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Podcast transcript:

Kyra: Hi everyone, welcome back to the podcast. For this episode, we're in conversation with Dr Lucy Bond, based at the University of Westminster. In this episode, we discuss Lucy's academic journey and current role in higher education, to which she explains her focus on memory and trauma research and how she engages with these concepts on the "Trauma in American Modernity: The Nation and its Limits" module. We also explore the topic of decolonising Memory Studies and its connections to colonial legacies and historical recollections, particularly the imperialist aspects of the field and the need to disrupt Western binaries in memory practices. Additionally, Lucy shares how lecturers might begin to embrace decolonial praxis in the classroom.

So, I usually like to start things off with our guest just telling us a little bit about themselves, in their own words, so, where did you grow up and where are you currently?

Lucy: That's a nice easy one to start with. I grew up in a really small, really tiny village in Devon, and now I live in Crystal Palace, in South-East London.

Kyra: And how would you describe your upbringing in terms of how race was seen and felt in your household?

Lucy: In all honesty, this is something I've had quite a lot of time to reflect on, and it now makes me feel quite uncomfortable, in a good way, because it should. I think...like race was pretty much a non-topic in my household. My mum was a single parent who went through a pretty messy divorce, so I guess kind of...[indexes] of minoritisation were pretty much read through the lens of gender rather than race. And of course, I see now how kind of reflective of white privilege that was, but, at the time, I wasn't very reflexive about that kind of whiteness at all, and it all felt very, very naturalised. So, it just wasn't something we really spoke about.

Kyra: And, I guess, did that differ in any way from...kind of in the wider community that you were in? You said you grew up in a small town in Devon, and I guess was race kind of seen and felt there, or was it pretty much the same...?



Lucy: It was a very white place, and, growing up, there wasn't a single person of colour in the village I lived in, which was a very rural farming community and pretty conservative, both in a small-c and in a big-C way. I don't know exactly what racial politics that conservatism masked. I do know it was never a village I felt very at home in or particularly comfortable in, politically. It has a massive Leave vote in 2016. I'm not equating necessarily Leave with racism, but I think there [are] probably some quite problematic attitudes playing out under that surface. So, again, race wasn't a live discourse in terms of things were actively discussed, but when I look back now, I see it as...an explicitly racialised community, in the sense of its kind of total whiteness.

Kyra: So, what books and what shows did you kind of read and watch growing up, and, I guess, what were the kinds of representations that you were exposed to?

Lucy: If you'd asked me as a teenager, I'd have said I was really well-read – like I was a bit of a bookworm and kind of read anything that came to my disposal. But I suppose it was only when I got to university, where I studied Literature, that I realised how kind of British and... and probably English, to be honest, most of the texts that I'd been exposed to were. And I think there are kind of two reason for that: in part, because of the very canonical nature of English Literature, as it was taught at that time, again, a very British, very white canon that was being taught in schools and at A Level; but also because a lot of the reading I did I sort of took from my mum, who's also a massive bookworm, and, again, I think there was kind of a class politics and a racial politics encoded within that that I wasn't really aware of. So, I was reading kind of a lot of classical texts, but they weren't really exposing me to a breadth of representation or a diversity of voice. And I don't think I'd have got that at all, at the time. And maybe something similar is true in terms of TV. Yes, I watched all the kind of usual suspects that someone in the '90s would watch, like Friends and the X Files. I had a real soft spot for Neighbours [laughing], which now seems slightly embarrassing! But, looking back, I'm kind of like...I'm also struck by the whiteness of most of those shows, and a kind of unconscious bias in...in culture representation that, again, I wasn't particularly sensitive to at that point. And that's, you know, partly coming from a particular class and racial background, that those things were...a broader diversity of [texts] and shows was not something that I was exposed to, and therefore I was kind of very ignorant about the...the kind of...the limitedness of the cultural production that I was seeing, I think.

Kyra: At what point do you think you started to kind of look at your environment and the things that were surrounding you and what you were exposed to through a kind of critical lens?



Lucy: I think, by the time I went to 6th form, definitely. I moved away from my little village school and went to a much bigger 6th form college in Exeter, which is a much more kind of diverse environment and I think started to reveal some of the kind of blind-spots in my social and cultural environment that I'd experienced to that point.

