Thinking Inside the Box

Performance and Decolonial Pedagogies of the Archive

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***Abstract**: This article presents and reflects on Thinking Inside the Box, a decolonial pedagogical framework that connects students with archival materials from Latin America. We understand these archives as artefacts of resistance to authoritarianism and struggle for social justice, and employ them as a point of departure for collective interpretations and 'performances'. Through a reflection and qualitative analysis of a survey carried out with students on the project between 2021 and 2022, we explore how Thinking Inside the Box constitutes a positive means for catalysing transformative learning experiences. At the same time, we identify how the current context of UK higher education poses challenges to the project's future.*

Keywords: Archives, performance, Paulo Freire, Decolonial Pedagogy, Latin America, History

Introduction

This article offers a reflection on *Thinking Inside the Box* (TITB), a critical pedagogical framework that nurtures the co-creation of knowledge by connecting students with archival materials. We focus its first iteration as a student-led project based on a collection of Latin American Political Pamphlets, which took place over the course of the 2021-2022 academic year. The project invited students from across the departments of History and War Studies at King's College London to work with the Special Collections Latin American Political Pamphlets archive at Senate House Library, University of London. The students that volunteered participated in a series of workshops and preparatory sessions before visiting the archive and exploring its contents. Each student then chose an item to curate for a collaboratively organised exhibition. With the guidance of academic staff involved in the project, students then applied historical and archival research methods to explore their chosen piece, prepare a caption, and produce a reflective essay based on their experience. Simultaneously, students and staff worked collaboratively to stage the physical and digital exhibition, design a visual identity, engage with various audiences through social media and a website, run events, and produce an 80-page catalogue, among other things.

The project title, *Thinking Inside the Box* (TITB), was chosen to represent our decolonial practices and values. The title of course refers to the metaphor of "thinking *outside* the box", a concept meaning to think unconventionally, to step away from the confines of our situated worldviews, and to be more creative and collaborative in our interpretations. At the same time, the concept is based on a series of assumptions about the box itself: that its shape is confined to its physical

laterality, that its contents are metaphysically and temporally finite, and, perhaps most importantly, that there is only one possible question that needs answering. In our interpretation, thinking *inside* the box is not does not mean thinking linearly and in a limited fashion, but rather welcomes the fact that with each new performative engagement, the contents of the box will change and take on new meaning.

In this way, we engage debates surrounding decolonial pedagogies, decolonial archives, and performance theory. Recent years have seen the emergence and centralisation of 'Design Thinking' and Student-Centred learning (SCL) in UK universities, concretised in large-scale learning strategies and shaped by the business and marketing concept of 'people-centred design' (Rofe and Grimaldi, 2023). As the spaces and opportunities for decolonial practices become smaller and harder to sustain, SCL has raised concerns among those calling for more humanist pedagogies, who recognise fundamental tensions and power imbalances between the two. Decolonising the curriculum does not just mean changing up a handful of names on readings lists to scholars of the Global South; for us, archives – as sites of knowledge creation - represent an opportunity to also decolonise the learning process itself. In this, we join a growing community of researchers drawn to the counter-hegemonic potential of what has been called the 'conflict archive' (Benzecry, Deener and Lara-Millán, 2020, 300); archives containing the voices and lived experiences of those excluded by hegemonic historical narratives. Our approach to un-silencing these voices and unlocking their potential for political and social embodiment draws on performance theory, through which we reconceptualise the relationship between the archive and its spectator as a dialogue and act of solidarity.

In the coming sections, we expand on these guiding principles in dialogue with relevant literature, demonstrating how our conceptual approach translated into practice through a student-led project. The project, which explored themes of political activism, social struggle, dictatorship, authoritarianism, resistance, and solidarity, worked with an archive of political pamphlets and posters from Latin America between the 1970s and 1990s. In the context of the neoliberal, post-COVID university today, we explore whether, and if so how, Freire's process of conscientisation takes place in the collaborative interactions between staff and students in archival spaces. With this guiding question in mind, we contextualise our specific archive and reflect on the activities of the project itself to navigate themes such as student autonomy over the learning process, reconfigurations of the relationship between educators, learners and performances, and the generation of new interpretations and meanings of the archive. We then discuss the results of a small-scale survey with thirteen of the 25 students who took part in the project. The article closes with some reflections on the project and its future potential.

Guiding Principles: Decolonising and Performing the Archive

TITB's conceptual and pedagogical framework was inspired by the work of Paulo Freire. For Freire, the traditional "banking" method of education, which rewards the student who best imitates the teacher, cannot be separated from its colonialist roots. In this way, students are presented with knowledge, so-called truths or facts, that are 'detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance' (Freire, 2017: 44). The oppressive educator renders reality static, compartmentalising and organising truth into predictable parts. In this context, a barrier is put up between learner and human experience, denying the ability to know "through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful

inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each Other" (ibid: 45). Freire challenges the banking method by prompting learners and teachers to enter a process of mutual "conscientisation" through the co-creation of the learning experience. This approach recognises – and indeed mobilises – students' *and* educators' positionalities and worldviews as fundamental dynamics in the creation of new knowledge. To break from the banking model of education is to challenge the hierarchy between educator and learner, and grounding the learning process in lived experiences to bring about what Freire calls *conscientisation* through liberatory education. The motivation behind this student-led iteration, *Thinking Inside the Box: Latin American Political Posters and Pamphlets,* was therefore for students to co-create their learning and skills acquisition through critical engagement with the archival materials.

TITB intends to provide an environment of collective social action through which the archive is radically re-historicised and decolonised. Archival collections have long served as testimonies and remnants of coloniality. As the nation-state emerged, the archive became 'a foundational narrative of its temporal genealogy' (Ernst, 2016: 11); the historical and administrative discourse of the imagined nation. The way that an archive is organised, catalogued, grouped, and labelled tells us about how the archivist relates to its subjects, how the powerful relate to those without power, and how those without power are understood in relation to one another. The archive *prescribes* meaning to its content, replicating the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. This prescription follows the logic and interests of the original archivist, and, '[a]s with the encyclopedia, the principle of organisation is not necessarily related to any intrinsic quality of the material in the Archive' (González Echevarría, 1990: 182-183).

