Decolonizing History: Enquiry and Practice

INTRODUCTION

‘Decolonization’ has been a key framework for historical research, but it has assumed increasingly varied and nebulous meanings in teaching, where calls for ‘decolonizing’ are largely divorced from investigating the actual end of empire. But how does ‘decolonizing history’ relate to the study of decolonization? And can history, as a field of practice and study, be ‘decolonized’ without considering histories of empire?

The following conversation between Amanda Behm, Christienna Fryer, Emma Hunter, Elisabeth Leake, Su Lin Lewis, Sarah Miller Davenport tackles some of these issues by reflecting on participants’ own experiences of teaching histories of empire and decolonization in academic departments that are beginning to address demands to decolonize the curriculum and teaching practice. It explores how their research and teaching practices have informed each other, and might shape broader practice across the United Kingdom and internationally.

This piece has emerged as a result of three different but related discussions. Some of what we talk about below stems from a two-year White Rose Collaboration across the Universities of Leeds, Sheffield, and York: ‘Imperial Afterlives: the Crisis of Nation and Citizen in Historical Perspective’. Its goal was to explore how the relationship between state and citizen was alternately developed, rejected and reformed during decolonization, and thus to generate new insights into current conflicts and claims over political subjecthood, legitimate governance and the idea of the nation.1 It also sparked discussions that coincided with the second impetus for this conversation piece: the 2018 report on race and ethnicity by the Royal Historical Society (RHS). This revealed not only the daunting problems that confront history departments trying to embrace and advocate diversity, but also the unequal burdens placed on their very small BME minorities. Discussions of the RHS report led the members of the White Rose Collaboration to reach out to other early and mid-career academics from history departments across the United Kingdom so as to begin a broader conversation about the report’s findings, opening onto the third major font of concern: the broader issue of ‘decolonizing history’.

While all involved in the following conversation are modern historians with interests in empire or decolonization as currently recognized subfields, the participants bring to it diverse perspectives, varied research expertise, and a wide range of teaching experiences, which they
hope will contribute to broader conversations among academics, students, and the public about what ‘decolonizing history’ means and entails. As a group, our focus is chronologically and perhaps thematically limited, and we cannot speak for all historians. Nevertheless, our work collectively suggests that, rather than occurring through tokenism or the one-off ‘flipping’ of reading lists and course themes, to decolonize history requires sustained, critical study of empire, power, and political contestation, alongside close reflection on constructed categories of social difference. We’re eager to engage a range of colleagues across historical and other disciplinary fields in exploring how the study of empire and decolonization can bring a necessary global perspective to what too often tend to be framed as domestic debates on race, ethnicity, and gender.

This conversation developed over the course of six months from October 2018 through March 2019. Initial questions posed by Behm, Leake, and Miller-Davenport were further refined and reframed in subsequent group discussions, face to face and via email. Participants crafted their own responses individually before the collective met to discuss core themes.

1. What does it mean to ‘decolonize history’ in the context of current debates about decolonizing curricula, especially in the humanities? Can we ‘decolonize’ without centreing historical studies of empire and decolonization?

Elisabeth Leake (EL): The idea of ‘decolonizing history’ seems ubiquitous today, and with good reason. In popular media, in education-focused publications, and among history practitioners and students, really interesting conversations are taking place that emphasize the need to diversify and rethink how history is taught and understood. However, while the number of calls for decolonizing history seem to be growing, what ‘decolonizing’ actually means is never entirely clear. Commentary frequently appears to conflate it with diversifying reading lists and bringing in more BME scholarship. But, as a scholar whose work is rooted in histories of decolonization, particularly in South Asia, I am struck by the fact that decolonization as a historical phenomenon is conspicuously absent. There is little discussion or reflection on the processes of empire and its ending, even though these are historical forces that have been absolutely crucial to the world we live in today. Empire and decolonization have fundamentally shaped politics and society across the twenty-first-century world, and they also are largely responsible for systems of inequality.
that influence our institutions today – can we really separate the lack of BME scholars or the whiteness of our curriculum from the systems that empire produced?

*Su Lin Lewis (SL)*: The process of ‘decolonizing history’ is broadly about making historians aware of and committed to addressing the disproportionate focus on Eurocentric history in the profession, and attuned to the structures of power underlying this. The study of decolonization rests on an understanding of imperial power and its implication in structures of racial discrimination, as well as the fraught processes of disentangling colonized societies from the economic, political, social, cultural, and psychological damage of imperial rule. At its heart, the historical study of empire and decolonization also gives us a global story. Empires were engines of migration and social change, which generated vast wealth in metropolitan societies while exploiting the resources of the Global South. These are necessary narratives that move us beyond the dominance of national and Eurocentric histories.

*Amanda Behm (AB)*: Empires were and are products of fundamental material and ideological conflict. They nurtured global inequalities, generated and diverted wealth and entitlements, and forged enduring belief systems – nationalist parochialisms not least. If decolonizing history encompasses confronting, examining, and in turn dismantling chauvinist and supremacist ways of knowing and doing history, then I might suggest a slight caveat to Su Lin’s critique of dominant national and Eurocentric histories in that we need more, not less, critical engagement with suspect traditions. But this has to be done conscientiously. It would involve challenging received wisdom and disciplinary reference points so that neither nations nor regions nor empires lurk in our assumptions as natural, coherent, unidirectional entities. There is important work to be done to reframe metropolitan, ‘Western’, elite, ruling sources and put competing visions and projects across space and time in conversation with each other. To undermine Eurocentrism, we need to expose its inner workings and fissures relative to the much wider contingencies that brought it into being.

