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Teaching Empire and War: Animating marginalised histories in the classroom

Introduction

How can we teach ‘forgotten’ histories of war and empire in the classroom, responding to urgent needs to ‘decolonize’ the curriculum and pedagogic practice? As social and cultural historians of colonial war experiences – one of us specialising in the First World War, the other in the Second – we had come to realise the importance of our scholarship not only in broadening the framework for research on global conflict but also in forging new pedagogical approaches. We had embarked upon our research projects in the midst of the First World War centenary between 2014 and 2018, where the sheer scale of engagement on multiple levels and in multiple forms – television programmes, social media, video games and online portals – left little time to reflect on whether research projects and initiatives to uncover global histories had successfully made inroads to deepen public understanding of race and empire during the conflict.¹ Had the stories of Black, Asian and other racialised people been more ‘assiduously pursued’, as the Imperial War Museum’s *Whose Remembrance?* Project asked?² Had these slipped into the ‘celebration’ against which Santanu Das had cautioned?³ Had we been able to get to stories that sufficiently included greater attention to the minutiae of history in all its asymmetries and messiness, as well as to moral and cultural complexities?⁴ There were tensions in the instrumentalisation of combatant service over that of non-combatants, and of how participation in past wars was made to count in the present. The centenary was, after all, a memory-making project that took place against the background of Brexit, the Windrush Scandal, Black Lives Matter, and racist and xenophobic discourses around migration.

We were also teachers of history in UK universities employed at this time on various temporary and precarious contracts. In our classrooms, with our peers, in our departments, we were engaged in ongoing discussions about what ‘decolonizing’ meant for us in teaching practice and curricula design, which was often constrained by what we had been assigned to or inherited.⁵ We were keen to establish an understanding of the past where people of colour (a shorthand here which requires disaggregation) were represented as actors of historical significance. We also sought to explore the network of connections forged by imperial rule and other geographies of power in order to navigate their post-imperial afterlives. With the release of the RHS report on Race and Ethnicity in 2018, the overwhelming whiteness of our discipline was foregrounded as well as the consequences of this analysis for the working and learning environments in which history was taught.⁶ We started reflecting on what an anti-racist, feminist pedagogy and classroom might look like, and where and how we could practise it.⁷ With the overwhelming demonstration for the need for the academic pipeline to be repaired as part of the toolkit of dismantling white dominance, our engagement in ‘widening participation’ activities were also at the forefront of our minds: work with schools and the curriculum therefore seemed essential.

Heritage and historical memory profoundly influence understandings of self and belonging, especially in the classroom, with the impact of one’s absence from this story so powerfully communicated by the poet and theorist Adrienne Rich.

When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. Yet you know that you exist and others like you, that this is a game with mirrors.⁸

We knew from the work of the *WWI in the Classroom* project, which ran from 2013 to 2014, that many secondary school-level History and English teachers struggled with teaching

colonial experiences of the world wars.⁹ This stemmed from both ‘the continued inability (or refusal) to confront a history of imperial exploitation and racial hierarchy’, but also the lack of familiarity with source material pertaining to colonial experience.¹⁰ While the activities of the First World War have produced many more resources to turn to for support, the atomistic nature of much of the work being done and its digital dissemination makes it difficult and time-consuming to bring together all available material, never mind reviewing it with a critical eye. If this was the case, then black students and students of colour were not seeing themselves in the classroom; they were not being shown how the lives of their ancestors had historically mattered or how they had been made to not matter. Furthermore, students, regardless of their ethnicity, were consuming a history of the world wars which did not engage critically with concepts of race, racialisation and colonialism.

It was in these currents and slipstreams that we applied for funding to run a project, *Teaching Empire and War*, during the summer of 2019. The project aimed to demonstrate a more global and ‘messy’ understanding of the role of empire in the First and Second World Wars and their commemoration, an opportunity to tie together syllabus strands on migration, empires and peoples with those on conflicts and tensions. We ended up with a reasonably-sized classroom of around 12 students aged 15-17 in roughly equal numbers from two London schools, who attended on and off across our sessions. The students were predominantly women (like us) and came from a cross-section of ethnic, class and national backgrounds: some were first-generation immigrants to the UK, others had longer migration stories. This was a classroom where being white was in the minority.¹¹ The students were accompanied by one teacher from each school. Teachers were invited to participate in the session as learners, rather than chaperones or support staff, which we will discuss in fuller detail. The sessions were chronologically ordered: moving from the

First and Second World Wars to the commemoration of the conflicts, not to create a teleological thrust towards the present but to provide a loose organising frame.

