Postcolonial Directions in Education

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Focus and Scope

Postcolonial Directions in Education is a peer reviewed open access journal produced twice a year. It is a scholarly journal intended to foster further understanding, advancement and reshaping of the field of postcolonial education. We welcome articles that contribute to advancing the field. As indicated in the Editorial for the inaugural issue, the purview of this journal is broad enough to encompass a variety of disciplinary approaches, including but not confined to the following: sociological, anthropological, historical and social psychological approaches. The areas embraced include anti-racist education, decolonizing education, critical multiculturalism, critical racism theory, direct colonial experiences in education and their legacies for present day educational structures and practice, educational experiences reflecting the culture and 'imagination' of empire, the impact of neoliberalism/globalisation/structural adjustment programmes on education, colonial curricula and subaltern alternatives, education and liberation movements, challenging hegemonic languages, the promotion of local literacies and linguistic diversity, neo-colonial education and identity construction, colonialism and the construction of patriarchy, canon and canonicity, Indigenous knowledges, supranational bodies and their educational frameworks, north-south and east-west relations in education, the politics of representation, unlearning colonial stereotypes, internal colonialism and education, cultural hybridity and learning in postcolonial contexts, education and the politics of dislocation, biographies / autobiographies reflecting the above themes, deconstruction of colonial narratives of civilization within educational contexts. Once again, the field cannot be exhausted.

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COLONIAL HERITAGE TOURISM AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMATIC MEMORY: NAVIGATING MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND RECONCILIATION (A CASE STUDY OF CON DAO PRISON – VIETNAM)

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Abstract

This study examines the intersections between heritage tourism, cultural trauma, and collective identity through an in-depth case study of Côn Đảo Prison—a prominent site of colonial violence and national remembrance in Vietnam. Drawing on theories of collective memory and memory tourism, the research adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach to explore how visitors emotionally engage with the site and interpret its historical significance. Through 13 semi-structured interviews with domestic and international tourists, the study reveals contrasting mnemonic frameworks: Vietnamese visitors primarily express patriotic pride and filial gratitude, while international tourists approach the site through critical lenses of colonial accountability and universal human rights. The heritage experience—mediated through symbolic spaces, curated exhibits, and tour guide narratives—functions not as a static encounter with the past but as a dynamic and emotionally charged process of memory co-construction. The findings underscore the ethical and affective complexity of interpreting dark heritage in postcolonial contexts, and argue for a shift in heritage governance toward narrative ethics, emotional literacy, and intercultural dialogue. By

situating Côn Đảo Prison as a performative space of remembrance, this study contributes to broader debates on trauma-informed heritage interpretation and offers conceptual insights for the sustainable management of memory tourism in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Memory tourism; colonial heritage; cultural trauma; postcolonial reconciliation

Introduction

In recent decades, heritage and tourism studies have increasingly turned their attention to trauma heritage and colonial heritage. Places marked by collective suffering—ranging from wartime atrocities and state-sanctioned violence to systems of colonial repression—are no longer understood simply as repositories of historical fact. Instead, they have evolved into affective and contested spaces where memory, identity, and emotion are actively produced, negotiated, and performed (Logan, 2009; Feakins & Bower, 2024). Such sites compel visitors not only to recall the past but also to confront its moral complexities through embodied, emotional, and ethical encounters.

This transformation is especially salient in postcolonial contexts, where suppressed or marginalized histories re-enter public consciousness through heritage reactivation. Colonial prisons, forced labor camps, and plantation complexes are increasingly framed as mnemonic arenas where questions of power, justice, reconciliation, and narrative authority are debated (Cheer & Reeves, 2015; Wei & Wang, 2022). These developments raise pressing questions: Who has the right to tell these stories? How should traumatic histories be mediated? And what forms of visitor engagement are appropriate in morally charged settings?

Vietnam's Côn Đảo Prison exemplifies these tensions. Established in 1862 under French colonial rule and later repurposed by the South Vietnamese regime, the prison served for nearly a century as a site of incarceration,

torture, and political repression. Today, it functions not only as a chilling reminder of colonial and postcolonial violence but also as a sacred site of national remembrance, memorializing the sacrifice and resilience of revolutionary prisoners. This dual symbolic status renders Côn Đảo a layered heritage site: simultaneously an archive of suffering and a monument to resistance.

Despite its historical and emotional gravity, Côn Đảo Prison remains underexplored in scholarship on memory tourism. Existing studies often emphasize material conservation, official designation, or pedagogical value within state-sanctioned narratives. Far less attention has been paid to the prison as a lived memoryscape—a space where visitors' emotions, cultural perspectives, and moral frameworks intersect with institutional narratives and interpretive practices (Light, 2017; Schwenkel, 2009). This gap risks overlooking the affective and ideological work undertaken by both visitors and heritage professionals in situ.

To address this, the study investigates domestic and international visitors' experiences at Côn Đảo Prison. It examines how cultural trauma is activated and processed through guided tours, exhibitions, and personal reflection. Drawing on qualitative interviews with tourists and guides, it explores how memory is transmitted, reframed, and co-constructed in postcolonial contexts.

This paper contributes to debates on heritage ethics, the politics of memory tourism, and the role of dark heritage in shaping collective identities. It argues that Côn Đảo Prison operates as an arena of mnemonic negotiation where national identity, historical consciousness, and intercultural dialogue converge.

Theoretical framework and Methodology

Key concepts

Collective memory and Cultural trauma

Collective memory refers to the dynamic process through which social groups remember, interpret, and preserve past experiences in order to construct and maintain a shared sense of identity (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick & Robbins, 1998). Particularly distressing historical events, when interpreted through a collective lens of suffering, can give rise to what Alexander (2004) terms cultural trauma—a rupture in social identity that becomes central to how groups remember their past. Importantly, traumatic memory does not remain confined to the directly affected generation but is often transmitted across generations through both psychological pathways and biological mechanisms such as epigenetics (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

As Balaev (2018) argues, trauma is inextricably linked to cultural reconfiguration, shaping narratives of identity and group cohesion. This view is supported by Li, Leidner, and Castano (2023), who emphasize that cultural trauma has a dual capacity: it can perpetuate intergroup tensions while simultaneously fostering the conditions for dialogue and reconciliation. The global relevance of trauma is further evidenced by empirical research, such as Benjet et al. (2016), which highlights the widespread exposure to traumatic events across diverse societies.

Furthermore, trauma is not only preserved in memory but is often inscribed onto physical landscapes and heritage objects. Coddington and Micieli-Voutsinas (2017) underscore the embodied nature of trauma in space, while Feakins and Bower (2024) introduce the concept of trauma-heritage—an interpretive framework that engages with historical pain through a trauma-informed lens. This approach positions heritage sites as spaces of potential healing, where collective memory can be restored and recontextualized with ethical sensitivity.

Postmemory and Intergenerational transmission of trauma

While collective memory is often rooted in direct experience, Hirsch (1997) introduces the concept of postmemory to describe the relationship that subsequent generations have with traumatic events they did not live through, but which nonetheless shape their affective and ethical consciousness. Postmemory is transmitted through narratives, cultural representations, and emotionally charged environments, allowing descendants of trauma survivors to inherit the memories, silences, and moral frameworks associated with historical suffering.

In the context of heritage tourism, postmemory becomes particularly salient when younger visitors engage with sites of trauma that predate their lived experience. This phenomenon is evident among many young Vietnamese tourists at Con Dao Prison, who, despite not having witnessed the war or colonial repression firsthand, articulate a deep emotional connection to the sacrifices of previous generations. Their affective responses—often shaped by national education, family storytelling, and collective rituals—demonstrate the intergenerational reach of cultural trauma.

As such, postmemory provides a critical framework for understanding how memory tourism operates not only as a mode of historical engagement, but also as a conduit through which inherited identities and emotions are performed, reaffirmed, or reinterpreted. Integrating this lens into the study of colonial heritage enriches our understanding of how trauma persists, evolves, and resonates across time, particularly in postcolonial societies seeking to reconcile with difficult pasts (Hirsch, 1997; Hirschberger, 2018).

Trauma heritage and Colonial heritage

Trauma heritage refers to heritage sites embedded with collective memories of extreme suffering, such as war, political repression, or genocide. These spaces serve not only as loci of remembrance but also as arenas where

societies confront historical wounds and seek symbolic resolution (Feakins & Bower, 2024; Hirschberger, 2018). Because of their emotional and moral weight, trauma heritage demands a careful and ethically grounded interpretive approach. Without such sensitivity, there is a heightened risk that sites of pain may be reduced to consumable spectacles, leading to the commodification and dilution of collective trauma.

By contrast, colonial heritage encompasses cultural artifacts, monuments, and practices inherited from colonial regimes. These elements often carry the imprint of hegemonic power, racial hierarchies, and cultural imposition (Cheer & Reeves, 2015; Wei & Wang, 2022). While some colonial heritage sites have gained recognition for their architectural or historical significance, efforts to preserve them frequently encounter the dilemma of whether commemoration inadvertently perpetuates the ideological structures of empire. Thus, the conservation of colonial heritage requires a nuanced balance between historical recognition and critical reflection on past injustices.

Although trauma and colonial heritage differ in historical origin and symbolic function, both act as material expressions of collective memory (Saito, 2006). At the same time, they are inherently political, often shaped by selective remembering and institutional narratives. Scholars have cautioned against the instrumentalization of such memory, noting that heritage can be co-opted for ideological purposes or nationalistic agendas (Knudsen, Oldfield, Buettner, & Zabunyan, 2022). In response, decolonizing heritage practices advocate for restoring narrative agency to marginalized communities—those whose histories have long been silenced or distorted (Feakins & Bower, 2024). When approached ethically and inclusively, both forms of heritage can function as powerful tools for intergenerational healing, empathy, and reconciliation (Brave Heart, 2003).

Memory tourism

Memory tourism constitutes a critical mechanism through which collective memory is both preserved and reanimated in contemporary society. As Dunkley, Morgan, and Westwood (2011) note, visiting historical sites offers individuals a means to connect with the past in ways that reinforce cultural belonging and social continuity. Such encounters are not merely educational but deeply affective, enabling participants to locate themselves within a broader historical narrative.

Biran, Poria, and Oren (2011) further emphasize that heritage sites of memory serve as emotionally charged spaces where visitors can experience a sense of historical empathy. These affective engagements foster the social construction of memory, transforming heritage tourism into a participatory act of remembrance rather than passive consumption. In this sense, memory tourism is not only about accessing the past but about negotiating its meaning in the present.

Nonetheless, Light (2017) cautions that the commemorative value of such sites can be undermined by excessive commercialization or politically biased narratives. When heritage becomes a tool of entertainment or ideological projection, its ability to cultivate authentic engagement with history is compromised. To address this tension, heritage management must carefully balance visitor engagement with narrative integrity—ensuring that emotional connection does not come at the expense of historical complexity and ethical responsibility.

Methods and Survey sample

Methodological approach

This study adopts an interpretivist approach that emphasizes the subjective construction of meaning within specific cultural and historical contexts

(Schwandt, 2014). Rather than seeking objective truths, it examines how collective traumatic memory is evoked and reconstructed through visitor interactions with colonial heritage sites. Con Dao Prison exemplifies this process, where memory is preserved in both material and emotional forms. Drawing on memory tourism and postcolonial heritage frameworks (Light, 2017; Smith & Campbell, 2024), the study situates visitor experience as central to understanding how heritage tourism shapes identity, reconciliation, and collective historical consciousness.

Research design

This study employed a qualitative case study design, suitable for exploring how visitors engage with trauma heritage in situ (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Focusing on Côn Đảo Prison—an iconic site of colonial repression and national remembrance—the approach enabled in-depth exploration of social, emotional, and interpretive dimensions of visitor experience. Grounded in a constructivist epistemology, the research assumes that meaning is co-constructed through human interaction with memory spaces (Schwandt, 2014).

Data collection combined three components. First, site immersion and participant observation were conducted during guided tours and informal interactions, providing contextual insights for interview design. Second, semi-structured interviews served as the primary method, eliciting narratives, affective responses, and interpretive perspectives through flexible yet thematically consistent questions. Third, data were examined using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and latent meanings.

The integration of observation, interviews, and thematic analysis enhanced credibility, depth, and contextual richness (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This design aligns with methodological developments in dark tourism and trauma heritage research, highlighting the role of lived experience, narrative

mediation, and emotional engagement in shaping collective memory (Biran et al., 2011; Feakins & Bower, 2024).

Methods

This study employs a qualitative methodology to investigate the experiential and emotional responses of visitors to Côn Đảo Prison—a heritage site deeply intertwined with cultural trauma and national identity. A qualitative approach is particularly effective in capturing the ways individuals perceive, interpret, and emotionally engage with heritage spaces, emphasizing context-rich, subjective perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Such an approach is appropriate for symbolically charged sites where past and present intersect in embodied encounters (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, allowing participants to share narratives while providing flexibility to probe key themes. The interview guide focused on three domains: (1) emotional and sensory responses when encountering heritage spaces (e.g., "Which detail most affected you?"); (2) connections between traumatic memory and identity, both individual and collective (e.g., "How do you interpret national history or human rights as represented here?"); and (3) the influence of mediating elements such as guides, symbolic artifacts, signage, and exhibitions (e.g., "How did the guide's storytelling shape your experience?").

For the tour guide group, interviews examined narrative strategies, intercultural mediation, and responses to visitor emotions. Questions such as "Which stories do you emphasize and why?" and "How do you respond to strong visitor reactions?" positioned guides as mnemonic intermediaries central to trauma heritage interpretation (Biran, Poria, & Oren, 2011; Smith & Campbell, 2024). Ultimately, the qualitative approach highlights how memory is not only preserved but reanimated through emotion, reflection, and dialogic engagement.

Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling to secure a diverse, information-rich sample, enabling exploration of varied experiential perspectives and emotional responses across stakeholder groups. Inclusion criteria required participants to have visited the Côn Đảo Prison heritage site within the past 3–6 months, possess the ability to articulate experiences in Vietnamese or English, and belong to one of two cohorts: visitors (domestic or international) or site tour guides.

Sampling was guided by theoretical saturation, with data collection ceasing when no new categories or themes emerged (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). A total of 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted, including six domestic visitors, four international visitors, and three site tour guides. International participants represented France, Australia, and the United States, ensuring cross-cultural perspectives. Gender and age diversity were also considered to enrich interpretive variation.

All interviews were conducted in person at the heritage site, each lasting 25–40 minutes. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically, allowing identification of recurring patterns that illuminate emotional engagement, interpretive processes, and the co-construction of memory within the heritage landscape.

Findings and Discussion

Historical trauma and memory of Con Dao prison

Established by French colonial authorities in 1862, Con Dao Prison is one of the most prominent symbols of colonial repression in Vietnam. Originally intended for the incarceration of political prisoners who resisted colonial rule, the prison was later utilized by the Republic of Vietnam to suppress revolutionary forces (Hayward & Tran, 2014). With a history spanning nearly

a century, Con Dao has become deeply embedded in Vietnam's collective memory as a site of pain, sacrifice, and the struggle for national independence.

One of the most iconic representations of traumatic memory at Con Dao is the "tiger cages"-roofless, isolated cells in which prisoners were shackled, tortured, and subjected to inhumane conditions (Kwon, 2008). Images of revolutionary prisoners suffering in these cages have become etched in the consciousness of generations of Vietnamese, symbolizing both the brutality of colonial oppression and the enduring resilience of patriotic resistance.

Documented accounts of torture-including beatings, starvation, exposure to the elements, and psychological abuse-are extensively supported by survivor testimonies and historical records. These practices have played a central role in shaping the collective traumatic memory of the Vietnamese people (Schwenkel, 2009). Today, Con Dao Prison serves not only as a historical attraction but also as a commemorative space where memories of pain and sacrifice are preserved and reactivated through exhibitions, educational initiatives, and memorial ceremonies.

As such, Con Dao Prison-with its tangible symbols such as the tiger cages and narratives of courage and endurance-has become an inseparable component of Vietnam's modern collective memory.

Interpreting colonial heritage at Con Dao prison

The interpretation of heritage at Côn Đảo Prison plays a crucial role in reconstructing historical narratives and reinforcing collective memory of Vietnam's colonial past. More than a preserved remnant, the site functions as a dynamic arena where memories of colonial violence and anti-colonial resistance are curated and transmitted. Exhibition strategies emphasize reconstructions of incarceration conditions and punishment instruments—

most notably the infamous “tiger cages” (chuồng cọp)—to evoke the harsh realities faced by political prisoners under French colonial rule (Hayward & Trần, 2014).

Bilingual informational panels further contextualize these displays, combining factual history with interpretive commentary that underscores colonial brutality while foregrounding detainees’ resilience. Such visual-textual mediation contributes to what Macdonald (2013) terms the “performance of memory,” inviting visitors to engage both emotionally and cognitively with curated narratives.

Tour guides serve as key mediators within this framework. Their use of affective storytelling situates personal accounts of figures like Võ Thị Sáu, Lê Hồng Phong, and Nguyễn An Ninh within the broader struggle for liberation. As Winter (2016) observes, incorporating individual testimonies fosters empathy and deepens understanding of traumatic pasts. These narratives function simultaneously as commemorative gestures and pedagogical tools, making abstract suffering more tangible.

Today, Côn Đảo Prison transcends its colonial function to become a symbolic site of national memory. Revolutionaries imprisoned here have been memorialized as icons of patriotism, their stories embedded in the national imaginary and contributing to what Anderson (2020) calls an “imagined community” grounded in shared historical consciousness.

