

Fecha de recepción: 26 agosto 2019  
Fecha de aceptación: 1 septiembre 2019  
Fecha de publicación: 9 febrero 2020  
URL: <https://oceanide.es/index.php/o12020/article/view/35/178>  
Oceanide número 13, ISSN 1989-6328  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37668/oceanide.v13i.35>

**Dra. Laura Lojo Rodríguez**

*Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, España*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9073-8401>

# War Thoughts from the Periphery: Contemporary Perspectives

## ≈ Resumen

La finalidad de este artículo es explorar los conceptos de tabú, silencio y amnesia que aparecen tanto en la historia pública como en la personal como resultado de la participación de soldados en la denominada “Gran Guerra” para, de esta forma, poder exorcizar el fantasma transgeneracional que continúa rondando las generaciones presentes. Para este fin, este ensayo analiza dos relatos publicados en 2014 como resultado de la conmemoración del centenario de la Primera Guerra Mundial: “Each Slow Dusk” de Sheena Wilkinson y “Coolies”, de Xiaolu Guo. Ambos relatos articulan, desde diferentes ángulos y perspectivas, la necesidad de comprender una herencia familiar traumática que ha sido silenciada. Al contrario de lo que sucedió con muchos veteranos de guerra que lucharon en 1914, los protagonistas de los relatos de Wilkinson y Guo se vieron privados de tal reconocimiento público, y su participación en el conflicto fue silenciada, tanto en el seno de su propia familia como en la historia oficial. La delicada posición de Irlanda del Norte como parte del Imperio Británico y su participación en la Primera Guerra Mundial es el tema en torno al que gira el relato de Wilkinson “Each Slow Dusk”, en el que la protagonista contempla impotente cómo sus sueños de acceder a la Universidad de Queen’s en Belfast se hacen pedazos como consecuencia del retorno del frente de su hermano en 1916, que sufre estrés post traumático. En “Coolies”, Guo pone de relieve la participación de 100.000 campesinos chinos – o *kulis* – reclutados por el ejército británico para cavar trincheras en el Frente Europeo durante la Primera Guerra Mundial, lo cual cuestiona una concepción de esta guerra como un conflicto exclusivamente europeo.

Palabras clave:

relatos de escritoras contemporáneas; Xiaolu Guo; Sheena Wilkinson; historia; fantasma transgeneracional

## ≈ Abstract

This article aims at critically examining the contemporary urge to overcome taboos, silence and amnesia both in private and public history as a result of participation in the “Great War” in order to exorcise the transgenerational phantom which continues to haunt the present. To do so, I here examine two contemporary short stories published in the wake of centennial commemorations of the Great War in 2014, Sheena Wilkinson’s “Each Slow Dusk” and Xiaolu Guo’s “Coolies”. These stories articulate from different angles and perspectives women’s necessity to settle accounts with their own family history and with a traumatic inheritance which has been silenced. Unlike many war veterans whose participation in the war was acknowledged by proper mourning and public rituals, the protagonists of Guo and Wilkinson’s stories were deprived of recognition and their participation was silenced within the family and by official amnesia. The political position of Northern Ireland as part of the British Empire is overtly explored in Wilkinson’s depiction of the country’s adherence to the First World War in her short story “Each Slow Dusk”, where the protagonist sees her dreams of entering Queen’s College in Belfast abruptly put to an end when her shell-socked brother returns from the Somme in 1916. In “Coolies”, British-Chinese writer Xiaolu Guo brings to the fore the participation of 100,000 Chinese peasants– or *kulis* – recruited by the British army to dig European trenches, addressing a topic which already challenges received conceptions of the conflict as a European drama.

Keywords:

contemporary women’s short stories; Xiaolu Guo; Sheena Wilkinson; history; transgenerational phantom

In Ali Smith's short story "Good Voice" (Smith 2014), a first-person unnamed narrator engages in a conversation with her dead father: in a metafictional reference to the composition process of the story itself, the narrator inquires him about her grandfather's participation in the First World War so she can "write this piece about the first war" (12). The narrator's father never spoke about the war when he was alive and he continues reluctant to do so now he is dead in this imaginary conversation, yet the family obliquely know about it through some collected items scattered through the house, like old pictures and newspaper clippings: "My brothers and sisters and I knew that his own father had been in the First World War, had been gassed, had survived, had come back ill and had died young, which was why our father had had to leave school at thirteen" (17). The narrator's father abruptly puts an end to the conversation by saying that "the past is past" (18), and that it is better leaving the dead undisturbed. However, and as the narrative unfolds, Smith's characters continue to endure the psychological wounds inflicted by the war long after it is over, which also entails a desperate determination to forget in order to, allegedly, overcome trauma.

