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Waiting to Be Discovered? Community Partnerships, the Facilitation of Diverse Memory, and Reflections on Academic Success and Failure

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Abstract: Community partnerships, based on 'the collaborative turn' in academic research, are an increasingly common framework through which 'bottom-up' histories, particularly of diverse and/or more marginalised communities, are being told. This article is about the 'doing' of this type of work. It focuses on the question: what lessons can be made visible when attempted cooperation fails to deliver the outcomes initially hoped for? Firstly, this article outlines the events and activities undertaken by the authors in exploring the ways that ephemera and other objects can be used to understand and transmit the historical experiences of communities often on the periphery of mainstream war commemoration. It will discuss the ways in which connections with these communities were built, with the aim of undertaking several creative writing workshops, leading to a co-produced publication of the participants' material. Secondly, as part of a broader acknowledgment of the possibility of failure and its benefits, it will explore why some of these creative workshop efforts failed to meet expectations and outline a series of recommendations for other historians and community-orientated projects to consider for future activities.

Keywords: co-production; marginalised communities; divergent memory; public history; creative writing; ephemera

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1. Introduction

Between September 2021 and May 2024, several researchers and creative practitioners across History, English Literature, Creative Writing, and Memory Studies, worked on the collaborative research project *Ephemera and Writing about War in Britain, 1914 to the Present*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Referred to in shorthand as the *War Ephemera* project, it was designed to explore the role ephemera and material culture can play in diversifying the literary representation and commemoration of conflict (War Ephemera 2024a).[1] Inspired by Ann Stoler's call to work along, as well as against, the archival grain (Stoler 2009), as well as existing work by Africanist scholars, such as Karin Barber and Rose Miyonga, who centre 'tin-trunk texts' as the grist for any social history of colonial Anglophone Africa, the project explored the ways ephemera and material culture have the potential to facilitate insights into aspects of war experience that are not covered by traditional sources and documents (Barber 2006; Miyonga 2023). The project was also framed by Alana Kumbier's work that explores the 'historic exclusion and under-documentation of queer cultures in archival collections', which suggests that there are broader opportunities and requirements for academics and researchers to consider not just what exists and has survived in official archives, but also the importance of those objects that have been excluded and overlooked (Kumbier 2014, p. 124).

It is from these approaches that this article, and the work that informs it, draws its inspiration. It contributes to the 'collaborative turn' in academic research, where new

spheres of collaborative knowledge generation and problem solving are redefining where knowledge comes from and who has expertise (Saltmarsh 2017). This article is not only about the importance of engaging authentically with communities and the material in their custody that has previously been overlooked or suppressed; it is also about the 'doing' of this type of work. In any externally funded research project, there is an understandable emphasis placed on 'outputs'. Yet, the very act of undertaking the work has value in, and of, itself and requires critical reflection to develop and improve on this type of activity in the future. This article forms the epilogue of a special issue of the journal *Genealogy*, focusing on the transmission of diverse family and community histories. It is not possible to interact with or transmit these diverse family and community histories without being willing to experiment with methods of co-production and, given the challenges as well as the opportunities of co-production and collaborative work, without being prepared to fail.

The *War Ephemera* project's temporal starting point of 1914 was chosen specifically as a way to critically respond to claims that the UK's commemorations of the centenary of the First World War (2014–2018)—the 'largest public history project ever seen in the country'—had diversified the history of the conflict beyond the dominant narrative of the white male combatant on the Western Front (Noakes and Wallis 2022, pp. 56–81). Despite government-level triumphalism, many grassroots organisations argued that 'diverse representation remained the exception during the centenary' (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2019). Explanations based on insufficient funding do not stand up to the evidence; the Department for Culture, Media and Sport estimated that GBP 230 million was spent on the centenary by the government and the National Lottery Heritage Fund (Malan et al. 2019, p. ii). Suggestions that First World War stories and histories relating to specific racial groups—often African or Indian—or aspects of the British Empire do not exist, or had not been found yet, were similarly reductive and inaccurate. Such views also tended to benefit those who view particular historical moments or locations as being a 'white mythic space' that do not contain racial diversity, whilst ignoring the ways in which the records or representations of that same diversity have been suppressed within archives or popular culture (Aguirre Quiroga 2022). Furthermore, framing the centenary commemorations of the First World War as an opportunity for traditionally marginalised communities to 'reveal' their experiences of the war betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between dominant and less dominant narratives of war. As Rob Attar, Editor of *BBC History Magazine*, explained at the centenary's close: 'Stories of minority communities who participated in the war may not necessarily be waiting to be 'discovered'; instead, they may have been purposefully hidden away because of the way members of these communities were treated during the war and after'(Pennell 2018, p. 14).

It was, therefore, our intention to not just simply try and locate that which was 'hidden', but to work collaboratively with the communities who held this material to understand their reticence about getting involved in 'national' commemorative initiatives and, if they wanted, to facilitate them in bringing into the public sphere experiences and stories that had been previously suppressed or withheld. By working together with communities through a framework of co-production, we hoped to form a relationship that was mutually enriching and equitable. The existing scholarly literature on the nature of co-production between academics and different communities that examined the dangers, as well as the potential benefits, was a foundational resource for us early in the project (Caswell and Mallick 2014; Gillies 2021; Graham 2023; Flinders et al. 2016; Lloyd and Moore 2015). For example, King and Rivett noted how '[A]ll too often engagement activities can slide towards 'tick box' exercises, which have to be 'top-down' in order to fulfil the needs of universities', which spoke directly to our desire to attempt more grassroots interaction with our participants (King and Rivett 2015, p. 220). Additionally, Pente and Ward have written about the need to unpick and consider multiple competing histories when it comes to understanding diverse communities (Elizabeth and Paul 2018). King, Stark, and Cooke also highlighted the importance of digital or online spaces in democratising such cooperative work, as 'digital means enable the co-production of exhibitions, oral histories, and other forms

of display and archives based on personal remembrance, recollection, and interactivity', which was also useful to us when considering how best to undertake our workshops and other activities (King et al. 2016). Aside from the conceptual framing, this key literature also highlighted the importance and necessity of not just undertaking work alongside either public or creative partners, but also including them in the academic outputs that followed (Hammett et al. 2020).

