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Unthinking remembrance? *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* and the significance of centenaries

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ABSTRACT

On 4 August 2014, the now iconic evolving work by Paul Cummins and Tom Piper, *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, opened at the Tower of London. Each of the 888,246 poppies in the Tower's moat represented one British life lost in the First World War (FWW). This article uses a unique dataset of 1488 responses to the installation in order to probe the impacts of this high profile intervention.

Systematic analysis of that data allows us to explore the centenary as a catalyst for remembrance activity, focusing on the kinds of "unthinking remembrance" that our research made visible. We detail how visitor responses activated a series of familiar tropes about past conflict, which often neglected recent work that has attempted to diversify perspectives about the past. This calls into question the extent to which policy objectives associated with pluralising narratives about the FWW during this centenary had been successful at this early stage in the commemoration and are likely to be successful in the future.

As the "cult of the centenary" becomes ever more embedded within education and policy frameworks, and refracted within the programming of national media and cultural organisations, we contend that much can be learned about how to usefully frame commemorative activities from the unprecedented case of *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*.

KEYWORDS

Remembrance; centenary; poppy; First World War; heritage

On 4 August 2014, the now iconic evolving work by Paul Cummins and Tom Piper, *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* (hereafter, *BLSLR*) opened at the Tower of London (see [Figure 1](#)). Each of the 888,246 poppies in the Tower's moat represented one British life lost in the First World War (FWW). Dismissed as "Fake, trite and inward-looking – a UKIP-style memorial" by Jonathan Jones in *The Guardian* (2014), it was nevertheless estimated that 5 million people visited it in the 4 months it was on site. Mark Brown (also in *The Guardian*) reflected that the piece was "the most visited and talked about public art installation for a generation" (2014) and William Cook claimed in *The Spectator* that "for a week or so, apparently, it was the most Googled image in the world" (2015). The

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Figure 1. *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* at the Tower of London. Image rights: Jenny Kidd.

installation was also notable in policy terms, as it came to be seen as a lynchpin of the centenary commemorations; a hyper-visible backdrop for politicians, the royal family and the military as they positioned themselves for public remembrance of World War 1 (WW1). In the fullness of time, this installation may well prove to have shifted expectations for large-scale commemorative activity within the UK and beyond.

Accompanying this installation was an education programme developed by Historic Royal Palaces (HRP) called "Why Remember?" At the programme's nexus were three questions "Why should we remember the war?", "Why are 100 years so significant?" and "How do you want to remember?" The "Why Remember?" programme ran online, was part of HRP's on- and off-site learning programmes and was the basis for our visitor research undertaken during the installation in London. We are now using the same three questions to address audiences as two set pieces from the poppy installation travel around the UK. To date, in our unique dataset, nearly 3000 people have responded to those core questions. But, it is the 1488 visitor responses collated from respondents at the Tower and online as part of HRP's learning programmes between August 2014 and April 2015 that are the subject of this article. Here we present a critical discourse and content analysis of the data, offering insights into how visitors responded to *BSLSR*, and the extent to which it constituted an intervention in terms of their thinking about WW1. We will demonstrate how visitors activated a series of familiar tropes about past conflict in their

responses, which often neglected attempts undertaken in recent years to diversify perspectives about the past. These findings call into question the extent to which policy objectives associated with pluralising narratives about WW1 during this centenary were a success in the early stages of the commemorations. They also point to the value of our longitudinal research project (outlined above) which will allow reflection on whether the multiple “memory moments” in the centenary of the FWW have created space for diverse, and divergent, narratives (Liddington, 2005, p. 212).

These findings will be significant to scholars of museums, heritage, cultural policy and memory studies, but they also offer key pointers for those planning future commemorative activities. As the “cult of the centenary” (Quinault, 1998) becomes ever more embedded within education and policy frameworks, and refracted within the programming of national media and cultural organisations, we contend that much can be learned from the unprecedented case of *BSLSR*.