I had a slightly weird time in secondary school, in part because I was bullied, and in part because I was quite bright, and this meant that I was often sort of taken out of class and taught on a one-to-one basis by teachers, which, again, was a real privilege, but it kept me in a kind of strange bubble, and it was only in getting into a much bigger, much more diverse environment that I realised quite how delimited that bubble was.

So, college was really, really good to me, and by the time I got to university, I was sort of much more...alert to, and I guess angry about, systems of privilege and minoritisation and the kind of behaviours that reinforce those. This was in part because the university, again, was a more diverse environment, racially, but it was also because, for the first time, I think I felt kind of exposed to...to systems of exclusion, in that I was a state school child at a majority private school university, and I felt on the receiving end of those kind of judgements and... "exclusion" is probably too strong, but a sense that I didn't quite fit, for a long time, the first couple of years of university, and that sense of kind of power imbalances. [And feeling that] through my own lived experience, albeit still from a kind of position of privilege, really kind of I think woke me up a lot more to a broader political understanding of kind of how systems and spaces and behaviours reinforce particular forms of inequality.

Kyra: I mean, can you explain to us kind of your role in academia today and I guess your journey following on from where you've just finished off into higher education?

Lucy: Yeah, of course. I'd say I've got a number of roles in academia today. So, I'm a course leader for both the BA English Literature and our new BA in Culture, Environment & Social Change – I can never quite get that right [laughing]. And I'm also the Co-Director for Learning & Teaching in the School of Humanities and the Co-EDI Lead for the School as well.

And I think one of the things that's been kind of most powerful for me over the past few years has been working with students and colleagues on decolonising and diversifying the curriculum. I'm kind of constantly amazed by our students, who are so much more alert and so much more attuned to those structures of privilege that we mentioned earlier than I certainly was.



And I guess my journey into higher education was a fairly orthodox one. I completed my BA, and I worked as a researcher for a journalist for a couple of years, and then I did an MA in Cultural Memory, and then a PhD. I guess perhaps the only sort of slightly unusual transition was to move my disciplinary focus as I became kind of more politicised and more alert to inequalities, I kind of moved away from Literature a bit towards a more kind of...a political approach to memory and to trauma.

Kyra: So, when did you start to really kind of, yeah, focus in on memory and trauma? Were those concepts that you were introduced to during your BA?

Lucy: No, not at all [laughing]! My BA was really, really orthodox in terms of the study of English literature. So, it was very canonical, didn't branch out very much beyond that. I've kind of got two answers as to like why memory and trauma, or how I got there. The first is more about my kind of own personal and political development. So, I'd just turned 18 when 9/11 happened and it was the first kind of major political event that felt really personal to me, or in which I felt kind of personally invested. I was really angry about the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and spent a lot of time campaigning against them when I was at university. And when I graduated, I worked for a journalist who was tracking people who had been rendered as part of the war on terror, so had been kidnapped by the US and exported to countries where regimes of torture were upheld. That work kind of really got to me, and I wanted to take it further, and I wanted to kind of understand a bit more about the sort of hegemonic politics that contributed to these kinds of policies. So, both my MA dissertation and my PhD examine the kind of politics of memory after 9/11 and the way in which the Bush Administration mobilised this really kind of rampant form of racialised nationalism to "justify" – and I say that very strongly in inverted commas – to "justify" their kind of practices under the war on terror. So, that's the kind of personal political lens, I guess...

But more generally, I think the thing that interested me about memory and trauma is the way they provide a different way of kind of interrogating unequal power structures and... both thinking through how some lives are framed as grievable and other lives are framed as...as almost less than human, in some ways, in kind of contemporary culture. And maybe we can say a bit more later about the kind of work that both of these fields have to do in terms of diversifying and decolonising their focus because they remain very white and very Western centric, and there's certainly a lot of work to do, but I think there's something really important at their core about how they make minoritized stories, or how they make minoritized experiences visible, and how they can challenge hegemonic readings of both the past and the present, and it's that that kind of really speaks to me.



Kyra: Thank you. And, I mean, like you mentioned, you're also teaching these concepts in a specific module. What are some of the ways that you engage with them on this kind of "Trauma in American Modernity: the Nation and its Limits" ...?