The attitude of Smith's narrator is symptomatic of a larger and deeply felt human reaction to the effects of trauma in both personal and official history, revealing an urge to forget in order to avoid the suffering of those who had participated or witnessed armed conflicts in the first person. Wars and their traumatic effects often became taboos within the family, and this also extended to proper official recognition of the victims' pain. However, and as the twenty-first century drew on and the centenary of the First World War approached, there was a sentiment that the time had come to exorcise ghosts from the past and lay them to rest, not by forgetting or silencing the things we would rather hide, but by insisting on talking about them. Abraham and Torok's "transgenerational phantom", or "the interpersonal and trans generational consequences of silence" (1994, 168), relates to the incorporeal embodiment of that which has been left unsaid, infecting forthcoming generations with the inexpressible and unexpressed consequences of past trauma, thus remaining "haunted" by the phantom.

The two short stories here under examination articulate a contemporary urge to overcome taboos, silence and amnesia both in private and public history as a result of participation in the "Great War" in order to exorcise, once and for all, the transgenerational phantom which continues to haunt the present. In this sense, Sheena Wilkinson's "Each Slow Dusk" (2014) and Xiaolu Guo's "Coolies" (2014) both examine, from different angles and perspectives, women's necessity to settle accounts with their own family history and with a traumatic inheritance which has been silenced and is in need of seeing the light by being publicly exposed. Unlike many war veterans whose participation in the war was properly acknowledged by mourning and public rituals, the protagonists of Guo and Wilkinson's stories were deprived of such recognition and their participation was silenced within the family and by official amnesia. In "Coolies", British-Chinese writer Xiaolu Guo brings to the fore the participation of 100,000 Chinese peasants – or *kulis* – recruited by the British army to dig European trenches, addressing a topic which already challenges received conceptions of the conflict as a European drama. By doing so, Guo's narrative overtly addresses the role of overseas imperial forces in the Great War and extends the conflict and its aftermath beyond the confines of European borders and

frontiers. In Guo's story, an unnamed first-person narrator travels to France with the purpose of finding her grandfather's grave in the Somme, buried without honour with hundreds of unidentified "coolies" in a foreign land, feeling that it is for her essential to properly recognise her grandfather's participation as integral to European history. Unlike China – not part of the British Empire yet a frequent migration route from it, thus recalling a European colonial memory (Carrera Suárez 2018, 242) – the political position of Northern Ireland as part of the British Empire is overtly explored in Wilkinson's depiction of the country's adherence to the First World War. Wilkinson's "Each Slow Dusk" is also rendered by a first-person narrator, Edith, whose dreams of entering Queen's College in Belfast are abruptly put to an end when her shell-socked brother returns from the Somme in 1916. In the narrative Edith not only faces the grief over the losses and horrors of war, but also social ostracism on account of her gender and of her brother's mental illness.

In this way, both narratives address the First World War as a conflict of unprecedented proportions which affected nations and communities worldwide. Political and cultural responses to different commemorations of the Great War's centenary opening in 2014 were, likewise, worldwide, and were produced out of an urge to heal wounds and trauma, but also of a necessity to reassess the conflict and shift into focus previously unacknowledged participants in the conflict and peripheral war experiences, which necessary entailed a redefinition of the Great War beyond the lens of Eurocentric perspectives. Contemporary historical accounts of the First World War – significantly published in the wake of such centennial memorials – often represent a shift away from the Western Front in favour of a larger understanding of the conflict as a world war (Costello 2015; Horne 2010; Owen and Pividori 2015; Romain 2017; Smith 2004a; 2014b), which must include not only campaigns in Africa, the Eastern Front and the Middle East but should also take into larger consideration the seminal role of British imperial forces in the war.

This article aims at bringing to the fore the role of British colonial soldiers in the First World War, whose presence has been consistently deemed as irrelevant and even invisible, as rendered in two short stories produced by, respectively, contemporary Irish and British-Chinese women authors. Both narratives were published in 2014 as part of literary compilations which signalled the opening of centenary celebrations of the First World War. Likewise, both short stories address their writers' urge to overcome trauma, silence and taboos as often experienced by Irish soldiers and, to a larger extent, by Chinese labourers – "coolies" – both at the battlefield and in their own communities upon their return. By so doing, both narratives acknowledge the centrality of British colonies in the First World War, thus readjusting configurations of the conflict beyond the European Front. Significantly, these stories testify to contemporary necessities to reassess history by deviating from hegemonic historiography and official war discourses by integrating the ex-centric, peripheral perspective of those who had been excluded in terms of class, gender, ethnicity or national identity.

