**Teaching London’s Past Today: An Experiential Approach to a Global City**

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**Abstract:** This article provides an account of teaching London’s cultural history on a semester-long, first-year undergraduate study-abroad course at Northeastern University London (NUL) using a multi-authored, case-study approach. It consists of an extended introduction by the course leader and a course instructor followed by seven contributions from current and former instructors, most of whom are still working at NUL, discussing examples of best practice in experiential learning in the humanities. Its intended audiences are teachers and lecturers of English and visual culture, of London, of pedagogy, and of other kinds of learning with a local, place-bound scope, as well as readers interested generally in transmitting London’s cultural past to learners and citizens in the present.

**Keywords:** pedagogy; culture, experience, localism, diversity, literature, walking, mapping

Whenever I write about a place, I don’t think, ‘Would this happen in it?’ I make this place up, and whatever I want can happen in it. So my London isn’t going to be like anybody else’s London. It’s a playground, it’s a place where I can imagine, where I can play.

Hanif Kureishi in an interview with Colin MacCabe[[1]](#footnote-1)

In his note on writing London, Hanif Kureishi raises a problem that concerns not only literary authors and their readers, but just as urgently teachers and students of London and its culture. Teaching the cultural history of a city involves transmitting both what has happened in a place (its history) as well as what has been imagined in and about that place (its culture). In the case of London and other global cities, the relationship between these two phenomena (history and culture) is particularly complex. London has so many cultures (not to mention histories) that it’s tempting to agree wholeheartedly with Kureishi: nobody’s London is alike. Then again, cities and cultures are not only differentiating, but also binding: they bring people together on the ground of shared experiences, values, and identities. To teach the cultural history of a city like London is thus to strike a balance between difference and similarity, to pay attention to the interplay of the singular and the systematic. If this pedagogical task requires intellectual rigour then, to echo Kureishi, it perhaps involves some playfulness, too.

This article is about taking up this task, about the challenges and the opportunities of teaching London’s social and cultural past to Northeastern University (NU) first-year study-abroad students who spend one or two semesters at its London-based college. Since 2016, the English Department at Northeastern University London (NUL) (formerly New College of the Humanities)[[2]](#footnote-2) has been teaching iterations of a semester-long course entitled Cultures of London, a *longue durée* survey of the city’s social and cultural history with an emphasis on migration and cultural diasporas. Taught in both the autumn and spring semesters, the course serves as an introduction to London and to humanities study for students who may not be very familiar with either.[[3]](#footnote-3) As such, it plays a formative role in their education, locating them both geographically and intellectually in the city, and at university. In this article we reflect on what such a course can teach us not only about a specific higher education sector and demographic, but also more broadly about the task of transmitting London’s past to a new generation of learners and citizens.[[4]](#footnote-4)

We begin by introducing the course’s development and content, including its syllabus, teaching and assessment modes, student cohort, and its institutional position within both NU and the wider UK and international HE sectors. Following this introduction, the article then comprises a series of structured reflections from current and former members of faculty who have contributed to course development and teaching over the course’s history. These contributors are at varying stages of their careers, from recent graduates to senior faculty. They all work in English departments and most completed their PhDs in the UK, while some are US doctoral graduates. The case-study approach of this article is intended both to recognise the large amount of collaborative labour that has made such a course possible and to draw on a wide range of faculty experience and expertise to provide specialised accounts of pedagogical scenarios and best practice. The contributions cover topics such as study visits and reading outside the classroom, the positionality of students, the social location of literary characters, and the use of multimedia and digital resources. Our hope is that these accounts of teaching London’s cultural past to learners in the present will be of interest to those who teach London-related (or place-centred) courses and topics at other educational institutions, to those who teach international students (who comprise the principal cohort of our course), to those (in and beyond the discipline of English) who combine methods of close reading and qualitative analysis with digital tools and learning beyond the classroom, and, finally, to those who are interested, as per the topic of this special issue, in how we transmit London’s history to present and future generations.

**Cultures of London: Institutional Past and Present**

The Cultures of London course was initially designed by Charlotte Grant and Peter Maber in 2016 as a third-year course taught to a small group of undergraduate English Literature students at the New College of the Humanities. At its inception as now, the course taught long histories of migration and cultural diversity across a number of identity categories, including race, class, gender, and sexuality. The course deploys the dual methodologies of close reading of literature and other cultural media, combined with utilising students’ experiences of the city outside the classroom—including through structured visits to significant cultural locations. With the merger of the New College of the Humanities and NU from 2019, the course developed into the largest taught at NUL, with a peak cohort of around 500 students per year. Along the way, more people than we can name here have had an input into the shape and arc of Cultures of London, including every instructor, who is invited to customise the course materials and delivery to their own teaching specialisms within the scope of the course aims and learning outcomes.

Those course aims are capacious, providing students with a ‘basic understanding of the history of London from 1600 to the present’, developing their ‘skills in cultural interpretation across a range of forms and genres’, and introducing them to ‘the development of London’s cultures and how they have been informed by the changing politics of race, gender, sexuality and class.’ That’s a lot to cover, and this range of knowledge and skill is reflected in the course syllabus, which (in its current iteration) starts with the birth of the British empire, colonial travel writing, and abolition movements before proceeding chronologically through Shakespeare’s London and early modern theatre; eighteenth century welfare institutions such as the Foundling Hospital; the industrial revolution and the uneven development of the East End (with Engels, Jack London, and other ‘social explorers’); the city during the Second World War and the Blitz (Elizabeth Bowen, Stephen Spender); the Windrush Generation and post-war diasporas (Sam Selvon, Wole Soyinka); before concluding with modern and contemporary poetry, fiction, and cinema about London from 1980 to the present (Hanif Kureishi, Monica Ali, John Agard). Alongside this core literary-historical arc, students study a range of visual and material culture in media including painting, photography, architecture, film, and television, as well as a range of cultural and sociological theorists (Roland Barthes, Susan Bordo, Pierre Bourdieu, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Raymond Williams). In addition to classroom learning, the course utilises asynchronous digital learning materials developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as a number of co-curricular visits to relevant places around the city, currently including Shakespeare’s Globe, The Foundling Museum, and the London Museum Docklands, plus two walking tours, one along the Thames and one of the East End. These elements are discussed by several of our colleagues below.