Lucy: So, both that module and the other module that I teach, which is 'Making Memory', ask students to kind of explore questions of inclusion and exclusion. So, kind of pedagogically, in terms of constructing curricula, I'm very concerned about including a diversity of voices, but actually, one of the most interesting forms of inclusion that I've found in teaching these modules is how much the students themselves are able to engage directly with the seminar material. I'm always really impressed by how they use the texts to reflect on their own lived experiences. Sometimes, this can be quite challenging as the texts and sites we look at tend to contain disturbing events, from racial violence to sexual abuse, and I'm very aware these could potentially be triggering, so one of the things I'm most concerned with is ensuring that their seminar room is a safe space, where students feel free to contribute or not, depending on how they feel in that moment. And I suppose, actually, one of the aspects of the modules that I found most surprising is how the kind of theoretical texts we look at can be useful in helping students to frame and make sense of their own lived experience, and it's really important to me that these modules resonate directly with the world around us, rather than being just kind of abstract explorations of history, if that makes sense.

Kyra: So, I guess just reflecting back on your journey in higher education so far, do you think your opinion or your perception of the university has changed kind of drastically now, as a staff member?

Lucy: Yeah [laughing]! 100%. It's changed enormously. It's changed in...in different ways, I suppose, both in terms of how I relate to Westminster as a particular institution but also in terms of how I understand the higher education sector as a whole. One of the things that really struck me when I started at Westminster was its kind of long history of widening participation. So, the polytechnic was established in 1838, with a kind of remit to provide access to education for all, and, today, the university celebrates itself a lot for being one of the most diverse universities in the country, which is great, but I suppose, rather than taking that status as a given, I've been increasingly aware that it's not enough to just be proud of that history and expect it to do the work of kind of widening participation today, or closing awarding gaps, or decolonising the curriculum – any of those things. I'm really aware, increasingly, how much this is proper work that we all have to do, as teachers and researchers, and that we have to accept it as being kind of continually ongoing.



So I'm uneasy, I think, about initiatives, and particularly those that are driven by metrics and external structures like the TEF that seem to try to provide a kind of quick solution to difficult questions, these kind of questions that should unsettle us and kind of provoke a more systemic thinking of how the structures of universities operate.

I'm also really aware that there's a problem of representation and that the staff base, particularly at higher levels, is very white, and that needs to change, and pretty male as well, and that needs to change. If we're asking students to kind of invest in this institution, it has to be an institution that not only speaks to them but also reflects them as well, and I don't think we're there yet.

But I guess, more generally, I'm really aware of the kind of pernicious effects of the massification and the marketisation of higher education, and the way in which, particularly as a Humanities scholar, that prioritising certain kinds of knowledge, particularly STEM subjects, and I think that means that the subjects that might be best placed to interrogate power structures and kind of provide some radical approaches to pedagogy, subjects in the Arts, the Humanities, and Social Sciences, are now really vulnerable of being, you know, completely cut in many places, gutted in others, and uninvested in in more places. And so, I think there's a real need to kind of re-invest in those subject areas, and to reframe universities not as places for profit, but, once again, as kind of places for learning and potentially [for social] change. So, I think not doing that, thinking about them purely as places for profit, makes it so much harder for staff to kind of carry out the kind of interventions that are necessary for authentic and for radical EDI work. And, you know, we see time and time again how the kind of burden of labour, in terms of time and energy and emotion, is pushed back upon particular groups or individuals, often those who already suffer most from the effects of marginalisation, and that's not a sustainable system and that's not an ethical system. And I guess, yeah, the more I'm in HE, the longer I'm in HE, the more I see those kind of systemic problems generating issues on a kind of institutional level but across the sector as well.

Kyra: And is there anything you wish you knew as a student that you know now?

