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Nina Reid-Maroney[1] / Amy Bell[1] / Neil Brooks[2] / Olivette Otele[3] / Richard White[3]

From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to "Countering Colston": Slavery and Memory in a Transatlantic Undergraduate Research Project

[1] Department of History, Huron University College, London, Canada, E-mail: nreidmar@huron.uwo.ca, abell44@huron.uwo.ca
[2] Department of English and Cultural Studies, Huron University College, London, Canada, E-mail: nbrooks@huron.uwo.ca
[3] College of Liberal Arts, Bath Spa University, Bath, UK, E-mail: o.otele@bathspa.ac.uk, r.white2@bathspa.ac.uk

Abstract:
In 2016–17 and in 2018–19, undergraduate students and faculty at Huron University College in London, Canada, and at Bath Spa University in the UK collaborated on an innovative community-based research project: Phantoms of the Past: Slavery and Resistance, History and Memory in the Atlantic World. Our paper outlines the structure of the project, highlights student research, and argues that the Phantoms undergraduate student researchers helped to create an innovative and important body of work on transatlantic Public History and local commemorative practice.

Keywords: Undergraduate research, slavery and abolition, sites of memory, Canada, transatlantic community-based research

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Olivette Otele has introduced the phrase *reluctant sites of memory* to evoke the tension between the memorializing of transatlantic slavery and the hidden histories layered through commemorative public spaces, places, and texts. Using the concept of *reluctant sites of memory* as our starting point, faculty and students at Huron University College in London, Canada, and at Bath Spa University in England created the undergraduate public history project, Phantoms of the Past: Slavery and Resistance, History and Memory in the Atlantic World. The project examines transatlantic histories of slavery and resistance through local sites of memory – monuments, landscapes, communities, photographs, genealogies, and texts – while focusing on three research questions: (1) How are interconnected histories of transatlantic slavery and antislavery remembered, forgotten, commemorated, and ignored? (2) What are slavery's sites of memory, and how does the meaning of memory shift over time? (3) How can our research on slavery, history, and sites of memory shape our understanding of race, identity and freedom in contemporary Canada and Britain? The research team included upper-year undergraduates in English and Cultural Studies, and History from both Huron and Bath Spa Universities, together with faculty researchers Amy Bell, Neil Brooks, Olivette Otele, Nina Reid-Maroney, and Richard White. Centered on a short-term research exchange that funded student travel to each of the partner universities, the project sought to reimagine local histories and sites of memory in their global and connected context. With the second iteration of the project underway in 2018–19, we have had time to reflect on the challenges and possibilities of this cross-departmental, cross-campus, cross-Atlantic project. Throughout the development of *Phantoms of the Past*, the interdisciplinary team kept a clear focus on undergraduate research opportunities, and the introduction of public history methodology to make the undergraduate research experience as rich and complex as the order of research more commonly associated with the graduate student experience[1] Students, faculty, community researchers, and activists created a collaborative network that invited participants working on particular narratives, sites, or visual culture to consider the broad implications of their research in the public sphere. The innovative possibilities of the *Phantoms* project were brought out by using a public history framework to ask students to address why and how their work on the project mattered beyond the classroom.

Experience with other community-based research at Huron and Bath Spa had provided tangible evidence to support the conclusion that community-based learning adds an *immediacy and relevance* to student research across disciplinary boundaries.[2] The *Phantoms* project, however, added a new dimension to community-based research by mobilizing students in academic and community networks with an international scope. Project researchers experienced transatlantic travel itself as a commemorative practice, and throughout the project *Phantoms* asked students to consider how their work (communicated at the project conference, through peer-reviewed publications, and through the project website) could contribute to public discourse on the meaning of the past.

Nina Reid-Maroney is the corresponding author.
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The *Phantoms* project took shape in the midst of a widening debate on the approaching sesquicentennial of Canadian Confederation and the question of how Confederation should be commemorated in light of the findings of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC investigated and reported on Canada's residential school system, concluding that residential schools were part of a cultural genocide perpetrated against Canada's Indigenous peoples.[3] At the same time, against the backdrop of the Black Lives Canada movement and calls for a Canadian apology for slavery, scholars of the African Canadian past drew renewed attention to the long history of racial discrimination in Canada, and the echoes of that history of racial oppression that still reverberate through commemorative landscapes and their carefully curated silences.[4] In Britain, the launch of the *Legacies of British Slave-ownership database* had reopened and shifted debate about public commemoration, historical consciousness, and slavery in the empire.[5] Given the context, we wanted the project to engage in research that could help students contribute to an understanding of their contemporary moment – the long shadows cast by the past, the political uses of historical memory, and the violence of historical erasure.