Given this wide breadth of topics, materials, and approaches, the course has been in other ways tightly circumscribed to provide coherence to the learning experience. One strategy for doing this is what we think of as *pedagogical localism*, a focus on the material and cultural specificity of place at given moments in time.[[5]](#footnote-5) Rather than attempting to teach London in its totality, the course could be more accurately understood as encouraging students to unpick a number of significant moments and events as they striate particular places and communities in the city. The opening of the Globe Theatre, the arrival of *Kindertransport* children at Liverpool Street station, the docking of the Empire Windrush at Tilbury: these are read as flashpoints that vividly illuminate their immediate sociocultural context whilst also enabling students and instructors to investigate longer histories of cultural continuity and change.

The second focalising lens of the course is what could broadly be described as an emphasis on *close reading*, understood both in its disciplinary sense of paying attention to the language and form of imaginative writing, but also in the broader sense of describing and interpreting cultural representations and objects of other kinds—from paintings and films to buildings, monuments, and urban infrastructures—in the classroom and outside of it. We try to teach students that reading is something they can do anywhere, but which always takes place somewhere—in short, that it is a local practice.

These two approaches—pedagogical localism and close reading—are combined with a third element in the course structure and assessments: a focus on students’ *embodied* *experience* of London. Learners are encouraged to draw on their own experiences of studying, residing, and even, to echo Kureishi, playing in London. They are here to have fun as well as to study, which can precipitate a playful relation to learning rather than simply a distraction. Their first assignment is a group presentation in which they analyse and interpret a place, building, or artefact located in the city, with a strong recommendation that they visit it in person and reflect on that experience (what could you *only* learn by being there, we like to ask them). In the past students have chosen well known places—Tate Modern, the Tower of London, red phone boxes—as well as more unusual ones—St Dunstan in the East Church Garden, Kennington tube station, The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries. Encouraging students to explore overlooked locations and artefacts in conjunction with major sites and monuments can not only bring to light new narratives and connections but also expand their conception of what counts as ‘culture’, and, in turn, of what can be accounted for by cultural interpretation. The second experiential assignment is a reflective journal in which we ask students to respond to texts, objects, and places, again in light of their own experiences of the city—to write, for instance, about the particular performance they saw at the Globe, or about viewing a particular painting in a gallery.[[6]](#footnote-6) At NU as elsewhere, institutional meanings of ‘experiential’—professionalisation, problem-solving, work experience—don’t immediately harmonise with humanities methods and objects of study. But as several of our colleagues discuss below, asking students to read culture *in situ—*locally!—can transform, say, the idea of Shakespeare (vague, scary) into the revelry of being in the pit at the Globe. It can turn cultural appreciation into an experience, and become the basis for new kinds of knowledge and understanding.

Who are these students? They exist locally, too, for the time they are with us. (We like to remind them that they’re Londoners, while they stay). They live in student accommodation in the East End—around Shoreditch and Whitechapel—travelling into campus (St Katharine Docks) mainly by foot and bus. They are all first-year NU students spending either a semester or a year in London. Most will go on to NU’s American Boston or Oakland campuses, though increasingly some might transfer to London for an extra semester or even their full degree. Most are North Americans, but a large minority are from South and East Asia, while others grew up in Europe and elsewhere. Most of them are not planning on majoring in humanities subjects, let alone English (though some are considering it by the end of the semester!). They currently all need to gain credits in ‘Interpreting Culture’ and ‘Engaging Differences and Diversity’ as part of their degree pathway—we fulfil those. We like to think we fulfil other needs, too. At its best, the course offers a welcome and different pedagogic space from a major in Computer Science or Economics, developing qualitative and critical methods that are central to the humanities. In their feedback, our students have reported particularly valuing the opportunities to explore London ‘physically and intellectually’, appreciating the ‘amount of trips and movement’, and enjoying ‘leaving the classroom and exploring places in London I would have never seen before’. Others have commented favourably on the ‘multiple perspectives’ and ‘diversity of the material’ the course introduces them to.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The course also serves a kind of pastoral function: our students are at a point of transition in their lives, often living away from home for the first time and reassessing their identities in relation to their upbringings and the locations of their often suburban childhoods and young adulthoods. They are in an unfamiliar culture and environment. This dislocation can be challenging for them; it can also enable them to see what is distinct about the city and their place within it. We try to help them locate themselves in London’s past and its present, to become global citizens but local residents.

**Courses on London: Globalisation and the City Culture Course**

If we look across comparable courses for both semester abroad and domestic students in London, it becomes clear that Cultures of London is a part of a wider pedagogical practice that takes the city as an object of study. Other remote colleges in London such as NYU, Fordham, St. Lawrence University, James Madison, and Florida State (in partnership with Theatre Academy London), amongst others, offer semester abroad courses focusing on aspects of London’s social and cultural history over time, from literature, theatre, and art to specialised periods and topics. These include courses on ‘Writing London’ at NYU and Fordham and on ‘Theatre in London’ at St. Lawrence. British universities also offer comparable courses from within their English departments, including some specifically for study abroad students. King’s College London and Birkbeck provide first-year undergraduate courses entitled ‘Writing London’; while Kingston offers ‘Reading London: Drama, Poetry and Prose’; King’s College London, ‘Shakespeare’s London’; Regent’s University, ‘Literary London’; Queen Mary, University of London, ‘London: Walking the City’, ‘London Global’, and ‘Representing London: Writing the Eighteenth Century City’; and Goldsmiths’, ‘Contemporary London Poetry’.