Giving students the opportunity to have hands-on contact with archival material was fundamental to this project – a way of getting straight to the heart of colonial experiences in these wars and exploring the traces that remain. Rather than mediating these lives and voices through the historiography, we wanted to give students an opportunity to play and experiment with their own interpretations of sources. In each session we shifted our subject focus. The first, ‘Men at War’, explored the experiences of colonial troops and their service away from home. The second looked at colonial women’s service in its multiple forms, from Una Marson’s work at the BBC to wartime writing from the Indian home front. In our third session, we explored the role of memorials in colonial commemoration and through creative modes like fictional writing and artistic media. Each session, in turn, had three activities, two based on critical inquiry into various genres of source material and a final activity which invited students to engage imaginatively with what they had discussed with us.¹² Following the workshops and feedback from teachers and students, we produced a digital resource pack for teachers, with lesson plans, archival source material and signposting to further resources.

Our article reflects critically on this exercise of pedagogic experimentation at a politically significant moment. The Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 in particular has galvanised institutional and disciplinary soul searching regarding exclusionary practices, anti-racist teaching approaches and curriculum transformation. What light can our project, then, cast on these important aspects of knowledge production and how might these be scaled up? To address this question, we are reversing the chronology of our workshop structure and starting where we ended – with the students’ creative responses to the workshops. In doing

so, we aim to foreground student outputs as key factors in the co-constitution of knowledge about marginalised histories, and seek to evaluate our methodological approach to teaching through their findings.

Using student creativity as a tool for generating deeper historical understanding

A poem, a short story and artwork – these responses were generated by creative design processes embedded into our workshops, where students had the freedom to ‘play’ with historical material.¹³ The creative responses were not prescribed as an extrinsic motivational factor, i.e. as a homework assignment that needed to be completed, but as optional. Furthermore, they explicitly drew upon empathy as an *intrinsic* motivational factor for the purposes of creativity.¹⁴ Students were free to imagine themselves on the battlefield in Mesopotamia in the First World War, for example, or as a female nurse in the colonies during the Second World War, or could think of new ways of representing memory and forgetting. There were few rules. These three responses focused on battlefield experience and war remembrance, and also revealed an understanding of the two world wars as the sites where other types of struggles – racial or gendered ones, for example – were being articulated. The poem and short story were read out loud, and the artwork displayed by its creator to everyone for discussion, in a continuation of our practice of sharing textual and visual material with one another in the classroom.

The first contribution, entitled simply ‘A short story’, shows the influence of First World War literature teaching in schools, as the familiar tropes of trench experience, male friendships, longing for loved ones, the untimeliness of death and the transcendent beauty of the natural world are focused on. The student writes:

The fear dissipates into the water. As I begin to float my body shrivels like a bud, my limbs hang heavy with anticipation. My blood flows thickly like a fountain spreading onto the contaminated mud. My brothers cradle me, each of us bathing in my crimson blood. They become contaminated with grief, but I focus on the silver light. The sinful sounds disappear into the surroundings as I'm captivated by the pure essence. The sky lay clear, the moon hung like a luminous pearl calling me home. I stare at the moon with content.

The highly stylised story generates an immersive, surreal dreamscape for the reader, through which the suffering male body in wartime is communicated. Although not explicitly evoking colonial experiences, it uses rhetorical devices discussed in the workshops – writing in the present tense and the effects that this may generate on the reader, nature and its connections with and separations from the human, the evocative force of similes and metaphors – to show how literary writing can re-imagine historical events to generate a sense of emotional immediacy. The use of prose creative writing here lends primacy to the subjectivity of war experience, as male comradeship is foregrounded through a gesture of maternal affection – ‘my brothers cradle me’. The student writer here is not only revealing their own empathy in inhabiting the perspective of a dying soldier who is strangely at peace, but is also dramatising an empathetic community on the battlefield. It is a tableau of grief, loss and death.

The second contribution, the student poem ‘The war wasn’t white, it was worldwide’, directly addresses some of the issues surrounding colonial war commemoration. It does not simply seek to put the ‘world’ back into the wars, as it were, but recognises some of the barriers in doing so. The student writes:

The bloodshed and pain that the soldiers endured, reminds society of the horrors that occurred.
Soldiers are commemorated, but not all.
Their efforts, contributions, sacrifices despite being crucial are not a nationwide memory
Their memories are shared with their families, but not shared in the nation’s history
We say lest we forget, but we have already forgotten.

