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Decolonising History Beyond the Curriculum: Student Participation and the Local Lens Towards a 'Reparative History'

Abstract

This chapter discusses a case study of undergraduate History students engaged in decolonisation activity outside the classroom. It focuses on the 'Legacies of Slavery in Gloucester' project where students have been directly involved in research and public engagement activities working in collaboration with external partners and community groups. By undertaking research and producing public facing exhibitions, students have been involved in uncovering hidden or underappreciated stories that trace numerous tangible and intangible legacies of empire, colonialism, and slavery at the local level. These represent the possibilities of the local lens and Public History as effective ways to 'bring slavery home,' as well as the potential for student participation in 'reparative history.' Going beyond the theoretical identification and critique of Eurocentrism, it showcases a more active and transformative engagement with the means of knowledge production and exchange which disrupts the effects of imperialism on historical narratives at the local level. The chapter argues this form of reparative work has become far more significant following the events and clashes of 2020. The projects and initiatives discussed here propose a means of decolonisation in practice for the discipline of History via student-centred active learning, engagement with local resources and stakeholders, and a focus on public engagement with the local community. Furthermore, these case studies not only highlight the importance of harnessing universities as an 'anchor institutions,' but provide useful examples for the deployment and development of a number of transferrable skills for students.

Keywords:

1. decolonisation
2. Local history
3. Public history
4. slavery
5. reparations
6. Student engagement

The events of 2020 and their contested aftermath have helped inject a sense of activism into calls for decolonisation across the education sector, particularly in terms of going beyond the curriculum. The responses to the murder of George Floyd and racial injustice channelled primarily via the Black Lives Matter protests were characterised by a call for Britain to confront its historic legacies of slavery. The toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol on 7 June 2020 – the 17th century slave trader responsible for the transportation of over 84,000 enslaved Africans - seemed to capture the frustrations of protestors that saw the monument as a symbol of Britain's reluctance to come to terms with this history (Olusoga, 2020). When Home Secretary Priti Patel described the removal as 'utterly disgraceful' vandalism, she was giving voice to the widespread belief that British history and values were under attack (The Week, 2020). These sentiments were amplified when considered alongside the fierce responses to the National Trust's report that identified 93 properties in its care that had direct links to slavery in the Caribbean (Mitchell, 2020). As Alan Lester has demonstrated, Britain's colonial past and role in the slave trade has become the subject of a heated culture war (2013:19-32).

This chapter discusses and reflects on an example of researchers and undergraduate students collaborating on public history projects uncovering legacies of slavery in Britain. It focuses on an initiative where undergraduate History students have been engaging in research projects alongside local government, heritage organizations, and community groups, with the University acting as an 'anchor institution' (Green, Lloyd, and Parham, 2013). The 'Legacies of Slavery in Gloucester' project provides a case study of decolonizing *beyond* the curriculum, interweaving student-led learning, academic research, and public engagement at a local level. It has allowed students to grapple with the theoretical as well as practical issues surrounding the production of historical knowledge on Britain's relationship with transatlantic slavery by engaging in their own research and knowledge production in local museums. I argue that this direct form of decolonisation in practice acts as a form of 'reparative history' at a time when Britain's historic role in the transatlantic slave trade is a matter of public debate (Hall, 2018).

Decolonising before and after 2020: moving towards ‘reparative history’

The responses to the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ campaign in 2017 and its prevalence in universities fuelled much of the academic drive to ‘take seriously the legacy of colonialism in the curriculum’ (Moncrieffe, Asare, and Dunford, 2019). Numerous disciplines consequently began to critique and revise their practices to identity and overturn the predominance of Eurocentrism that replicates colonial forms of knowledge production and exchange. Moncrieffe for instance, borrows the concept of ‘epistemic violence’ to highlight the manner in which the National Curriculum in History has traditionally obscured ‘non-Western experiences or approaches to knowledge’ (Moncrieffe, Asare, and Dunford, 2019: 21). This ‘epistemic violence’ has had negative impacts on students, particularly from ethnic minority backgrounds. Asare, for instance, suggests that the Eurocentrism embedded in the curriculum perpetuates the ‘deficit model’ where non-White peoples are presented as ‘both the problem and the victim,’ and serves to increase material as well as psychological forms of racial inequality among students (Moncrieffe, Asare, and Dunford, 2019: 23-4). Such ways of engaging students also has the effect of dissuading those from ethnic minorities to study subjects like History. The Royal Historical Society’s ‘Race, Ethnicity and Equality Report’ in 2018 highlighted how History in the UK was one of the least diverse subjects, with students from minority backgrounds being less likely to apply for university courses in the subject, and with underrepresentation even more marked when looking at the profile of academic staff (Royal Historical Society, 2018).