As Logan (2009) argues, heritage sites such as Côn Đảo both memorialize injustice and construct postcolonial national identities. The prison thus operates as a space of mourning and a source of inspiration, reaffirming values of freedom, resilience, and independence. Through carefully curated interpretation, Côn Đảo preserves colonial memory while transmitting ethical and ideological messages that sustain Vietnamese cultural identity.

Visitor experiences and reactions

Qualitative data derived from in-depth interviews with 10 visitors—including 6 domestic and 4 international tourists—and 3 professional tour guides at Côn Đảo Prison reveals the site's profound emotional impact and the divergent interpretive frameworks through which various visitor groups process historical memory. As a dark heritage site marked by trauma and resistance, Côn Đảo Prison activates a wide spectrum of affective responses, which are shaped by cultural background, prior historical knowledge, and moral positioning (Biran, Poria, & Oren, 2011).

For domestic visitors, the prison experience transcends historical learning to become a deeply affective engagement with national identity and collective memory. The Vietnamese participants frequently referred to Côn Đảo as a "sacred space" (không gian thiêng), where the memory of revolutionary sacrifice is ritually reaffirmed. This supports Timothy and Boyd's (2003) observation that postcolonial heritage sites often serve as loci for communal identification and ideological reinforcement. A 28-year-old Vietnamese woman shared: *"It felt like reliving the past through every tiger cage. Each step here is a reminder of sacrifices that must not be forgotten."* Her sentiment was echoed by a 35-year-old male participant, who stated: *"There was pain, but also pride. It reminded me of how our people have endured and resisted."* Another interviewee, aged 42, added: *"The silence in the cells spoke louder than any word. I felt connected to the spirit of the revolution."* These responses were often accompanied by tears or extended periods of contemplative silence, indicating high levels of emotional engagement.

International visitors, while also emotionally moved, approached the site from a more cosmopolitan and critical-historical stance. Rather than aligning themselves with the national narrative of sacrifice, they interpreted the site through the lens of universal human rights, postcolonial critique, and moral reflection (Light, 2017). A 45-year-old French male visitor remarked: *"I could see the specter of colonialism in every stone, every bar of this place."* A 32-year-

old Australian woman elaborated: *"Côn Đảo is not just Vietnam's story—it's a universal reminder of how power can go wrong."* A German visitor, aged 39, reflected: "This place challenges you—it makes you question your country's past and your place in global history." These accounts illustrate what Winter (2016) calls "global memoryscapes," wherein visitors interpret local trauma sites through transnational ethical frameworks.

The three interviewed tour guides confirmed their roles as crucial intermediaries in shaping visitors' affective and cognitive experiences. Their narratives were carefully curated to foster emotional resonance while maintaining historical integrity. A 40-year-old female guide emphasized: *"We try to tell real stories—simple, but powerful enough to touch the heart. When visitors stand silent before the tiger cages, we know that memory has been awakened."* Another guide, aged 36, noted: *"The stories of Võ Thị Sáu and Nguyễn An Ninh always move people, especially when we describe their final moments. Visitors often cry."* A third, a 29-year-old male guide, explained: *"Each group is different. For Vietnamese tourists, we speak of patriotism. For foreigners, we focus on human rights and colonial history. The message is adjusted, but the emotion is real."* These insights align with Biran et al. (2011), who argue that dark heritage sites promote not only historical comprehension but also emotional confrontation and socio-ethical reflection.

Overall, the findings suggest that Côn Đảo Prison operates as a multilayered mnemonic landscape—where domestic visitors engage through nationalist affect and pride, while international visitors adopt a critical global stance oriented toward ethics and reconciliation. The site thus functions beyond a static commemorative role to become a space of civic education, intercultural dialogue, and reflexive remembrance (Macdonald, 2013; Logan, 2009). In a globalized heritage context, such spaces play an increasingly important role in fostering shared understandings of history and facilitating cross-cultural empathy.

Colonial memory and the globalization of trauma heritage

Beyond its national role in remembrance, the case of Côn Đảo Prison demonstrates how sites of colonial trauma are increasingly embedded in transnational memory circuits. Levy and Sznaider (2006) argue that traumatic memories of violence and human rights abuses are no longer confined to local communities but circulate globally through tourism, media, diaspora networks, and heritage initiatives, contributing to shared moral and historical consciousness.

In this light, Côn Đảo functions as a "memory node" within the global heritage landscape. The presence of international visitors—many motivated by interests in human rights, colonial history, or reconciliation—helps situate the site within a transnational framework. Respondents in this study often compared Côn Đảo with other dark heritage sites such as Auschwitz or Robben Island, reflecting how global ethical discourses shape visitor engagement.

International organizations, including UNESCO, and heritage diplomacy initiatives further embed Vietnam's trauma narratives within global memory infrastructures. While such processes enhance global recognition and foster intercultural dialogue, they raise pressing questions about narrative authority and ownership. Whose voice defines the global meaning of Vietnamese trauma? To what extent might global circulation dilute the site's national specificity or alter its commemorative role?

As Knudsen, Oldfield, Buettner, and Zabunyan (2022) caution, globalization of memory risks detaching trauma from its socio-cultural roots, transforming lived histories into abstract symbols within moralized global discourse. For younger Vietnamese generations, with no direct experience of colonial violence, memory transmission through heritage and tourism is mediated by both national narratives and global norms. Hirsch's (1997) concept of

postmemory illuminates how subsequent generations inherit the ethical weight of trauma through representation rather than lived experience.

Thus, Côn Đảo exemplifies the dual role of colonial heritage tourism: a site of national remembrance and a participant in global memory politics. The challenge lies in sustaining cultural authenticity while engaging the ethical demands of international memory frameworks.

Comparative reflections on Côn Đảo prison and global sites of carceral memory: lessons learned and strategic orientations

Côn Đảo Prison, as a symbolic site of Vietnam's anti-colonial resistance, constitutes a critical locus of collective memory. When compared to internationally recognized carceral heritage sites—such as Robben Island (South Africa), Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (Cambodia), and Maison des Esclaves (Senegal)—both convergent and divergent interpretive practices emerge. These comparisons highlight the unique mnemonic configuration of Côn Đảo while offering insights into the ethical governance of trauma heritage in a globalized memoryscape.

At Robben Island, memory emphasizes resilience, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The use of former political prisoners as guides enables dialogical storytelling, fostering empathy and advancing post-conflict healing (Coombes, 2003). By contrast, Tuol Sleng adopts a starkly documentary approach: displaying torture instruments, photographs, and victim records. While preserving historical accuracy, this strategy can provoke secondary trauma if not supported by reflective pedagogies (Price et al., 2022). The Maison des Esclaves, meanwhile, functions as a transnational symbol of the slave trade but has been critiqued for dramatization and selective historicization, catering to Western audiences and risking commodification of memory (Ostow, 2019).

Côn Đảo exemplifies a hybrid interpretive model, combining material reconstruction (e.g., tiger cages) with affective storytelling centered on martyrs such as Võ Thị Sáu (Novak, 2024). This synthesis resonates with domestic patriotic sentiment while inviting international visitors into broader moral reflection. Yet, given its dual audience—local communities seeking affirmation of identity and foreign visitors, including from former colonial powers—the site faces a complex challenge: balancing national narratives with transnational ethical dialogue.

This comparative analysis underscores that trauma heritage interpretation cannot be monolithic. Instead, it must be approached as a dynamic, contested space where meaning is co-produced. Three strategic orientations are proposed: (1) develop multilayered intercultural frameworks responsive to diverse audiences; (2) strengthen guides as ethical narrators and affective mediators; and (3) institutionalize ethical governance to safeguard historical integrity, prevent commodification, and foster dialogical engagement.

Gendered memory and affective identification

The reception of traumatic heritage is not uniform but mediated through sociocultural lenses, with gender emerging as a critical yet often overlooked dimension. Drawing on feminist memory studies (Hirsch, 1997; Young, 1989) and affect theory in heritage interpretation (Doss, 2010), this section examines how gendered subjectivities shape affective engagement and mnemonic identification at Côn Đảo Prison.

Findings suggest that female visitors, particularly young Vietnamese women, often form strong emotional identifications with historical female figures, most notably Võ Thị Sáu. Rather than seeing her solely as a revolutionary martyr, respondents invoked kinship terms such as “sister” or “friend.” These associations illustrate Hirsch’s (1997) notion of postmemory, where affective identification with past suffering is transmitted across generations and

gender boundaries. For these visitors, memory becomes embodied, evoking empathy and moral reflection.

By contrast, male visitors frequently articulated responses in terms of endurance, resilience, and national pride. Their reflections emphasized material symbols of suffering—such as tiger cages or torture devices—framing the prison as a site of struggle and ultimate victory. This aligns with Winter's (2010) observation that masculine memory practices often privilege stoicism and patriotic valor. One participant described the site as "a testament to how we endured and prevailed."

Narrative mediation also reflected gendered patterns. Female guides often highlighted emotive biographies of women prisoners, whereas male guides focused on political milestones or collective resistance. Such dynamics underscore that both visitor and guide identities shape historical interpretation and emotional resonance.

Finally, these patterns intersect with broader cultural scripts around memorialization. As Doss (2010) notes, public commemoration is shaped by normative expectations of who may grieve or commemorate. At Côn Đảo, such scripts manifest in gendered tropes of martyrdom and sacrifice—simultaneously empowering yet constraining. Recognizing these dynamics highlights the importance of inclusive interpretive strategies that acknowledge gendered modes of memory reception.

Digital mediation in memory interpretation

In the digital age, trauma heritage interpretation is being reshaped by emerging technologies. At Côn Đảo Prison, where interpretation still relies on physical reconstructions and human narration, digital tools present opportunities to expand mnemonic engagement, personalize emotional resonance, and enhance accessibility.

Immersive modalities such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and interactive mobile applications allow visitors to encounter lost or inaccessible elements of the past, amplify marginalized voices, and simulate spatial experiences that foster empathy and reflection (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). For example, VR reconstructions of tiger cages could convey the oppressive scale of confinement without physically intruding into sacred spaces, thereby safeguarding site integrity while deepening understanding.

Digital storytelling platforms also enable the integration of oral histories, archival footage, and survivor testimonies, creating multi-perspective narratives absent from static displays. These tools act as mnemonic bridges across generations, engaging younger audiences through interactive media. Research in affective computing suggests that emotionally responsive interfaces can adjust delivery in real time, optimizing both cognitive retention and affective impact (Zhao, 2020).

Crucially, digital mediation should not replace traditional practices but supplement them through dialogic design. This entails curating technological experiences that promote reflection and ethical engagement rather than passive consumption. Post-visit AR installations or digital memory journals, for instance, could encourage visitors to record and share responses within a collective memory community.

Ethical concerns remain paramount. Given the political sensitivity of trauma heritage, digital tools must avoid gamification or spectacle that trivializes suffering. Content should be co-created with historians, descendants, and cultural institutions to ensure accuracy and representational justice. Moreover, infrastructural and equity challenges demand hybrid systems—such as multilingual audio guides, downloadable content, or museum kiosks—to balance innovation with accessibility.

In sum, digital mediation offers a generative frontier for interpreting Côn Đảo Prison. By extending mnemonic and affective engagement beyond physical

space, it can foster interactive, inclusive, and ethically grounded remembrance. The challenge lies not in adopting technology per se, but in using it responsibly to deepen historical consciousness and cultivate collective responsibility for memory.

Discussion and Managerial implications

Research findings reveal that visiting Côn Đảo Prison is not simply a historical excursion but a deeply affective and mnemonic process through which collective memory is reconstructed and reanimated at both individual and communal levels. Memory tourism thus operates as a form of identity expression, shaping how communities negotiate their pasts. As Feakins and Bower (2024) argue, trauma heritage must be understood not only as an archive of events but as a moral space where memory can be healed and reconciled within socio-cultural frameworks.

Visitor interpretations underscore that heritage is never univocal. Domestic visitors often perceive Côn Đảo as a symbol of patriotism, resilience, and sacrifice, mediated through tangible icons like tiger cages and emotionally charged storytelling by guides. International visitors—especially from former colonial powers—approach the site as a locus of ethical reflection, framing it within global memory and questions of historical responsibility (Light, 2017). This divergence highlights the contested nature of memory, requiring interpretive strategies responsive to diverse perspectives.

Interpretation, particularly through tour guides, emerges as pivotal in activating memory and eliciting emotional engagement. Silent artifacts gain meaning only through narrative mediation, where tone, affect, and presence transform history into lived experience. This resonates with Chronis's (2012) notion of "presenting the past," whereby visitors do not merely learn but feel history. Recognizing guides as memory mediators is therefore critical to ensuring narratives remain historically grounded, emotionally resonant, and ethically guided.

The study also warns of risks linked to commodification or oversimplification. When traumatic memory is reduced to spectacle, sites risk devolving into consumable memorabilia, forfeiting their educational and therapeutic functions. As Logan (2009) and Hirschberger (2018) caution, mishandled trauma heritage can distort or even reinscribe symbolic violence.

Based on these insights, the study proposes three strategic orientations for sustainable management: optimizing interpretive effectiveness, safeguarding memory integrity, and fostering inclusive visitor engagement in ethically charged heritage contexts.

Designing Multilayered and Intercultural Interpretive Frameworks

The first strategic priority involves the development of multilayered, culturally sensitive interpretive strategies that accommodate the differentiated epistemological, emotional, and mnemonic needs of diverse visitor populations. Traumatic heritage sites like Côn Đảo Prison, which simultaneously embody national martyrdom and colonial violence, require interpretive infrastructures capable of mediating between local identity narratives and transnational ethical concerns. Drawing on the work of Poria, Butler, and Airey (2003), it is critical to acknowledge that visitors approach heritage sites through varied identity lenses that shape how they receive and emotionally process historical content.

Accordingly, exhibitions and guided tours should be thematically diversified. For example, themes such as “Revolutionary Memory and National Resilience” could be tailored for domestic visitors, emphasizing patriotism and collective sacrifice, while “Colonialism, Human Rights, and Global Ethics” may resonate more strongly with international audiences, particularly those from former imperial powers. Moreover, the integration of digital interpretive technologies—including multilingual QR-coded narratives, mobile applications with cultural customization features, and interactive

touchpoints—can enhance accessibility, personalization, and emotional resonance (Tilden, 2009; Zhao, 2020).

To further deepen affective and ethical engagement, structured memory dialogues should be implemented. These facilitated encounters would allow visitors to reflect, question, and co-construct memory in dialogic settings, thus transforming passive consumption into active participation. Such practices align with the notion of "dialogical heritage" proposed by Waterton and Smith (2010), where meaning is not imposed by institutions but is co-produced through visitor experience.

Rethinking the Professionalization of Heritage Interpretation at Sites of Trauma

While the interpretive role of tour guides has often been acknowledged in heritage studies, the complexity of navigating trauma-related narratives demands a reevaluation of their status—not merely as narrators, but as professionally trained cultural mediators with deep ethical and emotional responsibilities. In contexts like Côn Đảo Prison, where historical pain is still actively remembered, guides must not only convey facts but also facilitate affective understanding, negotiate diverse visitor sensitivities, and maintain historical integrity.

Rather than viewing guides as informal actors on the heritage periphery, this study supports repositioning them as central agents in what Feakins and Bower (2024) describe as trauma-informed heritage praxis. This reconceptualization necessitates the establishment of formal training infrastructures, including certification programs in trauma communication, historical ethics, and cross-cultural empathy. These programs should incorporate interdisciplinary knowledge from history, psychology, and performance studies to ensure that guides are equipped not only with content mastery but also the emotional literacy needed to steward memory responsibly (Biran, Poria, & Oren, 2011).

In the specific case of Côn Đảo, several guides interviewed demonstrated intuitive approaches to balancing affective resonance and factual rigor. However, the study also revealed gaps in institutional support. For instance, no formal psychological training or structured debriefing mechanisms were in place, despite the emotional burden of recounting narratives involving torture, death, and imprisonment on a daily basis. As Lieberthal (2018) warns, such environments may expose frontline heritage workers to vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue, potentially compromising both well-being and interpretive integrity.

Furthermore, the emotional dramaturgy of heritage guiding—tone modulation, spatial choreography, and the performative activation of silence—remains largely unstudied and unsupported within site management frameworks. Yet these elements, as Chronis (2012) argues, are precisely what transform historical information into immersive memory experiences. Developing reflective practice models, peer-review workshops, and affective pedagogy modules could greatly enhance the interpretive depth and resilience of guides working in high-impact mnemonic environments.

Lastly, in an era of increasingly global audiences, guides must also be trained in intercultural heritage diplomacy—understanding how trauma is perceived differently across cultural lines and adapting narratives accordingly without sacrificing historical accountability. This requires a shift from generic bilingual delivery toward critical interpretive translation, where narrative framing and emotional tone are adjusted to suit both domestic mnemonic expectations and international ethical concerns (Smith & Campbell, 2024).

In sum, professionalizing the role of heritage interpreters at dark sites like Côn Đảo is not a supplementary task but a strategic imperative. It ensures that memory work remains both emotionally resonant and ethically rigorous, securing the integrity of collective remembrance in increasingly complex and contested heritage landscapes.

The third and most structurally significant recommendation is the development of a comprehensive ethical governance framework for the interpretation and curation of traumatic heritage. As Logan (2009) and Hirschberger (2018) argue, trauma memory must be safeguarded from commercial exploitation and reductionist narratives that distort or trivialize suffering. At Côn Đảo and comparable sites, memory is not a neutral resource but a morally charged legacy whose representation carries significant ethical weight.

This necessitates the establishment of a formal Ethical Heritage Code, governing all aspects of content creation, display, and visitor engagement. Such a code should delineate clear boundaries regarding (a) the use of graphic imagery (e.g., torture implements), (b) dramatization or sensationalism in guided performances, (c) the commercialization of sacred spaces, and (d) the contextualization of difficult heritage within restorative pedagogical objectives.

Periodic curatorial audits conducted by interdisciplinary heritage ethics committees—comprising historians, psychologists, museologists, and community stakeholders—should be mandated to ensure curatorial accuracy, emotional sensitivity, and ethical coherence. In parallel, systematic visitor feedback mechanisms—including qualitative interviews, affective journaling, and post-visit reflection tools—should be integrated into site management to detect interpretive dissonance, emotional distress, or unanticipated reception patterns.

Conclusion

This study reconceptualizes Côn Đảo Prison not as a static relic of colonial repression but as a living mnemonic arena where memory remains in motion—remembered, re-enacted, reframed, and co-constructed through

visitor encounters. The site functions as more than a preserved museum of the past; it emerges as a dynamic heritage interface where the lines between past and present, history and affect, witness and participant are continually blurred. Every act of storytelling, every embodied gesture of remembrance, and each emotional response contributes to the ongoing production of meaning. In this regard, heritage is better understood not as a fixed archive of facts but as a dialogical and performative process shaped by interactions among places, narratives, and visitors.

Côn Đảo's salience in contemporary heritage discourse derives from its capacity to hold multiple, and often conflicting, epistemologies within a postcolonial frame. Visitors do not encounter a single authorized script but rather enter a multi-layered interpretive space infused with nationalist pride in sacrifice, postcolonial critique of imperial violence, empathy with victims, and discomfort at the spectacle of suffering. These "mnemonic frictions" are not barriers to engagement; instead, they serve as generative sites where reflection, dialogue, and intercultural understanding are fostered. In grappling with these ethical tensions, visitors are invited not merely to consume history but to negotiate its meaning and moral relevance in the present.

Accordingly, this research calls for a paradigm shift in heritage management—from conserving physical remnants to governing memory as a socio-ethical practice. Dark heritage sites such as Côn Đảo, where historical wounds remain raw and politically charged, demand approaches that combine infrastructure and exhibition design with the cultivation of narrative ethics, emotional literacy, and visitor reflexivity. Such responsibilities cannot rest with curators alone but should be distributed across a network of actors: guides who mediate affect, educators who contextualize narratives, descendants who sustain oral memory, designers who employ digital storytelling, and policymakers who articulate cultural responsibility (Logan, 2009; Light, 2017).

Interpretation thus emerges as an inherently ethical act. In contexts marked by cultural trauma, it must move beyond factual transmission toward storytelling as a vehicle for healing, reconciliation, and mnemonic justice. A guide's tone, affective posture, and framing choices become instruments that help visitors navigate the emotional topography of remembrance, ensuring that memory is felt rather than trivialized, engaged rather than consumed as spectacle (Chronis, 2012; Feakins & Bower, 2024).

The study also identifies future directions. Immersive technologies such as augmented and virtual reality could deepen affective engagement while raising ethical questions regarding authenticity, representation, and emotional modulation (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). Ethical tourism frameworks rooted in historical accountability and cultural care could offer sustainable paradigms for colonial heritage management in post-conflict societies (Smith & Campbell, 2024). Crucially, practices must embrace emotional pluralism—the coexistence of grief, pride, anger, and compassion—as an integral part of heritage reception. Rather than imposing uniform responses, curators should design spaces that honor the complexity of human reactions to trauma.

Ultimately, while grounded in Vietnam, this case provides a theoretical scaffolding for reimagining heritage tourism as a domain of moral learning and cross-cultural dialogue. In an era marked by collective amnesia and political polarization, learning how to remember deliberately, dialogically, and justly is not a luxury but a necessity. Côn Đảo demonstrates that memory is never neutral and that the ways we choose to remember shape the ethical contours of our shared futures.

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LOOKING BOTH WAYS: IDENTITY, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND SOLIDARITY IN SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN YOUTH ACTIVISM

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Abstract

In this piece, I draw on a select history of South Asian American activist youth camps as a device to discuss the nuanced relationship they forged between identity politics, intersectionality, and solidarity across the last few decades. The two South Asian American political action youth camps that I examine are Youth Solidarity Summer (1997–2006 in New York City) and Bay Area Solidarity Summer (2011–present in California). The article, grounded in scholarship on critical multiculturalism and intersectionality (rooted in the legacy of Black feminisms), opens a reflection on the ways in which the evolution of U.S. politics over the last several decades has informed and transformed sites of youth organizing. Such gatherings have strategically organized around identity as an entry point into a deeper commitment to a robust solidarity. In its conclusion, the article calls attention to a contradictory relationship between identity and solidarity – especially for people of color groups that occupy ambiguous or complex locations of privilege and marginalization, and operate in environments where the category of intersectionality has been all too easily co-opted into the service of liberal multiculturalism.

Keywords: South Asian American Studies, youth activism, intersectionality, solidarity

Introduction

It is November 1, 2014. I am at the Finnish Hall, 1970 Chestnut Street, in Berkeley, California (situated in Northern California in the western region of the United States), for the city's first official 'Ghadar Day.'[1] Upstairs, volunteers set up more than a dozen half rings of chairs for a large intergenerational gathering, preparing to accommodate more than one hundred community members. But downstairs, in the Ski Club Room, two dozen Bay Area Solidarity Summer (BASS) youth alumni ignite things with a conversation engaging the same three veteran South Asian movement organizers who will soon be hosted upstairs – Ayesha Gill, 'Tinku' Ali Ishtiaq, and Sharat Lin.[2]

BASS, launched in 2011 as a South Asian American political education youth project, continues in a tradition established in the South Asian American left diaspora with Youth Solidarity Summer (YSS), which had a ten-year run in New York City in the late nineties. YSS produced a generation of South Asian American activists motivated by a politics of solidarity. BASS 2014 alum, Saliha, springboards the youth-centered Ghadar Day dialogue by proudly claiming Oakland as her birthplace and just as proudly remarking that it was the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam that had helped her father find his first job (Saliha, relational testimonio November 1, 2014). Finger snaps popcorn across the circle, letting 23-year-old Saliha know she is not just heard, but felt.[3] Saliha recalibrates, then rapidly jumps forward from

[1] On September 9, 2014, the City of Berkeley passed a resolution declaring November 1st Ghadar Day, in recognition of the contributions of the revolutionary Ghadar Party and the 100th centenary since its founding in 1913. See footnote 5 for more information.

[2] *Ghadar Day* was a public community event I co-curated along with BASS co-organizer Anirvan Chatterji and activist/community historian Barnali Ghosh.

[3] Though provided with written consent for the use of first and last names of all testimonio participants, I have chosen to cite youth by their first names to protect their identities as a practice committed to non-exploitative research and writing *with* communities that I have long-standing relationships with. In the case of the adult/veteran activists, I have chosen to cite both first and last names as most, if not all, are public figures. The practice of citing both first and last names in these cases is meant to reflect the collaborative knowledge production and committed political engagement that has made this work possible. Also, in this article I have only cited "youth" ages 18 and above (legally adult age) even as BASS's 2014 camp included participants aged 16 and above.

narrating her father's arrival in Oakland to describing a turning point experience of her own. In a tenacious West Coast American accent, she introduces a new theme into the discussion – one that will shape the next hour's conversation. Detailing a story of being arrested at age 18 with her close friend for protesting a beloved teacher's eviction in Oakland, California during a period of deepening gentrification allows her to offer her own intersectional intervention. She was held in a cell for 46 hours, whereas her Afro-Caribbean friend was arrested. To frustrate things further, she recalled an immigrant of color police officer advising her to 'stop hanging out with *these* people and you'll get far in this country.' Her speech, turns more emphatic as she reflects 'It's the truth, isn't?' Her annoyance mounts as she summarizes her critique of the ways South Asians in the U.S. have not only not done enough to interrupt anti-Blackness but have often benefitted from it. She continues 'I may be a Muslim woman, and I may wear the hijab, but I'm not Black…' adding that she routinely witnesses 'South Asians aligning themselves with white people versus aligning themselves with Black people and it becomes my identity this, and my identity that. It all just perpetuates anti-Blackness (Saliha, relational testimonio November 1, 2014.)'

Saliha's reflections on the persistence of social hierarchies that allowed her to evade arrest elicit a series of congruent responses from other peers who chime in, followed by insertions from longtime queer liberation and Bangladeshi community activist, 'Tinku' Ali Ishtiaq who reminds the group of the ways in which anti-Black racism colludes with other forms of oppression, namely homophobia, transphobia, and heteropatriarchy – a critique deeply rooted in Black feminisms (Ali Ishtiaq, relational testimonio, November 1, 2014.)

In a shared tempo of frustration, 19-year-old Rebecca reflects on the conditions that strain possibilities for mutual solidarity. She underscores how 'the assimilation factor' reveals white supremacy's more enduring and less obvious power, that of masking other hierarchical racialized notions that may migrate with South Asian immigrants, such as the caste system (Rebecca, relational testimonio, November 1, 2014).

Eighty-year-old Ayesha Gill, lifelong activist, Wobblie, and daughter and granddaughter of Ghadarites, comes into this rapid-paced conversation gently as she juxtaposes her family's unyielding antagonistic relationship with white supremacy, advanced in consociation with the Black Power struggles of the 1960s:

> My mother and I were very active in supporting the Black Panthers in Oakland and one of the things we did at the time, was the whole community went to the Black Panther headquarters in Oakland and surrounded it so the police wouldn't come in and tear the place apart as they had in San Francisco a short time before. We had a strong alliance with [the Panthers] (Ayesha Gill, relational testimonio, November 1, 2014.)[4]

She reaches further back into her family history to frame the conversation of assimilation, identity, and political turning points against a different backdrop – describing growing up in the 1930s/40s where only three Indian families, outside of her own, lived in California. Her family was closely tied to diverse working-class communities; their shared struggles advanced her family's liberatory politics. She is very direct: while other seasoned activists in the room describe a series of junctures that led them to a lifelong commitment to social justice, Ayesha emphasizes just one: 'I was born into a revolutionary family.' Both her parents were members of the internationalist Ghadar Party (headquartered in San Francisco), and her grandparents, Rattan Kaur and Bakhshish Singh, were among its 1913 founders.[5] Unlike most others in the room, her family, several generations deep, fiercely aligned with an anti-racist and working-class politics, fighting against the KKK and

[4] See Makhijani 2020 for more on the history of the Ghadar Party narrated through the perspective of Ayesha Gill and her mother Kartar Dhillon.

[5] The best-known revolutionary organization of South Asian migrants of the early 1900s was the Ghadar Party. The Ghadar Party was established in Astoria Oregon in 1913, headquartered in San Francisco for most of its lifespan, and formally dissolved in 1947. The Ghadar movement was understood as an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial formation that sought to overthrow British colonial rule in India, but in its later phase also articulated its analysis as anti-capitalist (Ramnath 2011).

other manifestations of white supremacy, while standing alongside workers over the last many decades.

Identity & intersectionality as political commitment to critical solidarity

The ambiguous location of contemporary South Asian American youth within the complex spectrum of privilege and marginalization simultaneously offers a unique opportunity to re-examine original arguments made in 1977 by Black feminists of the Combahee River Collective (CRC) about why the intersection of the most oppressed identities is critical to the development of revolutionary politics. The CRC was a Black feminist organization founded in 1974 under the leadership of Black women (including Black lesbians) that published a manifesto emerging from and further igniting debate around liberatory identity politics. Their articulation, grounded in a long lineage of Black feminist thought (notably recorded in the late 18th and early 19th century works of Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells), was later codified into academia by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 through the framework of 'intersectionality' – the observant term referencing the ways in which interlocking oppressions reinforce each other, creating new forms of binding but also potentially fostering new forms of political bonding.[6] The CRC offered a vision of solidarity that challenged flat expressions (where one's own struggle is subsumed in the struggles of others) to advance a more reflective and effective liberatory identity politics through recognition of how different struggles connect under oppressive systems of colonialism and capitalism. Deliberate and consistent reflection of this generative tension through shared

[6] Though the term "intersectionality" was coined much later by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, its origins are rooted in a long genealogy of Black feminism. Despite intellectual suppression, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary McLeod Bethune, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison and countless others including the work of the CRC led to a robust critique of single-axis analysis and in turn complex understandings for the need to fight against many systems of oppression at once. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989 and 1991 and Patricia Hill Collins 2000.

study, rigorous thinking, and collective political action enlivens our movement spaces, big and small, clearing endless pathways for liberation and justice.[7]

Ghadar Day was split into two public conversations curated as relational testimonios between aspiring South Asian youth activists and veteran South Asian organizers. Both the youth-centered and intergenerational Ghadar Day dialogues opened space, allowing for lost community histories of struggle to surface, midwifed through co-generated questions conceptualized by participating veteran and youth activist organizers. The format of the testimonio is something I discuss further in the methodological reflections that follow.

By strategically charting brief ethnographic histories of YSS and BASS, I aim to present in this article ways in which progressive South Asians in the U.S. (as a dislocated and relocated population) have grappled with commitments to community organizing and resistance in order to contribute to a deeper understanding of a liberatory identity politics in service of present-day widening solidarity.[8] I render this journey as a looking both ways – inward towards one's own community, and outward, toward solidarities with other communities of struggle. The focus on YSS and BASS also offers a window into broader questions around popular youth education and youth activism in diasporic communities, reflecting overlapping themes in activist studies, youth studies, diaspora studies, and social movement studies.

Methodology and positional reflexivity

This article is predominantly based on ethnographic research that I conducted from 2012-2017 on two activist youth formations: Youth Solidarity Summer (YSS) and Bay Area Solidarity Summer (BASS). My methods included

[7] See Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey (2017) and Charlene Carruthers (2018) for contemporary contributions to theorizing liberatory identity politics in relation to present-day material conditions.

[8] Throughout this article, when using the term "progressive," I'm broadly referencing a commitment to social justice generally understood through a left-wing politics in support of egalitarianism.

participant observation at BASS, as well as interviews with YSS and BASS co-founders, organizers, alumni and relational testimonios with veteran and youth organizers. I also draw on anonymous reflections from BASS participants collected through post-camp surveys over several years, along with YSS youth testimonies shared by organizers Biju Matthew and Ali Mir based on their notes and recollections. Given my own experience as an organizer and facilitator at BASS, I approached the research from an 'insider' perspective, attentive to both the possibilities and tensions that arise within youth-oriented, identity-based political education projects.

Throughout my fieldwork, I conducted 29 oral/relational histories and semi-structured interviews, each lasting between one and two hours. I also co-facilitated two relational testimonios that were the impetus of the 2014 Ghadar Day event.[9] These conversations aimed to reflect, above all, a commitment to activist ethnography. Activist ethnography as a method of research requires location in activist spaces and relationship to political struggle and includes considerable observant participation (where activism comes first), rather than the more traditional observation (where activism is secondary) (Vargas, 2008). Many of the conversations cited throughout were conceptualized in the form of shared testimonios. Inspired by the Latina Feminist Group (2001), testimonio has been used for theorizing meaningful ways of encouraging a collective group process for curating stories of resilience, opposition, survival, and bearing witness as a practice of self-determined community research. What primarily distinguishes the relational testimonio from the group interview is that it surfaces out of community struggle and shared experience. In this way, the relational testimonio reflects a greater politics of horizontalism in that it allows the community of research participants to inform the direction of the questions and thereby limits risks

[9] This article draws from fieldwork research conducted as part of my PhD dissertation and includes some reworked excerpts that were originally published as *Which Side Are You On? Black and South Asian American Youth, Solidarity Activism, and New Generation Politics* (2015).

of objectification that are harder to avoid through the traditional group interview where a research agenda is usually imposed on the "research subjects" by an "interviewer."

In addition, informal conversations over the years contributed to my understanding of the shifting landscape of South Asian American youth activism. While continuing to organize with BASS, I began lecturing in the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University in 2016. In Fall 2018 the course "Women, Class, and Race" (originally taught by Angela Davis in the 1980s) was added to my teaching roster. It is through teaching this upper division course for six semesters alongside deep engagement with students on the topic that I began to think further about structural, political, and representational politics (aka Crenshaw's dimensions of intersectionality). This experience, in addition to my positionality as a South Asian American (youth) organizer (organizing within *and* outside of my community), combined with my postcolonial anthropology academic training, enabled me to place these camps in a broader context of youth organizing in the United States.[10] Reflexively, this meant remaining critically aware of how my own class, caste, gender, and sexual identities shaped not only my access to participants but also my interpretation of the data.

Contextualizing the South Asian American Diaspora

Although the first South Asians set foot in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, the largest and most visible communities formed after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Before this watershed moment, South Asian presence was small, uneven, and often met with hostility. By 1907 there were only a little over a thousand "Asian Indians" in the country, yet their arrival triggered organized backlash (Singh and Singh, 1966, Lal, 2008). Riots in Bellingham, Washington, and Marysville, California that year

[10] My work in the Oakland-based Art in Action feminist collective starting in 2008 (which evolved into the co-founding of United Roots in 2009) offered the primary sites of my committed political engagement. Both formations predominantly served Black youth. I was co-executive director of United Roots from 2009-2013.

drove South Asian men from their homes and workplaces (New York Times, 1907 and 1908). Exclusionary laws reinforced this hostility: the 1917 Immigration Act barred immigration from much of Asia, and property ownership was restricted through local ordinances.

Small openings followed. The Luce-Celler Act of 1946 allowed limited quotas of South Asians to immigrate and naturalize, and the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 removed explicit racial barriers. But it was the 1965 Act that fundamentally reshaped the landscape. Motivated in part by Cold War competition, it opened new pathways for immigration from Asia by prioritizing skilled professionals and family reunification. The result was a mixed-class profile of migrants, ranging from doctors and engineers to working-class laborers.

The children of these post-1965 migrants came of age in the 1980s and 1990s, navigating a contradictory political climate. South Asian Americans were often celebrated as a "model minority," but also experienced racial violence, discrimination, and uneven incorporation. Crucially, caste, class, and religious differences migrated alongside families, shaping internal hierarchies within the diaspora (Prashad, 2000).

This period also saw the emergence of more visible South Asian American activism. Progressive organizations formed in New York, California, and elsewhere to resist anti-immigrant hostility, mobilize around labor rights, and address gender-based violence within the community. These efforts intersected with broader Asian American and multiracial coalitions, while retaining distinct features tied to caste, religion, and class dynamics.

Youth in particular sought spaces to explore identity and politics. They confronted the contradictions of being recognized as successful yet treated as outsiders, and of belonging to communities that sometimes reproduced anti-Blackness, casteism, or religious chauvinism. By the mid-1990s, South Asian student groups and community organizations were experimenting with political education that linked identity to structural critique. Youth Solidarity Summer emerged in New York City in 1997 directly from this

experimentation.[11] More than a decade later, Bay Area Solidarity Summer drew on the YSS model while adapting it to West Coast conditions.

The histories of exclusion, limited incorporation, and layered privilege created the conditions under which second-generation South Asians developed new forms of activism. YSS and BASS can thus be read as responses to shifting terrain: projects that began with identity affirmation but moved deliberately toward systemic analysis and solidarity.

Youth Organizing in the United States

By the 1990s, youth organizing in the United States had taken on new forms. The conservative turn of the Reagan and Bush years produced cuts in education and social welfare and intensified punitive approaches to youth of color. Urban African American and Latinx youth were frequently scapegoated for social problems, fueling policies such as trying juveniles as adults and expanding detention systems (Kwon, 2013, pp. 40–44). These developments shaped the conditions under which young people sought alternative political and community spaces.

Two frameworks emerged in response. The first, known as positive youth development, shifted attention away from pathology to an emphasis on cultivating resilience, self-worth, and community engagement. The second, social justice youth development, went further by situating youth problems within structural inequalities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, pp. 82–94; Kwon, 2013, pp. 45–72). Programs in Oakland and elsewhere connected young people to histories of racial capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy and encouraged them to see themselves as capable of social change.

Asian American youth also faced new challenges and opportunities. The arrival of Southeast Asian refugees after the American war in Vietnam created

[11] In New York some of these formations included South Asian Action and Advocacy Collective, South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA), South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection (SAMAR), South Asian Women's Creative Collective (SAWCC), South Asian Youth Action (SAYA), South Asians Against Police Brutality and Racism (SAPBR), Workers' Awaaz, Sakhi for South Asian Women, Manavi, and so on.

divisions between refugee youth and more assimilated East Asian adolescents (Thi Dao, 2020). South Asian youth, many of whom were children of post-1965 professionals, experienced a different set of contradictions: celebrated through the model minority myth, yet still targets of racial hostility, surveillance, and marginalization. Meanwhile, conservative organizations in the diaspora created youth camps that reinforced communal or nationalist identities.

Progressive South Asian organizers saw the need for alternative spaces. By the mid-1990s, student associations and community groups were experimenting with political education and coalition building, drawing lessons from Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian American movements while confronting caste privilege, gender inequities, and anti-Black racism. This was a contradictory period when state policy criminalized youth of color and community organizations sought new approaches. South Asian youth camps like YSS and BASS emerged as political rather than cultural spaces for learning, strategizing, and building solidarity across race, class, gender, sexuality, and caste.

Youth Solidarity Summer (YSS)

Youth Solidarity Summer, or YSS, was launched in New York City in 1997 under the auspices of the Forum of Indian Leftists. FOIL had grown from earlier projects such as *Sanskriti*, a progressive newsletter that began in Pittsburgh in 1990, and later expanded into *Ghadar*, a publication linking South Asian diasporic concerns to critiques of globalization and imperialism (Biju Mathew Interview, December 15, 2014). FOIL became a hub for progressive South Asians, and YSS emerged as one of its most ambitious undertakings (Biju Mathew Interview, December 15, 2014). The founding collective included Sonia Arora, Mona Chopra, Sangeeta Kamat, Sunaina Maira, Biju Mathew, Vijay Prashad, and Raju Rajan.

By the late 1990s South Asian American youth were seeking spaces beyond student clubs and cultural associations, which often emphasized heritage celebration rather than political critique. Parents were also asking for alternatives to the growing number of Hindu nationalist and conservative youth camps. YSS was conceived as a secular, progressive, explicitly political project that could provide second-generation youth with both community and analysis. The first camp drew about twenty-five participants from across the United States. It was held annually for a week each summer at the Brecht Forum in New York City, with youth housed by volunteers. Each session culminated in a public action, underscoring the commitment to link study with practice.

The pedagogy rested on a three-phase curriculum. The first, Meticulous Examination, invited participants to examine their own identities. Activities included storytelling, journaling, and group discussions. One key exercise asked each participant to narrate their family's migration story and map it onto a large timeline of South Asian migration to North America. The wall filled with markers from the Ghadar Party to the Immigration Act of 1965. By pinning their family narratives onto a shared history, youth came to see themselves as part of a longer trajectory of displacement and resistance. One participant said the camp was the first time they openly acknowledged caste privilege in their family history, which felt uncomfortable but necessary. Another said the exercise made her realize that her father's arrival on an H1-B visa in the 1980s could not be separated from earlier exclusion laws and racial struggles.[12]

The second phase, What the Fuck is the System, shifted from identity to structure. Workshops introduced frameworks for understanding capitalism, colonialism, (hetero)patriarchy, and white supremacy as intersecting systems. Facilitators used participatory exercises to make these dynamics tangible. In one, participants role-played families with different racial and class

[12] YSS youth testimonies in this section were received in July and August 2025 from co-founder Biju Matthew and multiple-year core organizer Ali Mir, as a follow-up request for use in this article based on their notes and recall.

backgrounds: a white middle-class family with generational wealth, an Asian immigrant family entering professional work, and an African American family two generations out of Jim Crow all confronting the same crises. The exercise underscored the difference between income and wealth and sparked conversations about caste privilege. Readings included the Combahee River Collective Statement, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, and speeches by Angela Davis. These texts framed difficult but transformative discussions. A student reflected that her family's "model minority" status obscured the struggles of working-class Black neighbors, while another recounted how his Hindu temple community reproduced caste hierarchies even in the U.S. A queer participant said YSS made it possible to hold their sexuality and politics in the same conversation for the first time.

The third phase, Resistance and Revolution, emphasized action and vision. Youth formed affinity groups to design campaigns, practice outreach, and plan direct actions. One group organized against tuition hikes at public universities; another built solidarity with striking cab drivers. Participants also experimented with ideas about posters, press releases, chants. Evening sessions brought in local organizers and artists. An alum described the closing demonstration as the moment they realized that being South Asian and fighting for justice were deeply connected rather than separate. The final reflective session, *Life on the Left*, prepared participants for the realities of sustained activism: modest incomes, risks of burnout, and the need for supportive communities.

The daily rhythm was deliberately structured: mornings with cultural energizers and workshops, afternoons for small-group skills, evenings with intergenerational activists and artists. This layering countered anti-intellectualism in activist spaces by grounding practice in analysis and ensuring analysis moved toward action. Alumni emphasized that what stayed with them was not just content but the experience of a community that valued both intellectual rigor and vulnerability. Another participant recalled feeling, for the first time, surrounded by people who understood what it meant to be

Brown, queer, and radical, which gave them the confidence to organize on their campus.

From the outset, YSS was shaped by radical Black feminist thought. The Combahee River Collective Statement provided a model for linking race, class, gender, and sexuality into systemic critique. Kimberlé Crenshaw's articulation of intersectionality sharpened the framework for South Asian youth organizing by offering language to analyze their own layered experiences. For instance, workshops that paired readings of Angela Davis and Frantz Fanon with personal migration stories helped participants connect caste privilege, gendered expectations, and racialization in the U.S. as intersecting systems rather than separate struggles (Ali Mir Interview, April 20, 2015). YSS organizers adopted these insights not only as theory but as curriculum design, ensuring identity politics would be an entry point to solidarity rather than a stopping point.

The camp faced challenges. In its early years, the organizing collective was dominated by first-generation Indian academics, with relatively few second-generation participants involved in leadership. This limited generational diversity at times created distance between organizers and the youth they sought to reach. Over time, activists from community health and queer spaces broadened representation. Queer politics became another area of struggle: many organizers had little prior experience with LGBTQ+ issues, and collective learning had to take place. These difficulties were not incidental but central to the project, demonstrating the necessity of building intersectional spaces even when uncomfortable (Ali Mir Interview, April 20, 2015).

YSS left a wide legacy. Many participants returned as organizers, while others carried lessons into broader movements such as labor campaigns, Palestinian solidarity, post-9/11 civil liberties, and anti-police brutality struggles. Alumni included artists, educators, and comedians who shaped public culture. By the late 2000s, the post-9/11 climate and shifting needs pulled organizers in new directions, and YSS ended in 2007. Yet its influence lived on through

sibling projects across the country such as South Asian Summer Solidarity for Youth (SASSY) in Boston (1998), and later RadDesi Summer in Austin, Organizing Youth! (OY!) in the San Francisco Bay Area (2004), DC Desi Summer (renamed East Coast Solidarity Summer) in Washington, D.C. (2010), trailed by BASS in the Bay Area, California in 2011, and then Chicago Desi Youth Rising (CDYR) in 2014 and South Asian Youth in Houston Unite (SAYHU) in 2017. Alumni also joined DRUM (Desis Rising Up and Moving) in New York, taxi and domestic worker struggles, and carried forward lessons through art, comedy, and writing.[13]

For participants, YSS was transformative. It provided a space for difference and long-term commitment to life on the left. It met an unmet need for second-generation youth to connect identity to systemic critique. The combination of personal reflection, structural analysis, and collective action demonstrated that identity-based organizing could generate solidarities when tethered to intersectional practice (Ashwini Rao Interview, Aug 27, 2014, also see Kamat, forthcoming 2026).

Bay Area Solidarity Summer (BASS)

Bay Area Solidarity Summer (BASS) was launched in 2011 by South Asian American progressives, some of them alumni of Youth Solidarity Summer (YSS) in New York. Founders included Virali Modi Parekh and Nupur K. Modi Parekh, who attended YSS in 1999 and 2001, along with Tanzila Ahmed, Priya Kandaswamy, and Ramesh Kathanadhi. The project emerged from an education committee of the Alliance of South Asians Taking Action, a Bay Area group committed to racial and economic justice. Conceived as a political education camp for South Asian youth on the West Coast, BASS sought to connect participants to histories of struggle and to build skills for sustained organizing. Many came from Bay Area

[13] Toronto Area Solidarity Summer Alliance workshops for South Asian and Indo-Carribean youth along with DRUM summer youth organizer programs, and the Asian Refugees United camp for emerging Bhutanese leaders offer resonant political education in the present.

communities transformed by postwar redevelopment and the rise of Silicon Valley, where successive waves of Asian immigration reshaped local class and racial dynamics (Makhijani, 2015).[14]

BASS began modestly with about two dozen participants but soon became a recognized institution. Like YSS, it was residential, providing meals and lodging for a nominal fee and ensuring no one was turned away for lack of funds. The five-day program, held in late July or early August, combined political education with community building. Each year the team received more applications than they could accept, prioritizing youth from the Bay Area and West Coast.

In its early years BASS focused on leadership development and connection among South Asian youth. By 2014 the collective redefined itself as a political action camp centered on community needs and current struggles, emphasizing campaign strategy and practical skills. Organizers noted that their focus shifted from convening volunteers to preparing participants to shape their communities beyond the camp (Ramesh Kathanadhi Interview, May 6, 2015).

The curriculum combined historical grounding, systemic analysis, and skill building. On the opening day, participants engaged with a South Asian American history timeline spanning from seventeenth-century indentured labor to contemporary movements. They located their families within it by adding drawings and captions. Many said the activity reshaped their sense of history: some recognized their family story extended beyond the 1980s, while others said aligning it with labor and feminist histories deepened their sense of obligation.[15]

[14] Prior to siliconization, this part of Northern California in the 1950s onwards was comprised of mixed-race working-class communities (ie. Mexican, Filipino, and African American). Rolling technoburbs emerged in the 1970s when technically skilled and unskilled immigrants of mostly Chinese and Indian descent, made Silicon Valley home, following a more sanctioned circular pattern of migration and return, in contrast to earlier patterns of (un)authorized one-way migrations and remittances (Makhijani, 2015).
[15] BASS youth reflections in this section were recorded in participant observation notes. Direct quotes came from anonymous camp surveys as a follow-up request to Anirvan

After anchoring in history, the camp moved into systemic critique. Workshops addressed capitalism, neoliberalism, caste, Islamophobia, and global labor migration. A climate justice session linked Silicon Valley technology firms to extractive industries in South Asia, asking who bears the costs of ecological crisis. Facilitators invited participants to examine how race, class, religion, caste, and gender shaped vulnerability and resistance. Dalit and caste-oppressed facilitators, including speakers from Dalit Women Fight!, led discussions on how caste hierarchies persist in diaspora spaces such as temples, student associations, and professional networks. One participant later said, "The conversations we had around caste [and] power & privilege gave me a lot of insight into how to approach upper caste people about their caste privilege, especially at my college where a vast majority of South Asian activists … are a bit blinded to it" (Anonymous response to camp survey 2020). Others reflected that the camp made them see how caste persists in California and that solidarity requires naming and challenging it. Another described the multiracial organizing against Islamophobia session as most impactful because it offered language to understand their family's surveillance after 9/11 and its connection to broader state violence. A final respondent added that the same session was valuable "because looking directly at successful case studies showed what works with movements/campaigns and how we can take that forward when organizing in the future" (Anonymous response to camp survey 2020).

Skill building became equally central to the camp. Participants learned how to construct campaigns: beginning with a problem statement, conducting power analyses, identifying targets, and planning tactics and timelines. In power mapping sessions they traced relationships among decision makers in city government, school boards, and corporations, then identified leverage points and allies. Media trainings asked youth to write three sentence narratives that framed issues and suggested action. They designed posters, prepared press releases, and rehearsed speeches.

Chatterji in 2025 for use in this article. They were drawn from the in-person 2018 camp and online 2020 and 2024 camps.

These skills were tested in small informal affinity group projects.[16] One year, participants organized a mock press conference to protest the construction of a new jail in San Francisco. They prepared demands, crafted chants, and answered hostile questions. Another year, a group designed a media strategy for holding a local oil refinery accountable for a fire that sent over 15,000 people to the hospital. A third group designed a campaign to pressure South Asian executives in Silicon Valley to improve conditions for subcontracted workers. In each case, participants emphasized that the exercises showed them how identity work could move outward into solidarity campaigns.

The daily rhythm of BASS reinforced this flow. Each day began with a morning circle for setting intentions and reflection. Workshops mixed theory with participatory exercises and group problem-solving, while shared meals built community. Afternoon sessions focused on skill practice in small teams, and evening circles allowed for processing, conflict resolution, and relationship building. The final day culminated in group presentations or an action, giving participants tangible experience.

Three elements became signature features. BASS hosted panels with local activists working on labor, immigrant rights, queer and trans liberation, anti-police violence, and environmental justice, followed by mixers that connected participants with alumni and mentors. Each camp also included a local South Asian radical history walking tour in Berkeley.

From 2014 onward, the camp adopted a more experiential, project-based model and built structures for yearlong engagement with alumni. That year, BASS alums met with an organizer from the National Alliance for People's Movements in India, joined a Political Posters webinar, and took part in Ghadar Day. BASS also collaborated remotely with Chicago Desi Youth Rising and East Coast Solidarity Summer, producing a co-written reflection.

[16] An affinity group is typically a decentralized formation structured around a commonality where members collectively make decisions in ways that allow the group to flexibly move swiftly in response to time-sensitive actions. See: https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/affinitygroups.

All three camps asked youth participants to collectively define key concepts in an activity inspired by the feminist social center *La Eskalera Karakola* in Madrid called the "drift."[17] Participants were asked to define "social justice," "resistance," and "solidarity," in their own language and on their own terms, both at the beginning and end of their camp experience. Alumni often emphasized that these types of activities created a lasting impact, instilling in them a sense of responsibility which they took with them. Several cohorts also carried camp projects into real campaigns. For example, one year, a group joined a campaign to defend security guards at tech companies who were subcontracted and underpaid. Their mock campaign at BASS became the blueprint for actual organizing with a local union.

BASS faced many of the same challenges as YSS, particularly around class and caste diversity. Early cohorts often came from relatively privileged backgrounds, including children of caste-privileged Hindu Indian technology professionals. Organizers expanded outreach to community colleges, working-class neighborhoods, and faith-based groups. By the mid-2010s, the participant base had shifted, with more youth identifying as queer, non-Hindu, and from non-Indian backgrounds. Many who described themselves as working class were still enrolled in universities and expected to graduate, revealing how education and aspiration coexisted with financial insecurity and complicated class hierarchies.

Queer and feminist politics were integral, though tensions persisted. Some organizers located their long-term homes in explicitly multiracial queer and trans spaces, underscoring that South Asian groups continued to struggle with inclusivity. Facilitator (and co-founder) Priya Kandaswamy noted that while the camp created openings for gender and sexuality work, her own political center remained in queer of color coalitions (Priya Kandaswamy Interview, May 3, 2015). Participants nonetheless described the space as life

[17] La Eskalera Karakola inspired "drifting" across camps as it offered a way to collaboratively generate activist research that centered youth understandings while also using the process as a tool to network all three camps and reflection upon the evolution of political perspectives from the beginning to end of each camp. See Serrano and Lopez, 2003.

changing, several noting that BASS was the first South Asian space where they did not feel forced to choose between being queer and being political.

For many participants BASS was transformative. The combination of history, analysis, skills, and fellowship gave them confidence to bring activism into their universities, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Alumni have gone on to join labor campaigns, immigrant rights movements, and climate justice organizing, often staying connected to the BASS network.

The COVID 19 pandemic forced BASS to adapt. Camps shifted online in 2020, with condensed workshops and digital tools.[18] Facilitators used breakout rooms, collaborative documents, and digital storytelling to sustain participation. Although the virtual format reduced the depth of in-person community building, it expanded access for those unable to travel or with caregiving responsibilities. Holding camp during the pandemic created space to discuss racial justice and COVID within South Asian contexts but also led to Zoom fatigue and the loss of embodied connection. One participant reflected that being in person allowed "the experience of looking someone in the eye, hearing them, seeing them, or even disagreeing with them," which they felt had a more lasting impact (Anonymous response to camp survey 2024).

From its origins, BASS built consciously on YSS. Founders who had attended YSS adapted its pedagogy to Bay Area conditions and a new generation. The camp retained the arc from identity to structure to action but placed stronger emphasis on concrete campaign skills and alumni networks. In doing so, it demonstrated that identity-based projects could evolve into sustained infrastructures of solidarity.

[18] BASS has been mostly online since 2020. During these years, BASS has offered optional (but recommended) in-person events at camp's end for building community. Virtual camp allows for participants to join from across the country, shifting the cohort demographics to roughly half from the Bay Area.

Looking Both Ways

Revisiting the histories of Youth Solidarity Summer and Bay Area Solidarity Summer reveals how identity-based organizing can move in two directions at once: inward, toward recognition and interrogation of one's own community, and outward, toward solidarities that cross racial, gendered, and class boundaries. Both camps began with the premise that young South Asians needed spaces to articulate their identities in a society that racialized them as outsiders, yet both refused to stop at identity affirmation. By linking identity to structural critique, they insisted that political education must cultivate a practice of solidarity.

This dual orientation is what I describe as looking both ways. The inward gaze allowed participants to reflect on how caste, class, religion, and gender shaped their position within South Asian diasporic communities. The outward gaze invited them to recognize the responsibilities and possibilities that came with those positions in relation to other communities of color, to working-class struggles, and to global movements against imperialism and capitalism. Maintaining both perspectives proved difficult, but the attempt itself generated critical solidarities.

The Combahee River Collective argued that liberation requires analyzing interlocking oppressions and centering the most marginalized. YSS and BASS carried this insight into South Asian American contexts, treating intersectionality as practice rather than theory. Through testimonios and workshops, youth connected migration, gender, and sexuality to broader systems of capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy. The pedagogy encouraged recognition, self-critique, and solidarity.

At the same time, both camps faced tensions that highlight the fragility of intersectional practice. In YSS, Indian dominance within the collective reproduced hierarchies that limited broader South Asian representation. Queer politics were initially marginal and had to be claimed through struggle.

Class and caste diversity in BASS remained uneven despite deliberate outreach, and some organizers questioned investing so many resources in relatively privileged youth. These tensions were not failures but reflected the contradictions the camps sought to confront, showing that intersectional solidarity is an ongoing process of negotiation, critique, and reimagining.

The dangers of flattening identity were clear. For many South Asian youth, identifying as Brown risked collapsing caste and class differences and positioning themselves solely as victims of white supremacy. This framing could excuse privilege by obscuring how South Asians benefit from anti-Blackness and proximity to whiteness, which refers to conditional forms of inclusion and advantage extended to non-Black people of color perceived as more assimilable within dominant racial hierarchies. BASS participants noted that complicity in power was harder to recognize than marginalization, and that guilt sometimes paralyzed action. A key lesson was that solidarity does not require identical experiences of oppression but a willingness to act against injustice even when not directly targeted.

Clarifying what it means for identity to be co-opted helps explain why the camps emphasized structural analysis. In the era of multicultural inclusion, identity can be commodified through festivals, census categories, and institutional diversity displays. Such inclusion rarely challenges material inequality or power. As Himani Bannerji (2000) argues in *The Dark Side of the Nation*, state multiculturalism welcomes difference at the level of culture while rejecting demands for political and economic transformation. YSS and BASS countered this by linking identity to systemic analyses of capitalism, casteism, and white supremacy, protecting participants from the lure of symbolic inclusion without material change. Exercises such as mapping family histories onto timelines of colonialism or tracing uneven wealth accumulation helped expose how identity gains meaning only when tied to structural critique.

Placing these camps in dialogue with decolonial and postcolonial thought highlights their broader significance. Decolonial scholars show that colonial logics continue to shape knowledge and power after formal independence. South Asian American youth camps confronted this by challenging Eurocentric narratives of U.S. history and foregrounding solidarities with other colonized peoples. Postcolonial scholars note that diasporas can reproduce hierarchies even as they resist exclusion, and the camps created space to confront these contradictions. They embodied what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2023) calls infrastructures of feeling, where emotion, analysis, and collective visioning produced new political possibilities.

The methodology of this study shows how intersectionality and testimonios work together toward these aims. Intersectionality identifies the structures that constrain and enable, while testimonios provide the lived narratives that give those structures life. Together they resist abstraction without reducing analysis to anecdote and align with activist scholarship that treats knowledge production as political practice. Documenting the histories of YSS and BASS is therefore an intervention, ensuring that their lessons inform future organizing rather than fade from memory.

Comparing YSS and BASS reveals both continuities and adaptations. Each followed the same pedagogical arc: beginning with identity, moving to structure, and concluding with action. Both grappled with diversity and representation and produced alumni who carried their lessons into broader struggles. YSS, founded in the late 1990s in response to right-wing diaspora politics, emphasized historical and theoretical education. BASS, launched a decade later, prioritized campaign skills and practical organizing to meet the needs of a new generation. YSS dissolved after a decade as its organizers dispersed into wider movements, while BASS continues in hybrid form, adapting to pandemic conditions and sustaining an alumni network. These trajectories show that political education remains provisional, shaped by context and the shifting energy of movements.

Taken together, this reflection on YSS and BASS traces the afterlives of intersectionality in South Asian American contexts. When grounded in community practice, intersectionality moves across generations, geographies, and political moments without losing its radical edge. YSS showed how identity can anchor systemic critique, while BASS demonstrated how that critique can become campaign skills and sustained networks. Their pairing shows that identity-based projects need not collapse into liberal multiculturalism; when deliberately structured, they can nurture solidarities that are intersectional in method and material in practice. This comparative history clarifies how South Asian youth have navigated positions of privilege and marginalization while contributing distinctive insights to diaspora studies, youth organizing, and intersectionality's evolving legacy.

In the end, YSS and BASS show that when identity is anchored in intersectional analysis and practiced through solidarity, it can be less a boundary than a bridge toward collective liberation.

This article is dedicated to BASS's 15th anniversary, marked in 2025. I wish to acknowledge all youth participants whose inspiration carried this article across a decade, and the hours of generous conversations with BASS and YSS organizers over the years. I am especially indebted to Biju Mathew and Ali Mir for their critical insights and feedback to various emanations of this article and above that, Ali Mir for his generative notes and insightful editorial suggestions that encouraged me to finally release this work to print, ten years in the making.

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APPRENTICING EMPIRE: TECHNICAL EDUCATION, DISCIPLINE, AND THE FORMATION OF COLONIAL SUBJECTS IN MALTA (1920-1970).

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Abstract

This article adopts a postcolonial micro-historical approach to explore the development of apprenticeship and vocational education in Malta, offering new insights into the links between colonial authority, educational reform, and postcolonial pedagogy. Drawing on the archival record of a Maltese shipwright who trained and worked through both colonial and post-independence administrations, the article examines how British-imposed apprenticeship systems shaped disciplined, "Anglicised" artisans. A document analysis of primary sources, institutional reports, critical historiography, and postcolonial theory situates this individual trajectory within broader debates on national modernity, social justice, and the lasting influence of empire on education in a British fortress colony that later transitioned to independence. Findings reveal how colonial disciplinary pedagogies and bureaucratic structures endured long after independence, creating ongoing barriers to fair educational reform. By critically engaging with the limitations of the colonial archive and foregrounding the ethical importance of subaltern experience, this article advocates for decolonising vocational education in Malta through curriculum reflexivity, participatory governance, and critical historical awareness.

Keywords: Postcolonial education; Apprenticeship schemes; Colonial discipline; Malta Dockyard.

Introduction

This article employs a postcolonial micro-historical approach to explore the development and lasting legacies of apprenticeship and vocational education in Malta, framing its analysis within debates on colonial authority, discipline, and educational reform (Bhabha, 1994; Foucault, 1977; Spivak, 1988). It is based on a close reading of two rare archival records: an apprenticeship indenture (H.M. Dockyard Malta, February 1924)[i] and the retirement certificates (Malta Dockyard Corporation, 1970)[ii] of a Maltese shipwright whose career spanned the transition from British colonial rule to independence. By emphasising these primary documents, the article demonstrates how such contracts functioned both as tools of imperial governance and as spaces for shaping moral, social, and industrial identities (Foucault, 1977; Ellul, 2006; Camilleri, 2024).

Drawing on Foucauldian concepts of surveillance, examination, and docility, and engaging postcolonial critiques of mimicry, ambivalence, and archival silence (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988), the article argues that apprenticeship schemes in colonial Malta produced disciplined, "Anglicised" artisans whose subjectivity was shaped by imperial bureaucratic structures as much as by technical pedagogy. The apprenticeship contract, in itself a "disciplinary text," embodies the tensions between autonomy and subordination, intention and compliance, and demonstrates the reach of state-managed learning into everyday life (Foucault, 1977; Stoler, 2009).

Malta's apprenticeship system, transformed by British rule from medieval artisanal traditions into tightly regulated imperial institutions, reveals both the utilitarian and moral aims of colonial education (Fiorni, 1993; Cassar, 2000; Sultana, 1992). By charting changes in statutes, curricula, and employment practices using the indenture as a generative point of entry, this

article links micro-level documentary analysis to macro-level dynamics of modernity, governance, and national identity (Briguglio, 1984; Vella, 1954; Lepholisa & Yu, 2025).

This article explores how British apprenticeship systems in Malta exercised disciplinary power and established long-lasting regimes of social, moral, and industrial identity, using a single empirical example, the apprenticeship indenture and retirement certificate of a Maltese shipwright as an entry point into the wider colonial archive. To achieve this, the analysis is guided by the key question: how did the apprenticeship contract serve as a "disciplinary technology" in colonial Malta, and in what ways did the rhetoric and practices embedded within it endure and develop after the end of formal empire, influencing post-independence vocational education (Foucault, 1977; Camilleri, 2024)?

Methodologically, the article employs document analysis, critical triangulation with institutional records, and a reflexive stance that directly addresses the limitations and silences of the colonial archive (Yin, 2018; Spivak, 1988; Stoler, 2009). This approach reveals how colonial disciplinary logics and administrative procedures persisted after political decolonisation, shaping educational reform and national self-understanding in ways that continue to marginalise subaltern voices and complicate postcolonial transformation (Ellul, 2006; Sultana, 1992; Camilleri, 2024).

Ultimately, the article offers a critical reading of apprenticeship as both a formative practice and an archival challenge, calling for renewed curriculum reflexivity, participatory governance, and deeper historical consciousness in postcolonial educational reform.

Historiographical context: apprenticeship, education, and empire

In the early nineteenth century, Malta became what Frendo (2013) describes as a *fortress economy*, with social and educational policies designed around strategic military and naval expenditure as a British Crown Colony (Busuttil, 1965; Brincat, 2009). Unlike colonies established for extraction or settler agriculture, Malta's principal value to the British Empire lay in its exceptional position at the centre of the Mediterranean, serving as a crucial naval base, supply port, and hub of imperial logistics. Within this system, technical instruction was promoted less as a civic right and more as an imperial necessity, aimed at producing disciplined labour for dockyard and naval operations.

The 1838 Austin and Lewis Royal Commission, a British inquiry into Maltese governance and society, explicitly recommended the establishment of preparatory schools for artisans, linking industrial training to the improvement of "moral disposition" (Austin & Lewis, 1838; Sultana, 1992). This fusion of pedagogy and morality became foundational to colonial educational policy. By the late nineteenth century, the Dockyard School had emerged as Malta's leading technical institution under naval control, offering training in mechanics, geometry, and drawing (Vella, 1954; Camilleri Bremann, 1963; Ellul, 2006).

Established by the British Admiralty in 1858, the Dockyard School provided both theoretical instruction and workshop-based training for apprentices, shaping generations of craftsmen in accordance with imperial standards (Sultana, 1992). The British apprenticeship model introduced in Malta reflected what Camilleri (2024) terms the liberal market model, a hybrid of institutional classroom learning and workplace discipline. Apprentices were formally bound by indenture contracts, alternating between technical tuition and practical training (Industrial Training Act X, 1952; Vella, 1954). The Dockyard School thus embodied what Jackson (2022) calls "imperial

modernity through moral education," reinforcing values such as loyalty, punctuality, and cleanliness (Ellul, 2004), and advancing Britain's claims to moral and administrative superiority.

Educational historians, including Sultana (1992, 1997) and Fenech (2005), identify the mid-nineteenth century as the high point of utilitarian colonial schooling in Malta, when curricula were explicitly designed to serve imperial purposes. Academic education remained chronically underfunded; working-class youth were channelled into manual trades, while intellectual pursuits were primarily reserved for elite or clerical circles (Balogh & Seers, 1955; Baldacchino, 1988). The introduction of Responsible Government[1] following the 1921 Constitution marked a partial shift. Local ministers gained authority over domestic affairs, yet defence and imperial policy remained under British control. This arrangement enabled the growth of local institutions and greater parliamentary accountability while maintaining the constraints imposed by Malta's status as a fortress colony (Pirotta, 2018; Sultana, 1992).

Recent scholarship (Jackson, 2022; Lepholisa & Yu, 2025) places Malta's vocational education within a broader imperial project that used schooling both as an instrument of economic development and as a mechanism of social discipline. Jackson (2022) contends that nineteenth-century humanitarian and missionary movements viewed technical and elementary education as twofold paths to moral order and racial governance across the empire. These colonial pedagogies blurred the boundaries between training and control, a dynamic clearly visible in Malta's education under British Imperial rule, where industrial discipline and moral formation were systematically intertwined.

Within this evolving political and institutional framework, the Industrial Training Act X (1952), enacted by Malta's responsible government, marked a

[1] Responsible Government in Malta refers to the constitutional reform of 1947, which re-established Maltese self-government under British sovereignty after its suspension during the Second World War. It granted an elected Legislative Assembly authority over internal affairs, while defence, foreign policy, and major financial matters remained under the control of the British Governor. This arrangement marked a key transitional stage between colonial administration and full independence in 1964.

significant shift in Maltese vocational education. It established a legal basis for apprenticeships, standardising entry age, duration, certification, and oversight by the Director of Labour and the Youth Advisory Committee (Industrial Training Act X, 1952; Pirotta, 1987; Camilleri, 2024; Camilleri, 2025a). Although the Act formalised apprenticeships and modernised training systems, its definition of the apprentice as a "male person over the age of fourteen" reinforced patriarchal and colonial hierarchies. In practice, both the Act and its associated apprenticeship schemes[2] promoted Maltese technical education while also upholding imperial ideologies of conformity, gender exclusivity, and state control (Camilleri, 2024; Camilleri, 2025a).

Earlier historiography emphasised the economic contribution of apprenticeships to industrial development (Briguglio, 1988; Caruana Galizia, 2017), but more recent research broadens this interpretation to include cultural and political dimensions. Ellul (2006) and Camilleri (2024a) reinterpret the Dockyard School through a Foucauldian lens of self-governance, where registers, attendance books, and assessments functioned as mechanisms of both moral and technical discipline (Foucault, 1977). Fenech (2005) accordingly describes colonial vocational education as "education for obedience."

Postcolonial theorists (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988) deepen this critique, revealing how colonial schooling manufactured compliant subjects who internalised imperial hierarchies, with the industrial apprentice seen as a "good native," disciplined through technical education yet confined within the empire's boundaries (Chakrabarty, 2000). From this perspective, apprenticeship emerges not merely as workplace training but as a key mechanism of colonial reproduction (Chakrabarty, 2000; Lepholisa & Yu, 2025a). Its legitimacy, rooted in imperial authority, was maintained through legal measures such as the Industrial Training Act of 1952 and embedded

[2] The Industrial Training Act (Act X of 1952) introduced a formal framework for apprenticeship in Malta, establishing state oversight of training schemes and standardising contracts between apprentices and employers. Modelled on British legislation, it sought to regulate wages, discipline, and duration of service while reinforcing gender and class divisions within technical education.

within narratives of national modernisation. Tracing this history helps explain how, even decades after independence, the dockyard craftsman remains a symbolic figure of Maltese labour and discipline, representing enduring colonial legacies in postcolonial education.

Training the Colonial Subject: A Micro-Historical Article of Apprenticeship in 1920s Malta.

The case of Robert (Bobbie) Alden illustrates the post-war path of skilled apprentices who connected industrial and civic spheres within the Cospicua community. Likely from a family of British descent that settled in Malta during the colonial era, Alden appears to have begun his career as an apprentice shipwright in the Dockyard system before rising to the role of Foreman of Shipwrights in the Marine Department of the Malta Drydocks (Malta Drydocks Corporation, 1970). His simultaneous role as Scout Leader of the 1st Cospicua Scout Group, recorded in 1948, places him within the social fabric described by Ellul (2017) as one where Scouting served as a key moral and civic institution in the Cottonera area. This dual role showcases how early vocational discipline and civic duty operated as mutually reinforcing values in post-war Maltese society (Harmer, 1997). The Alden family, of Anglo-Saxon heritage and introduced during the British rule, further positions Robert Alden within a lineage of colonial-era settlers who integrated professionally and socially into Cottonera, embodying the ethos of service, skill, and community leadership typical of the period (Camilleri, 2025b).

This article uses Alden's dossier as a lens to explore apprenticeship, discipline, and social mobility in colonial and postcolonial Malta. Born to a Maltese mother, Carmela, and an English sailor father, Alden's Anglo-Saxon surname and family background positioned him at the crossroads of the British administrative world and Maltese society. Through connections with local figures such as his uncle, the artist Harry Alden, his life and career shed light on the negotiation of identity, language, and belonging within the imperial setting.

Alden's vocational journey began at the Malta Dockyard School, where he entered the apprenticeship system to train as a shipwright. His formal indenture, signed on 11 February 1924, marked his official registration as an apprentice under His Majesty's Dockyard, Malta (Alden, 1924, *Indenture of Apprenticeship*). The document outlines not only expectations of technical skill but also the strict regime of moral discipline, obedience, and surveillance characteristic of the colonial vocational system. Throughout his training, Alden received both practical instruction and classroom education, internalising dockyard codes of punctuality, reliability, and loyaltyvirtues celebrated in imperial discourse as hallmarks of the Anglicised artisan.

Beyond the shipyard, Alden's civic engagement extended to his leadership as Group Scout Master (GSM) of the 1st Cospicua Scout Group during the immediate post-war years (1946–1948). Ellul (2017) notes that Alden not only led the restoration of the group's headquarters after wartime disruption but also that his "higher level of English literacy rubbed off on" other local Scouts, exposing them to English literature about the British Empire and modelling cross-cultural interaction at a time of social segregation.

Alden's professional career at the Dockyard spanned over four decades, encompassing dramatic shifts in Malta's governance from British military rule to self-government, and later, to post-independence nationalisation. His Certificate of Service, issued by the Malta Drydocks Corporation (Swan Hunter Group Ltd) and dated 31 March 1970, officially records his retirement as Foreman of Shipwrights after more than forty years of continuous service (Malta Drydocks Corporation, 1970, *Service Certificate*). This final document attests to his steady rise through every rank of the trade, culminating in his position as master shipwright and intermediary between British and Maltese workers.

Alden's progression from apprentice to foreman is therefore not only a personal achievement but also an instructive example demonstrating how

colonial pedagogies of discipline and civic morality were adapted and maintained within Malta's postcolonial education and labour context. This snapshot of this career provides a rare, documentary record of how colonial systems of discipline, certification, and moral expectation persisted, adapted, and re-contextualised well beyond independence.

Archival and documentary triangulation and interpretation

In line with Yin's (2018, p. 128) assertion that triangulation enhances analytical validity, this article adopts a micro-historical approach grounded in the integration of four interrelated bodies of evidence that together shape a unified interpretive framework. The first includes archival records, notably Robert Alden's original Indenture of Apprenticeship (1924) and his Service Certificate marking retirement as Foreman of Shipwrights at the Malta Drydocks Corporation (31 March 1970), alongside legislative texts such as the Industrial Training Act 1952. The second consists of institutional reports and curricula from the Dockyard School (Ellul, 2006) and post-war apprenticeship reforms (Director of Labour, 1972), which provide insight into evolving administrative frameworks. The third draws upon secondary historical literature, particularly Ellul's (2006, 2017) socio-industrial histories, Camilleri's (2023) analyses of vocational policy, and Sultana's (1992a, 1997) critical studies on education under empire, all of which situate Maltese apprenticeship within broader colonial discourses of discipline and governance.

This corpus facilitates triangulation across time, institutions, and disciplinary perspectives: legal and bureaucratic records establish institutional purpose; historical scholarship provides contextualisation; and theoretical frameworks shed light on colonial power relations. The juxtaposition of Alden's Indenture and Service Certificate as chronological bookends of his working life grounds theoretical critique in the real-world evidence of one individual's apprenticeship career. Through these records, the continuity and adaptation of imperial authority within Maltese vocational

structures become traceable at the personal level, demonstrating how bureaucratic practices served as moral instruments as much as administrative tools.

Analytically, the article proceeds through two interpretive lenses. Foucault's Discipline and Punish (1977) provides the conceptual language for reading apprenticeship as a technology of power. The routine of attendance, supervision, and periodic testing corresponds to mechanisms of surveillance through which colonial authority produced compliant and productive subjects. Comparable perspectives in educational historiography frame the intersection of discipline and imperial epistemology as structurally enduring. Jackson (2022) links these early British vocational regimes to the genesis of mass education, while Lepholisa and Yu (2025) trace their afterlives across twentieth- and twenty-first-century African TVET frameworks that continue to reproduce similar bureaucratic and moral hierarchies.

A complementary postcolonial lens further interprets apprenticeship as discourse. Said's (1978) Orientalism and Bhabha's (1994) Location of Culture reveal how colonial institutions imposed British social norms as universal standards, while Spivak (1988) reminds us that the subaltern's archival presence is mediated through the idiom of empire. In Alden's case, his identity and experience survive primarily through the bureaucratic language of colonial documentation, where personal agency is refracted through administrative record-keeping and institutional voice.

By situating Alden's apprenticeship indenture within these dual frameworks, the article redefines apprenticeship not simply as a form of education but as a mechanism of colonial statecraft, in which technical pedagogy and moral discipline intertwined to produce the docile, respectable subjects upon which the imperial project depended (Foucault, 1977; Bhabha, 1994).

Ethical considerations

This article utilises both publicly accessible archival records and unique historical documents from my private collection, notably Robert Alden's Indenture of Apprenticeship and Service Certificate. No living individuals are named, and all interpretations aim to preserve the historical authenticity of these materials and respect Malta's educational heritage.

As a researcher and student of history and education, I am curating a small private archive of artefacts[3] and documents related to Malta's vocational and educational history. The Alden records are part of this evolving collection and were legally obtained from a specialised antiquarian source that deals with twentieth-century Maltese industrial memorabilia. Their inclusion in this research adheres to principles of scholarly transparency and provenance, and I make these documents available for consultation by legitimate researchers upon request.

This research complies with the University of Malta's ethical guidelines for historical and archival studies, ensuring that all materials are handled, cited, and interpreted in accordance with professional academic standards.

Researcher Positionality

I approach this article as both a researcher and a practitioner within Maltese vocational education, a dual role that shapes every stage of my inquiry. This position provides privileged access to institutional memory and archival materials, and it inevitably influences the interpretive lens through which I view this history. My positionality is particularly significant given the evidentiary constraints inherent in a micro-historical approach. As only two

[3] The term *artefacts* in this context refers to historical materials and objects connected to Malta's vocational and educational past, including apprenticeship documents, Dockyard certificates, instructional manuals, photographs, and other items of material culture related to industrial training and civic education.

primary documents relating to Alden survive, the Indenture of Apprenticeship and the Service Certificate, I rely on two archival snapshots rather than a continuous personal narrative. The limitations of these sources highlight not only the enduring gaps within the colonial archive regarding apprenticeship and technical education, but also the epistemological risks of overinterpretation or inadvertent privileging of official discourse.

To mitigate these interpretive risks, I adopt a consciously reflexive stance, grounding all analysis in careful triangulation with legislative, administrative, and secondary sources. I allow interpretations to emerge from corroborated evidence rather than conjecture, maintaining fidelity to the archival record while recognising its silences. I remain acutely aware that the boundaries of what I can assert are shaped by both the fragmentary nature of the surviving sources and my professional position within Maltese vocational education. Rather than claiming objectivity or completeness, I aim to produce a nuanced and ethically grounded reading, one that is attentive to the evidential constraints of the colonial archive and to my own interpretive agency within it.

The Micro Case of Robert Alden's apprenticeship in a fortress colony

The Indenture of Apprenticeship, signed on 11 February 1924, officially enrolled fourteen-year-old Robert Alden into the shipwright trade at His Majesty's Dockyard, Malta. The original contract, documented in the Dockyard Personnel Files, 1924, No. 175/A, states a six-year term involving Alden, his mother, and the Chief Constructor "for and on behalf of His Majesty the King." The opening clause "the Apprentice doth by these presents freely and voluntarily put and place himself Apprentice to the Master to learn and exercise the art or occupation of Shipwright… for the use and benefit of His said Majesty" indicates a semblance of free will, yet this voluntariness was heavily influenced by economic need and family obligation (Alden Contract, 1924).

The language of the indenture is overtly prescriptive and hierarchical, positioning Alden not merely as a trainee but as a subject disciplined into imperial obedience. Its clauses bind him to "faithfully and industriously serve the Master… and obey all lawful commands, orders, and directions," to avoid "immoral, indecent, irregular, or improper conduct," and to "demean himself at all times with strict propriety and submission to his superiors." Such phrasing enacts what Foucault (1977) terms the microphysics of power: a system in which moral conduct becomes inseparable from labour discipline. The apprentice's body and behaviour are rendered sites of regulation, where industriousness and obedience are moralised as virtues of empire. The prohibition of "any act… whereby the goods and effects of His said Majesty… may be embezzled, injured, or damaged" further reveals that loyalty and productivity were framed as forms of devotion to the sovereign. The indenture's language thus converts work into a moral covenant, binding the apprentice not only to his employer but to the colonial order itself. This disciplining was not limited to the workplace; Clause X of the indenture also imposed explicit duties on Alden's mother, who "pledges to find and provide for the apprentice good and sufficient lodging, clothing, washing, and all other necessaries," making the household itself an auxiliary mechanism of colonial discipline and care. As Ellul (2006) observes, this represents "the moral economy of dockyard labour." Yet, it also exposes the ideological project beneath it, a pedagogical system designed to internalise surveillance, Anglicise local youth, and transform economic necessity into moral duty (Cassar, 2003; Ellul, 2006).

Apprenticeship at the Dockyard School: The Microphysics of Power and Colonial Pedagogy

Between 1924 and 1930, Robert Alden alternated between workshop practice and classroom instruction at the Dockyard School within the Admiralty's French Creek precinct. Established in 1858, the school epitomised what Ellul (2006, p. 116) calls "education through discipline": a pedagogy that fused

technical competence with moral regulation. Apprentices wore uniforms, lined up for inspection, and saluted superiors before lessons began, rituals that turned obedience into a visible and rehearsed habit. Every spatial and temporal aspect of learning, from arrival times to seating order to even silence, was structured to reflect naval authority. In this setting, learning did not merely transfer knowledge; it manufactured conduct.

The Indenture of Apprenticeship (1924) provides the textual foundation for this regime. It's injunctions that the apprentice must "faithfully and industriously serve the Master," "obey all lawful commands," and "demean himself at all times with strict propriety and submission to his superiors" (Indenture, pp. 2–3), translated directly into the pedagogical routines of the Dockyard School. Each clause became a learning outcome enacted daily through attendance registers, drills, uniform inspection, and graded performance reports. The Dockyard School thus embodied the microphysics of power that Foucault (1977) describes: a network of small, repetitive mechanisms of observation, correction, classification, and examination through which individuals are trained to regulate themselves. These practices reveal how power operated less through coercion than through disciplinary normalisation, shaping behaviour by making conformity habitual and morally desirable.

In this setting, during a dockyard apprenticeship, learning was closely linked with discipline. The classroom extended the shipyard's oversight into moral and intellectual realms. Technical lessons in geometry, mechanical drawing, and metalwork implied specific hierarchies: accuracy equated with virtue, order with loyalty, and neatness with civility. English language lessons, as Camilleri Brennan (1963) observed, served not just as a means of communication but also as a means of cultural integration, positioning English literacy as a marker of respectability and a gateway to the empire's administrative sphere.

This disciplinary pedagogy operated through what Bhabha (1994) terms mimicry, the production of a "reformed, recognisable Other," in this case, the

Anglicised artisan. Apprentices internalised British habits of punctuality, restraint, and decorum, yet were never permitted full parity with their British counterparts. The Dockyard School thus served as a laboratory of empire, where moral and technical education converged to reproduce imperial hierarchy under the guise of industrial training.

Yet the surviving record remains silent about the learner's own voice. Alden's progress appears only through bureaucratic descriptors such as "Very Good" or "Satisfactory." His thoughts, frustrations, and aspirations are unrecorded, what Spivak (1988) famously identifies as the silence of the subaltern. Within this regime of inscription, the apprentice's subjectivity is visible only through the language of institutional praise or censure. Reading the Indenture and school records against the grain (Stoler, 2009) reveals how the empire's moral lexicon, faith, honesty, and diligence functioned as technologies of regulation. These values were not merely taught; they were measured, graded, and embodied until they became self-governing norms.

Through this lens, the Dockyard School emerges as a crucial site in Malta's colonial education system where technical training doubled as moral engineering. What was ostensibly a school for skill acquisition functioned as an apparatus for producing docile, reliable, and "respectable" colonial subjects-workers who, in Foucault's terms, became the bearers of their own discipline. The same moral vocabulary, punctuality, and neatness, loyalty, was later embedded in the Industrial Training Act X (1952), which codified apprenticeship as a regulated moral economy. The Act's clauses on obedience, attendance, and gendered eligibility transformed the Dockyard's pedagogical discipline into a national legislative framework, ensuring that the microphysics of power first rehearsed in the Dockyard classroom persisted within Malta's post-war statecraft. In later decades, these values were rebranded as civic virtues, concealing their imperial genealogy beneath the rhetoric of national efficiency and respectability.

Archival silences and reading against the grain

The surviving documents, Indenture of Apprenticeship (H.M. Dockyard Malta, 1924) and Service Certificate (Malta Dockyard Corporation, 1970), offer precise bureaucratic detail yet silence the lived experience of learning. They catalogue obedience, diligence, and "very good" conduct, but omit the apprentice's anxieties, aspirations, or dissent. As Foucault (1977, pp. 170–173) observes, archives function not merely as neutral repositories but as technologies of power that define the limits of what can be said about individuals. Through such inscription, Alden's identity becomes a moralised data set, faithful, industrious, and punctual, constructed through the discursive logic of discipline rather than biography.

These omissions are structural, not accidental. Spivak's (1988) question, "Can the subaltern speak?" is sharply illuminated here: Alden's voice appears only when filtered through institutional evaluation. His experience "speaks" through official adjectives, never through his own words. The apprentice's moral worth was the true object of examination, and the absence of personal testimony reflects the wider silencing of working-class colonial subjects within imperial documentation (Stoler, 2009; Sultana, 1992).

The Dockyard School's disciplinary rituals and Alden's Indenture clauses were later formalised in the Industrial Training Act of 1952, which established the same pedagogical principles within a legal framework. Article 2 of the Act described an apprentice as a "male person over the age of fourteen … bound by written agreement … to serve an employer for a determined period with a view of acquiring knowledge, including theory and practice, of a calling" (Legislative Assembly, 1952, Art. 2). This clause mirrored the moral economy outlined in Alden's contract three decades earlier, where the apprentice pledged to "faithfully and industriously serve the Master … and demean himself … with strict propriety and submission to his superiors" (Alden, 1924, p. 2).

Such legal and moral codification illustrates what Foucault (1977, p. 138) refers to as the microphysics of power: a dispersed network of regulatory mechanisms, attendance, inspection, and assessment that transform obedience into a pedagogical norm. The creation of the Youth Advisory Committee and Trade Testing Boards under the Industrial Training Act X 1952 Act (Cole, Legislative Assembly Sitting No. 30, 28 Feb 1952, pp. 1342–1345; see also Camilleri, 2024) extended surveillance into every workshop, turning moral supervision into a bureaucratic practice. Consequently, each evaluation sheet, logbook, and "Journeyman Certificate" became a site where education, morality, and governance converged (Ellul, 2006; Pirotta, 1987).

The 1970 Service Certificate issued by the Malta Drydocks Corporation under the newly independent administration maintains this continuity. Its language, "Conduct: Very Good. Quality of Service: Very Good" (Alden, 1970), demonstrates the ongoing influence of colonial evaluation frameworks. As Caruana Galizia (2017) and Sultana (2017) note, such continuities reveal how British administrative vocabularies of discipline and respectability were incorporated into Malta's postcolonial civic ethos, redefined as national virtues of industriousness and loyalty.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this represents the continuum of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977, pp. 170–175): surveillance that begins with the regulation of the apprentice's body and extends to the preservation of his record in the archive. The documentation does not merely describe the subject it governs; it sustains visibility and evaluation as lifelong conditions of respectability (Stoler, 2009).

Engaging with these silences requires methodological humility. The researcher's task is not to invent the absent voice but to expose the epistemic order that made such absence possible. Alden's file, when read through this lens, becomes more than a personal dossier; it is evidence of a system in which learning equalled compliance, and virtue equalled productivity. The trajectory from Alden's Indenture (1924) to the Industrial Training Act (1952)

to his Service Certificate (1970) reveals a genealogy of discipline extending from empire to nation-state process through which colonial pedagogies of moral regulation became embedded in the very language of Maltese technical education (Camilleri, 2024; Sultana, 1992; Lepholisa & Yu, 2025).

From Disciplinary Pedagogy to Legislative Codification

The disciplinary rationality cultivated within the Dockyard School did not disappear with the decline of direct Admiralty control; instead, it was absorbed and rearticulated within Malta's emerging framework of state-managed technical education. The very routines that had once governed apprentices' time, conduct, and moral deportment became re-inscribed in post-war legislation that sought to "modernise" apprenticeship while preserving its imperial grammar. The Industrial Training Act X of 1952 thus represents the juridical afterlife of the Dockyard's moral pedagogy: it transformed the microphysics of power exercised through attendance registers and conduct grades into formalised state mechanisms of surveillance, assessment, and certification. Through clauses defining the apprentice as a "male person bound by a written agreement" and stipulating fixed periods of training and examination (Legislative Assembly, 1952, Article 2), the Act re-legitimised the same hierarchies of obedience, gender, and merit that had structured colonial learning. What had once been naval discipline performed in classrooms now became a bureaucratic logic embedded in national law, a continuity that illuminates how Malta's apprenticeship system, far from marking a rupture with empire, perpetuated its moral economy under the sign of development and reform.

The codification of apprenticeship under the Industrial Training Act (1952) extended the disciplinary logic of the Dockyard School into the legislative domain of post-war Malta. Far from constituting a pedagogical rupture, the Act formalised the same moral and administrative structures that had previously governed the Admiralty's educational regime. Its clauses did not simply regulate training; they legislated conduct. The apprentice was defined

as a “male person over the age of fourteen years bound by a written agreement” (Legislative Assembly, 1952, Article 2), reaffirming both the gender exclusivity and paternal hierarchy embedded in the 1924 Indenture. This statutory language transformed imperial moral expectations of obedience, punctuality, and industriousness, considered into enforceable categories of civic discipline.

By requiring every apprenticeship to be registered and overseen by the Youth Advisory Committee, the Act formalised what Foucault (1977) describes as the bureaucratisation of surveillance: the transformation of pedagogical observation into administrative control. Attendance records, examination reports, and trade-testing procedures acted as regulatory tools, ensuring that moral compliance and technical skill remained inseparable. The apprentice’s “good conduct,” once a subjective assessment in Dockyard evaluations, was now legally quantifiable through state certification.

At a pedagogical level, the Industrial Training Act entrenched what Jackson (2022) terms “imperial modernity through moral education.” The six-year training schemes and prescriptive syllabi reflected a belief that social order could be achieved through the disciplined bodies of workers. Each calling, joiner, fitter, tailor, was defined not only by a set of technical competencies but by behavioural expectations codified into law. Through these mechanisms, the micro-disciplinary culture of the Dockyard became the template for a national system of technical education, embedding obedience within the apparatus of Maltese modernisation.

Seen through a postcolonial lens, the Act’s rhetoric of standardisation and professionalisation masked the persistence of imperial hierarchies. It’s an attempt to elevate vocational training to “respectable” status, reproducing the colonial dichotomy between intellectual and manual labour. The Youth Advisory Committee’s oversight reinforced a top-down relationship between state, employer, and apprentice, replicating the master–servant dynamic that had long defined the Dockyard apprenticeship. Thus, the 1952 Act represents

not only a legal milestone but also a moment of epistemic continuity, in which colonial discipline was repackaged as national progress.

Discipline Through Pedagogy: Syllabi, Surveillance and the Moral Curriculum

If the Industrial Training Act X of 1952 translated the moral codes of the Dockyard into statute, its apprenticeship schemes transformed those codes into pedagogy. Each scheme, issued in the Government Gazette between 1952 and 1954, carried the unmistakable grammar of discipline: entry requirements, attendance rules, working hours, and conduct clauses interlaced moral and technical expectations. Learning a trade was not only about mastering tools or machinery but about acquiring the proper disposition to work punctually, deferentially, and orderly.

This institutionalisation of morality through curriculum illustrates what Foucault (1977) calls the capillary operation of power: the movement of authority into minute pedagogical detail. The Act's requirement that every apprentice be registered, medically certified, and periodically examined produced an administrative gaze that mirrored the Dockyard's inspection rituals. Attendance registers, progress cards, and trade-testing records acted as technologies of surveillance, transforming the apprentice into a permanently visible subject whose moral worth could be quantified. Power circulated through these instruments not as punishment but as observation and classification, each mark, signature, and grade reaffirming the state's claim to shape the industrious citizen.

The content of the schemes themselves extended this disciplinary order. Scheme No. 1 (Joiner and Cabinetmaker, 1952) and Scheme No. 2 (Tailor for Male Garments, 1952) Industrial Training ACT X (1952), apprenticeship schemes (Scheme No. 1 concerning the woodworking industry; Scheme No. 2

concerning the bespoke tailoring industry),[4] enumerated every stitch, measurement, and gesture the apprentice was to perform. The lists "use of the needle, thimble, and shears; stitching, padding, marking of sleeves" transformed embodied craft into measurable units of compliance (Malta Government Gazette, 2 May 1952, pp. 548–552). Each sub-skill functioned as a micro-lesson in precision and restraint; deviation from prescribed technique was not simply an error but a failure of conduct. Thus, the curriculum became the moral script of the modern worker.

At the top of this system stood the Trade Testing Boards and the Youth Advisory Committee, which together form what Foucault calls the examination complex, the connection between knowledge and power that creates both subject and truth. Through standardised testing and the awarding of the Journeyman Certificate, the state claimed the authority to declare who was competent, moral, and employable. Assessment was therefore less an act of verification than one of classification: it allocated apprentices across hierarchies of skill and virtue, reinforcing the same stratified order that had long structured colonial labour.

This pedagogy also reproduced the mimetic hierarchy described by Bhabha (1994). Apprentices were taught to emulate British standards of craftsmanship and etiquette, demonstrating civility through neat seams and measured lines. The curriculum's insistence on accuracy, presentation, and linguistic proficiency encoded a politics of imitation: colonial respectability translated into vocational excellence. In mastering the master's syllabus, the Maltese apprentice learned not only to cut cloth but to cut himself to imperial measure.

Yet, as before, the archive preserves little of the apprentice's own perspective. Syllabi, attendance lists, and examination minutes speak in the impersonal tone of administration. What Spivak (1988) names as the subaltern silence

[4] Industrial Training ACT X (1952), apprenticeship schemes (Scheme No. 1 concerning the woodworking industry; Scheme No. 2 concerning the bespoke tailoring industry)

persists: the learner appears only as a category "fit," "passed," "dismissed." Reading these materials against the grain (Stoler, 2009) exposes how the language of pedagogy, "efficiency," "skill," "conduct", operated as a moral economy. It measured worth through conformity and erased dissent through paperwork.

Through these intertwined mechanisms, syllabus, inspection, and certification, the Industrial Training Act recreated the Dockyard's moral pedagogy within a civilian framework. Education became the conduit through which discipline entered the post-colonial state, ensuring that the virtues of punctuality, neatness, and loyalty survived as the invisible curriculum of Maltese technical education. In this sense, the Act's apprenticeship schemes represent not merely an educational reform but the pedagogical afterlife of empire: a system in which learning remained a practice of obedience, and knowledge the measure of moral submission.

Bureaucracy as Afterlife: Continuity Beyond Empire

The disciplinary apparatus inaugurated by the Industrial Training Act X of 1952 did not dissolve with Malta's political independence; it metamorphosed into bureaucratic form. The same logic of regulation, inspection, and certification that had once animated the Dockyard classroom persisted within the machinery of the post-war state, now reframed as "modern administration." The newly established Youth Advisory Committee embodied this continuity. Ostensibly created to coordinate between industry and technical schools, it functioned as the administrative conscience of discipline, collecting attendance data, approving apprenticeship schemes, and recommending trade-testing procedures. Through its minutes and directives, the microphysics of power described by Foucault (1977) were translated into the rhythms of paperwork and policy.

By the early 1960s, the creation of the Department of Technical Education and the Apprenticeship School in Ħamrun extended this administrative gaze

into every corner of technical training. Apprentices were now released twice weekly to attend evening classes in English, Mathematics, Engineering Science and Drawing, culminating in the City & Guilds of London Institute certification (Vella, 1954). Attendance was compulsory; progression depended on satisfactory conduct and punctuality. Each of these procedural expectations mirrored the Dockyard's moral pedagogy, now rationalised as educational "standards." The inspection of workshops, the maintenance of individual training logs, and the periodic visits by Youth Advisory Committee inspectors functioned as what Foucault termed the bureaucratisation of visibility: an apparatus that renders the learner perpetually knowable and therefore governable.

The post-1952 reforms thus re-scaled imperial discipline into administrative normalisation. The state assumed the role once held by the Admiralty, ensuring that the virtues of diligence, restraint, and conformity remained the moral scaffolding of vocational identity. Even as the policy rhetoric shifted toward national development and self-sufficiency, the ethical vocabulary of apprenticeship, service, loyalty, and respectability remained unaltered. The Balogh Report (1955) and the Board for Education and Training for Industry (1963) both reiterated that national progress required "trained and disciplined labour," echoing almost verbatim the Dockyard's earlier emphasis on moral conduct as industrial efficiency.

This continuity is also legible in the archival traces of individual lives. Robert Alden's Certificate of Service (1970), issued by the Malta Drydocks Corporation, closes the circle: the same adjectives "Very Good Conduct," "Very Good Quality of Service" recur as official evaluation criteria, decades after independence. What had once been colonial moral assessment had become corporate human-resource taxonomy. The bureaucratic form concealed its genealogy; disciplinary power survived beneath the neutral language of personnel management.

Through this process of institutional translation, Malta's post-colonial state preserved the grammar of empire within the syntax of modern governance. The paperwork of technical education logbooks, inspection forms, and certificates replaced the inspector's eye, but the logic of surveillance remained intact. The colonial subject was reborn as the compliant employee, his morality still measured through attendance, punctuality, and the neatness of his work. In this sense, bureaucracy became the afterlife of imperial pedagogy: an impersonal technology that ensured the endurance of obedience under the guise of order, and the continuation of moral discipline as the foundation of national progress.

Genealogies of Apprenticeship: Colonial Legacies in Contemporary Maltese VET

When read across the longer genealogy of Maltese vocational education, the micro-historical analysis of Alden's apprenticeship makes visible how many of the structures, assumptions, and disciplinary logics forged under British rule continue to underpin Malta's contemporary VET system, particularly as institutionalised at MCAST. The bureaucratic technologies embedded in the colonial apprenticeship model, registration, attendance surveillance, graded progression, behavioural regulation, and standardised certification, did not vanish with political independence. Instead, they were reproduced in the post-independence apprenticeship frameworks of the 1970s and 1980s, most notably the Extended Skills Training Scheme (ESTS) and the Trainee Apprenticeship Scheme (TAS), both of which preserved the British alternation between institutional theory and supervised industrial practice and retained the state's reliance on trade-testing boards, detailed skills syllabi, and journeyman certification (Director of Labour & Emigration, 1990; Sultana, 1992). A third wave of institutionalisation arrived with Europeanisation, which re-embedded and intensified these inherited logics through the adoption of the learning-outcomes approach and the establishment of the Malta Qualifications Framework (2007). While framed as a modernising project aligned with EQF transparency and mobility, the learning-outcome

reform consolidated a culture of documentation, verification, and behavioural accountability, recasting older colonial technologies of discipline into contemporary quality-assurance practices (Cedefop, 2015; Camilleri, 2024). In this sense, Malta's transition to learning outcomes did not constitute an epistemic rupture but a reconfiguration of long-standing administrative rationalities, with assessment grids, competence descriptors, and monitoring instruments performing analogous Foucauldian functions of surveillance, normalisation, and governability within today's VET landscape (Camilleri, 2024).

This continuity is not incidental. The dual structure that historically defined colonial apprenticeship, alternating institution-based instruction with tightly supervised workshop practice, remains central to MCAST's model of work-based learning today (Cedefop, 2015; Camilleri, 2024). While contemporary VET frameworks have evolved significantly, the underlying logic persists: learning is divided between formal, curriculum-driven knowledge and workplace identity formation shaped by tacit norms of conduct, punctuality, teamwork, and productivity. The Alden case illustrates how this structure historically produced what Bhabha (1994) describes as the "mimic" colonial artist, technically skilled yet shaped by moral and behavioural expectations aligned with imperial norms. Contemporary apprentices, as documented in Camilleri's (2024) analysis of MCAST's assessment practices, continue to navigate similar tensions as they oscillate between college-based learning outcomes and workplace expectations that prioritise reliability, behavioural compliance, and immediate productivity (Fuller & Unwin, 2012; Camilleri, 2024). Thus, the colonial template shapes not only the organisation of learning but the types of subjectivities that Maltese VET continues to cultivate.

Within this context, the idea of "decolonising vocational modernity" gains both conceptual and practical significance. Decolonisation does not mean rejecting qualification frameworks or abandoning modern standards; instead, it involves exposing the historical roots behind them and expanding the

pedagogical space for reflection, agency, and learner voice (Said, 1978; Andreotti, 2011). Camilleri's (2024) findings demonstrate how the dominance of measurable, task-focused learning outcomes tends to restrict apprentices' reflective skills and decrease opportunities for higher-order learning. A decolonial shift in Maltese VET would therefore require integrating historical and critical reflexivity into curricula; redesigning workplace mentorship models to diminish hierarchical supervision; and balancing competence-driven assessment with identity development, collaborative problem-solving, and civic participation (Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1983; Camilleri, 2024). Decolonisation, in this sense, is not merely a rhetorical gesture but a reform initiative aimed at transforming a system that mainly produces compliant workers into one that educates critically engaged, socially conscious practitioners capable of contributing to Malta's evolving economic and democratic landscape.

From this perspective, several aspects of the present system can be understood as "imperial residues." The most visible is the bureaucratic weight of documentation and surveillance, a direct continuation of colonial logics of control (Foucault, 1977; Ellul, 2017; Camilleri, 2024). The hierarchical novice–expert dynamic, identified in the colonial workshop structure, persists today, with many industry mentors functioning more as behavioural supervisors than as pedagogical guides (Fuller et al., 2005; Camilleri, 2024). Additionally, the gendered and class-based hierarchies that shaped colonial technical education continue to influence societal perceptions of VET pathways, reinforcing the longstanding dichotomy between "academic" and "manual" routes (Sultana, 1997; Baldacchino, 1988). Even the utilitarian framing of apprenticeship as an instrument of economic supply, central to Malta's nineteenth- and twentieth-century fortress economy, remains evident in contemporary policy narratives focused on skills shortages, productivity, and competitiveness (Brincat, 2009; Frendo, 2013; Camilleri, 2024). These continuities do not negate the achievements of VET reform; rather, they situate modern structures within a deeper historical lineage of governance, discipline, and labour optimisation.

By making these connections explicit, the Alden micro-history becomes more than an archival vignette; it becomes a methodological lens through which both colonial apprenticeship and contemporary Maltese VET can be understood as part of the same extended epistemic and administrative genealogy. As Camilleri's (2024) doctoral study demonstrates, the transition to learning outcomes has modernised but not displaced the deeper historical logics that govern vocational learning. This historically grounded reflection underscores the need for reform movements that are not only structurally aligned with European frameworks but also critically conscious of the colonial residues that continue to shape pedagogy, governance, and vocational identity in Malta. Ultimately, acknowledging these continuities opens the space for imagining a more reflexive, participatory, and socially just vocational future.

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[i] Indenture of Apprenticeship
Page 1
D.-208.
(Revised October 1917.)

The Apprentice
This Endenture made the Eleventh day of February 1924, between
Robert Alden (being of the age of fourteen and a half years)
hereinafter called "the Apprentice" of the first part,
of
Carmela Alden
Father, Guardian, or next Friend.

Principal Officer of the Dockyard, to be described by his Name and Office.
(the mother of the said Robert Alden), of the second part, and
C. G. Hall Esq Chief Constructor,
H. M. Dockyard, Malta.

Who with his successors in his said office or other the person appointed from time to time to perform the duties of his said office, is hereinafter called "the Master" (for and on behalf of the King's most Excellent Majesty, His Heirs and Successors), of the third part, WITNESSETH that in consideration of the covenants and agreements of the Master hereinafter contained, the Apprentice (with the consent and approbation of the said party of the second part, testified her by being a party hereto), Doth by these presents, freely and voluntarily put and place himsell Apprentice to the Master to learn and exercise the art or occupation of Shipwright in the several branches or departments thereof in which apprentices are, or shall or may be employed in His Majesty's Dockyard at Pualla or other Home Yard, or other places, as may at any time or times during the term of his Apprenticeship, be directed by the Commissioners for executing the Office of Lord High Admiral of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, to serve as an Apprentice with and under the Master for the use and benefit of His said Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, for, and during and unto the end of the full term of six years to be computed from the day of the date of entry on the Yard books.

Page 2
And the Apprentice and the party of the second part do severally hereby covenant with the Master that he the said Apprentice shall and will during the said term faithfully and industriously serve the Master, and also such persons as he the said Apprentice may be placed under by the Master, and obey all their respective lawful commands, orders, and directions, and will observe all rules and regulations which are or shall be from time to time made by the said Commissioners in respect of Apprentices, and generally will diligently conduct himself, and use his best abilities and endeavours towards his improvement and perfection in the said art or occupation of Shipwright and for the good and benefit of His said Majesty, His Heirs and Successors therein.