The lines highlight the student's awareness of the importance of colonial participation and the trauma of soldiers' battlefield experiences, but their silencing when it comes to British national remembrance and the historical processes that craft dominant narratives. The poem also showcases how private memory can persist, even if it is at odds with national history. The separation of family from state reveals how charged the notions of belonging and citizenship are. Anger punctuates. It echoes the form and style of George A. Borden's 'The Black Soldier's Lament':

The peace restored the battle won
Black sweat and toil had beat the Hun.
Black blood was spilled, black bodies maimed
For medals brave no black was named,
Yet proud were we our pride unshamed.¹⁵

The student poem ends by playing on the classic words of First World War remembrance, from Kipling's poem 'Recessional' (1897) – 'Lest we forget' – and converts them into a memento to public amnesia – 'we have already forgotten'. This poem does not offer a redemptive or reparative view of history, but instead recognises the deep racialised asymmetries of war memory.

The third contribution, in the form of artwork, highlights the broadening out of war experiences to include different types of freedom. The first piece declares stridently, in a shade of crimson that matches the colour of the lipstick shown in the image, that women 'fought our own war'. Next to the words is the image of a nurse from somewhere in the British Empire, turning her gaze slightly away from the viewer, looking weary and yet resolute. The smudge of red on her right cheek blurs the distinction between blood and make-up, signifying not only the entry of violence into traditional gendered spaces but also a battle for more rights and freedoms for women in return for their war service.

Both contrasting and complementing the image of the nurse is the second piece of artwork, this time of a colonial soldier presumably wearing a First World War helmet, and looking determinedly and directly at the viewer. Although his illustration is in black-and-white, the background colour of the image is red, with the words ‘for our freedom’ scrawled in white. This draws attention, once again, to how colonial participation broadens the framework of how we understand and remember the two world wars: the freedom being fought for was not simply against the Central Powers or Axis forces, but against oppressive forces of all kinds, including British colonialism. The student’s sophisticated understanding of little-acknowledged racial and gendered perspectives of war find strong visual representation here.¹⁶ In these individualised figures, we see the transformation of official war photography of servicemen and women – homogenised, en masse – into individuals who stand alone, to whom political and emotional agency has been restored. This student’s artwork, then, is testament to the politics of colonial enlistment and advocates for a new form of war remembrance.



These three responses showcase the capacity of students to engage in the co-constitution of knowledge and to transform their learning about the past into modes of making, which in turn generate fresh narratives of war experience. In doing so, the students join the long traditions of framing historical imagination in terms of the present. The importance of recognising varied types of war experience, of articulating the need for freedom from all forms of repression, of claiming the war as ‘our own’ is powerfully invoked, gesturing to the students’ empathetic identification with historical agents. They take up the mantle of work which artists, poets and writers, such as Andrea Levy and Annu Palakunnathu Matthew,¹⁷ have set in motion: the creative reconstruction of the past to fill gaps in the historical record; the re-constitution of subaltern voices to allow them to ‘speak’; the turn from textual to visual to change the comparative frame, and ultimately, to read the world

wars differently. As Levy commented in the introduction to *Uriah's War* (2014), a short story of West Indian participation in the First World War:

The centenary of the outbreak of World War One made me want to add the experience of West Indian troops to the record. The more I researched, the more I was struck by the patriotism and courage of the West Indian men who volunteered to fight for the British Empire.¹⁸

In many ways, then, our sessions were designed to mirror Levy's process, to offer students both fresher and deeper understandings of empire and war, along with the tools by which to transform this learning into new forms of expression and representation.

Pedagogic approaches that solicited these creative responses: an analysis

In these three creative pieces, we can trace the archival materials used in our workshop sessions as generating new modes of re-imagining the past. Through their use of different genres for communicating their learning, the students reflected back to us the heterogeneity of approaches which our workshops had employed. This was a necessary function of excavating colonial experiences from asymmetric archives, and of re-reading and re-interpreting previously known material. The mass mobilisation of millions of people from within the British Empire during the course of two world wars offered exceptional conditions for the representation of colonial experience, not least in the mechanisms through which the state recorded these movements, and surveilled and censored colonial letters and postcards. Yet the uneven spread of literacy and archival recording, which minimises first-hand accounts, requires an exploration of different forms of writing and non-textual sources. We wanted students to understand the complexities involved in the processes of recovery: to move between genres to open up the less visible world of colonial experience, and the various methodological tools required to navigate and negotiate such a range of archival and textual material. We sought to eliminate some of the 'gatekeeping'

around archival sources and empower our students as historians in action by giving them direct access – to feel, even briefly, the joy, trauma and frustration of immersion in colonial archives. How might they account for the lack of first-hand written accounts in large numbers? We were inevitably shortening the journey of discovery and mediating the modes through which the students engaged with sources – printing out transcribed passages and images, made easy to read, and extracted from their original context – but we wanted students to work their way up from the archive.