We hoped to achieve our objectives by platforming ephemeral objects that existed within people's homes (such as photographs, letters, medals, war art, or other physical items) that could be used to convey or transmit a story to be recorded and published through a sensitively managed process of co-production. Even the absence of objects that had once existed could be used for this purpose; it was the stories that were attached to these objects (or the memory of an object) that were of interest. Such material culture, and indeed its absence, can serve as key transmitters of diverse understandings of war and history (Foster 2017, 2019; Das 2015, 2018). Ashley Jackson and David Tomkins have written about the 'importance of ephemera as a hitherto overlooked medium vital for the dissemination of information regarding the imperial and wider world' (Jackson and Tomkins 2017). However, undertaking this plan proved to be difficult in ways that we had not anticipated, and a reflection on those challenges—the 'doing' of this type of work—is a significant part of this article's focus.

Working in partnership with members of communities that have preserved, consciously or otherwise, such items and objects, we aimed to collectively explore how material culture can enable a confrontation with and response to archival silences between dominant societal commemoration of Britain's modern conflicts and those community members who have been disenfranchised, underrepresented, and alienated. To achieve these goals, this project employed creative writer and workshop facilitator Felicity Tattersall, who brought with her a wealth of understanding and experience related to the many layers or barriers that might prevent participation by different communities. Tattersall notes:

From barriers of perception, previous negative experiences with organisations representing authority, to cultural reasons, physical, mental, emotional, and similar. There is an ongoing detrimental assumption that it is a simple thing to connect with diverse community groups. The process takes time, takes great sensitivity and the dynamics of power need to be constantly analysed and realigned. It's almost impossible to achieve within the current system of short-term heritage project funding.

This work package (work package 2) sat within an overall project spread over several work packages and two universities. The first of these packages was undertaken by a historian, Dr Ann-Marie Foster, in the role of Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Northumbria, to find examples of relevant ephemera within the archives. Work package 3, led by the project's Principal Investigator Dr Ann-Marie Einhaus and Dr Foster, explored the role actual and fictional ephemera play in literary representations of the First World War and their writing process. Work package 4 was identified as the primary 'creative' focused undertaking and involved Prof. Tony Williams (a novelist, short story writer and poet) and May Sumbwanyambe (a playwright and scriptwriter) working together to explore the use of ephemera in dramatic writing and fiction to re-imagine aspects of First World War experience from previously under-explored perspectives. The final work package, in association with work package 2, involved all members of the project undertaking and interacting, to varying extents, with participatory workshops.

2. Acknowledging Success and Embracing Failure

This project has been successful in several ways regarding creative outputs, conference organisation, and multiple pending academic publications. When it came to our own work package, we had various aims and objectives, as well as preconceived ideas as to what our own 'successes' would look like. By and large, we met those objectives. Whilst these activities will be discussed in greater detail below, they can be summarised as follows: we interviewed a variety of relevant organisations and academics about their experiences of

working with diverse communities, hosted several creative writing workshops, facilitated the production of a creative anthology authored by participants of those workshops, and co-authored an academic journal article (as part of a wider co-edited special issue) reflecting on our experiences and findings. However, to focus only on success is to strip away a degree of the actual experience and context of these activities, and overlooks the difficulties encountered along the way. Some of these punctured our early preconceptions and left us wanting to reflect on the important lessons to be taken from the journey we undertook. Much the same as the material we wished to access, useful reflections on undertaking public engagement work were not 'waiting to be discovered' but would emerge organically as part of our own activities.

What were the failures in work package 2 and how did they come about? Whilst they will be discussed in greater detail below, the focus of critical reflection is the creative workshops. These went ahead—held as they were online—yet did not produce the experiences that we had hoped for. There remain significant questions about whether many of the participants were 'real' or not, and their potential use of AI software to produce their creative writing within each workshop. Some participants' desire for financial compensation made the final workshops an uncomfortable experience for the organisers and for those who participated in good faith. Furthermore, we put significant time and effort into trying to connect with various communities to populate those workshops and it appears, for reasons to be discussed shortly, we were unsuccessful in reaching those audiences. This perhaps registers more as a disappointment than a failure, but it did provoke in the authors a sense of missed opportunity. We succeeded in our initial aims, but how could we have succeeded better? What can we take from the sense that the path to our work package outputs was not as smooth as we had hoped it might be? How can we, and other projects, plan for events and outcomes that—despite best efforts and collective expertise—were not anticipated in advance?

Ordinarily academic publications represent a success. As an outcome of intensive research, often pre-dated by the struggle to win funding, to conduct the work in the first place, books, chapters, and peer-reviewed journal articles (having survived the necessary, but not always easy, attrition of the peer-review process) embody triumph; the fat of failure has been trimmed away, so only the most prime quality cut is served. Talking about failures or disappointments is hard and can make people uncomfortable. But this disguises the fact that failures and disappointments are a central feature of academic life. As Broeckerhoff and Magalhães Lopes state, failures 'are a constant companion to our academic journeys' (Broeckerhoff and Magalhães Lopes 2020). Yet academia, as a profession, struggles to engage meaningfully with failure. A competitive model centred around individual success in grant capture, publishable outputs, and impactful research has been normalised. As a result, such an academic environment shuts down the opportunity for reflection when things do not quite go to plan. Yet, as Karen Ross and Meagan Call-Cummings argue, it is not only important that as researchers we 'grapple with moments in which we fail to reach the onto-epistemological ideals we have set for our inquiry, but also how we as educators prepare our students for this same process' (Ross and Call-Cummings 2020, p. 499). It is not simply important for academics to understand their own failures, we must also consider how we can convey them as learning opportunities to others, as either teachers or colleagues. A reluctance to embrace failure does not simply stifle opportunities for learning; it is not collegiate. It is important for sustainable relations both within and beyond academia that there be an acknowledgement of the possibility of failure and of its benefits. If academics (and the stakeholders they wish to collaborate with) want to be able to trust and understand each other, then a degree of humility and contrition must be part of the equation.