More immediately for us as scholars and educators, it’s helpful to connect with work that reveals how struggles over the trajectory of nineteenth and twentieth-century empires informed key aspects of the disciplines and hierarchies we still inhabit. Across the Channel or Atlantic, I’d point to essential work by Pierre Singaravélou and Robert Vitalis, among others. My own
research on imperial Britain has explored debates over political inclusion, difference, and the nature of empire that informed the institutionalization of historical and social scientific knowledge. To apply this research, we might interrogate the genealogies of current institutional structures and practices. What standards of admission, achievement-oriented metrics, or rules for academic and political engagement may we still be taking for granted despite calls for curricular reform? What are the institutional and sectoral obstacles that still need to be overcome?

Christienna Fryar (CF): My responses to the recent pushes in the UK academy to ‘decolonize history’ are influenced by my own position as a historian of Britain who is also deeply engaged with Caribbean studies. That, though, is not the entire picture, since my identity as an African American woman (with Caribbean and Black British heritage) who began working in the UK in 2017 informs my scholarship and teaching as well as the ways I think about these questions. I am not (yet) a historian of decolonization, so I think we can decolonize history through other channels than histories of decolonization. Yet for the reasons Amanda elaborates, it’s harder to imagine how that will happen without sustained attention to the imperial contexts that produced the knowledge hierarchies we’re trying to topple. In this sense, I see something of a category difference between ‘histories of empire’ and ‘histories of decolonization’, in that while the latter histories help explain the shape of the contemporary world, the former are perhaps more crucial to understanding the shape of the contemporary academy. In other words, medievalists might not need to engage deeply in the literatures on decolonization, although certainly they can and some do quite fruitfully. Yet it is the histories of empires that explain why departments may have three or four people working on various phases and places in medieval Europe and no one working on the Kingdom of Benin in the thirteenth century. We can’t ‘decolonize history’ if we can’t diagnose how we got here.

Emma Hunter (EH): My contribution to this conversation comes from my perspective as a historian of Africa and a historian of decolonization. The roots of African history as a subject taught in university history departments in the UK and elsewhere lie in the era of independence and decolonization. New history departments in new universities in Africa, such as the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, were hubs of pioneering scholarship. A new generation of historians of Africa rejected colonial accounts of Africa’s past. The histories they wrote were
shaped by the context of nationalism and post-colonial nation-building, and demanded methodological and conceptual innovation. Early issues of the *Journal of African History*, established in 1960, show how closely that generation of historians of Africa worked with neighbouring disciplines such as archaeology and historical linguistics, and employed new methodological tools such as oral history, to ensure that the histories of those who did not leave written texts behind were not forgotten. The project of researching and writing African history is, I would therefore suggest, at its heart a decolonizing project. Remembering these roots is particularly important in today’s challenging research environment where research funding is tight, and there is often pressure for speedy publication to fit into national research audit cycles. All of this can lead historians to turn to ‘easier’ topics or those for which written (often Anglophone or Francophone) sources are available. Recent discussions around decolonizing history provide a welcome opportunity for us to refresh and renew the radical origins of our field. For those of us based in universities outside Africa, engaging with these debates can help us to make the case for language-learning, long-term fieldwork, partnership with historians based in Africa, and working closely with allied disciplines.

*SL:* I come to this discussion as a historian of Southeast Asia engaged in the methodologies of global and transnational history, and have researched and taught in area studies and history departments in the UK and US. While I agree that historians need to interrogate Eurocentric and imperial histories and engage closely with histories of decolonization, we can also advocate for the study of more inclusive, multi-stranded global histories rooted in area studies alongside this. The in-depth study of particular geographic regions has long given us ways of looking at Asian, African, Middle Eastern, Caribbean, and Latin American societies outside of Eurocentric and imperial frameworks. As early as 1939, the Dutch Indonesianist J. C. Van Leur urged scholars of Southeast Asia to challenge the lens of Eurocentric and imperial history, which saw the region ‘from the deck of the ship, the rampart of the fortress, the high gallery of the trading house’.

Following Van Leur, a generation of scholars of Southeast Asia in the 1960s pushed for the study of ‘autonomous histories’, viewing the region as an area of historical study in its own right, not simply when brought into contact with China, India, or the West. While historians of earlier eras attempted to recover an ‘authentic’ Southeast Asia that was disrupted by European intrusion, historians of the modern period sought to recover a sense of indigenous agency by tracing the
growth of an anti-colonial strand of nationalist, political consciousness. The rich historiographies of area studies – born out of dialogues between Western scholars and scholars from Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, or the Middle East – provide us with fascinating tensions between the drive towards ‘autonomous histories’ and an understanding of the way in which world regions became inevitably connected and fraught with unequal power relations before, during, and after the period of European colonization. As Emma has highlighted above, and as Eleanor Newbigin has recently shown in her discussion of the decolonized curriculum of the School of Oriental and African Studies, an appreciation of and advocacy for the richness of area-studies approaches should be another important component of decolonizing history curricula.⁵

Research on decolonization can only benefit from a joint effort of scholars who draw on different area studies approaches; we might encourage more of this among our graduate students. I’ve been lucky enough to co-lead, with Carolien Stolte at the University of Leiden, a team of researchers examining transnational networks of decolonization and Afro-Asian solidarity in the 1950s and 1960s; we have argued, as a collective, that a truly global study of decolonization can only be fruitfully brought to bear through a group of scholars who can view this era from multiple languages, archives, and perspectives, and who abandon the ‘lone scholar’ model by collaborating closely, from the point of archival inquiry through to the research and writing process.⁶ Productive discussions such as these are another example of this approach!

