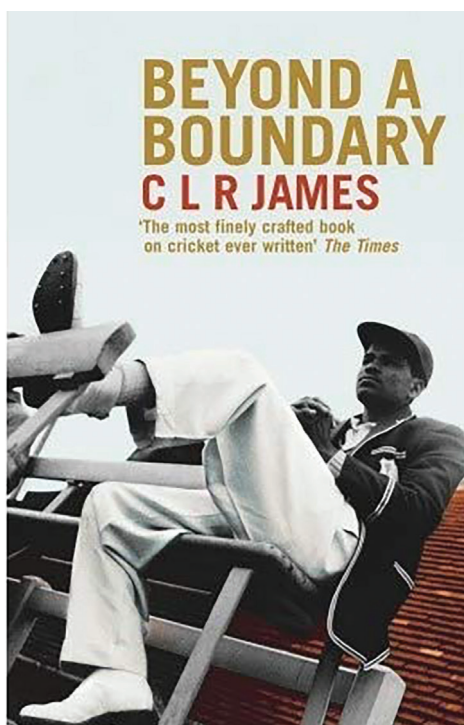


HA Update

Thinking beyond boundaries¹

In October of last year, the Royal Historical Society (RHS) published an important report highlighting the racial and ethnic inequalities in the teaching and practice of history in the UK (RHS, 2018). Focused on history teaching at university, it nevertheless highlighted the need for thinking to occur at *all* levels of history teaching, in order to address the issues. Acknowledging that history is a popular subject in UK schools, the report highlights that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) pupils are less likely than their peers to choose history for examination courses, which has an impact on under-representation in UK history departments. The report offers advice and guidance on how to take positive action to address and diminish barriers to equality in the discipline of history. Drawing on these and broader considerations, I offer some ideas and challenges that history teachers, departments and schools might want to consider. These are offered as suggestions and with recognition that, as individuals and institutions, we all operate within a specific set of circumstances that determines where, when and how that thinking might take place.

To begin by drawing on the report, I offer a rationale for why we need to attend to these issues and how all students, and more broadly, society benefits if we can challenge racial and ethnic inequality. The RHS report offers four principal and overlapping justifications. Legally, we are bound