And also that he the said Apprentice shall not and will not at any time during the said term do, or willingly suffer to be done, any act or thing whatsoeve, whereby the goods and effects of His said Majesty, His Heirs and Successorer can, shall, or may in any wise be embezzled, injured, or damaged, or His officers or service defrauded, or otherwise prejudiced in any manner howsoever, nor shall nor will, at any time absent himself from the service or work without the leave of the Master or any Officers under whose authority he may be placed; nor contract marriage during the period of this Indenture; nor be guilty by word or action of any immoral, indecent, irregular, or improper conduct or behaviour in any respect whatsoever, but shall and will demean himself at all times with strict propriety and submission to his superiors.

And the party of the second part doth hereby covenant with the Master that she, the said party of the second part, can and will from time to time during the said term find and provide for the Apprentice good and sufficient provisions, and other necessaries proper for his personal accommodation and benefit suitable to his said intended situation.

And also provide such implements, working tools, and instruments as the customs of the trade require to enable him to learn and practise the said art or occupation of Shipwright.

And in consideration of all and singular the premises, the Master doth hereby (for and on behalf of His said Majesty, His Heirs and Successors) covenant with the Apprentice and the party of the second part. Each of them,

that he the said Apprentice duly observing, performing, and keeping all the covenants and agreements on his part hereinbefore contained shall be taught appropriately and fully instructed in the said art or occupation of Shipwright And shall during such time as he shall continue at his work be entitled to and receive all the wages, emoluments, and advantages which the said Commissioners shall from time to time think proper to allow to Apprentices of his description.

And lastly, it is hereby especially stipulated and agreed by and between the said parties hereto, that in case the said Apprentice shall, for the space of one week during the said term, unless disabled from work by sickness. Absent himself from his service and employment under this Indenture, without the license and consent of the Master or other person authorised in that behalf, or shall neglect to perform the reasonable and necessary work required from him or shall be guilty of embezzlement or other criminal conduct, or shall for a period of six consecutive calendar months be disabled from work by sickness, or shall suffer from any disease or complaint that would render his continued

Page 3
C
Articles of Apprenticeship.
This is to certify that the Apprenticeship of
Robert Alden
Shipwright Apprentice
has been duly completed.
M Seed MANAGER, CONSTRUCTIVE DEPARTMENT

[ii] **Certificate of Service**

MALTA DRYDOCKS CORPORATION

ESTABLISHED BY THE DOCKS MALTA GC
MALTA DRYDOCKS ACT, 1964. MANAGING AGENTS:
FORMERLY ADMIRALTY DOCKYARD TO MALTA
SWAN HUNTER GROUP LTD.
GOVERNMENT, TRANSFERRED TO MANAGEMENT
AND OPERATION FOR COMMERCIAL PURPOSES.

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

NAME OF EMPLOYEE	**ALDEN ROBERT**
TRADE OR GRADE	FOREMAN OF SHIPWRIGHTS
DEPARTMENT	MARINE
HIRED OR PENSIONED	HIRED
FULL PERIOD OF SERVICE	FROM **27. 5. 61** TO **31. 3. 70**
PERIOD OF SERVICE IN PRESENT OCCUPATION	FROM **27. 5. 61** TO **31. 3. 70**
PARTICULARS OF SERVICE IF ANY ADDITIONAL TO THAT STATED	---
CONDUCT	VERY GOOD
QUALITY OF SERVICE RENDERED	VERY GOOD
CAUSE OF DISCHARGE	AGE LIMIT

[Signature over] **PERSONNEL MANAGER**
[MALTA DRYDOCKS CORPORATION 31 MAR 1970 PERSONNEL DEPT.]

DATE
31 MAR 1970
P. 14
LONDON OFFICE:- MALTA DRYDOCKS CORPORATION, ARMADORES HOUSE, 1/7 BURY STREET, LONDON E.C. 3. TELEPHONE: AVENUE 3800. TELEX: 261489. CABLES MALFADOC LONDON.

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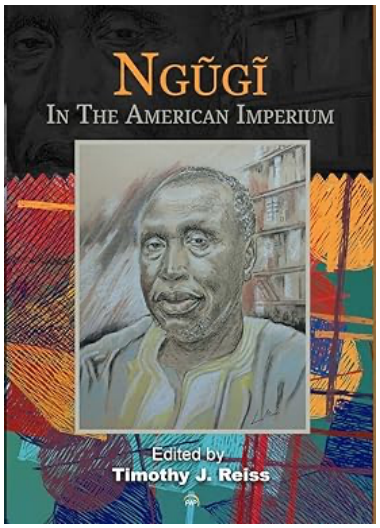
Ngugi and I: A Personal Tribute

by

Handel Kashope Wright



The great Ngugi wa Thiong'o has passed **https://lnkd.in/gecNjFKx https://lnkd.in/gt5U3VaX** As a student in my native Sierra Leone, at a time when the literature curriculum was decidedly Anglocentric, crowded with the British canon, with only a smattering of African texts and writers, Ngugi is one of the figures who made me fall in love with African literature. I avidly read his early novels in secondary school in Freetown and it was from *Weep Not Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) that I first learned about Kenya (rural life and culture, traditional and western education, colonization, the Mau-Mau and anti-colonial struggle). From those early works onwards Ngugi became a towering figure of African literature, recognized world-wide. As Richard Lea and Sian Cain (28 May, 2025) note in their tribute to him in *The Guardian* newspaper, "Considered a giant of the modern African pantheon, he had been a favourite for the Nobel prize in literature for many years."

And much later, when I tried to write about African cultural studies as a PhD in education student in Canada, Ngugi's work in general and especially the collective play co-written with Ngugi wa Miiri, *'Ngaahika Ndeenda'* (*'I will marry when I want')* and the activist work of the Kamirithu Centre (Kitata, 2025) in his home village of Limuru from which the play emerged, were instrumental in my articulation of what African cultural studies could be. The result was my doctoral dissertation (and after, my first book) in which I argued for a paradigm shift from a hegemonically aesthetics based English Literature in Africa to a more complex, aesthetic and utilitarian African cultural studies: *A Prescience of African Cultural Studies: The Future of Literature in Africa is Not What it Was*.

As much as I loved Ngugi's fiction, I came to admire him even more and to utilize what he produced as a most passionate postcolonial theorist and political and cultural critic. The perhaps lesser-known collection, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* became a favourite because the essays were particularly valuable for my articulation of African cultural studies (Wright, 1995). Ngugi is most famous for *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature,* a work that crossed over from African thought to become a staple of global postcolonial/decolonial thought. It epitomized what became his lifelong anti-colonial stance and work on the politics of language. Indeed, Ngugi is famous for eschewing the colonizer's language, English as the medium for his creative writing and even the colonizer's Christian name, "James" (his early novels were published under the name James Ngugi). He opted instead to write in his mother tongue, Kikuyu and to only translate works into English if and when he chose to. So, for example, in 1980 Kikuyu readers got to read *Caitani Mutharabaini*, which he initially wrote on toilet paper while imprisoned. It was two years later that others got to read the work when he translated and published it in English in 1982 as *Devil on the Cross*. Ngugi advocated that African writers write in their mother tongue and at a stretch in regional languages such as Swahili – the lingua franca in much of Eastern Africa. He also chose to use his Kikuyu

name and naming, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Ngugi, son/child of Thiong'o) and insisted everyone refer to him simply as Ngugi.

As a fierce critic of corruption in successive Kenyan governments, Ngugi's works were censored and he was imprisoned (which he wrote about in *Barrel of a Pen* and *Detained)* and upon his release, with the threat of assassination looming, he spent the rest of his life in exile, briefly in the UK, then mostly in the USA (as a professor successively at Yale, Northwestern, New York University, ending his career as Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at University of California, Irvine). Not just a Kenyan nationalist, Ngugi was in fact a devoted, lifelong pan-Africanist, and later in life became very interested in Indigenous thought and global critical politics, as evidenced in works like *Globaletics,* his coinage of the particularly utilitarian notion of "poor theory," his insistence on and continuous forging of links between the local and the global (including of glocal Indigeneity), and his exhortation that since it was European colonizers who carved out the continent's "countries," Africans should free themselves from what he identified as "the straightjackets of nationalism."

One never thinks they will actually get to meet their intellectual heroes so I was beside myself with excitement when Ngugi was invited to give the keynote address at the 2007 conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and I (African, new to UBC, recovering English major, and newly minted Tier 2 Canada Research Chair in Comparative Cultural Studies) was asked to give the response to his address. After his talk and my response, Ngugi made some excuse about needing rest and asked me to leave the conference venue with him (leaving behind a very disappointed gaggle of high-profile scholars who were obviously intent on rubbing shoulders with the esteemed keynote speaker). Rather than going back to his accommodations, he actually wanted me to walk the campus with him, including a stop at the bookstore (which, to my relief, carried some of his works). We had the longest talk about individual African countries, pan-African politics and the responsibilities of Africans in

the diaspora to the continent. I remember being astonished that he displayed in-depth knowledge of the history of and current issues in my native Sierra Leone. It felt like a dream to have this long chat with Ngugi as we walked the campus then sat outside his digs, with students walking briskly, blissfully by. I wanted to shout- "Can you see who I am with, who is talking and laughing with me? Can you believe it?"

The next time I met Ngugi in person, we were both on an invited plenary panel of the Postcolonial Education Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in San Diego in 2009, where he greeted me as one would a long-lost brother, with a big grin and a long hug. Perhaps I can be forgiven for not remembering the details of any of the presentations, swept up as I was by the very presence of the man and my astonishment at his very genuine modesty. From my experiences with him at the conference at UBC and again at AERA (and from accounts from others), Ngugi revealed himself to be a most modest and down-to-earth person, always very keen to hear from and engage others, as if his much-anticipated talks were simply an excuse to meet and learn about and from others. When he missed out on the Nobel in 2010 to Peruvian author, Mario Vargas Llosa, the modest Ngugi was less disappointed than the photographers who had gathered outside his home in anticipation of his win. “I was the one who was consoling them!” he reportedly said (Lea & Cain, 2025).

And finally, and in the most sustained way, I interacted with Ngugi (albeit via Zoom meetings) when I was invited by Tim Reiss (literary scholar and Ngugi’s colleague at UC Irvine), to contribute to an edited collection of essays about Ngugi and his relationship to and reception in the Americas, *Ngugi in the American Imperium*. Perhaps not surprisingly, I chose to explore what it might mean to take up Ngugi seriously in the politics of (re)articulating both an American and a global cultural studies (Wright, 2021). What was particularly thrilling for me about the project was that Ngugi himself was part of the collective- present at every Zoom meeting, enthusiastically engaging everyone’s drafts, and encouraging us to critique his own essay. This was

truly a labour of love for us and I consider that essay particularly important because it was a small contribution to a project that was so meaningful; a rigorous celebration of a towering figure who adamantly refused to be so identified. The pictures I have taken with Ngugi over the years have always been quite meaningful to me. With his passing, they have now become some of my most treasured images. To a fearless, radical social justice theorist and activist, avid pan-Africanist, and passionate advocate for global equity and representation of the marginalized I say, "Mzee! Wakai Awa! Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Rest in Power!"

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Book Review

Review of Kapoor, D. (Ed.) (2025). *Contesting Colonial Capitalism in the Americas, Africa and Asia*. Oxford & New York: Routledge.

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After Aziz Choudry died prematurely in 2021, social movement activists and scholars across the world joined in honouring and mourning him, paying tribute to the man and his work in multiple forums (e.g. Vally et al 2023). Four years on, his colleague, comrade and friend Dip Kapoor has dedicated this book to him, a collection of twenty-three social movement case studies from the Americas, Asia and Africa, each one inspired and informed by some aspect of Choudry's work. Tragically, this was also Kapoor's last book, as he died in August this year. It would be hard to overstate the loss this represents for those of us who value radical education scholarship.

Space does not allow me to review this collection adequately while also detailing the contributions which Choudry and Kapoor made over the last two and a half decades. But one simple point which this book illustrates is that sometimes separately, sometimes together, these two comrades were the absolute masters of networking. Between them, they produced multiple edited collections, bringing together many of the academy's most committed radical scholars with representatives of the world's most inspiring social movements, all to reinforce two fundamental propositions. The first is that progressive social movements, both with and without the help of academic allies, collectively produce the most important knowledge we can discover about how our world really works. The second is that this knowledge begins with the

world's First Peoples, whose struggles over the last 500+ years reveal the realities of colonial capitalism.

Kapoor's introductory essay sets the scene, explaining how he assembled the authors, almost all of them Choudry's close associates, and the themes he asked them to address. The book proper begins with the Americas and the Caribbean, with five chapters by Indigenous authors, centring indigenous peoples struggles in Turtle Island (Canada and the Unted States), Aotearoa (New Zealand) and in the lands of the Quechuas, Peru. The next chapter, in true Choudry style, breaks with the scholarly format, in a photo essay illustrating key moments in the history of radical social movements since the 1960s. The remaining five chapters cover Brazil's landless workers movement, Caribbean migrant labour organising, women's movement activism in Guyana and Jamaica, and oral history research on Argentine's military dictatorship.

Section II is on Africa. It begins with two essays from South Africa, one on the rise of anti-immigrant organisations, the second on Ubuhalism the philosophy/praxis of South Africa's largest contemporary social movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo ('people of the shacks'). The next chapter is set in Uganda, Tanzania, and Mali, where peasant movements are fighting land acquisition by 'agro-industrial' complexes linked to foreign capital. The next, set in Burkina Faso, recounts local opposition to Target Malaria, a research institute funded by Bill and Melinda Gates to experiment with genetic technology. The last two chapters in this section continue the theme of accumulation by dispossession, first in Ghana, with an account of the long history of opposition to the transfer of ownership of West Africa's largest alluvial salt yielder, the Songor Lagoon, to a private corporation, before ending with the activism of Ogoni women of southern Nigeria who are fighting for self-determination in the face of the petro-chemical industry.

Section III, on Asia, begins with an analysis inspired by Choudry's work on immigration and refugees, focusing on the Middle East (West Asia) and

Palestine. Immigration is also the focus of the next chapter, a study of Fillipino migrant worker organisation in Canada, which the authors argue is a direct result of the impact of neoliberalism in the home country. The next chapter builds on its author's 'slow ethnography' over three decades with women garment workers organising in Bangladesh to discuss their use of a Facebook platform to organise and educate many thousands of their co-workers, highlighting one young garment worker's use of the minimum wage campaign to express a new politics of hope. Feminist analysis continues with a chapter on research undertaken with the Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek (PKMT) (Eng: Pakistan Peasant Worker Movement), on how women livestock keepers and smallholders who produce 80% of the national milk supply are responding to legislation prohibiting the distribution and sale of unpasteurised milk, a move backed by multinational milk companies and the WTO. Staying on the subcontinent, Chapter 23 examines the 2020-21 farmers occupation in Delhi, involving 50000 farmers on any one day, and 700,000 at its peak, protesting laws giving control of food production and distribution to multinationals. It explores some of the political learning and activist knowledge production which occurred in this struggle, which led to victory after 380 days, when the laws were withdrawn. The final chapter compares the learning that has occurred in two movements, one amongst Adivasi in India, and the other with Indigenous and peasant landholders in Sulawesi in Indonesia.

Readers of Postcolonial Studies in Education may already be familiar with some of the themes of Choudry's work (e.g. Choudry 2014). From this book, they will learn how far and wide his ideas have spread, and how useful they are for revealing the multiple ways in which movement activism is itself a vibrant form of education, in part because it also always involves serious, rigorous research. As Choudry and Vally (2019) wrote in their introduction to another collection, "activist research, education and action are dialectically related." That is to say, social movements are learning movements, and research is a vital part of helping activists to learn from their experiences. As the MST in Brazil teaches, the movement is the school – but not just for the

direct participants, but also, importantly, for the wider society, including the academy itself.

This edited collection depended on the goodwill and hard work of its thirty-five contributors, too many to name. I felt humbled but also inspired to learn about so many activists and scholars across the globe who have devoted decades of their lives to working with and in grass-roots social movements, creating what Choudry and Kapoor (2010) called "learning from the ground up." What is amazing about Kapoor and Choudry is that they have been able to produce so many of these books, each one gathering together different activists and scholars from around the world. The academics who write in their books are facing increasing pressure within their institutions, especially but not only in the United States. But even before this, the work of building authentic relationships with the social movements of which they write has taken years, and much of this time will not have translated into 'career-advancement'. It may just as likely have produced the opposite. But one effect of this book is to demonstrate that activist scholarship is not only possible, but absolutely necessary.

Living in Australia, I was disappointed there was little mention of Oceania, and no case study of First Nations struggles here. Nor was there more than a passing reference to Cuba, which has played such a pivotal role in supporting anti-capitalist movements across Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa. On another level, there was no attempt to systematise the learning and knowledge production described in the individual case-studies. building for example on the anti-capitalist education theorising of Paula Allman, Sharzad Mojab and John Holst. Such a systematisation might have made more of the differences between the informal learning that occurs alongside any activism and the more explicit pedagogy of non-formal popular education.

That said, I do not hesitate to recommend this book to anyone with an interest in popular radical adult education, in social movement learning and knowledge production, and in activist participatory research. Any one or

several of these case studies provide ample material for teaching courses in these areas, to undergraduate and postgraduate students in higher education, and also to activists involved in self-education and more structured movement education classes. Taken together, they amount to an international encyclopedia of social movement activism.

To Aziz & Dip, my heartfelt thanks. May they rest in power.

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