Before we proceed, the authors of this article wish to acknowledge their various privileged positions. Both academic authors are white, a notable consideration given the project's focus on diversity. One is permanently employed on a full-time contract and the other is approaching the end of a multi-year postdoctoral position. In academic terms,

these circumstances represent a degree of relative security. This piece is published in a special issue of *Genealogy*, which two of us—Kempshall and Pennell—have co-edited. Whilst the piece has gone through a rigorous peer-review process (which as co-editors we recused ourselves from), we knew the piece had been greenlit for publication in principle (subject to peer review) when the editorial team of the journal accepted our proposal for this special issue. This meant that we felt liberated to highlight and embrace the failures and setbacks that underpin this article. In doing so, we do not seek to 'fetishise' failure or self-congratulate ourselves for achieving some perverse 'fail up' (Clare 2019). Instead, we want to normalise the discussion of failure—not only how we failed but also who gets to talk about this issue—to offer insights that may be useful to other academics attempting similar public engagement activities.

Whilst the context and wider consideration of this paper is about the experience of and reflection upon failures, it is not its sole focus. This article is about our attempt to platform, facilitate and empower marginalised or underrepresented communities—to be defined below—to tell their stories of war experience since 1914, using material culture and creative writing methods. However, it is also about the lessons learned following the issues encountered during the workshops. Naturally, the authors fervently wish that this was an article about unqualified success; we were inspired by the work of Jessica Hammett, Ellie Harrison, and Laura King and hoped to achieve a similar level of meaningful and impactful community co-production (Hammett et al. 2020). But there can be important lessons to take from failures and, as a result, we have embraced the opportunity to co-author a piece that shines a light on what we have learned.

3. The Planning behind *War Ephemera*

Before delving further into the intentions and methodologies of our approach, it is useful to contextualise how the authors of this piece arrived at the project and how it was structured. To varying degrees, each of the authors arrived at the project after much of the preliminary planning had already been undertaken. Prof. Catriona Pennell was invited to become a Co-Investigator (CO-I) on the project shortly before its final submission, after peer-review feedback suggested the project would benefit from a senior historian from outside of the Principal Investigator's (PI) institution. Dr Chris Kempshall was hired once the project had already begun to replace a named postdoctoral research fellow on the application, who had taken up a position elsewhere, before the outcome of the funding bid had been confirmed. Felicity Tattersall was hired, following an interview process, a year into the project. None of these things are particularly unusual in regard to the design, development, and final iteration of funding bids. The length of time it takes for both the writing and assessment of such bids often leads to changes in personnel by the time funding is granted (UKRI 2024b; How We Make Decisions 2024).[2] Everything that happened regarding the application for funding and the eventual decisions regarding the researchers involved is essentially common practice in academia. This is how the system and individuals within it work. What this means is that even if all three authors of this article had been included in the earliest stages of the bid writing process, we would not necessarily have done anything differently regarding the planning of the public engagement activities because there was no obvious reason or rationale to do so. However, we can also now say that given what we have subsequently learned: if we were to repeat the application and planning process now, we recognise the opportunities and benefits of doing things differently. It is these lessons that we believe have relevance and applicability to the wider academic field.

Because of the, soon to be discussed, complexities of working with communities, all of us now recognise the many benefits to be had from all parties, including potential community partners, being involved in the design of a project like this from its conception. Tattersall's expertise in facilitating community engagement workshops would have been invaluable in those embryonic stages. Whilst Sumbwanyambe was initially written into the bid to facilitate the Exeter workshops, over time it became clear that someone based locally and with local connections would be beneficial, and this was a key consideration

when it came to advertising for the role that Tattersall would subsequently take up. As a result, whilst we did have a creative writer and facilitator as part of the bid, it was not the person who ended up undertaking our actual workshops, which led to a degree of disconnect between the activities planned and those eventually delivered. This is not an issue with the actual bid itself, but rather a reflection on how plans around academic activity are constantly evolving and need to be flexible to changing circumstances, and that those changes have consequences. Overall, writing creative practitioners into funding bids from the start is something we strongly recommend, as it helps to ensure both their ongoing input and allows for proper renumeration of their time, whilst also allowing for their insight and knowledge to help guide the proposed activities from the outset.

There are significant pressures on research funding in the United Kingdom, and there are clear rationales for its current delivery model, but if work with diverse communities is to be properly funded, then collectively we should consider the best methods of disseminating and utilising those funds. For example, it might be better if easily accessible avenues of funding were made available to the types of community partners that we worked with, who then bring academics into the bid, rather than the other way round. This is essentially the arrangement that existed for the AHRC-funded First World War Engagement Centres during the centenary of 2014–18. Based, primarily, at the universities of Kent, Hertfordshire, Nottingham, Queens University Belfast, and Birmingham, these centres sought to provide academic advice and support to public projects during the centenary, as well as support for public projects applying to the Heritage Lottery Fund (UKRI 2024c; Hanna et al. 2021). There is no shortage of lessons and understandings that can be taken from the First World War centenary, but particular attention should be paid to the infrastructure that made such a sustained period of public engagement possible and how that can be translated into future funding opportunities. Decoupling the ownership and distribution of funding pots from universities to community stakeholders needs further consideration as part of an overarching commitment to flattening hierarchies in the UK funding arena. It appears that the AHRC is now looking to implement a version of the model used during the First World War centenary with the currently advertised AHRC Community-Led Heritage Research and Skills Hub. While welcomed as a potentially new model of funding distribution, this will be a single centre designed to cover the entirety of the United Kingdom, which could pose significant challenges (UKRI 2024a) ('AHRC Community-Led Heritage Research and Skills Hub' 2024).