Lucy: [Laughing] Almost everything! I wish I'd been a little bit more reflexive in myself, perhaps a lot more reflexive about my own positionality and my own privilege, and I wish I'd perhaps been a bit braver in speaking up to the institution and the problems that I saw there. But if I could have a crystal ball, I'd kind of...I'd really like to know how higher education would change... Like, when I started at university, tuition fees had just been introduced, although at a much, much lower level than they are now, and I don't think...even when I was doing my PhD, I don't think I was alert to the kind of dangers of neoliberalisation



and quite what that would do...what this wonderful government would do, over 30 years of Conservative rule, to higher education. I'm not sure I know what me knowing that would have done [laughing]. I don't know what I'd have done to help or change the situation or make a difference. But I'd have liked to have been more perceptive about the kind of structures of HE beyond my own student experience. I think that would have been really instructive in terms of thinking about education holistically rather than just kind of personally.

Kyra: And is there anything that you think you're still learning? And that could mean anything [laughing]...

Lucy: Anything and everything...?! I think...I think, as I said earlier, our students have a vocabulary and a sensitivity towards race, and other protected characteristics, that...that blows me away, and I learn so much from them every time I kind of step into the classroom. And it's been really useful to immerse myself a bit more in the discourse around EDI and the practice of EDI, and while it's imperfect, and while lots of its language is problematic, and while lots of different approaches are contested, I think just being aware of my own blind-spots and making me more reflexive about unconscious bias and privilege is really, really invaluable. And one of the things that working with SETI and talking to colleagues has made me see is how important it is to let yourself be challenged, about and through your teaching, and about and through your research, which isn't always easy. You know, even you think you're open to it, it still kind of...makes you defensive from time to time. But kind of just continuing to teach or to work in the same way is not...again, is not a sustainable thing to do, and it's not the right thing to do [in] such a volatile, polarised world, in a time of multiple different crises in multiple different areas, and I think we've got to be alert to that, and ready to change in response to that, and just continually kind of open to dialogue and learning and thinking.

Kyra: Absolutely. Yeah, because I suppose...I mean, especially when you're trying to kind of push social justice work within this institution, like there is a lot of unlearning that needs to be done as well, so yeah, it does mean kind of stepping back and allowing people to kind of give your feedback or criticism, and just learning how to kind of move forward with it.

Lucy: Yeah. I think "unlearning" is perhaps...maybe even more important than "learning", although those two things are [synonymous], right? But there's so much undoing that needs to happen before we can rebuild a more kind of...egalitarian, democratic, and inclusive space. That can't be done overnight, and it can't be done without fundamentally deconstructing some of the underpinnings and pre-conceptions of our disciplines of how we



learn and what we learn and the kind of managerial structures of the university as well. That's...that's a lot of work [...].

Kyra: So, I wanted to dedicate some time to discussing how we kind of interrogate Memory Studies for its kind of adherence to colonial legacies and colonial recollections of history. Obviously, this is a major topic that we might not be able to completely unpack [laughing] today and get to the bottom of, but I would love to hear your thoughts on this, as, you know, it links really closely to some of the work and thinking you've been doing for a number of years now. So, in what ways is the study and teaching of memory and trauma still kind of imperialist?

Lucy: It's interesting because, in some ways, Memory Studies was set up to oppose kind of hegemonic readings of history and to open the cracks of historical narratives to voices that had been...invisibilised in one way or another. But, having said that, both Memory and Trauma Studies were grounded in really Western-centric origins. They came out of a number of kind of late 20th century developments, particularly the need to interrogate legacies of the Holocaust but also rethinking national boundaries and national histories in the wake of the Cold War. And that meant that the kind of early focus of these disciplines was predominantly Euro-American and that the content of early sort of investigations in Memory Studies really valorised and prioritised white Western suffering and kind of very much marginalised...the traumas of other nations and other cultures, particularly those in the Global South.

But, beyond that kind of content, or that delimitation of content, there's a kind of wider epistemological issue, which is that most models of trauma and memory, or those at least that are most dominant, tend to be those that are native to the Global North, and that means they're not always appropriate to the settings upon which they are applied. So, for example, it's often said that the practices of humanitarian workers following the Boxing Day tsunami were culturally inappropriate in Sri Lanka and in Thailand because they revolved around Western centric approaches to grief and trauma that were sort of actively damaging to communities in that setting. So, there's a lot of work to be done, both to broaden the frames of Memory and Trauma Studies to incorporate a broader range of cultural and historical experiences, and to making sure that we resist a kind of colonial approach to knowledge by imposing inappropriate models or paradigms on situations that they really aren't right for or don't fit.