BSLSR in context

In October 2012, the (then) Prime Minister David Cameron announced funding for the refurbishment of the Imperial War Museum, London, which included the creation of new FWW galleries, as part of plans for what he called “a truly national commemoration” of the centenary of the FWW (Cameron, 2012). His comments were echoed in Eric Pickles’s insistence that “remembrance will unite the whole country next year” (Chorley, 2013). Indeed, on 11 January 2013, a National Commemoration Advisory Group, comprising of 3 women and 13 men was appointed to “oversee and advise on plans for a nationwide programme of events and educational initiatives to mark the centenary in 2014” (DCMS, 2013a). Writing of these early responses in a British Future report from August 2013, Dan Todman pointed to a “clear expectation that [the centenary] is about creating ‘national’ moments on the lines of the Jubilee or Olympics, though with a suitably different tone” (Todman, 2013, p. 17). He warned, however, about “casting commemoration as a parade of facts to demonstrate the national values we’d like to have now” because, he argued, it “would grossly misrepresent the complexity and unpleasantness of the past” (2013, p. 18). Todman’s words can be seen as part of a wider academic impetus to avoid reductive essentialisms and to broaden perspectives, something encapsulated in the large, publicly funded, Arts and Humanities Research Council First World War Engagement Centres launched the following year. These focussed on bringing researchers together with community groups funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and aimed “to bring new insights into the complexities of commemorating a conflict, the interpretation of which has never been settled, and which continues today to provoke different and diverse reactions in the public and the political domain” (AHRC, 2014).

The 2013 British Futures report thematised some of these diverse reactions within a context of knowledge about the FWW, which it described as “rather shaky” (2013, p. 2). It drew attention to themes arising from surveys and focus groups collated by YouGov, in particular debates relating to gender, conscientious objectors and the role of Commonwealth soldiers. In terms of the latter, Baroness Warsi, then senior minister at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Minister for Faith and Communities, wrote that the National Commemoration Advisory Group was looking at how best the contribution of those soldiers should be marked (Warsi, 2013, p. 7). Such comments can be seen in part

as a response to criticisms made earlier in the year that “the plans for the centenary [were] conceptually empty” (Strachan, 2013), and followed an open letter of May that year, with 49 signatories from the cultural sphere, criticising the focus of the government’s centenary plan (Open Letter, 2013). Amid accusations that the centenary’s cultural programme was lacking, Maria Miller announced £10m to fund various events (DCMS, 2013b). Cultural institutions drawing up plans for centenary activity were thus navigating in what was, unsurprisingly, somewhat fraught terrain.

Within this context, Paul Cummins approached HRP with the proposal to fill the moat of the Tower of London with thousands of ceramic poppies. By the end of 2015, the resulting installation had been appropriated as part of DCMS’s narrative of how it had fulfilled one of its strategic objectives, “to showcase what’s great about Britain – its heritage and traditions, nationally and internationally”:

Britain’s tourism, heritage and museums sectors are one of our great national strengths: they promote everything that is great about our country; they underpin the huge numbers of visitors – domestic and international – who enjoy what Britain has to offer; and they represent a crucial part of the UK economy. We have worked to support these sectors, planned and delivered commemorations, protected our heritage assets and demonstrated to potential overseas visitors that Britain is GREAT. [...] Our cultural programme is led by 14–18 NOW and has included such innovative projects as the Dazzle Ships, the Spectra light installation, and “Lights Out”, in which nearly 17 million people took part. One of the most powerful and poignant projects has to be the Poppies installation “Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red” at the Tower of London. We secured the necessary funding to retain and showcase part of the installation around the UK. (DCMS, 2015, p. 29)

The installation is situated here along with commemorative activities organised by 14–18 NOW (“the UK’s official arts programme marking the centenary of the First World War” (14–18 NOW, 2018a)). At this point, it was clearly still being understood and narrated as part of a broader national (UK) commemorative agenda, notwithstanding current controversy about the extent to which British interests were being rhetorically invoked as part of political power play in the devolved regions (McArdle, 2013). Within the context of a tension between a persistent national framing and a parallel impetus to diversify the focus of the commemoration, this article explores the responses to *BLSLR* within the first few months of the centenary commemorations.