4. Intentions

Working from the starting point that the First World War centenary struggled to platform diverse voices relating to the conflict's racial and imperial dimensions, a key objective of this project was to experiment with ways to improve the capturing and dissemination of such histories and experiences. This can only be achieved by entering into cooperative dialogue and co-production of knowledge with those who hold the objects and understand their past (Lloyd and Moore 2015; Hammett et al. 2020).

The notion of 'untold' stories and 'forgotten' histories has long been a feature of publishing and discourse surrounding the two world wars. But there are pronounced differences between stories that are forgotten or untold, and those which are actively suppressed or excluded because their telling is too uncomfortable or problematic for those in power of such narrations. This is important to acknowledge culturally, but also has implications for the activities we hoped to undertake during the project; the material and memories we aimed to work with may well no longer exist. We believed that by understanding and platforming a more diverse material culture, whether it still existed or not, richer and more complex stories of British experience in war and conflict could be told.

None of the authors of this piece attempted to assume any wide-ranging expertise in the experience of either religious or ethnic minority groups in relation to the First World War, or other wars. We predominantly conceived of our roles as enablers and facilitators by virtue of being grounded in the academic community and well-connected with mainstream

institutions, such as the Imperial War Museum. Furthermore, in acknowledgement of the triggering possibility both in revisiting suppressed histories and the possible trauma of wartime experiences, we explored ways of safeguarding our intended community partners. As a result, the project supported Tattersall in undertaking an additional mental health training session run by Mental Health First Aid England (MHFA Portal 2024) ('Mental Health Support for You or Your Organisation', n.d.). We would strongly recommend that other projects that intend to interact with communities in a similar manner also consider the benefits of investing in this form of training for their facilitators.

When it came to identifying the underrepresented groups who might want to work with us, we drew heavily on the lessons learned from reflections on the First World War centenary and included Southeast Asian, African, West Indian, and working-class white communities. However, we collectively knew, as the discussion will expand upon below, that traditional relationships between academics and underrepresented groups can often be highly extractive to the detriment of those groups and communities who hold the material of interest. This was a practice we were committed to avoiding. The stories and experiences we were seeking could only be produced from within the communities that held them; specific communities are the only ones who should attempt to tell their own stories, and in ways that feel authentic to them. We had to provide them with the space and safety to do so. The importance of allowing for ground-up activities, which are driven by members of the relevant communities, is not just restricted to specific nationalities or racial groups.

Because ours was a project based around ephemera and ephemerality, there were various options open to us. The very concept of objects and stories passed from generation to generation within these communities tied closely into the spirit and concept of the wider project. Therefore, the decision to utilise both the objects and the stories attached to them, to produce an anthology of creative writing, predominantly short stories, felt like an output capable of offering potential community partners a clear incentive to participate through providing a physical and digital record of the work undertaken together. It would also ensure a legacy of the workshops and the writing. From this starting point, we planned a series of three interlinked workshops, where around 12 to 15 participants who represented different communities and/or interest groups would move through the process of producing at least one piece of creative writing based around an object they either possessed (or which had been lost) that was linked in some way to British military involvement from the First World War onwards. The submissions would be collected and—with authors' permission and input—published in an anthology. A physical output that represented the ephemeral nature of stories and objects long overlooked by mainstream popular memory was an important outcome. To achieve this aim we would need assistance from various sources.

5. Working with Community Groups

Early in the lifespan of our project, we recognised the importance of gathering insights from those who were working on diversifying voices and material in the academy, as well as those who had worked extensively with community groups during the First World War centenary. At the University of Exeter we consulted with Sarah Campbell, the Director of the Arts and Cultures Centre at the university, and Dr Natalie Pollard, former editor of the online magazine *Unhoming Pedagogies* (Arts and Culture Exeter–About n.d.; Unhoming Pedagogies 2020). We also consulted with Prof. Sarah Lloyd who ran the First World War engagement centre *Everyday Lives In War* during the centenary (University of Hertfordshire 2024) ('Everyday Lives in War', n.d.). Together this trio helped us sculpt the conceptual framework of our activities and the earliest forms of the key considerations that we would have to undertake. At its essence, their advice directed us to secure viable partnerships with existing organisations that worked alongside the communities we wished to access, and that we needed to be clear regarding exactly what we were hoping to achieve and what we were prepared to offer in exchange.

From this position, we began to identify different types of organisations that we thought could be helpful in achieving our aims. The first of these were those considered to be potential partners and also, to varying degrees, trusted gatekeepers to the communities we wished to interact with. These included the Peabody Association in London, East Sussex County Council (ESCC), and the Institute for Cornish Studies (ICS) at the University of Exeter. These organisations were to become facilitators for conversations with smaller groups and constituencies we sought to reach. It was also our hope that they could not only introduce us, but also serve as effective character references. These specific organisations were also chosen because of existing contacts between them and several of the authors and, as a result, reflect a London, East Sussex, and Cornish geographical spread. Whilst our 'work package' was south focused because of our locations, the project's PI was also undertaking similar events with other partners in the north of the United Kingdom, therefore ensuring the project's wider geographical spread. We also made various attempts to contact, and work with, smaller community groups, such as Black Voices Cornwall, but it was not until after the workshops had taken place that we were able to engage in sustained dialogue with this group—highlighting the pressure on these small, volunteer-run organisations to respond to all the queries they receive—and, sadly, could not incorporate them into our grant-cycle timeline.