The coloniality of archives can also be seen in the way they are guarded. Gaining access to certain archives can require being deemed trustworthy and knowledgeable enough to do so, while it is also important to demonstrate that any findings will be used in a way deemed in agreement with the archive's agenda and sensibilities. Access must sometimes be applied for in good time, which can involve paying fees and memberships, providing written justifications, or procuring a trustworthy reference. Even when access is gained, certain parts of the archive might have been redacted, while others may have been treated carelessly and become damaged. The mechanisms through which we search and map the contents of an archive are also prescribed: from the codes and categories used to group the materials and suggest their relationship to one another, through to the titles, summaries, labels, and tags that have been chosen to represent the contents in short form, seeds are planted, parts of our view are cut off, guiding our engagement and limiting our reading of the materials. Thus, the archive as a potential source of knowledge (and power) can be kept from the potential knower through physical, temporal, and other barriers (Taylor, 2003:19).

The archive also represents colonial power relations through the imposition of specific mnemonic devices – namely, the written or spoken word[1]. A key principle of the archive is to transcend temporality through the preservation of meaning in material or digitised form, often through 'supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones)' (ibid: 19). In doing so, the archive – and moreso, its creator – assumes the inferiority of mnemonic devices that sit outside the written or spoken word; 'the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)' (ibid). Likewise, when archives are consulted to produce narrative descriptions – essays, articles,

[1] To read about Mnemonic Hegemony Theory (MHT) see Molden, 2015.

books, lectures – the materials are stripped of the embodied and performative dimensions of their original functions (ibid, 16-17).

In our view, however, archives simultaneously carry the antidote to coloniality. According to González Echevarría,

> *The Archive does not privilege the voice of anthropological knowledge, nor does it abide by the discourse of anthropology in method or practice. The Archive questions authority by holding warring discourses in promiscuous and mutually contaminating contiguity, a contiguity that often erases the difference separating them. The Archive absorbs the authority of the anthropological mediation.* (id. 153)

To address the colonial practices and functions of archives, and their decolonial potential, one needs to question the ways in which archives are accessed and used. A fundamental process of decolonising archives emerges through the idea of performance and embodiment. This phenomenological approach is a transformation of the archive into repertoire. According to Taylor,

> *By shifting the focus from written to embodied culture, from the discursive to the performatic, we need to shift our methodologies. Instead of focusing on patterns of cultural expression in terms of texts and narratives, we might think about them as scenarios that do not reduce gestures and embodied practices to narrative description. This shift necessarily alters what academic disciplines regard as appropriate canons, and might extend the traditional disciplinary boundaries to include practices previously outside their purview.* (2003: 16-17)

In performing archives, one is placing them in a given scenario, contextualising them, reading them within a frame (a theory), and providing them with contemporary contexts. As in any performance, an audience is required, however in the performance of the archive the audience are not simply spectators, but are also social actors. They transform and are transformed by the experience of turning the archive into a repertoire, by embodying it. In the case of an exhibition, performance acts as a sort of reconfiguration and historicisation of the archive, in which all those involved (curator, researcher, audience) are called upon to enact artefacts embodied in history as opposed to artefacts of the past. Returning to Taylor:

> *The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by "being there", being part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.* (2003: 20)

In the next section, we discuss how these concepts and principles are pulled together to construct a framework for decolonising and performing the archives, in line with the principles of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Oppressed.

Practicing "thinking inside the box"

The Senate House Library Latin American Political Pamphlets Collection that first sparked TITB was known to the staff involved in the project since long before it manifested as a student-led project. In 2016, we organised a symposium at Senate House Library titled *Thinking Inside the Boxes*, marking the first time the name was used to promote engagement with the archival collections among students and

colleagues[2]. In 2021, the concept resurfaced as a new student-led and co-curricular activity through which a new cohort of students were introduced to the archives. Crucially, the project's intention was not to simply "teach" the students about the history of Latin America between the 1960s and 1980s. Our plan was to reopen the boxes and let the students give meaning to what they were seeing through a dialogue with their own worldviews and positionalities. Instead of "banking" upon students the knowledge and interpretations we already had about the period and its cultural artefacts, we would support them to carry out research and develop their own understanding of the material in the boxes.

While staff members involved in the project provided administrative, intellectual, and material support, the students decided upon the shape and scope of the collaborative project, their individual contributions, and the construction of the cultural artefacts' meaning in the context of today. We also encouraged and guided students to use the project to support their primary curriculum activities and tasks; to bring the project into dialogue with their module readings, seminar discussions, coursework, essays, and longer-term professional or personal goals. This work was not without its challenges. Those involved in the project volunteered in their spare time, committing to a variety of complex organisational, administrative, networking, practical and editorial tasks that required careful coordination. Likewise, putting the philosophy of TITB into practice necessitated concerted efforts on behalf of us, as educators, to resist "banking" information on students, and prescribing rigid methodological practices. Pedagogically speaking, the project:

> *required us, as educators, to let go of many of our instincts and trust the students in guiding the project. (…) While we provided overall guidance and connected students with relevant points of contact and resources within King's, they are truly the stars of the show that allowed this project to happen. While each of us brings our own field of expertise and disciplinary backgrounds to the table, it is the students who approached us with their questions, who told us what support they needed, and who questioned the interpretations we had. While we used our knowledge of the pamphlets' historical contexts to provide students with background information, it was them who reacted and decided which avenues to take when conducting their own research.* (redacted)

The particular materials we were dealing with represented snapshots of political resistance to authoritarianism, dictatorship, and struggles for social justice in the context of Latin America's Cold War. Many were ephemeral in nature, including leaflets, posters, printed magazines and newsletters, and had transnational dimensions, either being produced locally and sent (sometimes smuggled) overseas, or produced overseas in solidarity and/or in exile. Many of the actors and organisations involved in the creation of these materials were once the target of repressive states. In other words, the political struggles contained within these archives have often been in danger of being repressed, erased and forgotten. Opening these archives presented an opportunity to reanimate dormant political subjects and liberate knowledge from a static state of being (Traverso, 2018). More specifically, the project brought social struggles of the past into the present by thinking about the way they related to students' situated experiences and realities. This approach acknowledges both students' positionalities and worldviews as fundamental to the creation of new knowledge, as well as the archive's counter-hegemonic potential.