In addition, courses across other departments such as History and Art History also take London as their object. Queen Mary has a particularly broad offer, with ‘The Buildings of London I: From the Ashes of Fire to the Capital of Empire’, ‘Black Metropolis: London, New York and Paris from Imperialism to Decolonisation’, ‘London and its Museums’, ‘Crime and Punishment in London’, ‘Medieval London: Pubs, Plague-pits and Cathedrals’, and ‘London on Film: Representing the City in British and American Cinema’. Royal Holloway offers the second-year course ‘People and Things in Victorian London’, while other institutions house courses that feature London indirectly, alongside other metropolitan cities, or as a core component of British history. In Art History, both the Courtauld and UCL offer teaching focused on art in London collections, while Birkbeck has a first year course titled ‘Art in London’ and Regent’s University offers ‘London as a fashion capital’, as well as a first year course called ‘London Perspectives’, which encourages students to engage with London’s cultural diversity through study visits and material culture.

As this short survey suggests, many of these courses are fairly specific to historical periods or artistic genres, whereas Cultures of London takes a more generalist approach in terms of its objects and timeframe.[[8]](#footnote-8) Acknowledging this difference, however, it is perhaps the case that these London courses tell us more when taken together, as parts of a shared culture of pedagogical practice, than they do when taken apart. Or, to put this as a question: what is it that London culture courses contribute to students’ education and broader experience of place at this time? One answer to this question perhaps lies in the changed relationship of place-bound courses (including London courses) to the higher education landscape in the age of globalisation. We live in a moment in which students are increasingly told that they can study anywhere, learn anywhere. Putting aside the question of to what degree this is in fact feasible, this new discourse and practice of ‘mobility’ is providing (some) students with valuable, new experiences of place; but it also risks deracinating learning by abstracting it from local communities of teaching and knowing. In its (worst) form as an ideological bulwark of expansive globalisation, ‘mobility’ implies that studying Shakespeare or Sam Selvon will be the same experience in London as it would be in Boston, or anywhere else for that matter. It constructs teachers as units of expertise and students as recipients of information, both equally detachable from their location in social and cultural space. Without pitting this discourse of deracinated mobility (or its economic counterpart, globalisation) against an outmoded notion of national or linguistic community, the reflections that follow nonetheless aim to ask: what could we achieve by foregrounding students’ contingent experience of the local as a necessary moment in teaching the global? How might we unravel London’s complex global histories through situated readings and embodied encounters, foregrounding and reanimating the vitality of literary methods of reading, whether in the classroom or on the street? The contributions that follow from course tutors past and present offer a number of answers to these and related questions. They provide a non-exhaustive sketch of an ongoing pedagogical project. We hope they are of interest to Londoners everywhere.[[9]](#footnote-9)

***The Lonely Londoners:* Acculturation and Positionality**

Peter Maber

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In 2018, I led on the development of a new version of Cultures of London for our visiting students, with the aim of ensuring we had a course that would facilitate international-mindedness and intercultural dexterity, in line with our University’s vision.[[10]](#footnote-10) A major challenge was to adapt material that had been designed for final-year London-based English majors to be accessible to students who might not have studied English literature before and who were new to London. I framed the course in terms of positionality, defined broadly as our ‘social location’: I thought that attending to the connections between identities and social and political contexts could help make sense both of the texts we were studying, and of what everyone was experiencing in coming from the US and elsewhere in the world to study in London.[[11]](#footnote-11) Importantly, distinctions were needed between the course theme of migration and the privileged educational journeys the students were undertaking. To illuminate the former, we studied the concept of acculturation, in terms of the different ways in which groups adapt to new environments.[[12]](#footnote-12) To distinguish these from the latter, we frequently shared and discussed our own past and present cultural experiences aiming, in a light-touch version of Pierre Bourdieu, to clarify our ‘position in relation to the object of study’.[[13]](#footnote-13) In these ways, I hoped to set up ethical forms of comparison that would not risk appropriation, even as students found personal resonances with what they were studying.

To give an example: one of our key texts was Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). Arriving in August, the students had the opportunity to visit Notting Hill Carnival, and so witness some of the forms of celebration and subversion that are at play in Selvon’s writing. This helped students to understand the evolution of cultural traditions in London: at the end of the novel, Harris organises a fete in St Pancras Hall, which anticipates the 1959 Caribbean Carnival that would inspire the setting up of the Notting Hill Carnival. In class, we discussed these historical contexts and the specific cultural forms, both those the students had witnessed and which are written in to Selvon’s text, such as the calypso with its jubilant rhythms counterpointed by political bite. To deepen their understanding of the complexities of migration, students took part in a mapping exercise that involved linking extracts from the novel describing different characters’ behaviours to different acculturation ‘strategies’ (assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalisation).[[14]](#footnote-14) In this way, the students developed the ability to apply both sociological frameworks and literary critical skills, thinking more deeply about the ways in which Selvon presents character and experience somewhere between realism and allegory in the interests of representing the challenges of different processes of acculturation for the Windrush Generation.[[15]](#footnote-15) There are characters who attempt assimilation, like Harris, who ‘like to play ladeda, and he like English customs and thing’, which gives him access to a world of ‘high tea’ where he can move ‘among the bigshots’.[[16]](#footnote-16) The carnival caricature cuts both ways, exposing both the absurdity of English attitudes and the alienation motivating and ultimately limiting the performance: ‘Only thing, Harris face black’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Meanwhile, Tanty is a character who represents separation in the form of resistance, leading to a form of reverse assimilation: refusing to adapt her behaviour at all, she refashions London in her own image, installing a Caribbean system of credit in a shop off Harrow Road by the sheer force of her will: ‘Where I come from you take what you want and you pay every Friday’.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The students responded passionately to the text, in relation both to its historical context and its contemporary relevance. The history of racial discrimination in the UK was far less well known to the students than that in the US and we discussed possible reasons for this, including the forms of embarrassed erasure to which Selvon is so attentive. Some students made illuminating comparisons with histories and legacies of imperial oppression in their own countries. Many reflected on the different kinds of social space they were experiencing in London, on the exceptional variety of these, and on the difficulties that could arise in their navigation. Through these experiential approaches, the students brought new perspectives to the study of the text and to the study of London at large, becoming attuned to historical and cultural specificity whilst finding room for sensitive personal reflections. As the course developed, we increasingly saw opportunities to build in more of this type of self-reflection, subsequently incorporating it into one of our assessments, which takes the form of a five-part journal.