Methodology

The 1488 responses analysed in this article were collected via specially designed postcards distributed at the Tower of London to visiting members of the public and to formal learning groups, as well as online via a linked survey on HRP’s “Why Remember?” pages. People were asked to respond to the three questions outlined above: their answers ranged from a few words, to more lengthy, considered and personal reflections.¹

Those deliberations have been comprehensively coded and analysed using the statistics package SPSS to establish the key frames according to which people responded. Some of these themes will be introduced in the discussions that follow. For each answer to a question, a maximum of three themes were identified in order to try to account for the complex layering of meanings that were worked into responses. This allowed us to map the conceptual landscape of peoples’ remembrance around this high profile installation. Multiple themes could, thus, be selected for each response.

Sixty percent of our 1488 respondents identified as female, 32% as male, and 8% chose not to identify, making our response rate significantly higher for women. The largest cohorts of respondents were women aged 41–60 (23%) and 61+ (14%), but there was also a significant clustering of those aged under 18 (28% of the total sample). The overwhelming majority of the sample were UK residents (80%). These demographics are important to note as they are enlightening variables in the analysis that follows.

In the following sections, we unpack the dominant discursive frameworks to be found in responses to our questions. We establish how people talked about the centenary and why they felt it is important to remember, before going on to explore the extent to which they articulated a broadening of perspectives about WW1 in particular. We then conclude the discussion by reflecting on the policy implications of the findings.

Debating the significance of the centenary

It's a bloody long time! (UK resident)²
We like centenaries. (female, under 18, UK resident)

This section explores how visitors debated the significance of the commemorations and how they responded to the poppy as a symbol of remembrance. We demonstrate that responses overwhelmingly circulated around two key thematics; 100 years as an ambiguous but compelling “milestone”, and second, narratives of “sacrifice” which have become a familiar trope in discourse about the FWW.

In discussions about the centenary, the standout themes referenced were that 100 years functions as a significant milestone (19%), that a centenary keeps memories and stories alive (19%), and that it means there are few people left who lived through the War itself (16%). These three responses often turned up as a trio in collocation – a pattern that seems to unfold naturally in this way:

100 years is significant because there are no survivors with first-hand memories to share. If we do not remember the war it will spiral into myth and legend. Once we lose the truth, we lose the lessons learnt. (male, under 18, UK resident)

Because 100 is a significant number and it was a long time ago and yet we still remember it because it was a key part in our future. Also there is [sic] not many survivors anymore as its [sic] a new generation so we have to make sure we make the future generations aware of what happened and about what people did for us. (female, under 18)

Perhaps as a consequence of the “cult of the centenary” that emerged in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continues to this day (Quinault, 1998, p. 303), our respondents seemed to be very familiar with the ways in which it is considered appropriate to debate the significance of a centenary. Quinault argues that, at the time he was writing, centenaries had become “very much taken for granted” in contemporary culture (1998, p. 303). In the intervening two decades, this has remained the case; centenaries have been used as hooks to elicit public interest, as enticements for public funding and as frameworks for strategic planning in the cultural sector.³ Phrases that have become an established part of the lexicon of remembrance (of WW1 in particular) were, thus, frequently cited by our research participants; “*Lest we forget*” and “*We will remember*” for example.

Most notable, perhaps, were the relatively large number of those aged under 18 who understood the significance of the centenary in terms of the “milestone” (42%). Distortions in time perception were demonstrated here that depended on age; younger respondents were more likely to reflect that the conflict was a long time ago than older respondents, who were inclined to comment on it as recent history; *“Because 100 years is such a long time that whatever happened 100 years ago will seem mysterious, distant and maybe important. That’s why we need to look back and make the details clear again”* (Under 18, Female, UK). Research is beginning to explore how emotions might manipulate our perceptions of time (Droit-Volet, Fayolle, & Gil, 2011), and this might be a significant factor in our responses, suggesting that one group is perhaps more affectively attuned to their remembrance than another.⁴

Respondents noted that it was important to mark 100 years because those who had fought in the War were now all gone, with a number referring to Harry Patch, the “last veteran of the trenches” who died in 2009 (Patch & van Emden, 2014). As one respondent noted, 100 years *“is a fundamental human cycle”*. We are now beyond what Nicholas J. Saunders has called “the furthest edge of living memory, the cusp upon which history becomes archaeology” (2004, p. 5):

It is a benchmark as the generation who lived through those years have now also passed and many of the next. We must ensure that the baton is passed on to each generation so the names of the fallen and struggles of more will be kept alive. They gave their tomorrow for our today. (female, 41–60, UK resident)

Because we have now lost all those who fought – so all we can do is mark key dates, and 100 years is a period that is both within, and beyond, our comprehension. (female, 41–60, UK resident)

To Saunders this is significant because we move from “first-hand memory” to what he calls the “realm of the object” (2004, p. 5). That this moment was marked by an installation itself characterised by such an intense materiality in the form of the ceramic poppies (with the potential to buy into that materiality also) is notable. A few respondents speculated on the implications of the veterans’ passing, seeing the potential impacts of a cultural amnesia as grave indeed; one respondent worries that no living witnesses could mean *“fanatics might stir up emotions of nationalism just as in 1914”*, another worries that as the stories will now have to be passed on in the absence of first-hand witnesses *“accuracy may drift”*.

So how did people talk about this 100 years “milestone”? It is a *“major anniversary”*, and as such, is *“so special”*. It is *“important”* in allowing for remembering as *“one big communitiy”*, and indeed as an opportunity *“to reinforce the lessons learnt”*. It was seen by only a few as an opportunity to *“celebrate”*. One of the concerns voiced about the tone of the centenary was that it would miss the mark as a commemoration and, instead, come off as jingoistic, triumphalist or celebratory (Andrews, 2014).⁵ However, this was not a theme that came up with any great frequency in our responses.

There were 121 cases of responses claiming that 100 years is *“not significant”* or *“no more”* significant than other anniversaries. It was in the 40–60 age group that this theme was most prevalent (43% of responses as lead theme for this demographic). This could, in most instances, be interpreted as meaning that *all* years are significant; remembrance is thus perceived as an ongoing responsibility for all, and at all times. It did not tend to be used as a way of signalling that the events, or the centenary, were themselves insignificant.

It is not particularly significant in itself, but it makes us all think about much this war changed our world and affected so many individuals. It is humbling to think of those men 100 years ago and it is a good reason to remember much more intensely. (female, 19–40, UK Resident)

It's not. We should remember every year. (UK resident)

I have no reason to believe that milestones are significant. It's just terrible if it was yesterday or a hundred years ago. (male, under 18, UK resident)

There were a number of responses that reflected in sophisticated ways on practices of remembrance and processes of memory:

It is only at 100 years that we can truly put it into perspective. Here is the tipping point where the myths are already rooted and now it has become a story for the telling of other stories. Now is the time we can take another look at those myths, and reclaim the other stories which have been pushed to the sidelines. (female, 19–40, UK resident)

Remembrance goes through phases I guess we are moving from one to another. (male, 41–60, UK resident)

Another respondent noted that it is especially important to “*spread remembrance*” as an antidote to its correlative – forgetting. A significant number of our respondents noted that a centenary offers a chance to gain new “*perspective*” on the conflict itself, and “*why it began*”; “*1914–1918 slips off the tongue, however four years is a long time*”. They also commented on how it offered a different perspective on the present day: “*The war puts our own era in perspective*”. But, such comments tended not to indicate any will at this early stage in the centenary commemoration to broaden perspectives and narratives about the war as would have fit the ambitions outlined in the policy framework above. This is a significant limitation of the discourse, and one we return to in the “A Broadening of Perspectives?” section.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, older respondents were more likely to note a personal connection to the conflict, with these being at the more detailed end of the spectrum of responses:

I am 71, I never knew my grandparents, my mother never saw her father as he was at the western front and died there, we are the last generation to really feel the affect of losing our loved ones and the consequences [sic] of it. The centenary of the war is a great time and the last time our generation have of passing on the truth, the stories, the horrors and senselessness of it to the next generations. (female, 61+, overseas)

My grandfather was in the 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards and original member of the BEF arriving in France in August 1914. He survived the early battles and was sent to USA to help train American troops in 1917. By this time he was a member of the Army Physical Training Corps. At some stage during his career I remember him telling me he actually used the moat of the Tower of London for physical training so this commemoration of poppies in the Moat is of special significance to me. (female, under 18, UK resident)

These views raise questions about what senses of the conflict *all* of our respondents carried with them, for none will have arrived at either the Tower, or the “Why Remember?” website without prior perceptions of it; perceptions that will have been in large part informed by their education (Todman, 2014) and the various media representations of WW1 that they had encountered during the BBC’s “Remembrance Season”, for example.⁶ As Jonathan Vance notes, “perceptions, whether or not they are grounded in

fact, have a cultural and intellectual reality that warrants attention" (1997, p. 4). This, in turn, raises questions about the relationship between such perceptions and memory. Jay Winter has said that "[w]ar experience is not in your belly, unless you were wounded there; for everyone else it is in your mind and in your memories, and they never remain fixed" (2012, p. 162). This is a useful reminder that our uses of "the past" are contingent and changing, and that how the past was accessed and made sense of whilst standing in front of the poppies installation was likely to differ from how it might have been accessed at other times or in other places. Indeed, it is widely accepted that remembrance is performative (Tilmans, van Vree, & Winte, 2010), and it is worth considering the kinds of performances of the past that were enabled around *BLSLR* and consequently in our responses. We are reminded again that this was a live and evolving work, and that standing in front of it was an embodied and expressive form of remembrance (Plate & Smelik, 2013, p. 9).

Having reviewed the often unsurprising ways in which visitors to the poppies were understanding their significance, we now discuss ways in which they did (and did not) engage in more critical appraisals of debates that were circulating around the installation.

A broadening of perspectives?

In this section, we examine how participant responses refracted the broader ambitions of those who "curated" the Centenary – that it should work to diversify narratives about and perspectives on that conflict. As noted in the "*BLSLR* in Context" section, there has been a broader project accompanying the commemorations to highlight the stories of (for example) conscientious objectors, women, and those who fought from Commonwealth countries. As we have already begun to indicate, there was limited engagement with this agenda within our cohort of respondents from August 2014, a finding we pick up again in this section.

How respondents activated the term "sacrifice" is enlightening here as one of the familiar tropes of discourse about war.⁷ A detailed analysis reveals not only the way many had connected to the centenary through family stories but also the limited temporal, geographical and gender terms within which such references were organised: the sacrifice was made by "*that generation*", "*our predecessors*", "*our ancestors*", "*families*", "*the last generation*", an "*entire generation*", "*our relatives*", "*for the next generation*", "*for the future*" and for "*generations past and present*"; it was made by "*men*", "*thousands of men*", "*by service men*", "*our grandfathers and their fathers*", "*our forefathers*" or "*men and boys*". This was sometimes specified using the archaic euphemism of the "*fallen soldiers*", "*the fallen*", the "*men who enlisted*" or the Tommies.

Despite early cross-European commemorative activities occurring when the installation was on site (for example, the international commemorations in Liège, Belgium and a service for Commonwealth leaders at Glasgow cathedral in August 2014), there were only very limited responses which took a transnational perspective in their emphasis on sacrifice: "*for both sides*", "*by all our relatives, in all parts of the world*", "*troops on all sides*" and "*on both sides*".⁸ While some responses referenced men and women, there was much less frequent mention of women. Winter (2012) has pointed to a gender imbalance in the representations of war on offer in museums – and presumably heritage sites also – noting that the everyday experiences of women in war are glossed over or left out

completely. Our respondents talked often about “*the men*”, and on occasion noted also the hard work and sacrifices of “*the women*”; although mostly through the familiar tropes of “*the wives*” and “*the mothers*”. Given that the poppies were acting metonymically for those men this is perhaps not surprising, the “range of possible identifications” (Winter, 2012, p. 162) for women visitors were of course more limited and had to be “shared” across the gender divide.

In contrast to such normative positioning of women, and given both the contemporary focus on the role of women during the War and the social gains made by women at the end of it, it is interesting that only a few respondents mentioned these in connection to sacrifice:

Because it is a significant part of our history and it is relevant today as it was in 1914. To forget the sacrifice that young men made would be terrible. The war to end all wars should not be forgotten as it change history abroad and at home. Women worked for the first time doing men’s jobs and the social structure of the country changed a lot. (female, 41–60, UK resident)

Such infrequent reference seems to support Lucy Noakes’s claim that notwithstanding “a large body of research on the gendered history and experience of the FWW, the impact of this work on cultural memory of the conflict has been marginal” (2017, p. 3). It will be interesting to see if we can trace changes in commemorative discourses in our later research, particularly following the Vote100 activities in 2018.⁹