[2] You can read more about the event and collection here: https://latinamericandiaries.blogs.sas.ac.uk/2016/02/02/thinking-inside-the-boxes-the-ilas-latin-american-political-pamphlets-collection/ (accessed 28.02.2023).

We focused primarily on the visual components of these materials. A majority of the materials contained text in Spanish and Portuguese, so this allowed us to minimise the barriers this could create for those who did not speak either of those languages. The arrangement of symbols in an image are encoded with meaning and need to be decoded by the viewer (Maasri, 2009). On the one hand, therefore, students needed to decode those original meanings – what do the symbols refer to? What do they tell us about the artists and viewers of the image at the time? And, on the other hand, students would be decoding these symbols in light of their own worldviews. In this way, student participants ceased to be spectators and were instead rendered performers and social actors; re-creators of meaning (Freire, 2017: 48). In Freirian terms, engaging with the visual aspects of the archive provided an opportunity to strike back against the banking concept of education, which assumes a "dichotomy between human beings and the world" (idem), by placing the conscious individual – the student, the co-curator – *with* the world and with each other, rather than merely *in* the world. The most important aspect, however, was to avoid imposing our own worldviews on the students regarding what they should see or not see in the posters and pamphlets, but to constructively and dialogically engage with them, their positionalities and hermeneutic horizons in the ways they performed the archives. In Freire's words: "for us, however, the requirement is seen not in terms of explaining to, but rather dialoguing with the people about their actions" (id.: 27).

The next section introduces the collection at Senate House Library that formed the foundations of this project.

The Collection

For *Thinking Inside the Box: Latin American Political Posters and Pamphlets,* the archives we engaged with were born out of particular historical conditions. In relation to Latin America's Cold War, 'the archive' takes on a specific meaning. The period saw a wave of authoritarian, mostly military, dictatorships across the region. In 1954, the Paraguayan army an army officer in forcing the current President to resign and eventually taking the position for himself. That same year, over 5,000 km away, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) orchestrated the overthrow of Guatemala's democratically elected President. Ten years later, Bolivia and Brazil followed suit. In Brazil, armed forces placed the presidency in the hands of the Army Chief of Staff. Some months later, with the blessing and generous investments of the US, a military junta deposed Bolivia's President. In 1973 both Uruguay and Chile had their own military regimes installed. Then joined Argentina, where in 1976 a military junta took the Presidency from the world's first female President.[3]

These military and authoritarian governments committed a multitude of crimes against their own citizens. But beneath the torture, murder, disappearances, indigenous genocide and impoverishment was a more sinister form of repression: enforced silence; the negation of narrative. Those who opposed the regimes were not only physically removed from existence, but so were their stories. Media censorship ensured that the general public and its institutions heard only one historical narrative, as journalists were disappeared, and clandestine printing houses were demolished. Some stories escaped, fled, and reconvened in underground, transnational spaces of safety. Even so, the regimes of Latin America's Cold War ensured that silence lasted long beyond so-called processes of democratisation:

[3] For more on the broader context of Cold War Latin America, see for example: Vanni Pettinà (2022) A Compact History of Latin America's Cold War; Stephen Rabe (2016) The Killing Zone; Hal Brands (2012) Latin America's Cold War.

> *The different attempts to reactivate this disruptive power have been interrupted by the continual overlap of diverse mechanisms: the inoculation of collective memory from State systems; the defensive oblivion assimilated by civil society; the depoliticisation of subjectivities in restructuring neoliberal economies; the aestheticisation of counterculture, etc.* (Longoni, 2016: 26)

Yet, the attempted inoculation of political resistance and struggles for social justice also led to the creation of a specific kind of archive, one whose very existence simultaneously resists and evidences state violence (Cesar, 2016: 68). Indeed, Latin American Cold War archives took on various new forms during this period. In Chile, a group of graphic designers and artists going by the name of Tallersol produced political posters and began collecting visual artefacts of political resistance.[4] In Italy, a Brazilian exile going by the codename of Francisco Correa had smuggled documents pertaining to the history of the workers' movement, which he feared would become the target of the military regime. He called it the Archivo Storico del Movimento Operaio Brasiliano (ASMOB) – The Historical Archive of the Brazilian Workers' Movement[5]. All over Western Europe, in places like Paris, Rome, Berlin, and Amsterdam, exiles, human rights advocates, scholars, politicians, and other collectors compiled the ephemeral remnants of political resistance and solidarity for Latin America, which congregated around certain institutional buildings where they remain as archives today.[6]

The Senate House Library Latin America Political Pamphlets collection is itself an artefact of political resistance, international solidarity, and struggle for social justice entwined with the historical context described here. It was originally formed as the Contemporary Archive on Latin America (CALA) in 1976 as an 'alternative' source of information on the region. The nature of the documents it contains – political pamphlets, solidarity materials, documents from political movements, human rights organisations, missionary workers, volunteer agencies, and journalists, indicate that this alternative was to mainstream news mediated by dictatorial or conservative governments at the time. CALA was forced to close in 1981, with different options for its adoption being explored before it was taken on by the Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London, which itself closed its doors in 2020. The collection continued growing throughout this period and in 2003 the School of Advanced Study made a donation towards a joint project to create an item-level catalogue. The collections is made up of a range of languages and countries of origin, comprising over 140 boxes of around 3,000 individual items.