Sarah Miller-Davenport (SMD): This conversation has highlighted the various scales at which decolonizing history must take place: the disciplinary and professional level; the institutional and university level; the curricular level; and in our individual research and teaching. Decolonizing history at those broader levels unquestionably requires a deep engagement with empire as a shaping force, but once you get further down the list I don’t know if empire must necessarily be at the centre of our analysis. For one thing, I worry that if we insist on emphasizing the histories of empire and decolonization, we might exclude our colleagues who work on, say, the early middle ages in Britain – and if we leave people out, we also risk letting them ‘off the hook’ in addressing the imperial foundations of the discipline. At the same time, as others have pointed out, decolonizing research and teaching might mean actively decentring empire by foregrounding the autonomous histories of people outside of Europe and the United States.
Decolonizing domestic European and North American history involves making race a key problematic. And here empire might play a more or less important role, depending on the subject matter. While a growing scholarship traces the roots of prejudices based on ethnic, religious, and colour difference as far back as antiquity, the notion that the world could be divided into a handful of distinct races really emerged in the context of New World slavery and European overseas colonialism. In US history, however, a good deal of excellent scholarship on race in American life does not directly engage questions of empire, despite a growing historiography on the relationship between US empire and race—most notably on how white supremacy both fuelled and was produced by settler colonialism in North American and, later, in America’s overseas territories. But, because of the domestication of racial slavery, empire need not necessarily be at the heart of individual works on race in US history. British history strikes me as quite different. Because the vast majority of nonwhite racialized subjects were physically outside of Britain, in overseas colonies, it would be near impossible to divorce race and empire. (The same goes for other European imperial powers.) But there is a potential problem with linking race and empire, which is the risk that race then becomes an issue that is basically external to the metropole. And this is my sense of how race is taught in British history: as an analytic that only applies to the history of Britain’s overseas colonies, or as a problem originating in, and mostly confined to the United States. (This was a point made by Gary Younge at a recent Imperial Afterlives-sponsored conference at Leeds.) There is a tendency in the UK to assume that race is not relevant to your work if you research and teach the history of white people in Britain—a position that not only severely restricts the parameters of what constitutes British history, but also overlooks the ways in which whiteness itself was constructed in an imperial context. So in this case it’s not just a matter of insisting on the connections between race and empire, but of better integrating race and empire into understandings of the ‘domestic’.

*CF:* This is a really important point. To an astonishing extent, British history as practised in the UK appears virtually unequipped to engage with questions of race, despite its utter centrality to many aspects of British history. On a personal level, I find this shocking, but on a professional level, it has revealed stark differences between the development of the field of British history in the UK and the US that warrant more consideration. When I was in graduate school in the US starting in the mid 2000s, British history effectively was British imperial history. Scholars like...
Antoinette Burton, Mrinalini Sinha, Catherine Hall, Kathleen Wilson and others emphasized the need to think about Britain and its empire as ‘mutually constitutive’ rather than as separate entities with disconnected histories. Since this trend was dominant, British history in the US was to some significant degree grappling with histories of race. Here in the UK, British imperial history is still mostly treated separately from modern British history, with the undesirable result, as Sarah points out, that many see race as an irrelevant analytical category for modern British history. This fact goes some way to explaining the longstanding marginalization of Black British history in the academy. It also means that while calls to ‘decolonize history’ in this country are in many ways genuine, those who are in theory supposed to do this work come from the generations of scholars who have been trained and encouraged not to think about race.

EL: Christienna’s point about the dearth of training is crucial, though I hope this is changing with newer generations of historians (and students). I still feel strongly that particularly in the United Kingdom, departments need to find ways to teach histories of empire, especially in the first-year curriculum. Understanding how empires were created, how they affected communities across the world, and how they created problems of systemic violence, racism, and inequality is fundamental. Additionally, teaching processes of decolonization provides a great opportunity for emphasizing the agency of non-Western actors and for reminding students that not all people see the world through a European or North American lens. Requiring students to study imperialism forces both them and us, their teachers, to take a more global view of the past and present.

2. How do we promote critical engagement with questions of power, political contestation, and constructed categories of social difference in our work?

SL: While it’s necessary to study the struggles of colonized societies to free themselves from colonial rule, histories of anti-colonialism often have their own problems, including ethnocentrism, the subversion of indigenous feminism, and a tendency to valorize narratives of male nationalist elites. Women have long been marginalized in narratives of anti-colonial nationalism and decolonization, though they often strategically made use of partnerships with feminists in the West and across the Global South to campaign for equality and rights at home, and often were criticized for being ‘inauthentic’, ‘unpatriotic’, or ‘Westernized’ for doing so. To
move beyond imperial and national frameworks, we must also adopt global and transnational approaches to think about how diverse groups of men and women in Asia and Africa interacted within and across the boundaries of emerging nation-states to push for political and social change, conscious of the ways in which they were ever connected to a much wider world.

**EH:** I very much agree with Su Lin’s points. I’d add that writing global histories also means finding ways to explore the histories of those men and women who were prevented by material or political constraints from travelling, but instead created and sustained connections through print and epistolary networks, sometimes writing in European languages, but at other times writing in vernaculars or regional lingua francas.

**CF:** Not all of us are writing global histories, and indeed I would categorize my current work as explicitly British imperial history in its focus on changing ideas about what responsibilities British imperial governments had toward Jamaicans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But these histories too should engage with questions of power and constructions of difference. For example, imperial debates about the extent to which asylum patients in Jamaica were due protection from the metropolitan government were entirely bound up in postemancipation shifts in racial ideologies. I have also been thinking and writing about the bureaucratic processes by which certain freedpeople’s stories emerge out of the imperial archive, while most do not. Intentionally questioning how certain material ended up in imperial archives while other material didn’t has been important to my own practice of writing and simultaneously challenging imperial history.