We learned much from our initial contact with our three main potential partners. Peabody, despite their primary role as a housing association, had widespread community contacts across Thamesmead and other parts of London, and proved to be a useful early partner. ESCC were able to direct us towards more regional local government bodies, who then could introduce us to specific community organisations. The ICS were also able to provide useful insights and suggestions regarding the importance of disseminating our call for participants widely and the potential difficulties of trying to gather people across the region into a single location. Given the emerging geographical spread of the organisations we were working with, this consideration was a key starting point in our decision to explore online, rather than in-person, workshop events.

Our plans also greatly benefited from our decision to undertake an additional aspect of our work package in parallel. We already had plans to hold interviews with a small selection of charities, organisations, and academics who interacted with similar communities to those we wished to work with. There was an obvious link between the interviews and the preparations for our planned workshops. We, therefore, designed the interviews to reflect this. The types of questions we asked were grouped around themes, such as 'Reflection' and 'Marginalised Communities', and were designed to allow us to draw both on the experiences of these groups and individuals during the First World War centenary and to allow us to understand the lessons they had already learned, as follows:

Reflection

1. Efforts were made during the First World War Centenary to include the voices and experiences of underrepresented people and communities. However, some post-centenary reports highlighted that these were efforts were of limited success. From the point of view of you and your organisation, do you think underrepresented people and communities were adequately incorporated into this sort of national commemorative event?
2. What lessons do you think should be learned from past national commemorations of conflict?

Marginalised communities

1. What do you think are the obstacles that make it difficult for underrepresented voices/experiences to be incorporated or recognised? Are these obstacles solid things or are they also based on perception?
2. How can communities own events that have meaning/importance to them, and how can organisations like yours work with them and others to facilitate this?

In response to these questions, some of the organisations brought up concerns regarding the historical imbalance between the desires of academics and the suspicions of the community, by noting that academics can tend to 'parachute in' and ask for (or take for museums) things from people despite having never shown interest in their stories or experiences before (Interview 3—Independent Charity, 16 December 2022). The way to avoid this perceived imbalance was, according to our interviewees, to ensure we recognised the importance of trust in these interactions and to undertake the work necessary to gain it. One respondent told us that being a member of the shared community and heritage gave them a level of trust within it (Interview 4—School Teacher, 8 March 2023). The possibility of using schools or other 'trusted' community members to help gain access to different groups was also raised by the representative of a charity (Interview 3—Independent Charity, 16 December 2022). However, in a complicating factor, and one that shows how difficult it can be to identify the most suitable audiences, Peabody strongly suggested that, given the focus upon war, it might be best to avoid interacting with school students as there was perceived to be a chance that the children, or their immediate families, may have either direct experience of the violence of war or were potentially still experiencing it abroad. Again, the need to safeguard and protect our participants was paramount here.

An interviewee from a charity noted that the world wars, as historic rather than present day events, were a particularly good starting point for community engagement of this sort because some 'Remembrance Sunday services' can be 'entirely white'. Those from diverse backgrounds, in this instance they were referring to Muslim school students, 'Sometimes . . . [. . .] don't *feel* invited and there isn't very much effort made to make people feel invited' (Interview 3—Independent Charity, 16 December 2022). Another interviewee noted how, in their experience, 'things which are privileged in the public memory' can result in others being 'left behind' (Interview 1—Arm's length body of government & Charity, 5 October 2022). It was felt that our project could help bridge the gap between not just inviting those from underrepresented or marginalised communities to take part in a wider discourse but, more importantly, to convey to these individuals and groups that they would be able to shape the discourse and not just be passive participants to be 'studied'. Another interviewee also reflected on the importance of undertaking trust-building work when attempting to engage with new communities who might have previously been 'alienated from [major national museums], and didn't feel welcome there' (Interview 2—Academic Historian, 2 December 2022). At the same time, the importance of undertaking a project like this from 'the bottom-up' was noted by one of our interviewees—from a charity that also exists as an arm's length body of government—who declared that: 'actually if you're trying to create a sense of cohesion or a sense of belonging or being part of . . . the bottom-up matters just as much as the as the top-down may do. . . sometimes bottom-up approaches can have a look at things that are very difficult for top-down interventions to engage with' (Interview 1—Arm's length body of government & Charity, 5 October 2022). As mentioned at the outset of this article, the very act of attempting to reach out to these groups and communities, and undertake a 'from the bottom-up' project such as ours, is important entirely on its own terms, regardless of whether the academic outcomes and outputs are as successful as initially hoped.

An important recurring theme that emerged during these conversations was that people within the communities we wished to collaborate with had 'interaction fatigue', particularly regarding academics. Academic interaction with the public, particularly marginalised communities, has often been—as mentioned in some of the previously referenced writings on co-production—unequal to the point of being extractive, where the public participants do not have full 'control' of their own stories (Hammett et al. 2020, pp. 250–2; King and Rivett 2015, pp. 219–20). The academics gain access to new material, whereas the holders of this material—those who own it and convey it to others—receive very little in return. This scenario has likely only been exacerbated by the nature of the Research Excellence Framework's (REF) 'Impact agenda' which now governs the ways academic work and funding is carried out in the United Kingdom (UKRI 2022) ('REF Impact', n.d.). The on-

going requirement for Impact has likely led to specific groups and communities within the UK being repeatedly targeted and surveyed in ways that are designed to meet the requirements of the REF, but not necessarily provide consummate value to those who participate. Ethically this is a highly problematic power imbalance and, in a cost-of-living crisis, is also of great concern.