**From Museum to Market: Long Histories of Migration and Hybridity**

Leighan Renaud

University of Bristol

In *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (2016), David Olusoga asserts, ‘whilst post-war migration had been unprecedented in scale it had not marked the beginnings of black British history ... it is today well understood that people of African descent have been present in Britain since the third century’.[[19]](#footnote-19) The book points to the longer history of Black people in Britain, dispelling the myth that 1948, and the arrival of the SS Empire Windrush, marked the beginning of multiculturalism in the UK. But how to articulate this truth to American university students whose immersion in London’s culture and history would only last for one teaching semester?

I taught on the ‘Cultures of London’ course in autumn 2019 and found the syllabus carefully attuned to capture a multitude of cultural influences that contributed to the fabric of London. I was delighted to have the opportunity to teach Sam Selvon’s foundational novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), which Peter Maber discusses above. The syllabus also included poetry by John Agard, Benjamin Zephaniah and Louise ‘Miss Lou’ Bennett reflecting on twentieth-century relationships between London and the British Empire. This enabled discussions about the intricate entanglement between England’s capital city and the Caribbean, but I wanted to ensure that these stickier conversations about the city’s imperial past were threaded through the entire semester.

The syllabus, as it stood, allowed me several opportunities to sustain this discussion, and the experiential learning elements of the course were surprisingly useful in allowing us to engage with London’s long multicultural history. In our first week, we took students to the Museum of London to explore their Roman London exhibition. As we walked through the museum, discussing the history of Londinium, we were able to draw on the evidence of its multiculturality. Roman London was home to Britons, Romans, Germans, and many more. Thus, from the very start of the semester, the syllabus allowed us to contextualise London as a city that has always been hybrid. During this museum visit, I was able to briefly talk to students about Bernardine Evaristo’s novel-in-verse *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001), which features a Black protagonist living in Roman London. The novel provides a space to consider London’s long history of multiculturalism, and bringing it into dialogue with the artefacts on display at the museum was a fun and intertextual way to demonstrate how twenty-first century writers continue to grapple with London’s nuanced history.

We went on several walking tours over the semester, and one such opportunity saw us visiting Borough Market in Southwark. The market has a one-thousand-year history and originally functioned as a wholesale market. During the 1990s, it transformed into an international food hub, giving visitors the opportunity to eat a wide variety of cuisines, including Middle Eastern, Taiwanese, Cypriot, and Malaysian foods. In his sensory ethnography of East London, Alex Rhys-Taylor describes how London’s history of ‘post-colonial migration, global labour markets and geopolitical conflict’ can be experienced through smell and taste.[[20]](#footnote-20) In Borough Market, I gave students the opportunity to explore the market at their own pace, and take in the sights and smells. A number of students even returned to the group with food newly purchased. Despite the market’s history of internationalism being relatively recent, this experience gave us the opportunity to consider London’s relationship with the wider world, discuss students’ culinary experiences in London, and think more generally about how the city’s food offerings also speak to its longstanding multicultural history.

The Museum of London and Borough Market provided an opportunity to consider the city’s ancient and more recent histories of movement, migration, and internationality. The experiential learning elements of the course, coupled with the inclusion of texts by writers of colour (that facilitated more nuanced discussions about the city’s history), meant that approaches to London’s hybridity were quite holistic, and students had multiple ways and opportunities to engage with the diversity of London.

**Thinking and Feeling Through London’s Fogs**

Flora Lisica

Northeastern University London

One of our classes explores visual representations of London’s fogs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We draw on Christine L. Corton’s book on the subject, discussing the air pollution from domestic and industrial fires that transformed the mists, which London is prone to due to its geographical location, into thick, toxic, lingering smog.[[21]](#footnote-21) As we unpack the significance of the fog as a cultural metaphor, this historicist approach is accompanied by an emphasis on the students’ own intellectual and emotional responses to different artworks, however contradictory, messy, and fragmented these might be. Elizabeth Wanning Harries writes about what she refers to as ‘receiver-based’ art forms in the eighteenth century: literary and architectural fragments, which, in their overt incompleteness, actively involve the viewer of an artwork in the construction of meaning.[[22]](#footnote-22) Cultures of London invites students to approach cultural representations more broadly, as well as the city as a whole, as ‘receiver-based’, and as actively inviting them in the construction of its meaning.