**AB:** I wonder if we can collectively expand our thinking and teaching on the relationship between ‘decolonial’ demands and longer, interdisciplinary traditions of postcolonial critique, especially in the UK. This was a point recently raised at a White Rose Consortium event: that there seems to be a disjunction between calls to ‘decolonize the syllabus’ and the active deployment of insights from postcolonial theory, critical race theory, and ‘new imperial’ history within and against wider historical practice, something that Christienna has also mentioned. Of course, there are already inroads – for example, Emma reflects on African history as an inherently decolonizing project. But when it comes to British history as the dominant field in UK
history departments, it’s not enough to replace existing titles or perspectives with those by individuals from marginalized groups when the basic criteria for civic belonging go unexamined. Domestic and imperial history need to be taken as a unity and grounded and regrounded in critical race consciousness. So, for its suspicion of the nation-state, its keen scrutiny of constructions of difference, and not least its own historical specificity, we might insist that foundational postcolonial scholarship should claim a central place on general British history syllabi.

*EL*: Amanda makes an important point, which complements Su Lin’s observation. I would argue that studying processes of decolonization and resistance provides another way for us to decentre history – particularly in the twentieth century – from that of the nation-state. This is an important area of study in transnational history and in the history of decolonization: recognition that the nation-state was not the be-all, end-all for many former colonial subjects. The work of scholars like Fred Cooper and, more recently, Lydia Walker, demonstrates that there were numerous decolonizations in the twentieth century. Some of these came to fruition, in the forms of the states we know today, but for many former subjects, others did not. It’s important to study the unevenness of decolonization and reflect on power dynamics in all the countries that emerged from empire – both former metropoles and newly independent states. Why, in so many decolonized countries, for example Pakistan, did visions of democracy, equality, and representation not come to pass? Additionally, many influential groups of non-state actors – networks of anti-colonial militants, ethno-nationalist secessionist movements, supranational partnerships like the Non-Aligned Movement – emerged as a consequence of decolonization processes. In this way, we can see how the ‘moment’ of decolonization in the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s actually created new forms of political contestation and competitions for power that persist today.

*SMD*: Much of the recent work in the history of US foreign relations revolves around these questions – how American engagement with the world outside its borders shaped both global and domestic relations of power. Interestingly, the push for this more expansive ‘US and the world’ field came from scholars of domestic US history rather than traditional diplomatic historians. They brought with them a critical understanding of race and gender that the histories of high-
power politics lacked. This shift within the field has also meant a new emphasis on American empire. Compared to European empires, American empire has tended to be more diffuse and ‘informal’. This can make it harder to study in a way, because there is no centralized colonial archive to speak of, but it also really opens the field to a cultural approach. I find Paul Kramer’s framing very helpful here. He talks about the ‘imperial’ as a category of analysis rather than an entity – ‘something to think with’ – that helps us to discern the varied ways in which US actors have sought to exert power on the global stage (and how those exertions reverberated domestically).11

3. What can we do in our teaching and in shaping the academic environment in our departments beyond diversifying reading lists and course themes? What has or hasn’t worked for you in your teaching?

*CF*: The way that discussion of decolonizing so quickly turns to reading lists is vexing, in part because I am never entirely sure what this means. Are we supposed to be adding texts onto ‘further reading’ sections? Surely that is performative rather than substantive. And if we’re adding or swapping texts in the set reading, what is the criteria? It’s never clear to me whether the imagined goal is to add texts that talk about the issues we imagine a decolonized curriculum should encompass or whether we are also pointedly adding texts written by scholars of colour. And if we’re doing the latter, are we flagging that to our students, and how? This is something I’ve been thinking about because while my set readings skew quite strongly toward work written by women and women of colour, to the extent that students pay attention to this, it is probably more obvious that many of these scholars are women, but less obvious which are scholars of colour.

*SMD*: I agree. What has not worked is when I look at a given reading list, realize it lacks readings on or by people of colour, and attempt to fill these gaps after the module has already been designed. The key, for me, is to make questions of race and empire central to the way I structure my modules in the first place, which almost automatically means including works by and about people from marginalised groups. So in designing a module, I aim to expose students to the ways in which processes of empire, decolonization, and globalization shape relations of
power – both globally and domestically – as well as categories of social difference. This often requires challenging traditional approaches to particular historical fields. My course on US foreign relations, for instance, emphasizes the role of the US as an empire. It also goes beyond the study of high-policy actors to look at the various cultural and social forces shaping, or shaped by, the US role in the world. That broader approach means that students can better understand the ideological context in which foreign relations unfold, and can discern how race – or gender, or other categories of social difference – are woven into various encounters and policy decisions. That does not always mean that race or empire are the central issues in every text we read (though they often are), but those questions are at the very least hovering in the background.

I will say here that I suppose it is something of a luxury for me to teach US history to British students, as they are completely willing to accept the history of racism and imperialism there. It is more challenging to teach this critical view of the US in the United States itself, or to teach British history in that vein in the UK.

AB: Amen to what Sarah says – it’s been bracing, to say the least, to teach race as a historical problem in a domestic as well as overseas context in a British department. It’s something I’ve been trying to address, and something around which my colleague Sam Wetherell has designed modules very effectively. But broadly, I say we need to put or keep histories of decolonization in view as urgent and unfinished and, as Elisabeth has said, to ground them in a geographically and chronologically ecumenical study of empire. UK undergraduates, more than the US students I previously encountered, seem to come to the study of late-modern history thinking of empires as black boxes, as good or bad things that preceded nation-states, and are somewhat shy to engage with either critical theory or public debate that brings these things roaring back to the present day. But then, I’ve also seen UK groups arrive at more original and far-reaching conclusions about historical agency and interpretation after just several weeks’ work together, despite or maybe because of the process of grappling with difficult texts and positions for the first time.