The Project Process

We began with a preliminary meeting to bring together interested students, who were recruited through modules being taught by the organising staff members. In this initial meeting, we presented our ideas and hopes for the project, namely, to visit the Senate House Library collection and to engage the archive through our

[4] For more on Tallersol, see: https://tallersol.org/ (accessed 28.02.2023)

[5] For more about ASMOB, see: https://www.cedem.unesp.br/#!/acervo/asmob/ (accessed 28.02.2023)

[6] See for example the Latin America collection of the Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine (BDIC) in Paris: http://www.lacontemporaine.fr/collections/quelles-aires-geo-linguistiques/amerique-latine; The Basso Foundation Historical Archive collections on Latin America in Rome: https://www.fondazionebasso.it/2015/archivio-storico/?lang=en; and related collections at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam https://iisg.amsterdam/en (last accessed 28.02.2023)

performative, decolonial approach. A very important aspect of this first meeting was also to present to the students the principles of Pedagogy of the Oppressed. The most important point was that the project was not an activity that objectified students, but that all those involved in the project would act as subjects and collective creators of knowledge. It was clear to the students that we were involving ourselves with artefacts of solidarity and, echoing Freire, that "[s]olidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture" (Freire, 23). We then opened up to students' thoughts and suggestions, which led to the organisation of specific 'teams' based on the creation of an exhibition, who would collaborate on tasks such as exhibition curation, visual identity, social media, catalogue production, and accessibility.

Students' ideas about the project guided our arrangement of relevant preparatory sessions. The first was an introduction to the archive itself by the collection manager, and the second was an induction on visual analysis and how to choose images for the exhibition, delivered by one of the students with experience in this field. The students then received a tutorial on how to navigate the archive search system and order boxes to the library for consultation. As the archive is organised by country, students formed groups based on countries of interest and then ordered specific boxes from those countries – in most cases without knowing exactly what they contained. Finally, we then accompanied visits to the library to sit with students as they looked through the materials and chose their pieces.

After choosing the image(s) they would work with and curate for the exhibition, students and staff collaborated in decoding visual components of the materials to guide independent research into the historical context of the posters and pamphlet illustrations, the artists that designed them, the magazines or bulletins they appeared in, and the political struggles that they captured. Following this, each student produced a 1000-word reflective essay. The project organisers then read the first drafts and provided feedback to encourage students to fine-tune the essays structurally and, most importantly, to emphasise their own interpretations and analysis of the materials in line with the guiding principles of the project. Students were, therefore, co-constructors of archival interpretation, transforming their life-stories, experiences and solidarity into the project's hermeneutic horizons.

Based on the images collected, students then produced a logo for the project which formed the basis of the project's visual and graphic identity, social media posts, and other communications (see figure 1). The social media team built their bases by following related associations and organisations,and expanding their readership amongst other students. They documented different parts of the project as it developed, creating digital content around students meetings and activities, and updating audiences on the exhibition launch. The catalogue team compiled the reflective essays, exhibition images, and photos of the project activities to produce an 80-page booklet, which was registered with the British Library and published ahead of the exhibition launch[7]. One student produced an essay which was published on a university blog in Spanish, and appeared in *Latino Life* magazine in English[8]. Other students worked to create a 'virtual' exhibition to accompany the

[7] To download the full catalogue, see: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63cad96a2c69fc2f342b8244/t/63f904404836bd79ade87410/1677263971471/Thinking+Inside+The+Box+catalogue+2022-compressed+%281%29.pdf (accessed 28.02.2023)

[8] See the full article here: https://www.latinolife.co.uk/articles/art-evidence-belly-latin-american-political-posters (accessed 28.02.2023)

physical one, including audio captions and music playlists relating to political resistance[9].