The post-Colston climate has coincided with calls to go beyond the focus on the curriculum and address some of the causes of these inequalities. Fearing decolonisation might become another passing trend with limited effect, scholars and educators have suggested that efforts to decolonise must do more than revise reading lists, modules, and programmes. For instance, it has been argued that ‘any decolonising effort needs to disrupt Western-centric epistemology as part of the larger colonial project... rather than focusing on superficial diversity and inclusion’ (Abu Moghli and Kadiwal, 2021: 9). This leans on Gurminder Bhabra’s assertion that ‘students and

academics should be able to reflect on their situated, historical, social and political intersectional histories, which shape their ways of looking at the world' (et al 2018: 117). Enslin and Hedge also suggest a more ambitious form of decolonisation that engages with the material as well as cultural legacies of colonialism, and propose approaches that align with forms of reparative justice (2024: 228). Similarly, Yasmeen Narayan questions the purpose of exercises like the UK's Research Excellence Framework, which assesses and rates the quality of research in Higher Education institutions - if the same 'silences on the histories and legacies of colonisation' are constantly reproduced. She thus argues for methods of conducting academic work that are 'tied to questions of indebtedness, academic reparations and reconstruction and belonging' (2019).

These ideas echo Catherine Hall's definition of 'reparatory history,' which is historical work focused on 'reconciliation [and] the repair of relations damaged by historical injustice' (2018: 12). Hall's definition has become much more relevant in the current climate where the debate over actual reparations for slavery has once again become front page news. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Samoa in October 2024, the CARICOM organisation representing 15 Caribbean governments called for discussions with the UK government 'on reparatory justice with regard to the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans' (White, 2024). The responses in the media have been all too familiar. Prime Minister Keir Starmer's refusal to discuss reparations echoed Tony Blair's reluctance to apologise for slavery following the debate sparked by the bicentenary of abolition in 2007 (Lyons and Duncan, 2024; Hall, 2018). Starmer's response is contrasted by more fervent denials and refusals to accept the legacies of Britain's colonial past in relation to slavery. Aspiring Conservative leader and MP Robert Jenrick challenged the idea of reparations by claiming that it was former colonies that owed Britain 'a debt of gratitude' for its role in ending slavery (Groves and Churchill, 2024). This response is part of a broader resistance to the findings of recent historical scholarship uncovering the underappreciated economic as well as social and cultural legacies of slavery in Britain (see for instance Hall et al, 2014; Berg and Hudson, 2023; Fowler, 2024; Lester and Sanghera, 2024). Organisations such as Restore Trust and History Reclaimed have worked in parallel with parts of the press to delegitimise much of the academic work claiming to trace and teach the hidden truths of this history

(Lester, 2023). These efforts to ‘deny and disavow’ indicate that Paul Gilroy’s idea of ‘postimperial nostalgia’ is very much alive and well (Hall, 2018: 12). They also reiterate the need for decolonisation practices that address the wider public contests over the past.

Public History, defined as the ‘process of making the production of history more public – more accessible, more engaging and participatory’ has emerged as a particularly effective way of making decolonisation an active and transformative process as much as a theoretical consideration (Cauvin, 2024). Despite the considerable scholarship of recent years re-examining Britain’s often misinterpreted or forgotten history of colonialism, there is still a considerable gap between this important academic research and the broader public. This is further aggravated by the fact many of these historians have been subjected to negative attention in the press for their work. Chao Tayiana Maina argues that many professional historians remain ‘reluctant’ to present their research in more accessible ways or with more uninitiated audiences in mind (2024). However, this growing area of the historical discipline, which examines the complex ways in which historical knowledge is produced, communicated, and understood beyond the confines of the classroom or the academy (National Council on Public History, 2024), provides practical opportunities for academics and students to intervene directly in the current public debate over Britain’s colonial past. It involves taking a more active role in shaping historical narratives that engage and involve non-academic audiences, while challenging and overturning Eurocentric models of historical knowledge production. Since the events of 2007’s bicentennial of the end of the transatlantic slave trade, there have been several important collaborative projects across the UK engaged in this form of public history. These have aimed to interweave the work of academics, heritage organisations, community groups and the wider public work, very often via more localized contexts.¹

¹ Many examples were presented at the Open University’s a one-day workshop on ‘Slavery, the Industrial Revolution, and Public History’ in May 2024, organized by The Centre for Empire and Postcolonial Studies.