### Sheena Wilkinson's "Each Slow Dusk"

At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Ireland was on the verge of a civil war: the opposition Conservative Party opposed the Home Rule for Ireland, and the Protestant majority

in Ulster organised the Paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), whereas nationalists formed the Irish Volunteers, eager to defend the Home Rule when it was implemented (Gregory 2010, 404). Despite the social and cultural ostracism which has characterised Ireland's participation in the First World War, official figures acknowledge that over 200,000 Irishmen served in the British forces during the war (Dorney 2018), led by different – and even opposing – motivations: some saw this participation as an opportunity for the Home Rule as promised by H.H. Asquith's liberal government; others served out of loyalty for the British Crown (Gregory 2010, 405). But the “grand narratives” relating to emergent colonial self-rule and independence have certainly overshadowed Ireland's participation in the Great War as well as its social and political consequences, often regarded as a “mere backdrop” against the seminal national events which would eventually lead to the Constitution of the Irish Free State in 1922 (403). Massive voluntary enlistment characterised the first years of the war both in Britain and in Ireland, which corresponded both with popular enthusiasm and, to a larger extent, with a perceived sense of duty of defence, especially after the dissemination by the press of German atrocities in Belgium. Northern Ireland had higher enlistment rates, and Irish Volunteers followed the lead of John Redmond – the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party – and renamed themselves as “National Volunteers”.

Sheena Wilkinson's “Each Slow Dusk” is set in Belfast, presumably in 1917, amid a popular fever to enlist in the army to defend Ireland and Britain from a common enemy who perpetrated unspeakable atrocities at the European Front. Edith, the first-person narrator, is a talented young woman of sixteen born to a middle-class family, whose means have been drastically reduced as a result of her mother's illness and subsequent death. As an excellent student, Edith is encouraged by her teachers to complete her training at school and apply for a scholarship for Queen's University. However, when Edith's brother Gilbert is sent home from the Somme, parental and social pressure encourage her to give up college to comply with her more “natural” duties as a woman; namely, nursing her sick brother at home.

“Each Slow Dusk” was published in the opening of centennial commemorations of the First World War in a collection entitled *The Great War: Stories Inspired by Items from the First World War* (Wilkinson 2014). As the preface clarifies, each story is inspired by one particular object which “brings home the reality of a war that is now fading from living memory—a war many hoped and believed would be a war to end all wars” (i). Such an original editorial project unveils, on the one hand, the large imprint of the conflict on our collective consciousness; on the other, the collection's emphasis on little objects as synecdoques of a larger understanding of history undermines the relevance of grand narratives by emphasising the *petit récit* of ordinary men and women and the various ways they choose to remember and to construct their particular versions of the Great War.

As such, the collection as a whole works as a living reminder of horrors past by bringing to the fore the Great War and integrating the conflict in the collective consciousness of younger generations one hundred years after. In so doing, and despite the inherent violence which has often characterised war narratives, these have been central to the constitution of national identities by forging a sense of community revolving around the certainty of common memories and experiences of a shared past. In this sense, Maurice

Halbwachs has shown how collective memory works to effectively maintain a collective sense of identity over time when memories of a recollected past are invoked (1992). Such a prevalence of individual and collective memories undermines a conception of modern memory as solely historical, archival, historically self-conscious, more often than not compliant with dominant, hegemonic discourse and used to the pursuit of specific cultural and political aims, as Charles Le Goff explains: “The traditional history of ideas is tending to give way to a new intellectual history, less focused on concepts and more concerned with institutions and with the social practice of ideas” (1992, x). And yet, and as a twenty-first century historiography awaits to be developed, the memory of men, women, peoples, and nations will inevitably play a major role in its birth (xi).

Indeed, treating memory as a legitimate form of historical understanding would open up new possibilities where “subjective renderings of the past become embedded in the process of interpretation, and not as counterpoint to objective facts” (Johnson 2003, 7). If, as Le Goff poses, the dialectic of history is based on the opposition between present and past, this process inevitably – and naturally – entails a retrieval which is never neutral, since it invariably entails an evaluative, and therefore subjective, system (1992, xv).