CF: Amanda’s point about histories of decolonization as ‘urgent and unfinished’ is crucial, and one I’ve been increasingly taking up in my own teaching of Caribbean history. Like Emma and Su Lin, I believe that for some of our fields, decolonizing history is as much about insisting that certain geographic regions are important as it is about changing the approach to traditional
subjects. At all levels of UK education, from primary school onward, the history of the Caribbean has virtually no permanent place in the curriculum, not least because popular narratives have managed to categorize the region as a place of no sustained concern to British history or the nation of Britain. One measure of this is the significant differences in knowledge about Columbus’s journeys among students in the US and the UK respectively. It makes sense, of course, that British students know less about Columbus because he isn’t part of national origin stories here. At first glance, this seems like a good thing; celebratory narratives haven’t set in. Yet I noticed toward the end of my time teaching in the US that when I asked students what they knew about Columbus, I increasingly got an onslaught of corrective narratives, as students eagerly relayed what they had been taught about Columbus’s role in the decimation of indigenous populations across the Americas. Many used words like ‘murderer’ and ‘genocide’. It was a notable shift from even a few years earlier. Anecdotally, it appeared to be New York City secondary school teachers who had most aggressively challenged Columbus myths, and I doubt that was a coincidence. In other words, over time, those teaching more students of Caribbean heritage (Haitians, Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans, in particular) were decolonizing the curriculum to provide students with the tools and context they needed to understand their place in the world. Caribbean history provides a route to do that, especially given the extent to which Caribbean history sheds harsh light on European history. Indeed, the students regaling me with Columbus correctives were not taking my Caribbean courses, but an introductory survey on Europe from 1500 to the present. For many, this was the only university history course they would ever take.

*EL:* Christienna makes an important point, one also made in the RHS report: where does decolonization – or histories of empire, or area studies – fit into the pre-university curriculum? One of my most memorable experiences at Leeds has been teaching second-year students about decolonization – in this instance, the Mau Mau in Kenya, the court cases from 2009–11 that held former British colonial officials to account for torture practices, and the revelations concerning the migrated archives, the thousands of documents that British officials sought to conceal. My students, all of whom were British, were horrified and demanded to know why they had not previously known of this. It sparked a classwide discussion about the fact that Britain’s imperial history simply is not widely taught in GCSE or A-level history. This is obviously a problem that
extends far beyond higher education and speaks to Amanda’s point about how Britain’s imperial past has embedded certain practices. How do we enable our students to think about these issues at an earlier age? Some academics, like Sarah Ansari at Royal Holloway, have done really incredible work trying to develop programmes to introduce British schoolchildren to issues like South Asia’s partition. And it’s heartening to see A-level courses like ‘The Road to Independence: India 1914–48’, but this is only a single case study – and one not widely available at schools across England. The fact is that very few academics – especially if you’re early-career, trying to manage a full teaching and administrative load, and pursuing your own research – have the time for such activities. I don’t have an answer to this problem, but it’s a point that needs further reflection. How can academics in higher education influence curriculum reform outside of universities? How can we work collaboratively? Is this even our job?

**EH:** Like others in this conversation, I teach students who often encounter African history for the first time in my classes and may have little knowledge of Africa’s geography or history. Where they have encountered Africa’s past in their previous study, it has often been through the eyes of outsiders, from European explorers or colonial officials to, in the more recent past, development experts. In my teaching, I seek to flip this perspective, and start from Africa, while also placing Africa in a wider context of unequal global power relations. Students engage directly with the voices of the historical actors we study, through the close analysis of primary sources. At the same time, I try to make visible the fact that the sources they are reading are often in translation – by, for example, presenting the original Swahili alongside the English translation – and bring out the processes which mean that the available texts or objects have often been mediated by colonial censorship regimes or the creation of the colonial archive. And I introduce students to the challenges of researching African history and the ways in which historians have always worked closely with scholars from other disciplines to better understand Africa’s past.

**SL:** Students, particularly in the UK, need to have a fundamental understanding of the process of empire and its role in creating racial categories and processes of discrimination which we continue to see today. Alongside this, we need to pay attention to the role of indigenous agency and the ways in which colonized actors challenged such categories. My own department at Bristol was long known for imperial history, and up until last year ‘Introduction to the British
Empire’ was a mandatory first-year course. It was, in essence, built around a conventional imperial history course, dominated by perspectives from the metropole; in recent years, area-studies colleagues (including Jonathan Saha and Rob Skinner) tried to include more non-European perspectives. While the course had its problems, it did provide a good foundation for first-year students to think critically about the trajectories of empire and imperial power, increasingly from multiple perspectives. For this reason, I had mixed feelings about our abandonment of the course in favour of a ‘Modern World’ first-year course (as many departments now have) which has allowed for more modern European and global perspectives, including the study of communism, capitalism, institutions, and environmental changes that have had an important impact on the non-European world. I’m glad, however, that we’ve also included a mandatory second-year ‘Global History’ course in our curriculum to complement this. While we will keep imperial history as a strong thread within these two courses, I think we now have scope to explore other kinds of histories alongside. We also have fantastic lecturers, Sumita Mukherjee and Saima Nasar, who are teaching histories of migration across Britain, Africa, and Asia, as well as Black British history, which have added a much-needed and in-depth dimension to the curriculum around race and connected histories of empire.

In my own teaching I’ve designed courses that have a broad comparative reach, moving away from imperial and national histories to examine global histories of women and modernity in Asia and the emergence of the modern Asian city, as well as connected histories of anti-colonial radicalism and decolonization in Asia and Africa. I usually divide my classes into small groups, with each taking on readings from particular Asian or African countries along similar themes, which we’ll then discuss together. This works well in highlighting the diversity of experiences of modernity, urbanism, feminism, and decolonization across Asia and Africa, and thinking along the lines of pan-Asian or Afro-Asian connections and comparisons instead of a colony-metropole axis.