For example, a sketch by John Leech, published in *Punch’s Almanack* in 1855*,* depicts a foggy London scene (fig. 1); the caption reads ‘The fog is so very thick that Frederick and Charles are obliged to take Clara and Emily home’, and the two well-dressed couples are led by a linkboy, a child whose job was to help more affluent Londoners traverse the city at night or when rendered unrecognisable by the fog.[[23]](#footnote-23) We speak about the way the image shows the fog highlighting social differences: the caption suggests that women could not traverse the city as freely as men. However, the fog also has the potential to subvert power relations with the socially inferior link boy leading the way. These interpretations pull in somewhat different directions; we speak about the way that they might also all be important at once. And while the class focuses on London’s weather in the past (students are unlikely to encounter such dense fogs, though if they’re lucky they will have perhaps witnessed a misty morning), we also draw parallels with London’s contemporary environmental concerns, from ULEZ to the Congestion Charge Policies, and the complex political dimensions of these.

We then look at some highly aestheticised portrayals of the fogs by James McNeill Whistler, Claude Monet, and Yoshio Markino from the 1870s to the early 1900s. We speak about how realistic Monet and Whistler’s portrayals of the river seem to the students; we look at these artworks in the classroom, which looks out over St Katharine Docks and the Thames. The class takes place after our Thames Walking Tour, which introduces students to the economic and political roles of the river in the city, and we query the purpose of depictions of London that might appear resolutely apolitical, discussing whether there is value in these artists’ insistence on the mesmerising beauty of the foggy city irrespective of—or precisely because the fog manages to veil—its problems. I often ask students whether they like these paintings or not, and their responses can range from frustration to enthusiasm. They might find their intellectual responses coloured by their emotional ones, or alternatively, they may be reconciling the contradiction between what they feel about the paintings and what they think in light of what they have learnt about them; what they think and what they feel is equally important as they work out what these visions of the urban landscape mean to them.

Our London Fog class takes place early on in the semester, as our students are still adjusting to London’s weather; they are making out what they think and feel about all this, much like we are making out what we can or can’t see in the foggy paintings. By privileging students’ responses to class materials and to London’s environment and culture, our course aims to help them explore the city on their own terms, and to sharpen their attention to what they are experiencing, and how, and why, in London and elsewhere.

**Covid-19 and the Digital City**

Alistair Robinson

Northeastern University London

When the UK entered lockdown, Cultures of London went online. Theatre trips were replaced with films, live lectures with recordings, museum visits with digital galleries. This story belongs to hundreds of humanities courses and lecturers, many of whom had to cope with this transition on-the-fly. I was more fortunate. In spring 2020 I was the interim course leader for a course that had no students. I had time to explore tools and resources and to think about how a highly experiential course, one rooted in lived experience, might work online in the upcoming academic year of 2020/21. In this section I discuss replacing a walking tour with a digital map of the city.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Creating the online equivalent of a walking tour was a challenge. As several of my colleagues discuss, walking tours encourage you to learn through your senses, through what you can hear and smell and taste, as well as what you read on a crumpled handout. They require physical presence. My decision to replace a walking tour with a map created using the izi.TRAVEL app felt somewhat inadequate.[[25]](#footnote-25) After all, a map, with its panoramic perspective, is as far as you can get from ground-level experience, especially in London where the field of vision is often cramped by buildings or tunnelled by narrow streets. As Lynda Nead observes while discussing maps of the Victorian metropolis, a map makes the city appear more ordered and legible by removing its crowds, objects, sounds, and odours.[[26]](#footnote-26) The map is an antidote to the sensory stimuli that walking tours invite us to explore.

That said, the izi.TRAVEL app differs from Victorian maps. Unlike Charles Booth’s poverty maps, for example, which immobilise the wealth and virtue of the city by grading its streets (gold for ‘wealthy’, red for ‘well-to-do’, black for ‘vicious, semi-criminal’), izi.TRAVEL encourages a more fluid and personalised engagement with the city. Built on Google Maps, users make their own walking tours, using pins to attach text, image, audio, and video to specific sites of interest. These routes are designed to be walked—content flashes on your phone when you enter each pin’s geographical orbit—but they can also be navigated remotely from the comfort (and safety) of one’s own home.

The tour starts at the Bank of England, takes the walker-reader over London Bridge and down to the Mudlark pub, then along the river past a replica Tudor galleon, the ruins of Winchester Palace, Shakespeare’s Globe, and the Tate Modern, and then back over the Thames to St Paul’s. Through the app, users can access recordings of texts by T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Angela Carter; a video clip from a 1937 newsreel about the rooftop garden of Adelaide House, an Art Deco office block; and links to blogs about the Frost Fair and virtual tours of the Globe and St Paul’s. Each location is also accompanied by a snippet of history available in text and audio formats.

A map on a desktop can’t replace the tang of the estuary that blows off the Thames, or the tortuous stone steps that take you off London Bridge down into Montague Close. Nonetheless, the izi.TRAVEL map was a good vehicle for the classroom content of the walk—the narrative of the instructor and the readings read by students—and, to some extent, it also served as a meaningful analogue. The multisensory experience of the tour was replaced by the multimodal format of the map, which not only provided learners with images and voices from across time, but also invited them to explore London’s history through articles, images, YouTube, and virtual buildings. It encouraged them to wander.

Since the pandemic, the map has continued to be a useful tool. Housed in the University’s Virtual Learning Environment alongside other digital resources that support the classroom delivery of Cultures of London, it provides an accessible alternative to the traditional walking tour, a mode of teaching that often assumes students are not living with disabilities.

**The Map Versus the Tour**

Natasha Periyan

Northeastern University London and King’s College London

Walking has an established status as a form of critical practice. Virginia Woolf describes setting out for an urban walk as a process through which we ‘shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers’ as she loads the act of walking with political potential.[[27]](#footnote-27) Caroline Knowles describes walking as ‘how I make sense of the world. A slow way of taking stock of places and people’.[[28]](#footnote-28) For NU students, many of whom grew up in the suburbs and for whom a walkable city is often a novelty, the act of walking as a method of urban exploration holds particular relevance and novelty. On teaching Cultures of London in 2023, I worked with students to explore how different kinds of knowledge are created by different encounters with the city space: the map versus the walking tour.

Students were encouraged to think through the different perspectives maps and walking offered on London through de Certeau’s essay ‘Walking in the City’. De Certeau describes the ‘fiction of knowledge’ created by the Icarian perspective of the ‘solar Eye’, which he opposes to the position of Daedalus ‘in mobile and endless labyrinths far below’.[[29]](#footnote-29) De Certeau’s image offers an analogy for thinking about the distinction between the map and the tour as models for understanding space. Nead argues that the modern map ‘explains the logic of the metropolis; it lays out boundaries and priorities’.[[30]](#footnote-30) In seminars, students explored how maps constituted the boundaries of London space by comparing John Rocque’s 1741–1745 map of Londonto Reynolds’s 1882 map. Students reflected on the increasing urbanisation of East London as it encroached into surrounding green space. Analysis of Charles Booth’s poverty map of London enabled students to consider the social context of the slums of the East End. Students then analysed an extract from Arthur Morrison’s *A* *Child of the Jago* (1896), published with its own semi-fictionalised map of the slums of East London. Morrison’s text reflects on the ‘grimed walls’ and ‘mingled stink’ of the ‘blackest hole’ of the Jago.[[31]](#footnote-31) Students’ close reading strengthened their analytical purchase on the consequences of urban planning and organisation. We revisited Reynolds’s 1882 map and students had fresh insights into the maps’ cramped and densely networked streets. We discussed the kinds of knowledge of city space that maps occluded. Responses included the levels of maintenance of urban streets, questions of population density, and the ways in which the city is marked by the routinised ebbs and flows of urban life.

Before embarking on the walking tour of the East End, students examined an extract from de Certeau which theorises walking as a process which ‘elude[s] legibility’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Where the assessments asked students to analyse a particular site, the walking tours counterbalanced this with a focus on the ‘act ... of passing by’ that de Certeau identifies.[[33]](#footnote-33) On walking through spaces and between stopping points, students often asked questions about particular buildings and their features. As we passed by, students spontaneously noticed the sculpted frieze of bakers depicting the division of manual and artisanal labour now adorning the Honest Burger Spitalfields branch, and were fascinated by the layering of the modern chain restaurant and the historic craft baker on one site.[[34]](#footnote-34) As a pedagogical tool, the walking tour is caught between the legible and the illegible. As a guided tour, the walk historicises transient and interstitial aspects of the city space rendering them legible to students. Attention to de Certeau’s theorisation of the act of walking suggests, moreover, fruitful questions for alternative pedagogies of walking that offer more open understandings of the city.

**The Location of Reading**

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To the questions of ‘what’ and ‘how’ we read, questions of curriculum and interpretation, we might add the question of *where*. As John Guillory suggests, one of the more pressing questions for diagnosing the contemporary condition of teaching literature is identifying its location. Where, exactly, in the social and cultural landscape, do literary objects appear?[[35]](#footnote-35) Identifying the social position of literature means locating its position in a media world. The blurring of media lines between text and non-text in post-codexical modernity leads to a dispersal of acts of reading. What reading means is affected by where reading happens. As Yves Citton argues, readers—our students—are faced not only faced with reading on proliferating, digital, non-codexical surfaces, but also by proliferating ways to read.[[36]](#footnote-36) It is not only that text has saturated our media environment (and vice versa): reading has become environmentalised, taking place outside the book, outside the home—outside.

When we ask students to read, we might thus consider *where* we are asking them to read. Where reading takes place shapes what kind of reading takes place. Asking students to read on a tour is one way to raise this question for them. While literary tours are established pedagogical practice, giving opportunities to contextualise and situate texts considered in the classroom, the East End Tour on Cultures of London aimed to blur that boundary between text and context, classroom and city, by an experiment in reading in the street. The tour proposed that the street is a legible surface itself, scored with words and other semiotic systems. But more than this, reading literature as part of that surface offers opportunities both to integrate reading practices with that surface, and to rethink *where* literature takes place. Rather than studying texts in the classroom, the preparatory class introduced some of the theoretical context of reading in the city, and asked students to research four key sites of the tour. These sites were mapped onto moments in literature, which students would then read on the tour itself, and then integrate with their research on the places. Thus, standing by the Kindertransport memorial outside Liverpool Street station, they read W. G. Sebald’s description in *Austerlitz* of the layered construction and destruction of the site. Students are asked not only how the site substantiates the reading, but how the two interact: does Sebald’s description of the buried verticality of the building, the grave site, the old Bedlam hospital, change how we read the building now? And what about these commuters and shoppers, passing in and out of the station, do they recall the haunting arrivals described in Sebald’s text, or memorialised in the statue? Crucial, here, is the students’ own movement: from London’s first synagogue on the city boundary, Bevis Marks, the first stop, and now on to the third stop, the Brick Lane Mosque, a palimpsestic layering of Huguenot church, synagogue, and mosque, and the site of the next reading, Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*. As with Sebald, Ali’s street is the space of encounter, of migration and memory narrated by moments of sensory location. Ali’s narrative of crossing and passing, of noting and marking the city in the street, both models and is complicated by the students’ own movements, arrivals, and departures on this tour, as well as by their other reading. The tour aims to locate these moments of complication or dialectical difficulty *as* acts of reading, seeing how literature not only represents the city but returns to it, differently, as part of London’s evolving history. The city, and the street, taken as reading spaces, not only contextualise but environmentalise acts of reading—students hear, see, smell, and mark the city and its difference from the text as part of their reading.