Interestingly, *The Great War: Stories Inspired by Items from the First World War* does not aim at retrieving a historical past in archival terms, but rather at providing a universal, world-wide sense of shared experiences which have contributed to the making of what we call collective memory. The collection's choice of authors (Michael Morpurgo, A.L. Kennedy, Marcus Sedwick, John Boyne, Tracy Chevalier or David Almond, to name just a few) from different corners of the world discussing the Great War from a variety of angles brings to the fore an interesting dialectics between sameness and difference, between the particular and the universal, inherent to any recollection of the past, invariably articulated as a tension between past and present and never neutral.

Wilkinson's chosen object to trigger such “new” realizations of the past centres on the relevance of school magazines, which mirrored not only early twentieth-century educational programmes, but also larger societal concerns relating to values, attitudes and modes of behaviour, which targeted a young adult readership. In the narrative, however, the usual domestic contents of Edith Hamilton's school magazine have dramatically shifted to acquire darker undertones at the outbreak of war in 1914, now reproducing soldiers' letters and articles about life at the front (Wilkinson 2014, 225).

By doing so, these magazines help to reinforce a sexual division of labour which works in terms of the dichotomy between the public sphere – here dominated by male positions at the Front – and the private realm, where women are expected to patiently wait for the return of their loved ones and, in the meantime, raise the spirits of those defending the nation by writing encouraging letters to soldiers, which are sent to the Front attached to boxes containing cakes, cigarettes, and woollen socks, knitted by the young women at school. Significantly, however, the narrative also addresses the already existing tensions between private and public borders at the turn of the twentieth century, pointing at the existence of barriers which had already become porous and questionable at the

time of the first suffragette movements both in England and Ireland. Maud, Edith's best friend, metaphorically expresses her reluctance to comply with social expectations by affirming that she can only knit "deformed" socks (226), thus signalling her unsuitability to fit in her socially assigned role: "I hate knitting. I want to do something (...) important [...] I want to go out there. Lots of girls do. I could be a nurse or drive an ambulance" (226-7). In fact, and in counterpart to male volunteering, many young middle-class women volunteered as nurses in the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) (Gregory 2010, 407). Maud's wish to become a volunteer nurse mirrors a rising climate of middle-class romantic volunteering both for men and women: Piers McBride, the young man killed in action at the opening of the story, had joined the Royal Irish Rifles as a cadet. His death is seen by Edith as an unnecessary sacrifice, since "he could have waited until he was old enough for a commission, but he was worried the war might be over before he had his chance" (222). In the midst of such fervent atmosphere of volunteering, those who chose not to enlist were regarded with suspicion, as is the case of Maud's brother, Frank, in the words of Edith: "I'm usually the one to stick up for him when she [Maud] complains about him not joining up" (221).

Frank's refusal to serve his country contrasts with her sister's commitment with the cause. However, and despite the apparently transgressive nature of Maud's desire to volunteer, nursing perpetuates women's traditionally assigned role as caregivers which, in this case, extends outside the home. However, Edith contemplates a rather more radical possibility for herself; her way out of ordinariness and compliance with gender expectations comes for her through college education at Queen's University: "I [...] imagine the wrought-iron gates of Queen's University swinging open to let me in. Not just to study. To a whole glittering future. Dickens. We have all his novels in the parlour. The Brontës" (223). As the narrative unfolds, however, Edith's dream will be swamped by several obstacles: in the first place, her mother's illness and subsequent death has left the family in an uncomfortable economic position: "You can't go to college now. Everything is different" (223; emphasis in original). Edith's admission at Queen's depends on a scholarship, for which she is not working hard enough since her brother's return from the Somme: Gilbert has been declared invalid out of the army – apparently for "rheumatism" (220, emphasis in original) – and Edith is expected to nurse him since there is no other woman in the house, thus neglecting her work at school and, by doing so, slimming her chances of entering Queen's: "I wish I could go up the stairs to my own little attic bedroom, climb onto the bed with my book, and curl up for the afternoon, forgetting about everything else" (230).