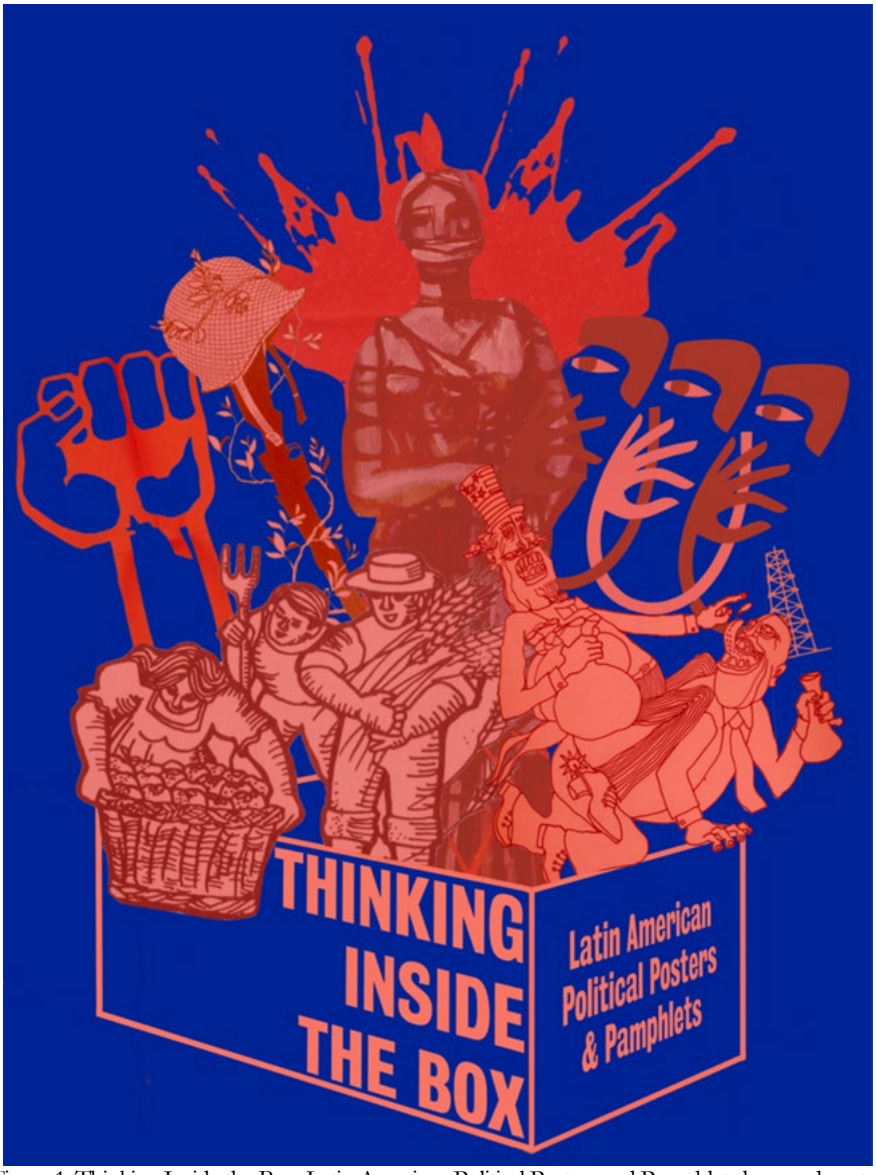

Figure 1: Thinking Inside the Box: Latin American Political Posters and Pamphlets logo and poster.

The exhibition launched in late April, 2022 (see figures 2-3). Over seventy students, staff, and other special guests were invited into the space, where they were greeted with a playlist of resistance music from Latin America created by students. After an introduction from the staff members, visitors were invited to look at the images before them, if possible without first reading the captions, so as to 'think inside the box' themselves and give the materials new meaning in that very moment. Students stood near the images they had chosen and curated, ready to share their experiences and answer any questions that the visitors had as a way of performing the materials through dialogue. Boxes – the particular kind of box produced for archives, made of non-acidic materials – were mounted onto the mobile walls that

[9] See the virtual exhibition here: http://www.brazilinstitute.org/the-collection (accessed 28.02.2023)

made up the exhibition space. The boxes were filled with printed postcards of the images students had chosen, some of which were displayed as part of the exhibition, others which we had been unable to include. Visitors were invited to physically open those boxes, to place their hands inside and see which postcard drew their attention most. The exhibition also included QR codes which linked to online content. These were the performative aspects of the launch. The exhibition was in place for a month, during which time two parallel events took place to discuss political posters in the contexts of Turkey, Lebanon, and Cuba.

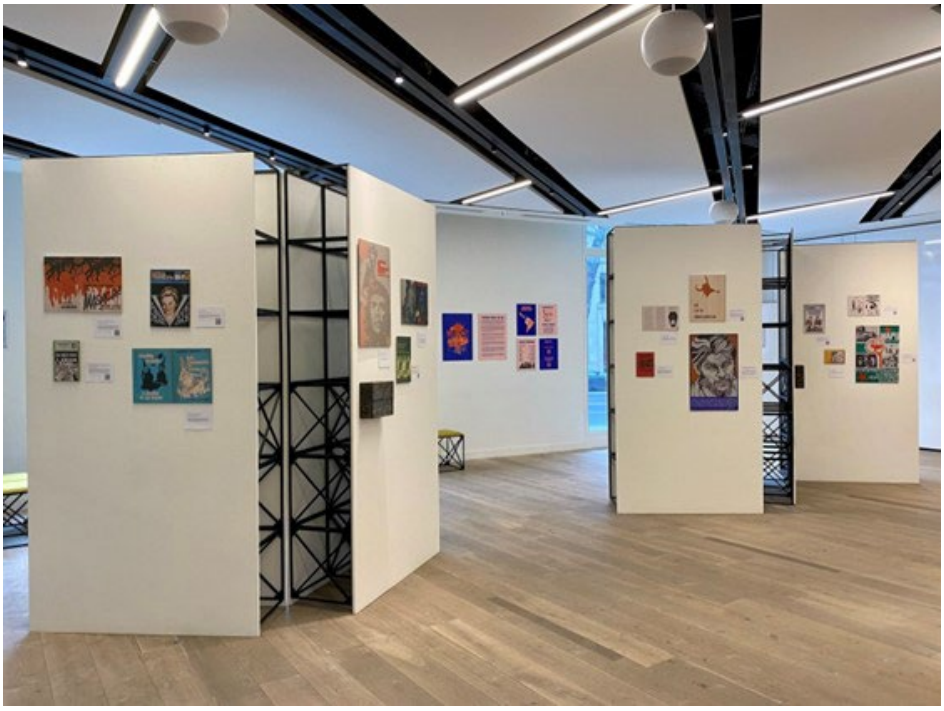

Figure 2: Exhibition space at [redacted], photo taken by the project team.

Figure 3: Students 'performing' the archive at the exhibition launch, photo taken by the project team.

In the next section, we present and reflect on the outcomes of a survey carried out during the months following the exhibition.

Survey Results

Of the 25 students who took part in the project, thirteen responded to a post-project survey comprising the following four questions:

What has been the most valuable thing you learned and took away from the project?

Do you think the project was engaging for participants and audiences? If so, why? If no, what do you think it could have done to improve engagement?

If you were to repeat the project, what do you think you would do differently? And what would you keep the same?

Is there anything you think the project organisers could do differently/should they keep the same?

The questions were designed to address all components of the project, from the initial meetings and workshop, through to the archive visits, reflective essays, the management of social media, the creation of the catalogue, the exhibition launch, and the parallel events. First, the questions intended to evaluate the project's process and to inhabit the values of Pedagogy of the Oppressed by learning from students' experiences. Second, we took the survey answers as a source of proposals to explore the viability of the project's continuation and potential ways in which it could be adapted and enhanced. Finally, and most critically, the answers provided a series of qualitative assessments on the pedagogical aspects of the project, allowing us to explore the potential of Thinking Inside the Box to generate the process of conscientisation. Recognising the potential for bias in students' responses, we explicitly anonymised all answers, which will be cited simply as respondents A-M.