My suggestion is that we should no longer think of reading as a singular interpretative encounter with a page. Reading is an activity both more and less integrated than that: more in that it includes more persistent internal and external sensory encounters than the moment of reading (literature stays with us); less in that these encounters are dispersed, seeded in the temporalised processes of recall and reflection that characterise interpretation. But thinking of reading in this sense does not mean necessarily separating the textual from the contextual encounter, the classroom interpretation from the tour that gives it flesh. Instead, by thinking about the *location* of reading, we might think about the ways literature (and our students) are already positioned by a context of legibility that activates new interpretative possibilities for them. These brief examples suggest that we might confront the increasing textuality of the world (and the dispersal of our students’ attention beyond the page) by embracing the new legibilities of space, focused so richly in the overlapping histories, and histories of movement, of London’s East End, and by locating reading itself more emphatically outside, a practice in and of the world.

**Cultures of Laundry**

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One of the challenges of a course that covers more than four hundred years of history and requires students to close read across different media forms, genres, and styles is that by the end of the semester, their understanding of London can amount to little more than Eliot’s ‘heap of broken images’, a rag-tag collection of ideas soon to be discarded on the laundry piles of their educational histories.[[37]](#footnote-37) The problem is not one the course can resolve, but it is fitting that it should conclude with a focus on laundry itself, through an exploration of *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), written by Hanif Kureishi and directed by Stephen Frears.[[38]](#footnote-38) The lectures on this film re-cap several of the course’s major themes of migration and diversity, introduce students to London in the 1980s, and teach them the rudiments of cinematic analysis. As that is a lot of mess to sort through, I find it best to start with the mess itself.

The first thing I ask students to do when introducing the film is to tell me about the university’s laundry facilities. The stories are predictable: ‘it’s a nightmare’; ‘people just toss your clothes on the floor’; and a personal favourite: ‘the system’s fucked’. After hearing these experiences, I ask them to consider why Kureishi and Frears might have chosen to set their film in a laundrette. With some historical scaffolding, I encourage them to see it as a symbol of Thatcher-era London. We read the film’s prologue—in which white, working-class Johnny is ejected from an abandoned home before a jump cut takes us inside the dilapidated laundrette—as a metaphor for a London stuck in endless and violent cycles: a place, like the student laundry, of competition for limited resources, where people are chucked out of homes like clothes out of machines. Thus, the reconstruction of this laundrette by Johnny and British-Pakistani Omar becomes a utopian attempt to transcend London’s hierarchies of race, sexuality, and class.

Of course, critics have debated whether this utopian impulse is ultimately progressive or reactionary. Gayatri Spivak has argued that the film’s closing sequence, which sees a half-dressed Johnny and Omar provocatively splashing each other with water, as a moment of ‘ablution’, in which London’s legacies of colonialism, homophobia, and class struggle are purportedly washed away.[[39]](#footnote-39) On the other hand, Vinh Nguyen has countered that the ending ‘makes room for the possibility of connection ... without denying or flattening out the messiness’.[[40]](#footnote-40) And I find that staying with that messiness can be a compelling way to end a course that can only ever cover a small portion of the fractious histories of a city defined by migration and mobility.

Even more apt, then, that mobility itself should feature as a key theme within the film, both literally in its representation of London’s network of trains, cars, and bikes, but also figuratively in the respective dreams of Omar’s uncle, Nasser, for entrepreneurial mobility and of Omar’s father, Hussein, for educational mobility. Omar’s dream is literalised in his automobile business, and Hussein reveals his dream when he says: ‘I don’t want my son in this underpants-cleaning business. I want him reading in college’. In this moment, the film seems to present the university as the obverse of the laundrette, but I ask students to reflect on how this dichotomy is unworked by the fact that it is Hussein himself who expresses it—a ‘washed-up’ elitist who describes his ‘disappointment’ with the working class. I hope that, as students come to appreciate these tensions and dreams of mobility (even as they are embarking on their own privileged educational journeys), they can start to recognise how the film undermines both Hussein’s and Nasser’s proposed notions of mobility as solutions to the realities of underpants-cleaning, the film’s central metaphor for social antagonism in 1980s London. Methodologically, moreover, I hope they see that the film encourages us to bring the act of interpretation *out* of the academic sphere of the university and *into* the messy worlds of the laundrette and the city. Rather than seeing the student laundry and the student classroom as separate, in other words, they can come to see both as opportunities for analysing and understanding London’s past and present.

**Conclusion**

Teaching London’s past today involves a number of challenges that this article has attempted to think through. London’s status as a global, postcolonial metropolis is in large part what makes it such a vibrant and dynamic place to live, study and work. But the city’s sheer scale and diversity also presents certain pedagogical and cognitive difficulties: how to perceive and understand this multiplicity without falling back on either older, structuralist conceptions of ‘totality’ or newer postmodern notions of relativity: one London or infinite Londons. This article has suggested a number of solutions to this problem via three pedagogical approaches: *pedagogical localism*, *close reading*,and *embodied experience*. We hope that, combined, these approaches can provide a pedagogical ethos and praxis to counteract some of the cognitive dissonance that comes with studying (and living in) a vast, global metropolis, as well as foster a sense of the agency and responsibility involved in reading and interpreting the city and its histories. As the higher education sector continues to transform under the pressures of globalisation and impact, becoming ever more integrated into regional, national and international economies, and as, concomitantly, students become ever more mobile and itinerant, the preceding contributions have suggested that embedding learning in the particularity of place can serve as a powerful way to reconnect academic knowledge and skills with the daily life of London’s communities—past, present and future.