Colonial photographs, wartime recruitment posters, oral histories, third-person recollections, newspaper articles, military censorship reports, radio broadcasts and poetry were showcased to students alongside one another to encourage reflection on both the range of source material offered and the need for such variety. These included colonial photograph collections from both world wars, housed at the Imperial War Museums; Indian letters from the Second World War, exchanged between home-front and battlefronts, and intercepted, translated and excerpted by the colonial censor; educationist and teacher Muriel Wasi's memoir *The Narrow Corridor* (2005) on life on the Indian home-front during the Second World War; Stimela Jason Jingo's oral history *A Chief is a Chief by the People* (1970), on his experiences in the South African Native Labour Corps during the First World War; and the recollection *From the Islands of the Sea* (1918) by the English-born chaplain Alfred Horner, who served alongside a battalion of the British West Indies Regiment in the First World War. Rather than seeing such a diverse spread of material solely as components of a recuperative approach, we sought to invest this material, especially the visual, with the same significance as the textual: these were not inferior substitutes but necessitated the same level of critical scrutiny. In our close focus on reading the text for what Hermione Lee has called 'moments of intimacy, revelation or particular inwardness',¹⁹ we established launch points from which to interpret the emotional worlds

and mentalities of our narrators, and to draw suggestive and inventive conclusions about the context and conditions in which these texts were produced. We consistently read aloud, producing a soundscape of the war in a contemporary classroom, letting our sources and their subaltern voices speak. Driven by the source materials, our workshops steered away from traditional lecture formats, and instead lightly introduced each session's activities, posing questions for inquiry so that students and teachers could work together in small groups. Furthermore, our pedagogic approach was built on students not having prior knowledge or undertaking preparatory reading for the sessions. This, we felt, allowed students to be adventurous and ambitious in their responses: there were no wrong answers, just different ways of reading.

Our focus throughout was on encouraging and developing these new reading practices, where reading, as Elleke Boehmer terms it, is “taken as an inventive, border-traversing activity”,²⁰ mirroring the imperial borders that were crossed to make the global contribution to both world wars possible in the first place, as well as negotiating the limits of genre and form, historical sources and literary material, by placing them alongside each other in a comparatist approach. This was very much a *postcolonial* reading practice, deliberately breaking away from canonical works on the two world wars – of which there are many – and focusing instead on making meaning from the marginalised and the unheard. In discussing the *Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds* project, Elleke Boehmer and Erica Lombard speak of the “agency of reading” as opposed to a passive reception of the text. Reading, they argue, “allows us better to understand and direct our interrelations with and within the world. Through reading, we identify ourselves within our various communities, and navigate our relationships.”²¹ The fresh literary and historical material that we were placing before our students, then, could not by its very nature conform to conventional modes of reading that apply to the established historical and literary canon,

because such a canon underpins “a weighty background of entrenched national and cultural value”.²² This is precisely what we were teaching our students to challenge.

Many of our source materials were necessarily retrieved from colonial archives, which meant that they were mediated by colonial languages and editorship, and often filtered by eyewitness accounts. However, as historians Kim Wagner and Ricardo Roque explain, ‘Approached as a productive condition of possibility, and not as a harmful obstacle to historical understanding, colonial knowledge enables, rather than deters, the writing of history of other cultures and events.’²³ Throughout the series of workshops, we attempted to open up to students colonial archives as precisely such an enabling resource, albeit one with limitations, in recovering war experiences from across the British Empire. We also sought to stimulate in students the beginnings of critical engagement with such knowledge by drawing attention to its conditions of production. While analysing a war recruitment poster, for example, that urged Kenyan women to volunteer their support for the Navy, Army and Air Force in non-combatant roles during the Second World War, we drew attention to the types of roles being advertised and their gendering. The women were represented, through a series of stick figures, as performing a range of jobs, from ‘accountant’ to ‘nannie’ to ‘telephonist’ and ‘farm girl’. We asked students to discuss whether these roles would have been thought of as conventional, and to what extent wartime could have reframed colonial women’s presence in the public sphere.²⁴


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V.A.D.


TRANSPORT

K.W.E.O.


EDUCATION


F.A.N.Y.

WOMEN OF KENYA

IT'S UP TO

YOU.

YOUR

SERVICES ARE NEEDED.

SHE WHO HESITATES IS LOST!

VOLUNTEER NOW

AND

BACK UP


THE


NAVY — ARMY — AIR FORCE

TO

VICTORY


SEWER



STOREKEEPER



TYPIST


COOK



ACCOUNTANT


PACKER


TELEPHONIST


CANTEEN


NANNIE


FARM GIRL

SIRONA HOUSE,
SADLER STREET,
NAIROBI.

Box 1802 TEL. 2170.

‘Women of Kenya – It’s Up to You’. © IWM. Art.IWM PST 15356.

