



CARNEGIE
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

Race and Education

Review 'History Education And Transatlantic Colonial Slavery' by Lucy Capes, History Teacher

“I felt like everyone was looking at me and pitying me.”

“I’m sick of hearing about slavery.”

“It was just slavery, there was no rebellion.”

These comments from my A Level History students were provoked by my suggestion that they take part in a project about the legacies of slavery in Hackney in 2013. They were not interested. And while alarming, their reasons are far from uncommon. As a teacher, my priority is to start where the students are; to learn what is already known; to respect how it has been experienced and to unpack and build on that together. In terms of historical content, it appeared that their schooling had not equipped them with the basic truths of the period; the global context of the trade and its vast economic, political, and social impact on Africa, the Americas, and Europe. The relentless and varied nature of resistance had been absent. Without resistance, pedagogical attempts to evoke empathy were commonly experienced as pity. Legacies were ignored and as such [sensitivity and nuance absent](#). The magnitude and weight of such history is not easy to teach in the best of circumstances, and certainly not in the highly pressurised conditions under which teachers in the public sector work. As such, the opportunity to debate these issues and to devise a plan for better practice were both urgently needed and welcomed by many.

‘History Education and Transatlantic Colonial Slavery’ took place on 1 June 2017 at the [Museum of London in Docklands](#). The conference brought together a range of teachers, teacher training providers, museum staff, youth group leaders, and academics with a shared concern to support educational professionals in improving the teaching of transatlantic colonial slavery by sharing ideas and developing guidelines for effective practice. There were four sessions: the first on ‘Historicising Race’ by the hip-hop artist, writer and educator [Akala](#); the second on ‘Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching Transatlantic Slavery’ by Abdul Mohamud and Robin Whitburn (Institute of Education, University College London / [Justice to History](#)); the third on the [Legacies of British Slave-ownership database](#) and how it can be used to support teaching by the director of the new Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-ownership (UCL) [Nick Draper](#); and a final session [Local Roots/Global Routes: Legacies of Slavery in Hackney](#) by members of the collaborative project team Toyin Adebisi (Ligali), Lucy Capes, Katie Donington (University of Nottingham), Kristy Warren (University of Nottingham) and Emma Winch (Hackney Museum).



(BSix History students, Bloomsbury Theatre, 8 November 2014. Credit: James Hooker, Genesis Graphics Ltd.)

As I spoke in the final session about the Local Roots project (which was profoundly shaped by the speakers in the other sessions) I will in what follows below draw out themes from the project that were also expressed at the conference. Having reflected on my students' experience, I explained to them that the project would provide a platform for their views; that during the project they would be working with UCL historians, local archivists, museum staff, and Akala. The last of these clinched the deal. Through archival work, history walks, lectures, and debates, the students were taught the latest scholarship on the topic and ended the project with their own interpretation of what they had learnt through a self-directed performance at the Bloomsbury Theatre.

Using the Legacies of British Slave-ownership database as a starting point the project team constructed activities to help the students uncover ways in which the past is alive, to show that the legacies of slavery are all around us in London - in ways that we might not be aware of. Traces of this past were revealed in Hackney street names, buildings, graveyards, and even in the discovery that former slave-owner [John Williams Blagrove](#) had lived in the asylum that formerly occupied the site of their college. Our lived environment was historicised. Race was historicised. It was also personalised. During one of Akala's sessions with the students he shared personal examples of racism. He created an atmosphere that empowered the students to voice their own painful experiences of racism and in a few cases self-loathing. Hearing these accounts and seeing how their very expression moved the experience of racism from a place of individualised, internalised inadequacy, to a shared

space of mutual experience and solidarity demonstrated the power of historicising race for educational repair. When interviewed after the project, one of the students said: “For me it was mental reparation, it repaired me mentally.” That this came from one of the students whose words opened this review, demonstrates the impact of the project.

Both the Local Roots project and the conference emphasised the value of collaboration. Having access to the latest research from academia, combined with local knowledge from the archives, museums and community educators enabled us to draw local connections to global histories in such a way that encouraged young people to engage more actively in their communities and to ensure that History was of use to the present. By the end of the conference community and youth workers were demanding resources from academics and archivists. Groups with different roles in the community were figuring out how to contribute to a subject we all care about. The collaborative and democratic nature of the conference not only helped us develop the right content but also to create a methodology of practice through which academics can better serve their communities. Communities in turn can help to steer the research towards a usable past.

The guidelines that emerged throughout the day for effective practice in the teaching of transatlantic colonial slavery covered the following topics: pre-colonial African civilisations; resistance (from minor acts of defiance to the Haitian Revolution); the global context of the trade and its legacies; the historicising of race; the importance of teaching empathy by humanising the story. In order to avoid some of the issues raised by students around the role of pity we discussed how solidarity can be more usefully employed when exploring empathetic teaching methods. We talked about the legacies of slavery in terms of contemporary racism but we coupled this with the importance of recognising a proud legacy of African-led resistance to it. Doing justice to history is about making these connections. It was these links that the students’ expressed most eloquently in a song they wrote and performed at the Bloomsbury Theatre: “*Now I know my history... no one can tell me who I am.*”

First published June 2017 in a blog for '**Re-presenting slavery: making a public usable past**' - a British Academy funded project to encourage the collaboration of academic and public historians working on the history of transatlantic slavery and its legacies.

<http://www.slaveryandpublichistoryuk.com/blog/archives/06-2017>