1. Colin MacCabe and Hanif Kureishi. ‘Hanif Kureishi and London.’ AA Files, 49 (2003), 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The New College of the Humanities, founded in 2012 by philosopher Anthony Grayling, combined a liberal arts model with Oxbridge style tutorial teaching until it merged with Northeastern University in 2019, moving from Bloomsbury to St Katharine Docks in the process. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Typically students take four courses per 13 week semester. Where students have an intended or declared major they will take courses primarily in that area whilst others might take a broader range of courses. Along with other courses from the English Department such as ‘British Drama and the London Stage’, Cultures of London has historically fulfilled a compulsory ‘Culture’ requirement. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We are aware that similar questions have previously been explored in this journal. See Jill Fenton, ‘Teaching London: A Two-Day Conference Jointly Organised by The Centre for Metropolitan History, Institute of Historical Research and The University of Westminster London Studies Programme, 3–4 November 2006.’ *The London Journal*, 32.2 (2007), 185–189. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This practice has much in common with the pedagogical discourse of ‘situated learning’ developed by Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger (1991), which ‘takes as its focus the relationship between learning and the social situation in which it occurs’. (p.14) However, whereas situated learning has come to mean using pedagogically iterative environments (classrooms, laboratories, workplaces) to induct students into larger ‘communities of practice’, the emphasis here is on place as an object as much as an instrument of learning - often an unstable and contingent object. This isn’t to say that our students don’t come away from their encounters with place having learned skills and knowledge transferable to workplace contexts, but that pedagogical localism implies a reckoning with the particularity and even the singularity of place as a source of its value. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (United States, *Cambridge University Press*, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This experiential approach to the city is local in time as well as in space; shows and performances are time-bound and ephemeral (as are all cultural monuments over a long enough duration), and students’ work documents London at a particular moment in its ongoing history. We also document versions of classes - lesson plans and materials - on our VLE platform corresponding to different years and instructors, allowing each instructor to adapt past iterations of the course, and to try out new ideas without having to go back to the drawing board. What is beginning to emerge from these sedimented student and faculty documents is an archive of both the course and of London itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Quotes taken from anonymous student course feedback. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This generalist approach is as much a function of our US student cohort as anything else. Unlike in the UK BA system, our students have not yet declared their majors, and as such our first-year courses must appeal to a wide range of disciplinary interests while also drawing on the faculty’s discipline-specific expertise. Expanding the (inter)disciplinary *objects* of study while retaining the discipline’s *methods* of reading and analysis has been one of our solutions to this challenge. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This phrase is adapted from the dedication to *Cultures of London; Legacies of Migration*, ed. Charlotte Grant and Alistair Robinson (London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2024). The book brings together 35 contributors, including academics, writers and curators, and emerges from, but is not defined by, the Cultures of London course. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Joseph E. Aoun, *Robot-Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2017), especially 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Juanita Johnson-Bailey, ‘Positionality and Transformative Learning: A Tale of Inclusion and Exclusion’, in *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*, ed. Edward W. Taylor and Patricia Cranton (Hoboken: Wiley, 2012), 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I drew on the frameworks of the psychologist John W. Berry. See, for example, ‘Conceptual Approaches to Acculturation’, in *Acculturation: Advances in Theory, Measurement, and Applied Research*, ed. Kevin M. Chun, Pamela Balls Organista, and Gerardo Marín (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2003), 17–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Shaun Rawolle and Bob Lingard, ‘Bourdieu and Doing Policy Sociology in Education’, in *Education Policy and Contemporary Theory: Implications for Research*, ed. Kalervo N. Gulson, Matthew Clarke, and Eva Bendix Petersen (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Berry, op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Karishma Patel and I explore these different strategies more fully in our essay ‘Tricksters of the Water: Sam Selvon’s West London and the Migrant Experience’, in *Cultures of London: Legacies of Migration*, ed. Charlotte Grant and Alistair Robinson (London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (Harlow: Longman, 2005), 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Macmillan, 2016), p.xx. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Alex Rhys-Taylor, *Food and Multiculture: A Sensory Ethnography of East London* (Oxon: Routledge 2020), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Christine L. Corton, *London Fog: The Biography* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *The Unfinished Manner: Essays on the Fragment in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville; London: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. John Leech, ‘The Fog Is So Very *Thick’, Punch’s Almanack 28,* (1855). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This can be accessed here: https://izi.travel/en/browse/d1475534-c3d7-400d-83d0-faf67f5c1577/en?passcode=nchlondon#97285b04-162d-483d-9649-7ba3a2117909 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. My thanks to Martin Dines who introduced me to this app and has created his own map, ‘Surbiton Stories’, for his students and Kingston University London. You can find it here: https://izi.travel/en/927f-surbiton-stories/en [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Virginia Woolf, ‘Street Haunting’, in *Collected Essays IV* (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), 155*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Caroline Knowles, *Serious Money: Walking Plutocratic London* (London: Penguin, 2022), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Michel de Certeau, ‘Walking in the City’, in Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* (1896), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. De Certeau, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. De Certeau, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The sculptures by Philip Lindsey Clark (1889 – 1977) are located at 12 Widegate Street, formerly the site of Nordheim Model Bakery. The 1926 building was designed by George Val Myers, later architect of Broadcasting House. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. On the ‘eccentric’ (exterior) location of literary study relative to the university, see John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022), 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Yves Citton, ‘Learning to Read in the Digital Age: From Reading Texts to Hacking Codes’, *PMLA*,130:3 (2015), 745. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Previous iterations of the course have taught extracts from various films, including Charles Crichton’s *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), Ron Peck’s *Nighthawks* (1978), John Mackenzie’s *The Long Good Friday* (1980), and Patrick Keiller’s *London* (1994). Film also features on the course in a class examining London in the Blitz, for which students watch the Ministry of Information propaganda film *London Can Take It* (1940). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Gayatri Spivak, ‘In Praise of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*’, *Critical Quarterly*, 31.2 (1989), 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Vinh Nguyen, ‘Queer Intimacy and the Impasse: Reconsidering *My Beautiful Laundrette*’, *Ariel: A Review of English Literature*, 48.2 (2017), 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)