More abstractly (and seemingly uncritically) references to “freedom” predominated. “Freedom” was described as being the object of the sacrifice (“*they sacrificed their freedom*”) and the reason for it (“*they died for our freedom*”). It was most frequently used in the abstract and also in terms of freedom from “*tyranny*” and “*oppression*”. Freedom was linked to democracy and peace, with a startling number of respondents claiming that people sacrificed “their” lives so that “we” might live in peace – with more than 3% of respondents from across all age ranges even asserting that this had indeed been the case to the present day (including using unreflectively the oxymoronic and often heard phrase “*fighting for peace*”). Such responses are somewhat incongruous given that the next most prevalent theme included reference to learning lessons, avoiding mistakes and preventing future wars (16% by lead theme, 26% reference at some point in their answers). In fact, there was surprisingly little reference to contemporary conflict in response to our questions.¹⁰ We understand such responses as forms of “unthinking remembrance” which channel broader narratives, discourses and representations about war, but without engaging with the political, societal and cultural legacies of conflict, or their refractions in the everyday.

Given these findings, the prevalence of respondents from the UK, and criticisms by elite sources of the art installation as a whole, it was interesting that only 11% of responses featured nation as a theme. This percentage is not insignificant but instances of overt nationalism tended to be exceptions rather than the rule in the sample. Their presence should not be surprising, as Maggie Andrews asserts, “commemoration, memories and narratives of past wars and conflicts are utilised to construct a sense of nationhood” (2014, p. 105):

To remind us of the people who sacrificed their lives to keep our country safe. Rule Britannia. (female, 61+, UK resident)

We should remember the war because people sacrificed their lives for our country. If the people did not sacrifice themselves our world would be very different and we may speak German! (male, under 18, UK resident)

Nevertheless, as Michael Billig reminds us, the routine deixis of banal nationalism “flags” the nation even when there is no explicit mention of it. The nation is, Billig argues, “mindlessly remembered” through the “deixis of little words” (2014, p. 144, p. 94). This was particularly visible in our sample through the use of non-specific possessive pronouns which take for granted that the addressee knows which collective is being referred to: “*They sacrificed their lives for our country*”, “*on our behalf*”, “*their lives for us*”, “*they gave up their lives for all of us*”. Sometimes such phrases were linked to well-known memory rituals, for example: “*They gave their tomorrow for our today*”; “*They died that we might live*”. These are, according to Billig, “habits of language” (2014, p. 93) that flag the nation.

Such language is particularly, although by no means exclusively, noticeable in the 34% of responses mentioning sacrifice from those under 18. For example:

Because they sacrificed their lives to save us. (male, under 18, UK resident)

lots of people died for us. if they didn't the world wouldn't be the same and they sacrificed there [sic] live [sic] to save us. (male, under 18, UK resident)

Explaining the high frequency of such responses by young people is tricky and beyond the scope of this research, but it *may* reflect wider discourses within educational establishments, museums and the media about the military; “our” soldiers, and their actions overseas.¹¹ What was surprising given the more inclusive debates circulating around the centenary and its representations (referenced above), was how seldom they were reflected in our answers. This raises questions about how we move younger people (and others) *beyond* unthinking remembrance, and how best to frame symbols that are as potent as the poppy in doing that work (Andrews, 2014, 2017; Saunders, 2014).

Most visitors did not seem to know or think about the numbers of poppies on display (which could have been the source of a lot more controversy than was the case), and little reference was made to those not commemorated in terms of the Commonwealth.¹² Such comments might not in and of themselves have demonstrated a broadening of perspectives or understanding however. Despite the fact that, as Richard Smith recently points out, “a more inclusive interpretation of the war is being promoted through British government-funded and voluntary-sector projects”, we have to remain alert to the danger of commemoration stressing an “unproblematic, multicultural war”, in which complex and difficult (imperial) histories disappear altogether (2015, p. 358). Smith noted that while the installation was “deeply moving” it also promoted a “very visceral sense in which the planting of porcelain poppies represented a staking of claims to national belonging” (2015, p. 358). He cautions against “processes of remembering [which] have been undertaken within the context of a contemporary multicultural British nation which increasingly recalls the imperial military past as a Commonwealth achievement” (Smith, 2015, p. 348). Indeed, even those few responses which pointed to who was “missing” from the dead metonymically represented by the poppies focussed instead on the German war dead rather than others in the Commonwealth:

