

# **‘Difficult Heritage’ and the Legacies of Empire. Diversifying engagement with material culture in public spaces and museums**

**Mirjam Brusius** (German Historical Institute London/TORCH Oxford)

The vestiges of empire extend beyond standard conventions of physical control and coercion. Empire persists and proliferates in the present through material and visual representations and celebrations of the past. It manifests in statues, museum exhibits, artefact collections, and is embedded in public spaces and the individual's consciousness. This has an impact on how audiences access and perceive not just artefacts in public life, but also history.

Brighton provides an apt platform for this session. Here, one of the landmarks of the city, the Royal Pavilion, incorporates an ‘Oriental’ appearance. The session intends to feature six case studies that address the legacy of empire in public space, ranging from imperial statues and architecture to the possession and presentation of artefacts in museums, and beyond. Following up on debates that have taken place in the last few years, e.g. on Rhodes in Oxford and Cape Town, the session seeks to learn from examples of what a critical engagement with material culture could look like in practical terms through interventions by (art) historians, curators, community members and artists. How can difficult histories be made visible in public space, e.g. if imperial statues are not removed? How can museums tell their complex collection histories in more inclusive ways? Finally, how could these interventions contribute to attempts to diversify audiences in museums and make institutions more accessible and relevant today?

## **Speakers and Abstracts**

### **Confronting the Legacies of Empire: Slave-ownership and the Victoria and Albert Museum**

*Hannah Young (Institute of Historical Research/University of Hull)*

Found across the length and breadth of the country, absentee slave-owners used their wealth, rooted in the exploitation of enslaved people, to help build 19th-century Britain. The legacies of this history continue to shape the world we live in, and the museums we visit, today.

This paper will uncover the links between British slave-ownership and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Objects that were once in the collections of slave-owners are now dotted throughout the museum, found in almost every gallery. But the violent histories embodied in these objects are rarely acknowledged. The paper will thus also raise the question of how, in a 21st-century museum, we can confront and engage with this difficult, contentious and uncomfortable history.

The paper will explore one example of attempting to engage with ‘difficult heritage’, and make a critical intervention within a major national museum. It will discuss my experience of undertaking this research at the V&A and working with artist-in-residence Victoria Adukwei Bulley, who has created a series of five short films and poems (‘A Series of Unfortunate Inheritances’) that unearth the names, lives and experiences of individuals whose enslavement is inextricably tied to objects held in the museum’s collections. It will highlight how important critical interventions can be in helping museums to engage with more complex and inclusive histories, while also discussing the difficulties involved in embedding such work within institutions on a more permanent and long-lasting basis.

---

### **Cook Redux: 250 years of European storytelling in the South Pacific**

*Alice A Procter (UCL)*

What does the Pacific look like from England? And what, if any, is the place of ‘discoverer’ figures like Captain Cook in European museums today? 2018 saw a wave of exhibitions and displays marking the beginning of a series of anniversaries linked to Cook’s three voyages around the Pacific. With an emphasis on ‘scientific discovery’ and Enlightenment world views, the exhibitions mostly presented sanitised stories of adventure, preferring to skim over the reality of conflict and violence. Cook’s voyages continue to haunt museum collections, with materials made and acquired by the European travellers acting as lightning rods for protest and anticolonial debates, but narratives in the UK tend to focus on their intentions rather than their consequences.

This paper examines the anniversary exhibitions at the British Library, Royal Academy and National Maritime Museum, their presentation of contested objects, and their use of contemporary artistic responses, in order to unpick the mythologies that still surround Cook. As new monuments to Cook are planned in Australia – while old ones are removed in New Zealand – these exhibitions and their re-enactments of contact zones and collisions could provide crucial spaces for dissent and critique. As we look ahead to the next 11 years of Cook commemorations, how can museums learn to welcome and support this process, to empathetically curate a story of invasion and violence, and to responsibly confront the uncomfortable histories of their collection.

---

### **Anthropological Blindspots: Colonial histories, Ancient Egypt and ‘orphaned cultures’ in the ethnographic museum**

*Alice Stevenson (UCL)*

*Alice Williams (Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology/University of Oxford)*

Ethnographic museums have been subject to intense scrutiny over the last four decades, leading such institutions to be reconceptualised as spaces for the interrogation of legacies of Empire and for engagement with source communities. Yet the reflexive approaches that have been adopted in practice and widely promoted in the academic literature to this end mask a more piecemeal and selective appraisal of ethnographic collections as a whole. The extent to which fundamental epistemic and political predicaments underlying ethnographic museum representations, particularly their colonial foundations, are being systematically confronted can be questioned when it is apparent that significant parts of collections remain freighted by colonial and Eurocentric discourses. The interpretation of material procured from Egypt, which is ubiquitous across British ethnographic museums, forms a case in point.