While discussing how to read colonial archives, Wagner and Roque also alert us to how ‘many colonial accounts emerged from situated bodily encounters that were unforeseen and unpredictable; encounters that mattered for the internal contents of colonial description.’²⁵ Bearing in mind this importance of the colonial body, we asked students to undertake formal analysis of a photograph that showcased West Indian troops stacking eight-inch shells at a dump on Gordon Road in Ypres during October 1917, and encouraged them to address the following questions. Why did the photograph focus on black male bodies undergoing physical labour? Were some forms of war work, and therefore certain war fronts, prioritised over others? Who was observing these men, and what sort of relationship might he have had with the men he was photographing? And what could the photograph tell us about ideas of colonial masculinity that were circulating at the time?²⁶



‘West Indian troops stacking 8 inch shells at a dump on the Gordon Road, Ypres, October 1917’. © IWM (E(AUS) 2078.

These discussions on the racialised aesthetics of photographs led us on to the limited use of West Indian troops as labour corps during the war, the functioning of racial hierarchies within a colonial military structure, and the damaging psychological effect this may have had on West Indian servicemen. We also presented archival material that could potentially counter students' preconceived ideas of resistance from the colonies to imperial wars. An extract from a letter written by an Indian woman in Punjab in 1943 to her soldier-husband, urging him to display his 'loyalty' by serving the British government well and to showcase his military skills on the battlefield, generated important discussions as to how relationships of mutual benefit between traditional military recruiting areas in India and British imperial authorities continued to be forged during wartime.²⁷ By making image and text, historical material and literary responses 'speak' to each other in this way, we aimed to provide our students with the critical tools necessary to begin unentangling the legacy of the British Empire in the two world wars.

Sources were selected largely from our own research; material we had scoured for specific purposes in the construction of historical arguments. Evidently, we needed to be selective in our material; these were only three workshops, lasting an hour-and-a-half each, with much to cover. We were asking the students to trust in our expertise, in our choices. But this material was ripe and open to new interpretation. The students we taught were enthusiastically without disciplinary boundaries, and their openness and curiosity about modes of reading enabled the classroom to become a site of imaginative practice. This practice was supported by the connections we forged with more contemporary presentations, through the frame of commemoration, as we considered the diverse ways by which modern memory, both personal and public, is able to engage with past global wars, particularly in reanimating 'unremembered' colonial experiences. This meant discussing twentieth- and twenty-first-century war memorials, pertinent to the recent

dismantling and de-platforming of statues. We talked about the significance of the 2017 war memorial for African and Caribbean men and women located in Windrush Square in Brixton, and steered students towards addressing the following questions: Why was such a memorial created only in 2017? What might have influenced its location? How was the memorial's design different to others, such as the Memorial Gates on Constitution Hill in London, and why did they think this was the case? Late twentieth-century short stories and art installations were juxtaposed, foregrounding shifts in our understanding of national/colonial remembrance in public spaces, and initiating discussions on how literature and art can bridge critical gaps in our knowledge by imaginatively exploring the subjectivity and agency of colonial men and women during wartime. That extracts from Levy's *Uriah's War* had been read with and connected to the words of Corporal A. L. Henty of the British West Indies Regiment, as published in the *Daily Gleaner* – 'I felt like a man: my spirit was suddenly up and in a reckless way I dashed into the thick of it' – offered students a mode through which to consider the translation from archive to memory-making activity, which inspired their own creative responses.²⁸

'Decolonizing' the curriculum and the classroom by foregrounding the marginalised: an anti-racist teaching approach

This process of encounter – with the past, with structures of memory making, with the racialised trauma of the colonial archive – took place within a particular curriculum and a particular classroom. Rather than 'diversifying' the curriculum, our approach was based upon a curriculum driven from what has previously been marginalised, where each element of the course addressed colonial experience, and used race and gender as core categories of analysis. In doing so, we acknowledged that, as Meleisa Ono-George has argued, 'the content and diversity of the curriculum do not map directly onto issues of B[A]ME

equality'.²⁹ Though not working entirely within the university system which Ono-George is critiquing, we were conscious that our classroom was not a neutral space: we had brought students, both white and BAME who were identified as requiring 'widening participation', into the institution of the academy from our position of power as 'experts' in the field. As such, we wanted to incorporate anti-racist teaching practice in ways that might challenge racism in our wider communities.³⁰ While the project undoubtedly mapped on to 'diversity' agendas in relation to both curricula and academic culture (explaining its funding, perhaps), it was not limited to these factors: we enjoyed the freedom to practise and instil the values of anti-racism and inclusivity. Running this project as a shared, collaborative and co-taught endeavour gave us – two early-career academics – the opportunity to reclaim aspects of our teaching where we were empowered: to establish core principles rather than reform those which we had inherited.