In terms of students' experiences, it was interesting to see that eight of the thirteen respondents mentioned the academic skills they gained. In reference to researching the images they had chosen and producing the reflective essays, students identified independent research, writing skills, and visual analysis as central take-aways. The visual analysis was particularly valuable to respondent D, for whom it was the "first time working on a project related to arts". Three of the respondents emphasised an appreciation for learning how to access archives and consult and analyse primary materials, with respondent G commenting that "I think it is a very valuable skill that can represent a competitive advantage when it comes to applying for jobs in academia". Five students also explicitly referred to what they learned by exploring the historical context of the items they had chosen. In the case of respondent C, "[t]he project inspired me to pursue 20th century Latin American history in my third year and has shaped some of my module choices for the following academic year". The survey also indicated that students recognised the transferrable nature of their gains from the project. Three students mentioned project management in particular, in reference to the organisation of the exhibition and the teamwork involved in the broader activities. Respondent M described this as "the power of collaborative research and organisation in creating an impactful public-facing project".

Through the independent research components of the project, therefore, students were able to develop and enhance fundamental academic skills such as writing, consulting and analysing primary sources, and communicating their ideas in various ways, in particular through visual analysis. Independent research also

propelled student's learning of history, in one case inspiring a student's future academic pathway. The responses also indicated that students interpreted their learning as professional development, citing project management and teamwork. These outcomes can be understood as a direct response to the pedagogical approach of the project, which facilitated but did not dictate the direction of learning by allowing students to choose their objects of research and get involved in the organisational aspects of the project in the ways that benefited them, and to the degree they wanted and were able to.

Questions 3 and 4, referring to what students and organisers did well and what they might have done differently, indicated a number of ways we might consider adapting and enhancing the project in its future iterations. While four students stated that they would not change anything, several others offered constructive feedback on how to enhance the project. Four indicated they would have liked to spend more time with the archival materials, while three suggested that more regular meetings and communications would have improved the experience for them personally. For Respondent K, "[t]here were so many things going on at the same time that if you missed one meeting, even though there would be an email update, you would not know the next steps or you would find that there was something else going on". Other suggestions ranged from bringing a musical component to the project, inviting a more diverse group of students (in reference to the departments of origin), providing more cultural- and historical context-based instruction, using WhatsApp as a communication channel, and registering a dedicated student society for the project.

A more in-depth examination of the nature of these comments provides important insight into students' perceptions of their own autonomy and agency. What is particularly striking is that the majority of suggestions made by students appeared to be directed away from themselves, in that their comments referred to what should be done differently by coordinators, rather than what they would do differently as students. Respondent F "would have liked to see a more artistic component to the exhibition", while Respondent G stated "I think I would just include a more diverse cohort to have a greater variety of insights". Some students were more reflective in this aspect, thinking directly in terms of what they personally would have done differently, such as respondent B, who stated "If I did it again I would have kept better track of poster codes and had more of a timetable for producing the work".

Along similar lines, several respondents indicated the value of shared management in the project, with eight making reference to this overall. While two respondents indicated they enjoyed the organisation of the project, such as the "division of groups" (Respondent E), the remaining six indicated that they would in fact have preferred additional input and organisation from the staff members involved in the project. These were particularly in relation to the creation of roles, such as Respondent K, who would have changed the "internal organisation" of the project, or Respondent E, who believed the creation of more "project manager roles" would have improved the process. For Respondent H, the promise of student input through organisational roles was not delivered: "I do think that in some aspects they might have 'oversold' how much the participants would contribute in some of the organisational aspects".

These feedback comments offer excellent ideas for how the project might be run differently in future, constituting examples of the ways students would have liked to be more involved in the design and management of the project. In some cases, the comments carry a tone of frustration. In this way, the responses clearly show that despite the project's intention to foster student leadership in the project,

students found the ability to voice their suggestions and proactively take on organisational roles difficult at the time. The pervading impression seems to be that the division and allocation of roles to be in the remit of the staff members involved in the project.

A final theme to which the survey responses speak is the pedagogical approach and intentions of the project. Despite previous comments suggesting that students wished to have more direct input into the project, it is relevant to note that three respondents emphasised inclusivity in terms of giving students the ability to make a direct impact on the project. For Respondent K, "[b]eing part of that process and having a voice in it was an amazing experience and opportunity", while Respondent C noted that "we were always encouraged to voice our opinion which was always taken into account". Respondent M more explicitly cited 'autonomy', for which they "definitely felt that it was a student-led project". Finally, Respondent H responded as follows: "I think there was a consistent effort on behalf of the organisers of the project to include the participants and have their ideas, suggestions and research shape the project and its final result".

Many of the most positive aspects of the project highlighted in the survey were also those which were led by students themselves. Seven responses emphasised the success of the final exhibition, which Respondent I noted to have had a "very successful turnout", while six noted the educational and informative nature of the exhibition in its multi-dimensional format (including visual, textual, and audio). For Respondent J, this provided for a more holistic way for both audiences and student participants – or performers - to interact with the materials. Three responses also highlighted the exhibition's level of accessibility, which was facilitated through a student initiative to record audio captions. Finally, five responses pointed to the parallel events alongside the exhibition, while three praised the achievements of the social media team. For Respondents C and H, these achievements led to a sense of confidence, with Respondent H commenting that: "the project taught me not to shy away from these kinds of opportunities". Overall, the responses expressed a feeling of pride and accomplishment stemming from the things they themselves had made happen.