Despite the noted concerns regarding 'interaction fatigue', the need to ensure that a relationship of trust was built, and the ongoing considerations and concerns about how best to host our planned workshops, our potential partners and interviewees all commended our project and believed it had the potential to offer something new and valuable to the communities they represented. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, not just about the ideas and motivation behind our project, but also in regard to the potential benefits from it, and we were strongly encouraged to pursue our planned activities. Whilst there would be issues with the workshops, it is important to note the success of gaining the trust and experience of our partners here. The time and energy put into building a relationship with them provides a model for future projects and, although there can be no guarantees of success with the communities themselves, we strongly believe that this is the best way of maximising success.

The interviews with a broad selection of individuals and organisations and our discussions with community partners, such as Peabody, jointly informed our plans for the workshops. The project itself had initially budgeted for workshops to be held in Leeds, London, and Cardiff, with money allotted for room hire, catering, and travel. Tattersall had undertaken both in-person and online workshops in the past and was comfortable in working in either format, so we had flexibility from that standpoint. However, ongoing concerns around finding local participants who could attend the in-person events made us question whether such a plan was tenable. Our community partners were supportive of our aims and intentions but could not, naturally, guarantee actual turnout.

Early evidence appeared to back up our concerns about in-person numbers. Despite the work we had undertaken behind the scenes in building relationships with organisations like Peabody, in total around 18 months of planning and coordination, and making clear the opportunities and offerings attached to our project, initial take-up for the workshops was slim; an online taster session attracted only two participants. Our community contacts had been advertising the project within their networks, but we were gaining limited traction, potentially a result of the 'interaction fatigue' previously mentioned. Following this first attempt, we re-evaluated the direction of the project and our attempts to contact the audiences we hoped to work with.

The eventual decision to move the workshops entirely online instead, is one that we have been given repeated cause to question. In particular, it made it impossible to connect with, in any meaningful sense, those who were participating in the workshops. However, we must also note that it is not guaranteed that in-person events would have been a success either; certainly, the evidence regarding potential audience sign-ups suggests a potential failure in itself. We could have spent a considerable portion of the project's funds on venue hire and catering, as well as on travel, for an event that could conceivably have had no participants. This would have resulted in us having fewer resources remaining to then try and rectify the issue. As a result, it was decided that holding online workshops, which drew together all our potential participants, would allow for the most rewarding experience as, by holding them online with the same participants each time, we could build an evolving series of events, designed to increase the writing skills of those present, as opposed to repeating single one-off in-person alternatives. Whilst online events included the possibility of technical complications, these could be addressed through coordination and help from our partner organisations, with Peabody in particular offering assistance if required. The temptation is to say that we picked the wrong option, but it is also entirely possible that if the in-person versions had failed, we would now be writing about the folly of not going online.

In response to the taster session, we worked more intensively with groups like Peabody, who expanded their outreach attempts. We also initiated a wider call through online and social media channels, which resulted in around thirty people signing up to the workshops. Participants would, hopefully, come to each workshop with a specific object, either in their possession or in mind, from which we could begin the creative writing process. During the registration of interest for each participant on Eventbrite, we requested some additional brief details about the nature of any objects people intended to bring. This was partly so we could understand these objects in advance to help prepare for the workshops thoroughly, but also as part of an ethical safeguarding consideration. Historical objects, whilst key transmitters of past experiences, are not necessarily 'neutral'. One of the conversations we had early in the planning phase was what to do if, for example, Nazi-related objects or memorabilia were to be brought along by a participant and the distress such items could cause. But by asking potential participants to include descriptions and details of their objects in advance, it gave us the chance to screen any such issues out before the workshops. Additionally, even if participants did not have or currently possess an object, it was not viewed as a serious obstacle. What we prized most was active participation. It was also decided that we would offer any participants a variety of opportunities for knowledge exchange, drawing upon the expertise within the project and also through our university institutions. If participants in the workshops wanted to request a form of learning opportunity from a pre-populated menu—ranging from oral history training, guides to using key archives, to Microsoft Office inductions—we would aim to deliver this. Alongside the offered skills exchange options, Peabody also encouraged us to consider exploring some form of financial compensation for our participants' time and help them during a cost-of-living crisis. While a very reasonable request, there are restrictions within UKRI rules on how project funds can be used, which made this a complicated consideration.

6. The Workshops

When it came to running the workshops, the value of having Felicity Tattersall onboard rapidly became apparent. One of the primary lessons we had taken from the First World War centenary was, when considering successful outputs, academic historians did not necessarily have the skillsets to address every situation. Whilst we had experience of organising events and connecting with communities, we had no background in the type of creative writing or activity facilitation that we intended to undertake. It was for this reason that we hired Felicity Tattersall as our creative writer and workshop facilitator. Her expertise and skills would prove invaluable in planning and delivering the workshops.

Tattersall strongly believes that building trust with a community and providing a safe and supportive network or framework in which the participant can participate is vital. The aim was to create an ongoing, and enduring culturally respectful, empathetic, and supportive network. The relationship should be about strengthening a community, rather than mining it for a fast, transactional extraction of 'stuff' and/or knowledge. In our workshops, we began each session by outlining that the space we were creating was antiracist and that all participants and their stories were equally important. There was no hierarchy. It was with this principle in mind that we designed our own workshops.

On the surface, the planning and implementation of the workshops was a success. We held three online events; each expertly designed by Tattersall to complement each other and build upon an evolving approach to writing and reflection upon each participant's chosen object and the stories behind it. When reflecting upon the workshops themselves, Tattersall noted that a recurrent theme around absence (of information, recognition, archival records, or appropriate commemorative graves or practices) had emerged during discussions with participants, as did a desire for recognition, particularly in regard to community heroes and their heroic acts. We are often almost overly aware of the narrative around heroes, survivors of feats of ingenuity and bravery against all costs, of good versus evil against the enemy, often with a white European, male protagonist. We discussed what bravery really meant, and how there were many forms of bravery and heroism, perhaps against the

enemy within. This led to agreement that it is equally brave to share your story, especially if it has been actively ignored, overlooked, or suppressed in the past, more so than histories or groups of people whose histories have been privileged within national narratives. We discussed lost archival material, and how that spoke about implicit value systems around both collecting that documentation and conserving and caring for it, essentially ensuring its survival and the impact around how that loss was felt by a community.