Student responses to our workshops foreground that that there is merit in breaking away from traditional classroom hierarchies. The most productive aspect for one student was 'the calming atmosphere of getting to know each other'; another said that they 'had a lot of fun with the other students' and 'felt very welcomed'. The joy and energy of the classroom, much of which came from the students themselves, was our shared highlight from the project. It also raised further questions for us. What does it mean to feel welcome and calm in the classroom? Why was this something to be remarked upon? We were conscious that the university is not always a welcoming or comfortable space, so we aimed to achieve this goal through the collaborative and active participation of all attendees, striving to remove existing power structures and to place classroom learning with the wider context of student lives. At each session, we served refreshments; eating and drinking together fostered an atmosphere of hospitality and conviviality. By co-facilitating and co-teaching each session, we demonstrated models of collaborative exchange and learning in

practice, including the fact that our ‘expertise’ could be debated and discussed, or that there might be multiple ways to approach and think about a topic. From the beginning, therefore, we designed interactive sessions that functioned more as workshops: this was possible as we were not involved in assessing these students’ work or preparing them for exams. Rather than formal classroom etiquette, we all addressed each other by our first names, including the teachers who accompanied the students.

We were grateful to the two teachers who participated in our workshops for their willingness to relinquish the power dynamics of their classroom, and to engage in critical discussion with their students about the curriculum and how history was taught. The enthusiasm with which they responded to our initial requests and their commitment to this work was crucial: they were interlocutors and co-creators of knowledge with us and the students. Moving beyond the inability or ‘refusal’ that the *WW1 in the Classroom* team had identified, the teachers had already been resourcing this material beyond the curriculum.³¹ We know that the work we were able to do in these workshops and the dynamics within which we were able to collaborate were based on conversations taking place in these schools – one of which we had already engaged in other ‘widening participation’ work. It was for this reason, above all others, that we did not ‘get slammed’, but aimed instead to overcome the alienation and estrangement that the classroom can create.³² For teachers to show themselves as learners too, and to open themselves up to their students for future conversations in their everyday classroom, was a necessary vulnerability.

The students’ own ‘cultural capital’, from their schools, homes and communities, were readily employed, forging connections between family stories of military service and migration with the primary material in front of them. They sought to make links with the past through modes that refuted the growing historical distance between ‘living’ familial

memory and the war.³³ While approaching schools about the project, we had asked teachers to select students based on the latter's reflective statements highlighting their reasons for participation. Much of this response, which we discussed in our first session, revealed that the students were eager to move beyond their curricula or conventional textbooks; they were hungry for material that might be considered supplementary but for them was fundamental – and which had not been sufficiently part of their education to date. Their interest was driven by a desire for connection, not only familial but also based on gender and ethnicity, which fuelled *empathy* in the classroom, stemming from a sense that marginalised voices from these conflicts are important and need to be heard. This impulse to recognise a 'forgotten' history, and the care that the students invested in such work of recovery, enriched their imaginative readings of the material.

It should be made clear that these students are by no means exceptional. The activism and initiative of young people around their history and decolonising the curriculum is and has been phenomenal: the Young Historians Project and Fill in the Blanks to name just two such projects.³⁴ Young people are organising to get themselves to the places their curricula cannot. Their disillusionment with the canonical 'pale, male and stale' literature and history that Boehmer and Lombart comment on,³⁵ has energised projects of their own. As academics, we cannot become gatekeepers bestowing our expertise on young people. Instead, we must open up space through which we can share and collaborate and learn from the young people who are energizing and organising, and join them in their activism.

Conclusion: A Critical Reflection

The extra-curricular nature of this project perhaps explains the reasons for its success in its classroom iteration: the freedom and creativity of the sessions, and the engagement

from learners who had chosen to be there. Students arrived to sessions already equipped with some of the analytical tools we had anticipated having to teach them. Consequently, we were able to delve directly into source material that allowed them to test their interpretative and critical skills. Responses one might anticipate from a classroom having to confront the role of racism in structuring our knowledge of the past – guilt, anger, frustration, disillusionment, disorientation – were little present in our workshops. The ‘difficult conversations’ and discomfort that might arise in discussing race and colonialism, of deconstructing structures of power and difference, had either taken place or were ongoing elsewhere: we benefitted from that labour with great results.

Our project, however, does not simply exist as a teaching and learning experience that now is past, and whose memories today, in a pandemic-ridden world, have perhaps taken on a utopian gloss. It continues to live digitally, as a website offering resources to students and teachers alike, in the workshop structures within which they were taught, and includes outlines of our learning activities: <https://teachingempireandwar.wordpress.com/>. We have also provided links to other useful resources for teachers and students alike to develop their knowledge. The website was created as an imaginative space for a project not designed to be static or complete but open for reuse, recycling and re-interpretation to anyone who wishes to challenge how we organised our sources by cutting them up and putting them back together in different ways. We conceived of sharing our resources freely as an opportunity for scaling up our work in the classroom, of the project being valuable to others who sought to engage in decolonizing curricula or changing the perspective from which they viewed the world wars.³⁶ In fact, our website is now part of the open access digital repository ‘Teaching Race, Empire and Migration - A Resource Bank’, hosted by the Institute of Historical Research in the wake of the Black Lives Matter response in 2020.