The two examples noted in the paper's title highlight the possibilities of undergraduate public history teaching. The *Phantoms* project allowed us to reframe the landscapes, texts, and visual culture of the British imperial context as a site of research. One of our Canadian community partners was the *Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site*, which is supported by the *Ontario Heritage Trust*. It is the site of the *British American Institute*, the school and settlement co-founded by Josiah Henson, the self-emancipated abolitionist whose autobiography provided inspiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe's character of Uncle Tom. The site is clearly situated within a larger narrative of the Underground Railroad, and distinguishes Henson as a historical figure while contextualizing his famous relationship to the fictional character. In the UK, one of the community participants in the project was the *Countering Colston Campaign to Decolonise Bristol*.[6] Focusing on multiple commemorative sites that mask Colston's role as a slave trader while celebrating his philanthropy, the *Countering Colston* campaign draws attention to the wider problem of how the deep implications of slavery in imperial Britain might be made visible. Community activists who met with our students are engaged in active resistance to historical narratives of commemoration that ignore Bristol's role in the slave trade. Students were able to compare approaches to commemoration and ask important questions about the ways in which memory has been shaped, contained, and challenged.



At the base of the controversial statue of Edward Colston in Bristol, small figures evoking the imagery of the 1789 "Plan and cross-section of the slave ship 'Brookes'" draw attention to contemporary injustices and human trafficking. The figures are part of guerrilla art interventions and the wider *Countering Colston* movement. Meeting with *Countering Colston* activists is an important component of *Phantoms* field work. Photo: Hannah Verster, Huron University College.

While students worked on individual projects, they did so within the larger context of shared field work that asked them to question their own assumptions about transatlantic slavery and the movements to end it that had linked abolitionists in Canada and Britain in the nineteenth century. In addition to hearing from activists and artists with *Countering Colston*, students critiqued the exhibits on slavery at the Bristol Museum and *M-Shed*, and visited Bath, the *Docklands Museum*, and the *National Portrait Gallery* in London – reflecting as they went on the ways in which slavery and antislavery have been remembered and forgotten. One of the most unexpected points of engagement came at the *Saltford Brass Mill* outside of Bath.[7] The mill, long abandoned until being rescued in the late twentieth century by a group of local history supporters, at first appeared to be out of place (amidst our visits to museums and landscapes connected to histories of the slave trade) until we entered the building and realized that we were standing in an industrial mill used in the eighteenth century to manufacture *Guinea kettles* – brass hollowware that was used in the slave trade. Our guides to the site noted that while the links to the history of the slave trade had not been at the top of their agenda when the mill was acquired and preserved, those links are now a central part of the interpretive exhibits at the site. Saltford was a powerful reminder of the way African slavery permeated economic relationships and everyday life, even in places that appeared to be far removed from the history of slavery. It made us think about the way in which monuments and memorials and commemorative practice can emerge: without fanfare yet transformative in their effect on the cultural landscapes they inhabit.

The theme of landscape, memory and hidden histories emerged most clearly in our walks hosted by Richard White, who led a performative and reflective walk to reveal and reinterpret Bath's commemorative public spaces.[8] Guided through the streets of Bath, students were able to experience the city in ways at odds with the intentions of official planning and authorized heritage.[9] We heard how the buildings we were viewing still stand as visible but largely unacknowledged markers of the wealth generated through plantation slavery, and learned of the ways in which slave-owner residents of Bath had benefitted from the British government's compensation scheme at the time of emancipation. Community historian Roger Holly brought local antislavery research findings to the walk, and shared those findings as we stood beside the buildings where nineteenth-century African Canadian abolitionists had preached and lectured. Our impressions, responses, and photographs from the walk were captured and geotagged in real time using social media, adding our own critical voices to the record of commemoration that we had set out to study.

On the Canadian side of the research exchange, we were able to establish a comparative context, and to connect *Phantoms* to work that students in other classes were doing on antislavery histories in southwestern Ontario. One student project, for example, used the British Library's newspaper database to map travels of black abolitionists from Canada through Britain creating a digital map linked to primary sources and photographs from the sites that other Huron classes had visited in the antislavery center of Oberlin, Ohio. Using methodologies of History of the Book, a student-created website traced material features of antislavery texts and considered their material histories as textual sites of memory. *Phantoms of the Past* made transatlantic, regional, and local connections clear again, and prompted reflection on the privileging of commemorative narratives of the Underground Railroad at the expense of narratives of transatlantic black political activism.



Bath Spa and Huron students at Christ Church, Dresden, Ontario. Founded in 1859 in the black abolitionist community surrounding the Dawn Settlement by Thomas Hughes, a white antislavery priest in the Church of England, Christ Church holds an important but seldom recognized place in the history of antislavery work in Canada. Photo: N. Reid-Maroney.