Kyra: So, are there any kind of memory practices or kind of methods out there that are kind of created in ways that actually interrupt or reject kind of those Euro-American, Western kind of binaries, such as like male/female modern/traditional, man/nature, black/white?



Lucy: That's a really good question, and what I'd say is they're emerging. They've taken a long time to emerge because there's been quite an orthodox approach to commemoration that has been disseminated from Europe and America, as I say, particularly in the wake of the Holocaust, that's become a kind of global paradigm for memory work. And it's only now that more grassroots' approaches and more diverse approaches are becoming visible that I think the kind of orthodoxy of those original models is beginning to break up a little bit or beginning to be called into question.

But there's still loads of work to do here. In her really important book, 'In the Wake', Christina Sharp, who's an African-American writer, argues that, in order to think about or to commemorate structural injustice, we need to completely rethink the ways in which we approach memory work because kind of orthodox memory work tends to assume that the focus of commemoration is...is discrete, that it's a kind of single person or a single event or a single experience that's temporally or spatially bounded, and then, therefore, can be sort of captured in a particular site or in a particular image. But, if you're talking about systemic injustice, that's not the case, and there's no neat way of encapsulating centuries of racialised or gendered dispossessions. So, the ways in which we think those framings need to be pushed and interrogated a lot more, I think.

And it's also true of issues like climate change and environmental destruction. Scholar, Rob Nixon, talks about "slow violence" and asks how can we remember disasters that are ongoing and that kind of [star] no one – so atrocities such as global warming and toxic drift that take place over a long period of time and vast expanses of space, and that are often invisible to the naked eye. And that's a kind of...a real problem that I'm not sure I have an answer to, except that I think the most affecting memory work I've seen is memory work that asks the visitor, or the reader or the audience, to reflect on their own kind of blind-spots and pre-conceptions, whether that's by kind of engaging in dialogue with other people or being taken to spaces that you wouldn't normally encounter. I think that's a really powerful way of challenging pre-conceptions and challenging binaries.

And kind of, as a last point – and I'm running on a bit – if I think about the kind of...the most powerful museums and memorials I've seen, they're those that can think intersectionally. So, they don't just focus on one event, or one cause and one event; they're able to link, across sectors and across spheres, different forms of injustice or different forms of trauma and loss, which isn't easy, particularly with kind of...when you're trying to deal with the challenge of communicating that to a general audience. I mentioned this when I spoke to you the other day: I was particularly blown away by a place called the TEP Center in New Orleans, which is located in one of the first schools to desegregate in the American South, and it's in fact run by one of the first four black children to attend that school, so she's really



taking the legacies of her past experience and applying them. And it's a really, really extraordinary place. It tells the story of New Orleans from the perspective of the Lower 9th Ward, which is a majority African-American community that was almost completely devastated by Katrina, and what it does... I don't know how it does it, but what it does, really compellingly, is to weave together the histories of colonialism, capitalism, and white state power, and show how that, as a combination, a toxic combination, has disenfranchised this [area] of the city, economically and politically and culturally and environmentally, over 350 years, and they do this using just photography and very, very small little placards of written narrative, and it's such a clever piece of work and it really does make visible how structural racism impacts lives at the level of communities and the level of individuals. And it's also kind of attached to a public housing initiative for low-income residents over 55. It also contains an anti-racism educational centre. And so, it combines the kind of heritage work with active community service and with contemporary activism, and it brings all of these things together just in one building. So, that kind of work I think is extraordinary. It's quite unique but, yeah, if you can...if you can work to make visitors sort of reflect on their own experiences, to think intersectionally, and to combine heritage work and activism work, I think there's something really powerful there in terms of challenging the binaries that you mention.

Kyra: Absolutely. Thank you. So, what do you think are the innovations or interventions that are still needed to really recognise and integrate non-Western memory cultures, and their study, into kind of core Memory Studies?