From these workshops, we succeeded in developing multiple additional outputs. Following coordination with and support from Tattersall, three participants submitted short stories that formed the basis of our planned anthology.[3] One story focused on the issue of a lack of information that surrounded the Mwembe Tayari statues in Mombasa. Another used the starting point of an ornate sword to explore the Singapore Mutiny of 1915. The final story utilised a photo frame from the First World War decorated with British, French, and American flags to examine ideas of shared family memory and the absence of knowing. Whilst limited in number, these stories did ensure that we fulfilled our main objective and helped prove that there are stories and shared experiences attached to objects within marginalised communities and that they can be drawn out, through shared exercises built on trust, into wider mainstream view. One participant later described the workshops as an 'enriching' experience and that they had spent a great deal of time dwelling on how difficult it must be 'to have nothing' relating to a lost loved one or family member in wartime (Participant 1 2024a). They also noted how much of 'a surprisingly big deal' it was for them to have their own work published in the anthology.

In addition to the creative writing produced by the participants, the sessions themselves also served as a creative inspiration. Each workshop was recorded within Zoom and this record passed on to Laura Sorvala, a graphic illustrator with experience in visually documenting these sorts of events. Her illustrations, which are featured below (Figures 1–3) and are also now available on the project website, helped to chart exactly how we approached the topics under discussion and capture the key considerations, lessons, and energy with which Tattersall orchestrated the workshops (Laura Sorvala Illustration 2024; War Ephemera 2024b) ('Workshops', n.d.; Laura Sorvala's work and background can be found at: 'Laura Sorvala Illustration', n.d.).

Sorvala's illustrations give a clear indication of how we wanted the events to work. Firstly, anonymity of the participants was maintained. In order to preserve the workshops as a safe space for people to discuss their own histories and objects, the illustrations were not to feature reproductions of actual individuals. Instead, where relevant, the objects under discussion served to 'speak' for themselves in these images, as evidenced in Figure 2. Sorvala also aimed to capture the evolution of the discussions and the different ways in which Tattersall aimed to convey her own knowledge and experience to the participants. Ideas such as having participants consider what questions they would like to ask their object combined with different ways of considering what constituted 'ephemera' were key to our early workshops and Sorvala was able to reproduce them in her work, whilst also producing a version of the workshops that could be viewed and understood by anyone. As Hammet et al. highlighted: 'If you research the everyday lives of ordinary people, why wouldn't you present that research back in a form that's of the everyday?' (Hammett et al. 2020). In our view, 'if you undertake creative work with ordinary people, why wouldn't you present it back in a creative form?' The illustrations produced by Sorvala helped us meet that standard.

Figure 1. Workshop 1, illustration by Laura Sorvala.

Figure 2. Workshop 2, illustration by Laura Sorvala.

Figure 3. Workshop 3, illustration by Laura Sorvala.

However, despite these successes, the workshops also presented several unforeseen challenges. During the first workshop, it was noticeable how few of the participants were willing to turn on their cameras. This could potentially be explained by an assumption that the participants were not yet comfortable with showing their faces, or underlying issues with the online technology. But in addition, the conversations within the workshops, which were expertly planned and facilitated by Tattersall, were carried out almost exclusively within the chat windows of Zoom, rather than through the sort of online face-to-face dynamic we had expected. As a result, with each passing workshop, it became increasingly difficult to tell how many people were actually participating, or indeed whether the participants were real, at all. Some of the writing exercises and prompts used in the workshops, which were orchestrated on Padlet, did produce responses from workshop attendees, but the lengthy responses in the form of poetry (even in response to tasks that were designed for prose) gave strong indications that they were created within AI programs such as ChatGPT.

Furthermore, it became increasingly clear that a significant number of the attendees were ostensibly from America rather than from the UK-based locations and communities we had hoped to reach.[4] A number of these participants then began to demand financial compensation for their time and participation, which they wanted paid in cryptocurrency. Some of these demands came via email, from people and addresses who had not joined the Zoom space during any of the workshops. This led to considerable difficulty in trying to divine who was an active participant with a story to tell and who was, effectively, either a bot or a fake email account, masquerading as a participant aiming to gain a financial benefit. This, obviously, had a notable impact on the morale of those who had been organising and facilitating the activities. Furthermore, none of the participants made use of the advertised knowledge exchange opportunities that had been part of the original offering to attendees. All of this created a peculiar situation at the conclusion of the workshops and the writing submission period, where we had effectively achieved our initial aims, but were left with

the distinct feeling that the workshops had fallen short of our hopes and that we had either somehow failed or not succeeded to the extent that we could have.

7. Conclusions: Lessons and Reflections

There remain clear lessons from the running of these workshops and, following a period of reflection, we believe that we have various recommendations that may prove useful for any project teams wishing to emulate this type of community-based creative interaction. The methodological process underpinning our approach to the workshops emerged as a result of preparatory conversations with representative cultural and community hubs. They all stressed the importance of taking the time to gain community members' trust and of moving forward in terms of a genuinely equitable collaborative agreement. Our time spent with groups like Peabody was designed to ensure that we would firstly build trust and provide assurances to respect the independence and intellectual ownership of the stories of the groups and communities with which they worked. From that position it was hoped that they would vouch for us directly to those communities and we would organically draw participants from them. However, despite Peabody's best efforts and attempts to reach out to the communities within their remit, we were unable to gather the number of participants and interest that we had hoped for.