Nonetheless, scaling up the scope and methodology of our project could be problematic. For some students and teachers, this may be their first encounters with colonial histories: will these be understood to be a starting point for developing tools to extend these approaches beyond the wars? How far is this resource being used as an ‘add and stir’ approach to ‘diversifying’ course content: extra or further material to be navigated by students in their own time, taking up one lesson rather than challenging the fundamentals through which the world wars (and history more broadly) is taught.³⁷ Are we providing a resource that could be used to ‘globalise’ while leaving conceptual categories of race and colonialism untouched?³⁸ This work is an optional extra: it is not on the curriculum. Would the project have had more impact if we had spent our time lobbying for curriculum reform rather than finding space beyond the curriculum to engage?

The 2020 Black Lives Matter revolution, the public conversation about the role of history and its rewriting³⁹, a reckoning about the versions of Britain and Empire that are taught in schools, the revitalised demand for curriculum reform, for decolonizing⁴⁰, for academic institutions to move beyond ‘optical allyship’, has created an expanded appetite for projects like ‘Teaching Empire and War’. In addition to newer initiatives around curriculum reform⁴¹, those who have long been working with academics and policymakers on this area of work, like the Runnymede Trust, are continuing the conversation and collaboration.⁴² Achieving that embeddedness at both secondary and higher educational levels, in ways that retain its connectedness to the political circumstances in which education is taught, how it is taught and who is teaching it, would render projects like this redundant: that is, ultimately, what we should be striving for.⁴³

¹ Helen B. McCartney and David G. Morgan-Owen, 'Commemorating the centenary of the First World War: national and trans-national perspectives', *War & Society*, 36, 4 (2017), 235-238; Ann-Marie Einhaus, 'Cultural memory, teaching and contemporary writing about the First World War', *Literature and History*, 25, 2 (2016), 187-204.

² Suzanne Bardgett, Emily Fuggle, Lucy May Maxwell and Roger Smither, IWM, *Whose remembrance? A scoping study of the available research on communities and the colonial experience of two world wars*

(<https://www.iwm.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/gallery/Whose Remembrance Discussion Paper.pdf>), p. 1.

³ Santanu Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture: Writings, Images, and Songs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 414.

⁴ Das, p. 415.

⁵ Amanda Behm, Christianna Fryer, Emma Hunter, Elisabeth Leake, Su Lin Lewis and Sarah Miller-Davenport, 'Decolonizing History: Enquiry and Practice', *History Workshop Journal*, 89 (2020), 169-191.

⁶ Royal Historical Society, *Race, Ethnicity & Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change* (2018).

⁷ Meleisa Ono-George, 'Beyond diversity: anti-racist pedagogy in British History departments', *Women's History Review*, 28, 3 (2019), 500-507.

⁸ Adrienne Rich, 'Invisibility in Academe', *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (London: Norton, 1996; first pub. 1986).

⁹ Catriona Pennell, 'Learning Lessons from War? Inclusions and Exclusions in Teaching First World War History in English Secondary Schools', *History and Memory*, 28, 1 (2016), 36-70, p. 56.

¹⁰ Pennell, 46.

¹¹ As Sara Ahmed writes, 'whiteness can be experienced as wall: something solid, a body with mass that stops you from getting through'. Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 146.

¹² Elleke Boehmer discusses the process of imaginative exchange which we sought to provoke in *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st-Century Critical Readings* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 2-3.

¹³ Olivia Sagan, 'Playgrounds, studios and hiding places: emotional exchange in creative learning spaces', *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 6.3 (2008), 173-186, 182.

¹⁴ For the purposes of this article, we use the term 'empathy' as defined by Junker and Jacquemin – a response that combines emotions, such as our reactions towards a person or character, with cognition, such as conceiving of another person's point-of-view or imagining ourselves faced with the dilemmas of a person or character. Christine R. Junker and Stephen J. Jacquemin, 'How Does Literature Affect Empathy in Students?', *College Teaching*, 65.2, 79-87, 79.

¹⁵ George A. Borden, 'The Black Soldier's Lament' https://iwwpa.net/borden_ga/the-blac.php <Accessed 24 July 2020>.

¹⁶ All the creative responses discussed in this section can be accessed in full at: <https://teachingempireandwar.wordpress.com/creative-responses/> <Accessed 24 July 2020>.