Lucy: I think there's a real danger of complacency, and I think there's a real danger of taking interventions from the core and applying them to the periphery of Memory Studies, taking [? On] the Global North and imposing them upon scenarios in the Global South. And I say this in part because one of the most kind of interesting interventions in Memory Studies in recent years has been what is often called the transcultural term, and it comes out of the work of people like Michael Rothberg, who is a brilliant scholar. He argues that we shouldn't see memory as kind of a zero sum, or as limited, but we should see it instead as kind of dialogic. So he thinks that commemorating Western atrocities like the Holocaust and 9/11 shouldn't exclude, or preclude, the recognition of non-Western memories of colonialism and genocide and slavery. Rather, he argues that the paradigms established by Western work might provide a way of making previously marginalised histories visible. I think it's an interesting idea [and it's become] kind of taken up as almost an unquestioned practice now, like multidirectional memory, as he calls it, is now very much kind of underpinning a lot of work in Memory Studies, and this assumption that, yeah, this is the way forward, this is the way to diversify and to broaden our frames. My hesitation is that, as I said earlier, I'm wary of this tendency to use Western epistemologies and practices to address non-Western trauma and suffering. I'm worried that becomes kind of culturally appropriative and that it's, again, a kind of outsider perspective imposed on a situation that it's not necessarily relevant



to. So, I guess, in answer to your question, what I would argue for is far more engagement with the work of scholars and practitioners from the Global South, both in terms of broadening the frames, the contextual frames, of memory work, but also enabling that memory work to impact on what we do in the Global North. So, opening up more spaces of critique in Western memory culture as well, spaces that don't just celebrate, for example, Britain's role in the abolition of the slave trade but acknowledge its fundamental responsibility for establishing it, spaces that, you know, not only critique empire and an imperial practice but acknowledge the ongoing violent legacies of colonialism, and spaces that fundamentally allow for those who've been affected by Western violence to speak of their experiences, past and present. I think there needs to be far more dialogue between memory cultures and scholars in the Global North and the Global South, and it's not just about making room for marginalised histories; it's about also allowing our histories to be challenged and changed in that process.

Kyra: So, I guess, just linking that back to pedagogy and how that manifests in the classroom, what do you think lecturers can do to kind of begin to like decolonise their pedagogy and practice?

Lucy: Some of it, again, is about listening, I think. I think that's absolutely fundamental, and, again, that kind of openness and reflexivity. But it's also about engaging with the resources that are all around us – like those created by SETI, the Anti-Racist Toolkit, this podcast, all the seminars and events. The work of decolonising isn't easy, and, as you said earlier, it means unlearning before we can relearn, and sometimes you're unlearning assumptions that have underpinned disciplines for decades or even centuries. I think we need to make use of everything that's around us. We need to understand this work is really vital if universities are to become more inclusive spaces and are to contribute to a more inclusive society. So, again, it's about challenging biases and blind-spots. It's about questioning preconceptions and the gaps and absences that are in the curriculum. It's about creating inclusive assessments that don't privilege particular traditions of thinking and writing. And I guess – this sounds really obvious, but most importantly, working with students and listening to students about what they need and what they want to see on their modules and on their courses.

Kyra: Thank you. So, unfortunately, we're coming to the end of our talk, but as a question I like to finish up on, what is something you'd like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years? I feel like some of the points in your last answer like...should also be a part of this list [laughing].



Lucy: Yeah. Oh, I've got a wish-list if that's alright [laughing]! [I don't really have just one thing] but I guess a lot, like I'd like to see more women and people of colour in senior positions, and I'd like to see the kind of skills taught by non-STEM subjects given their proper values, given their proper kind of weighting as practices that can radically critique and maybe even change society. I'd like to see EDI work kind of embedded in every aspect of university life, and I guess, most importantly, for that kind of embedding to be a truly meaningful attempt to decolonise and decarbonise and democratise ways of thinking and learning, so not in relation to government metrics or any of that kind of nonsense. And, yeah, I'd like to see staff and students kind of working more closely together I think, and listening to one another, learning from one another, and being open to one another.

Kyra: Me too! Lucy, I cannot thank you enough for joining me on this podcast today. It's been so nice to have you here as a guest and to learn a bit more about your background and how you came into higher education, but also like your reflections on Memory and Trauma as a kind of discipline – it's been really interesting. Thank you so much.

Lucy: Thank you so much. It's been an absolute pleasure talking to you.

Kyra: To find out more information, access our tools, or get in touch, visit us at blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj.