Imagining the Imperial Community: Wartime and Postcolonial Representations of the British Women's Military Services in India and the Middle East, 1942–1945[1]

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During the Second World War, women's branches of the British military were established in India and the Middle East. This paper considers how representations of the overseas women's services—and the English and local servicewomen who were employed in "auxiliary" duties ranging from clerical to medical—participated in Britain's late-imperial project. Drawing primarily on newsreel footage accessed at London's Imperial War Museum, I argue that wartime representations of the overseas women's services erased the gendered and racialized power dynamics that underpinned the lived experiences of servicewomen. Instead, British media emphasized multicultural inclusion in the name of post-war political stability. This exercise in "imperial inclusivity"—reliant on simultaneous othering, tokenization, and erasure—was perpetuated by two turn-of-the-century public history projects that attempted to restore colonial women's wartime service to collective memory. Recognizing the continuities between these wartime and contemporary representations will, I hope, elucidate how the imperial past, and therefore imperial power itself, continues to be negotiated in our postcolonial moment.

Allow me to begin by briefly describing the gendered and racialized power dynamics that did in fact characterize the women's services in India and the Middle East. Wartime labor pressures forced War Office and Air Ministry officials to make an expedient move toward inclusivity by recruiting non-white servicewomen. However, the creation of the overseas women's services was overall defined by attempts to maintain imperial power dynamics. For the first few years of the

[1] This paper is based on my undergraduate thesis, "Engendering Empire: The British Women's Military Services in India and the Middle East, 1939–1945," which considers the establishment, experience, representation, and memory of the overseas women's services.

Second World War, the services were carefully constructed as a space in which imperial authority was engendered by white British women. This is indicated by military authorities' careful control of both the labor and image of British women, as well as their attentive maintenance of racialized difference upon the commencement of local recruitment. Letters and diaries written by service-women reveal that power and identity were negotiated on a daily basis, with race, gender, and class interacting in complex and unpredictable ways.

However, in reaction to rising anti-colonial tensions in India and with the Jewish community in Palestine, the British media flattened these complexities in an attempt to maintain postwar political stability. While some wartime representations of the overseas women's relied on Orientalist imagery of British privilege abroad, many portrayed non-white colonial women incorporated into inclusive imperial spaces. That these two opposing visions of the imperial community were simultaneously disseminated is, in part, indicative of a deep-seated tension in British self-understanding. As Sonya Rose has argued, Britain sought to maintain an "image of itself as a particular kind of imperial power"—that is, benevolent and inclusive—despite the fact that the empire was persistently understood in terms of racial stratification. As such, "British propaganda efforts attempted to deny, mask, or circumvent the power relations that were at the heart of both race and empire."[2] My analysis of the overseas women's services functions as a case-study of this representational imagining of the imperial community, which became particularly pressing in light of rising anticolonial and nationalist sentiment during the war.

The women's services in Palestine received extensive press coverage, with non-British recruits foregrounded so as to represent the women's services as an inclusive imperial project. Senior Commander Helen Pine of the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) Training Depot recognized the

[2] Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 241, 280.

propaganda value of making local recruits' participation in the ATS as visible as possible; by doing so, the British authorities might diminish any impression of "friendly occupation." The Army Film Unit was in regular contact, and required footage of both British and Palestinian ATS servicewomen.[3] In May 1943, a Company Commander noted the "arrange[ment] for visit of Hebrew, Arab and British Press representatives to ATS Training Depot."[4] And in April 1945, a Public Relations officer stayed with ATS units in Palestine "in order to obtain stories for the local and UK newspapers."[5] Palestinian journalists and film producers were also in touch with ATS units across the region.

Such depictions and the imperial subjects made visible in them had the effect of putting a new face on empire, suggesting a dawning recognition on the part of British authorities: expanding the gendered and racial parameters of "Britishness" was a necessary investment in imperial survival. The 1945 newsreel "WAC(I)s Celebrate Third Birthday," for example, features footage of Indian and Anglo members of the Women's Auxiliary Corps (India) standing to attention side-by-side.[6] Sir Henry Knight, Acting Governor of Madras, solemnly shakes the hand of an Indian WAC(I) wearing a sari. The WAC(I)s are constructed here as loyal subjects of the Raj. Indeed, when the war ends, the narrator concludes, "they will take back with them qualities of independence and responsibility. [...] Back in civilian life, they may well become a powerful factor in shaping India's destiny." These final lines might be interpreted as implicit propaganda against the Indian independence movement. The women serving the British Empire, the narrator suggests, personify India's future. They will enjoy their newfound "independence and responsibility"—courtesy of the Raj—within the existing imperial framework, as loyal British subjects.

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[3] 1942 ATS Egypt War Diary (WO 169/6828, The National Archives), September 7.
[4] 1943 ATS Training Depot War Diary (WO 169/13845, The National Archives), May 5.
[5] 1945 ATS HQ Palestine War Diary (WO 169/21567, The National Archives), April 4.
[6] "Indian News Parade No. 111" (INR 111, Imperial War Museum), 1945.

By foregrounding local women's inclusion in the services, British media erased the gendered and racial power dynamics that continued to define recruits' experiences. In fact, due to the rise of anti-colonialism following the war, memories of Middle Eastern and Indian women's service in the British army—too easily construed as an example of colonial collaboration—quickly became dissonant in their own countries. Moreover, as women of color, their stories were fated to fall victim to racial prejudice in the metropolis. Memories of colonial women's participation in the war effort remain limited, suggesting their potential to disrupt dominant narratives of the Second World War along simultaneously gendered and racial lines. As such, the act of opposing the erasure of colonial women's service from collective memory engenders "critical remembering" as defined by Takashi Fujitani, Geoffrey White, and Lisa Yoneyama: a process that "recuperates...memories that have been distorted, disavowed, or effaced by the effects of power."[7] In the case of colonial women's wartime service, the source of such "effacing" power can easily be traced to postcolonial nationalism, deeply racialized in the U.K. and almost always gendered male. Indian and Middle Eastern servicewomen have traditionally had no place in Britain's postcolonial national myth, for they show the war was not white, male, and limited to the nation, but instead multicultural, multigendered, and imperial in scope.

At the turn of the century, however, colonial women's wartime service was subjected to a limited process of collective remembering. Two public history projects—a 1995 Imperial War Museum multimedia resource pack and a 2000 Ministry of Defense photographic exhibition—sought to recast the imperial past of colonial military service as a foundation for 21st century multicultural British identity. But both postcolonial narratives of multiculturalism were predicated, like their wartime equivalents, on simultaneous erasure, tokenization, and othering in the name of

[7] Takashi Fujitani, Geoffrey White, and Lisa Yoneyama, *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s),* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 2.

benevolent, inclusive whiteness. Indeed, both multimedia resource pack and photographic exhibition elucidate how the imperial past, and therefore imperial power itself, continue to be negotiated in our postcolonial moment.

The "We Were There" exhibition (2000–2005) chronicled the involvement of non-white British subjects in the armed forces from the seventeenth century through to the modern day. Opened by the Ministry of Defence in November 2000, the photographic exhibit would be installed over the next five years at community centers and museums across the United Kingdom, including in London, Glasgow, Manchester, and Liverpool.[8] The section devoted to the Second World War is the most comprehensive—due to the abundance of photographic sources as well as the central place the war occupies in contemporary British memory—and includes a brief segment on "Women in War." This features photographs of the Women's Auxiliary Corps (India) and West Indian members of the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

The past presented in the "We Were There" exhibition (now archived online) is framed as an important step toward a more inclusive and equitable future in the Armed Forces as well as the United Kingdom at large. Highlighting the absence of colonial military personnel from collective memory, the introduction articulates the Ministry of Defence's aim to "celebrate the vital yet little known contribution made by these people, the descendants of whom now form part of our richly diverse ethnic population in the United Kingdom." The allusion to such descendants makes explicit the relevance of past to present, emphasizing a continued commitment to inclusivity by shifting the terms on which British history and contemporary identity are understood.

As a practice of collective memory transformation, the exhibit was a success. One visitor noted that "We Were There" was "a reminder and recognition of the part played by the 'non-

[8] Ministry of Defence (U.K.), "The We Were There Exhibition," The National Archives, May 23, 2005, webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20050523230947/http://www.mod.uk/wewerethere/exhibit.html.

British' heros [sic]." Another said it was "a reminder of how much we owe to people of other ethnic backgrounds and to individuals who showed extraordinary courage."[9] Both comments term the exhibit a "reminder," suggesting attendees' recognition that "We Were There" was operating as a corrective to whitewashed memory of British military service and, therefore, British identity writ large. Numerous primary school teachers remarked how much their pupils had learned, including one who pronounced the exhibit "extremely worthwhile since children have very little idea of the role of British ethnic minorities either today or in the past." It is hardly surprising that interconnections between past and present were highlighted by an educator, professionally charged with versing the rising generation in its historical inheritance.

Indeed, the past of colonial military service has been framed "for present purposes" of socio-political inclusion in the sphere of education as well as public history.[10] In 1995, the Imperial War Museum released "Together the Contribution Made in the Second World War by African, Asian and Caribbean Men and Women," a multimedia resource pack intended for primary and secondary school teachers.[11] The Introduction to the pack states: "In a multi-cultural society, such as Britain is today, it seemed vitally important to show that our history is a shared history, that children whose parents or grandparents came from Africa, India and Pakistan or the West Indies have just as great a family involvement in the war as children whose families were in Britain." "What should be avoided at all costs," the guide to Using the Pack adds, "is a multi-cultural slot at the end of the topic, during which pupils are suddenly bombarded with materials like these. Instead, the materials should be integrated throughout the teaching of the topic...." This pedagogical advice is sound. By "integrating" stories of colonial service throughout the curriculum,

[9] Ibid.
[10] Fujitani et al., *Perilous Memories*, 1.
[11] Imperial War Museum, *Together the Contribution Made in the Second World War by African, Asian and Caribbean Men and Women: A Multi-Media Resource Pack* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1995).

teachers might construct a narrative of the Second World War that captures the multi-faceted and global experience of 1939–1945, instead of merely juxtaposing the non-British (read "non-white") war with the Eurocentric one that prevails in Western memory. Furthermore, given the centrality of the Second World War to contemporary British identity, the act of "integrating" the stories of colonized populations into the historical narrative is to "integrate" their descendants into the British national community.

However, as in "We Were There," the narrative of colonial participation in the Second World War forwarded by "Together the Contribution Made" privileges colonial loyalty over anti-colonial resistance—of which no mention is made. To take either exhibition or multimedia resource pack at face value is to envision the wartime British Empire as a community defined by seamless socio-political unity, instead of a fraught arena where power, identity, and loyalty were negotiated on a daily basis. Indeed, both exhibit and multimedia resource pack vividly demonstrate that to reshape collective memory is not necessarily to engage in critical remembering. Although both purported to correct collective memory in order to encompass multiethnic British subjects, we must consider the possibility that erasures persist.

To begin with, it is significant that "We Were There" was a photographic exhibit. Certainly, visuals contribute to the success of public history projects; however, images are also up for narrative grabs. "We Were There" could have given voice to colonial recruits by centering oral histories or excerpts from memoirs, and including stories of resistance alongside those of loyalty. Instead, colonial military personnel are seen but not heard. While the exhibit's title adopts the voice of colonial recruits by employing the first-person plural (*We* Were There), all captions are written from the perspective of an objective contemporary narrator, effectively silencing the lived experience of colonial service in the British Armed Forces. Thus, the exhibit has the effect of objectifying

the colonial subjects it features, tokenizing them as symbols of imperial loyalty and subordinating them to an ongoing performance of white inclusivity.

Because "We Were There" is narrated by a metropolitan Britisher for an assumed audience of white metropolitan Britishers, inclusivity as manifested in the exhibit is predicated on persistent (if implicit) othering. This is what allows visitors to say "how much *we* owe to people of *other* ethnic backgrounds" and to claim "*children* have very little idea of the role of British *ethnic minorities*," whereby "we"/"children" are put in opposition to "other"/"ethnic minorities." In both statements, white Britishness is coded normative. After all, both a normative and an "other" must be maintained by the group in power if that group is to understand itself as inclusive.

In fact, both images and captions paint a picture of empire strikingly similar to that seen in the wartime newsreel footage: an inclusive space where power dynamics are leveled and multicultural harmony nurtured in the name of not only imperial security, but of white British self-understanding "as a particular kind of imperial power."[12] Like wartime propaganda, "We Were There" manages to "deny, mask, or circumvent the power relations that were at the heart of both race and empire."[13] "We Were There" represents an act not of critical remembering, but of collective memory transformation whereby erasure and tokenization are employed to recast the imperial past as a foundation for 21st century multicultural British identity predicated on benevolent, inclusive whiteness.

This phenomenon of flawed memory re-creation can be attributed in part to the archive—a state institution deeply rooted in the colonial era—which perpetuates the liminality of colonial women through persistent erasure, thus maintaining gaps in both collective memory and scholarly discourse. To fully understand the dynamics of collective memory, historical erasure, and silence,

[12] Rose, *Which People's War?*, 241.
[13] Ibid., 280.

it is essential to recognize that the archive "not only contains documents but is itself the primary document of history."[14] In fact, the Imperial War Museum's 1995 multimedia resource pack is best understood as a microcosm of the colonial archive. The pack includes a brief memoir of Lilian Bader, a WAAF whose father was West Indian and mother English. Otherwise, most artifacts are visual: four posters about the colonial contribution to the war effort; 32 photo reproductions, including "one of hundreds of Indian nursing sisters who have gone to serve in the Middle East"; and three fliers that proclaim "Jamaica for Victory," "Nigeria for Victory," and "Uganda for Victory," respectively. There are a couple British sources, including an article from *The Times* and a facsimile transcript of a radio broadcast on "The Colonial Effort" given by Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the Colonies Harold Macmillan in July 1942. As in the state archive as a whole, the multimedia resource pack relies on images and British voices to tell the story of colonial service in the Second World War.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot points to "uneven power in the production of sources, archives, and narratives," noting that it is at these moments that "silences enter the process of historical production."[15] In the vein of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, Ann Laura Stoler posits the archive as an instrument of state power, an institutional attempt to resolve epistemic anxieties.[16] Together, Trouillot and Stoler's frameworks suggest why the voices of colonial women are not represented in the archive, thus allowing for transformations of collective memory that fail to engage in critical remembering. The sources that would permit the "recuperation" of marginalized

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[14] Nicholas B. Dirks, *Autobiography of an Archive: A Scholar's Passage to India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 41.
[15] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 27, 26.
[16] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

voices—as called for by Fujitani et al.[17]—are not accessible, leading instead to tokenization of the marginalized and the masking of imperial power in the name of fostering British national identity.

This interaction between archival silence and politically motivated memory re-creation suggests that we must investigate the way the language of multicultural inclusion can cloak ongoing discourses of difference. Critical race theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva has drawn our attention to the ways in which post-modern discourses posit the problem of race as one of exclusion; instead, da Silva argues, we must interrogate how the racialized subaltern was constructed in the first place.[18] We might apply this framework to the persistent logics of empire: instead of practicing historical inclusivity in the name of fostering a contemporary multicultural identity that implicitly perpetuates "othered" difference and normative whiteness, we must investigate the dynamics by which the boundaries of imperial belonging were constructed, imperial subjectivity fostered, and imperial power understood by both colonizer and colonized.

[17] Fujitani et al., *Perilous Memories*, 18.
[18] Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).