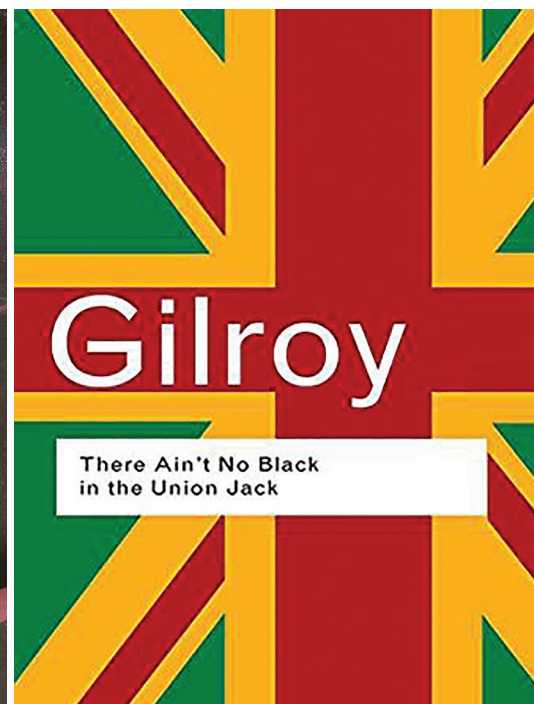
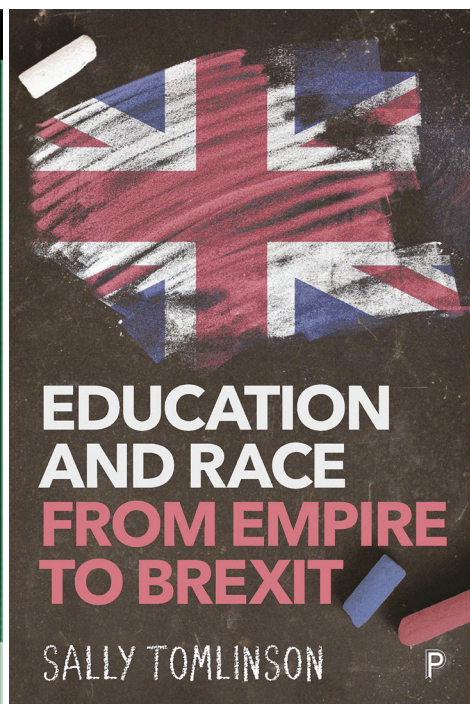
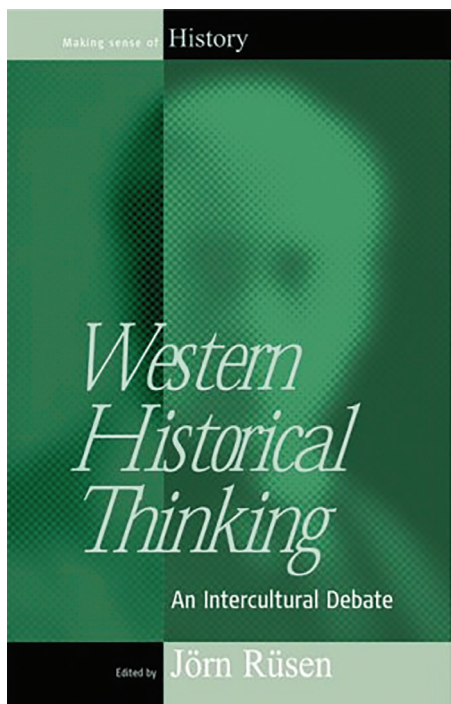


to the Equality Act, and the public sector equality duty requires that schools carry out their functions with 'due regard', not just to eliminate discrimination but also to advance equality. The next rationale is a demographic one: the proportion of pupils from BME backgrounds has been steadily rising over recent years. According to DFE figures for January 2019, 31.3% of pupils are from minority ethnic origins. Next the RHS offers an ethical rationale: 'We are an evidence-based discipline. Having followed the evidence, we consider racial and ethnic equality to be an ethical imperative' (p.13). The final conviction is an intellectual

view, that hints at the value to all of us in attending to these issues: 'We are alive to the vital role that new interlocutors, new research questions and new methodologies play in enhancing historical research and interpretations. The intellectual dynamism of history as a practice feeds on a substrate enriched by multiple, often disputing voices' (p.12).

The report recognises the multiple dimensions of inequality, bias and discrimination, and the focus on BME is not to diminish other forms of inequality nor to neglect how BME inequality is shaped by intersectional factors. The highlighted issues of under-representation and experiences of discrimination are nevertheless sobering and particularly acute for black students and staff.

Before focusing on history teaching in schools, it is important to set a broader context related to the history of race in schools, not least because it begs important questions about the persistence of these issues and the need to think about institutional practices and policy. Sally Tomlinson (2019) has recently documented the intransigent and sometimes hostile responses at government level to successive reports highlighting the persistence of issues of racism and offering suggestions for change. The Swann Report (1985) recommendation that a more plural democratic society might require a rethinking of national identity



was regarded by the Conservative Monday Club as a 'profoundly dangerous' document. Alexander and Weekes-Bernard's examination of the nature of diverse curricula, following the most recent national curriculum reforms, argues that 30 years since the Swann report, 'the struggles over the History National Curriculum clearly illustrate how much is at stake and how much is still to achieve, in terms of recognition, policy and practice.' (2017, p. 490).