*EL*: I arrived at the study of decolonization and twentieth-century South Asian history in a roundabout way. As an undergraduate in the United States, I took courses that covered a huge array of topics but was particularly drawn to British imperial history. At that stage, it was the policy-making undertaken by white colonial officials that interested me, but over the course of postgraduate study and a postdoctoral fellowship, I became much more engaged with subaltern
perspectives. Teaching that has really cemented my passion for promoting history from a non-Western perspective, while also making me far more aware of, and radical in, my own status as a BME scholar in a largely white department. Like Emma, I flip traditional ‘international history’ on its head when I teach decolonization by using primary and secondary sources that prioritize Asian, African, and Middle Eastern voices and perspectives and focusing less on assumed European and North American centres of power. This has been an effective way to introduce students to a more global perspective and to encourage British students to rethink the history of their homeland. It has been gratifying to watch students realize how significant the end of empire has been and continues to be.

On a semantic point, I have called my decolonization module ‘Anti-colonialism and the end of empire’. Framing the discussion in terms of ‘anti-colonialism’ has been particularly useful for explaining to my students that we are prioritizing the perspectives of countries and communities that fought against colonial rule and took the lead in their countries’ independence. I am actively trying to teach international relations in the mid-twentieth century from the perspective of leaders and societies in the decolonizing world, moving away from Western-centric histories. Where discussing ‘decolonization’ can fall into the trap of focusing on white men in Whitehall, ‘anti-colonialism’ unabashedly locates this history in the Global South. (Incidentally, it also has provided a good talking point if a student asks why we study few primary sources that show empire was ‘good’ or ‘bad’, harking back to Amanda’s earlier observation).

AB: I should say that, in teaching comparative empires, my approach has been just a bit of the opposite, in that I’ve found it useful to ask students to get to know and to take seriously different schools of thought and interpretation regarding ‘the imperial nerve centre’ from the outset, from liberal, Marxist-Leninist, diplomatic and strategic models to postcolonial and critical theory. This at least gives the vast prospect of ‘imperial history’ some identifying features. We then put those traditions in conversation with each other, laterally as well as over time to think about why some models of global history came to hold sway at certain moments, how they diagnosed power discrepancies, and what remedies they proposed. The goal is definitely not to awe students with a canon but to give them the opportunity to reckon with different, pivotal understandings of the past and to claim their own authorial position. But Elisabeth’s comment does prompt me to keep
thinking about how this exercise might better support a decolonizing approach asking who speaks for the past and how they come to claim authority.

SL: I agree with Elisabeth’s point about the usefulness of anti-colonialism as a framework for teaching histories from the point of view of the Global South, and have taught this myself for similar reasons. I’d add that alongside this we must equally take a critical approach to anti-colonial nationalism that is attuned to issues of race, class, and gender.

EH: Another challenge we face is how to move beyond the individual course to the curriculum level. In my own teaching, I am committed to decentring the European and Western historical experience. Students welcome the opportunity to read and engage with ideas which challenge their core normative thinking about the world, for instance by reading the first President of Tanzania Julius Nyerere’s discussion of one-party democracy. But students arrive at university with a set of assumptions about the world we live in today and the historical processes which created it, and many of these assumptions are implicitly or explicitly reinforced in parts of school and university curricula. A good example is the category ‘modernization’, often used unproblematically in a way which resuscitates older divisions of the world into ‘advanced’ and ‘backward’ societies. Simply ‘globalizing’ first-year courses, in the sense of paying attention to the world beyond Europe while leaving such central conceptual categories untouched, means that the task of deconstructing such categories is delayed until students enrol in more specialized courses later in their degree programme. And so I think the RHS report provides a valuable opportunity to create a wider conversation among colleagues within departments about the curriculum as a whole and what it might mean for all historians to think seriously about how we decentre the modern West in our teaching.

CF: I have also run into some real difficulties when it comes to my teaching. The relative rigidity of teaching structures here, in marked contrast to the flexibility and mostly hands-off approach to teaching in the US with which some of us are familiar, makes it difficult to start the process of overhauling department programmes. I would never describe history in the US academy as decolonized, and to a certain extent, the call to decolonize is more muted in the US. Yet it is easier for individual lecturers there to decolonize their own modules in meaningful ways.
Moreover, while UK students take more discrete history modules than their US counterparts – the latter do liberal-arts degrees – many of these modules are significantly compressed in comparison. Turning a fifteen- to sixteen-week course that met two or three times a week into an eleven-week module that has only one lecture a week has required that I sacrifice material that I don’t feel is optional. Such a compressed time frame is especially a problem for those of us who have sole departmental responsibility for teaching centuries of multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-state continents, subcontinents, and archipelagos to students encountering all of this material for the first time. Under such pressures these histories may get short curricular shrift. Colleagues teaching thematic modules on a few decades of British history can be safe in the knowledge that other aspects of British history will be covered by other colleagues.

SMD: As Christienna says, part of the burden we all face is the distinct possibility that many of our students are only encountering these kinds of topics, or only doing so in any kind of depth, in our modules. What is our responsibility there? How do we balance the demands to do so many things – decentring the West, emphasizing the imperial in both global and domestic histories, diversifying reading lists to include scholars of colour, etc. – at once?

4. How might the RHS report inform approaches to your teaching and/or research?

EH: Public discussion around decolonizing the curriculum has brought a welcome new dimension to classroom debate in recent years. Discussions around reading lists, for example, provide an opportunity, which we must embrace, to question global inequalities of knowledge production and the challenges which confront many colleagues in history departments in African universities trying to carve out time to conduct research and publish. But these discussions also provide an opportunity to think about the ways in which historical research and writing is both global and segmented. The questions we ask and the histories we research and write are shaped by trends in the discipline but also by the material and political contexts in which we work. This means that historians are both locally rooted and part of global conversations. Discussions around decolonizing the curriculum provide an opportunity for us to be explicit about these aspects of knowledge production.
The question of resources is also an issue for our undergraduate and postgraduate students as they begin to develop their own research projects, particularly at the point of the honours or postgraduate dissertation. My students often approach me with a desire to work on African history topics and expect the same ease of access to research resources that their fellow students working on Western history enjoy, such as digitized archives or newspapers, or translations of key texts. At the postgraduate level, the realities of limited funding for fieldwork travel and language training limit the projects which can be undertaken, as do time constraints which pay little heed to the challenges of, for example, securing research clearance. I therefore welcomed the emphasis in the RHS report on the need for universities and funding councils to commit material resources for expanding research in African history and the history of other regions of the global south.