Metaphorically, the room works in the narrative as Edith's "room of her own", signalling the freedom and independence which would be achieved through her education. Significantly, Edith's father insists on her abandoning her attic to move into her mother's old room, thus metaphorically replacing his wife's vacant place in the household. Although Edith initially resists this idea, social and patriarchal pressure will make her give up her dreams of an improved life by her adherence to her "natural" role as a caregiver. When Edith becomes aware of her brother's serious illness, she inquires the family doctor about the convenience of hiring a nurse to look after him: "A nurse? Good gracious me, no. He'll be fine in a day or so. And I can see what a grand little nurse you are. Sixteen now, aren't you? Well, then. No point in messing up all your routines with a nurse. And I'm sure he

would rather be looked after by his sister than a stranger" (244). Frank's illness is never openly discussed in the family, and it is euphemistically referred to as "rheumatism" (220) throughout the narrative. However, and as Maud's dreams of entering Queen's begin to fade, the verbalization of Frank's shell-shocked nature and his traumatised condition materialize: "It's the first time I've mentioned Gilbert's nights. After the first two, when he stood helpless in the doorway, Father has not gotten up. I don't think he can possibly have slept through – his room, Hugh's old room, is next door – but he leaves it to me" (238).

The narrative closes with Edith's bitter realisations: her brother will "never be the boy who left here in 1915", which will prevent her from finishing school, thus shuttering into pieces her dreams of a college education. In 1917 Edith Hamilton yields to family and social pressure and abandons her dreams of independence when she concedes: "Father's right: it's silly to be up in the attic when it's too far from the rest of the family" (245).

By posing forward a number of subjective variations and repetitions pivoting on the Great War and its aftermath, *The Great War* moves beyond a composite of mere recollections of the past: its aim is to offer a composite of subjective experiences, retrieved from individual memory through recollection of quotidian events, which interrogate official discourse on the Great War by bringing to the fore how the conflict has directly affected different communities. By doing so, this collection in general, and Wilkinson's narrative in particular, aim at "realizing [the past] anew", in Paul Ricoeur's words, since "the creative power of repetition is contained entirely in this power of opening up the past again to the future" (2004, 380).

### Xiaolu Guo's "Coolies"

Xiaolu Guo's "Coolies" was published in Lavinia Greenlaw's compilation of short stories 1914: *Goodbye to All That: Writers on the Conflict between Life and Art* (2014), which, like the previously discussed collection *The Great War*, is articulated as a series of literary responses to the First World War and its aftermath from contemporary perspectives. In this sense, *Goodbye to All That* was published as part of the centenary commemorations of the conflict, as its editor explains: "The First World War changed the course of life. It also changed the course of our lives to come. A hundred years on, it is still in sight but has slipped out of reach" (Greenlaw 2014, 7). Significantly, Greenlaw borrowed the title for the collection from Robert Graves's "bitter leave-taking of England" (2000, 7) as rendered in his autobiography, published under the same title in 1929. In Graves's wake, the collection ambiguous title reassesses some of the questions already at stake in Graves's autobiography, such as the radical changes which the Great War brought about and how these affected a writer's urge to create: "What does it mean to have your life and your identity as an artist shaped by conflict? I didn't want writers simply to return to the past but to formulate and reinvigorate questions we should never stop exploring" (Greenlaw 2014, 8). In this sense, Greenlaw's compilation shares a good number of focal points with *The Great War*, which pivot on the nature of subjective reassessments of armed conflicts and their aftermath on individual lives and communities which are grounded on the dialectic tension between past and present in the forging of a collective consciousness, which here functions as an artistic alternative to historical and official discourses on war.

Guo's narrative aims to rescue from oblivion the 100,000 peasants recruited by the British army to dig European trenches during the Great War. Significantly, the story inspiringly combines personal history, fictionalised memories and recollections to reconstruct the lost steps of one of the character's grandfather, one of those peasants or "coolies" that were hired by the British Army to serve on the Western Front. By doing so, Guo reassesses traditional historiography by fictionalising the historical research done by Daryl Klein (*With the Chinks: In the Chinese Labour Corps during the Great War*, 2009) and Gerard Oram (*Death Sentences Passed by Military Courts of the British Army*, 1998) – both cited in the narrative – by narrowing down those findings to also include personal experience and family history.