This paper will examine the exceptionalism and interpretive inertia that continues to characterise displays and treatment of ancient Egypt, using the example of the Horniman Museum to establish how colonial silences in the ethnographic museum have been historically produced and continue to be socially constructed. To redress the lacunae, and diversify narratives associated with Egyptian collections, this paper will further provide examples of strategies through which such material can be more meaningfully integrated within the sorts of museological discourses that have informed rethinking of other legacies of Empire and which does not necessarily rely on specialist Egyptological knowledge.

---

### **Camels, Conflict and Colonialism: Re-examining the role of Somalis in the First World War**

*Dorian Knight (Brent Museum and Archives)*

In 1888 the British established a protectorate in present day Somaliland that lasted until independence in 1960. As a result of the complex historic colonial relationship that developed between the two countries, many Somalis fought in Europe during the First World War on behalf of the Allies. Many more served in the Somali Camel Corps in East Africa and provided backup to the military effort.

In 2018, Brent Museum and Archives, in partnership with the Somali Advice and Forum of Information, put on an exhibition as part of a Heritage Lottery Funded project, aimed at exploring Somali contributions to the First World War and addressing the invisibility of Somalis within common narratives of British history. This exhibition toured a number of sites in the Borough of Brent and is currently on display in Hargeisa, Somaliland. The exhibition aims to be part of a changing historical *zeitgeist*, as highlighted by Dr Johanna Lewis (London School of Economics) there is a new recognition of the global dynamics within national histories. Consequently, scholarship of the First World War has re-rooted and re-routed itself in the international involvements in the conflict. An exhibition emphasising the neglected history of Somali contributions to the Great War reflects this changing attitude.

This talk will critically examine and document how many Somalis were caught up in the conflict in various ways and the lasting impact and legacy of British colonial rule on present day Somali populations living in Brent, as told through a museum display.

## **Mapping the Infraworld of Delhi: The potential of digital media to explore undisciplined urban heritage**

*Deborah Sutton (Lancaster University)*

Delhi is rich in latent, submerged pasts. These histories exist outside the obedient spatial and physical orders of curated heritage but find sporadic and significant connections to the present. This paper uses the concept of the 'infraworld' (drawing on Mesoamerican archaeology) to think about the connections that exist and that might be created between these ambiguous and polyvalent pasts and the heritage present. The paper examines the infraworlds associated with two urban transformations that punctuated the city's Imperial history: the destruction carried out in the aftermath of the rebellion of 1857 and the Partition city of Delhi, from 1947 until the late-1950s. Both are profoundly spatial histories that can be mapped across the contemporary city-scape, yet neither has bounded and definitive co-ordinates. These histories transformed the city's physical, social and cultural fabric and are contained within fragmented materials and attendant, localised knowledges. Neither is incorporated into the expansive, official heritage of the city. As infraworlds, however, they connect the discrete realms of monumental heritage with their surrounding localities and with contemporary contestations of heritage. Digital media has unique potential to engage with the multitudinous, overlapping, polyvalent complexity of dense, urban pasts. The SHARC Partition City heritage app, launched in December 2018, will be used to consider the capacity of digital heritage to engage with fragmented, ambiguous pasts. Digital media and geolocation technologies offer a means to create a vivid, animated physiognomy of the city's multitudinous heritage; one that can incorporate the ambiguities, overlays and fractures that characterise the city's pasts.

---

## **Hidden in Plain Sight: Tracing histories of empire in Glasgow**

*Rosie Spooner (University of Glasgow)*

This paper aims to present the work of a walking tour offered during Scotland's recent Black History Month (BHM) celebrations. I developed this project following an invitation from the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, the leading anti-racism charity that organises BHM Scotland. The tour is grounded on the premise that much of Glasgow's urban fabric and public institutions reflect the city's deep involvement in colonial and imperial networks, whether economic, social and/or cultural in nature. The walking tour engaged in a critical examination of two of Glasgow's most well-known public spaces, a large landscaped park and the purpose-built municipal museum that sits within it. Responding to the theme of "Difficult Heritage" and the Legacies of Empire', I propose discussing the motivations behind the walking tour and summarising its route through Kelvingrove Park and Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, highlighting specific points of intervention. The session is a timely opportunity to situate this practical case study in relation to other initiatives that similarly seek to examine legacies of empire that are arguably hidden in plain sight and consider the theoretical implications of this discursive mode. This paper will therefore undertake a broader consideration of how collective walking can be a strategy for increasing awareness of difficult histories embedded in public spaces, and how collective talking can be a tool for calling out the continued silencing of these problematic pasts in public museums.