*SL:* The RHS report found that teaching covering race or BME populations is often allocated to BME staff, regardless of their own specialism. While I think issues of race are being taught more widely – especially by historians of the US, regardless of their race, and increasingly by historians of Europe familiar with post-colonial theory – I think the teaching of ‘global history’ tends to get relegated to a few scholars who do ‘extra-European’ history, regardless of their specialism (these tend to be BME as well as non-BME staff). I’m conscious that I often – admittedly by choice – teach outside my area of immediate regional expertise, Southeast Asia, partly because I enjoy doing so and partly because we currently have no historians teaching on, for instance, the modern Middle East, an area of great interest to our undergraduate students. However, I have used the RHS report to advocate not only that historians across our departments engage in questions of race in their teaching but that more historians of the modern West engage in global and comparative perspectives, by expanding their reach beyond their country or regional specialty and delving into other regional historiographies that resonate with themes in their own research. Given the ubiquity of English-language scholarship, language barriers should not be an excuse to stop historians from exploring these rich historiographies and making connections. The RHS report also notes the impact of this on recruitment of students to the discipline from a wide diversity of backgrounds, and advocates teaching critical histories of empire and globally inclusive histories, and exposing students to a range of approaches outside
Eurocentric frameworks. I’d love to explore further how we might do this not only at university level but at secondary-school level as well.

AB: As others have said, filling gaps on reading lists has limited results – accretion isn’t a good unto itself and students register the incoherence. Like Sarah, I prefer to design modules from the ground up, centring on questions of power and contingency which cut across traditional subfields. But even when that’s been possible, I’ve still struggled to get the formula right. For example, when teaching the first run of a module on the ‘Color Line’ in British and American worlds, I found UK students to be reticent in group discussions that they thought required swift verdicts. Many of them recognized race and colonialism as sensitive topics, but most hadn’t engaged with these issues before and seemed to feel they should either say the ‘right’ thing or withhold comment, especially around more unfamiliar concepts such as settler colonialism. But the RHS report has encouraged me not to go overboard in revising the module, not to bend over backwards to eliminate discomfort or awkwardness. I can get students questioning race and difference by engaging with narratives, case studies, and contemporary debates while also remaining firm that they need to recognize and grapple with major critical interventions – for instance from Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, Paul Gilroy, Patrick Wolfe – as historical positions and heuristic devices. It’s about assembling tools, not hitting a set of talking points.

SMD: Coming to the UK from the US, I was quite surprised to realize how poorly race was integrated into British history here, and I think a big part of the problem lies in postgraduate training. It would be difficult to get through a US PhD on modern history in any field without spending considerable time on race as a category of historical analysis, even if race is not the main focus of your research. So I do hope that the RHS report triggers a broader conversation not just about inserting more race and empire into undergraduate teaching, but about how we prepare professional historians at the PhD stage. The recent push to make doctoral students finish in three years is not going to help any of this. In any case, given that there are no comprehensive exams here, this would probably mean reforming the MA curriculum.

Students must also be empowered to play a larger role in shaping the university and its curriculum. One of the reasons American higher education is somewhat ahead of the curve on engaging with race as a category of analysis and promoting more inclusive national and
transnational histories is because of the Black Studies and Ethnic Studies movements of the 1960s and 1970s. This was a student-led effort to upend traditional white-centred curricula and, whatever its limits, it did have a transformative effect on the way history is taught in American college classrooms. There are now few major American universities without an African American Studies or Ethnic Studies programme. There has really been no equivalent in the UK. But while the US does not provide a perfect model – in contrast to the UK, it’s easier to create new interdisciplinary programs in the US – I do think that it offers students here a way to frame their demands. University administrations are often more receptive to appeals for change from students than they are from staff. Most staff at my own university – though certainly not all – are sympathetic to calls to decolonize the curriculum. But we need more student engagement on the issue if we are to go beyond updating reading lists. The case for new hires, for instance, would be strengthened if we had more students who were vocal in demanding it.

EH: My own institution, the University of Edinburgh, provides a really interesting example in this regard. A team of students led by Henry Mitchell and Tom Cunningham have developed a fantastic collaborative project called ‘Uncover Ed’. Their mission is to research, write and bring to a wide audience the forgotten histories of the many students from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean who have studied at the University of Edinburgh over the past 300 years and, in their words, to ‘situate the “global” status of the University of Edinburgh in its rightful imperial and colonial context’. Projects like this can play a hugely important role in transforming understanding of our universities and their histories.

CF: There can be a real danger, especially in this country that is still struggling to incorporate Black British History into the academy, that the few scholars of colour working in history departments are solely teaching histories of the Global South, making the histories of the Global South the preserve of white scholars and a few scholars of colour, while European histories are only about white people, written by white scholars, and taught by white scholars. Again, thinking back to that European history survey in the US, more than one student told me that their interest in European history grew once they stepped into the room and realized there was a Black woman in the front who was prepared to connect European history to the histories that mattered to them. Sarah is right to point to PhD training in the UK as a major factor here, although even within the
current three- to four-year system, many students are encouraged to develop familiarity with theories of gender, class, and sexuality. It’s not that there is no time to think about race; it’s that students aren’t told to make time to think about race. The shorter PhD does have real costs in terms of breadth of teaching expertise, but where expertise allows, departments need to be more thoughtful about the messages sent by traditional approaches to staffing.

