped by colonial legacies. Therefore, many of the displays are representations of voices and narratives told by the subjects themselves.

In November 2022, we curated the “Thinking Through Music” material display to tie in with the festival of the same name that was taking place at SOAS. The material selected for curation demonstrated the breadth of the collection and the non-Western canons pertaining to ethnomusicology. The display was designed as a way of putting a mirror to oneself, allowing audiences to see themselves in the works written by authors who themselves are the experiences that they are documenting. The works displayed focused on Black dance music in Peru, revolutionary music in Lebanon and Iran, and vinyl sleeve covers that visually recorded testimonies of music from a particular period in time. Documenting music through books, vinyl records, and CDs was designed to stimulate minds and interrogate how we view music through decolonization and diaspora. It was a space to

acknowledge global struggles, and how music can be used as a political vehicle to empower minority voices.

Thus far, we have also curated the “Activism in Hong Kong” display in the library, again featuring materials from within the collections. The highlight of this was our pro-democracy zines, created by those who were affected and participated in the activist movements in Hong Kong during the years from 2014 to 2020. As amateur or small-press publications, we felt these displays showcased voices that are not usually championed or amplified by libraries, particularly academic ones such as SOAS.

## **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK**

While we are still very much in the exploratory stages of our work in liberatory librarianship, there are exciting times ahead as we plan and begin to undertake new projects in our journey to decolonize the library. These include rolling out long-overdue content warnings for our more sensitive library and archival collections; updating outdated and offensive terminology in our catalog subject headings (and developing in-house ones) where we consider Library of Congress subject headings inadequate; and continuing our Hidden Histories series. We are also engaging with the student body at SOAS to further explore reading lists as a means of dismantling the Western canons of literature and readdressing the space and signage in our library through an inclusive lens.

While there is much work ahead of us, we look forward to these challenges and to sharing further developments with our colleagues across the world, as our global community seeks to learn (and share) what it means to create a truly liberatory library.

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