Another priority of the project was to elevate the co-creation of knowledge through dialogue between different positionalities, interpretive worldviews, and skillsets. Regarding this aspect, only a few comments were found across the survey. In addition to the above-mentioned responses, which indicated that students felt they had learned important teamwork skills, two students recognised the project as a community endeavour. Respondent M referred to the project's approach as "community oriented", and cited the collective-based creation of knowledge as one of the projects successes: "individual students contributed a wide range of skills under the leadership of our professors to create an exhibition that is greater than the sum of its parts". Similarly, Respondent H commented that "[f]rom an intellectual perspective, everyone's contribution and research on the topic of Latin America more broadly was highly enriching".

Approaching the archival materials as an act of performance was another fundamental component of the project noted by students. We did this through a range of activities with the intention of creating new meanings and interpretations surrounding the materials, both in terms of student's engagements with the materials and through engagements with wider audiences. For Respondent G, one of the biggest achievements of the project was the culminating exhibition, which "provided a more personal component to the project". For Respondent I, it was the fact that audiences could take home postcards – miniatures of the posters being displayed, plus additional images relating to the project – that made the project a

success. Interestingly, however, other students indicated a preference for a more prescriptive method of engaging with audiences by suggesting that more guidance be given to support audiences' interpretation of the images, in a sense against the intentions of the project. Along these lines, Respondent L commented that "[p]erhaps the setting of the exhibition (and the way the posters were arranged) could have followed a theme to make it easier for the audience to navigate through the exhibition and the issues it was presenting". Similarly, Respondent J suggested more formal analytical frameworks be applied to the exhibition, such as a timeline or comparative case studies. Respondent F's suggestions were "for audiences to be able to see a more clear thread throughout the exhibition", in other words, to be prescribed more of a narrative.

A final theme that emerged from the survey regards temporality. One of the ways this project understood the decolonial approach to archives was to shine light on artefacts of the past in a way that gave them meaning and life in the present. For some students, this was touched upon in the sense that they imagined a longer lifespan for the project. Respondent C showed high hopes for the project's continuation through social media:

> *The scope of social media is huge, I think we started off really well and developed a good following in the months prior to the exhibition. Now we have more time to develop it, it can really showcase the work everyone is doing whilst attracting awareness and a global following.*

Similarly, Respondent K envisaged that audiences would "[discover] a new part of history that they did not know and [go] to their houses [to research] events or figures that they had seen [in] the exhibition". For Respondent M, the project and format of the exhibition amounted to a better experience for audiences who could "learn a lot in a short amount of time" by allowing "for deep contemplation of each image at one's own pace." Another way students engaged with the non-chronological dimensions of the project were by emphasising the relationship between past and present. Also from Respondent M, was the observation that the project allowed "marginalized and silenced voices" to be brought to life and asserted. For Respondent L, what was striking about the project was

> *[t]he continuous solidarity between countries (especially [Latin America and Africa]) during the Cold War period and the many resemblance of the issues they were facing and fighting against. It was interesting to see how some of these are still present today.*

Reflections and Conclusion

The survey results offered a number of critical observations on both theoretical and practical levels, as well as pinpointing some of the key challenges for the future of the project. Through four open-ended questions, students explored topics such as autonomous and self-guided learning, perceptions of the project's theoretical-pedagogical approach, and the role of staff participants. Through this, the responses brought to the surface some of the tensions between students' expectations of the university learning experience – which closely echoed 'banking method' approaches –, and the things they most enjoyed about the project, namely its transformative potential. Across all these themes, students expressed appreciation and desires for more guidance in some areas and more autonomy in others, two assertions that were not mutually exclusive. All feedback highlighted clear steps we can take to enhance the student experience and deepen the process of conscientisation, while also reminding us of the many institutional and pedagogical barriers we face.

Students showed that what they found most challenging in the project process was acting autonomously. This strikes an important reference to Freire, who argues that the oppressed continue in states of oppression out of familiarity and by having internalised the oppressor. We are conscious - and so the survey has illustrated – that it is not easy for students to shape their own learning process to build autonomy and conscientisation, not because they do not want to, but because they are not accustomed to doing so. Students have expressed a sense of insecurity when prompted to act autonomously upon knowledge construction and performance. Through the survey, students reflected and discovered that there was a lot more they would have liked to have done with the project, and indicated a number of ways they would have done so. At the same time, they also demonstrated that they desired more guidance. In this way, we might consider that the process of conscientisation we ignited is incomplete and/or ongoing.

In this sense, the project reminded us that the process of conscientisation, as Freire suggested, is not simple. The logics of oppression in education are deeply rooted, and for many students, the word 'guidance' actually translates to traditional practices of oppression. As Freire says:

> *One of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is prescription. Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the preserver's consciousness. Thus, the behavior of the oppressed is a prescribed behavior, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor.* (2017: 20-21)

It is important to keep in mind the extent to which students' responses have been shaped by the expectations they were 'sold' as consumers of a UK higher education degree, as much as it is crucial to highlight the moments in which these assumptions were challenged. While some students suggested that they would have liked to have more direct input and management from staff and peers, others associated their experiences as empowering, inclusive, and welcoming of their voices and ideas. This dual conceptualisation of TITB was echoed was students discussed the way they presented their work together with audiences. While some students perceived the performative approach to the archives and exhibition as innovative and effective, others would have preferred a more traditional, didactic, and prescriptive way of presenting their work to audiences. In this context, students also recognised tensions in the project's temporality, which were at once open to negotiation between participants, but also dictated by the university's calendar and booking processes, which was acknowledged as a barrier to the project's qualitative and longer-term potential.