Planting poppies, learning about the conditions (for both people involved and not) and remembering the soldiers and their stories (from both sides). (female, under 18, UK resident)

I want to remember BOTH sides in this conflict. I am very concerned that the remarkable and moving poppy installation is only counting the losses on the British/Commonwealth side. To only remember those lost on this side, rather than also all those that WE killed, does not

demonstrate any degree of humanity and reconciliation. The ceremony at St. Symphorien, for British and German, did set the correct tone. I want to remember ALL those who were affected by the foolishness of going to war. I want people to really see that we must find other ways to resolve differences. I sincerely hope and pray that when it comes to the WW2 centenary in 2039 that we will not be thinking only in nationalistic terms about British losses. The world needs to change – and quickly! (female, 61+, UK resident)

It is no surprise that the active, performative and embodied nature of the poppy as symbol was reflected in the frequent mention people made of wearing the poppy – something most frequently collocated with “*pride*” and “*proudly*”. There was reference to repeated ritual and a taken-for-grantedness of the relevance of the poppy (“*as usual*”, “*as always*”, “*every year*”).¹³ The imperative to commemorate was epitomised by those visitors who talked about being organisers or sellers for the Poppy Day Appeal. The issue of the commercialisation of remembrance is particularly fascinating in terms of the ceramic poppies in the moat, which were later sold to members of the public for £20 a piece, and soon appeared on online auction sites for £350 each (BBC, 2015).¹⁴ Several respondents wrote about buying one of these poppies and others expressed regret that they were sold out. The ceramic poppy seems already to have become part of a very detailed commemorative package – part of a list of activities which includes battlefield tours and other rituals (Iles, 2008). For some visiting the Tower became an act of remembrance in itself, even replacing usual acts of commemoration.

Writing in 2013, Nicholas Saunders asked whether both the increase in UK charities like Help 4 Heroes, which particularly focuses on veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the so-called War on Terror “caught up so treacherously with Afghanistan’s opium poppy” could “ultimately see the Remembrance Poppy fade away” (2014, p. 223). The events at the Tower of London a year later suggest not. The poppy as a symbol still resonated for audiences who took part in this survey either on Tower Hill or online. For those who responded, the installation was not, as Jonathan Jones scathingly wrote in the left-liberal newspaper, *The Guardian*, a “deeply aestheticised, prettified and toothless war memorial”. It was signifying powerfully and in multi-vocal ways. For Jones, the installation was a “lie” because it did not accurately represent the “truth” of the FWW, something which could be more meaningfully signified by a moat “filled with barbed wire and bones” (2014). In fact, his image of an “appropriate” memorial corresponds to a very particular set of experiences and understandings of the events of WW1, as Todman has shown (2014). His criticism points, however, as Andrews argues, to the “treacherous path” that heritage sites have to navigate when commemorating the centenary (2014, p. 105).

Since September 2015, two sections of the installation have been touring the UK. By the end of 2018 they will have been installed at 19 sites (excluding the original installation at the Tower of London). At the time of writing, “[t]hey have already been seen by over 3.5 million people” (14–18 NOW, 2018b). We are following the poppies with our “Why Remember?” questions in order to examine whether interpretations of the poppies change with geographical context, and/or whether the perspectives we encounter diversify as we progress further into the centenary commemorations.

Conclusion

Why Remember?, our learning and engagement programme for Tower of London Remembers, was designed specifically to engage our audiences in a meaningful discussion about First World War remembrance and by so doing, transform their relationship to it. (HRP, 2014)

It would seem from our research that the “cult of the centenary” is becoming ever stronger in the UK. The public response to *BLSLR* corroborated British Future’s assertion in 2013 that a “remarkable public appetite for the centenary [was] bubbling under” (2013, p. 2). Based on his work on historical centenaries, Quinault maintains that centenary commemorations owe “much to similar styles and procedures” (1998, p. 321). We contend therefore that there are lessons to be learned which can inform future commemorative activities and their framing.