The Legacies of Slavery in Gloucester Project

An example of such work is the subject of this chapter and involves a collaboration between Gloucester City Council, heritage organisations, community representatives, and historians at the University of Gloucestershire. This project emerged in response to the events of 2020 and the clashes following the removal of Colston's statue. Acknowledging the fact that Gloucester has an ethnically diverse population, the City Council's Commission to Review Race Relations was moved to respond proactively and seek ways of avoiding some of the racial tensions exhibited in the summer of 2020 by recognising the contribution of diverse communities to the city's history. With this aim in mind, a research committee was put together including representatives from Council, the City archaeologist, local museums, heritage institutions, as well as myself to review the city's heritage landscape and links to the transatlantic slave trade. It was designed to promote a more critical appreciation of this history and involve community stakeholders and heritage organisations in the development of a more inclusive heritage landscape. Some of the central questions of the ongoing project included: what are the links between the city and the slave trade? How did the development of slavery as well as abolition affect the city? How are these stories reflected in the city? To what extent are they hidden, and why? In what ways can acknowledging this history contribute to community cohesion, as well as broader efforts of decolonisation going forward?

The project proceeded in two phases. The first was based on carrying out a monuments review that would bring together the research on the city's various connections to slavery and make a set of recommendations on each heritage 'asset.' These recommendations could range on a spectrum from maintaining the status quo and contextualizing, to repurposing and even removal. The results of the research conducted by all members of the committee was published in the 'Gloucester City Monuments Review' report made public in January 2022.² It provided an extensive

² A copy of the report can be accessed on the project webpage 'Legacies of Slavery in Gloucester' on the Cotswold Centre for History and Heritage website: <https://sites.glos.ac.uk/cc4hh/2024/10/29/legacies-of-slavery-in-gloucester/>

overview of the direct and indirect connections between the city and the transatlantic slave trade. Alongside the report, a thirty-minute film was produced entitled ‘Gloucester and the Slave Trade: a Documentary.’ It was designed to make the results of the report more accessible to a broader audience and was screened at the Gloucester History Festival in September 2021 (‘Legacies of Slavery in Gloucester,’ 2021).

The review highlighted the ways in which a localized focus provides an effective way of bridging with the global. As Katie Donington highlights, the ‘local lens... reminds us that [slavery] was not simply a historic aberration that occurred in a distant land – it was and is something whose legacies are still with us today, etched into tombstones and inscribed on street names’ (2016: 194). It covered less obvious statues of monarchs like Charles II, who could be used to tell the story of the Royal African Company, and the crown’s role in promoting the slave trade and the establishment of trading ports on the West Coast of Africa in the 17th century. It also covered the memorialization of other key figures celebrated in the city that much like Colston in Bristol, had had their connections to slavery hidden from public view. These included the 18th century evangelical preacher George Whitefield, Founding Father of the American Revolution and slaveholder Button Gwinnett, and people who played a large role in Gloucester’s industrial development and received significant amounts of money as part of the Slave Compensation Act of 1837. The report also included several general recommendations on suggested actions for each of the connections found. One of the main recommendations was to develop a public engagement programme to share the results of the report, as well as strategies for different heritage institutions in the city to develop inclusive practices that acknowledge the history while involving various stakeholders. These were formally accepted by Gloucester City Council in early 2022. The project subsequently moved into an implementation phase, and it is here that students have been able to contribute to both the project’s research and apply their critical abilities in attempts to decolonise the local.³

³ Implementation has involved developing number of public exhibitions examining the links with slavery as well as forgotten histories of people of African descent in various heritage institutions in the city, and the development of educational resources alongside community representatives and local educators.

Student Participation in Decolonizing the Local

Students at the University have been contributing to the implementation phase of the Gloucester project by conducting research and producing exhibitions for public view in local museums and at local events. These have been conducted via the Cotswold Centre for History & Heritage which was created by the History department to give History students the chance to engage with global issues through a local lens. The Centre aims for students to not only apply and develop their critical abilities, but with the local focus allows them to critically engage with familiar examples of ‘the heritage,’ which Stuart Hall characterized as ‘always inflected by the power of those who have colonised the past’ (2005). Students are provided with briefs with clear objectives that importantly leave room for them to develop and refine aims as their work develops. The briefs are designed so the projects are manageable and achievable within the confines of their degree programme. While students are expected to take the initiative and lead the research process, they are mentored by academic staff through a series of progress workshops that allow reflective feedback and development alongside their peers. The process also involves visits to Gloucestershire Archives and other local sites that may be relevant to each project, as well as guest talks by some of the external partners and organisations supporting the projects.