Other projects analyzed photographs, offered critical readings of abolitionist commemoration, and placed traditional exhibits in conversation with the concerns of community activists. One student chose to produce a collection of poetry which included a poem about each site visited and a critical reflection on the ways in which the poems themselves sought to intervene and disrupt traditional commemorations. This highlighted the importance of artistic responses to the activist task of toppling dominant yet inadequate and crippling official narratives.



The Black Mecca Museum in Chatham, Ontario and the Chatham-Kent Black Historical Society host student researchers from both sides of the Phantoms of the Past research exchange as part of their community partnership with the project. Photo: N. Reid-Maroney.

At a concluding public conference at Huron in March 2017, students and community partners shared the floor. Throughout the project, students were challenged to balance a respect for partners' interest in maintaining particular sites on the one hand, with an attention to critical assessment on the other. When a student asked a

pointed question about the inefficacy of putting complex histories within the frame of a blue Ontario Heritage plaque – "confining the past to a *box*" – a curator of one of the project partner sites acknowledged that the concern was important, but countered by asking, given the choice between a commemorative plaque and nothing, should we refuse the plaque? Throughout the project, community partners contextualized academic research by reminding us of the relationship between public history and their experience of race in 21st-century communities. Community members noted that the project broke away from familiar interpretation, placing seemingly ordinary objects and landscapes in a framework that emphasized intellectual connection across the Black Atlantic.

Students also learned how histories of slavery are remembered within their own academic spaces. Bath Spa students attending a university which offers a graduate program in Heritage Management frequently found themselves challenging well-articulated yet oppressive national narratives regarding slavery and abolition, while Canadian students confronted official silences on Canada's role in the slave trade. Both groups of students learned from the academic experience of their transatlantic undergraduate partners; this knowledge infused their final projects. As one student noted in her project reflection, the comparative and international context made it clear that "differences in commemoration reflected variation in what a society or group values from the history they portray."

Framed by the vast scope of global histories of slavery, and the complex ways in which those histories are unearthed and buried, remembered and forgotten, *Phantoms of the Past* seeks to recover a sense of the agency of ordinary people, and to find traces of their lives in places, texts, images, and time. Historian Marcus Wood's caution that "the historic trauma of transatlantic and plantation slavery must not be encapsulated within a history believed to be stable, digested, and understood" reminds us that the *Phantoms* research questions remain unresolved, though not unasked.[10] In its 2019 iteration, *Phantoms of the Past* has returned to those questions, and to the central argument that the undergraduate classroom is an extensive site of research with a surprising power to transform the study of historical memory into an intervention in critical commemorative practice.

Notes

1 Scholarship on the value of undergraduate research learning led to the development of Huron's Centre for Undergraduate Research Learning in 2016. Additional resources can be found through the Council on Undergraduate Research. In addition, Bath Spa University has established the Global Academy of Liberal Arts (GALA) to support student and faculty research networks.

2 Ira Harkavy and Bill Donovan, eds., *Connecting Past and Present: Concepts and Models for Service Learning in History* (Sterling, Va.: Stylus, 2005), 1.

3 The work of activehistory.ca provides nuanced examples of the debate about how Confederation and the Canadian nation-state should be commemorated, including this essay from July 2016 http://activehistory.ca/2016/07/join-the-confederation-debate-today/

4 See for example the calls for papers and program details of 2017 and 2018 meetings of the Black Canadian Studies Association; Interview with Dr Afua Cooper, "Black Lives Matter – at Settlement, Confederation, and 150 Years Later," *The Monitor* May 1, 2017. https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/monitor/black-lives-matter%E2%80%94-settlement-confederation-and-150-years-later

5 Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington, and Rachel Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

6 Olivette Otele, "Bristol, Slavery and the Politics of Representation: the Slave Trade Gallery in the Bristol Museum," *Social Semiotics* 22, no. 2, (April 2012); 155–172; Abdoulaye Gueye and Johann Michel, *A Stain on Our Past: Slavery and Memory* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2018).

7 The Saltford Brass Mill is included in the BBC documentary, *Civilisations Stories: The Remains of Slavery* (2018) https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0b19v6v;http://www.brassmill.com/index.html

8 Juanita Sundberg, "Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies," Cultural Geographies 21, no. 1 (January 2014): 33–47, https://doi:10.1177/1474474013486067.

9 Olivette Otele, "The guerrilla arts in Brexit Bristol." in Stuart Ward and Astrid Rasch, eds. *Embers of Empire in Brexit Britain*(London: Bloomsbury 2019); Laurajane Smith, "Empty Gestures? Heritage and the Politics of Recognition," in *Cultural Heritage and Human Rights*, Silverman and Ruggles (New York: Springer 2007), 159–171.

10 Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780–1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 11.