"Coolies" is rendered by an unnamed first-person narrator, an art schoolteacher come to Britain in 2002 to avoid censorship (2014, 132) who chaperones Li Ling, "a fifty-two-year-old Chinese woman from Qingdao" (125) and mother to one of the narrator's former students. Li Ling and the narrator travel to the Normandy coast, briefly stopping at Calais, which, in the context of the story, not only brings to mind memories of the Second World War, but also the ignominious immigration camp unofficially known as "the jungle", thus raising issues pertaining to war itself and its "collateral" effects on a large number of individuals and communities. The war's imprint, as the narrator observes, is to be seen everywhere on the landscape and on its inhabitants: "Two men, with wind-scorched faces, are pulling lobsters out of ice containers with pale, wrinkled hands. They look as ravaged and weathered as the soldiers you see in black-and-white photos from the First World War" (125–6). The pain of such an imprint is what has fuelled Li Ling's journey; she has travelled to France after years of silence and repression to retrieve a relevant part of her family history, which is also an unacknowledged chapter in the history of her own country: Li Ling wants to find her grandfather's grave, who was one of the "Chinese labourers who died at the Somme during the First World War", of whom they just know that "his Labour Number was 4621, given by the British government on the Chinese seashore before embarked" (125–7).

The narrative is divided into five different sections, whose ambivalent tone is already signalled by the word "Coolie" in its title, which the narrator translates as "bitter labour" or "bitter strength" as essential to experience and which has, therefore, "to be accepted" as a "part of life". However, the negative connotations of the term came attached to imperialism and exploitation, since it used to describe "the virtual slaves who, from the eighteenth century onwards, were dispatched from China to serve the West" (126). As such, "coolies" worked as labourers in all the different continents, and yet, as the narrator explains, there is one particular group of coolies that has been almost entirely forgotten: "the 100,000 contracted to the British Army during the First World War and sent from Eastern China to the ashes and mud of the European trenches" (127).

However, historical records reflecting exact figures that would give an idea of the magnitude of events were difficult to find for Li Ling and the narrator, and official neglect was enhanced by the existing silence in Li Ling's family, since her grandfather "was illiterate and sent no letters home recounting his experiences. There were no other personal documents to recover" (127). Li Ling and the narrator's years of research are rendered in section two of the narrative, "The Contract", which includes archival

information concerning "the massive losses during the Somme Offensive" in 1916 while also suggesting human trafficking with the compliance of both the Chinese government – since "half a billion [Chinese] were struggling to survive" – and the "West", in need of recruiting manpower for the Western Front: in this sense, China represented "a bottomless pool of potential labour" (127). The narrative, however, gradually moves from these historical facts to the personal drama of Li Ling's grandfather, a nineteen-year-old young man from Hebei Province who had just married to a servant girl, had a ten-month-old baby and had been seduced by "the promise of earning one French franc per day and was told he would be at least ten miles from the firing line, nowhere near the Front" (127).

Departing from figures and facts, the narrative slows down to focus on the fictional memories of Li Ling's grandfather in section 3, significantly entitled "Crime and Punishment", in which the narrator imagines her grandfather's four-month journey to the Western Front, and how his expectations became progressively disappointed when working "ten hours a day, seven days a week" (129) in inhuman conditions. In this way, the narrative progressively adopts a critical tone when unveiling the hardships and difficulties which the 40,000 coolies hired in 1917 by the British Army had to face in France. Official figures and estimations are informed by archival work and historical documents such as Daryl Klein's *With the Chinks*, which further emphasise the narrative's intersection between personal memories, historical records and fiction. As such, and as the narrator informs the reader, the "British Chinese Labour Corps" were all "packed like cargo and shipped towards the West" and were established on the Western Front, where they were assigned numbers, suffered a strict policy of segregation and worked in inhuman conditions to dig trenches that were similar to the depth of a grave, thus becoming confusing and disorienting (128–9) for the coolies. Despite their oppression, the coolies staged strikes against their unfair wages, insufficient food, cruel punishment and demeaning work, resulting in a number of executions whose official figures are unknown to this date: "There are no clear records of how many coolies died from the effects of hard labour and how many from punishment. All we have is the official British version of events which says that, by 1919, 2,000 coolies had died on the Western Front. Of course, Chinese historians have disputed the figure. Perhaps the figure 2,000 refers to the number of gravestones scattered around Flanders. The actual figure, no one knows" (130).