Another issue I have faced throughout my career is being recognized as a historian of Britain. That has always been my primary scholarly affiliation, and within the various scholarly organizations dedicated to British history, I am mostly understood that way. But no matter how forcefully I assert that, I am frequently described as everything but. The most common way that people try to categorize me is as an Atlantic historian – surprisingly people outside the field of Caribbean history are less likely to think of me as a Caribbeanist – despite the fact that many definitions of Atlantic history stop well before the post-emancipation period. This trend continued in my first few years in the UK, especially when it came to curricular offerings in British history. At a previous institution in the UK, I was never part of the Modern Britain survey teaching team, though I pushed for it. I pushed for this because it is my area of expertise, and I wanted to contribute to department offerings in this field. But I also pushed for it because part of decolonizing history is also about confronting deeply-held (but often unspoken) ideas about what kinds of people teach what kinds of history – and for British history in particular, what subjects and topics count within the history of Britain.

AB: To partially echo Christienna, I have also been pondering my position as a US-trained ‘British’ historian in a UK department: that is, whether my training and research consigns me here to either ‘British’ or ‘rest of the world’ teaching. My first book focused on UK institutions and figures, and I was hired as a historian of modern Britain and empire. Yet the department allocated me early on almost exclusively comparative and global history modules. I love learning about and restructuring my teaching on those topics, but I do feel there’s some short-changing going on, that students’ only exposure to Indonesian history comes from someone the profession might label a Victorianist (on my bad days, at least), or conversely, that lessons on interwar Britain might barely, if at all, touch on colonial violence, extremist ideologies, or international rivalry.
EL: The RHS report has provoked one particular consideration for me as a historian. Leeds, like so many UK universities, has an overwhelmingly white student body (and School of History). While I have had many conversations about issues of race with students, these are usually the result of the modules I teach and the themes we have covered – the conversations flow from the historical material we study. I plan to use the report more proactively to place discussions of race and inequality front and centre. I think all students, from the very beginning of their degrees, need to be made aware of the realities of history’s ‘whiteness’ in the UK. I plan to use the report to promote awareness, especially among my first-year students, and also to explain the approach I take in my own teaching. My first-year introduction to international history, which is required of all students on the International History and Politics BA, has moved away from Eurocentric approaches, and emphasizes important historical moments like Japan’s rise to power in the early twentieth century, the Chinese revolution, and non-alignment and Afro-Asian solidarity. The report provides a powerful tool for explaining to my students why I have chosen the approach that I have. Students need to be made aware from the outset.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS
This conversation has highlighted both numerous common assumptions as well as, somewhat unexpectedly, points of departure, among historians committed to decolonizing the curriculum. Clearly, there is no ‘one way’ to decolonize history, though we all agree that simply changing reading lists is inadequate. In reflecting on teaching, we largely agree on the need for more sustained engagements with constructed categories of social difference, especially race; the need to emphasize and teach the interactions between national and imperial histories; and the desire to inculcate a more global perspective in our students, for example by changing the ways we teach ‘traditional’ fields of British or international history, shifting the primary source bases for our modules to involve more subaltern non-Western voices, and incorporating the advances made in area studies. The question and debate remain whether such goals are best achieved through modules that specifically focus on empire and imperial history, or whether we can incorporate these shifts in existing modules, particularly given the strictures on module creation and reform in the UK.

‘Decolonizing history’ requires recognizing and training historians to understand the ways that empire has fundamentally shaped the institutions in which we work, research, and teach. We
see opportunities to do this in different ways in our undergraduate teaching, but we also argue that, in agreement with the RHS report, more opportunities are needed for all postgraduates in history to take up training in literatures addressing the long-term development of inequalities and constructions of social difference, not least as doing so will inform their own subsequent intellectual endeavours.

Recently, at a conference roundtable on ‘decolonizing the syllabus’ that built on the discussions above, several of us were challenged with the question of whether there is an ‘endpoint’ to decolonizing history. Given the diversity of ways in which empire informs history and history departments, and the numerous ways in which history needs to be ‘decolonized’ – through the teaching of empire and decolonization, changing teaching and training practices, and shifting the burden of ‘decolonizing’ from select BME and non-BME colleagues to departments as a whole, no endpoint seems to be in sight. But nor should we expect one. Instead, ‘decolonizing history’ remains a constant critical perspective – and a call to sustain an ever-broader collaborative challenge to systems of inequality that continue to pervade history as it is taught, understood, and practised.

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**NOTES AND REFERENCES**


2 For a powerful exception, see Meera Sabaratnam, ‘Decolonizing the Curriculum: What’s All the Fuss About?’, SOAS Blog, 18 Jan. 2017,

4 J. C. Van Leur, in a review of vols II and III of *Geschiedenis van Nederlandsch Indië* (Batavia 1855), ed. F. W. Stapel, 1939, in *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde* vol. 79, 1939, p. 590. vol.? or part?


Abstract

On the back of the Royal Historical Society’s 2018 report on race and ethnicity, as well as ongoing discussions about ‘decolonizing the syllabus’, this is a conversation piece titled, ‘Decolonizing History: Enquiry and Practice’. While ‘decolonization’ has been a key framework for historical research, it has assumed increasingly varied and nebulous meanings in teaching, where calls for ‘decolonizing’ are largely divorced from the actual end of empire. How does ‘decolonizing history’ relate to the study of decolonization? And can history, as a field of practice and study, be ‘decolonized’ without directly taking up histories of empire? Using the RHS report as a starting point, this conversation explores how we ‘decolonise history’. We argue that, rather than occurring through tokenism or the barest diversification of reading lists and course themes, decolonizing history requires rigorous, critical study of empire, power, and political contestation, alongside close reflection on constructed categories of social difference. Bringing together scholars from several UK universities whose teaching and research ranges
across modern historical fields, this piece emphasizes how the study of empire and
decolonization can bring a necessary global perspective to what tend to be framed as domestic
debates on race, ethnicity, and gender.