Students' expectations for and experiences of the project were also shaped by the very diverse background of project participants. Students came from a range of degree programmes, were at different stages of their academic journeys, and brought different skills and strengths to the table; students also came from a range of different socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, were of different genders, and no doubt that each of these dimensions of identity intersected to create power imbalances. Likewise, and despite attempts to avoid bias through anonymising the responses, some students may have felt more compelled to be positive in their feedback than others. Without intervention or conscious reflection on these power imbalances, inequalities may have been reproduced, potentially explaining why some students volunteered for managerial responsibilities, while others felt they may have missed out because they were not assigned to a role, or did not value their own involvement when it did take place. This is not to say that an entirely horizontal organisational structure is necessary, but rather that a more

reflective and conscious approach to collectively acknowledging power imbalances and individual contributions may have been helpful.

When prompted to think about improving the project method, students voiced a need for more time, both together and in the presence of archives. In other words, there was a dual desire for more of the presential, performative and dialogical elements of the project, and more prescription.

With this reflection, we argue that this particular iteration of TITB was a positive pedagogical exercise in relation to the impact it had on many of the students. It also raised important questions about the fragility of the framework in practice and the care that needs to be taken in its delivery. In this way, we feel we have succeeded in generating a provocative pedagogical endeavour, and in adding to the debate about decolonising the learning process. The pedagogy of conscientisation presupposes that the actors involved come from an experience of non-autonomy, and intends that through collective knowledge production, autonomy is generated. The process of liberation is thus a complex one as it depends on the actors' conscientisation; autonomy does not arrive merely by virtue of joining the project, but relies also on participants' capacity to fully engage and collectively self-reflect.

What student responses might also suggest is that it could be helpful to propose and carry out more guided collective reflection on lessons learned, rather than or in addition to collecting reflections through individualised survey responses. For example, for some students, personal academic and employment goals were clear, and this allowed them to tailor their learning and skills acquisition in a focused way. For others, however, it may have been helpful to think about goals in a more focused way before beginning the project. Likewise, for some students the skills that were acquired were clearly translatable to the sphere of employment, while for others the connection was less obvious. Spending a little more time discussing goals at the beginning of the project and reflecting on the learning process collectively at the end will provided a more consolidated overall experience for students in future iterations, relating directly to what Freire says:

> *Just as the educator may not elaborate a program to present to the people, neither may the investigator elaborate "itineraries" for researching the thematic universe, starting from points which he has predetermined. Both education and the investigation designed to support it must be "sympathetic" activities, in the etymological sense of the word. That is, they must consist of communication and of the common experience of a reality perceived in the complexity of its constant "becoming".* (ibid: 81)

Crucially, the survey also confirmed that students experienced the effects of challenges posed by the neoliberal University of today. Despite dynamic campaigns and claims of decolonising the curriculum and generating critical consciousness in students, most aspects of Higher Education today are increasingly planned, 'streamlined' (i.e. limited in range), centralised, and profit-driven. This applies to everything from overall programme outlines to course-specific syllabi and module assessment. This system likewise limits the creative freedom staff have in designing and carrying out pedagogical innovations, or fails to provide sufficient incentives to do so. Often, readings lists, assessment patterns, and learning objectives need to be carefully prescribed and approved through lengthy bureaucratic processes. Even where such projects might be possible, additional factors also severely limit the amount of time and scope staff might have to dedicate. Staff cuts and minimised administrative support, complex bureaucracy, and unrepresentative workload allocations mean that staff must often focus on competitive form-filling, grant writing and publishing ahead of pedagogical practices.

Thinking Inside the Box intended and intends to generate liberatory conscientisation. As this article has shown, we encouraged student to become autonomous by facing the challenge of having to build up their own interpretation of the posters through their worldviews, and likewise their interpretation of the world through the performance of the posters. We hoped that by engaging in performing the archive, students would be transformed from passive audiences of prescribed knowledge that merely incorporate content, to active creators of knowledge within an educational process.

Understanding this project as action and reflection simultaneously, we might say that the main objective of the project was met, as in the entire process, the challenges of performing the archive in a non-prescriptive way has been observed and experienced. We experienced the difficult task of breaking the boundaries of hierarchical structures of management and knowledge. This particular area of our findings also emphasises the importance of coupling our evaluation of students' reflections alongside those of our own. What did the process tell us about our own autonomy? About the aspects of 'banking' education that we ourselves have internalised? How might we have facilitated students' conscientisation more meaningfully and equally? These are the questions we must put to ourselves as educators in a more systematic way before committing to future projects.

The project delivered a very important lesson: we must move away from the programming model we see in Higher Education today in a way that allows educators the space and time needed to fully commit to a genuine process of transformative and liberating education, because, "apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human" (ibid: 45). If what we truly desire is transformative education in a pluricultural Higher Education context then we must observe the diversity of student's situated knowledges and engage with them. If what we truly seek is decoloniality then it is crucial to diverge from banking upon students what it is they need to do and how they need to do it.

Afterword

It has been almost three years since we first began planning this article, and we believe it is worth mentioning and congratulating the many iterations of TITB that have taken place since the first student-led project. We have worked hard to take on board the reflections we produced here, particularly to incorporate more collective reflection, and the results have been nothing short of magical. The TITB exhibition has travelled to Turin, it has initiated collaborations between multiple universities and institutions across the UK, as well as with the archives of Tallersol and the Chilean diaspora of the North of the UK. It has even been integrated into accredited module design through a co-curated curriculum based on digital archives. It has been cited and analysed from a variety of perspectives, and has been explored within diverse spheres of scholarship (Grimaldi and Gukelberger, 2023; Grimaldi and Smith, 2024; Grimaldi, 2025). The website has grown, and we have expanded our reach through a documentary and a podcast episode.

Despite continued challenges in the form of increasingly complex bureaucratic requirements, work-loading calculations, restrictive regulations and priorities, and the difficulty in securing funding year to year, we have grown and thrived. The increasing incompatibilities between the fundamental principles of TITB and the institutional hoops preventing its integration at a more meaningful level have required creativity and determination. The solidarity and encouragement we receive from peers and alumni of the project who return to offer their support, as well as the many other incredible initiatives we have met along the way, have kept us going.

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