What is known about BME students' experiences of history? A DfES publication *Ethnicity and Education* (2006) showed that history is one of the least popular subjects on the curriculum among a range of minority ethnic groups. Kay Traille's (2007) small-scale work found that pupils of African-Caribbean descent felt alienated by the curriculum they were taught. Hawkey and Prior's (2011) work investigating the perspectives and narrative frameworks of BME teenagers found a fluid and evolving picture of diversity but concluded by endorsing Stuurman and Grever's (2007) view that, 'In a globalising world an inward-looking canon will be less and less convincing', before calling for curricula that offer students usable frameworks that enable them to orient themselves in the present. They suggested a focus on the movement and migration of people as especially pertinent. Another notable aspect of this is how little systemic work appears to be taking place, looking at students' experience of the curriculum. Recent emphasis on a knowledge-rich curriculum seems to have downplayed students' affective needs and desires: something that might be especially problematic for students of BME background (Wilkinson, 2014).

Clearly, one way of addressing some of the issues raised by the RHS report is to think about the content

of your curriculum. Claire Hollis has phrased this well, as making the curriculum more representative. She offers a parallel rationale to that of social justice: that in making the curriculum more representative of the complexity of the past, we will be doing greater justice to the discipline itself. Bringing together both a social justice rationale and a disciplinary one is the work of 'doing justice to history'. They offer an approach to 'challenging the serious omissions and distortions in historical narratives' (Mohamud and Whitburn, 2016, p.4), with the school curriculum being one such narrative. This is more than a simple call for more black people in the curriculum: Mohamud and Whitburn argue we also need to directly address race as a historical phenomenon.

In trying to make your curriculum more diverse and more representative, a specific consideration is necessary: this is what Stuart Hall and others termed 'the burden of representation'. For teachers constructing migrant journeys, for example: how do you ensure that students understand the full range of meanings possible in the term 'migrant'? How do you ensure an analysis that goes beyond analysis of a phenomenon, to capture the human agency and the human stories behind that phenomenon? The seeking of the individual stories serves a dual purpose, both in combating



Toni Morrison



the prevalent and problematic media representation of the nameless and story-less homogeneous immigrants. Human stories also serve a pedagogical purpose of hooking students into an analysis of complex issues: an individual story can provide a way of anchoring the students' learning.

The RHS articulation of the intellectual rationale suggests the need for broader consideration beyond curriculum content. This should include thinking about the genealogy of history, both as a discipline and as a school subject. Current space precludes a full discussion here, but we need to be aware of the way that the origins of our subject are fundamental to modern discourse about nation, including who is included and excluded. Stefan Berger's work (2008) shows how history sought to legitimise itself through a discourse of 'scientificity', one impact of which was to favour academic historical writing over other forms of knowing the past. The European project of modernity that helped to

shape our subject simultaneously shaped notions of race and ethnicity, something that should give us pause for thought. This is the sort of thinking with which university departments are beginning to engage, following calls to decolonise the curriculum. I am not suggesting we throw the disciplinary baby out with the bathwater, but we might at least ask some questions about the impact of these antecedents.

How far has this privileging of academic writing occurred within history education and with what consequences? I was reminded of this question on hearing a re-run of an interview with the great African-American novelist Toni Morrison, who argued that while the history of the African American is well documented, it needed to be 're-imagined', as it is through imagining that agency and humanity can be returned. It is notable, when thinking about the range of fiction writers from BME backgrounds, how many of them are drawn to history. If we look to where history is found beyond the strict borders of the discipline – in heritage, oral histories, local stories, memory work, theatre and literature – it is there that we will encounter people of BME backgrounds engaging with and using the past. Ashton and Hamilton's (2010) metaphor of history as a large house with many rooms is apt: people may inhabit more than one room and they will make visits to other parts of the house. Let's examine how strongly we should defend the boundaries of history and for what purposes. To use a historical example, the Anglo-Saxon ritual of beating the bounds served a range of purposes, but one of them was to indicate who was to be included and who should be excluded from an area. Policing the boundaries is often about the operation of power and this needs examining. This exploration of boundaries suggests that it may also be fruitful to open up considerations of interdisciplinary work in schools. The recent TIDE Beacon report (Todd, Macintosh and Das, 2019) concluded that conversations and collaboration across subjects should be developed in schools, reflecting the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of research on topics such as migration, empire and belonging.