The Legacies of Slavery in Gloucester project has enabled students to reflect on the ways in which dominant forces have hidden and underplayed British legacies of slavery at a local level. At the same time, the emphasis on creating narratives and outputs for the public has provided a means of participating in the creation of local decolonised narratives. Importantly, a large proportion of these projects are made possible by openly accessible resources that have been made increasingly available over the last two decades and create the space for this form of work. Following the bicentennial of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 2007, projects were launched to investigate legacies of slavery in Britain. The most significant in starting the process of ‘bringing slavery home’ was UCL’s Legacies of Slave Ownership project, which led to the creation of an openly accessible database with records of over 46,000

British claims for compensation for their ‘loss of property’ following abolition. Similarly, the Frederick Douglass in Britain and Ireland mapping project, which began as part of Dr Hannah Rose Murray’s Phd thesis at the University of Nottingham in 2018, details the journeys of African American abolitionists and anti-lynching campaigners during the 19th century.⁴ Resources such as these are essential in demonstrating the significance of the local in terms of rethinking Britain’s historic relationship with slavery.

The two databases have been central to several projects students have conducted on legacies of slavery and abolitionism in Gloucestershire, and exhibitions they presented at the Gloucester History Festival in 2021 and 2022. Over 400 individuals from the county appear on the UCL database as either successful or unsuccessful claimants and awardees of compensation. Focusing on specific individuals or samples across specific areas, students have examined the documents presented alongside other available resources in newspapers and local archives to examine the dynamics of the Compensation Act of 1837. An example is the profile of William Prescod, described as the largest slaveowner in Barbados, who relocated to Cheltenham after abolition following his claim for £37,000 (equivalent to £4,000,000 today). Prescod’s case demonstrates the direct links to the plantation economy of the Caribbean, and the importance of Barbados to Britain as a slave-based colony. However, students also uncovered the life of his son Samuel Jackman Prescod, who became a prominent abolitionist and the first person of African descent to be elected to the Parliament of Barbados in 1843. Combining these seemingly contradictory elements, students created a story that brings slavery home while also highlighting the complex internal struggles over slavery and abolition within a single family. Acknowledging both elements indicates their appreciation of their role in disrupting the familiar narratives: ‘[o]ur findings challenge the idea that slavery was simply something that happened a long time ago and somewhere far away... even at a local level, it is possible to trace links to the transatlantic slave trade’ (‘Legacies of Slave Ownership in Gloucestershire,’ 2022).

Students have also conducted research that examines the issue of abolitionism. This was a transatlantic movement involving a number of important agents across the

⁴ See ‘Frederick Douglass in Britain and Ireland,’ <https://frederickdouglassinbritain.com/>

18th and 19th centuries, including enslaved people as well as women, reformers, and philanthropists. However, the role of abolition in the current culture war demands a particular form of decolonisation given the fact prominent ‘anti-woke’ campaigners, right-wing organisations, and MPs often lean on the claim that Britain’s main contribution was to pioneer abolition more than it was to promote slavery (Lester, 2023: 178). Students have been able to critique this argument, not only by shining a light on the ways in which abolition was achieved by compensating slaveowners at a local level, but also by uncovering how abolitionism was pioneered by the enslaved. In addition to examining the work of local abolitionists like Samuel Bowly, in ‘African American Abolitionists in Gloucester’, students traced the visits of Moser Roper, William Wells Brown, and William and Ellen Craft in the 19th century as part of their tours across Britain and Ireland (2021). This project focused on the existence of a transatlantic network of campaigners, but also emphasised the agency and activism of the formerly enslaved in resisting and campaigning against the practice.

The student projects have also explored how Britain’s relationship with slavery is framed within the local heritage landscape. Collaborating with St Mary’s de Crypt Church in Gloucester, in the ‘Remembering George Whitefield’ project, students critiqued the representation of one of Gloucester’s most celebrated figures. Whitefield was one of the most famous and influential figures of the 18th century in Britain and the American colonies. His brand of evangelical Protestantism became particularly popular as part of the ‘Great Awakening.’ While frequently celebrated as the ‘Prince of Preachers’ for his role in bringing religion to the people (including in a donated plaque inside St Mary’s church), local representations of Whitefield have often neglected his problematic relationship with American slavery. Initially appalled at the treatment of enslaved people in the American colonies, Whitefield’s views changed as he tried to raise funds for an orphanage in Georgia to promote his virtuous deeds. He supported the campaign to legalize slavery in the colony, which was ultimately successful in 1751 and allowed the practice to expand significantly. The exhibition ends with an invitation for audiences to reflect on the reasons for slavery’s absence from his story, and also presents the preacher as a means by which the evolution of race, slavery, and religion in the British Atlantic world can be understood (‘Remembering George Whitefield,’ 2020).