As the story unfolds in section 4, "The Meaning of Poppies", the intersection between the narrator's documentary tone and the more personal imprint of history on personal and collective memory becomes more conspicuous. Departing from the well-known poppy image that in the United Kingdom and Europe relates to Remembrance Day, the narrator focuses on the historical and social consequences of the Great War for her own community and for herself as a Chinese woman, which largely vary from the experience of other communities. For the Chinese, the Great War was a mere backdrop to their own grand narrative pivoting on the rise of Communism and the October Revolution led by Lenin, which "illuminated the sky in the East", rising to establish a "new order on the ruins of feudalism and imperialism" (132). In China, the red poppies which commemorate the British soldiers fallen in France relate instead to the shameful past of the Opium Wars, paradoxically forced by the British on China, as the official narrative history renders (131). For the narrator

herself, however, poppies acquire the larger significance of universal oppression both in China and abroad: “There are 20 million men, women and children around the world in slavery. In the twenty-first century people are still sold as property, dehumanized, trafficked and subjected to sexual or labour abuse” (133). In this sense, the personal experience of Li Ling’s grandfather is universalised through common a sense of oppression, suffering and subjection, which extends beyond countries, race and gender. This is, rather than the poppy itself, a universal emblem of human pain, more akin to the humble chrysanthemums which Li Ling carries to honour her dead grandfather at his grave.

As Li Ling and the narrator travel to Noyelles-sur-Mer, the place where the largest number of coolies are buried (842 gravestones), the narrator muses upon slavery and oppression as experienced in varied ways across time and across history: the physical slavery of Li Ling’s grandfather, the intellectual slavery she herself experienced in China as an artist due to the strong censorship, the 20 million men, women and children around the world in slavery (133). Upon their arrival, however, and as if anticipating the two women’s commemoration of the dead and eventual forgiveness, “the wind grows quieter” and the sun “begins to shine” (133). The newly inaugurated year, 2014, seems to invite a new climate of reconciliation and peaceful commemorations. Aided by the narrator, Li Ling eventually finds her grandfather’s stone, where the man’s name and number are clearly visible: “Li Changchun, British Chinese Labour Corps 4621. Died 12<sup>th</sup> January 1919” (134). The discovery shocks the two women, since they realise that Li Ling’s grandfather had actually died when the war had already ended, thus raising a number of questions which leave ambiguities and uncertainties unsolved: “Did he die from random explosion during mine clearances? Or from starvation? Or was he killed for desertion? There is no clue. Only some blackbirds flapping their wings in the distance” (134).

The indifferent flight of the blackbirds emphasises the absurdity of the gravestone’s inscription, “Faithful unto death” (134), which unveils the hypocrisy, silence and indifference in which Li Ling’s grandfather – as thousands of other ungrieved victims – had lived and died. After all, Li Ling’s grandfather did not have an honourable death on the Front, but most likely one in which other less glorious factors – such as hunger, exhaustion or overwork – actually intervened. Official silence is cast over them, yet it is the dutiful commemoration of their heirs and family what brings them back to historical memory and rescues them from indifferent oblivion.

In this way, Guo’s narrative challenges readers to consider an alternative, unacknowledged vision of the Great War, which recalls Britain’s imperial history and a European colonial memory. As the author-narrator explains, “it is a cliché that history looks very different depending on where you are standing”, but it is also true that the history of empires has been for a long time uncontested and propagated as the grand, official narrative: “it surprises me how often British people expect me to know their history back to front when they know little of mine” (131). By doing so, Guo’s narrative advocates a more inclusive understanding of the Great War as a worldwide conflict, which should acknowledge the centrality of colonial subjects. The possibility of “saying goodbye to all that”, as the title of the compilation ironically indicates, will not be fulfilled until what has been left unfinished eventually materialises through mourning and public recognition.

## Conclusion

Wilkinson’s “Each Slow Dusk” and Guo’s “Coolies” are examples of a large number of narratives written in the wake of centenary commemorations of the Great War, opening in 2014. Despite their differences in terms of social context, ethnicity and national identity, these short stories tackle an urge for official recognition of the war’s victims, suggesting how the lack of public responses has affected, traumatised and embittered generations from 1914 to the present. Both Wilkinson and Guo explore the consequences of “the interpersonal and trans generational silence” (Abraham and Torok 1994, 168), which relates to what has been left unsaid, irreversibly affecting forthcoming generations with the inexpressible consequences of past trauma. If, as Paul Ricoeur has argued, the dialectic of presence and absence is at the heart of the representation of the past” (2004, 414), remembering becomes essential to forge a sense of collectivity. The two short stories here examined articulate the anxiety to overcome taboos, silence and amnesia, both in private and public history as a result of participation in the “Great War” to exorcise the transgenerational phantom which continues to haunt the present in order to eventually come to terms with a painful past.