Another consideration relates to the nation as the foremost unit of analysis in history. I have only briefly outlined how history was central to modern discourse about nation, and as a result, 'National History has been a dominant genre of history writing in Europe for almost two centuries.' (Berger and Lorenz, 2008, p.1). The most recent curriculum reforms called for a greater emphasis on 'our' island story and to give students clearer 'narratives' and 'schemata', often serving to give the nation a greater centrality in the curriculum. Knowledge of our nation's origins and development is no doubt important but how far does a curriculum built exclusively around its history reflect the needs of young people in an increasingly globalised world? How far does it inform a sense of exceptionalism? These questions have been raised in university history departments for a long time. The question 'Who needs the nation?' was originally posed by Kobena Mercer, the black British cultural critic, in *Welcome to the Jungle* (Mercer, 1994) and taken further by Burton (1997), and is still worth asking. It has also been examined at a school level. In his excellent book, *History Teaching, Nationhood and the State*, examining the debates around the national curriculum and the place of nation, Rob Phillips (1998) noted how the historian Raphael Samuel was 'pointing attention [...] to the ways in which history is created for particular purposes' (Phillips, 1998, p. 131). The suggestion is that the choices or emphases we make, in relation to the curriculum, are related to the exercise of power – perhaps unconsciously – in replicating our own histories, but with possible detrimental impacts for both the subject and those pupils who may see themselves excluded from this national story.

A final consideration, therefore, to take us beyond nation, might be for a consideration of an intercultural approach to history. The German thinker Jorn Rüsen (2002), in his exploration of the 'uniqueness' of western historical thinking, is clear that a key function of history is in forming identity, but that this process of subjectification involves the drawing of boundaries between self and other.

He argues that intracultural and intercultural communication is crucial to overcoming the ethnocentric asymmetry of this identity building. His analysis is based on recognition of how the forces of migration and globalisation have opened up new challenges to our approach to history and new questions about what history we should engage with, arguing that ‘western historical thinking has to reflect the critique of ideology’ (p. 4). The challenges to the discipline arise because ‘behind the standards of reasons, there are claims for power and domination that endanger, if not destroy, the sovereignty of other cultures’. These challenges are well articulated, not least in post-colonial theory, but how well are they reflected in our own curricula, reading lists, and professional discussions? How might these discussions be enlivened by reading Chakrabarty (2000), who called for the study of history to provincialise Europe? Or by reading Akala’s *Natives* (2018) for the way in which it reveals that knowledge is political.

My intention is to offer suggestions and also provocations. I recognise the willingness and desire of history teachers to empower all their students and that their teaching often happens in less than perfect circumstances, but my main desire has been to ask that we all examine the ‘given’ nature of things; that we recognise our subject as a discipline, as a school subject, and that we ourselves are products of both history and the associated operations of power. Ask critical questions of the content of your curriculum, including how BME historical actors are positioned. Consider the purpose of history and especially its relationship to identity building. Consider the impact of drawing the boundaries of the spatial unit (the nation) but also of the discipline, too narrowly. Consider the possibilities of dealing with racism and/or migration as historical phenomena and the consequences of not doing so. Paul Gilroy (1987) argues that, ‘Racism rests on the ability to contain blacks in the present, to repress and to deny the past’ (p. 12). It is clear, therefore, that history has a vital role to play in challenging inequality in the present by acknowledging this past.

In sum, engage reflexively with both the content of your teaching and also with the nature of historical thinking. I believe that through this we can begin to address some of the inequalities highlighted in the RHS report and also enrich all our students by attending to the dynamism of our subject.

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¹ Inspiration taken from C.L.R. James’s ground-breaking book about cricket. James reaches beyond that sporting boundary to open up an analysis of race and class.

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