Our study reminds us that ritualised memory discourses are difficult to disrupt. They are gendered, encultured and sedimented. Old tropes rather than new perspectives predominate. Thus far in our research we have found little evidence of the broadening of discourses about WW1 that had been attempted by academia, museums and the media, in particular to reflect a more inclusive representation of stories and experiences. If, as Andrews et al. insist, the installation was at this point still part of a bigger focus on the (male) “combatant dead”, then this maybe unsurprising (2017, p.1). But we will see, in the next stages of our research, whether the amplification of previously marginalised narratives became a feature of people’s responses at other sites and as the centenary progressed. In the above quotation it can be seen that HRP’s ambition was to change visitors’ relationship with, and habits of, remembrance. Yet, our research found that young visitors especially seemed to uncritically repeat the archaisms of ritualised memory discourses, normalising a set of discursive formations which may continue to frame remembrance into the future. That such discourses are difficult to disrupt, however, does not mean we should not try to disrupt them. The “Why Remember?” Programme itself was an opportunity to intervene; to ask people to reflect on their own familiar patterns of remembrance. But perhaps the questions could have pushed them further.

Quinault describes centenary events as both “ephemeral affairs” and those with “lasting impact” (1998, 323). If, as 14–18 NOW claims, its “programme of large-scale contemporary arts events have set a new benchmark for the arts and heritage sectors in commemorating national moments both in the UK and internationally” (14–18 NOW, 2018b) then cultural institutions will be negotiating future memory events against the backdrop of *BLSLR*’s unprecedented visibility and popularity. The installation has assumed a status and become itself a marker in time. But the meaning of *BLSLR* was never static; it was (and still is) an evolving work in more ways than one.

Installations such as *BLSLR* are not made in a vacuum but within a political and social context. They are shaped by policy priorities, funding decisions and the agendas of stakeholders. Sometimes those agendas are conflicted. In the case of the centenary there was a stated ambition to broaden the range of narratives on offer, yet at the same time there were repeated, high profile framings of this installation that resorted to problematic nationalistic, yet seemingly seductive, essentialisms. These neutralised the critical power of a piece like *BLSLR* and, we conclude, blunted its potential for critique. This was no doubt amplified in this case (in part at least) as a consequence of the centrality of the poppy as symbol. The poppy is weighty with the associations, narratives and critique that it has to bear. It was perhaps an unreasonable expectation that radical or disruptive forms of critical remembrance could ever have been catalysed around such an installation.

Notes

1. This is an evolving dataset (we are still collecting data as the poppies tour the UK) and as such is currently not openly available for study.
2. Where respondents volunteered simple demographic data we reproduce this here.
3. See, for example, The Decade of Centenaries. Retrieved from <http://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/>
4. Research is also exploring how these effects might alter as we age.
5. The Imperial War Museum issued a document entitled “Speaking of the Centenary ...” which addressed some of these concerns, offering guidance on “developing our tone of voice” so as to be “appropriate” to the Centenary (IWM, 2013).
6. Maggie Andrews has written about the “considerable increase in the visibility of remembrance on television” and the “cultural preoccupation, even obsession, with Remembrance” that it helps sustain (2014, p. 105).
7. Sacrifice was an early trope promoted by press and popular fiction during WW1 and in the following decades, as Dan Todman has shown (2014, p. 14, 18).
8. Michael Billig does point out, however, that the national “we” always also involves both the particular and international context (2014, p. 89).
9. See <https://www.parliament.uk/vote100>
10. This is despite a broader media context in which images of wounded veterans and charities such as Help 4 Heroes are prominent (Andrews 2014, pp. 111–113).
11. This must be seen in the light of a wider discursive context and what Katharine Millar has called the “subjectifying dynamics” of narratives about the military (2016).
12. The learning and engagement programme at Historic Royal Palaces, in contrast, stressed the global nature of the conflict. See, for example, the animation “After 100 years, stories of the First World War are fading from memory. How can we keep them alive?” Retrieved from <https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/tower-of-london-remembers/#gs.Gfgxz6c>
13. On some level these respondents obviously felt a compulsion to insist that they wear a poppy (reminiscent of “poppy fascism” debate, Saunders, 2014, p. 151).
14. The poppies were sold to raise money for charity, which resulted in various controversies. The role of BSLSR within a broader context of “conscience capitalism” is beyond the scope of this article, but see Farrell (2015) and Tidy (2015).

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