Of major importance is the recognition that our decision to host the workshops online was not as successful as hoped, despite the fact that the workshops took place and we received creative writing submissions as a result of them. Holding the events online did not help us gather a wider spread of participants from multiple British-based locations or communities to mitigate for the lack of in-person events. Perhaps the 'interaction fatigue', which we had been warned about, had doomed the initiative from the start. Similarly, despite our best efforts to highlight the fact that our project was not just concerned with the First World War—and was in fact eager to move beyond that conflict—many of the partnership groups we interacted with considered us to be First World War-focused and it is entirely possible that individuals who may have been interested in the workshops viewed us the same way and decided against interaction because of it. Since the conclusion of the centenary, it may be that a certain First World War fatigue has set in amongst the wider British population and they were not yet ready to either focus on that conflict or move onto other historical moments.

Regardless of why we did not secure the numbers we had hoped for, the decision to expand our call for participants—particularly through social media calls—likely resulted in the activities being hijacked by an unknown number of individuals who were not operating in good faith. The fact that errant participants potentially used AI or ChatGPT to produce content is something that we had not considered but should be of concern to others looking to run similar activities. The danger of AI related submissions would not have been present if the workshops had been held in-person. Perhaps we should have undertaken a form of 'risk assessment' to try and imagine the full scope of worst case scenarios in regard to the online workshops, but it is not clear that we would have ever imagined this particular outcome. Our experience serves as a stark reminder that no one in academia can avoid the significance of the AI revolution.

The primary lesson that can be taken from this situation is that reaching audiences who are underrepresented or marginalised is incredibly difficult. They do not owe anything to those reaching out to them and, as a result, success and failure can both be an outcome of random chance and circumstances. We spent a great deal of time discussing our plans with groups like Peabody. Perhaps if we had spent longer, it would have increased our chances of success, but that is very difficult to quantify. Whether it was through distrust, disinterest, or interaction fatigue, we did not make the headway that we had hoped for and anticipated. Perhaps, however, we are also putting too much emphasis—or are considering it in the wrong way—on the causes of this fatigue? It may be that it was not simply the act of participating in such studies and collaborations with researchers that put people off, but the fact that it did not sufficiently alter their daily lives and experiences. Whilst

platforming and showcasing more diverse histories will hopefully have a long-term impact, it does not immediately enhance the lived experiences of those within the communities from which we drew our participants. It did not automatically make them less likely to be discriminated against. A hoped-for long-term impact is not a substitute for more immediate considerations.

However, this does not mean that the time was wasted. We undertook our activities with the goal of facilitating and platforming the history and experiences—through specific objects—of marginalised communities in the form of a creative anthology. That creative anthology does now exist. We may not have taken the expected path towards that goal, but we did achieve it, nonetheless. Furthermore, one workshop and anthology participant who already had an existing interest in further studying the First World War as an MA student is now turning that idea into reality (Participant 1 2024b). While not a direct outcome of our workshops, the interaction and engagement with our project will have a legacy if they take that next step. Regarding academic outputs, there has been both a conference paper and this article based upon our experiences. But beyond this, we succeeded in the underlying foundation of all academic endeavour, we learned things through both our successes, but especially through the moments that felt like failures. This article is, therefore, not the only output we are producing to reflect on, and disseminate, our experiences. We have further commissioned Tattersall to produce an advisory guide for other academic projects and to provide a training session to any interested parties within the field.

There also remain important additional considerations not just for our project, but for the wider field, who may wish to undertake similar work with the public in both a sustainable and equitable manner. The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns that accompanied it led to various forms of social isolation, which were likely even more pronounced for those communities who already existed on the margins. The ongoing cost-of-living crisis in an existing austerity climate will have exacerbated this isolation and many people are now working multiple jobs to stay afloat financially. In both cases, how willing or able will those within marginalised communities be to undertaking cooperative work with academics with no defined or tangible benefits? Barriers to participation and access can exist in many forms and perhaps the most beneficial focus of future research into co-production and collaboration would be to explore these barriers in order to better understand how to dismantle or circumvent them in a manner that is beneficial to those communities themselves. There are likely to be notable differences in these barriers and circumstances between communities, but a wider analysis of them remains essential. In the words of Tattersall: 'the overall approach needs to equally balance the needs, benefits and ultimately the sustainability of the community with academic research interests'.

The motivation that drove us remains both sound and important. There are borderlands of memory and barriers between the mainstream and the periphery that are limiting the ways in which we can tell and understand broader and more diverse histories. Using objects and community engagement can be solutions to this problem. But the best laid plans can sometimes not survive first contact with reality and circumstances beyond their control, and the difference between success and failure can sometimes be based upon the perceptions and feelings of those undertaking the work. Perseverance may be required to bridge the gap but, if you or your hoped-for plans are going to fail, it remains valuable to fail in public so that the effort can be noted, the precedent established, and alternative solutions considered.

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Notes

1 Further details are available at: 'Home', War Ephemera, https://hosting.northumbria.ac.uk/warephemera/ (accessed on 16 January 2024).

2 For details as to how the UKRI funding process in general works, see: 'How We Make Decisions', https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/how-we-make-decisions/ (accessed on 8 March 2024). For the same information on the AHRC in particular, see: 'Guidance for Reviewers–AHRC', https://www.ukri.org/councils/ahrc/guidance-for-reviewers/ (accessed on 8 March 2024).

3 The final anthology included these submissions along with those produced during writing workshops undertaken at the University of Northumbria and via a separate call for submissions to creative writing groups within our networks.

4 The exact reason for why the project caught the attention of an American audience remain unknown. The likeliest explanation is that, when the workshops were shared on social media, they reached an international contingent not previously anticipated.

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