Importantly, the project contributed to the updating of Whitefield's blue plaque in Gloucester in 2023 and acknowledge his relationship with slavery (BBC, 2023).

Another project was based on a collaboration with the Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum as part of their 'Project 360,' which aims to examine the underappreciated interactions of the Gloucester Regiment with the wide range of diverse cultures encountered throughout its history (Holden, 2022). This was also prompted by the discovery that Ukasaw Gronniosaw (aka James Albert) - one of the first African men to have recorded their experiences of being enslaved and the Middle Passage with a narrative - served in an early version of the Regiment during the Seven Years War (1756-63). As well as examining the global links between European interests in the Caribbean and those on the Indian subcontinent, students explored the hidden use of enslaved and free Black men in the West Indian campaign. They also discussed how the British military took an active part in the purchase of enslaved people prior to 1808 and had a role in perpetuating problematic ideas of race. The exhibition was on display between November 2023 and March 2024, and included a digital story produced on the life of Gronniosaw ('The 28th Regiment of Foot and the West Indian Campaign in the Seven Years War,' 2023).

Reflections

The role of students as active participants and collaborators is essential to meaningful decolonisation beyond the curriculum in practice. Their experience of the curriculum and its effects means their critical engagement can be a vital ingredient to overturning the 'epistemic violence' it creates (Takhar, 2024). Furthermore, by examining the ways historical meaning is produced and communicated, students can also engage with their 'positionality' by 'reflecting on [their] location in the geopolitics of knowledge production, and its implications' (Abu Moghli and Kadiwal, 2021:4). In other words, students are able to identify the effects of Eurocentric thought processes on themselves through their educational experiences, as well as how these processes are traceable more widely. At the same time, by reflecting on and formulating methods of communicating this history in ways that disrupt these processes, they also develop a

greater appreciation of how historical knowledge is contingent on contemporary social, political and cultural forces.

The examples of student collaboration on the ‘Legacies of Slavery in Gloucester’ project highlight the potential for public history at the local level to be an effective form of decolonisation practice. Not all projects dependent on a high level of student engagement and participation have been as successful as the examples mentioned. However, while it is necessary to investigate the long-term impact of these projects on local communities, these projects indicate that student involvement in academic research can fulfil many of the ambitions of a decolonised curriculum and beyond. Such an approach also fulfils the UK Quality Code for Higher Education’s principle of ‘engaging students as partners’ (QAA, 2024: 5). While it is right to consider the participation of students from ethnic minority in efforts to unpick and disrupt Eurocentric systems of knowledge, as Catherine Hall reminds us, ‘we are all the survivors of slavery, not just those who can directly trace their lineages’ (2018: 9). The History students discussed in this chapter are primarily from white backgrounds and reflect the limited diversity within the discipline more broadly. However, decolonisation should not rest solely on shoulders of minority groups or those with more direct connections to the consequences of enslavement. Part of the process of ‘bringing slavery home’ is recognizing that we are all inheritors of the legacies of the British past, and therefore should assume collective efforts to repair the damage.

The decolonisation efforts discussed in this chapter have been dependent on forging effective partnerships with external organisations and stakeholders. These connections and mutually beneficial relationships are important if decolonisation is to take more tangible forms. Building these necessary criteria for a university to act as an ‘anchor institution,’ however, is not always straight-forward. Establishing local connections with external partners and organisations can be time consuming and require significant resource. Establishing these local networks, while fruitful, is often undermined by academic working environments in which funding and workloads provide significant barriers. This is often compounded by the institutional difficulties of many heritage organizations, especially at the local level. However, such limitations can also make collaboration mutually beneficial and provide an effective and low-cost

solution to some of the obstacles. Academic departments and students can support the work and practices of local galleries and museums by providing support for particular projects and initiatives, while students are provided with avenues to develop their own critical abilities outside the classroom, as well as potentially gain valuable additional experience. Furthermore, while my discussion has centred on the discipline of history, such localized decolonisation work could also involve staff and students working in or alongside other disciplines such as artists, illustrators, and writers that can experiment with various forms of public engagement and means of communicating historical knowledge.

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