¹⁷ See 'THE UNREMEMBERED: Indian Soldiers from the Italian Campaign of World War II' project on Annu Matthew's website <http://www.annumatthew.com/gallery/unremembered/> <Accessed 21 July 2020>.

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- ¹⁸ Andrea Levy, *Uriah's War* (London: Tinder Press, 2014), Introduction.
- ¹⁹ Hermione Lee, *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing* (London: Random House, 2010), p. 3.
- ²⁰ Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics*, p. 1.
- ²¹ Elleke Boehmer and Erica Lombard, 'Publishing, the Curriculum and Black British Writing Today', *Wasafiri*, 34.4 (December 2019), 115–121, 116. .
- ²² Boehmer and Lombard, 115.
- ²³ Ricardo Roque and Kim Wagner, 'Introduction: Engaging Colonial Knowledge', in Ricardo Roque and Kim Wagner, eds., *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: Reading European Archives in World History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 1–32 (p. 3).
- ²⁴ 'Women of Kenya – It's Up to You?'. © IWM. Art.IWM PST 15356. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/32613> <Accessed 22 January 2020>.
- ²⁵ Roque and Wagner, p. 3.
- ²⁶ 'West Indian troops stacking 8 inch shells at a dump on the Gordon Road, Ypres, October 1917'. © IWM (E(AUS) 2078. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205213105> <Accessed 22 January 2020>.
- ²⁷ This letter was written by an Indian woman in Nabha near the Indian state of Punjab between 24 March and 6 April 1943 to her husband, an Indian soldier, a Lance Naik in the British Indian Army, stationed at the Middle East and North African front. The letter was originally written in Urdu, and then translated into English for the colonial military censor. The extract states: "My dear husband, you should do your work sincerely and faithfully. Try to defeat the enemy and show your bravery in the battlefield. Do not blame me and your mother. Come soon with the crown of success. My husband, I request you to serve the Government with your whole heart and never be disappointed." Accessed from the British Library's India Office Records archives, IOR/L/PJ/12/654.
- ²⁸ *The Gleaner*, 2 December 1918. Anna Maguire, 'I felt like a man': West Indian troops under fire during the First World War, *Slavery & Abolition*, 39, 3 (2018), 602-621.
- ²⁹ Ono-George, 502.
- ³⁰ Ono-George, 503.
- ³¹ Pennell, 46.
- ³² Robin DiAngelo & Özlem Sensoy, 'Getting slammed: White depictions of race discussions as arenas of violence', *Race Ethnicity and Education* (2012), 1-26; bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (South End Press, 1989), p. 51.
- ³³ Ann-Marie Einhaus observes how 'centennial teachers and writers alike deal with the great- and great-great-grandchildren of the war generation, whose link to the war is becoming ever more tenuous. This is particularly true of young people from migrant backgrounds, whose forebears may have participated in the conflict – if at all – in completely different ways compared to the white British "Tommy" on the Western Front.' Einhaus, 'Cultural memory', 190.
- ³⁴ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z7g66v4> <https://www.younghistoriansproject.org>; <https://linktr.ee/fillintheblanksuk> <Accessed 16 July 2020>.
- ³⁵ Boehmer and Lombard, 115.
- ³⁶ The site has had almost 500 unique visitors since it was launched a year ago.
- ³⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "'Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles', *Signs*, 28, 2 (2003), 518-521.
- ³⁸ Emma Hunter discusses this in the conversation piece, 'Decolonizing History: Enquiry and Practice', 183.
- ³⁹ Olivette Otele, 'These anti-racism protests show it's time for Britain to grapple with its difficult history', *The Guardian*, 9 June 2020

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/09/protests-british-history>
<Accessed 15 July 2020>.

⁴⁰ See *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy* ed. by Jason Arday and Heidi Mirza (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) and Katy Sian, *Navigating Institutional Racism in British Universities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁴¹ See for example the incredible work of the Black Curriculum Project (<https://www.theblackcurriculum.com>) and the Young Historians' Project (<https://www.younghistoriansproject.org/about-us>).

⁴² Kimberly McIntosh (Runnymede Trust), Lavinya Stennett (The Black Curriculum) and Christianna Fryar in conversation with Rana Mitter on 'What does a Black History Curriculum Look Like?', *BBC Free Thinking*
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000kpl5> <Accessed 15 July 2020>

⁴³ We are grateful for points raised by Christianna Fryer in the virtual session of the *History Acts* seminar on Black Lives Matter which rejected a separation of the current political revolution from the engagement with history as it is taught and researched. The video of this discussion can be accessed here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vzqfoo2_rDQ <Accessed: 29 June 2020>.

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