In her contribution to Greenlaw’s compilation of stories – significantly entitled “Goodbye to Some of That” (2014) – Kamila Shamsie identifies “empathy” with human pain and suffering as the point of ignition of her own writing (32) and as the bridge that enables to “bring the world around me and the world of the novel into conversation with each other” (34), thus opening up “previously unimagined possibilities” (40). In a sense, the narratives here explored aim at establishing that empathic connection with the victims one hundred years later towards a progressive disappearance of, in Paul Ricoeur’s words, “the gap between the history taught at school and the experience of memory” and towards a “gradual familiarization with the unfamiliar, with the uncanniness of the historical past” (2004, 394). The lack of private and official mourning and the failure to perform symbolic burial ritual makes those transgenerational ghosts appear, and they demand from the living writing those untold stories which will enable the dead to finally rest.

## Works Cited

- ABRAHAM, Nicholas & Torok, Maria. 1994. “Secrets and Posterity: The Theory of the Transgenerational Phantom.” In *The Shell and the Kernel*, edited by Nicholas Rand, 65–171. London: University of Chicago Press.
- CARRERA SUÁREZ, Isabel. 2018. “Stories Told and Untold: Re-gendering World War I through Centenary Narratives.” In *Gender and Short Fiction: Women’s Tales in Contemporary Britain*, edited by Jorge Sacido Romero and Laura M<sup>a</sup> Lojo Rodríguez, 235–52. London: Palgrave.
- COSTELLO, Ray. 2015. *Black Tommies: British Soldiers of African Descent in the First World War*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

DORNEY, John. 2018. "Ireland and the First World War –A Brief Overview." *The Irish History*, December 14.

GRAVES, Robert. (1929) 2000. *Goodbye to All That*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

GREGORY, Adrian. 2010. "Britain and Ireland." In *A Companion to World War I*, edited by John Horne, 403–17. Oxford: Blackwell.

GREENLAW, Lavinia, ed. 2014. *1914: Goodbye to All That. Writers on the Conflict Between Life and Art*. London: Pushkin Press.

GUO, Xiaolu. 2014. "Coolies." In *1914: Goodbye to All That. Writers on the Conflict Between Life and Art*, edited by Lavinia Greenlaw, 123–35. London: Pushkin Press.

HALBWACHS, Maurice. 1992. *On Collective Memory*, edited and translated by L. Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

HORNE, David, ed. 2010. *A Companion to World War I*. Oxford: Blackwell.

JOHNSON, Nuala. 2003. *Ireland, the Great War and the Geography of Remembrance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

KLEIN, Daryl. 2009. *With the Chinks: In the Chinese Labour Corps during the Great War*. London: Naval and Military Press.

LE GOFF, Charles. 1992. *History and Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

ORAM, Gerard. 1998. *Death Sentences Passed by Military Courts of the British Army*. London: Francis Boutle Publishers.

OWEN, David and Cristina Pividori, eds. 2015. *Writings of Persuasion and Dissonance in the Great War*. Leiden: Rodopi.

RICOEUR, Paul. 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

ROMAIN, Gemma. 2017. *Race, Sexuality and Identity in Britain and Jamaica: The Biography of Patrick Nelson, 1916 – 1963*. London: Bloomsbury.

SMITH, Ali. 2014. "Good Voice." In *1914: Goodbye to All That. Writers on the Conflict Between Life and Art*, edited by Lavinia Greenlaw, 9–26. London: Pushkin Press.

SMITH, Richard. 2004. *Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War: Race, Masculinity and the Development of a National Consciousness*. Manchester: Manchester UP.

———. 2014. "Propaganda, Imperial Subjecthood, and National Identity in Jamaica During the First World War." In *World War I and Propaganda*, edited by Troy R.E. Paddock, 89–112. Boston: Brill.

WILKINSON, Sheena. 2014. "Each Slow Dusk." In *The Great War: Stories Inspired by Items from the First World War*, edited by Walker Books, 219–245. MA: Candlewick Press.

This article benefits from the collaboration of the research project *Intersections: Gender and Identity in the Short Fiction of Contemporary British Women Writers* (FEM2017-83084-P, AEL, FEDER), the research group *Discourse and Identity* (ED431C, 2019/001, Xunta de Galicia) and the research network in *English Language and Literature III* (ED431D 2017/17, Xunta de Galicia).

Título:

Pensamientos de guerra desde la periferia:  
perspectivas contemporáneas

Contact:

[laura.lojo@usc.es](mailto:laura.lojo@usc.es)